

Mimesis and Remembrance: Daedalus's A Place at the Table and the performance of testimony.

In the theatrical encounter with difficult histories -- the witnessed atrocity, the traumatic memory, the intolerable image -- distance between the testimonial and the aesthetic is valued. This is for several reasons, firstly concern regarding the potential conflation of genuine experience with artistic expression, which in turn necessitates a need to distinguish between the assumed authenticity of testimony and the fiction of theatre. Secondly, the ethics of making performable that which is arguably impossible to recall, let alone represent. In the various forms of the 'emergent testimonial genre' (Forsyth 2011: 154), much attention is paid to appropriate languages and dramaturgies of testimony as distinct from performance. However, recent efforts have embraced the latter, for instance Anna Harpin's attention to the artist's translation of 'extreme experience into the materiality of the theatre' (2011: 108) in order to examine the spectatorship of aporia, and Alison Forsyth's proposition that the plasticity of testimony not only requires but necessitates performance. Thus the case for performance as a function of the act of remembrance emerges and, as such, the theatricality of the testimonial genre, the aesthetics of staging and the performing of this, become a current concern.

The acting of witness is a risky endeavour, with worrying connotations of the therapeutic (even the solipsistic). It requires a re-embodiment of testimony which has the appearance of correlation between self and the testifying Other and it is this proximity between performance and testimony that causes anxieties as to whether theatre is an appropriate form for revelation of the witnessed. Whereas I would argue that the re-playing, re-presenting, re-showing; the theatrical simulating or mimesis[<sup>{note}</sup>]<sup>1</sup> of difficult histories, is more integral to the act of aesthetic remembrance, and might be a means of encountering that most difficult of memories, the intolerable, perhaps disrupting that which Rancière has considered is 'a matter of dispositif of visibility' (2009: 102). The creation of the intolerable image -- and the intolerability in its recreation -- is essential to its disruption; it is a construction of mimesis that tackles the positioning of 'the victim as an element in a certain distribution of the visible' (2009, 99). This article explores the function of mimesis in the performance of the remembered, one which addresses the material relation between performer and the space of the re-enactment. This analysis, based on Roger Caillois' thesis on mimicry and the similar, and Michael Taussig's re-reading of this, implies a theatrical, more

functional version of mimesis that suggests agency not just in bearing witness, but also in the act of performing.

A Place at the Table by Daedalus Theatre Company<sup>[2]</sup> is a verbatim theatre production which centres on authenticity, testimony and unreliability in assembling the ‘truth’ about the assassination of the Hutu president Ndadaye of Burundi in 1993 and the subsequent massacre and its aftermath in the civil war of Rwanda in 1994. A large proportion of the text of the production is gleaned from testimonies, reportage, blogging and personal experience of a variety of participants and contributors to the production. Some of the collaborators and performers are refugees and survivors, from Rwanda and Burundi. Indeed the impetus for the production was the director, Paul Burgess’s personal experience; a close friend and her Burundian fiancée were killed when a bus they were travelling on was ambushed.<sup>[3]</sup> The subject of A Place at the Table is the ‘eye-witness’ and the difficulties remembered in this production are not dissimilar to the intolerable atrocities that Gutete Emerita gazes at from within Rancière’s The Intolerable Image.

The production begins with the varying versions of events from UN Security Council reports. For this, the audience is assembled around a single, sizeable table which dominates the entire theatre space, we are seated and interspersed with the cast who, poised patiently at microphones, intercoms and armed with minutes, give the impression that this will be a naturalistic re-enactment of the Security Council meeting and indeed for the first ten minutes or so it is. The only overt evidence of the theatrical event is that the technician also takes her place at the table. This could be a piece of documentary theatre, or an ‘investigation’ on the scale of Peter Weiss’. But it isn’t. The space is purposefully theatricalised and the place we are in evolves. First we are allocated our place at the table, next we are introduced to the location of the events, Burundi and Rwanda, then we are transported to the different places at which evidence was gathered and information around the real event assembled, these places are interspersed with fictional, theatrical expressions of the unfolding problematised truths. The table is the stage for all this, with panels that lift to reveal hidden secrets underneath. The director is also a designer and thus the production is a visual response to verbatim material. Eventually the table becomes Burundi the earth, the very territory fought over -- the table becomes the place.

As the places at Daedalus’s table evolve, so too does the audiences’ positioning in relation to the atrocities remembered. An example of this is one of the first overtly theatrical sequences in which the audience are treated to a demonstration of ‘a new way of living’, somewhere between a cookery lesson and stand-up comedy.

TV Host (A): Ladies, gentlemen, distinguished guests. This evening I would like to welcome you to try a new way of living. To open your mind to an innovating and exciting practice that is found all over the world in the primitive climates [...]

At this point get out bowl and mix ingredients ...

Take a new generation - Brand new put of the packet. I tend to go for a pure breed. As they are easier to manipulate due to coming from a strong tribal line, rather than a mixed breed - their alliances are often confused and highly unpredictable. You then take this generation – let’s call them First generation- just for clarities sake, and surround them in Fear, Violence and Hatred.

Pause to allow the chopping of the fish head

Here is one I prepared earlier. Add some gentle pressure and watch all that Fear, Violence and Hatred spill out. Remember to have your next generation or Second generation waiting to absorb the Fear, Violence and Hatred and there you have your very own cycle of violence and destruction. As tested by The Western World! (Daedalus Theatre Company 2009: 14)

Throughout this sequence, though the audience remains static, the place alters in three ways. Firstly is the actual place around the table and our presence for the cookery demonstration, secondly as it unfolds we understand our positioned place as the inactive witnesses to the ‘way of living’ one which, as the last line indicates, implies us as complicit in. Thirdly there is a metaphorical place, to which the chopping of the fish head refers to here. Throughout the demonstration another performer guts a fresh fish, its smell permeating the performance, an expression and metaphor of the brutality that counterpoints the comic cultural cookery. These three emerging places are conjured by both the material properties of the space and the theatrical developments of it, an aesthetic of place captured by Anne Ubersfeld’s theory of the scenic place which describes the fictional place of action and also ‘the transposition of the major features of the social space’ (Ubersfeld in McAuley 2000: 18), as comprised by audience and performers. In other words Ubersfeld’s use of the term ‘place’ denotes both the aesthetic materiality of the theatre event and the social (and therefore cultural and political) experience of it as well as the space in which this occurs. My point is that A Place at the Table raises interesting questions about the theatricalisation of verbatim material, in particular the making material of difficult personal testimony as integral to the act of remembrance. Rancière asserts that the act of testimonial is a condensation of the

recollected and its re-enactment that produces actions and expressions that function as ‘an artistic figure’ (2009: 94). Thus, Rancière suggests, the act of remembrance produces a particular aesthetic. This aesthetic is expressed in a narrative of ‘figurative equivalence’ which is in itself ‘a system of relations between similarity and dissimilarity’ (Rancière 2009: 94). This dialogic process of assimilation -- between memories ‘known’ and, in the act of recollection, actions anew -- can be understood as a testimonial mimesis.

Mimesis is not without negative connotation, as short-hand for duplication it is often acquainted with promulgation of the existing, recapitulation for example. Mimesis is also deemed primitive because it is synonymous with the similar; Benjamin described this as, ‘nothing but a weak rudiment of the formerly powerful compulsion to become similar and also to behave mimetically’ (1979 [1933]: 69). This sense of a residual, innate Aristotelian impulse has produced a modern mistrust of mimesis; ‘today it is commonplace to lambast [it] as a naïve form or symptom of Realism’ (Taussig 1993: 44). However Roger Caillois has demonstrated a different potential; a material mimesis, that which designates mimetic acts -- or as he terms them, acts of mimicry<sup>[4]</sup> -- as more complex, dangerous incidences of proximity. In Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia<sup>[5]</sup> Caillois explores animal and insect spatial morphology and sets out to dispel the received notion that a species copies or mimics its environment as a survival tactic. He points out that, as a defence mechanism, morphology is not in the least bit effective, mainly because most prey are hunted and successfully devoured by other means (smell for instance) and, moreover, because effective mimicry frequently results in incidences of accidental cannibalism. Caillois argues that mimicry is not a case of the survival of the fittest, but rather is a manifestation of a lack of distinction between the insect and the space, which results in ‘a disorder of spatial perception’ (Caillois 2003: 99). Caillois proposes that there is an instinctive desire between self and space and he goes as far to suggest that this is a ‘lure of space’ (2003: 99). This is manifested in the self as an ‘instinct d’abandon’ (2003: 102), a desire for the experience of letting go and that this is excessive, a ‘luxury’, with no use but to place the self in peril. The aim of Caillois’ thesis here is to describe the loss of self that is experienced in extreme psychotic conditions (for which the term psychasthenia used to be employed), schizophrenia for instance, whereby the sufferer may claim ‘I know where I am, but I don’t feel that I am where I am’ and Caillois suggests that this is a process of ‘depersonalisation through assimilation into space’ (2003: 100) a process of morphology of turning into space not unlike that of the insect world. In Caillois’ mimesis space is dominant, a threat to the self, who can be easily diminished by such relinquishment to their surrounds.

In relation to A Place at the Table, Caillois' theory reveals a more morphous, ominous relation between the testifying self and the space in which she places her testimonies. For example, the performers denote how the space evolves into place by use of their selves (the table becomes a café in Whitechapel, a street corner in Burundi and is designated as such by their bodies and their texts), also they imbue the space with their bodies (the growing threat of massacre played out by the thrashing of arms against the surface of the table) and we can even see, towards the end of the production an example of the lure of space as one the performers unearths and articulates -- and in doing so takes on the guise of -- the contested place.

Jennifer: I am a piece of earth

Sow & reap my fruits so sweet

Desecrate & rot harvest harvest genocide harvest never be forgot

Dig me up

Violate me

How would you like to use me?

Use my hands for healing hands for cooking hands to slay hands to pray...

Just keep those politicians of power busy don't let their ties get to slack look quick you might find a machete in your neighbours back-garden where you play child soldiers can't run away (Daedalus Theatre Company 2009: 18)

Thus in A Place at the Table the material relation between performer and place, culminates in the morphing of the two. But Caillois' theory suggests that this is a process that subsumes the self, in this case the eye-witness could be considered diffused in the process, 'lost' in the act of remembrance. However, in this production the self was certainly not so subjugated. This aesthetic simulation of space differed in its construction from Caillois' masochistic morphing.

Taussig's version of Caillois' theory is much less doom laden. In his defence of mimesis he grasps the key quotation from Caillois' essay that, in the process of assimilation with space the self, 'is similar, not similar to anything in particular, but simply similar' (Caillois 2003: 100). Taussig's response is that 'I am struck with the way, therefore, mimesis is not only a matter of one being another being, but with this tense yet fluid theatrical relation of form and space with which Caillois would tempt us' (Taussig 1993: 34). Taussig's version of Caillois' theory suggests that the self has more agency in the process of mimesis, that in

the realm of the non-real (in play, in ritual, in theatre) the self is not necessarily subsumed by morphology, but potentially ‘slip[s] into Otherness, trying it on for size’ (1993: 33). Taussig’s mimesis is still a compulsion, a dare to be Other, but without risk of *becoming* this because the fiction of mimicry, particularly in the theatre, in turn reaffirms the identity of the self in the everyday. Simon Shepherd develops this autonomous morphology in drama as a form of ‘self-ing’ the space, almost the opposite of Caillois’ loss of self to the space. Shepherd asserts that the self ‘spaces-out’ (to borrow Taussig’s phrase) by means of a ‘correspondence [between the] animate and inanimate brought about through ... performance registers ...’ (2006: 167).<sup>6</sup>

In A Place at the Table this ‘slipping into Otherness’ is explicit, in that performers play and play with a range of characters -- perpetrators, reporters, murderers, victims -- but the point is not that these performers have the agency to morph into who-ever they so-chose, but that in doing so they inform -- they perform -- the space, and this is what designates the place, in all the complexity that Ubersfeld’s term suggests. This placing by means of slipping into Otherness is most explicit in the played out moments of interrogation. At a key point in the production a ‘character’s’ identity is challenged, the sequence is as follows:

Susan: Who are you?

Anna: I’m a character in a play.

Susan: Who are you?

Anna: I’m an actor.

Susan: Who are you?

Anna: I’m a woman.

Susan: Who are you?

Anna: I’m a resident of NW1.

Susan: Who are you?

Anna: I’m history

Susan: Who are you?

Anna: I’m a truth

Susan: Who are you?

Anna: An eye-witness testimony.

Susan: Who are you?

Anna: An eye-witness testimony.

(Daedalus Theatre Company 2009: 16)<sup>7</sup>

Anna is acting the different ways in which she appears in the places of the production; she is a character with a place at the table and a place in the narrative, but she also has a place in history, claims a place in the truth of the narrative and even details her actual place of residence. In doing so she not only navigates the different places of the performance, but declares these, her self is the very identifying presence -- it is she who performs her shifting role through the fiction of the theatrical production, it is she who slips in and out of Otherness, trying it on for size, and in doing so she executes a kind of selfing of space. This movement, is a form of agency by means of which she brings her own truth to the replaying and remembrance of the event.

Recreating intolerability, encountering the visual dispositif requires an emancipated mimesis, an aesthetic understanding of the theatricality of the material relation between self and space. This might allow us to admit to the lure of theatre for the witness, the proximity that is necessary for the testifying subject to adopt and exert control over the Other and, in doing so, disrupt the intolerability of the events in Burundi and Rwanda; to face what The Eyes of Gutete Emerita see.

## Notes

1 While there is ‘no fixed, reliable or agreed English equivalent’ (Shepherd & Wallis 2004: 212) for the Greek term mimesis, the alternative versions listed here all share one ‘similar’ property, that they are plastic. Mimesis, however it is organised, coerced, reclaimed or liberated, remains an aesthetic proposition.

2 The production was developed at Camden People’s Theatre, North London and subsequently toured with performances at Southwark Cathedral, South London and for Amnesty, returning to cpt in 2011, for more information on the production see [www.apatt.co.uk](http://www.apatt.co.uk)

3 Charlotte Wilson a VSO worker in Burundi was robbed and murdered along with twenty or more passengers in 2000, the difficulties in ascertaining the facts of this event and the trauma of uncovering the varying ‘truths’ are documented in Titanic Express, 2000 by her brother Richard Wilson, who is also an advisor for A Place at the Table

4 Mimicry is also a category of Caillois' classification of games that form the basis of his ludic theory, the most advanced manifestation of which is acting, a sophisticated version of 'passing for another' (Caillois 2001 [1958]: 21).

5 This essay had a notable impact on subsequent theories of self, identity and similarity, for instance Lacan's The Mirror Stage (1949) can be read as a response to this theory of the fusing of self and space in which he acknowledges Caillois' 'signification of space for living organism' (Lacan in Frank 2003: 90).

6 Shepherd interprets Caillois' instinct d'abandon as a reflection of 'the relationships between body and space as constitutive of identity' (2006, 166) and the self becomes a part of a 'represented space' (Caillois in Shepherd, 2006, 167) befitting Shepherd's emphasis on the appearance and perception of 'the becomings' (167) of self in drama, which depend on the 'psychic and social circumstances of those watching the becomings' (167).

7 This was the sequence of declarations as performed at Camden People's Theatre in May 2009, though a note to the script states that this is in part improvised it always ends with the repetition of the culminating statements.

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