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The Hanging Man

Death, indeterminacy and the event

LIB TAYLOR

To engage with an event that is uncertainly poised between reality and performance raises significant questions for discourses of analysis that might describe and interpret it. The stakes of this problem are raised when the event in question is the death of a human being, or the simulation of such a death. Further, the indeterminate spatial and temporal location of an encounter with such a traumatic spectacle affects the possibilities for pinning down what was perceived and what it may mean. In a foreign country, in public space, the glimpse of a hanging and apparently dead body briefly disarmed the functions of everyday and rational cognition and displaced the coordinates of experiential time in a rare moment of open, yet troubling perception. On the basis of a personal experience that insistently posed these problems, this article debates how approaches to performance can engage with such an event and with the frameworks of interpretation that can be brought to bear on it. This was a momentary experience that happened in the past, so the analysis must also take account of the function of memory in reconstructing the event, and the paradigms of cultural knowledge that offered themselves as parallels, comparators or distinctions against which the experience could be measured. Theoretical frameworks deriving from analytical approaches to performance, media representation and ethical dilemmas are evaluated here as means to assimilate an indeterminate and challenging event, and the notion of what an 'event' may be itself

addressed. The sight of a hanging man becomes an occasion for an active process of engagement, characterized by reflexive meditation on the interplay of reality and simulation, space and time, and perception and interpretation. By insistently allowing a space for performance to be indeterminate, this discussion seeks to match the character of the event that gave rise to it and to argue for the understanding of an event as an ethical as well as intellectual challenge.

THE HANGING MAN

While driving out Interstate 10 from Los Angeles to Palm Desert, my partner and I came across a traffic jam, which slowed cars down as they were funnelled into one lane. The cause of the disruption was a body hanging by the neck on a rope from a bridge some 25 or 30 feet above the freeway. Clearly, we had arrived at the scene just after something had happened there. The feet of the corpse dangled at shoulder height of the policeman directing traffic past the obstacle. We manoeuvred around the hazard, the cars picked up speed and we were on our way.

The image of the body has marked itself on my memory. Several years later I believe I can still recall it vividly: a man with longish dark hair in a green parka and khaki trousers. He was thin, with a dark face, and his arms hung by his side while his feet were slightly turned out. I was shaken, unable to assimilate what we had seen. I assumed that it was a tragic suicide. I did not feel anguish or pain, since I did not know the man or his circumstances. My response was a

Notes

¹Examples of these mediated representations of death include Henry Singer's 9/11: The falling man (2006) and Robert Capa's photograph 'Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936', the veracity of which was questioned by Phillip Knightley ([1975](#)).

²The notion of suicide as a discursive act is relatively uncommon in sociological studies, but see Knizek (2007).

³For discussion of suffering, enlightenment and liberation in Buddhism, see Burton [2004](#).

⁴On theatre space as uncanny, see Taylor [2006](#).

⁵Franco B's performances include: Oh Lover Boy (2001), I Miss You (2003) and Still Life (2005).

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