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Staging an emergency

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Staging an Emergency

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The event is what comes and, in coming, comes to surprise me, to surprise and to suspend comprehension: the event is first of all *that which* I do not comprehend. Better, the event is first of all *that* I do not comprehend....: my incomprehension” (Derrida, 2003, p. 90)¹

I.

In a 2001 interview in New York City, Jacques Derrida was asked to reflect on the status of 9/11 as a ‘major event’. In his response, Derrida spoke at length of the non-representational quality of such an event. A major event, Derrida proposed, is a disruptive force. Major events exceed, dislocate, and problematize the systems of meaning through which we order everyday life. It defies understanding. It doesn’t make sense. So it is only natural, that in the aftermath of such an event, we are compelled to try and re-appropriate it back into these systems. The trauma induced by the irruption of a ‘major event’ compels us to find a *meaning*. To make it make sense.

This demand has found new urgency in a media ecosystem comprised of 24-hour news channels, live blogs and instant twitter updates. Recent events such as the Boston Marathon bombing and the Woolwich stabbings amply demonstrate the considerable influence of major media outlets in shaping these processes. Staking their credibility on being the first to report ‘breaking news’ media outlets compete to collect, collate and report snippets of information no matter how seemingly trivial. Teams of experts and witnesses are corralled to interpret this data and identify those responsible, their political affiliation, their motive, and their process of ‘radicalization’. Speculation abounds as reporters, fearful of losing an increasingly oversaturated audience, construct hypothetical narratives linking the event to identifiable social problems. As news stories synchronize across media outlets, as particular photographs become iconic through their reprinting, as events are translated into documentaries, Hollywood blockbusters, and made-for-tv movies the event is confirmed as a major event through its repeated reproduction.

But of course this process is not innocent. The extension of a pervasive security apparatus, anti-Islamic hate crimes, and even foreign wars are enabled by the ways in which these representations appear to beg for a response.

In light of this politics of representation, what I found particularly interesting in Rowena Easton’s spoken choir performance “!” [Hollywood Blues] was the way in which it offered an alternative mode of staging ‘major events’. Rather than providing another narrative through which the sense of the event is established, “!” [Hollywood Blues] explores the complex and disorienting processes through which the disaster is written. In what follows, I would like firstly to distinguish the structure of this performance from those which we, as spectators, have become accustomed to receiving of ‘major

¹¹ Derrida, J. (2003). Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides. In G. Borradori (Ed.), *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (pp. 85–136). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

events'. In particular, I would like to suggest that this structure is better attuned to the complex processes underlying the co-evolution of disasters and societies in their emergence. In the final section, I would like to briefly discuss some questions which this performance may raise in the fields of disaster response, the social sciences, and politics more broadly defined.

II.

Video and photographic imagery anchor discourses on disaster. Their looped reiteration and iconic reproduction provide an objective basis grounding the more speculative analyses and commentaries they almost always accompany. The blatant disregard for visual representations within "!" [Hollywood Blues] already signals a radical departure from contemporary treatments, in both the media and the arts, of major events. The basic constitutive element of this performance is the statement. These statements do not attempt to represent the event. They neither describe it nor are they an account of anyone's experience of it. They are more reactions: expressions of fear and alarm, orders, consolations. This communication thus arises from a zone located *between* an objective happening and a subjective register. These are not the statements of individual characters. Rather, they are the collective enunciation of what disaster researchers would term a crowd: an amorphous assemblage of bodies, displaying a unity of behaviour and intention despite the heterogeneity of its parts.

Crowds do not pre-exist crises. They are formed *in* and *through* them. The statements which comprise "!" [Hollywood Blues] allow us to trace the constitution of crowd and event through a process of symbiotic evolution and creative destruction.

Of course, this is not the first time we have invoked a disaster, real or mythical, to tell us who *we* are. Indeed, such narratives may in fact be one of the oldest mechanisms of community building. Rather, I would suggest that the innovation which "!" [Hollywood Blues] introduces must instead be understood in terms a shift in temporal register. "!" [Hollywood Blues] tells the story of the disaster, not as it is rationalized in retrospect, but as experienced in its emergence. The unitary, chronological time of the narrative, which tames the event by placing it within a coherent narrative framework, has been discarded. What is left is the fractured, dislocated time of crisis itself. This is time experienced as a multiplicity of unfolding events: Not the event *in* time, but the multiple temporalities which embody time itself.

Only in "!" [Hollywood Blues] the series of statements forms a non-synthesizable totality. It simply does not add up. Rather than being drawn along by the integrative, chronological time of the narrative, we are subjected to the differential force of statements which purposefully act to disrupt and undermine the establishment of a coherent narrative.

The effect is utterly disorienting. Statements fire from the crowd in rapid succession. The sense which begins to form across one series of statements disintegrates in the chaos of divergent series. Story lines disappear as quickly as they are introduced. Heroes and victims emerge and fade within the crowd. Tension mounts and dissipates.

Through it all, the audience is left to piece together a fractured event. In this respect, I couldn't help but notice how the audience assumes the responsibilities of coordinating groups who, in an actual emergency, are tasked with making the event known. Collecting and collating information

from various agencies in the form of situational reports (SIT REPS), these groups are tasked with creating a 'common operating picture' and disseminating it amongst the myriad of responder agencies in order to create 'shared situational awareness'. A shared understanding of what the event *is*, underpins the integration of activities and personnel in contemporary multi-agency responses.

This performance, however, refuses the audience the opportunity, and satisfaction, of constructing one. Fragments are assembled, but do not cohere, provoking confusion, frustration, and anxiety.

Interestingly, as the performance unfolds, these activities slowly dissipate. The struggle to impose a meaning upon the chaos surrenders to the affective force of the performance itself. The performance is permitted to move us. If the performance refuses the establishment of a narrative, it is because the disaster is not understood - it's felt.

It is here that something rather remarkable happens. These affects facilitate processes of bottom-up self-synchronization and emergence. Chorus and audience become enjoined within a wider resonance machine. The battle-rhythms of the performance intensifies to a crescendo. Tension fills the room. Suddenly, and without warning, an absurd comment—irrational, over-exaggerated or just plain stupid—cuts the tension. An eruption of laughter washes over the audience evacuating the room of the mounting anxiety. The performance is involved in the creation of a dynamic affective field comprised of multiple feedback loops. Amplifications of intensity tip across unforeseen critical thresholds. Something new is being *created* which does not share a purpose, or a meaning, but is more organically glued together through the transmission of something less, or more, than a feeling.

This is not the story of a well, defined unified community moving forward in history. It is an account of the emergence of the crowd: disoriented, fractured, disjoint subject to reversals and collapses in its coherency.

III.

While the implications of the innovative structure of this performance are undoubtedly numerous, in this final section I will limit myself to three observations.

1. While "!" [Hollywood Blues] departs radically from the ways in which we are accustomed to having disasters represents, what it does display an affinity with are the emergency scenarios and Preparedness Exercises organized by emergency response agencies. Here too, the narrative or 'plot' is only a secondary consideration, behind the production of particular affective atmospheres within which responders are expected to rehearse their responsibilities.

These similarities raise interesting possibilities for an engagement between the arts and emergency practitioners. How might theatre and performance studies shed light on how rehearsal and memory are employed within preparedness exercises? How might the arts be used to boost community resilience through innovative applications of community theatre and other media?

2. "!" [Hollywood Blues] raises important methodological questions for those working in a range of academic disciplines interested in the social and political dimensions of crises and emergencies.

On the one hand, this performance should alert us to the multiple ways in which an event may be represented and engaged. Methodologically, this might provoke us to explore new methods for engaging with the complex dynamics of an unfolding event: accounting for both the productive and destructive dynamics at play and tracing the confused non-linear processes of emergence underlying those objects we all too soon characterize as pre-formed in the social sciences. Indeed, this may even require a new vocabulary, better equipped to account for these complex processes—drawn as much from the arts as from the sciences.

3. Finally, as I have suggested, this performance raises important questions concerning the politics of representation.

Does "!" [Hollywood Blues] provide us with a more ethical mode of representing a disaster? If by, ethical, one means resolving the politics of representation within an objective, 'true' rendering of the event accepted by all parties, then clearly it does not. The contribution of this performance is not in advancing a solution to the problem of representation. Rather it is in providing an account of the problematic space-time prior to the act of representation. The effect is two-fold: on the one hand, highlighting the complexity of these processes actively disrupts the conditions which enable a politics of violence and violent othering. On the other, the mobilization of affects gestures towards a mode of community building constructed *through* a common experience of uncertainty, and indeed insecurity, rather than a shared identity, set of values, or enemy.