



UNDERSTANDING ATROCITIES: REMEMBERING, REPRESENTING, AND TEACHING GENOCIDE

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ISBN 978-1-55238-886-0

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Atrocity, Banality, and *Jouissance* in Performance

Donia Mounsef

The Banality of Evil in Performance

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt argued that atrocities are committed by ordinary people who are victims of neither perversion nor monstrosity. For Arendt, reporting on Otto Adolf Eichmann's trial from Jerusalem in 1961, evil is the result of two systems: the first is a system that commits atrocities by merely diverting the attention of its participants onto bureaucratic concerns; the second is a system that fails to accomplish its goals by disconnecting its participants from the principles of the institutions they are serving. Eichmann, according to Arendt, "was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness ... that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is 'banal' and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace."¹ This, in essence, is "the banality of evil"—that atrocities can be committed by ordinary people who are "neither demonic nor monstrous." In a lecture Arendt gave ten years after the Eichmann trial, she asserted that large-scale evil deeds—"which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer"—were perhaps the result of extraordinary shallowness.²

It would have been more “comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster” writes Arendt.³ But the problem with evildoers like Eichmann is precisely

that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied ... that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis generis humani*, commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.⁴

What became evident in the Eichmann trial is that the perpetrator followed ordinances and rules within the confines of the law, demonstrating that there is a certain blind obedience governing the actions of people like Eichmann, who follow bureaucratic rules to the teeth but fail to reflect on the content of such arbitrary rules.

Arendt’s position on Eichmann is frequently criticized for failing to account for the evil that is committed with full knowledge and intent, or as a blatant disregard for ethics. Most critical positions on Arendt’s rendering of the Eichmann trial argue that she trivialized the man’s fanatical and radical anti-Semitism by ascertaining that evil has no roots, that it is never “radical, that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. ... That is its ‘banality.’ Only the good has depth and can be radical.”⁵ For Arendt, it is unequivocally “sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed [Eichmann] to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.”⁶

Other critics, such as Slavoj Žižek in *The Plague of Fantasies*, have pointed out different blind spots in Arendt’s position: that *jouissance* makes clear the inadequacy of the “banality of evil.” From the French, *jouissance* is contrasted with pleasure as a form of transgressive enjoyment combined with a sense of loss. Using Lacan’s notion of the master’s enjoyment in inflicting pain that structures the relationship of domination, Žižek contends that, beyond its banality, evil is a function of an “imaginary

screen” that maintains distance with the victim and the horror inflicted. The “imaginary screen” is the self-delusion, the story that glosses over the real motivation for becoming an agent of atrocity. For example, the Nazi guards hide behind an imaginary screen by telling themselves that they are “civilized Germans” who are doing a “necessary job” and following orders thoroughly while drawing secret enjoyment or sadistic *jouissance* from the bureaucratic violence they are committing. In other words, political subjects are allowed “inherent transgressions” sanctioned by the system to produce this secret *jouissance*. For Žižek, in order to understand the way executioners carry out atrocities without the slightest indignation, we have to supplement the purely *symbolic* bureaucratic logic involved in the notion of the “banality of evil” with these two other components: the *imaginary* screen of satisfactions and myths “which enable the subjects to maintain a distance towards (and thus to ‘neutralize’) the horrors they are involved in and the knowledge they have about them,” and “the *real* of the perverse (sadistic) *jouissance* in what they were doing (torturing, killing, dismembering bodies).”⁷ This very neutralization of the crime, according to Žižek, is precisely what makes it “ambiguous in its libidinal impact,” and thus morbidly enjoyable since

on the one hand, it enabled (some of) the participants to neutralize the horror and take it as “just another job”; on the other, the basic lesson of the perverse ritual ... was in itself a source of an additional *jouissance* (does it not provide an additional kick if one performs the killing as a complicated administrative-criminal operation? Is it not more satisfying to torture prisoners as part of some orderly procedure—say, the meaningless “morning exercises” which served only to torment them—didn’t it give another “kick” to the guards’ satisfaction when they were inflicting pain on their victims not only by directly beating them up but in the guise of an activity officially destined to maintain their health?). ... One cannot claim that [the Nazi guards] were grey, dispassionate bureaucrats blindly following orders in accordance with the German authoritarian tradition of unconditional obedience: numerous testimonies bear witness to the *excess of enjoyment* of “unnecessary” supplementary inflicting of pain or humiliation. ... One cannot claim that the executioners were a bunch of crazy

fanatics oblivious of even the most elementary moral norms. ... One cannot claim that they were terrorized into submission, since any refusal to execute an order would be severely punished: before doing any “dirty work,” members of the police unit were regularly asked if they were able to do it, and those who refused were excused without punishment.⁸

It is this very “libidinal impact” that makes representations of atrocities highly problematic, as artistic, creative, and fictional works often risk trivializing, aestheticizing, or sensationalizing the atrocity they represent. Adrienne Rich underlined this same contradiction by arguing in favour of art as a necessary critique of totalizing systems in “Legislators of the World,” an article she wrote for the *Guardian* in 2006:

Poetry has been charged with “aestheticizing,” thus being complicit in the violent realities of power. ... If to “aestheticize” is to glide across brutality and cruelty, treat them merely as dramatic occasions for the artist rather than structures of power to be described and dismantled—much hangs on that word “merely”. ... We can also define the “aesthetic,” not as a privileged and sequestered rendering of human suffering, but as news of an awareness, a resistance, which totalizing systems want to quell: art reaching into us for what’s still passionate, still unintimidated, still unquenched.⁹

There is an undeniable disjunction between art, politics, violence, and *jouissance* that reframes the binary distinction between “ethicism” (the notion that art is guided by ethical concerns) and aestheticism (the notion that art and ethics belong to autonomous spheres). If perpetrators of atrocities can hide behind an “imaginary screen,” so can audiences of atrocity conceal themselves behind the safety of the fourth wall. Can art represent atrocity without being complicit in the structures of power that it purports to critique?

After tracing a brief history of violence in performance, this chapter will interrogate the way recent theatrical representations have challenged binary configurations of good and evil, and problematized simplistic regimes of “us” and “them,” giving shape to Arendt’s view that evil is as ordinary as it is banal all the while embodying Žižek’s “libidinal impact”

of such representations. Three examples of recent artistic representations of atrocities will be examined: a play by Canadian playwright Judith Thompson, *Palace of the End* (2007), and multimedia performances by the Iraqi-American performance artist Wafaa Bilal, *Shoot an Iraqi* (2007), and ... *and Counting* (2010). These plays and performances question the representation of violence and the violence of representation by arguing that performance does not construct the real violence or reconstruct it for the audience—on the contrary, it estranges it, not unlike Brechtian alienation, revealing an exchange that is both realist and anti-realist, artistic representation and reproduction of actuality, spectacle and mimesis.

Spectacular Atrocity

How can theatre and performance, in their intimate and contained settings, speak about atrocities, and other acts committed on a large scale, with a complex set of actors, victims, and perpetrators? Unlike representations of other major historical traumas, atrocities and genocide are not simply reproduced, nor are they reproducible on stage for a variety of reasons. Theatre has, for the most part, subscribed to a certain sense of decorum (propriety, or what the French call *bienséance*) when it comes to representing extreme violence. The rule of good taste, as it has been known, governs what is allowed on stage and what shall remain off stage. In general, extreme violence was not depicted in front of an audience for a good part of theatre history even though violated bodies found their way into ancient Greek theatre, but they had to be moved off stage using the *ekkyklema*, or the wheeled platform, to conceal their provocative horror. Nevertheless, ancient Romans introduced blood spectacles and gladiator fights depicting the live slaughter of humans for the entertainment of the elite. Similarly, medieval drama and passion plays showed martyrdom, sacrifice, and morbid mutilations as part of the action. Even Shakespeare's theatre did not avoid some gory stage violence. Except in seventeenth-century neoclassical France, the rule of good taste did not categorically prohibit the showing of extreme violence, which became the hallmark of the modern theatre. Whereas the early twentieth century showed a moderate amount of violence on stage—acting mostly as a contemplation of its consequences in the theatre of Bertolt Brecht or Samuel Beckett, for example—the theatre

of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, influenced by television and media, exploited a more graphic depiction of violence.

What became known in the 1990s as “in-yer-face” theatre (as per Aleks Sierz’s term) was part of a long tradition of theatre of provocation, which is most broadly defined as a theatre that aims at shocking, provoking, and offending an audience. Like other forms of provocation theatre, what in Britain became known as the New Brutalist movement¹⁰ dominated the London scene of the 1990s with daringly graphic representation of violence as part and parcel of the theatrical avant-garde. New Brutalists such as Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, Naomi Wallace, David Eldridge, Martin McDonagh, and Mark Ravenhill pushed the limits of what is acceptable on stage, multiplying physical and verbal violence, mutilated bodies, horrific tortures, and gory scenes, and frequently offending their audiences with an extremely gruesome and unapologetic cruelty. Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995), which coincided with the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, is often considered the quintessence of the New Brutalist movement. These violent and offensive acts changed the way we experience or “consume” staged violence. They aimed not at creating new scenes of gore, as nothing could shock an audience accustomed to filmic and mediatized violence, but at breaking the codes of how we see and experience that brutality.

Despite the ubiquitous rule of good taste, from Aeschylus to McDonagh, the theatre has a long tradition of terrifying acts of physical aggression, murder, dismemberment, even cannibalism. The difference is that in the late twentieth century, instead of following the classical rule of *bienséance*, playwrights represented the violence with either extreme realism or extreme stylization combined with an autobiographical impulse. For example, one cannot dissociate Sarah Kane’s *Psychosis 4.48* from the playwright’s relationship to self-harm, and the severe depression that led to her suicide in 1999. Nevertheless, as violent and as horrifically real as the New Brutalist aesthetic was, there is a distancing effect at play—not in the Brechtian sense of distance for critical awareness—but in the sense of a numbing distance.

If stages in the 1990s were littered with corpses, rape, murder, blood, and bones it was perhaps a way to express ideological disillusionment after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the binary opposition between the Eastern and the Western Blocs, while the international will to stop mass atrocities (from Rwanda to Somalia to

Kosovo to Bosnia) was being challenged. With the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of a clearly defined ideological Other, theatre turned violently inward, where the body became the site of a real and imagined violence packaged in realist, surrealist, or farcical overtones.

Yet, as in any representation of symbolic violence, the audience will always demand more, making the need for excess at best tedious and at worst ethically problematic. What would the logical evolution from extreme “represented” violence be if not “presented” violence or the unacceptable terrain of snuff, where “actors” (not characters) are actually tortured and subjected to extreme violence? Is there a danger of rendering an audience immune to such violence to the point that it may identify not with the victim but with the perpetrator? How do we control, if that is even possible, the slippery slope of representation and identification with atrocity in live performance? I am not sure if these questions are on the minds of most playwrights when they are writing extremely violent and gory scenes, but they are likely on the minds of audience members leaving the theatre who may feel guilty, angry, or simply offended for having willingly or unwillingly, consensually or non-consensually, participated in brutally orgiastic violence.

And yet, the mass dissemination and representation of atrocities continued past 9/11 and into the War on Terror with the return to spectacular violence exposed in the massive distribution of the images of the American prison scandal at Abu Ghraib.¹¹ Beyond their political or military significance, the Abu Ghraib photographs performed a certain colonial nostalgia for a fetishistic representation or desire to subjugate otherness through the *mise en scène* of a soft-core pornographic performance meant to endow the director/soldier/voyeur with a “screen” of superiority over the dangerous “subhuman” Other. Spectacular atrocities such as the Abu Ghraib prison scandal (and the continued fallout of torture scandals revealed in massive cable leaks) or the highly stylized ISIS beheading videos put an end to Michel Foucault’s “age of sobriety” in punishment and brought back to the forefront questions of the representation and representability of violence on a large scale. It is perhaps because atrocities in the global era have morphed into messy crises made even messier by what Michael Mann called “the dark side of democracy,” and because democratic ideals convert *demos* into *ethnos*, we are witnessing the rise of “organic nationalism” that only helps promote the cleansing of minorities. Consequently,

representations of these atrocities have become problematic: no longer is it important to stage these events as a reminder of our struggle to “remain human,” as Christian Biet argued when he wrote that representations of the Holocaust were necessary “to lead the audience to a humanistic and universal understanding of the difficulty every human must face in the struggle to remain human.”¹² But beyond that need to remain human, violent history is un-representable because it destroys the very foundation of language we need to represent it. In effect, it may only be possible to represent history in an artistic rendering. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub pointed out in *Testimony: Crises in Witnessing*, “art alone can live up to the task of contemporary thinking and of meeting the incredible demands of suffering, of politics and of contemporary consciousness, and yet escape the subtly omnipresent and the almost unavoidable cultural betrayal both of history and of the victims.”¹³

“Between the Spectacular and the Embodied”

In their book, *Violence Performed*, Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon suggest that “violence acquires its immense significance in a delicate pivot between the spectacular and the embodied.”¹⁴ This delicate pivot is what brings the public to convene around scenes of mass atrocity, as Mark Seltzer observed in his classic study of trauma and wound culture. According to Seltzer, the pathological public sphere functions as a form of “convening of the public around scenes of violence,” with a “fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, the collective gathering around shock, trauma and the wound.”¹⁵ As fascinated as we are by torn bodies, we continue to grapple with their representability in art and the paradox of the impossibility of witnessing. Felman and Laub observed judiciously that a witness is required “when historical accuracy is in doubt and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question.”¹⁶ Conversely, writing on Arendt’s Eichmann, Felman warns of the danger of dramatizing the struggle between law and pathology, and the surfacing of a “juridical unconscious” during trials that attempt to give a voice to victims of trauma. She maintains that a pattern “emerges in which the trial, while it tries to put an end to trauma, inadvertently performs an acting out of it. Unknowingly, the trial thus repeats the trauma, reenacts its structures.”¹⁷ There is, however, a contradictory process at play

in representing atrocities: the compulsion to speak and make the trauma visible and the pressure to remain silent in the face of one's inability to articulate a truthful representation of the experience. As Felman observed brilliantly: "testimony does not simply tell *about* the impossibility of telling: it dramatizes it—*enacts it*—through its own lapse into coma and its own collapse into silence."¹⁸ Theatre is the site of this problematic dramatization between the experience, the understanding, the re-enactment, and the recollection.

The Spectacular

In Judith Thompson's 2007 play, *Palace of the End*, the first of a three-part monologue titled "My Pyramids" is told from the perspective of the female soldier, Lynndie England, who appeared in many of the Abu Ghraib photographs gleefully committing acts of atrocity and torture, and later becoming the scapegoat for the entire debacle. An earlier incarnation of the play, from 2005, showcased a single monologue entitled "My Pyramids," and was then expanded into three monologues with the addition of "Harrowdown Hill" and "Instruments of Yearning." The three-part play was first produced in Toronto at the Canadian Stage in 2007. "My Pyramids" gives us a different and more human side to Lynndie England, who appears pregnant and in good health after her return from a tour of duty in Iraq that ended with the infamous scandal. The monologue begins with Lynndie (referred to as "Soldier") "googling" herself to find out, much to her naïve surprise, that her name produces six hundred thousand hits. The media frenzy around Lynndie's actions at Abu Ghraib sheds light on the way the public response often works to assign blame without any complex analysis of ethical or political responsibility. Lynndie's naïveté makes her lament the fact that she will never be a hero like Jessica Lynch:

SOLDIER. I mighta had a TV movie made about me, too. She is truly a hero she is, and hey, did you know she's from West Virginia too? Yeah, she's a country girl, like me, and us country girls kick butt! *Nobody* messes with a country girl, oh no, let go! Can you imagine how scared she felt? Everybody in her company killed except her? Prisoner of the most brutal people on earth? Yeah. I reckon Jessica Lynch is America's sweetheart. I am America's secret that got shouted out to the world.¹⁹

If it is possible to scapegoat this young naïve woman from West Virginia it is because she is, compared to the other female hero, an anti-hero, an “anti-Jessica Lynch,” as Melissa Brittain proposed in her chapter “Benevolent Invaders, Heroic Victims and Depraved Villains,” in *(En)Gendering the War on Terror*.²⁰ Lynndie expects that the public will demonize her and condemn her for her despicable actions—all those “liberals, PEACE PINHEADS. Pink cotton candy cowards afraid of being at war.”²¹ This is perhaps the playwright’s attempt at implicating her audience in an active dialogue with the banality of evil veiled in naïve patriotism or nationalistic rhetoric. When Lynndie is done with her racist, orientalist tirade we are left with a crash through the “looking glass of culture,” as she imagines herself standing in—metonymically—for what makes America powerful and vulnerable: “I said you don’t MESS with the eagle you don’t MESS with the eagle, dude or the eagle tear your eyes out and that’s what I did I tore ‘em out and I flew, man, for just that night I flew through Abu G. my wingspan like a football field. And I soared through the air. ‘Til I crashed back. Through the looking glass.”²²

Brittain further observes that when the Abu Ghraib prison scandal erupted we saw many photographs of male perpetrators and their male and female victims. When the pictures became public and the story turned into a scandal, “we began seeing fewer and fewer photographs of male soldiers torturing Iraqi men, and began seeing and hearing more and more about the photographs that depicted Lynndie England sexually humiliating Iraqi male prisoners.”²³ The images of white female perpetrators served a different purpose, according to Brittain:

The images of Arab men being broken, subdued, shamed and disciplined by a white woman allow for the realization of the “American dream” of the total demasculation and humiliation of Arab men, while white masculinity remains outside the category of “depravity,” and the white male establishment, both military and governmental avoids blame. The pleasure a deeply racist society experiences when viewing images of a white woman grinning at the sexual humiliation of Arab men diverts attention away from the larger question of who is ultimately responsible for the abuses, and on to a discussion of one “sexually deviant” woman.²⁴

This is because, according to Brittain, focusing on England was an effective way to manage yet another crisis in US authority: “In the fantasy world of US benevolence, England is the ‘anti-Jessica Lynch,’ the ‘whore’ in the conventional virgin/whore dichotomy. The fetishization of England as a ‘phallic female’ turned the scandal into a cautionary tale of what happens when women get too much power, while sparing white masculinity the bad press.”²⁵ Similarly, in contrast to the elemental evil portrayed by Lynndie, the “media mobilized Lynch’s working-class status through reference to her humble ambitions and ‘down-home’ tastes, replacing the middle-class femininity of colonial narratives with an image of working-class white femininity worth protecting.”²⁶ Thompson’s play works against the ideological manipulations of England versus Lynch by offering a vision of the female soldier as yet another pawn in a hyper-military, hyper-masculine system that turns atrocity into spectacle.

In an earlier interview with playwright Ann Holloway, Judith Thompson discusses the same issue of dehumanizing the soldier in “My Pyramids.” The portrayal in “My Pyramids” of Lynndie’s childish amusement at her torture of Iraqi prisoners as well as her tendency to downplay her personal responsibility for the abuse of these prisoners is highlighted in the interview.²⁷ Thompson reminds Holloway that at Abu Ghraib, Lynndie went as far as to perform certain torture “skits”—such as walking the soldiers on leashes—for the entertainment of other, mostly male, soldiers.²⁸ Thompson sees in Lynndie more than just elemental evil, and points to her lack of education and sophistication and her pathetic susceptibility to the flattery of any kind of sexual attention from male soldiers. In a sense Thompson gives credence to Arendt’s view that thoughtlessness and delusion are at the roots of evil when she remarks in the interview that “self-delusion is funny, and the way she talks is funny. And I do think that unfortunately there is an element of class condescension—that we are laughing, I guess, at her lack of education.”²⁹

In the play, the thoughtlessness with which Lynndie proceeds is evident in her complete ignorance of her obligation as a jailer and of her prisoner-subjects. She starts by viewing Iraqis not as men, but as a “bunch of terrorists” who all look and act the same: “these are not men, they are terrorists. . . . Actually, it’s the first thing that came to my mind when I walked into that prison and seen all them men that look exactly alike. I know what might be fun: HUMAN PYRAMID WITH NIKKID CAPTIVE MEN.”³⁰

Following these racist musings, Lynndie recalls an incident where as a child she tormented a young girl in West Virginia: “Lee Ann Wibby is an American, she was very VERY different from the APES AT ABU GH-RAIB. They was monsters in the shape of human beings.”³¹ What makes Lee Ann Wibby different from the Iraqi “apes”? Is it because the victim is an American girl who is by definition innocent? Or is it because in torturing and dehumanizing Arab men who are “animals” and “monsters” she feels more useful in this system of instrumentalized power without responsibility? As an agent of this unquestionable neo-colonial system, Lynndie rules over “evil RAKEES” who must be subdued and moulded into an ideological entity that carries its guilt by simply being the *Other* in the colonial binary.

Nick Stevenson observed that the American war machine must often construct otherness as evil at the outset of war in order to justify abuse and domination. He writes that leading up to the first Gulf War in 1991, media and television stories were constructed to focus on “the personalised evil of Saddam Hussein, the promotion of inadequately verified horror stories of Iraqi atrocities, racist projections of uncivilised Arabs and the marginalisation of alternate perspectives.”³² The media hallucination (or the “ecstasy of communication” as Jean Baudrillard would call it) makes it possible to hide behind our self-deluded view of our neo-colonial mission and helps us avoid any ethical and historical responsibility. Even though no one in the West believes that the war was about exporting democracy to Iraq or ridding it of its evil dictator, it became absolutely necessary for the media to represent the “savage,” uncivilized Other in need of help, while in effect bringing out layers and layers of violence, exploitation, and abuse. “My Pyramids” is a piece about our ethical porosity and inability to look at the Other as equal, which the play’s second monologue addresses in different ways.

In “Harrowdown Hill” we are presented with the perspective of Dr. David Kelly, the British weapons inspector who was found dead in mysterious circumstances in 2003—an apparent suicide—two days after he appeared in front of a British government inquiry and denied claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. The title references the wooded area near his home where Kelly’s body was found. In the play, we meet him in the last few hours before his death, and we hear a monologue that is more dialogic and less self-centred than Lynndie’s “Pyramids,” in which

he addresses the audience and invites us into the scene of his death. Kelly predicts the public response to his impending death: “almost nobody will believe it. There will be rock songs, art installations by angry Germans, television movies and the Internet will roil with talk of the murder of David Kelly by men in black, that’s how I’ll be remembered. The mousey scientist who set off a storm. Another casualty of the War in Iraq.”³³ Kelly is capable of discerning the constructed division between a neo-colonial self, and a cultural Other by demonstrating a capacity to apprehend the humanity of Iraqis. In his hazy rant, he recounts his close friendship with Jalal—the bookshop owner in Baghdad—who was killed along with his family by American soldiers, who also raped his young daughter.³⁴ Jalal, having noticed that some US soldiers were watching his daughter with “evil in their eyes,” had appealed to Kelly for help. Kelly was unable to help his Iraqi friend and his daughter while reassuring him that the soldiers are “carefully monitored by their commanding officers, and they would never dare approach her.”³⁵

Kelly’s monologue is a reminder of what happens when we stand idly by and do nothing to stop the atrocities committed in our name. Susan Sontag argued in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that the pain of others is what interpolates us in pictures of atrocity, but if we are left unable to do anything about what we are witnessing, and if we are unable to learn something from what we are seeing, then we succumb to our voyeuristic tendencies. Dr. Kelly’s final testament is a reminder that doing nothing is damning in itself because it strips us of our conscience and makes us complicit in the very acts that we purport to condemn:

[DAVID] You see, this might be the only way I can have an impact, the only way I can make up for what I did not do. ...

I’m beginning to think that it’s the greatest sin of our time.

Knowing, and pretending that we don’t know, so that we won’t be inconvenienced in any way. Do you understand what I am saying?

I knew. All the things I knew. And I did nothing.³⁶

Like Lynndie, Kelly must walk “through the looking glass” in his final scene, revealing the truth about his guilt-ridden self. After he shouts his need to tell the truth, his breathing becomes laborious, he lies down, thanks the audience for witnessing his dying moments, has an imaginary conversation with his daughter, to whom he sings a song from “Winnie the Pooh,” and then prepares to let go: “But I, David Kelly, I am *here*, and I promise, I will always be here.”³⁷ David Kelly’s ghostliness transforms the stage into a thanatological site where the living become memorials to unrecoverable loss.

Foreshadowing the spectral appearance of its protagonist, the third monologue begins where the second left off: “One of my earliest memories is drawing with my own blood” says Nehrjas Al Saffarh of “Instruments of Yearning.”³⁸ The final monologue is recited by the ghost of an Iraqi woman, tortured along with her children by the Saddam regime. We soon find out that she was killed in a US bombing during the first Gulf War. She was subjected to all sorts of brutality by the Saddam regime for refusing to reveal the whereabouts of her husband, the leader of the Iraqi Communist Party. The monologue is titled “Instruments of Yearning” after the nickname given to Saddam’s secret police. Nehrjas (which means daffodil in Arabic) is a gentle, loving mother whose poetic recounting brings the audience close to the stage. She even comments on the cultural divide that separated her from us: “Wait. I can see you are pulling away from me when I say ‘Communist.’ But this is not the Communist Party of Stalin, or Mao or Pol Pot, or post-war Europe, far far from it. All the kind and thinking and peace loving people in Iraq at that time were members of the Communist Party.”³⁹ Some critics have dismissed the first two monologues, perhaps because of the unease with which we have to face a Western subjectivity responsible for either perpetrating or justifying atrocities. Sam Thielman writes in the online magazine *Variety*: “If ‘Palace of the End’ was nothing but this third section, it would be an excellent play with a lot to say about an underexplored period in history. As it is, it’s a painfully mediocre retreat of everything everyone thinks about Iraq. But, with a triumphant finale.”⁴⁰

Nevertheless, “Instruments of Yearning” is the most graphic of the three monologues in terms of its depiction of atrocities, and yet it remains the most poetic. As we listen to Nehrjas recount the death of her sons and her torture at the hands of Saddam’s secret police, we also listen to her

recite beautiful Arabic poetry and describe in poetic terms the mythical significance of the palm tree, which seems surreal when contrasted with her horrendous accounts:

NEHRJAS. Like an American horror movie. Now, the castle has three stories. The highest floor is where they would take you to talk. ... Then if you didn't wish to talk, they would send you down to main floor. It was what we call Torture Lite.

Beatings. Broken bones. Nails removed. ... And if you still didn't talk, you were sent to the basement. There were bodies everywhere. Bodies of people you knew. Once you have smelled the smell of death, of mass murder and suffering, nothing smells sweet again, not ever again.⁴¹

The Nehrjas of “Instruments of Yearning” is everything we refuse to see or relate to in Iraq: she is a woman, she is gentle, she recites poetry, and she is strong in the face of unspeakable suffering. To the death, she will not betray her political convictions, even when her son is tortured and killed on the roof of the prison.⁴² While we witness Lynndie’s vibrant health and obvious pregnancy in the beginning, and are called to witness as Dr. Kelly’s dying moments are consumed by guilt, we are invited to listen to Nehrjas’s posthumous testimony as a tribute to what remains human in all of us in the face of unimaginable atrocity. If the soldier, Lynndie, needs to defend her innocence and irresponsibility, and Dr. Kelly pleads for forgiveness for his inaction, then Nehrjas wants us to open our eyes in the hope that we better understand what happens on the other side of our war machine. By performing three different first-person accounts, these three testimonies imply that it is up to the spectator to move from irresponsibility, guilt, and complacency to action, empathy, and understanding. The triptych of *Palace of the End* references the tension between atrocity and representation, and poses a fundamental question as old as the Oresteia, as Marvin Carlson observed in *The Haunted Stage*: “How does one break out of an ongoing cycle of almost unimaginable cruelty and revenge?”⁴³

The Embodied

Wafaa Bilal, an Iraqi-American performance artist, proposes a different perspective on the problems of responsibility, atrocity, and representation. By showing and enacting the atrocity, performance art offers an ontological approach to the epistemological tension between telling and showing. While texts narrate the horror, sometimes metaphorically, performance art locates us face to face with the suffering body and the difficult embodiment of otherness as “a people” not just “people.” As Adam Muller argued in chapter 3 of this collection, “the signal casualty of genocide is *a people*, not *people*, and thus a highly morally and politically charged form of (and capacity for) belonging.”⁴⁴

Bilal’s performance piece and interactive installation, *Shoot an Iraqi* (2007; also known as *Domestic Tension*), was based on the artist’s experience of living for one month in a Chicago gallery with an internet-controlled paintball gun aimed at him at all times that allowed people all over the world to shoot him. Bilal explains that the idea came from a newspaper article he read about a young American soldier who goes to work every day in Colorado to execute orders of firing remotely controlled missiles and drones at Iraqis. After the first twelve days in the gallery, Bilal was shot at over forty thousand times. By the end of the performance, over sixty thousand people from over a hundred and thirty countries had fired the internet paintball gun at him, while some hackers tampered with the gun to make it fire automatically instead of a single shot per person.

Shoot an Iraqi does not expose the banality of evil; on the contrary, it performs the banality of *jouissance* associated with the enjoyment of perpetrating a remote violence with no tangible consequences. It shows that our complacency is the result of being desensitized to the suffering of others. Not unlike the ethical complexities revealed in the Milgram Yale experiment and the Zimbardo Stanford experiment,⁴⁵ where people’s critical resistance is easily compromised by authoritarian regimes, Bilal’s gallery experiment reveals how easy it is for ordinary people to inflict extreme violence and gleefully become agents of the most unimaginable atrocity. Bilal foresees that his approach may be controversial; he argues that this “sensational approach to the war is meant to engage people who may not be willing to engage in political dialogue through conventional means. DOMESTIC TENSION [depicts] the suffering of war not through

human displays of dramatic emotion, but rather through engaging people in the sort of playful interactive video game with which they are familiar.”⁴⁶

Bilal’s experiment points to Žižek’s critique of Arendt: that there is an avoidable enjoyment or *jouissance* associated with inflicting pain that underpins the relationship of domination. The internet gun is a function of an “*imaginary* screen” that maintains distance from the victim and “the *real* of the perverse and sadistic *jouissance*” discussed above. Bilal critiques this perversity further in his other performance project ... *and Counting*. In this 2010 live tattooing session set up at the gallery of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in New York, Bilal had 105,000 dots representing the official Iraqi death count, and 5,000 dots representing American deaths, tattooed on his back. Green ink was used to represent Iraqi deaths, and was visible only under ultraviolet light, while red ink was used for the American deaths. Bilal explains that the dots also embody the death of his brother Haji, who was “killed by a missile at a checkpoint in their hometown of Kufa, Iraq in 2004. Wafaa Bilal feels the pain of both American and Iraqi families who’ve lost loved ones in the war, but the deaths of Iraqis like his brother are largely invisible to the American public.”⁴⁷ In addition to the tattooing, during the performance different people from different backgrounds were invited to read the long list of names of Iraqis and Americans killed in the war.

Turning his body into a living gravestone, Bilal uses primitive forms of engraving to slow down the frenzied violence of modern regimes, who through a click of a button can annihilate a whole people. There is a secular *mythopoiesis* (the creation of myth) at play in this performance as the sharing of the tattoo session encodes the body with the here and now, transforming the distancing and telematic structures of remote violence into embodied experiences—a shared modern Eucharist, elevated to the level of mythology devoid of mystical connotations. Bilal shows us how important it is to embody suffering and atrocity through a violation of textual boundaries producing permanent, fleshy documentary evidence which cannot be disputed. Bilal’s tattooing displays atrocity by bringing the external experience inward in order to resist sensationalizing, trivializing, or aestheticizing it. Consequently, by becoming the corporeal site of suffering, Bilal’s embodied testimonial points to the fact that representing atrocity is not only a story of trauma—it is also a story of survival and resistance.

Conclusion

Both Judith Thompson and Wafaa Bilal point out that what is real, what is plausible, what is provable, and what is reproducible, is not necessarily representable. When we are asked to witness the dying moments of David Kelly, or the painful live tattooing of the artist in order to make a statement on the embodied nature of atrocity, we assume that there is a general cultural context in which this shared knowledge is recognizable. Addressing the modalities of perception of the audience bearing witness to atrocities, this chapter argues in favour of considering the space of performance not as a site of construction of truth or a mirror to atrocity, but as a space of resistance where being present, listening, and reflecting becomes an ethical responsibility. While we are faced with the ethical density of atrocities, we have a responsibility as cultural critics and as artists to reflect on their historical, material, and existential conditions. In conclusion, we can only echo what Toni Morrison said when asked how she can write about slavery: “if they can survive it, I can write about it.”

NOTES

- 1 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 287–288.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (Fall 1971): 418.
- 3 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 5.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 276.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 27–28.
- 7 Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 55.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 55–56. Italics in original.
- 9 Adrienne Rich, “Legislators of the World,” *Guardian* (London), 18 November 2006, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview15> (accessed 20 January 2013).
- 10 The expression “New Brutalism” was coined by the British architects Alison and Peter Smithson to refer to the architectural style exhibiting a brutalist aesthetic (from “brutalism,” derived from Le Corbusier’s use of *béton brut*, or raw cement, in the 1950s).
- 11 The Abu Ghraib prison scandal erupted in 2004 when internet accounts and photographs of abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners held by the US Army’s 372nd Military Police Company were made public. The senior officer in Iraq at the time, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, ordered an investigation which Major General Antonio Taguba conducted, issuing a damning report that confirmed widespread prisoner

abuses at the hands of US Army personnel: waterboarding, humiliation, sodomy, attack with dogs, sleep deprivation, burning with phosphoric acid, etc. A media storm ensued with in-depth reporting by programs such as *60 minutes* (broadcast on 28 April 2004), and the *New Yorker* magazine (10 May 2004), accusing high-ranking officers of turning a blind eye to the violations.

- 12 Christian Biet, "Rwanda 94: Theater, Film, and Intervention," *Cardozo Law Review* 31, no. 4 (2010): 1046.
- 13 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 34.
- 14 Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, eds., *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 5.
- 15 Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (1997): 3.
- 16 Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 6.
- 17 Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 161. Italics in original.
- 19 Judith Thompson, *Palace of the End* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2007), 10.
- 20 Melissa Brittain, "Benevolent Invaders, Heroic Victims and Depraved Villains" (*En Gendering the War on Terror*, ed. Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel Eds (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 86.
- 21 Thompson, *Palace of the End*, 7.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 18–19.
- 23 Brittain, "Benevolent Invaders," 89.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*, 89–90.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 88.
- 27 Quoted in Ann Holloway, "Hedda & Lynndie & Jabber & Ciel: An Interview with Judith Thompson," in *The Masks of Judith Thompson*, ed. Ric Knowles (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2006), 143.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Thompson, *Palace of the End*, 12.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 32 Nick Stevenson, *Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communication* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 188.
- 33 Thompson, *Palace of the End*, 23.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 25–26.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 30.

- 38 Ibid., 32.
- 39 Ibid., 38.
- 40 Sam Thielman, "Palace of the End," *Variety*, 23 June 2008, <http://variety.com/2008/legit/reviews/palace-of-the-end-1200508877/> (accessed 1 February 2014).
- 41 Thompson, *Palace of the End*, 41.
- 42 Ibid., 44.
- 43 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 47.
- 44 See Adam Muller's contribution to this volume, "Troubling History, Troubling Law: The Question of Indigenous Genocide in Canada."
- 45 The Milgram shock experiment was conducted at Yale University in 1961 shortly after the beginning of the Eichmann trial. The experiment was devised by social psychologist Stanley Milgram to measure the willingness of participants to follow orders even if those orders contravened their ethical and moral imperatives. The experiment measured how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another through a fake electric shock just because he was ordered to do so. By the end of the experiment, 26 of the 40 participants (65 percent) would have inflicted the highest voltage, enough to kill their subject. The Zimbardo experiment, also known as the Stanford prison experiment, was conducted by a team of researchers in 1971 headed by psychology professor Philip Zimbardo and funded by the US Office of Naval Research. The experiment, which was interrupted after six days, examined the behavior of 24 participants randomly assigned the role of prisoner or guard. The guards were instructed to inflict psychological torture and mild abuse on the prisoners, a role that many assumed willingly, demonstrating that abusive behaviour by average individuals without sadistic or authoritarian tendencies develops by virtue of being in an oppressive setting.
- 46 Wafaa Bilal, *Shoot an Iraqi. Domestic Tension*, 2007, artist's website: <http://wafaabilal.com/html/domesticTension.html> (accessed 1 May 2012).
- 47 Wafaa Bilal, . . . *And Counting*, 2010, artist's website: <http://wafaabilal.com/html/and-Counting.php> (accessed 1 May 2012).