**The Ethics of Representation: Punctum Language, Evental Photography and Affective Scenography in Howard Barker’s Drama**

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Howard Barker (1946-) is a versatile artist. Not only is he a long-standing dramatist (written over one hundred plays) and poet (six volumes of published poetry since 1985), he is also a professional painter and photographer. Significantly, Barker has also come to assume increasing responsibility for the production of his own plays as director and dramaturg (including sound and costume design). This multi-mediality and poetic style is vividly reflected not only in Barker’s language (intensely musical and densely poetic: in its phrasing, imagery, rhythm and use of metaphor) but also in his highly elaborate audial-visual aesthetics of production. Accordingly, this essay seeks to demonstrate how the thematic content of a scene (informed with Barker’s tragic values – evental ethics of speculation, self-overcoming, proximal relationship with the other, obscurity, irrationality, desire, pain, anxiety, and death) and its mode of aesthetic presentation/figuration (language, textual composition and dramatic/scenographic dynamics) are intimately intertwined. This essay seeks to explore the aesthetic and ethical aspects of language/text, image/photography and scenography by dwelling on two paradigmatic scenes in *The Europeans* and *Judith* in conjunction with an investigation of the evental-cinematic role and nature of photograph in Barker. Tackling the foregoing issues, particularly given the affective-thematic complexity and manifold dynamics of the selected scenes ([including] two traumatized individual characters, spiritual-carnal proximity between them, carnal light, nakedness, haptic gaze, and absence of touch), demands an equally nuanced and multifaceted theoretical framework capable of unraveling their aesthetic and ethical facets. For this purpose, I have drawn here on Barthes, Levinas, Lyotard and Deleuze in an attempt to reveal the way various aesthetic, ontological and ethical layers are interlaced [in Barker] and to demonstrate their implications.

Howard Barker’s *The Europeans* (1987) – avowedly the first fully-fledged instance of his proposed Theatre of Catastrophe1  – takes place at a time when Austria has just vanquished the Turks and released itself from their colonial grip. This triumph has chiefly been achieved through the display of intrepidity and military ingenuity by the commander, Starhemberg. There are two main characters in the play. Katrin is a war victim who has been raped, disfigured, and impregnated by Turkish soldiers; she inexorably undertakes an array of disruptive and provocative public acts to publicize her pain and traumatic state. These include Katrin’s public parturition and her insistence on being exposed to, recorded and archived by the medical-clinical discourse. In fact, by deciding to construct “her life around the unforgiving” (Barker, in Brown 193), she turns herself into a “Screaming Exhibit” in the post-war “Museum of Reconciliation” (*Arguments for a Theatre* 98; henceforth *AT*); and, thus, by repudiating “pity, reconciliation and forgetfulness” (*AT* 59), she embodies a “negativity” (or an individual with an “impossible-to-assimilate history” (*AT* 195) which resists sublation into the dialectical synthesis and teleology by official History and to the ideas of unity/solidarity and will-to-forgetfulness for the purpose of progress promoted by the society and modern State (see Kristeva 1984, 107-127). Crucially, Barker makes Katrin’s overdetermined body and her child “a ground for struggle between State and private will” (Barker, in Brown 176) where the State strives to diffuse the negativity of the pain (of the individuals like her), contradiction, and inassimilable anomaly of the tragic personality under the guise of historical progress, public good, and reconciliation. Another character who features prominently in the play and in a sense intensifies and further the lines pursued by Katrin and Starhemberg is Orphuls. Orphuls is an unorthodox priest who is living with his restrictive, possessive and debilitating mother who constantly diminishes his autonomy by reminding him of filial ties and trying to reduce him to an Oedipal economy: “You love me, that’s what kept me whole ... You must do or you wouldn’t tolerate me” (). Orphuls is preoccupied with evental possibilities for the re-fabrication of one’s self and a new ethics released in the aftermath of the recent catastrophe and also with the manifestation of the contingency of moral truths and social conventions. Consequently, fascinated by Starhemberg and his practice of an ethics which is beyond good and evil, Orphuls relinquishes the Christian morality (of ressentiment, pity, shame and ascetic ideal) and embraces an aesthetics of self-cultivation: “The good have little purchase on the memory. Who would follow the innocent? No, you follow him who triumphs over himself, who boils within and in whose eyes all struggle rages. Him you follow to the water's edge, and no other ... (He kisses STARHEMBERG's hand.)” (104). In his quest for self-transcendence and becoming-other, and intensified by Starhemberg’s provocations, he embarks on a series of transgressive acts culminating in the murdering of his mother.

Starhemberg is an eccentric character who relinquishes his official position as the military chief of the state and peregrinates in the precincts of Vienna in pursuit of an authentic knowledge of human soul, desire and pain by seeking eventful encounters with the unpremeditated and unknown. The itineraries of Starhemberg and Katrin are strewn with ethical and existential vicissitudes. Both are non-conformist individuals who defy the ideological strictures and normative morality of State institutions, the Law, and the collective values of the public and family. They both adamantly eschew being approached and touched by others due to the traumatic tribulations they have undergone - Starhemberg in relationship with his so-called mother and Katrin due to the rape and enforced pregnancy. But they also behave thus in an attempt to maintain the singularity of their pain and existential autonomy against the normalizing and reconciliatory forces of dominant ideology and the collective harmony.

Accordingly, *The Europeans* contains two pivotal moments. The first turning point is the moment of climactic encounter between Katrin and Starhemberg towards the end of the play – where, in a willed gesture of intimate contact, they sit stark naked opposite each other merely gazing at one another; a moment which features as the culmination of their pursuit of existential-ethical authenticity, their excoriating struggles to love, and their ostensibly paradoxical quest both for the self (that is, a self less handicapped by ideology as well as personal pain/trauma) and overcoming of the self. *The European*’s second turning point is the poignant return of Katrin’s child, christened - by the liberal-humanist State - Concilia, to the Turkish Commander at the border. In this scene, despite Katrin’s relentlessness, Starhemberg convinces her to abandon her child, and gives the child to the Turkish Commander in an attempt to thwart the liberal-humanist state’s attempt to make them figures in its grand narrative of reconciliatory progress. Thus, the final scene, by epitomizing such tragic irreconcilability, constitutes a double-edged moment of catastrophe (affecting both the self and the socio-symbolic order) rather than catharsis.

Indeed, the former event constitutes the focal point of this essay. Notwithstanding its central position in Barker’s oeuvre, apart from the author’s extended analysis of the play2, there have been only two extended engagements with *The Europeans*, by David Ian Rabey (1988) and David Barnett (2001). Rabey’s account, implicitly based on Existentialist ideas of freedom, autonomy and self-creation, is mainly expository and concerned with the exploration of the development of characters in the throes of catastrophic circumstances and confronted with ideological strictures of a liberal-humanist state in the play. Barnett further elaborates the gaps and under-explored points in Rabey’s analysis by more explicitly and extensively delineating the Nietzchean facets of Barker’s tragic drama. Nevertheless, the textual and linguistic features of the play in general, and the abovementioned scene (between Katrin and Starhemberg) in particular – despite its holding the key to the problematics surrounding the characters and their ethical and psychic-corporeal traits, as I would argue – has eluded scholarly attention. This essay undertakes to fill this lacuna by exploring the relation between *the mode of relationship* between the characters (in *The Europeans*) and *the mode of language* deployed to reflect that relationship. Given the fact that I have already delved into the ethical and aesthetic aspects of relationship between Katrin and Starhemberg at length elsewhere3 (a relationship which is trauma-ridden whereby trauma is primarily registered on the level of the skin and skin ego as a psychic envelope), on what follows, initially I generally explain the status of the event in *The Europeans* and characters’ relation with it. Then, I shall seek to demonstrate how the characters (and their inter-affective relationships) is profoundly informed or driven by the catastrophic event. Such an investigation, indeed, shall allow us to discern how such a preoccupation with an ethics of the event demands the adoption of a mode of (re)presentation which is sensitive to the complexities of the eventful nature of the scene and reflective of the limitations of representational language in the treatment of such scenes.

**The Ethics of the Event in *The Europeans***

In keeping with Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe’s principles of “self-overcoming” (“the element of conquest” through which the character “reconstructs himself out of his circumstances”) (*Arguments for a Theatre* 57) and self-cultivation through “aesthetic will to experience” (*AT* 122), *The Europeans* is imbued with a sense of historical-existential disjunction and moral chaos. This is evident in its placing of the characters in liminal and contradictory situations. Indeed, a sweeping survey of *The Europeans* lays bare a common thread running through all the main characters; almost all of them are preoccupied with the possibility of commitment to *an ethics of the event*4; and all seek to undertake this evental ethics by “free[ing] the unborn self” (*The Europeans* in *Plays Three* 100) and transgressing “the silent contract of socialized love” (*AT* 195). To the main characters, the paramount importance of adhering to such an ethics, by becoming worthy of the event, evinces itself primarily in moving beyond the existing personal, familial-social and political confines and achieving the possibility of cultivation of new modes of being and new dimension to the self. Such virtual possibilities can be actualized, exemplarily, in the self’s relationship with the Other. In other words, the aesthetics of the self can only be realized *in an irrevocable relation to* either an ethics of the event or an ethics of otherness5 (as respectively elaborated by Deleuze and Levinas). To them, and Katrin, Starhemberg, and Orphuls in particular, such an ethics “either makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us” (Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* 149). They, in their unflinching endeavour to separate disaster from fiasco, try to outreach themselves, and the symbolic order in which they are embedded, by overcoming their present (internal-external) limits and traumatic states. Such a self-transcendence can only be achieved by pursuing the indeterminate *law of the future anterior* by self-exposure and self-reconfiguration in relation to a futurity and state of the possible that is immanent in the relationship with the singular Other or an eventful field without prescribed or a priori rules “in order [for the characters] to formulate what will have been done” (*The Postmodern Condition* 81).

This attitude towards wielding every cataclysm for the transcendence of the present self and gaining (ethical-existential) knowledge finds an articulate expression in the three main characters. Indeed, Katrin’s intransigent insistence on maintaining her identity-in-crisis/process as a means of resisting nationalist and moralist narratives of unified identity, reveals the inextricable link between the process of undertaking pain on the one hand, and (existential-spiritual) knowledge, aesthetics of becoming-other, and dynamics of political negativity on the other. Katrin’s assertion is illuminating: “I know. I do know all this. You must get knowledge, Susannah, from anywhere, but get it [...] Yes, and make yourself again! There, now I’ve given you all this time, and all the time I’ve given you is time lost for myself [...]” (69). An analogous commitment to an ethics of self-knowledge and self-overcoming through pain informs Starhemberg’s actions. At a point in the play, the Empress expresses her aspiration to take her inspiration from Starhemberg as an aesthetic model for self-fashioning: “You see. I can match all your gestures. No real man is worth the effort, but one who invents, and re-invents himself! He can keep us heated!” (76) Orphuls’ remark more vividly captures the pervasive sense of freedom and necessity for action upon the self, emerging in the aftermath of the upheavals: “Every morning when we awoke, we felt the possibility of utter transformation, rising with the sun” (80); yet, as he plaintively wonders: “If everything remains the same, why did we suffer? I buried thirty in a day and still I imitate! (He examines himself.) Other self. Other self unborn. Wrist inside my wrist. Lung inside my lung.” (83). Later he adds the affirmative act as the premise of his ethics: “Is there an evil except not to do?” (107)

Therefore, it is safe to say that almost all the characters, though to varying degrees, are preoccupied with the profusion of possibilities unleashed in the aftermath of the recent upheavals, and with the manner to tackle them. Indeed, the degree of characters’ ethical and existential authenticity6 is determinable by what would count as their proper response to the event or the encounter with the Other (as a singular individual).

**The Language of the Event: Punctum and Figurality**

Now we turn to the main issue at stake in this essay, to wit, the correlation between the mode of language and the modality of relationship between characters. A paradigmatic instance of such a correlation is discernible in the moment of intimacy between Katrin and Starhemberg. What is revealing in this scene of co-birth and spiritual-carnal intimacy between Katrin and Starhemberg is that Barker depicts this moment - when they (momentarily) are denuded of their present entrenched psychosomatic state (respectively hysteria and melancholia-narcissism) and transcend their former modes of intersubjective communication - as both sitting against each other naked. In other words, this figural moment of aesthetic-ethical denudation and trans-figuration has been transposed into a literal sense/scene of nakedness. There we read: “A room in Vienna, shuttered. The bell ceases. Into the obscurity, Starhemberg walks slowly. He removes his clothing, item by item. He goes to a chair, and sits. KATRIN is discovered, already naked, in a chair distantly opposite his own. They gaze, unfalteringly” (109-110).

Evidently, in this climactic scene, the act of denudation, on both Katrin’s and Starhemberg’s part, features as an act of self-giving through which each self turns itself into a possibility of utmost solicitation, inter-affective responsivity, and relational becoming-otherwise. Elsewhere, I have extensively explained how this absence of touching arises from their traumatic states inflicted on their skin and registered at the level of skin ego.7 As is evident in their speeches coupled with their approaches to the senses (sensory perceptions), to selfhood and the relationship with the other, Starhemberg can be characterized by a melancholy-narcisssitic condition and Karin with a hysterical-masochist one. Such symptomatic states reveal why touching (and the absence and refusal of touching) features so prominently and occupies such a crucial place in the play.

By the same token, stark nakedness reveals the excess of sensibility, inter-corporeal proximity, and vulnerability. Desire here designates an impetus to transcend the foreclosure of one’s bodily borders and the “imperialism of the ego” (*Otherwise than Being* 128); this act of transcendence involves not a mystical unity or an ecstasy of a consciousness by or between the characters, but a pre-cognitive movement out of the totality of the self into the infinity of the other. Both Katrin and Starhemberg (each as a self), in this *desire-based* face-to-face relationship, undergoes “the erosion of the absoluteness of the self by the presence of the Desirable” (*Totality and Infinity* 63). As such, the *haptic gaze* between Katrin and Starhemberg proves to be the totality of the body (or exposed skin) through which the totality of sensible-spiritual capacities (of each individual) is offered for reciprocal enfoldment and chiasmatic proximity in the haptic gaze. Such a haptic vision translates vision into sensation and inter-affectivity.8

The proposed nature of this gaze is testified by Katrin’s acknowledgment that, “It’s odd, but though I have done all that suggested itself to me, I never looked at any man but you, I think. Looked, I mean. I never knew to look was love” (109). Levinas’ distinction between touching and caressing can help us unfold the nature of this haptic, or caressing, “look” which opens up a sensible space of releasement, relieving them of their chronic psycho-somatic pain: “The caress is a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking” (*Time and the Other* 89). In the same vein, notwithstanding the apparent absence of any visible act of “touching” between them, Katrin and Starhemberg “caress,” rather than touch, one another through their con-tactile *gazes*; and this is the manifestation of the utmost love; the fulfilment of their harrowing “Struggles to Love,” as reflected in the subtitle of *The Europeans*. The ensuing passage acutely captures the dynamics of desire and self-transcendence, in conjunction with their ethical and existential implications, underlying the ostensibly merely erotic act of denudation and reciprocal gaze between Katrin and Starhemberg:

what the caress seeks is not situated in a perspective and in the light of the graspable. The carnal, […] the caress, the beloved, is to be identified neither with the body-thing of the physiologist, nor with the lived body of the ‘I can,’ nor with the body-expression, attendance at its own manifestation, or face. In the caress, a relation yet, in one aspect, sensible, the body already denudes itself of its very form, offering itself as erotic nudity. (*Totality and Infinity* 258)

Barker himself alludes to the occurrence of this event as one of the rarest moments in his drama: “The word love is not uncommon in my work, but I only edged towards a meaning for it in *The Europeans*”. Significantly, he proceeds to affirm that this love in *The Europeans* “is in many ways not mediated through the body, as desire is” (Barker in Brown 60-1). Accentuating the spiritual and existential facets of their relationship, Barker describes Starhemberg’s love for Katrin as “a love for her completion, her pursuit, which he perceives and perhaps judges more finely than she does herself” (Ibid).

The crucial point about this scene of intense intercorporeal intimacy between Katrin and Starhemberg is that it is primarily realized in a nebulous mode, namely, what Barthes and Lyotard, having analogous meanings in mind, call, figuration (in keen contrast to representation). According to Lyotard, figurality stems from the incommensurable conjunction of two heterogeneous spaces: the figurative in the textual or the textual in the figurative. More lucidly, the figural language of the scene of denudation and intimate gaze derives from its combination of the visible and the invisible; a language which manifests the coalescence of graphic letter (the written text), plastic line (the topographical composition and typographical configuration of the language on the page), and figural opacity (the imagery evoked in the scene) (see *Discourse, Figure* 160-201, 205-231).

At the end of the first scene of self-overcoming and intimacy between the two, we hear Katrin insistently asking Starhemberg: “What do you see? What do you see?” (*The* *Europeans* 109) A question to which no response is given; and instead we see Susannah (Katrin’s sister) entering and opening the shutters one by one. Barker’s rendering of the second eventful occasion follows the same logic (of nakedness earlier in the scene). Katrin demands that Starhemberg behold her and, reiterating her question, asks him: “What do you see?” This time, too, the response is not given in verbal medium, but it figures in the flurry of fulgurations and myriad illuminations that score the sky. As the description of the scene reads, Starhemberg’s gaze is accompanied by “an eruption of fireworks, explosions and coloured lights, cheering from the entire fort” (116). Here, such a moment of self-transcendence, inter-corporeal proximity and exposure between them has been depicted in a sublime form and exteriorized on a scope of great magnitude, corresponding with the ethical, spiritual, and inter-affective scale and significance of the occurrence; an act which illustrates how such a moment exceeds the constraining bounds of representation and the individual body.

Linguistically speaking, the answers to both questions feature as a haunting, yet replete, void in the text, meaning that, the reader is afforded neither an explicit visual insight, nor a verbal cue by the text (through stage direction, scene description or a comment by another character) into what Starhemberg perceives and what/how he is affected when looking at Katrin. In other words, the reader/audience does not see what Starhemberg sees when being corporeally-visually exposed to Katrin’s sight/scene, and vice versa. As such, the ‘readers’ of the text are, instead, confronted with a multi-sensory image which has been couched in language (scene description). This move, on Barker’s part, demonstrates his belief in the unrepresentability of such eventful moments, not solely in terms of linguistic representation, but the inadequacy of representation in general; implying that such moments require gesturing towards a more affective-performative medium; in brief, what I would call: *a* *punctum-based and figural language*. Hence, the answer in both scenes defies both the order of pure visibility/vision (of distance and detachment) and that of language (textual-verbal expression). More strictly, the response to Katrin’s questions is cast in, and partakes of, both orders yet exceeds both: it is *a felt and described image*, the definite referent, and underlying cause, of which is never pinpointed or verbalized. It is, thus, supposed to be perceived as an imagined and con-tactile affectivity. Accordingly, Barker deploys a composite of discursive and non-discursive modes for imparting the density, intensity, and multi-valence of the scene. The ethical logic of such a visual aesthetic has been most cogently articulated by Judith in her remark to Holoferness: “You might wish to imagine me rather than to know me. That is the source of desire, in my view. Not what we are, but the possibilities we allow to others to create us. Silence for example” (250)

Indeed, the aforementioned scene in *The Europeans* is readily reminiscent, in scenographical and aesthetic-ethical terms, of an analogous occurrence in *Judith* and in its sequel piece in *The Possibilities*. In *Judith*, the dynamics of the relation between Judith and Holoferness bears striking affinities with the aforementioned scene between Katrin and Starhemberg, not only as regards the scenographic and thematic features, but in terms of existential-ethical implications of the affective-carnal proximity between the two. *Judith* depicts Judith, a widow, accompanied by a servant whose principal function is that of ideologist and exhorter, treading to the tent of the commander of enemy troops, Holofernes, with the intention of murdering him through seduction so as to preclude the havoc which is to be wreaked on her nation (Israel) in the imminent war on the following day. The highly ambivalent and volatile interlocution which emerges between Judith and Holofernes (in terms of role-playing and concealment of truth of identity and intention) swerves into new directions and begins to involve a genuine baring and hazarding of identity in which both Judith and Holoferness are compelled to undergo precarious subject positions, culminating in genuine self-exposure and authentic amorous exchanges between them. In consequence, there occurs an self-transcending moment of proximal relationality with the other for each of them, in which all their respective national, historical and ideological allegiances are rendered redundant. Judith’s remark to Holoferness testifies to the excessive affective “giving” (as coup de don) and self-overcoming involved in their relation:“Dear one, you want to sleep because this also has been a battle. [...] A terrible battle for, him. To love. To give”9. In the sequel, we are afforded a glimpse into the moment of intimacy between them by the Servant, who reminiscing and recounting the critical scene, observes: “He looked at her and stood away - when she was naked - stood away - ……. They sat naked, and apart. Intolerable and wonderful. They looked, they drank and ate the sight of one another naked, the air was solid with their stares” (109).

The condition of such moments in *The Europeans* and *Judith* approaches the overlapping, or co-im-plication, of the discursive aspect of language with the punctum-based and figural aspects of the text, and the outcome is something midway between a dim image overwritten with words intensely faded and/or a text haunted by an image or a series of images deeply shaded. Roland Barthes defines ‘punctum’ thus: it is that “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the punctum” (*Camera Lucida* 26).10 Punctum triggers, pricks, provokes (42, 47; passim). Punctum comprises an element, or number of elements that embody and emit an impulsive outward thrust, which, in its own turn, penetrates and impregnates the viewer. The punctum punctuates the common or denotative meaning of the photograph: the studium. As a result, punctum is perceived as an affectively-charged vector of the text/image that unsettles the habitual body of the reader/viewer and instigates the involuntary memory. Hence, it can be suggested to entail a mnemonic poetics of desire and an erotic poetics of personal history: “A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). It incorporates a saying and an unsaying, saying by unsaying and an unsaying of a certain and definite said, as it is the outcome of a hyper-dialectical (to wit, non-synthetic) relation between verbal-textual and visual/pictorial, between literal and metaphorical, between reality and imagination. As such, punctum is characterized by a “certain latency” (53), a thickness, an ambiguity, a multi-dimensionality, a polyphony of the senses which speaks only to a multi-sensory approach. Barthes’ description of punctum exhibits these ostensibly paradoxical attributes: “it is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction: a floating flash” (53). The dynamic delineated above, I would suggest, equally applies to the (literary) texts too. (In this regard see also Graham Allen’s commentary on Barthes’ theory (Allen 127-8), where he extends the scope of the term from the photographic and/or optic/visual to the textual realm, and associates punctum and studium respectively with the writerly and the readerly texts.)

The notable feature that reveals the ethical dimension of the punctum, and sheds light on the relationship between the ethical thrust (in its Levinasian sense) of the scene (between Starhemberg and Katrin) and its language, is the way Barthes ascribes the eruptive or projective formation of *a new space* to punctum, and associates it with “desire” and eroticism. He defines the punctum as a kind of “subtle beyond, as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see” (59). Having categorized the erotic picture/photo as punctumic, Barthes proceeds to contrast the “light desire” implicated in the erotic photo with the “heavy desire” embedded in pornographic photo (Ibid). Given the fact that, *light desire* is not directed towards possession, gratification, and stagnation, but towards incessant flotation, contagion, and multifoliation, this light desire corresponds to, and is reciprocally expressive of, the *carnal intimacy* and becoming-other which flows between Katrin and Starhemberg, and is strongly implicated in the semiotics of the scene. As such, the punctum-performative language of the scene, by evoking such a spatial-temporal excess, plunges the reader into a pre-conceptual sensibility and pre-cognitive orientation. Put more clearly, the audience feels exposed to a mode of desire and inter-personal relationship that is *not* aimed at the comprehension of the other (as an object of knowledge assimilated into totality of the self’s consciousness and its history); as such, audience’s “cognition turns into proximity, into purely sensible” (*Collected Philosophical Papers* 118-9). Such an *inter-kinaesthetic dynamic* brings about a *re-schematizing effect* by prompting an inter-affective reverberation between the three figures (the two characters and the individual reader/audience)11, fostering a dynamic of desire which is reflective of the self-transcending and other-oriented (*heteronomous*12*) mode of desire* surging between Katrin and Starhemberg. As such, the climactic scene in *The Europeans* imparts the other-oriented affectivity of the scene to the reader as an integral dimension and vector of the scene. And herein lies its ethics.

**Theatrical Punctum and Evental Dynamics of Photopgraphy in Barker**

As the last point, the application of Barthes’ categories to the medium/genre of drama/theatre needs a succinct explanation here. Although extending Barthes’s dialectic of studium-punctum (which is apparently concerned with still-static image/photo) to theatre (as involving animate/mobile scenes or three-dimensional presences) might appear as problematic, what is at stake in Barthes’ theory is the performative and kinaesthetic force of this semiotic object and the affective-cerebral perception of image by the viewer. Some critics, nevertheless, have posited an anti-theatrical facet to Barthes’ approach to photography. Michael Fried recognizes Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* as an exercise in “antitheatrical critical thought” (2008, 98). Fried’s reading is premised on Barthes’ descriptions of the accidental nature of the punctum, a detail that is “not, or at least not strictly, intentional” (*Camera Lucida* 47). It is worth noting, however, that by theatricality Fried intends an overtly self-conscious quality of photograph arising from photographer’s intentionality. Fried’s claim is based on Barthes’ argument that if the photographer’s intentions are too easily visible in a photograph (if it “shows itself being seen”), it displays a theatricality and artificiality, thus losing its affective force. The theatrical quality of the photo, therefore, must be overcome (Fried 2008). Countering this position, theorists such as Keir Elam have already sought to establish the applicability and utility of the categories of studium (as response characterized by cool interest) and punctum (as “that mode of painful and compulsive pleasure that is not sought out but actively seeks out and injures the receiver”) to the field of theatre and phenomenological approach to drama:13 Relatedly, Arnaud Schmitt describes punctum as an “embodied cognitive event” (19). Equally notably, various drama critics have already extended the applicability of Barthes’s categories to drama discourse and theatrical context by deploying the terms in their analysis.14 The more compelling evidence, in this regard, is provided by Barthes himself who links photography not with its representational precursor, painting, but with the theater. In a passage highly resonant with the aesthetic premises and tragic values of Barker’s catastrophic drama (death, desire and the aporia of spectrality of the actor), Barthes states: “but if Photography seems to me closer to the Theater, it is by way of a singular intermediary: […] by way of Death. We know the original relation of the theatre and the cult of the Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead” (31). Referring to the totemic whitened bust, the painted face in China, the No mask in Japan, the Katha-Kali of India, Barthes indicates how the actor designated himself “as a body simultaneously living and dead” (31). The/This eternal return of the dead in the body of the actor, discerned/indicated by Barthes, has been vividly captured by Barker:

The play only appears to be about the living because the actors are living. The characters have never lived, nor by the same token, can they ever be said to be dead. Theatre is situated on the bank of the Styx (the side of the living). The actually dead cluster at the opposite side, begging to be recognized. What is it they have to tell? Their mouths gape... (*Death, the One and the Art of Theatre* 20; henceforth *DOAT*)

There is however a crucial dimension to photography missed by Barthes that Barker attends to and accentuates, to wit, the question of the evental dynamics and of virtualities embedded in photograph, inducing a productive ontological transitivity between photograph and reality. As Jean-Michel Rabaté acutely observes, “[b]y stressing the ontological nature of the apparent mystery by which real past objects or people leave an ‘emanation’ as a visual trace of their presence in the world, rather than the authorial or ideological manipulations by which an operator transforms or frames a material that is still plastic or malleable, Barthes deprives photography of its productive transitivity” (8). A significant point worth adding to this delineation of the theatrical dynamic of the punctum effect of image/photo is the idiosyncratic conception of photograph in Barker’s catastrophist drama: Barker’s depiction of photographs is inherently *performative-cinematic*; that is, cinematic, as characterized by Deleuze – a combination of movement-image and time-image: “It is characteristic of cinema to seize this past and this future that coexist with the present image”. In this cinematic photograph, clear chronological distinctions are, however, superseded by a superimposed and evental mode of time: “there is no present which is not haunted by a past and a future, by a past which is not reducible to a former present, by a future which does not consist of a present to come” (*Cinema II* 38). The photographs either produced (photographed or photomontaged), ekphrastically described or utilized by Barker (either as stage props, for instance in *Ursula*, or photographs in their own right, in *13 Objects* and *DOAT*) are uncannily animate and cinematic. This is also discernible in the evocative and complex ways in which Barker’s photographs (set-designed and taken by himself under the pseudo-name of the fictional alter ego: Eduardo Houth) – used in the production and program leaflets and pictures – relate to the play with which [each is] they are associated.

Barker, in keeping with his anti-realist aesthetics and compositional practice, compounds the indexical function of image/photograph. Indeed, his subversion of the indexical function of photograph (and the ontological relationship between artwork and reality presumed on that basis) can be also construed as his critique of realism and naturalism in drama. Barker’s photographs not only possess depth and dimension, but point beyond themselves to virtual futures/pasts or coexistent presences/presents: “The old photograph. What is behind the tree? Something was behind the tree. To turn the photograph on its edge. To scratch away the surface of the tree” (*DOAT* 13). He continues the exploration of latent, or dormant, layers of libidinal mnemonics or erotically-charged memory as virtual possibilities contained in the same photo thus:

The land behind the tree continues. A field, leading to a road. The road leads to the city. At this moment (the moment of the photograph) in the city, a room where a woman (a man) crosses one leg over the other. This is both contained in and excluded from the photograph. The essential agony of all photography (13).

As is amply attested by the foregoing examples, in Barker’s approach, photographs are already treated as a theatrical-performative sites/scenes and open wounds, imbued with affective intensities and virtual events: “The photographic paper before its immersion in the developing tank. The invisible is present. The immanent form. But never an immutable form (we might stop the development ... the exhaustion of the chemicals...)” (*DOAT* 12). Each image/photo or scene is always already populated by the uncanny effect of an in-between (entre-temps) time and an interplay of desire, memory, and death/mortality. As such, “what seemed to be the eternal stability of photography” (69) gives way to a release of a suspended time/moment and actualization of unrealized events. This evental dynamic reveals Barker’s approach to history: history as becoming. It thus yields three effects on the perception of the photograph: anamorphosis, anamnesis, and anagogy, that is, photograph-perception as an event effects as the distortion of habitual modes of perception and identity through the complication of the referent and the retroactive re-membrance of something that never happened or was never consciously registered. The event, inherent in the surface of these photographs is, by definition, and in contrast to the ordinary and actual states of affairs, immaterial, incorporeal and virtual entailing a dynamic process of becoming-other (see *Logic of Sense* 1-7, 164-5): Deleuze’s explanation elucidates *this double-structure of the event*: “This is what we call the Event, or the part that eludes its own actualization in everything that happens. The event is not the state of affairs. It is actualized in a state of affairs, in a body, in a lived, but it has a shadowy and secret part that is continually subtracted from or added to its actualization: in contrast with the state of affairs, it neither begins nor ends but has gained or kept the infinite movement to which it gives consistency (*What 1s Philosophy?* 156) The photograph as described in the following passage illustrates the dynamic delineated above:

Where this photograph was taken (the place) may never have changed (we cannot identify the place). Whilst few places are unchanged, we cannot say authoritatively that the general law of change applies to *this place*. So the photograph has the status of a wound, which smarts with its *irresolution* . . . (*DOAT* 13)

The dynamics instigated by this photograph demonstrate that there will always be part of the event that “eludes its own actualization” which as such “exists between two instants”. Photograph, as conceived here, far from depicting a fixed state of affairs, transpires as a dynamic and open field of (theatrical) possibilities where memory, desire and imagination interact (reaching new reconfigurations) in the melancholy aura and emanation of past images and objects. To more lucidly grasp these virtual events latent in actual photos/images and scenes in Barker’s work, we can translate them into three registers: (1) as entre-temps (in-between times) a “monstrous and inhuman” mode of temporality existing in the interstices of language and time which is primarily revealed by tragedy but also associated with the interminable time of dying and plastic arts (see Levinas’ *CPP* 1-15). Entre-temps exposes the externality of time and gaps in the unity and autonomy of the temporal instant/moment. Entre-temps thus opens up the possibility of a diachronic transcendence, disclosing within the moment that which is other, the immemorial and unpredictable. As Levinas observes, “There, between the present and that which has never been able to join a present, is situated the ‘between times’ [entretemps] of poetry or resurrection” (1997, 7–16 ); (2) as a time-space for individuation in the temporal mode of the infinitive verb or future anterior (haecceity: the indefinite article + proper name + infinitive verb – see *Thousand Plateaus* 261-3); and (3) as the unconscious (as a productive, rather than representational, force) desire latent in the time, scene or individual. Indeed such an idiosyncratic attribute of photography reveals the mode of temporality at the core of tragic experience in Barker The following anecdotal vignette, while also poignantly capturing the long-established link between photo and death, evocatively captures the interplay of erotics, mnemonics and history delineated above and demonstrated the complex mode of the perceived temporality at stake in such photographs:

He held between his fingers a photograph of the one. Not as she was. As she had been. Her childish hairstyle, […] ... an image of the most intense life but also of death, as if it were published in a newspaper and she were a long-forgotten murder victim . . . but the one is not dead, she exists only in that miasma of dreaded death which causes the lover of the loved one to cry out with such heartfelt anxiety, ‘Don’t die... promise me...!’ And yet is this child – the origin of the one – not dead in fact, for nothing of her remains that can be seen here but a way of looking, a soul perhaps? Every material factor that contributed to the one-as-a-child has – by the law of cellular reproduction – been replaced many times and only the photograph remains, albeit decayed. He examined an image of one who existed once and existed no longer whilst certainly continuing to exist...

This passage palpably conveys the tension between the physical-corporeal and affective-psychological-spiritual aspects of the Other (the loved One) as perceived or imagined by the self (lover), while prompting a musing on the source of desire, the question of identity-in-process/crisis, the evental nature of love, and image-repertoire all intensely evoked by the photograph. On this premise, it can be argued that every photograph (image, or scene) in Barker’s work is lined with a multiplicity of pasts (pasts that were never present) and virtual futures. Each photograph in Barker contains an unconscious which, upon being triggered/intended, can instigate a process of desiring-production and becoming-other (see *Anti-Oedipus* 29-53) This in-between or meanwhile (as a time of “an infinite awaiting that is already infinitely past, awaiting and reserve”), as the time of the experience of the artwork involving a dialectical interaction between the virtual and actual, has been articulately explained by Deleuze:

If we take this direction to its limit, we can say that the actual image itself has a virtual image which corresponds to it like a double or a reflection. In Bergsonian terms, the real object is reflected in a mirror-image as in the virtual object, which, from its side and simultaneously, envelops or reflects the real: there is coalescence between the two. There is a formation of an image with two sides, actual and virtual. It is as if an image in a mirror, a photo or a postcard came to life, assumed independence and passed into the actual, even if this meant that the actual image returned into the mirror and resumed its place in the postcard or photo, following a double movement of liberation and capture. (*Cinema 2*, 68)

I would [We] can conclude by arguing that the punctum status and nature of images/photographs (already laden with virtualities) in conjunction with the kinaesthetic-affective nature of language and scenography in Barker all demonstrate the evental dynamics (in the sense variously elaborated by Deleuze and Badiou) informing his catastrophist ontology where events have ontological priority over substances.

**Notes**

1. The excerpt is from “The Sunless Garden of the Unconsoled” given as a paper at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 10 July 2009.

2. I am deploying event (as opposed to “the state of affairs”) in the sense elaborated variously by Badiou and Deleuze. Event here designates events of sense and a process of becoming-other, counter-actualization of the actual and actualization of virtuals leading to re-subjectification. For an extended discussion of this aspect of Barker’s work see Alireza Fakhrkonandeh’s “Melancholy Ontology, Evental Ethicals” 356-405; also see Alireza Fakhrkonandeh’s “Noli Me Tangere”, 1-36.

3. See “Noli Me Tangere”.

4. For an extended explication of the meaning of ethics (contrasting with morality) in Barker see Alireza Fakhrkonandeh’s “The Acousmatic Voice as the Chiasmatic Flesh: An Analysis of Howard Barker’s Gertrude-The Cry”, pp. 240-244.

5. That is to say, primarily, to the other singular person, the other existential and inter-personal state, or the other socio-political order , and only secondarily and negatively, to the collective or ideological other.

6. See *DOAT* 11.

7. See “Noli Me Tangere”, 14-35.

8. I have derived the distinction between optic vision and haptic vision (associated with distance and proximity, respectively) from Deleuze. In his study of Francis Bacon, Deleuze observes how there is a haptic vision at work in Bacon’s paintings, arguing that the use of deformations and distortions in Bacon’s paintings is a pictorial strategy adopted to convey the necessity of seeing otherwise, but to make the audience be affected by the materiality of the sensation and flesh at stake in his paintings. See The Logic of Sensation, 122-137.

9. Howard Barker, *Judith* in *Collected Plays Three*. 256.

10. Acknowledging his debt to “phenomenology and its language” (20-21), Barthes however adds that his appropriation of phenomenology is inflected with being “vague, casual, even cynical” (20). This latter aspect emanates from the personal-singular aspect of photo-perception which raises the questions of desire and a view of the object which is immediately steeped in desire repulsion nostalgia euphoria” comment observation confirms this attitude or phenomenological inflection attitude: “my phenomenology agreed to compromise with a power, affect” (21). Delving into the paradoxes of this double methodology, Barthes finally settles on a synthetic approach termed “affective intentionality” (21). Punctum, thus, can be argued to brings into play a phenomenology of both theatrical event and a spectatorial dynamic of image-perception in that, according to Bathes’ definition, it is both singular-immanent and universal-transcendental: both an affective quality (singularity contingency) and an eidetic essence of photography: “Last thing about punctum: whether or not it is triggered , it is an addition [supplement]: it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless there” (55). This qualified phenomenological approach is in accordance with Merleau-Ponty’s twofold definition of phenomenology: both as “the study of the essences” – the essence of consciousness and perception - and a “philosophy which puts essence back into existence” – thus incorporating the questions of desire, memory and inter-affectivity (*Phenomenology of Perception* vii).

11. Drawing on the insights offered by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Behnke elaborates on the kinaesthetic and relational characteristics of affectivity thus: as affection “functions on both sides of the correlational a priori there is a corresponding double sense of ‘affectivity’: on the one hand, it refers to the strength with which the affective incitement ‘knocks at the door’ of consciousness; on the other hand, it refers to the degree to which the (inter-kinaesthetic) experiencer is open to this incitement and available to be moved by it” (Behnke 146.).

12. I am deploying heteronomy in the sense variously articulated by Bataille and Levinas. By heteronomous they mean a mode of non-identity thinking and an outside- or other-oriented mode of relationship that posits freedom not in the autonomy of the self but in the heteronomy of the self’s relation with the other or the outside. A heteronomous relationship, according to them, is driven by an other-related excess and self-transcendence (rather than self-preservation and self-interest), and defies approaching the other in terms of cognition and comprehension (that is, as an object of knowledge within the totality of the self). On this basis, a heteronomous ethics can no longer be conceived in terms of categories and universal, general categorical imperatives, but in the immanent relation with the other (or the indeterminable) that allow for radical difference, heterogeneity, and the thought of the incommensurable. See the first two chapter of Otherwise than Being; also see ‘Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony’ in *Basic Philosophical Writings* 105.

13. As Elam argues: “The problem with much of what goes under the name of theatrical pragmatics (or theatrical semiotics in general) is that it is strictly and […] strategically limited to the temperate zone of the studium and keeps a safe distance from the tropics or dangers of the punctum. … We as students or theorists of theatre, including theatrical reception, necessarily operate within the terms of the studium, a professional ‘application to’ or ‘being interested in’. But does this mean that we must attribute an analogous cool studiousness to our model spectator or to ourselves as actual spectator? Is the semiotics of theatrical communication […] destined inescapably to be a studium of the studium alone or is it not possible to conceive instead of a semiotic conception of the punctum, or pathos or […] audience passion, that compulsion which … motivates the receiver’s active participation in the artistic practice?” (58)

14. See Simon Bayly 50-59; see also Marie Kelly 257-278.

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