

# *The hanging man: death, indeterminacy and the event*

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### **The Hanging Man: death, indeterminacy and the event**

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

### **The Hanging Man**

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

The image of the body has marked itself on my memory. Several years later I believe I can still recall it vividly: a man with longish dark hair in a green parka and khaki pants. He was thin with a dark face, and his arms hung by his side while his feet were slightly turned out. I was shaken, unable to assimilate what we had seen. I assumed that it was a tragic suicide. I did not feel anguish or pain, since I did not know the man or his circumstances. My response was a combination of emotional shock and abhorrence, which induced physical inertia and introspection, tempered by bewilderment. There was no frame for agency or understanding, leaving an unaccommodated surplus of feelings of loss, sadness and waste.

At the time, I was convinced I saw a dead body. I assumed it was real, and only sometime afterwards did it occur to me that this might have been a stunt: a dummy, a protest or a performance. Why had the police not completely stopped the traffic, or at least cut the body down? I cannot recall seeing any symptoms of asphyxiation on the body (though the face was very dark), but having never seen a hanged man before, my only frame of reference would be via crime fiction and fiction film and television. A check of the newspapers the following day produced no mention of the incident. I have never found out what happened. What remained was a haunting image with no definitive frame for understanding, or too many, and no forum in which to respond. I can describe what I saw, or remember seeing, but cannot construe any depth of meaning and my reading of the event is based almost entirely on the clothed body itself and the sympathetic fiction that I constructed around it.

While it seems that the image of the body itself is the foundation for imagining a narrative that gives it sense, the building of a life-story around the body emphasises some of its details and not others. My partner and I saw the figure quite differently. The green

parka, undone and flapping in the wind, was significant for me, but less so for my partner than the black tee-shirt that it revealed. While the position of the feet, recalling ballet's second position, drew my attention, it was the scuffed white trainers that he focused on. More significantly, we assembled two different narratives around these scraps of information. While for me, reading the body, pose and costume signified a poor migrant worker from across the US's southern border, for my partner the body's camouflage pants, tee-shirt and trainers framed him as a protesting war veteran (we were in a 2002 Los Angeles aware of the impending Iraq war and protests were on every street corner). Perception and narrativization operated together, each modifying the other.

The incident is not as an unknowable, indecipherable event. Though there are many means to address it, it can be analysed as a performance and the problems posed by the event raise important questions for that discourse. There was a body in a public space where the frame was loosely defined, a spectacle glimpsed by an audience uncertain of its own status and function. Yet, though the event can be analysed as a deliberately composed spectacle, its traumatic effect as a horrific violation of the body can never be erased from discussion of its impact on the spectator. Its very indeterminacy locates it uncomfortably between a shocking confrontation with the real and a mocking simulation that invoked a real death. A real dead body's possible meanings would be profoundly disturbed, even ridiculed, by the possibility of a stuffed doppelganger, while an impersonating, sardonic dummy would be haunted by its invocation of a corpse. This performance was always clouded by the possibility of death, and that death was shadowed by the risk that it was a sham.

### **Spectacle of death**

The performance of death has been deliberately staged as a live event to achieve political or social objectives, but it is around screen presentations of death that controversy has recently coalesced. A recent example was the documentary by the acclaimed filmmaker Paul Watson, Malcolm and Barbara: Love's Farewell (ITV 2007). Initial promotional material claimed that the film showed the moment Alzheimer's sufferer Malcolm Pointon died. Actually, he died two days later, but in the film the moment when he slipped from consciousness stood in for his moment of death. The moment was enfolded in a much

larger narrative about the Pointons' relationship, the care available from the British National Health Service for terminally ill old people, and was preceded by Watson's documentary Malcolm and Barbara: A Love Story (ITV 1999) and the publicizing of the Pointons' decision to film the end of Malcolm's life. The relationship of that moment with the preceding and subsequent footage, and with media discourses about dying and its social, political and moral significance, framed the event. On one hand, the enfolding narrative around Alzheimer's reduced the over-determination of the moment which represented the death itself. On the other hand, the affective power of the death was increased by its extensive foreshadowing in media discourse and its public visibility on film.

In other mediated images of death where observers are present, such as deaths in war or the photographs of the falling man dropping from the World Trade Center on 9/11, moments of death are also enfolded in larger narratives, such as the stakes of war and its necessity or futility, or political narratives around terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Death is mobilized as a means of drawing attention to an issue, whether intentionally by the participants or without the awareness of the dying person. Moreover, the moment of death in any mediated example is shadowed by the uncertainty of how death is defined as a moment and by the possibility that the representation is just that, a representation and not the real thing. Death may well be one of the most common areas of human existence represented in fiction but performance always frames it to render it meaningful, even if that meaning is subsequently labelled gratuitous by critics. To present a moment of death as real is always shocking, and there are strong taboos around the representation of death. In the case of the hanging man, to suggest that the event may have been a performance is already to challenge and potentially disrespect the idea of death by making it susceptible to representation. The challenge that the hanging man poses is the question of which frames there might be that render him meaningful, and how they do so.

### **Death as performance**

Defining the event as a performance does not deny its other possible definitions: suicide, murder, protest, even accident. Yet, whatever descriptor is applied, this death was a public episode, deliberately staged for an audience at a particular moment, with attention

to the details of the spectacle. My first thought on seeing the hanging man was that I was witnessing a suicide, and the narratives I have since woven around the incident project a back-story for it that connects the December day to Christmas, poverty, despair, fear, separation and guilt. Whether suicide is a ‘cry for help’ or a determination to die, it is most often an action calculated to have a palpable affect upon its spectators or more frequently the spectators of its immediate effects.<sup>2</sup> The violence of suicide is not only fatal self-harm instigated by the perpetrator but also an aggressive act against the eyewitnesses. Both the perpetrator and the eyewitness might be called the ‘victim’ of suicide and the event itself almost invariably targets a spectator through the manner in which it is carried out. It is a public demonstration of distress and resistance; a protest against the status quo, be that personal or communal.

One of the most notorious examples of suicide as political protest in twentieth-century history was a self-immolation related to demonstrations against the Vietnam War. On June 16 1963, a Buddhist monk, Thích Quảng Đức, committed an act of self-immolation in Saigon (see fig.1). His act became a powerful image of active resistance which immediately prompted an uprising among the South Vietnamese people, but it also functioned as a powerful anti-Vietnam War symbol across the United States and Europe, one that catalysed not only political opposition to the war but also further acts of self-immolation in America. It was not strictly a suicide in the conventional Western sense. The word ‘immolate’ refers to sacrifice, and though it often connotes consumption by burning, fire is not intrinsic to it. Self-sacrifice to ease the distress of others has particular significance for the attainment of enlightenment in the Buddhist faith, and in this context, Thích Quảng Đức’s action would not be defined as suicide – an act of despair and self-eradication – but rather as a means to draw attention to suffering and inequity, thereby prompting change.<sup>3</sup> The performance was more important than the death itself, and the symbolism of the action was more important than the actuality of the dead body. The incident was located in a public space at a particular historical moment. Qualities essential to the event, including the movement and heat of the fire, ensured that boundaries were necessarily maintained between spectator and spectacle. Furthermore, the act was enfolded in a shared narrative of Buddhists’ persecution and resistance,

delineated by press coverage and public demands. Nevertheless, the deployment of horrific death expressed the gravity and magnitude of the situation.

For hunger strikers, notably those in Ireland who were part of the republican movement, protest is enacted on the body to the moment of death. The fast is intended to draw attention to the plight of the victim but also to create feelings of guilt among the supposed perpetrators of injustice. In positioning themselves as martyrs, victims connote both witness and sufferer. The term martyr originally signified a ‘witness’ or someone testifying to a belief, while more recent meanings refer to torment, pain or even death experienced in the name of a cause. Martyrdom is a form of bearing witness in which the suffering of the victim testifies to the actuality of the experienced or witnessed injustice. More contemporary meanings of martyrdom assume the martyr dies, and thereby the witnessing martyr retrospectively validates the reality of the perceived injustice rather than eye-witnessing something that occurs in the same present time. As Jacques Derrida (2000) has written, the martyr’s witnessing conjures up a truth. The hanging man’s public presentation of death suggests there is a truth to which his suffering bears witness, but the substance of that truth remains opaque. The public visibility of the hanging man as a witness suggests that there was a particular injustice or suffering to be discovered, but the performance hands over to its spectator the problem of interpreting it. An enjoinder to read the performance and its motives is set in place, but without the capacity to answer the questions they pose.

The difference between the performance of the hunger striker and the self-immolation is in the availability of channels of communication to the public. In order for an event to function as a performed protest, it must have a conduit to public consciousness, something partially denied the hunger strikers who were not able to exploit the public spectacle of their emaciated bodies as a means of political engagement. Whereas Thích Quảng Đức’s protest was most articulate in his spectacular bodily performance, the hunger strikers were dependent on drawing attention to their physical privations through means other than physical display. During the most stringently organized set of hunger strikes in Northern Ireland, the leading Republican activist, Bobby Sands, was elected as a Westminster MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone on an ‘Anti H-Block / Armagh Political Prisoner’ ticket. The likeness of Sands used on

promotional material throughout his Westminster campaign was not a carefully tailored publicity still of a politician or a campaigner, nor the image of his emaciated body but rather a slightly out of focus snapshot, showing no sign of starvation or abuse (see fig. 2). It was made all the more disturbing by the evident gap between the smiling, healthy young man represented in the picture and the fragile, wasted figure he evoked. What became an iconic image of Sands served to trigger recognition of the absence of a starving but politicized body that was deliberately kept from sight. The electoral campaign helped ensure the perpetuation of the specific political issues for which Sands fought, giving him an audience but one that could not witness the performance unto death.

The three examples of Thích Quảng Đức, Bobby Sands and the hanging man, considered in the frame offered by performance as protest, represent three variations on the relationship between performance event, audience and interpretation. For Thích Quảng Đức the performance of death took place with a present audience and was subsequently re-presented in media images. The event of death was strongly framed by a specific political context. Bobby Sands' hunger strike was a performance that was invisible (except to prison officers and a handful of visitors), but was re-presented in public campaigns where it gained a large audience who were asked to imagine its visibility. His actions, too, were framed by a powerful and long-running set of political discourses that contextualised them and offered interpretive frames for them. The death of the hanging man was very visible as an event to an audience on the freeway and potentially in subsequent representations of the event, but there was no available context, whether political or not. The hanging man's performance remains opaque and multiply decipherable, so that framing it as the death of a human being performing his martyrdom remains only one interpretive possibility.

An uncertain shift between shock at the prospect of death and curiosity about what may have been a stuffed dummy inhabit the image of the hanging man both in confronting him initially and in puzzling over him in retrospect. In fact, in terms of its impact, whether the body was real or a simulation is immaterial, because the possibility of its 'realness' is enough to profoundly disturb those who witness it, and the brevity of the encounter only increases the uncertainty over the status of the body and the questions



about it. This assertion suggests that iconicity shaped our response to the hanging man. Since the body looked like a real person, it might have been one and therefore a spectator reacts, as least initially, as if it were a real person. It is only later that doubts about its veracity creep in. Anthony Gormley's artwork Event Horizon fleetingly posed similar questions. The work consisted of thirty-one life-size casts of the artist's body, placed on the top of buildings in London's South Bank arts complex (see fig. 3). Some were located on the edges of rooftops, positioned as if to jump off, but their context and form made them less indeterminate than the hanging man and their interpretation more secure. The lack of iconic resemblance to living people that came from their upright, static pose and their uniform coloration, and their reproduction across several simultaneously visible London sites discouraged this misperception. Their indexicality drew a momentary sharp intake of breath quickly dispersed by the certainty of their obvious constructedness and their duplication as thirty one identical castings. The artwork had been heralded in the press and on television, and was installed in a location where public art is common. Event Horizon might have briefly recalled the hanging man but its contextual framing provided a security that death was not imminent.

Baz Kershaw relates in his book, The Radical in Performance, the example of performances enacted by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War organisation, who, in Washington in 1971, 'wore whiteface, carried toy guns and had their real ... war decorations pinned to their combat fatigues' as part of what he calls 'a protest dramaturgy' (Kershaw, 1999: 103). In this performance, 'Relations between the real and the imaginary are deliberately distorted and confused'. These were 'real' Vietnam vets performing soldiering. For Kershaw this mixture of the real and the replica confounds 'the real and the imaginary so thoroughly, it leaves the nature of any subsequent action open to the spectator.' (Kershaw, 1999: 103). There was an intention to perform a protest which, however much it drew on the real for its emotional impact, was purposefully fabricated. The presence of whitened faces connoted acting, theatre and jest, and the reflexive theatrical frame placed the audience at a critical distance from the event. The presence of the obviously toy guns, set against military fatigues and 'real' medals, expressed a critical ambivalence essential to the complex interpretation of the event. The performance might have been uncomfortably open because of the presence of real

soldiers and its layering of signification, but at least in connoting performance there was no ambivalence about its performance status. What clouds interpretation in the image of the hanging man is also the relationship of the real to the imaginary, but in this case there is no theatrical frame, no signification of fabrication either to provide the security of critical distance or the reassurance of pretence.

### **Space and Time**

The short period in which the hanging man's body could be seen contributed to my uncertainty about its status and therefore my interpretation of its meanings. I was not driving the car so I was free to look where I wished. We moved slowly past the body, but not only would it have been indecorous to stare, but my initial physical reflex was to turn away. Like the spectator of almost any horrific or frightening image, desires both to look and look away - to have seen but not to be in the moment of observation – were overwhelming. The feelings of extended duration produced by seeing a shocking image were set against the knowledge that the forward movement of the car made the glimpse fleeting.

The slow approach towards the hanging man differentiated the anticipation of arriving at the cause of delay from the conventional flow of time on the road. Passing time in anticipation is common to the experience of any traffic jam, waiting and watching for the moment of revelation as to the cause. It is like waiting for the curtain to go up at the beginning of a theatre performance, where anticipatory time is marked as a different temporal frame from everyday time, the time of the performance event itself and the time after the event. The event itself might be momentary in comparison with the weight of significance placed upon it. For example, Beckett's *Breath* lasts only one minute, and can be interpreted as a first intake of the 'breath of life' followed a minute later by a 'dying breath' (Beckett, 1984: 209-11). By manipulating the temporal frames of waiting, spectating and reflecting after the performance event, the play connects different kinds of temporality and their different relationships with duration and finitude. The play emphasises the complex expansion and contraction of time in the relationship it sets up between performance time and the everyday time in which it exists and that it also seeks to represent.

The lack of certainty about the status of the body, together with the brevity of seeing it, left the hanging man as an intractable memory image. That memory, like the memory of any traumatic event, is ephemeral, but the insistence on recalling it and narrativizing it is therefore all the stronger. In his discussion of photographs and their relationship with time and signification, Roland Barthes suggested when distinguishing between denotation and connotation that ultimately denotation – the mute presence of something in itself, before cultural meaning enfolds it – is a myth. For my partner and myself the image of the hanging man now resides in our memory like a photograph, since we saw the image through the frame of the car window and the image was recorded in memory in a single, brief moment. But like Barthes describing the photograph, we cannot determine the extent to which what Barthes called ‘connotation procedures’ have intervened in it to ‘utilize the special credibility of the photograph ... its exceptional power of denotation – in order to pass off as merely denoted a message which is in reality heavily connoted’ (Barthes, 1977: 21). We can never experience a pure moment of perception. But he adds the suggestive rider that perhaps only something extremely traumatic can exist as pure denotation: ‘The trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning’ (Barthes, 1977: 30). For Barthes ‘truly traumatic photographs are rare, for in photography the trauma is wholly dependent on the certainty that the scene “really” happened’ (Barthes, 1977: 30). Witnessing what looked like a hanging man, without warning and in an unexpected situation, is perhaps one of those rare events that momentarily breaks through the almost instantaneous processes of cultural assimilation.

The question of how to assimilate the hanging man was dependent on space as well as time. It is possible that it was an event that Americans around us could interpret, while my British partner and myself were hampered by our cultural distance. The geographical location of the encounter could have affected its significance, and some of the possible narrativizations of the event could draw on the meanings of the road that are deeply embedded in US culture, such as the national obsession with the car and the myths and romance that it conjures. In popular culture, the road is a symbol of freedom, independence and self-definition; it is one of the defining images of the American Dream, deployed in film, literature, song and painting. Delimited by precise physical boundaries, rules and signs, the road might have offered the hanging man a compelling public

performance space where disruption to movement through space could hold up an audience and demand attention to a spectacle. There was a series of spatial frames, and the perplexity and fascination of the experience were exaggerated by the different kinds of boundaries that road travel brought. I was sitting inside a car but could look freely all around through the windows. The car was on a roadway from which we could not escape, bordered by grass, the central reservation, and ahead of us by the concrete bridge, but we were required to move into an area only loosely defined by the policeman's traffic control and then to move out of it again. Overall, the definition both of my own space and that of the performance was hazy, tending both to 'flatten' the event as if staged or screened for a public, but also allowing the event to penetrate into what would otherwise be the enclosed and private environment of the car. Performance carves out a differentiated space in which events are invested with meaning and the audience are invited to interpret them, posing the question of the distinctiveness separating performance from the everyday. Unexpectedly coming across a performance inaugurates a crisis of spatial interpretation in which the transformation of the everyday into performance makes the space uncanny.<sup>4</sup> Considering traumatic events like the impacts of airliners on the World Trade Center as performance events, for example, draws attention to their rupture of public space. The choice of the Twin Towers not only ensured maximum disruption and death but also secured the widespread visibility of the event as public spectacle. That visual impact was so strong that one cannot now look at a plane banking low over a city without triggering a fleeting recall of the trauma of 9/11.

### **Performance, Criticism and the Event**

It is the characteristic role of the critic to inhabit the space between an event and the frameworks of interpretation that can be brought to bear on it, and link them up. The primary argument throughout this article is that the relationship between event and framework are both uncertain but also determined by a set of constraining principles. Events on the borders between reality and performance are interesting and challenging to criticism because they insist that analytical discourses must hover on those borders and confront the durational and modifiable activities of perception and interpretation, in their temporal and spatial particularity. Having arrived 'too late' at the scene of the hanging

man, it was not possible to know whether the act was a suicide or a theatrical performance. The problem lay in not knowing the rules of engagement. If the hanging man was a human being and not a dummy, that would demand a certain emotional and analytical response and the interpretive questions would include what kind of person he might have been, and why he might he have killed himself, leading to the political interpretations considered above. If the hanging man were a dummy, this would produce a search for what motivated its fabrication and display, though that might only be a desire to hold up the traffic either as a protest or a prank. If the audience was being duped, in a trick or macabre performance, that would elicit a certain resentment at being fooled and would influence the spectator's interpretation. Iconicity is a precondition for the indeterminacy of the hanging man because the possibility of a real body brings with it the enhanced affect of the event. Contemporary performance draws on this affective power especially in relation to the body. The public and critical interest in Franco B's body-art, for example, rested on its multiple resonances with other body-art works and the open-endedness of its meanings. Franco B presented his real body that bled in front of the audience, on a trajectory towards unconsciousness and death. The visceral effect of the performance rested on the reality of the blood and the potentially fatal effects of bleeding, but the audience were always 'there too early' to witness his death.<sup>5</sup>

Moments like seeing the hanging man cannot be assimilated easily into existing criteria, since it is not clear how they might belong in a customary category. It is this problem of the categorisation of the event that Lyotard (1985, 1988) has theorised, in relation to ethics and politics. In that analytical discourse, the term 'event' is restrictedly defined as something that poses an ethical problem that has to be 'set right', for instance via an investigation or tribunal such as were set up to address the Holocaust or apartheid in South Africa. It is the process that matters and that opens out questions of ethics and justice, even if the event remains intractable to final interpretation and a redress for its injustice has to be indefinitely deferred. This article has argued that witnessing the hanging man forces an interrogation of the scenario as an event. Very exceptionally, such an event is something that happens in the now, and resists being described or evaluated. At the time, it was too late to prevent the event, and now it is still too early to assimilate its meaning or redress whatever may have been its causes. But like the event in Lyotard's

thought, the experience seeks, through the interpretive activity of its witnesses, for suitable categories and processes of understanding. In a sense, the event takes on its own agency in forcing itself, in all its ambiguity, onto my consciousness. In struggling with what it is and how to understand it, I am required to reflexively consider my own agency as a perceiver and analyst.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of these mediated representations of death include 9/11: The Falling Man (2006) and Robert Capa's photograph Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936 the veracity of which was questioned by Phillip Knightley (1975).

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

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of suffering, enlightenment and liberation in Buddhism, see Burton 2004.

<sup>4</sup> On theatre space as uncanny, see Taylor 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Franco B's performances include: Oh Lover Boy (2001); I Miss You (2003); Still Life (2005)

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