BOOK REVIEW

Unspeakable Truths: The Performance of Terror in Everyday Life


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*Rustom Bharucha’s* Terror and Performance stages a rigorous and challenging analysis of the relation between terror and performance. The book unpacks the entangled relations between performance, embodiment, violence and history. In the course of his book, Bharucha raises provocative questions that unsettle doxic understandings of both terror and terrorism. His book, I argue, works to materialise unspeakable truths that shed light on the complex aporias that inscribe the relation between terror and performance.

*Terror and Performance* is driven by a question that is both urgent and unsettling: What is the relation between terror and performance? This is an urgent question precisely because acts of terror, in all of their mediatised manifestations, are at once informed and haunted by the performative. This is an unsettling question as it immediately brings into crisis common sense understandings of acts of terror as somehow beyond the purview of pre-planned scripts, calculated gestures and the discursive codes and conventions that work effectively to render these acts culturally intelligible—precisely as *acts* of terror. Events such as 9/11, Bharucha (2014, p. 51) reminds us, must be read as performative and theatricalised events because they ineluctably assume, through televised mass repetition, the dimensions of theatre—of cruelty, terror and violence: ‘Following the axiomatic assumption of performance studies, theatre can never occur once; it can only occur twice, or many times, in its ceaseless repetition’. Bharucha’s book stands as a tour de force of polemical and scholarly analysis. I know of no other book that stages such a rigorous and innovative examination of the relation between acts of terror and performance.
In the course of his book, Bharucha proceeds to map the complex and at times startling entanglements of the performative and acts of terror, and, as he demonstrates, these startling entanglements often transpire in the very space of the theatre, and the acts of terror and horror that unfold in such precincts are not the result of state-designated ‘terrorists’ but of the state as a purveyor of terror:

One of the most chilling examples of this volte-face can be detected in the raid of the Dubrovska Theatre in Moscow in October 2002 by the Russian state police, following the disruption of a high-tech Broadway-like musical when the entire audience was taken hostage by Chechen rebels. Tellingly, it was not the Chechens who killed the spectators, thereby affirming their status as ‘terrorists’; rather, it was poisonous gas pumped into the theatre by the Russian militia which resulted in the deaths of a majority of hostages, many who choked to death on their own vomit. (Bharucha 2014, p. 29)

The complex entanglements that Bharucha traces in the course of his book are unforgettably materialised in the opening chapter: ‘Genet in Manila’. This chapter stages a post-mortem analysis of how the events of 9/11 inscribed themselves irrevocably in his production of Genet’s The Maids at the Republic of Malate theatre in Manila. The chapter stages a virtuoso mapping of the inextricable connection between a cluster of texts, acts and events that would seem to be disconnected. The staging of a play in which the protagonists are two maids is powerfully interlinked to the ‘political and economic fact that ‘the maid’ is one of the biggest export items of the Philippines. She earns more foreign exchange than almost any other commodity produced in the Philippines, and contributes to 12 per cent of the Philippines’ GDP through remittances’ (Bharucha 2014, p. 33). Never losing sight of Genet’s text, Bharucha proceeds to embody Genet’s figure of the ‘criminal saint’ in the person of the Filipina maid Flor Contemplacion, executed by the Singapore state for two alleged murders. Bharucha interweaves the massive public display of grief on the return of Contemplacion’s body to the Philippines and her anointment as the ‘people’s saint’ with the key concerns of Genet’s text—specifically, the manner in which the domestic and quotidian is, for the disenfranchised and marginalised, always inscribed with violence: ‘This gamut of manifestations’, writes Bharucha (p. 35), ‘relating brutality to the most ordinary and banal levels of social interaction, reveals how people live with terror in everyday life, which gets routinized and accepted’.

Following Genet to the very spirit of his charged corpo-textual politics, Bharucha unfolds the unspeakable dimensions that inscribe figures and acts of violence with desire. It is in the context of this fraught domain that he refuses platitudinous and reductive understandings of violence and terror; rather, he reflexively navigates a fraught terrain littered with ethical mines in order to disclose what would otherwise remain buried: the aporias and contradictions that are constitutive of the very categories—terror and performance—that frame the entirety
of his analysis. By dextrously intermixing the personal and political, the conceptual and affective, the anecdote and historical fact, Bharucha breaches the self-censoring and dogmatic protocols of stolid academic writing in order to raise difficult questions and to expose unspeakable truths. Watching the televised spectacle of the 9/11 attacks, Bharucha marks, for example, that ‘split-second of jubilation’ that he experienced. He then proceeds to unpack everything that is at stake in materialising this split-second affect:

In a politically correct mode, one could argue that it is reasonable to feel ‘solidarity’ (for the victims) and ‘anger’ (against those xenophobes targeting minorities and Muslims in particular). ‘Horror’ and ‘grief’ are even more acceptable as valid emotions in the repertoire of affects sanctioned by the critical event of ‘September 11’. However, in our self-censoring times when accusations of sympathizing with terrorists are fraught with serious risks and misunderstandings, it is clearly not quite so acceptable to acknowledge ‘jubilation’, even for a split-second. I am trying to problematize here the difficult aporia in acknowledging that there is a jouissance linked to the moment of terror, which then gets overwhelmed and subsumed in other emotions. (Bharucha 2014, p. 43)

Even as he uncompromisingly delineates such fraught junctures in his text, Bharucha never resiles from asking the most pressing of questions precisely by refusing facile conflations of the performative, acts of terror and the resultant deaths:

In whose authorial framework and from which disciplinary set of protocols and expertise can death be proclaimed as performative? Who determines performance for others, including the dead in whose name we speak? One could argue that there is an automatic reflex in interpreting death as performance through the spectacular effect of its visuality for a particular audience. One could deepen the argument by suggesting that this effect is integrally linked to how performance affects us in a moment of extremity. What are the political lines of affect? Indeed, what are the limits of empathy which make affect possible in the first place? (Bharucha 2014, p. 62)

Having raised these difficult questions, Bharucha does not leave them in a state of interrogative suspension. Rather, in the course of his book, he sets to work attempting to unpack them in order to do justice to them. When, for example, he opens up the question of empathy, as important in enabling a subject to engage with the pain of the other, he simultaneously underscores its limits: ‘Making sense’ of people’s extreme actions leading to their deaths is surely a worthwhile response so long as this process is subjected to a lot more political reflection and contradiction than ‘painful empathy’ (2014, p. 63).

Bharucha’s exhortation that we subject ourselves, as interpreters of acts of terror, to political reflection and contradiction does not possess the status of a mere rhetorical flourish. Rather, the entire fabric of
Bharucha’s text is inflected by this difficult exhortation and, furthermore, it is augmented by an insistence that the political should always be historically framed and situated: ‘Building toward my critique of representing death as performance, I work against the predilection to theorize acts of terror independently of their history and factuality’ (p. 90). In his chapter on ‘Muslims’ in a Time of Terror’, Bharucha documents the multiple violences experienced by Muslims (and all of their spectral incarnations in the form of racialised conflations and misrepresentations, including Sikhs, people gathered under the violent descriptor ‘of Middle Eastern appearance’, and so on) across diverse geopolitical sites and times. Bharucha’s searing analysis of the genocide in Gujarat, India, exemplifies his critical inflection of the political with the historical. The genocide at Gujarat ‘specifically targeted Muslims between 28 February 2002 and 3 March 2002’, and it resulted, through a violent process of ethnic cleansing, in the death of over 3,000 Muslims and the displacement of over 100,000, ‘of whom 21,000 continue to live more than ten years later in transit relief camps’. Tracking the construction of the Muslim by the violent forces of Hindutva nationalism, Bharucha (2014, p. 91) informs his political critique with historical fact. He brings into focus the manner in which British colonial policy set the racialological frame through which the contemporary Muslim would continue to be positioned in contemporary India: ‘Keeping the normativity of political identities in mind, let us return to the slippery logic of the British colonial imperative which attempted to prove that Muslims were different but not essentially different from Hindus. The hermeneutic twist in this argument was further complicated by the assumption that even as the vast majority of Muslims were identified as local converts, the entire community (‘Muslims’) was implicitly blamed for othering itself’. Having articulated the essential attributes of this historical frame, Bharucha (2014, p. 91) immediately links its material effects to the present: ‘Beyond the boundaries of the Indian colonial state, this accusation levelled against self-othering of minorities can be regarded as a familiar trope in the contemporary rhetoric of racism’.

The extraordinary scope—geopolitical, aesthetic, historical and ethical—of Bharucha’s text cannot be encompassed in the genre of a book review. He offers, amongst other things, a trenchant analysis of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa and of its equivalent, the gacaca, in post-genocide Rwanda. In the wake of his book’s genealogy of terror and performance, Bharucha offers if not an exit to violence, then at least a counter-act: performing non-violence in the age of terror. Bharucha’s mapping of the particularities of the performance of non-violence is animated by a superbly nuanced and rigorous reading of Gandhi’s non-violent politics. Tenaciously refusing the dominant hagiographic mode of making sense of Gandhi’s politics of non-violence, Bharucha proceeds to articulate the complexities and contradictions that inscribe Gandhi’s ethics, even as he valorises those aspects that offer a glimpse on how to act otherwise in a time of violence and terror. Having brought into critical focus the unstated ‘violence of non-violence’ that informs Gandhian practice, Bharucha (2014, p. 174)
reflects: ‘As I unravel these thoughts, I realize how difficult, if not impossible, it is to ‘fix’ non-violence as a particular creed or set of practices. Perhaps, like Gandhi’s primary concept of swaraj (self-rule), it is best subjected to relentless scrutiny and reflexivity in a constant search for the deepening of political struggle through a transformation of the self’. I can think of no better line to sum up the achievement of this groundbreaking book. Bharucha’s work is a striking example of the deployment of relentless scrutiny of political practice in order to effect personal and political transformation.

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