

## **Authenticity/Theatricality: World spectatorship and the drama of the image**

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### **Introduction**

In his famously coruscating critique of the *Jargon of Authenticity* (1973), Theodor Adorno traduces the tendency of early twentieth century philosophy to valorise existentialist markers such as 'authenticity', 'care', and 'death' in a way that occludes their historicity as products of material social processes and casts them as seemingly self-evident, politically incontestable terms. For Adorno, the use of these words to denote supposedly self-referential content demonstrates the mystification of language into a mode of 'magical expression' or 'jargon' which serves to naturalise an ideological formation and justify its relations of domination. Terms like 'authenticity' appear to lay claim to exist outside of historical determination and reification rather than being produced by them, as if authored by an absolute creative subject rather than articulated to *political* processes of fetishization and subjectification. If Adorno's point is that there is no simple, objective presence outside the modes of representation that do the work of *making* present, then it follows that the term 'authenticity' should be conjoined with another term that indicates the constructed nature of this presentation and its operation of staging – 'theatricality'. This juxtaposition is not designed simply to void the authentic of its apparent content by suggesting it is something 'inauthentic', but rather to mark 'a shift of dominance within the semiotic function' by which it achieves its effects so that it appears 'not as an objective given' but as contingent upon historical conventions and structures of representation. Theatricality, as Erica Fischer-Lichte suggests, can be seen to appear when signs operate as 'signs of signs', drawing attention to the arbitrariness and ontological emptiness of the sign as such and marking its ideological construction (1995, 88). In this respect, as Elin Diamond has argued, theatricality operates both as a medium of signification and the means by which 'the spectator is enabled to see a sign system *as* a sign system' (1988, 85).

The inter-connections between theatricality and authenticity are explored from a slightly different perspective by Elizabeth Burns in her foundational text on the subject (1972). Burns suggests that theatricality becomes evident when a gap is opened up between the social norms governing spontaneously lived and ideologically naturalised forms of behaviour and breaches in the modes of presentation 'composed according to this grammar of rhetorical and authenticating conventions' (33). For Burns, theatricality is characterised as depending on historically and culturally determined authenticity effects framed by aesthetic codes and discursive practices which construct a specific mode of relationship with the spectator. This frame constitutes theatricality as a 'mode of

perception' (3) rather than an ontological condition; a *way of seeing* as much as an apparatus of staging, in which the space between reality and representation is opened up at the very moment it is subsumed into the normalising conventions of the ideological formation. Josette Féral advances this proposition by arguing that theatricality 'emerges from the play between these two realities', positioning the spectator as a 'desiring subject' imbricated in its operation (1982, 178). For Féral, 'theatricality is the result of an act of recognition on the part of the spectator' in which they perceive 'cleavages' or ruptures in the fabric of representation. These 'cleavages' re-open the gap between presence and representation, 'reality and fiction' in a way that 'creates disjunction' and disrupts 'systems of signification' (2002, 10—11). Yet theatricality is also at play in covering over this gap, 'suturing the real and the really made-up' (Taussig 1993, 86). Theatricality is therefore 'not necessarily resistive or contestatory; it is as much inscribed in the regime of representation as in any apparent moment of its destabilization' (Kear 2019, 301). Accordingly, theatricality is not simply experienced by the spectator as a moment of recognition; it is implicated in the production of the spectator as subject and the cultural construction of the spectator position.

In this respect, it is important to recall Christopher Balme's designation of theatricality as 'a particularly Western style of thought which ultimately was brought to bear on most of the colonized world' (2007). Drawing heavily on Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Balme cautions that theatricality and colonialism are 'related phenomena', and that rather than opening up a horizon of 'alterity', as Féral claims (2002, 12), theatricality constructs 'a closed field, a theatrical stage' repeating colonial perspectives (Said 1978, 63). The 'mode of perception' produced through theatricality's cultural and historical construction of spectatorship therefore needs to be interrogated as part of a colonial regime of representation. In this chapter, I propose to trace its operation within and across a series of visual scenes which serve to demonstrate both the co-dependency of the authenticity/theatricality relation in the cultural politics of spectatorship and its central position in the construction, circumscription and continuation of racialized ways of seeing. By pursuing this 'method of dramatization', I aim to show rather than simply explain its cultural and historical formation, allowing access to '*the dramatic dynamisms* that thus determine it in a material system' (Deleuze 2004, 98). The scenes are drawn from a repertoire of images that seek to capture, in various ways, the 'drama of immigration' attendant on the contemporary crisis of clandestine migration and the forced trafficking of people that makes up what Ruben Andersson calls the 'illegality industry' (2014, 37, 14). At the same time, the images also evidence the fact that border politics and policing itself involves a certain 'staging'—the construction of a *mise-en-scène* of risk, rescue and redemption and the composition of sympathetic and consolatory registers of address. Each scene presents a singular event as an image, re-staging it as an optic through which to view the

relations of presence and representation underpinning its operation. Taken together, the scenes are composed dramaturgically to demonstrate the workings of the material system of spectatorship they evidence and expose, interweaving the perceptions, affects and visceral experience of the aesthetic-political regime from which they emerge (Rancière 2013, xi).

### **Scene 1: 'The horrors of the sea'**

After a month that had witnessed some of the worst episodes of the contemporary crisis of 'irregular migration' in the Mediterranean, including an infamous shipwreck off Lampedusa in which an estimated 700–1100 people died after a being locked by traffickers in the cargo hold, *BBC News Magazine* published a collection of images by the award-winning photographer Juan Medina under the title, 'The horrors of the sea' (27 April, 2015). Although none of the images selected were actually images *of* the events of that month, they were nonetheless presented as testifying *to* the recent disasters at sea. In appearing to make visible something that otherwise could not be seen, their authenticity (as real photographs, capturing real events), was put into the service of theatricality (as a mode of perception, a constructed point of view) in order to produce and reproduce political effects. The photographs are presented to the viewer as a visual point of access to an invisible and inaccessible scene by actively creating a spectator position from which they are to be seen. They work, in other words, through a logic of staging in which the authenticity of the image is articulated to the theatricality of its composition.

One image in particular seems to condense and display the dynamics of the authenticity/theatricality relation and its construction of a privileged spectator position. It shows the terrified faces of six Black men desperately trying to clamber aboard a rescue boat after their makeshift patera had capsized. As several hands reach upwards towards the deck, one man's face, centrally framed, looks up at the camera as he appears to be sinking down into the depths. The drowning man seems to return the viewer's gaze directly, his look of helpless entreaty – captured at the very moment of his disappearance into the sea – locking the mode of perception of the image into a theatrical relation through which the spectator's pity is generated in response to his precarity.

The face of a drowning man is thereby turned into *the* image of clandestine migration – commodified, circulated and reproduced regardless of the context of its production or 'authentic' signification. His mute presence is made to speak for the figure of the migrant that he appears to embody and express, the image economy theatricalizing him as an actor whose iconic function extends far beyond the confines of his own self-presentation. Medina took the photograph over a decade earlier, yet it is redeployed here to visualise an otherwise unseen disaster off the coast of

southern Italy. The reproduction of the image in this context is designed to suture a gap in the field of the visual field by drawing upon the repertoire of representations through which it is repeatedly structured. The photograph of the drowning man appears as a surrogate for an otherwise unrepresented scene of suffering, its authenticity as the material trace of a singular event being subsumed into its signifying function within a regime of representation. Medina himself seems super-conscious of the tendency to tear these images away from the material conditions of their production. He notes that the image was taken in pitch darkness, without being able to see anything. The flash alone illuminated the scene as ‘a glimpse of the unseen’, creating the iconic image of the drowning man as ‘a bare, naked, drowning life’ even though his own intention had been to move beyond the construction of a ‘humanitarian gaze’ (Andersson 2014, 151—154). Yet the image is circulated within a visual economy designed to reproduce the ideological stability, political security and liberal sensibilities of the spectator position it constructs. As Georges Didi-Hubermann reminds us, ‘the event—emotional or “pathetic” as it is in our case—never comes to us without the form that presents it to the gaze of others’ (2007, 69). The image is never simply seen (in its ‘authenticity’); it is always formed by historical relations of seeing and culturally constructed modes of perception (its ‘theatricality’).

## **Scene 2: ‘Our boat’**

The theatrical ‘cleavage’ created in the visual field by the absence of an authentic image of the disaster at sea of 18 April 2015 – the event of a shipwreck which, by definition, it would have been impossible for the spectator to see – was re-opened by the Swiss artist Christoph Büchel’s contribution to the 2019 Venice Biennale. Highly controversially, Büchel’s exhibit, *Barca Nostra* (‘Our Boat’), consisted solely of the installation of the recovered remains of the Lampedusa shipwreck on the quayside of the Arsenale. The boat had been salvaged by the Italian Navy in 2016, with the then Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, proposing to send the wreck to Brussels as a reminder of ‘the scandal of migration’. Whilst this suggestion offers a tacit recognition that border politics and policing always involves a certain desire to render clandestine migration ‘spectacularly visible’ (Andersson 2014, 138), the fact that the boat was shipped off to the Biennale makes its function as visual spectacle appear almost inconvertible.

Despite the claims made by the organisers that *Barca Nostra* serves as ‘collective monument and memorial to contemporary migration’ by representing ‘the collective policies and politics that create these kind of disasters’, the exhibition of this authentic artefact reclaimed from the sea in fact performs its act of political recuperation through the dramatic dynamisms of theatricality. Although the authenticity of the boat itself is not in question – the holes ripped in the side of the hull can be

clearly seen – the staging of it as an image most certainly is. For the scene being indexed necessarily remains unseen – the almost unimaginable scene of drowning, terrified people locked inside the hold – which renders the boat a scene of crime regardless of its disjunctive semiotic situating of the spectator by its framing upon dry land.

In his seminal book, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, Hans Blumenberg recounts how images produce the ground of not only conceptual thinking but political subjectivation. Using the image of the spectator's relation to the scene of shipwreck as an extended example of the process of constructing 'an inviolable, solid ground for one's view of the world' – a political as well as epistemological standpoint – he traces the historical formation of world spectatorship as a cultural practice or way of life. Starting with the Classical formulation set by Lucretius' evaluation of the pleasure of observing the 'scene of emergency at sea' – which derives not from enjoyment of another's suffering but rather from 'enjoying the safety of one's own standpoint' and perception of subjective security (1997, 26) – Blumenberg situates the spectator as the incarnation of the pleasures of theoretical distance over experiential engagement. It is therefore not surprising that the spectator metaphor seems to find its structure of feeling directly embodied in the theatrical scenario. If 'it is only because the spectator stands on firm ground that he [*sic*] is fascinated by the fateful drama on the high seas' – i.e. the spectator's experience is itself devoid of danger because it both vicarious and at a safe distance – then 'theatre illustrates the human situation in its purest form ... Only when the spectators have been shown to their secure places can the drama of human imperilment be played out before them. This tension, this distance, can never be great enough' (1997, 39). The political operation of the shipwreck metaphor is to ground the spectator as its effect. Theatrically, the spectatorial relation is inscribed in the materiality of distance necessary to produce the illusion of proximity and emotional affect; the pull of intimacy and the push of distance continually re-frames the performance of otherness as a means of shoring up the security of the spectator's political subjectivity and sensibilities.

Something of this configuration can be seen to be in play in the aesthetic construction of *Barca Nostra* as theatrical *mise-en-scène*. It is 'Our Boat' not only because the image is the construction of the spectator (and the disaster is thereby framed as 'our responsibility'), but also because the material position of the spectator is reaffirmed by the boat's very appearance *as image*. Even though 'simple images turn us into spectators', as Blumenberg puts it, 'there is no connection between the sinking ship out there and safety here, other than the heartfelt weighing of form of life [*Lebensformen*]' (2010, 31–32). This lack of connection foregrounds dramatization as a mode of political subjectivation through the theatricalizing operation of world-spectating. The dramatic scene

functions as a *dispositif* whose theatrical set-up and performative operation serves not only to re-instantiate the spectator as the locus of political subjectivation but to act as a reminder of the inseparability of the event from its mode of representation. Accordingly, the drama of the image is composed as much through triangulation with the spectator as it is through pure presentation. The spectator's encounter with the image can thereby operate as the site for re-opening rather than simply foreclosing the tension between 'authentic' presence and 'theatrical' representation, providing the opportunity for exceeding the containment of the dramatic frame and creating a moment of aesthetic experience which 'pulls presence into another world, creating a hole in the visual field' (Demos 2013: 99).

### Scene 3: 'After the torture of the storm'



Figure 1: *The Slave Ship*, J.M.W. Turner, 1840. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The drama of the image before us – J.M.W. Turner's controversial masterpiece, *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On (The Slave Ship)*, 1840 – appears to condense the theatrical depiction of a scene of historical suffering into a visual intensification of the dynamics of the spectatorial relation. A non-commissioned work first exhibited at the Royal

Academy in 1840 to coincide with the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, the painting seeks to confront the horrors of the 'middle-passage' and the criminal trafficking of human beings. The specific historical event it references—the decision by the captain of *The Zong*, in 1781, to cast his live 'cargo' into the sea to try to outrun the coming storm and then claim the 'loss' for insurance purposes (Riding and Johns 2014, 257)—operates as a synecdoche for the broader catastrophe of trans-Atlantic slavery. The scene of the disaster at sea is thereby set-up to configure, metonymically, the disastrous effects of the trade as a dehumanising tragedy, viscerally illustrating the reduction of life to the level of the commodity.

At the same time, the work is not simply representational. The event of this image appears not only to be the scene depicted within it—the event it captures, presented at a standstill—but the simultaneous opening out of the image as the locus of the viewer's aesthetic encounter and experience—the 'event of the gaze, ephemeral and partial' (Didi-Huberman 2005: 156). The viewer is struck by the image's flatness rather than depth, by its frontal, almost confrontational, visual address. The line traced by light of the setting sun appears to create a fold in the fabric of the depicted scene, pushing the perspective forwards and outwards so that it seems to simultaneously pull the sky over the sea to produce a disorienting experience of vertiginous 'frontality' under the pressure of which the image 'suddenly rends' (Didi-Huberman 2005: 228). With this rupturing of the horizontal plane, the materiality of the image itself—as *painting*—appears to interrupt the scene it represents, breaking open the ostensibly representational logic of the composition to construct a distinctively *theatrical* visual event.

This moment of interruption, in which the viewer becomes the event's *spectator*, thereby opens up the image as *drama*. The frontal fold creates an asymmetric cut within the composition of the seascape, establishing a diagonal relation between the 'subject' of the image—the slave ship occupying the left of the central horizontal plane—and the anamorphic 'objects' floating in the foreground. These are the material traces of presence upon which the painting builds its theatrical, representational economy: bits of broken bodies turned into image material, the remnants of transported human beings whose fragmented limbs remain gazed upon insistently. Whilst the severed leg in foreground seems to disrupt the spectator's field of vision and re-codify the act of looking as an act of witnessing, it nonetheless functions within the painting's visual economy to reproduce the relations of power and exchange it appears to critique. The image seeks to confront the spectator with the fact of slavery through the theatrical instrumentalization of slavery's suffering, inviting us to both look on in horror and to look away in disgust and shame. The painting's register of address is thereby both sympathetic and consolatory, a drama staged directly to enable the

spectator to experience politically the theatrical dynamics of emotional proximity and optical distance, simultaneously allowing us to be pulled into the aesthetic of the image and repulsed by its representational frame. The spectator is thereby positioned as the point of assimilation and integration of the agonistic confrontation between ‘the guilty ship’—metonymically indexing the extended network of economic relations practised by the triangular trade—and the torturous suffering of the discarded ‘dead and dying’ rendered visible in the foreground of the painting even as its visual structure appears to rend, splitting open the gap between the materiality of the image as representation and the materiality of what it represents.

In this moment of confronting the image, ‘vision is here rent between seeing and looking: the image is rent between representing and self-representing’, constructing an ‘event of the gaze’ in which the viewer experiences their own subjective position—their point of view, so to speak—as partially and temporarily ‘breached’; as if being looked at whilst looking, forced to ‘face up’ to ‘what presents a front to us—of what looks at us—when we look’ (Didi-Huberman 2005, 156; 271). What this image of atrocity confronts us with, and what it makes us confront, is something like the politics of spectatorship *sui generis*, requiring us to examine how what we see not only affects and alters us but reproduces and re-inscribes the logic of world spectatorship itself. This necessitates that we interrogate how seeing suffering not only ‘ruins but renews our desire to see’; how the very act of looking at the image effectively *re-enacts* the logic of the gesture it interrupts so that ‘it infects our gaze, meaning that our gaze is devastated but holds on, resists, returns’, *repeats* (Didi-Huberman 2003, 278). In other words, the aesthetic-political experience of being confronted by the image appears as but one moment of a dialectical movement in which the regime of representation renews itself through the recuperative dynamics of repetition.

Turner’s staging of the scene of suffering functions within an explicitly ‘racialized regime of representation’ (Hall 1997, 245) in which the objectification of the Black subject is rendered and repeated in its dismemberment, displacement and disappearance into the structure of signification (Bhabha 1994, 92). The fragmented Black bodies in the foreground of the painting—visual evidence of the ‘epistemic violence’ of the racist gaze despite being aimed at producing in the spectator the sententious affect of its *anti-racist* inversion—appear at once to disrupt and to re-stabilise the allegorical shipwreck’s disastrous field of vision. The materiality of the violence suffered by them becomes tacitly yet tangibly integrated into the materiality of the painting itself, rendered visible in the swirling surface of the seascape on the canvas at the same time as disappearing ‘after the torture of the storm’.



The phrase is John Ruskin's, who eulogises *The Slave Ship* as 'the noblest sea ... ever painted by man'; 'a perfect composition ... dedicated to the most sublime of subjects and impressions'. Ruskin's reading thereby continues the over-extension of the logic of displacement and disappearance by removing the tortured Black figures from the scene entirely, as Paul Gilroy notes, relegating their significance to a footnote reluctantly recognising that 'the near sea is encumbered with corpses' whilst elevating the presumed *subject* of the painting to *the spectator's* encounter with the Sublime (1993, 14—17). To this extent, Gilroy argues, Turner's painting 'remains a useful image not only for its self-conscious moral power' but as an index of how 'modernity itself might be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships' it frames with racialized others (1993, 16—17). For Gilroy, the painting's reception illustrates the processes by which 'race has been tacitly erased' from the discussion of aesthetic experience—both at the level of content and in the constitution of discourses of spectatorship—and at yet at the same time returns within in the historical regime of representation that appears to enact its disavowal. Whilst this demonstrably negates the work's 'racial content' by refusing to afford it an 'aesthetic significance of its own' (Gilroy 1998, 335—337), the dynamics of modernity's racialized regime of representation do not simply serve to dramatize content alone but situate the theatrical production of spectatorship's mode of perception as integral to the construction of a racialized frame, form and regime of representation.

#### **Scene 4: 'The Spectacle of the "Other"'**

The contention that the politics of spectatorship, 'race' and representation are mutually co-constituting is not exactly a new one. Stuart Hall's textbook essay, 'The Spectacle of the "Other"', for example, traces the historicity of the practices of representation 'which have been used to mark racial difference and signify the racialized "Other"' throughout the colonial and post-colonial formation, arguing that they provided the 'discursive site through which ... "racialized knowledge" was produced and circulated' (1997, 239, 244). Drawing on a range of cultural historians, he demonstrates the centrality of the development of a 'racialized regime of representation' to both the operation of colonial power relations and the identification of aesthetic-political strategies of critique and contestation. Crucially, this recognises that 'the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which "difference" is represented' (232)—the objectifying technologies of display and degradation, fragmentation and fetishism—functions as an apparatus of subjectification, securing the re-production of the power/knowledge effects of racial 'difference' and racialized ways of seeing at the level of lived subjectivities. The call to the spectacle of the other is therefore both re-iterative of the visual dynamics of Fanonian '*epidermalization*: literally, the inscription of race on the skin' (Hall 1996, 16); and re-duplicative of the *internalisation* of these in historically lived identities.

For Hall, following Fanon, both the racially-marked performativity of 'blackness' and the relatively unmarked normative position of spectatorial 'whiteness' are co-constituted by the regime of representation's apparatus of staging, mimetically re-produced through its construction of positions of enunciation and identification and structural logics of enactment and observation (20). The appearance of the black body in the space of representation is always, in this respect, an appearance in the 'place of the other'—on the stage constructed by the gaze of the white spectator, which confirms the spectator's 'whiteness' as its effect. The 'epistemic violence' of such a staging of 'blackness' creates a discombobulation disrupting the black body's 'own frame of reference', rendering its 'field of vision disturbed', split and alienated by the incorporation of an external perspective (Bhabha 1986, xii). Not only, then, are the subjectivating dynamics of 'race' co-constitutive—producing and reproducing the identificatory binary white/black as the ontological effect of the representational '*return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the Other place from which it comes*'—but so too are the structural relations governing its appearance in 'the differentiating order of otherness' (Bhabha 1994, 45). 'Race' and representation must therefore be seen as co-constitutive, at least within the dynamics of the persisting social formation; operating through modes of repetition congruent with the theatricality of the actor-spectator relation and the performativity of dis/identifications made through, before, and *for* the gaze of the Other.

Hall recounts numerous instances through which the specific modalities of theatrical display have served to condense, codify and contain the relational configuration of race and representation into the formal fixity of stereotypical images of racial difference and alterity. Foremost amongst these is the notorious exhibition of Saartje Baartman, otherwise known as 'The Hottentot Venus', whose objectification 'through the medium of display' provided the precursor to the nineteenth century form of the living ethnological exhibit (Greenhalgh 1988, 82) and the instantiation of a pruriently pathological and fetishizing view of racially and sexually marked bodies. Brought to London from the Cape region of South Africa in 1809, two years after the abolition of the slave trade by Britain, Baartman's exhibition as a cultural curiosity apparently designed to justify colonial exploitation through the ocular 'evidence' of the spectacle was controversial from the outset. Her self-presentational performances on a raised stage platform drew condemnation from anti-slavery protestors who objected to the humiliating and degrading utilisation of the conventions of the 'freak show' to install a logic of racialized cultural difference. As Susan Stewart has argued, these spectacles produced the performer as 'anomalous' in the eyes of the viewer by creating and accentuating the *distance*—and thereby the *difference*—between performer and spectator, 'normalizing' the position and self-perception of the latter in the process (1992, 109).

Central to the construction of such distance was the denial of a verbal relation between actor and audience, achieved through the muting of the performer's voice so that they could only be seen to *show* themselves as image rather than *speak* for themselves as subjects. Accordingly, spectatorial interpretation was mediated by the 'barker' acting as commentator on both the action and the performer, remediating the significance of the performer's presence for the benefit and entertainment of the audience (109—110). Such compression of the space between presentation and representation attempted to anchor the performance in an apparently self-authenticating 'reality', situating the performer as seemingly unaware of the representational—and political—frame governing her appearance and theatricalizing her behaviour as performance. The erasure of any signs of direction, choreography or even rehearsed behaviour sought to ensure that the 'authenticity' of the show confirmed the ideological 'reality' of the representation as well as obscuring its reality *as* representation. In order to assure the spectator of the 'naturalness' of the display—and reassure them of the propriety of their own spectating—the theatrical set-up of the spectacle demanded of the performer 'a feigned unawareness of the very act of performance' (Strother 1999: 33); an orchestrated and internalised denial of their agency as an actor.

It is therefore not surprising that, in the case of the living ethnological exhibit especially, signs of resistance to the display or reluctance to enact its objectifying dynamics were identified as evidence of coercion and control by anti-slavery campaigners concerned that free actors would not consent to their own racial humiliation and sexual degradation. In the case of Baartman's exhibition in London in 1810, the tension between the apparent agency of the performer and the spectatorial affect of the performance was eventually tested in a court case. The abolitionists who brought the case, pointed to Baartman's reluctance to play her instrument, and therefore her *role*, as evidence of her compulsion to perform. The case was lost on the grounds that Baartman gave her 'consent' to perform, and thereby participated in the representation itself; repeating the long history of protecting the vicarious violence of the voyeuristic spectator through recourse to the attestation of willing participation by the objectified performer (Strother 1999, 32—33).

### **Scene 5: Restaging 'The Spectacle of "the Other"'**

Something of these dynamics returns in the periodic re-emergence of the figure of 'The Hottentot Venus' as 'the embodiment of difference' (Hall 1997, 265) – racial and sexual – long after the withdrawal of Baartman's body from theatrical, medical and museological display. Her function as 'the central image of the black female throughout the nineteenth century' appears to re-appear, for example, in South African director Brett Bailey's highly contested resurrection of the living ethnological exhibit as a contemporary performance form. *Exhibit B* was presented at the Black Box

Theatre, Galway, Ireland in July 2015 after the shows in London and Paris were either cancelled or disrupted by protest at the work's self-evident resuscitation of racial stereotypes and a demonstrably racialized theatrical gaze. In this work, constructed as a series of living images of racialized violence, and in particular the 'epistemic violence' of spectatorship, the 'Hottentot Venus' is framed once again as the epitome of the dynamics of theatricalization. She appears in the form of a young Black performer standing on a small raised platform clearly set-up as a 'stage'. Above her head hangs a white plaster picture frame. Her presence is framed as an image, an object to be looked at even though she can be seen looking back. She is clearly 'costumed' although stripped to the waist. Rows of buttons adorn her arms and thighs. Her skin is darkened yet shimmering, *theatricalized* by both the blue light of the illuminated stage and the historicity of racialized relations of looking. Her position on the elevated stage means the spectator looks upwards at her whilst she looks straight ahead. As the stages revolves, she appears to catch the spectator looking as she turns into their gaze – returning it not with the force of recognition but rather the nervous realisation of being looked at. This moment of realisation is evidently supposed to be shared with the spectator, who experiences themselves as seen as well as seeing, and perhaps questions whether they have the 'tacit consent' to look assumed by the conventions of theatrical performance. Yet this exchange of looks does nothing to alter or challenge the visual economy within which the exchange takes place; returning the gaze does not weaken its performative force but rather renews and re-authorises its operation.

Although this image is only the first of thirteen comprising the visual dramaturgy of *Exhibit B*, the contours of the work's claim to be constructing the ground for a visual encounter between performer and spectator can already be traced quite distinctly. For Bailey, the question is less about *who* gets to look at whom than *how* the gaze is met; yet this in itself simply mirrors the racialized relations of power and desire which reproduce the position of world spectatorship as their political effect. Tellingly, the image of 'The Hottentot Venus' is prefaced by that of a 'Jamaican immigrant/asylum seeker' (the difference in either status or trajectory is not made clear). Stationed just inside the entrance door, framing the spectator's entry into the space, this image is simply a man wearing trainers, jeans and t-shirt, his hands held by side. He is looking forwards; looking back at us but without a gleam of agency. There is no sign of recognition, no gesture of mutuality, no glimpse of identity. His presence is rather framed by the statistical information set to the left: 'Mode of entry to EU; Port of Entry; Country of residence'. This is how his presence is represented; how he is rendered visible in the context of official discourses of immigration and asylum and their attendant racializations. But the image also frames the set-up of the performance as such, suggesting that the contemporary theatricalization of migration maintains a direct historical

continuity with the colonial aesthetic regime governing the production, reception and circulation of the images it reproduces.

The subsequent image, captioned 'The Age of Enlightenment', shows the whitened figure of elegantly attired Black man reclined on sarcophagus. This appears to reference the fate of Angelo Soliman, an historical figure from the Austrian court of late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Despite being a man of numerous cultural accomplishments, he was subjected to brutalising taxidermy after his death and rendered an 'exotic savage' through this mode of preservation and posthumous exhibition. Like Baartmann, Soliman's reduction to an eviscerated, hollowed out body can be seen to be the effect of his being rendered into an image. A stuffed Pelican, similarly whitened – another example of 'exotica' perhaps – stands over the performer's body.

The fifth image, 'Still Life' is staged opposite the above. Set up as a Dutch 'golden age' picture, it offers a pastiche of conventional 'still life' in which exotic fruits, animals, objects, etc. are established as a representational frame within the frame of representation. Such opulence is indexed as the *mise-en-scène* of mercantilism and trade, without eliding their appropriative, necropolitical dimension. Standing within the gold picture frame, central to the image, is a Black male performer in an iron slave mask, emblazoned with a gold painted crest as a brand on his chest. He is restrained, denied voice, unable to speak – appearing as an object amongst other objects within the frame of the image. His eyes look back, accusatory; contesting the frame within which he is set. His looking-back acknowledges that the image itself is *animated* by looking; existing because it is looked at. The image condenses and exemplifies the theatricalization of otherness; situating spectatorship as a technology of appropriation and exploitation. It likewise suggests that he spectator is not only implicated in its operation but is actively constituted by the inter-animating relations of power and violence manifested in, through and as the ground of the image.



Figure 2: *Exhibit B*, Brett Bailey. Photo: Sofie Knijff. Barbican, 2014.



Figure 3: *Exhibit B*, Brett Bailey. Photo: Murdo Macleod. *The Guardian*, 2014.

Reconstructed from a 1920s colonial exhibit, 'A Place in the Sun', presents a chained and manacled black woman, torso exposed, sitting on a bed with her back to the audience, looking into a mirror at an angle that allows her face to be seen and her to see the spectator. The spectator does not see themselves but sees their look being apprehended, and held, by the performer. She appears within the *mise-en-scène* as part of the master's props and property; arranged along with other objects metonymically delineating the space as 'his' – boots, britches, hat, gun, *photographs* ... The photographs on the walls show the historical 'fact' of racism and colonialism: authenticating images of Black people captured and enchained, including one depicting the lynching of several Black men. Juxtaposed to these atrocity trophies are photographic portraits of a white family – likewise authenticating the racialized relations of power encoded in the images and accentuating the historical reality of these people having existed, these things having happened. As Roland Barthes observed in analysing the image of a slave market, part of the ontological dynamic of photography serves to 'ratify what it represents' (1982,32), asserting the 'this has been' of the photographically captured event. At the same time, the apparent authenticity of the photographic image operates in relation to the more indeterminate temporality and ontological undecidability of the theatrical image. The theatrical image puts into play the performative retroactivity of the 'has been' alongside the anticipatory dynamics of the 'will have been' to construct the event of the woman's anticipated and evident violation (she will be/has been/is being raped).

The implication of the spectator in the unfolding event of this act/crime seems to be secured through the performer's look in the mirror as a gesture to the absent presence within the scene – whether the master for whom it is intended or the spectator to whom it is directed. Whilst theatrical images are not made without the construction of a future present and anticipated presence of a spectator to come, the temporality of the image enables action to be put into suspension; the spectator must animate its retroactive anticipation and recognise its dynamics of theatricalization. Hence the spectator's gaze is not returned by the performer; it is rather directed inward, creating a projective canvass for the spectator's composition. It is only returned and recognised as the spectator looks away. As Katherine Sieg notes, 'the performer's alert, intense gazing without verbally articulating' the text's silent injunction 'can be perceived as a command to carry the performance forward by putting into speech what has remained unsaid' (2015, 264). However, this non-reciprocal relation – the theatrical relation of non-relation at the heart of world spectating – creates a tension in not knowing how to recognise or show recognition to the performer or how to acknowledge the relation between their actorly agency and aestheticized positioning within the theatrical frame.

In *Exhibit B*, the spectator is set the problem not only of having to navigate the discomfort of intersubjective (mis)recognition but of negotiating the politics of racial (dis)identification and (re)mediation. The question posed by the images appears to be how to (dis)articulate the structural spectatorship position assumed and produced by the exhibition's regime of representation. This testifies to the theatricalizing logic of colonialism's aesthetic-political formation, and to spectatorship as a technology of otherness. Accordingly, the spectator is set-up to occupy a 'fixed', intrinsically racialized position in the theatrical apparatus of the exhibition – an assumption of 'whiteness' as a relation of seeing. Its 'theatricality' insists on locating the spectator and the frame of spectatorship as the locus of racialization, situating the ways of seeing it seeks to explicate as operating not only within the exhibition but within the 'exhibitionary complex' (261) of colonialism's aesthetic-political regime. Yet this fixity appears to essentialize racialized representational practices and to install spectatorship as coextensive with whiteness. The argument appears to be that spectatorship *as such* operates within and is the product of a *racialized regime of representation*, which the occupation of the spectatorial position itself continues to produce and reproduce through an essentially *racialized way of seeing* and apparatus of staging.

Not only does this risk reproducing the logic of the racist modes of perception and the performative production of otherness it seeks to critique, it offers little space for spectators to occupy a position that is not already over-determined as 'white'. The image entitled 'Separate Development' seeks to instantiate the racialization of the spectator position within the material set-up of the frame of spectating itself. The scenography demarcates the viewing space for the image as a designated 'Whites only' area, separating the spectator from the figure of a woman sat on a kitchen stool. She appears without make-up, in a plain dress, simply returning the spectator's gaze. Whilst the performer appears to embody the signifying structures of racial segregation, it is the spectator who is 'fenced in' by material frame the compound. Caged within a three-sided space – an inverted theatrical picture frame in which world spectatorship appears as *mise-en-scène* – the spectator is staged as the figure conditioned and contained by theatricalization. The spectator is explicitly constructed as 'white' and spectatorship is correlated with 'whiteness'; yet the anamorphic presence of the wire cage disrupting and distorting the field of vision suggests that spectatorship itself is a theatrical construct; and that the 'whiteness' it produces is the condition of seeing through a racialized regime of representation and aesthetic political frame.

### **Conclusion: 'Seeing through Race'**

In his W. E. B. Du Bois lectures, W. J. T. Mitchell recognises that 'there is no other social abstraction quite like race, no other idea quite so difficult to see *through* rather than *with*' (39). The



double-edged meaning of this phrase suggests both the necessity of seeing through racism as ideology whilst recognising that its theatricalizations continue to structure the authenticating conventions of materially lived experience. It suggests that 'race' operates as the lens through which *seeing is itself is conducted*. It is therefore both 'a medium and an iconic form—not simply something to be seen, but itself a framework for seeing through' (14). In situating race as a medium, Mitchell follows du Bois in suggesting that racialized ways of seeing obscure the capacity for recognition by creating a theatrical 'surface where images of the other are inscribed, painted and projected', whilst at the same time leaving the medium of race 'always open to remediation' (89). He suggests, accordingly, that the political task at hand is to 'learn to see through, not with the eye of race' (40). All the while the 'epistemic violence' of the racist gaze repeats itself indefinitely, the concept of 'race' seems impossible to do away with or move on from politically. This chapter has argued that, in this context, it is necessary not only to critique the way in which race is represented and constituted through representations, but also to interrogate spectatorship itself as the ontological ground of race's performativity as a medium.

'Seeing through race', as Mitchell puts it, necessitates examining how aesthetic-political ways of seeing are always-already overdetermined by the theatricalizing constructs of racism and racialization, and how claims to authenticity operate as an optic producing, and seemingly substantivizing, racial subjectivation and objectification (Fanon 1986, 95). In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate how the racialized regime of representation depends on mobilising the 'epistemic violence' of theatricalization and instantiates world spectatorship as a mode of political subjectivation. The dramatic dynamisms at play in the constitution of 'the medium of race as material social practice'—a practice of representation—have been seen not only to frame racialized ways of seeing but to constitute them. As Mitchell contends, if 'seeing through race' entails seeing it as medium—as 'an "intervening substance" that both enables and obstructs social relationships' (4)—then this chapter has demonstrated that it remains necessary to situate practices of representation within the historical, political and aesthetic regime that governs their operation. By investigating the ways in which seeing and subjectivity are co-constituted in the politics of world spectating, the chapter has sought to contribute to the historical tracing of race as a medium of theatricalization and theatricality as a medium of racialization.

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