

Editorial: On Disconnect

SILVIJA JESTROVIC

In the opening scene of Jonathan Glazer's film *The Zone of Interest* (2023) a group of family and friends is bathing in a sun-kissed river, the children are gleeful, the adults are relaxed. A tranquil woodland road leads from the river to the immaculate family home, surrounded by a walled garden where roses are plentiful. This is 'the beautiful day' of simple life (Aristotle's *eumenia*).¹ It is only several minutes into the film, when the father of the family appears in Nazi uniform, that the opening scene gets an eerily different reading. The man in the uniform is commander Rudolf Höss; the house is his, as is the family and the garden; and just on the other side of the garden wall is his workplace – Auschwitz. The camera never ventures across the wall, but the sounds from the other side travel – into the garden and into the house – and so does the smoke from the crematorium chimney. Agamben, drawing from Arendt, Debord and Foucault, points out that in both modern totalitarianism and the society of mass consumerism, 'the "beautiful day" will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of spectacle condemns it'.²

The perspectival estrangement in the film is chilling – from the vantage point of the perpetrators, the Holocaust seems like an economic venture; more efficient ways of utilizing labour and extermination technologies are discussed in a businesslike manner, in the style of a corporate board meeting. Yet what makes the horror especially palpable is the nearness between the 'good life' (Adorno, Butler) and the 'bare life' (Agamben). The latter is hidden from view, only to appear allusively through remains – someone's fur coat and lipstick that Höss's wife tries on, bags of ashes brought over to fertilize the roses, a human bone that interrupts another idyllic family moment by the river. The disconnect between the 'good life' of Höss's family, its middle-class averageness, comfort and normalcy, on the one side of the wall, and the 'bare life' on the other is uniquely monstrous here. Even though *The Zone of Interest* is set in another context, in another war, the wall, separating the 'good life' from unthinkable suffering, transcends into a wider metaphor of disconnect. It is this disconnect that normalizes the continuation of 'good life' amidst the conditions of 'bare life'. The question is, how far from the wall does one's rose garden need to be for the 'good life' to be lived in clear conscience?

How near is far: a scenario

Middle England. A study in the peaceful little town of Leamington Spa.

Close-up of the computer screen and fingers typing 'Editorial: On Disconnect...'

VOICE-OVER: This journal issue in front of you has been edited and prepared for the production stage between early November 2023 and early March 2024 in conditions that could be described as those of 'good life', whereby the basic needs of food, water, shelter, freedom from violence and persecution ... are not only met but taken for granted, so that there is space (mental and physical) to work, think, read, write, enhance experiences, engage in public life, go to the theatre, edit an international theatre journal, rest ...

Cut to the Occupied Palestinian Territories in Gaza.

Subtitle: Meanwhile in the Middle East ...

Montage sequence of news footage from the last five months (October 2023–March 2024).

VOICE OVER: According to the figures of the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs over 30,000 Palestinians were killed in Gaza and surrounding areas in Israeli air strikes since 7 October 2023, most of them were women and children. The report also highlights 'catastrophic levels of food insecurity', while the state of public health, the water and sanitation conditions are described as dire.³ Hospitals have been destroyed in the bombings, while the situation in the remaining ones continues to be extremely precarious due to power cuts and disruptions to medical and humanitarian aid supply ... A citizen of Gaza says for the UK daily *The Guardian*, 'We can't take it any more. We don't have flour. We don't even know where to go in this cold weather. We demand ceasefire. We want to live.'⁴ There is no 'good life' in Gaza, there is not even 'bad life', there is just 'bare life'. Gaza is the epitome of Agamben's formulation of the 'space of exception' – a political space where 'human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no acts committed against them could appear any longer as crimes'.⁵

Cut to Google Maps showing that the distance between Leamington Spa and the Gaza Strip is exactly 2,302 miles.

Far enough from the 'space of exception' or too close for 'the beautiful day'?

A brief taxonomy of disconnect

Spatial disconnect is not about proximity but about what it obscures from view to enable the 'good life' to go on amidst the 'bad life'. Rather than being determined by distances, *spatial disconnect* determines what is near and what is far through political, social, judicial and psychological mechanisms. Hence spaces a few metres apart, with only a walled fence to separate them, can appear miles away from one another. *Spatial disconnect* is intrinsically linked to *time* that unfolds differently in 'spaces of exception' than in spaces where 'the beautiful day' is possible.

Take, for example, the temporal category of 'immediate' – in Gaza it means supply humanitarian aid today, in the next hour, cease fire now. In spatio-temporal zones of *disconnect* such as in the UK parliament, for example, 'immediate' takes months to deliberate to agree whether it means 'immediate *pause* of hostilities' or 'immediate ceasefire', before it makes it to the House of Commons vote that then generates its own self-referential drama and ends (in the moment of writing this editorial) with a non-binding vote.

Marking the anniversary of the Bloody Sunday, in Selma, Alabama the US vice president, Kamala Harris, emphatically called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Then, with a perfect stage timing, before the cheers and applause have fully quieted down, in a lower tone of voice, comes her aside: ‘... for at least six weeks’.⁶ Within the *spatio-temporal disconnect*, ‘immediate’ always comes with a caveat. In the discourses of international politics, ‘immediate’ is a tentative term meaning, ‘we are taking the time to think about this very hard, we are weighing the complexities, we are drafting the terms and conditions of the “immediate” as we speak’. For Palestinian citizens as well as for the Israeli hostages and their families in Gaza, ‘immediate’ is the distance between life and death and it is often a matter of hours, if not minutes.

There is also the disconnect between the strongholds of political power and organizations and institutions such as the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International – whose main purpose is to ensure that these powers do not go unchecked. This form of cross-institutional disconnect casts the acts of the latter into the realm of symbolic performative gestures, as their impact on actual decision making and actions becomes increasingly diminished. In the interview for Mehdi Hasan’s show on MSNBC, Palestinian photojournalist Motaz Azaiza said, ‘Don’t call yourself a free person if you can’t make a change ... if you can’t stop someone to kill someone else.’⁷ In persistent protests of citizens worldwide against the bombing of Gaza and the occupation of Palestine, it is not rare at all to find members of various communities, including Palestinian and Jewish, marching together. Still the disconnect between the voices from the street and from the communities on the one hand, and the governing institutions on the other, has been felt profoundly. This disconnect is especially dangerous as it tends to erode individual and collective agency to a state of resignation.

For Hannah Arendt the experience of freedom is that of acting in the public sphere, where care for the common world becomes a measure and limit of such a freedom. It is the space of appearance shaped through ‘acting and speaking together’.⁸ Arendt’s public sphere is associational, it appears whenever people act in concert, and this is where freedom appears. The space of appearance is fragile and must be continually re-created through action as it exists when the actors gather for the purpose of discussing and deliberating matters of public concern. It disperses when the action stops. To resign to hopelessness, cynicism or escapism is to accept the disconnect, to become part of its perfidious mechanism – it is to let go of the experience of freedom.

Against the state of disconnect

Nonetheless, the politics and culture of disconnect have also continuously been challenged in various modes and on different scales. South Africa’s case against Israel’s occupation of Palestine and bombardment of Gaza put to the International Court of Justice in The Hague is one such example of a large-scale act within the political and legal public sphere. Pleas from the governments of Brazil, Ireland and Spain; from numerous international humanitarian organizations; and from the Vatican to put a permanent stop to the ongoing Israeli military action in Gaza also resonate loudly, shaking up the state of disconnect. Smaller-scale acts of refusing the politics and culture of disconnect are numerous too, such as the public outcry when

the award ceremony in honour of the novel *Minor Detail* by Palestinian author Adania Shibli was cancelled at the Frankfurt Book Fair in the immediate aftermath of the 7 October attack. Her novel on the Nakba also speaks about the violence inherent in the relativity of distance and nearness in the land(s) of walls and checkpoints. Reacting to the cancellation of Shibli's award ceremony and to Maxim Gorki Theatre cancelling *The Situation*, a play by Austrian-Israeli Yael Ronen, author Lana Bastašić writes, 'Never again, they would say, every time some Bosnian anniversary or other popped up in their feeds. But *never again* is a feeble phrase. The world forgets, just like it has forgotten Bosnia. The *nevers* have been worn out and abandoned; the *again* keeps coming back in bigger numbers and darker stories.'⁹ Soon after, Bastašić, the author of the award-winning novel *Catch the Rabbit*, inspired by her childhood memories of Banja Luka on the eve of the war in Bosnia, received her own disinvitation from the Literary Festival in Salzburg.

When theatre scholar and lecturer at the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai Sharmishta Saha and writer/theatre-maker Sudhanava Deshpande from the political street theatre troupe Janam, showed the Dutch-Israeli documentary *Arna's Children* (2004) by Juliano Mer-Khamis and Danniell Danniell to Saha's students, in response to the bombardment of Gaza, they experienced a torrent of blind accusations, police investigations and threats. Their colleagues Rashna D. Nicholson and Sruti Bala published a strong statement of solidarity. Their piece 'Reflections on Teaching Israel/Palestine in the Theatre Studies Classroom', is, however, more than a gesture of support; it is also a blueprint for pedagogies of connectedness in the era of disconnect. In their concluding points Bala and Nicholson write,

Theatre in the context of war is not just what is presented on stage but encompasses the practices of making theatre against all odds. Not all of it is benign and praiseworthy. Yet it can never be understood through the lens of good vs. evil. The ambivalences and radical uncertainty of theatre offer a necessary antidote to the deadly binaries of conflict. The task of a humanities education is thus to cultivate a sensitivity for suffering of all kinds as well as a generous capacity to imagine its overcoming.¹⁰

To appear and critically publicly engage with complexities rather than safely nestle in the comfort of simplifications and disciplinary escapism is to take risks: of being misunderstood; of losing opportunities, privileges, status (including financial risks and risks to job security); of legal action; even of violence and persecution. To practise freedom in the form of appearance in the public realm requires labour and personal courage. As Seyla Benhabib reminds us, the separation between the cultural and the political public sphere is porous, and to reverse perspectives and see the world from the standpoint of others 'is a crucial virtue of moral and aesthetic imagination in a civic polity'. She adds, 'the public sphere is like the pupil in the eye of the body politic; when its vision is murky, cloudy, or hindered, the sense of direction of the polity is also impaired'.¹¹

In February 2024, the Barbican in London pulled out of hosting Indian writer Pankaj Mishra as part of the *London Review of Books's* (LRB) lecture series, after it transpired that the title of his lecture was 'The Shoah after Gaza'. The LRB, in support

of Mishra, published the cancelled talk in full. Mishra comments on the razing of Gaza and culture of disconnect in his *LRB* piece: ‘Never before have so many witnessed an industrial-scale slaughter in real time. Yet the prevailing callousness, timidity and censorship disallows, even mocks, our shock and grief.’¹² Histories and realities are complex, traumas intergenerational and present, experiences of statelessness historical and current; vulnerability and violence are all part of it – and while public discourses should be approached with sensitivity of understanding one’s own view through the other’s, injustices and crimes are not relative. The world is at a critical moral junction and it is paramount that ‘the pupil in the eye of the body politic’ is not obscured and clouded. The cultural public sphere – theatre being an intrinsic part of it as artistic practice, pedagogy and academic discipline – should never give up on its capacity of seeing/doing better – not only as understanding, but also as standing for, the plight of the oppressed and the violated.

In this issue

This issue brings a range of rich and diverse articles spanning Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the UK and Germany; they take us from urban centres to the island of Naoshima in Japan, and to the village of Oberammergau in Germany. Although thematically varied, they all foreground the capacity of theatrical performance to bring together communities and carve spaces that are both convivial and critical.

In her article ‘Theatre as Transitional Infrastructure: Flow, Freedom, and the “Long Middle” of Change in Hong Kong’, Joanna Mansbridge explores the notion of freedom in the specific political and cultural context of Hong Kong in the aftermath of the 2019 pro-democracy protests and amid the pandemic. Focusing on the productions of Hong Kong theatre collective Zuni Icosahedron, *Bach Is Heart Sutra* and *2 or 3 Things about Interrupted Dream*, the article draws on Lauren Berlant’s conceptualization of infrastructure, situating these works in relation to the protests. It argues that the performances in question open a space for experimentation and reflection within the city that has seemingly foreclosed on practices of questioning, exploring and gathering.

In the article ‘Performing Reparative Solidarity: The Politics and Poetics of *Pān-toh* in *Twelve Dishes Ballad*’, Fan-Ting Cheng shows how *pān-toh* – an ancient practice of collaborative roadside banquet in Taiwan, in which participants temporarily occupy a public space – gets a topical revival in the Gather Theatre Group’s performance *Twelve Dishes Ballad*. The essay explores how the form of *pān-toh* marks a return to urban spaces to foster collaborative, communal performances in hybrid languages and accents to embrace diverse modes of participation. Cheng argues that this *pān-toh* performance allegorizes a reparative solidarity and moves prevailing political scenarios forward towards a non-violent practice that emphasizes an alternative approach of mutual dependence and support.

Alison Mahoney’s article ‘“Severe” Sensory Theatre: Building Relational Disability Politics during UK COVID Lockdowns’ examines the work of three UK companies – Oily Cart (London), Frozen Light (Norwich) and Spectra (Birmingham) – who adjusted their practices to embrace their audiences’ shifting access needs, including

those in caregiving roles. Mahoney foregrounds crip theory's move away from the often individualistic and identity-focused frameworks of early disability studies to consider disability in political and relational terms. This approach shifts the focus from disability as an individual problem to social patterns of exclusion and stigmatization through which the problem of disability is constructed. The article builds on the given performance examples to call for reimagining disability and disability justice as a relational category from which wider solidarities might arise.

Jyana S. Browne and Elliot Leffler both turn to traditional forms – bunraku by an all-female troupe from the island of Naoshima in Japan and a passion play tradition in the German village of Oberammergau respectively. Although these theatrical forms are far apart in every sense, both articles demonstrate the capacity of traditional forms to revitalize communities and to even clear political blind spots. Browne's article, 'Puppetry Networks of the Island of Naoshima', explores how the Naoshima Onna Bunraku troupe revitalizes a puppetry tradition dating back to the Edo period (1603–1868), negotiating the pull of its local, community-oriented past and its global present as a desirable art tourism spot. Using Morris-Suzuki's liquid area studies approach, the article reveals the interconnections between artistic communities, even those presumed isolated on a tiny island, such as the example of Japanese–Philippine friendship rooted in cultural and educational links forged through the puppetry of Naoshima.

Leffler's article, 'The End of an Impassioned Feud: The 2022 Oberammergau Passion Play and the Public Embrace of Progressive Politics', is grounded in vigorous ethnographic research into this arguably largest and longest-running passion play tradition in the world, which depicts Jesus' arrest, conviction and crucifixion at a spellbinding scale. This communal event, which takes place every ten years, has also been at the centre of controversy regarding its historic anti-Semitism and its efforts to reform, spearheaded by a director with a zeal for radical change. The article argues that the feud that engulfed the town for decades has abated with the 2022 Passion Play. Drawing on theoretical frames from Sara Ahmed and James Thompson helps explain this seismic shift in the sociopolitical orientation of the community, whereby the reformed staging of the Passion Play not only rights the wrongs of its historic antisemitic semiotics but offers a progressive and inclusive approach in both process and staging – so much so that even if some dissensus remains, the form of the Passion Play is seen increasingly as a tradition that should always be adapted to urgent and topical themes.

In this issue, we also remember our dear colleague and friend Professor Jim Davis through heartfelt and intimate tributes by Janelle Reinelt, Patricia Smyth and Tim White. Jim, of course, was a wonderful, prolific and illustrious theatre scholar. Yet his research, leadership and pedagogy were always infused with the warmth of friendship and hospitality that brought so many of us together. The tributes, each in their unique voices, evoke telling memories of how, in Jim's orbit, everybody felt welcome, always.

NOTES

- 1 The term is used in Aristotle's *Politics*, and it literally means 'the beautiful day'. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1278b. Agamben refers to *eumēnia* and the Aristotelian political ontology in formulating his notions of bare life,

- ‘which remains included in politics in the form of exception’. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 11.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported for the Occupied Palestinian territory since 7 October 2023, at www.unocha.org (accessed 22 February 2024).
- 4 Jason Burke, ‘Aid Paused amid “Incredible Level of Desperation”’, *The Guardian*, 23 February 2024.
- 5 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 171.
- 6 The video is available at www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2024/mar/04/kamala-harris-calls-for-immediate-ceasefire-in-gaza-video (accessed 12 March 2024).
- 7 Mahdi Hasan’s interview with Motaz Azaiza is available at <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3YabrPozXFT8shQe3ywhbw> (accessed 12 March 2024).
- 8 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 198.
- 9 Lana Bastašić, ‘I GROW UP in Bosnia, amid Fear and Hatred of Muslims. Now I See Germany’s Mistakes over Gaza’, *The Guardian*, 23 October 2023, at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/23/bosnia-muslims-germany-gaza-ethnic-cleansing-palestinian (accessed 12 March 2024).
- 10 Sruti Bala and Rashna D. Nicholson, ‘Reflections on Teaching Israel/Palestine in the Theatre Studies Classroom’, *Theatre Times*, 22 November 2023, at <https://thetheatretimes.com/reflections-on-teaching-israel-palestine-in-the-theatre-studies-classroom> (accessed 12 March 2024).
- 11 Seyla Benhabib, ‘The Embattled Public Sphere: Hannah Arendt, Juergen Habermas and Beyond’, *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 90 (December 1997), pp. 1–24, here p. 19.
- 12 Pankaj Mishra, ‘The Shoah after Gaza’, *London Review of Books*, 46, 6 (March 2024), at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v46/no6/pankaj-mishra/the-shoah-after-gaza> (accessed 14 March 2024).