

LEE WENG CHOY

On The Intersections of *Terror and Performance*



In *Terror and Performance*,¹ the conjunction “and” joins the two complicated terms of the book’s title, even as author Rustom Bharucha states explicitly that he does not want to explain either one through the other. It is not that he doesn’t look at terror through performance and vice versa, but he treads carefully, trying to maintain a—tension—seems an inappropriate word, as do others. While Bharucha does not argue that terror and performance are opposites, framing oppositions is part of his approach. Stanford University Professor of Performance Theory, Branislav Jakovljević, in his review in *The Drama Review* begins by pointing that out:

*Bharucha dedicates the first chapter of Terror and Performance to Jean Genet and the last to Mahatma Gandhi. In this way, his rich series of reflections is bookended by a literary criminal and political saint, a (former) small-time crook and a (former) lawyer, a champion of stateless nations and a nation-builder, a traitor and a martyr... It seems that oppositions between them could go on forever.*²

For Jakovljević, what brings Genet and Gandhi together is that both took positions of “marginality and excess in relation to their own historical and institutional situations,” and both demonstrated “unique capacities for self-renunciation, so rare and precious in the contemporary world of literature, politics, and especially theatre.”³ Navigating oppositions is only one of a number of tactics Bharucha employs, and here I use the word “tactics” rather than “strategy” to suggest the author’s deliberately provisional approaches, since his purpose is not to proffer any overarching analysis or diagnosis. In trying to find the words to trace his method of working, one wonders about introducing more pairs of terms as a way of entering into the difficult terrain of the book—for instance, “violence and silence”, or “method and meaning”.

Often a response to terror or violence is stunned silence. Yet the concerned thinker, who feels a duty to speak, tries to find a way, a method to move forward, to reflect, discuss, and find or make meaning from trauma. How does one write on terror? How *should* one? How is a person who is not a direct witness or survivor to speak of its aftermath? Yet silence can only be a temporary holding position, as an impulse to speak eventually becomes a necessity, whether by those who have suffered directly or those adjacently affected. But also, speaking up becomes important because one cannot let violence redouble through its silencing of conscience, analysis and action. Bharucha himself hesitated as he approached the topic. Terror was not something he deliberately sought to write about; rather, it crept up on him—less because of world events, more so because his work in politics, culture and theatre has for a long time been deeply implicated in the intersection between terror and performance—the book is a way of reckoning with these concerns.

Terror and Performance might begin with the obvious point of departure—‘September 11’—but the author approaches it through personal coincidence and from perspectives removed from New York or Washington DC. Less than a month after the 2001 attacks, Bharucha arrived in Manila to begin rehearsals for his production of Jean Genet’s *The Maids*, in a Tagalog translation. It was a project that after some time was finally being realized. When the play ended its short run in late November that year and he returned to his hometown Kolkata, he learned that the Republic of Malate, “the funky bar and dance club in which the Maids had staged their rage against Madame,” burned to ashes just days after the last performance.⁴ In 2003, he wrote about directing and producing Genet in Manila, in which “‘September 11’ provided an arresting backdrop.”⁵ Years later, when attempting to rework the text, he realized that “it was no longer possible to circumvent terror through a fictionalization of a somewhat bizarre theatrical accident; I had to *think through it*.” From “providing the mere background

of an essay," terror became foregrounded in the book, "doubling as both its catalyst and subject in and through its relationship to performance." If the burning down of the Republic of Malate was the initial provocation for *Terror and Performance*, the larger impetus was the question, "How can one free terror from the hegemonic discourse of terrorism?"⁶

The book offers a catalogue of disparate moments that could all be labelled "terror". Bharucha describes the first chapter as a "post-mortem not of [his Genet in Manila], but of the larger historical moment and the time of 'September 11' that unconsciously pervaded the rehearsal process" of the play, and which continued to haunt his writing about it.⁷ He would later point out that during a lecture in South Africa, when the book had just been published, that post-mortem "literally means an 'autopsy' performed on a dead body, which is dissected to figure out the causes of a generally unnatural death."⁸ In chapter two, he shifts from the sites of theatre and spectacle to look at "*performances in everyday life* within the larger global immediacies of Islamophobia, which impact at local levels in acts of 'passing' and 'covering' as a Muslim, and of 'queering' the Muslim as 'terrorist'."⁹ Next, in chapter three, he discusses the Truth and Reconciliation processes in South Africa and Rwanda. In the final and fourth chapter, he attempts to rethink "non-violence in the age of terror", melding together "different readings of Gandhi's *activist performances* and the actual *video performances* of suicide-bombers presenting their testimonials in front of the camera, among other extremist acts performed by refugees and asylum seekers."¹⁰

While the book considers a mix of major and minor events across North America, the Philippines, India, Rwanda, South Africa, Palestine and Australia, as Bharucha explains, if his "narrative engages with terror in diverse geographical locations, it was not because [he] had any particular desire to be 'comprehensive'." It is the "terror expert" who surveys from a birdseye strategic vantage point, reporting, summarizing and performing the "regular stock-taking of terror in different parts of the world." In contrast, his intention was "to think from the ground up, through local densities which provoke a concatenation of thoughts—disjunctive, processual, and, at times, deliberately left unprocessed and unfinished."¹¹ University of Melbourne academic Paul Rae, in his review in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, notes that Bharucha emphatically refuses to "prioritize a single event or definition that will ground his enquiry," and instead "commits to investigating a plurality of lived experiences as unfolded in a diversity of locations and touched by different modalities of violence."¹²

It is because the book is a *working through*, rather than an attempt to synthesize such different, difficult and irreducible moments, that makes Bharucha's analyses and reflections especially resonant and apropos. Indeed, to 'work through' is precisely to embrace moments as profoundly different, difficult and irreducible. Yet by the author's own admission, his analysis is, from the onset, already late or behind; in an email, he noted, "terror continues to be timely even as it defies normative temporalities. We will always be trying to catch up with terror."¹³

So why "performance", what can it show or tell us about "terror"? Before citing Bharucha's reasons, it would be useful to provide context by considering some of his critiques of existing approaches to the latter. He speaks highly of University of Chicago's Professor of Art History and English, W.J.T. Mitchell, calling his book, *Cloning Terror*¹⁴ "a masterful analysis of image production relating the 'war on terror' to the simultaneous incursions of biotechnology in the public sphere."¹⁵ However, when he observed Mitchell speak on terror, he was disturbed not by his speech, but the enthusiastic response from the audience.¹⁶ Mitchell had ended the lecture soliciting audience responses to the photo, taken by Official White House photographer Pete Souza, of President Obama

and his team in the White House Situation Room watching the targeted killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011. What stunned Bharucha was “the virtuosity with which this image was interpreted by members of the audience in an unconscious spirit of hermeneutic one-upmanship, each interpretation outdoing the other in its brilliant, surely-I’m-right reading.”¹⁷ This anecdote reveals the hazards of living in an age defined not only by an excess of images, and images of terror, but an excess of their interpretation. One might lament the lack of the general public’s visual literacy in engaging the spectacle of modern day media, but those who are more visually literate run the risk of hankering to read quickly and proliferate meanings without any deep understanding.

In chapter two, “‘Muslims’ in a Time of Terror”, Bharucha criticizes Arjun Appadurai’s 1998 essay, ‘Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization’,¹⁸ in which he “levels the killing fields of the world with a rhetorical bravura and an encapsulation of several taxonomies of violence. What matters is the citational and discursive sweep of this violence at a global level, rather than a close reading of any one particular genocide, atrocity, or ethnic killing.”¹⁹ Appadurai seems to be “more theoretically challenged by the *excess of violence* than by the realities of violence itself.”²⁰ So, again, why “performance”? Firstly, Bharucha emphasizes that one should not utilize performance without also working through some combination of “the psychological, the social, the political, and the economic dimensions of any analysis of terror,” and secondly;

*... if [he] had to specify some key concepts and modalities of analysis that are distinctive to performance, [he] would say that its capacities of ‘embodiment’, ‘affect’, ‘corporeality’, ‘kinesthetics’, and ‘reflexivity’ are more palpable than what is found in the social sciences, enabling a different kind of analysis of terror from what is available in political or economic theory.*²¹

If performance has a privileged place in the book, so does non-violence. Bharucha’s last chapter enlists Gandhi, not to have “the last word on terror,” but because he offers some of “the strongest questions and provocations as to how we can go about countering it in the immediacies of the here and now.”²² Bharucha thinks through Gandhi to reflect on the preceding chapter on Truth and Reconciliation, arguing that he was, though not unproblematically, a one-man Truth Commission; he also discusses his politics as “activated with specific reference to the events surrounding the famous Dandi March or Salt March.”²³ At a fulcrum in the chapter, Bharucha evokes Brecht and the necessary task of “crude thinking”: “How can thinking against terror get translated into practice?”²⁴ — especially when “justice cannot be implemented by the existing legal institutions.”²⁵ His response is, admittedly, no grand revelation, but his book is a compelling re-affirmation of faith in non-violence:

*... we may need to find new ways of imagining how justice can be envisioned outside the law through new modes of non-violent critical thinking and dialogue. Here one needs to inscribe the courageous and vastly under-reported struggle of peace activists across the world, working against the most formidable odds as they sustain their sporadic and vulnerable movements against the force of state power and counter-terror vigilance.*²⁶

An especially thought-provoking chapter is the third. The discourse of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was officially inaugurated in South Africa in 1996, and has been questioned, critiqued and adapted in multiple situations since, including in Rwanda, which Bharucha also discusses. In South Africa, offenders at the amnesty hearings were not required to express contrition or remorse, and while the intention may have been to encourage the telling of truth, ultimately the



TRC Report excluded the disordered negotiations of pain and forgiveness, accusation and bitterness between victims and perpetrators. Victims waited years for reparations, but perpetrators were given amnesty almost immediately. Some commentators have said the cathartic performances of victims and perpetrators speaking in public were ultimately a distraction in the arduous process of seeking justice, but Bharucha argues that, on the contrary, that was what made the TRC intelligible. Official rhetoric had argued for the primacy of recognition—but what happens after recognition? The South African experiment didn't go far enough; storytelling alone was not enough, as reconciliation without reparation is inadequate, and the TRC failed to fully prioritize social justice as being at the core of healing from violence. There was also the complex issue of who got to tell their stories. In Antjie Krog's quasi-fictional *Country of My Skull* (1998) there is a conversation between the author and playwright Ariel Dorfman, who has written about Chile's own Truth Commission. Krog asks, "isn't that sacrilege—to use someone else's story, a story that cost him his life?" Dorfman replies; "Do you want the awful truth? How else would it get out? How else would the story be told?"²⁷

Bharucha brings the book to a close employing another provisional tactic, the postscript. The final pages comprise an assembly of leftover fragments that are not so much conjoined or disjointed, as—to employ a phrase the author has used to reflect on his methodology —“a concatenation of... thoughts.”²⁸ Similarly here, my own last paragraphs are a postscript of sorts, reflecting on a pair of unfinished thought processes that are also not quite conjoined or disjointed: the first, on Bharucha's book, and the second, on large-scale exhibitions of contemporary art. In writing about his book now, in the aftermath of Brexit, the 2016 USA elections and the ongoing tragedies in Syria, Myanmar and elsewhere, one cannot but think about how our public discourses have failed to confront the crises of our time, and speak to terror and power. But my purview here will not be all-embracing; in writing about *Terror and Performance* my aim is to make the book speak to currents in the contemporary art world. These two boundless topics, terror and biennales, may not be something one typically considers in the same breath, but I have a small personal history with



Bharucha and biennales. One of the first instances I wrote about his work coincided with my visits in 2002 to *documenta* and the *Gwangju Biennale*. In an essay regarding both exhibitions, I wove in a reading of Bharucha's own textual contribution to *documenta 11*, 'Between Truth and Reconciliation: Experiments in Theatre and Public Culture', which he had presented at its Platform 2 conference in New Delhi in 2001.²⁹ For the *Gwangju Biennale* in 2018, I co-convoked a panel discussion, 'Greater Asias', for co-curator David Teh's *Returns* project, and we invited Bharucha as one of our speakers.

In writing about *documenta 11* and the 2002 *Gwangju Biennale*, I questioned how do biennales teach us how to write about them? Isn't Bharucha's own central question, how to think about *terror* outside of the hegemonic discourse of *terrorism*, also of this form? The premise behind such queries is that the phenomena as such, whether biennales or *terror*, are so disparate, complex and constantly transforming—and it is they that should teach us how to think about them, rather than to presume and re-enforce a certain privileged framework, such as, in Bharucha's case, the discourses of *terrorism*. Doubtless, it's an impossible ideal, a contradiction, as analysis is never without its assumptions. But endeavouring to manoeuvre through this is what I believe motivated *Terror and Performance*, and in its own way, has been the motivation for my examination and writing on *documenta 11* and the *Gwangju Biennale*.

If Bharucha queries "why performance?" then my challenge is "why the biennale?" Kingston University's Professor of Modern European Philosophy, Peter Osborne contends that, "Art today lives—can there still be any doubt?—in the 'age of the biennial'."³⁰ Biennales currently may be one of the dominant platforms of contemporary art, but I disagree that what is dominant should then be understood to be what is definitive. As an art critic, I have been highly critical of these large-scale exhibitions and, at the same time, have refused to frame them as operating hegemonically—to do so would concede them that power when a critical understanding demands we think of ways to resist such a trap. There is so much more to contemporary art practice than what is presented by biennales, even though they have a seemingly infinite capacity to absorb anything external into their fold. Some critics contend that biennales repeatedly pursue the same art; yes, many may appear similar,

but their diversity should be recognized. Furthermore, artists who are new to biennales occasionally bring with them new sets of references and networks—different local communities are represented from corners of the world not yet colonized by the biennale gaze. This ‘not yet’ is not a temporary condition, but a permanent feature; biennales are intrinsically incomplete. Another feature of these endeavours, and of pertinence here, is that ‘terror’ has become, if not an explicit topic in every exhibition, a strong undercurrent in many.

My own experience of *documenta 11* and the *Gwangju Biennale* in 2002 was strongly affected by how various art works dealt with the aftermath of violence and trauma, whether it was still raw or historical legacy. Searching for a way to write on those major exhibitions, I turned to Bharucha’s ‘Between Truth and Reconciliation’, which would later provide material for his chapter in *Terror and Performance*. Against this context of the TRCs of South Africa and Rwanda, Bharucha also discussed workshops he had conducted with the Siddi (an ethnic group descended from East African slaves brought to India three hundred years ago, some of whom live in the state of Karnataka) in which he wanted to break a chain of causality. Rather than, for example, establish a ‘truth’ through debate and discussions of evidence and then seek a ‘reconciliation’ of tensions and conflicts, his approach was to examine moments of “reconciliation with reality” — a *working through* — using the theatre rehearsal as a space for improvisation and the unpacking of deeply held emotions and beliefs.

An ambitious project with multiple platforms and sites, Okwui Enwezor’s *documenta 11* shifted the discourse of biennales, bringing to one of the premier contemporary art events a more globalized art world. One could describe this *documenta* as being constituted by artistic interventions that sought to expose the truths of traumatic histories, from regions beyond Western Europe and North America, showcasing art from Africa, the Middle East, Asia, South America, Eastern Europe, and of the marginalized, from women to workers, and ethnic to sexual minorities. But it was not without its problems; to me, it seemed mostly interested in delivering some form of truth but had forgotten the continuing work of reconciling with reality.

Typically, when viewing a biennale, I find a number of works inspiring, but I also find myself frustrated at the level of the exhibition as a whole, thematically and curatorially. Even with the most ambitious of artworks, I feel able to apprehend their scale as human. And it is not just individual works—a whole exhibition can be of a human scale—just not one as expansive as a large biennale. Questions of scale underpinned our 2018 *Gwangju Biennale* discussion, ‘Greater Asias’. Among the points discussed was how *Gwangju* in particular, and biennales more generally, are constituted by mapping and projecting themselves, not *onto*, but *through* large geographic regions. The ‘biennale’ is art at its most vigorous world-making.³¹ The spectacle of ‘the big show’ is so intense that I have never come to terms with all the contradictions, even after all these years of viewing these exhibitions.

To return to terror. At the risk of generalizing, perhaps what all moments of terror share is the vastness of their scale—terror always feels too large. While I would argue against terror and the hegemonic discourses of terrorism, I am not arguing against biennales. Not yet. I am not entirely sure what their purposes are, and I remain skeptical or agnostic. But I think their experiment with largeness has something to teach us. And I am still learning how to write about them.

Notes

¹ Rustom Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, New York: Routledge, 2014

² Branislav Jakovljević, ‘Review: Terror and Performance by Rustom Bharucha’, *TDR: The Drama Review* 59:3 (T227), 2015, p. 169

³ *ibid.*, p. 169

On The Intersections of *Terror and Performance*

⁴ Bharucha, op cit., p. 1

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2. See Rustom Bharucha, 'Genet in Manila: Reclaiming the Chaos of Our Times', *Third Text* Vol. 17, Issue 1, 2003

⁶ All quotes Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, op cit., p. 2

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 33

⁸ Rustom Bharucha, 'The Aftermath: Reflections on Terror and Performance', unpublished lecture, presented at the Gordon Institute for Performing and Creative Arts, Capetown, South Africa, 2014

⁹ Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, op cit., p. 26

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ All quotes Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, op cit., p. 30

¹² Paul Rae, 'Review: Terror and Performance by Rustom Bharucha', *Contemporary Theatre Review* Vol 24, Issue 4, 2014, p. 517

¹³ Rustom Bharucha, email correspondence with the author, 24 October 2018

¹⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The Ware of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011

¹⁵ Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, op cit., p. 17

¹⁶ Mitchell's lecture was presented in May 2011 at the Hebbel am Ufer Theatre in Berlin

¹⁷ Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, op cit., p. 18

¹⁸ Arjun Appadurai, 'Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalisation', *Public Culture* 10(2), 1998, pp. 225-47

¹⁹ Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, op cit., p. 98

²⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 100-01

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 28

²² *ibid.*, p. 148

²³ *ibid.*, p. 153

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 174

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 182

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*, London: Vintage Books, 1999, p. 361

²⁸ Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, op cit., p. 185

²⁹ Rustom Bharucha, 'Between Truth and Reconciliation: Experiments in Theatre and Public Culture', presented at the *documenta 11* Platform 2 conference, 'Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation', New Delhi, May 2001, and published in *documenta 11 Platform 2*, Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2002; see also, my essay discussing Bharucha's text: Lee Weng Choy, 'Biennale Time and the Spectres of Exhibition', *Forum on Contemporary Art & Society* No 4, Singapore: The Substation, 2002

³⁰ Peter Osborne, 'Every other Year Is Always This Year: Contemporaneity and the Biennial Form', *Making Biennials in Contemporary Times – Essays from the World Biennial Forum No 2*, edited by Galit Eilat *et al.*, São Paulo: Biennial Foundation, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo and ICCo–Instituto de Cultura Contemporânea, 2015, p. 15

³¹ On the topic of contemporary culture and world-making, see Patrick Flores *et al.*, *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making*, Michelle Antoinette & Caroline Turner eds, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2014, and Pheng Cheah, *What is a World?: On Post-Colonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016