

Religion, the media, terror... and theatre

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Notes on several moments in *TODAY ulysses* and other texts

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In one of the closing lines of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), the poem, which for a century had already been haunting the modern age with its images of appalling desolation, looks at its own composition and says, 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins.' It might easily be the twentieth century looking back at itself, seeing only debris propping up the ruins. Or any way of thinking that tries to grasp what are called modern times. The most concrete and symbolic image of these ruins were the Twin Towers as they collapsed in the morning of 11th September 2001 during a worldwide television broadcast (though the ruins of Kabul and Jenin belong in the same image, as do countless others). The pictures of the planes slicing into the Twin Towers - and perhaps even more so the collapse of the towers a short while later - are according to Jean Baudrillard 'our primal scene'.¹ This event radicalised not only the state of global affairs, but also the relationship between image and reality. The Gulf War, the death of Diana, the Yugoslavian wars, the genocide in Rwanda, these were all undoubtedly global events. But what Baudrillard sees as so exceptional about 11th September is its symbolic dimension: not only was it broadcast worldwide, it also signified the failure of globalisation, and of a particular idea of it. One can hardly gauge the consequences: 'It turns the whole game of history and power upside down, and also the conditions that make analysis possible. We have to take our time. When events stagnated, we had to be faster than they were and anticipate them. Now they are themselves accelerating so fast we have to slow down. Without letting ourselves be buried under the ballast of discourse and the mists of war, while keeping the unforgettable impact of the images intact.'²

Welcome to the desert of the real. It was under this title that Slavoj Zizek published several reflections on 11th September.³ The sentence comes from the film *The Matrix* and is spoken by Morpheus, the resistance leader, when the film's hero (played by Keanu Reeves) gains an insight into the virtual construction of our reality, generated and controlled by a gigantic computer to which each and every one of us is connected. The 'true' reality, to which the hero gains access, is the desolate, ruinous landscape of Chicago after a global war. Zizek points out that in one way or another the 11th September catastrophe already existed in our imaginations: think of the many disaster films (*Independence Day*) and media interest in terrorist attacks: 'this threat was also obviously libidinally invested'. Baudrillard also points to this sort of libidinous investment. What makes it so difficult for us to analyse 11th September is the 'deep and unacknowledgeable complicity' that links us to it. The way Baudrillard expresses it is as simple as it is blunt: 'c'est eux

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *L'esprit du terrorisme*, Paris, Galilée, 2002, p. 36

² *Ibid.*, p. 10

³ Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the desert of the real*,

<http://web.met.edu/cms/reconstructions/interpretations/desertreal.html>

qui l'ont fait, mais c'est nous qui l'avons voulu'.⁴ They did it, but we wanted it. 'We' and 'they' are communicating vessels, but this astonishing and troubling insight is concealed behind simple metaphysical (good v. evil) and political (free world v. terror) divisions. Žižek does not see the symbolism of the attack on the WTC towers in the fact that they represent the centre of capitalism, but that they are the centre of virtual capitalism and of the financial speculation that is cut off from the realm of material production. The division is not between good and evil or between democracy and terrorism, but between the digitised First World and the wilderness of the Third World (poverty, exploitation, humiliation). We refuse to see the ruins and the wasteland behind the civilisation we have built. Walter Benjamin had already said that every monument to civilisation is also a monument to barbarity. All we have to do is look at reality long enough.

Radical mediocrity

'How long do you think you can sustain reality?' It might have been a question asked in *The Matrix*, but it was put by one of the actors in *TODAY ulysses*, a piece conceived and performed by Bojana Cvejic and Jan Ritsema.⁵ On a completely bare stage stand two people, Cvejic and Ritsema themselves. At the beginning they sit amongst the audience in the first row and start a conversation from their seats. From there it is only a few steps to the stage, steps that are taken almost organically: they stand up and move away from the group in order to address the audience. Actions barely worth mentioning which are not even shown in most performances. Yet in their turn they too constitute a 'primal scene'. The primal scene of what theatre has meant to us since the Greeks: moving away from the group (the community), stepping onto the open space of the stage and speaking as a solitary individual. The performance gives the floor to two speakers: a young woman and a somewhat older man. Two voices, two bodies that try to position themselves without actually taking up a clear position. They react to each other, they disagree, but this does not lead to a real discussion (real conflict, real drama). It is not about fighting and rebutting each other's points of view. It may not even be about adopting a point of view. It is much more about identifying and questioning the foundations (or the ruins) of one's own thinking: 'why do I want to think that I can think differently/that I can think/why, how can I change the system disc'.⁶ In light of the impact of technology on our thinking, the digital metaphor is much more than simply a metaphor. It is the image of the way we are connected to the megacomputer of information and communication technology. In *TODAY ulysses* the consequences are drawn from this image: 'he is overlit and X-rayed by the world/pierced through and not able to prevent it/because he is no longer able to/produce borders of his own being/he can't hold a mirror in front of him/he is only an absorbing screen, a turning disc'.⁷ Complete transparency between the subject and the world has here become a fact, but at what price? The 'scene', the 'ruin' and the 'disc' here function as three devices whose

⁴ Baudrillard, *ibid.*, p. 11

⁵ Bojana Cvejic, Jan Ritsema, *TODAY ulysses*, Brussels, Kaaitheater, 2002

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

mutual involvement determines the horizons of our thoughts and deeds.

Surely the most crucial question we can and must ask ourselves at the moment is that of the organisation and function of the stage, the setting, the appearance, the theatrical and spectacular, in other words the question of the public space as a stage, publicness, computerisation and visualisation, or in short the question of the media? And at the same time is this not the question that can no longer be answered? According to the philosopher Henk Oosterling we (this 'we' also has to be more clearly defined) are becoming characterised by a 'radical mediocrity': it is the measure of the resources that define our existence. The resources, the media (from car to mobile, from microwave to CNN, from chip to cyberspace, from biotechnology to intelligent weapons) have become the 'environment' in which we live: 'If the medium has become an environment, the question of whether a medium is good or bad can no longer be answered'.⁸ A pure critique of our 'media-based condition' is no longer possible because in his critique the critic has no choice but to use the media being criticised: which cultural critic can now formulate his critique without television, PC and the Internet? According to Oosterling only 'hypocriticism' is possible: 'a critique that undermines itself by realising that it is as essential as it is impossible.'⁹ The Japanese philosopher Nishida uses the image of the castaway who puts together on the open sea the raft on which he will for the time being sail the waters. This provisionality, this vulnerability and this impossibility from now on characterise (hypo)critical thinking. We no longer know what it means to work in dry clothes, soaked as we are by our times, our reality.

'How long do you think you can sustain reality?' The bare stage, the absence of plot and dramatic narrative, the actors' refusal to embody characters, the normal tone of speech, etc., lead deliberately and irrevocably towards the edge of what theatre is. Primal scene and limit at the same time. The semiotician Charles Pierce defined a sign as 'something that replaces something else for someone' and thereby gives a concise description of what we have for centuries called theatre: an actor embodies a character while someone watches. '*Cacher-montrer: la théâtralité*', said the philosopher Jean François Lyotard.¹⁰ The tension between showing and concealing is the perfect theatrical device. According to Lyotard, this theatrical device places us at the heart of nihilism and negativity: the sign always stands for something else. This other thing is never really present, but is represented by the sign. The existence of the real thing present is denied (because it stands for something else), while the other thing contains the ultimate reality, but is not really present. The presence is always haunted by the absence. This theatrical device is at the same time the basic framework of western metaphysical and theological thought (there is a higher reality: the Idea, God, Progress, Reasonableness, etc.). The intention behind *TODAY ulysses* is an attempt not to repeat this theatrical device. As Jan Ritsema said, 'It is necessary that there are no secrets to be offered, nor to be revealed. Everything is what it is and nothing else.'¹¹ No concealments/unveilings, no secrets, no

⁸ Henk Oosterling, *Radicale middelmatigheid*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2000, p. 29

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 1980, p. 89

¹¹ Jan Ritsema, 'The different theatre (a theatre of difference)', in *TODAY ulysses*, *ibid.*, p. 43

apparitions, no theatre. As Baudrillard says, the performance is an attempt to slow down thought in a reality that is too fast and excessively media-based.

One of the preoccupations of *TODAY ulysses* is a reflection on sentiment and the spectacular, the two primary infections of our western culture. Theatricality, as a combination of spectacle and sentiment, is an instrument of power and the market. Reality shows, Big Brother, live programmes, etc., are all built up round the same mechanism: the possibility of something happening, or appearing. Authentic emotion? Authentic spectacle? Miracle? Wonder? The retraced son, the father imagined lost, the dreamed-of meeting between fan and superstar, the declaration of love, the unmasking, the accusation! 'We live in the culture of fireworks,' says the actor in *TODAY ulysses*. He explicitly connects the notions of sentimentality and spectacle to the image of Christ's Crucifixion: 'now this horrible death infects us/nicknamed the salvation/as if this gave it wings.'¹² In our fascination for the sentimental and the spectacular, we westerners are intoxicated by Christianity: the story of suffering, death and resurrection. The cult of visibility, the image, the idol, in which truth reveals itself.

The return from religion

Is it not in this story of the Passion, the story of a body that vanishes and appears again, that the theatre turns up again in the celebration of the Eucharist at Easter, after centuries of silence in the Middle Ages? After theatre had come to grief in the violent and bloody spectacles of the Roman Circus Maximus, where the bodies of the Christians thrown to the lions erased all boundaries between representation and reality, it found a new form of articulation in the staging of the resurrection of the Body (or the memory and repetition of it), which in its turn was the victim of state terror. At the heart of this second birth of theatre is the so-called '*Quem quaeritis*' troupe (literally: 'Who are you looking for?'). This is the question the angel asks the women who have come to the grave to embalm the body of Christ. Here too it's '*cacher-montrer: la théâtralité*'. Disappearance and appearance, the game of representation and negation that are the foundations of theatre and the spectacular. The visibility of God, his appearance (and disappearance) in the Son, is the legacy of Christianity. Radically rejected by Judaism and Islam. The notion of 'visibility as added value'¹³ does not exist for the Jew and the Muslim. While western theatre was born again, a second time, out of the Resurrection from the dead (a double resurrection, from both the body and the theatre, of the theatre in the body, of the body in theatre), Islam rejects the appearance of the body, the figure (the idol). In the cancelled opera by Onafhankelijk Toneel, Aisja, the Prophet's young wife, was not permitted to appear on stage; her voice could emerge from the wings (the voice of the invisible muezzin that sounds out from the minaret, the voice of the Invisible that spoke to the Prophet through his messenger Gabriel and taught him the suras).

¹² *TODAY ulysses*, p. 24

¹³ Barbara Baert, 'Woord, huid, sluier. Omtrent beeld en monotheïsme', in *Etcetera*, vol. 20, no. 81, April 2002, p. 13

In the early nineties the French researcher Gilles Kepel wrote a book on the rise of Islamic, Christian and Jewish fundamentalism, with the provocative title of *La revanche de Dieu* [tr. 'God's Revenge']. It is in the first place the dangerous breakthrough of radical political Islam that dragged religion back to the centre of attention and analysis. Many intellectuals had already seen religion as no more than an archaic substrate of modernity, or at best a private matter with no consequences for public and political life. In 1966, in the introduction to his play *Saved*, the English playwright Edward Bond pointed out that the moral education of children and the young is still based in religion. Since adults no longer believe, it is absurd to bring up children with religious morals: 'This puts children in the greatest moral confusion - religion has nothing to do with their parents' private lives, or with our economic, industrial and political life, and is the opposite of the science and rationalism that children are taught at other times. Religion discredits the morality it should support. ... There will always be people who can perform sufficiently sophisticated mental gymnastics to reconcile science and religion. But the great mass of people will never be able to do this, and because we live in an industrial society we shall be brought up in a scientific tradition. This means that in future religion will never be anything more than opium for intellectuals.'¹⁴ A judgement like this was only possible in line with a particular interpretation of the Enlightenment in which religion was equated with obscurantism and sectarianism.

The present position of religion and religions in the political, cultural and intellectual discourse therefore has all the characteristics of a rebirth or a reversion: 'It is the renewed signalling of the presence of something which we thought we had forgotten forever, the return to visibility of half-erased traces, the reopening of a wound, the reappearance of what had been forgotten, the sudden understanding that what we had thought was an *Überwindung* (in the sense of being outdated, fulfilled and therefore pushed aside) is only a *Verwindung*, a long period of convalescence that has to cope with the ineradicable traces of the disease',¹⁵ according to the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. The return of religion on a geopolitical scale is at odds with the self-image and self-interpretation of modern states and their citizens. The development of a rational and differentiated public space went hand in hand with the formulation of ideals of identity and self-determination, of individual independence, universal rights and a cosmopolitan spirit, which conflict with authority-based thinking, particularism and violence, as attributed to religious doctrines and practices. The meta-narrative with which the West identifies and legitimises itself, secular modernity - whose hegemony is reinforced even more by the process of globalisation and the dominance of free market capitalism - has missed the fact that throughout history the concept of politics is always in part determined either by the authority of the dominant religion itself, or the political reinterpretation of its main tenets, rituals and institutions.¹⁶ In this light, nationalism (including American) can without much trouble be analysed as a civil religion and it is no

¹⁴ Edward Bond, *Saved*, London, Methuen Paperback, 1987, p. 7-8

¹⁵ Gianni Vattimo, 'Een spoor van een spoor', in Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo & Hans-Georg Gadamer, *God en godsdienst*, Kampen/Kapellen, Kok Agora/Pelckmans, 1997, p.100

¹⁶ Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (ed.), *Religion and Media*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, California, 2001, p. 3

coincidence that the foundations of Islam in the Arab world stand on the ruins of a failed nationalism. Religion plays a part in setting the political agenda, from the Iranian Revolution to the 11th September attacks, from the Gulf War to the Israel-Palestine conflict (not to mention the desperate religious conflicts in Africa and Asia). And this applies not only to Islam (and the *jihad*) but also to Judaism (and the myth of the Promised land) and Christianity (the crusade that Bush, father and son, are carrying on against Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden).

Following Hegel, Nietzsche called the death of God the fundamental experience of modern times. How can we connect this death to His Revenge, with the spectacular resurrection of religion from the grave in which modernity (rationalism, the Enlightenment, progress) had buried it? Who rolled away the stone? 'Why seek ye the living among the dead?' (Luke, 24:5) is the question put to us once again. Is this resurrection, this rebirth of religion actually something fundamentally different from the proclaimed death of God? And what role do the new information and communication technologies play in the processes of death and resurrection of religion (and religions)?

Global-Latinisation

TODAY *ulysses* develops a line of thought in which spectacle, sentiment, excitement (kicks), guilt, sympathy and empathy form a chain of substitutions that determine our everyday media experience (is there any other sort of experience?). This experience clearly includes a religious (Christian) substrate. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida discerns an intimate link between the substance of belief in Christian religion and mediatisation.¹⁷ He points out that Christianity is the only one of the great religions that has a structural connection with the media. The non-Christian religions also mediatise religious orations, discussions and educational information, but never religious events. By contrast, during the Christian mass the event itself, 'the presence', takes place in front of the camera. The structural link Derrida describes is the 'incarnation' or 'mediation' of Christ, the '*hic est meum corpus*' that forms the heart of the celebration of the Eucharist. In this sense, the global mediatisation of religion is a fundamentally Christian phenomenon. Derrida uses the main concept of Christianity to explain this. The '*kenosis*' is the incarnation of God, the involvement of the divine in the world. This incarnation of the divine is mediatisation, but in this process the divine also cancels itself out. The Christian hegemony in 'global televisualisation' is that of a religion based on the *kenosis* and death of God.¹⁸ The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo also pointed to the proximity of Christianity and nihilism. The incarnation of God is the first step in a process of secularisation, which is thus essentially a Christian process.

Derrida notes that when we talk about religion we use the Latin word. Are Islam and Judaism 'religions' in the same way as Christianity? Perhaps the incomprehension and misunderstanding between the religions is partly due to the one-sided use, defined by Christianity, of the Latin word

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Above All, No Journalists', in Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, *ibid.*, p. 58

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

‘religion’? It is certainly the case that one can say hardly anything about Buddhism by using the word ‘religion’ with the connotations it has. Nevertheless, in the west Buddhism is also quite simply called a religion. Derrida sees this use of the language as yet another example of a worldwide mediatisation and distribution of a particular sort of interpretative system.¹⁹ According to him, without digital culture, jet planes and TV, no religious manifestation is nowadays possible: ‘no papal visits, for example, and no papal address, no organised spread of the Jewish, Christian or Islamic cults, ‘fundamentalist’ or otherwise. These cyber-spatial religious wars have only one purpose: the determination of the ‘world’, ‘history’, the ‘day’ and the ‘present’.²⁰ This is why Derrida refers explicitly to ‘global Latinisation’, a Latinisation of the world (even when it is currently taking place through American English) and in a certain way he thereby also means the ‘Christianisation’ of the world: ‘The universalism that dominates global political-legal discourse is fundamentally Greek-Christian. At least that is what I believe. It is a Christianity that speaks a little Greek.’²¹ Not in the sense that everybody should adhere to the Christian faith, but they should to the global spread of ‘this strange alliance between Christianity as the experience of the death of God and tele-techno-scientific capitalism’.²²

Manuel Castells arrives at a similar ‘proximity’ of technology and religion by way of a different analysis when he describes the operation of the new communication system as a process in which the familiar coordinates of space and time, the fundamental dimensions of human existence, are dissolved and erased in a virtual space where time and locations are stripped of their substance (their cultural, historical and geographical meaning) or ‘disembodied’, abstracted and delocalised, and replaced by ‘a space of flows’ and ‘a timeless time’. These are ‘the material foundations of a new culture that encapsulates and transcends the diversity of systems passed down through history: ‘the culture of real virtuality where ‘make believe’ is belief in the making.’²³ Global computerisation and the change in the experience of space and time result in the mechanical production of a particular structure of ‘belief’. Is it not precisely this ‘belief’, this new global belief in the digitised First World, that is actually the belief in the death of God, and against which another belief, one in the name of the living God, violently rebels? These two forms of belief (‘I believe in technology’ and ‘I believe in God’: in both cases it is about a primary and elementary trust in what is essentially religious) are both part of the so-called ‘return of the religious’. If Christianity is essentially the belief in the death of God, this means that Judaism and Islam are the last two monotheisms that rebel against everything that the death of God signifies in the Christianisation of the world.

Is the ‘archaic’ violence in the name of the living god - the slaughter, the mutilation, the rape, the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, ‘Geloof en weten’, in Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo & Hans-Georg Gadamer, *ibid.*, p. 38-39

²¹ Jacques Derrida, in Hent de Vries, *ibid.*, p. 74

²² In Jacques Gianni Vattimo & Hans-Georg Gadamer, *ibid.*, p. 23

²³ Manuel Castells, *op.cit.* in Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, *ibid.*, p. 13

suicide commandos - the 'revenge of one's own body on an abstracting and delocalising tele-techno-science, which in fact is identified with the world-embracing nature of the market, the military-capitalist hegemony and the global-Latinisation of the European democratic model in its double secular and religious forms'?²⁴ The clean technological war fought by the West with as few as possible victims on its own side as against the commitment of one's own body, self-sacrifice. But perhaps something else happened on 11th September. 'Archaic' violence, the 'sacrificial duty' (Baudrillard) here entered into an alliance with technology and efficiency. The terrorists penetrated deep into the system. They have exploited the secret alliance between the media, spectacle and terror to their advantage. Their most powerful weapon was probably the use of the real time of the pictures to make their message clear.

'The mother of all events', 'the pure event that concentrates in it all the events that have never happened': this is how Baudrillard describes the terror of 11th September, which led to the resurrection of both 'image' and 'reality' in an era when both seemed to have lost their power.²⁵ He qualifies this statement, however, by pointing out the ambiguous role played by the image: 'at the moment the image glorifies the event, it also takes it hostage. ... The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption.'²⁶ It has often been said with regard to 11th September that reality outdoes fiction: 'If this seems to be the case, it is because reality has absorbed the energy of the fiction and has itself become fiction. One might say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the fact is jealous of the image... It is a sort of duel over which of the two is the most inconceivable.'²⁷ Baudrillard sees the attacks on 11th September as the perfect marriage of the two mass spectacles of the twentieth century: the magic of the white screen and the black magic of terrorism. The spectacle of terrorism and the terror of the spectacle go hand in hand: 'And the political order is powerless against this immoral fascination (even if it causes a universal moral reaction). It is our theatre of cruelty.'²⁸

Commentary

In a discussion with Derrida on the relationship between religion and the media, the following question was put to him: 'If it is true that the whole world is indebted to an image and to media that are Latin and Catholic, or to a democratic structure that develops in the same movement as this global-Latinisation, does there then not exist in this world a need or infinite longing for the possibilities of the voice, commentary and difference?'²⁹ The voice, commentary and difference: these are precisely the elements that provide the 'deceleration' in *TODAY ulysses*. The play is a sort of comment, a series of notes in the margin of a whole series of other writings, films and anecdotes.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Geloof en weten', *ibid.*, p. 80

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, p.10

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁹ Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, *ibid.*, p. 83

In the published script there are no indications of the speakers and their respective lines. The 'I' figure can be male or female, young or not so young. Memory helps to attribute certain passages to one of the two voices, while other passages continue to waver between the two voices, so that the play can be cut and divided. And thus lead to yet new comments. And that is ultimately what this article is too: comments on several moments from *TODAY ulysses* and other writings in order to try to keep afloat as long as possible on a sinking raft.

Notes