

ART SPACE, CRIME SCENE

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Readers who send letters to Sherlock Holmes, 221B Baker Street, London, have been taken in by author Conan Doyle. They have failed to understand that the convincing narrator, Dr. Watson, was nothing but a literary figure, a pure invention as well. A member of the audience who storms the stage to beat up Mephistopheles has also misunderstood what is in play. Admittedly, this does not happen very often. However, transgressions of the boundaries between art and the real world sometimes do occur. Artists have often celebrated and deplored these boundaries, and thematized them by transgressing them.

Peter Handke once offended his audience; Timm Ulrichs was the first artist to proclaim himself a living work of art; Mishima had himself publicly beheaded in a live performance. Duchamp brought everyday objects into the space of art, and John Cage opened our ears to everyday sounds: even babbling voices and wailing sirens were sounds and as worthy of being listened to consciously as music. “Thinkers on stage”, a lecture series at the Stadttheater Freiburg, turned the lecturers willingly/unwillingly into actors. The event implicitly raised the question of whether thinking is just theatre or, vice versa, whether theatre hasn’t always been philosophy.

In an unparalleled performance at the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow in 2002, the world itself broke into the space of art. During the second act of the musical “Nord-Ost” the theatre was turned into a crime scene: the stage and auditorium were mined, there were armed terrorists everywhere. At the end of the show, there were dead bodies in the seats, in the aisles. The Russian TV channel ORT showed the pictures on Saturday, a few hours after the hostage crisis was over.



Those who had come to escape for a short while their everyday lives, to leave their cares behind, to forget the reality of politics, war, and terror suddenly found themselves confronted with exactly these things, and worse: their very lives were at stake. Through absolute control of the theatre, the audience was dragged upon a stage that it would never have entered of its own accord. Unawares, the audience itself was turned into an actor, forced into immobility on a stage that the hostage-takers had re-designed for their own purposes with explosive charges on chairs, pillars, walls, and bodies.

The protagonists in the Moscow theatre played an extorsive game with their own and other people's deaths. Although they were "asleep", apparently put out of action by gas, they were all shot. They and their helpless co-actors had been pushed into yet another stage setting, designed by Alpha fighters this time and executed almost without bloodshed, but to deadly effect: 118 people lost their lives. Being forced into the picture can be fatal. Within a few minutes, the stage created by the hostage-takers had been changed once again. For whom—if not for all of us—was this performance intended?

Scenes for spectacular mass hostage-takings have been passenger liners, hospitals, ambassadorial residences, and hotels. The choice of turning such places into crime scenes might be explained by the logic of the perpetrators. Politically or religiously motivated crimes need the public eye, the attention of the world. The choice of stage for the violent criminal—lonely and deserted places, private rooms—is dictated by opportunity and the awareness of wrongdoing. Freedom fighters and those who call themselves such, who are interested in more than mere personal enrichment or private gratification, prefer to penetrate into public spaces. Obviously, there seem to be enough suitable places.

Theatre and television are stages already; they do not need to be turned into one. The perpetrators of 9/11 could count on their crime being put on the world stage of TV, they did not have to factor this into their strategy. But since nothing can happen nowadays without being photographed or filmed (as the Concorde crash showed), wherever you are can become either a stage or an auditorium. "Big Brother" and "Live-Cams" are nothing but the publicly accepted productions of such amalgamations of the real world and its visual self-description. Bullfighting arenas, racetracks, and boxing rings are stages where life and death are at stake without criminal energy or belligerent fighting spirit being in play. This is where the gaze that wants to see everything—to the very end—has become institutionalized.

Turning an auditorium into a stage for death means using an existing structure. This is why the political struggle was brought onto a stage, because the stage is the very space for the extra-ordinary. Different rules apply there. The stage has always been the venue for dealing with vital issues, fundamentally and radically, in accordance with artistic standards. The space of art is extraordinary, however, precisely because that is not where the business of politics is conducted, that is not where murders are committed.

Turning the auditorium into a battlefield, into a scene of real life, also means destroying its conditions of applicability. The violent crime of the "Chechen Martyrs Brigade" was surely no "cultural terrorism" like the attacks on the Uffizi Gallery in Florence or the destruction of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. Yet in Moscow a work of art—that is, a performed work of art—was destroyed as well and the space of art damaged. According to producer Georgi Vassiljev, the place has become cursed.

Could it be that what happened at the Dubrovka could happen only because nothing tremendous had happened there before? Were the perpetrators in Moscow able to realize what the ordinary drama director can only dream of—the immediate relevance of art to life?

Degas once said that the execution of a painting required cunning and villainy, like a crime. Sonderborg wrote, "For me, painting is like a criminal act." Federle sees himself as a quasi-criminal, Hüppi talked about himself as a willful offender, and Beuys admonished outright: "Woe to those who are not criminal today." 1

To understand the meaning of such comparisons we have to go back to the origins of this comparison in the 18th century. Foucault wrote: "Against the law, against the rich, the powerful, the magistrates, the constabulary or the watch, against taxes and their collectors, he [the criminal] appeared to have waged a struggle with which one all too easily identified.... In appearance, it is the discovery of the beauty and greatness of crime; in fact, it is the affirmation that greatness too has a right to crime and that it even becomes the exclusive privilege of those who are really great. The great murders are not for the peddlers of petty crime."

Initially, the parallel between art and crime implied the acknowledgement of the master's right to break the law. The master (the "great") is the one who acts in his own name and who claims at the same time to represent what is genuinely right.

As Hegel tried to demonstrate with reference to "world-historical individuals" like Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon: by pursuing only their own personal interests, the great accomplish the higher and timeless General. They are great because the Impersonal, or the General, expresses and realizes itself through their personal striving. When artists are bold enough to compare themselves with criminals, that seems to be the *tertium comparationis*. The artist's crime-oriented statement expresses a seamless relationship to the deed.

How is this different from the criminal act? In the work of art, as in a crime, the individual ignores all other laws and rules, except his own. The criminal usually acts for the sake of his own financial interests and has an awareness of wrongdoing, which he manifests through efforts at concealment. The artist, however, has different motives and acts in full awareness of a law of his own that replaces the traditional or any other law and that he offers up to public discussion. That is exactly what terrorists do not do.

Opposed to the crime-oriented view of artistic action is the detective-oriented one: it is not oriented towards the production of objects but towards the perception and the installation of social spaces.

Art today must play with its boundaries—since they are socially in question. Nevertheless, someone shooting in all directions on a theatre stage is a murderer and not an artist. Theatre productions that are too close to current events run the risk of sabotaging the very space that makes them possible. Art requires a delicate balance between closeness to and distance from reality; or at least the distance of what has been decried long enough as being an "ivory tower" or "White Cube". We will have to take seriously again what is being dealt with in literature, in music and in dance, on stage and in pictures—so that nobody will have to die there in order to prove that what is being played in the theatre is not a game at all.

(Translated from the German by Jean-Marie Clarke)

1 Richard Schindler, *Das Geschäft der Detektive. Kunstrezeption und Verbrechensaufklärung*, in: „das Kunstwerk“, magazine, pp. 4-54, 1990

2 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, pp. 67-69, New York 1979