Between Excess and Subtraction: Scenographic Violence in Howard Barker's

Found in the Ground

(Presented on April 9th 2015 at 'Writing of Violence, Violence of Writing' at Université Paris-Sorbonne)

This essay examines the violence produced by the scenography of Barker's *Found in the Ground*, which emerges out of the play's formal experimentation. It draws primarily on the play text and the scenographic proposals contained therein, but also considers the 2009 production by The Wrestling School. *Found in the Ground* re-visions the collective European memory of the Holocaust. The play's thematic violence – of war, industrialised genocide, collective trauma as well as systematic dehumanisation and humiliation – is expanded and subverted by scenographic means, radically reimagining the historical context. The particularity of the spatio-temporal, audio-visual rendering of violence in Barker's text is the focus of this essay. Because of the complexity of Barker's work, both textually and in working with The Wrestling School, I deliberately limit the discussion to two aspects: excess (in sound and imagery) and subtraction (of characterisation and narrative cohesion). The formal experimentation of the play text engenders a violence of writing that exemplifies the ways in which Barker seeks to – in his own words – "inundate an audience with experiences which attack all the senses" (qtd. in Brown 81); an endeavour one might term Artaudian.

In many junctures of his work (be it in writing, painting, directing or scenographic engagement) Barker challenges the liberal humanist notion that violence is inherently objectionable and the desire for it unnatural. Instead, he proposes that "profound emotional experiences even where they fill the audience with despair […] serve to increase resistance to social coercion" (Barker, *Death* 13) and thereby regards his audiences as potentially "free, cognitive and essentially autonomous" (Barker, *Arguments* 50). The encounter with his violent playwriting might therefore be considered in those terms: as an attempt to offer

something that wrests the imagination free from the self-censoring processes of rationalisation and social compliance. By utilising scenography conceptually (in attesting beyond that which is manifested to things invisible, inaudible or simply impossible to actualise) as well as the tangible spatio-temporal realisation in production (with its affective impact on the audience's senses), Barker extends his thematic considerations of violence into the physical presentation of the stage worlds. This serves not only to render them perceptible but crucially offers the resulting sensual assault as something beyond reason to invite, excite and overwhelm the audience's imaginations. I here examine how this is achieved in *Found in the Ground* – among other theatrical techniques that are at play – through a skilful combination of excess and subtraction.

The exordium of *Found in the Ground* already establishes the excess of sound and imagery that is subsequently multiplied throughout the play. To the soundtrack of an unceasing industrial process, a naked, headless woman perambulates through an unidentifiable landscape as images of bombed out cities are projected onto hanging screens behind her. Immediately we are confronted with a multi-layered imagery: high-heeled and graceful, Macedonia is not without a certain erotic appeal; however, coupled with the images of war-torn civilisation and, more importantly, by virtue of the fact that she is headless (Barker, *Plays* 123) (portrayed through an ingenious hat design in Barker's production), which effectively de-individuates her, any possible effect of sexual arousal is complicated by her positioning as part of the catastrophic and anonymous wasteland of the projections: she becomes an unidentifiable victim of war crimes, the faceless stand-in for millions of violated bodies, displayed for the visual stimulation of others. Her headlessness and nakedness serve to increase the sense of a threatening environment, which in production provided material contrast to the vulnerability of her body through an abundance of metal, and through the ever-present smouldering fire (suggested by lighting, and smoke against a metal trapdoor).

Macedonia is merely one example of the way in which Barker combines the alluring and the repulsive in ways which recall Kristeva's proposition that "the abject is edged with the sublime" (Kristeva 11). The oscillation between attraction and repulsion lies at the heart of the sublime experience in which fear and pleasure are simultaneously encountered by a subject that is overwhelmed by the encounter with that which inspires these emotions. Macedonia's beautiful and erotic, yet disturbing and horrible appearance can be considered in these terms; she becomes a miasmatic black hole through which the individualised audience members bear "expressive witness to the inexpressible" (Benjamin[1], 199), to cite Lyotard. The contradictory complexity of Barker's imagery is at once attractive and deeply unsettling. We find ourselves confronted with the limits of what is conventionally permissible as enjoyable. More importantly, we are riven with potentially contradictory and violent emotions in response to clusters of meaning that overwhelm, strain and distort our self-perception.

The excess of imagery on stage is exacerbated by the deliberate absence of concrete spatial boundaries. The 2009 production saw the stage stripped back to the bare wall of the theatre, necessitating a long approach for the actors, visible to the audience. Space as indicated both in the text and the production, lacks definite boundaries and clear identifiers, creating a sense of limbo, an uncertainty of location, without sacrificing a sense of *somewhere*. It engenders "a lack of referentiality for the whole set of experiences, an impossibility of making them topographically contingent" (Benjamin, 188), to cite Lyotard once more. This physical dismantling of borders echoes the 'dissolution of all distinctions' that 'is also the dissolution of ordinary reason' (116) that Guyer discusses in relation to Nietzsche. He considered it conditional to the sublime as 'experience of the dissolution of rationality, not its affirmation' (*ibid.*) which follows the breakdown of concepts that usually exist by virtue of definition

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[1] I would like to note that *The Lyotard Reader* is an English-language collection of Lyotard's writings edited by Andrew Benjamin. As the edition comprises many varied writings previously published elsewhere, I reference the editor and page number of that collection for simplicity.

against one another (inside is "not outside", now is "not then", and vice versa). Instead, Barker proposes a cumulative layering of both/and (in terms of place, and time among other things), which in itself might be considered violent for its overwhelming effect. The place of the play is "like" other places, and brings to mind various locations (libraries, concentration camps, war-torn cities), but it is also always not quite like them. As such, the accumulation of possible meanings that arises from the principle of 'both/and' is bound up with a principle that offers audiences grades of likeness, that draw them in, and seduce them into sustained meaning-making attempts, even if they are bound to be frustrated. By textually referring and visually alluding to recognisable places, the stage space of *Found in the Ground* is thoroughly evocative yet decisively indefinite, refusing an easy conceptual completion by audience members. This repeated layering of associative content in imagery contributes to the overall excess in Barker's scenography.

The fetishisation[2] of victims' and in particular women's bodies is another recurring motif that heightens a sense of transgression, throwing into relief the commonly invisible boundaries of propriety. This is also apparent in Burgteata's self-professed 'vocation' to 'sleep with the dying' (Barker, *Plays* 128). The deliberate overlap of death and sex, of violence and eroticism, permeates the play from beginning to end and evokes, in the words of *The Guardian*'s Lyn Gardner, the 'worm of private desires eating away at the public face of history' (2009 online review). The proximity of death and sex drive as identified by Freud (1922; inspired by Spielrein, cf. Cooper-White 2014) and the violent potential of each appear to inform the actions of Barker's figures (e.g. in their immediate co-existence in Burgteata's actions, cf. also Denmark's suicide attempt on the bonfire, Barker *Plays* 188), which in turn

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[2] One might note here the significance of the fetish in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis (cf. http://science.jrank.org/pages/9365/Fetishism-Overview-Psychoanalytic-Interventions.html; accessed 23 May 2016) in terms of the relation between object and sexual arousal, displacement and gender performativity, all of which play a role in *Found in the Ground*. However, a detailed exploration of the fetish and the process of fetishisation in Barker's playwriting would exceed the scope of this particular analysis.

heightens the violence of the discomforting stage world, in which scenographic violence abounds.

Barker challenges the audience to interrogate historically conditioned emotional responses that are evoked in the face of war horrors, particularly those of the Second World War. He does so by problematizing and subsequently dissolving the boundaries between supposed opposites: the Nuremberg judge is a noxious and repulsive cripple who burns his own library, a stark image that calls to mind the book hunting and "cleansing" of literature by National Socialists in Germany in 1933; the nurses (an image of femininity prone to sexual fetish, and consequently objectification and dehumanisation similar to Macedonia: violent processes that further shape the conceptual stage environment for the audience) who supposedly care for him are callous and cruel, yet at his beck and call serve him the literal earthly remains of Nazi war criminals whom he sentenced to hanging. This melange of disquieting images is intensified by a soundscape that Barker describes as the 'repetitive sound of an industrial process' (*Plays* 123) in the stage directions. In the 2009 production this consisted of clanging metal, occasional high-pitched electrical whirring and an ongoing, echoing drone of unspecified origin that suggested not only a place unfit for human habitation, but also machinations that systematically suppress human individuality. This excessive soundscape was expanded by the 'ferocious barking of dogs' (123) before Toonelhuis' recurring line 'I hear a woman pissing' (123) broke into the ongoing din, adding live sound to the pre-recorded tapestry of sonic assault which the exordium set out. As the industrial sound slowly faded, but did not disappear, Gerrard McArthur's idiosyncratic vocal register, that of raspy bass took over. The quality of his particular voice was then counterpointed by Suzy Cooper's more melodious tones.

The play's fragmented lines emphasise repetition and assonance, foregrounding the affective sonic qualities of the words over their semantic content. This may take alliterative forms such

as Toonelhuis' request for the 'heaps of earth or peat' (*ibid*.): 'Who/ Has / Hoss?' (124). The names of the Nazis he sentenced to hanging also provide an interesting example of Barker's use of plosives and fricatives: 'Hoss/ Funck/ Dolbuch/ Klysek/ Rimm' (138) with alternating vowel sounds, as does Toonelhuis' frequently repeated line 'I hear a woman pissing/ Piss then/ I hear a woman stripping off her bra/ Strip then/ Strip off your bra' (123, 125, 179) and its frequent variations. The alternation of brighter vowel sounds (i, e, a) with darker ones (o, u) is also particularly evident in the Workman's recurring line 'All right/ All right/ SHUT UP/ SHUT UP' (131, 141, 147, 157). In the words of Lyotard, 'the powers of sensing and phrasing are being probed on the limits of what is possible' (Benjamin, 190). Notably, Barker has referred to The Wrestling School's ensemble as an orchestra of voices (qtd. in Reynolds 65), an image that actress Julia Tarnoky echoes: '[Working with The Wrestling School] is like being in an orchestra: he [Barker] expects that everyone can play their instruments and read the music, so we begin' (qtd. in Rabey, 254). The cacophony of multi-layered sound is constructed from pre-recorded audio materials both scenically grounded, such as the barking dogs, and abstract, such as the ongoing, not clearly identifiable industrial noises and the 'sound of infinity' (Barker, *Plays* 123, 131, 138, etc.) that the stage directions demand at various points; these are complemented by the live sounds of performers' voices, varied footsteps (contrasting different performers' shoes and gaits, such as Burgteata's and the nurses' heels in contrast to the Workman's heavy boots and Lobe's measured pace) and objects such as the wheelbarrow, wheelchair as well as the distorted sound of Macedonia's amplified and live manipulated voice. This cacophony of sound, often separated from its source (physically through amplification as was the case for Macedonia's lines, or by being played over loudspeakers either side of the stage, as were the dogs' barks; the chorus of nurses offered yet another potential sonic displacement as their voices blended together in production) offers an immense sensory assault to the audience, who are already confronted with the complexity of the narratively inconsistent timelines, the complex network of

individual desires the figures so relentlessly pursue, and of course the visual impact of the stage image. As such, the physical violence the scenography produces complements and heightens the thematic and associative violence contained within the play text.

As mentioned previously, the visual imagery is similarly complex to the sonic scenography, from the vicious looking mechanical dogs made of metal, to the fiery pit into which books are thrown time and again. The scenography of *Found in the Ground* is abundant with violence, whether it is in association, action or tone: Macedonia and Knox, as spectres of a bygone war which nonetheless continues to haunt the stage, figuratively as well as literally, serve as a poignant example of associative violence in *Found in the Ground's* scenography; particularly the conjunction of headlessness and nakedness in the figure of Macedonia (though in production she wore a garter belt) attest to violence that has passed, though its effects are still very much present visually.

Additionally, various figures engage in violent activities: the Workman burning books (124), the violent sexual encounter of Burgteata and Denmark (130), Denmark's threats to shoot Toonelhuis (166/67); later, the librarian 'flings himself onto the smouldering pile' (188) of books; Burgteata (203) and Hitler (207) experience violent fits. Denmark angrily stabs (207) the remains of Toonelhuis with a 'pronged garden fork' (205). In addition to these examples, the relationship between Lobe and the nurses appears based on a power dynamic of carefully distributed humiliation and denial of affection (162), not dissimilar to what happens between Burgteata and Denmark (138/39). Tonally, the glorification of murder that Knox pursues in 'articula[ting] the pleasures of [his] […]/ KILLING' (135) are more obviously violent than the dismissive reprimands of Toonelhuis to Denmark (150/168). Another example of scenographically rendered visual and conceptual violence are Denmark and Burgteata copulating as the 'dogs erupt from the kennels' (130) and the workman tips another wheelbarrow full of books onto the fire, 'which flares into life' (*ibid.*). Notably, Denmark

'forces her […] into an intimacy' (*ibid.*), suggesting a further visual and conceptual expansion of the multi-layered violence of the play. This particular example leads me onto my next point for consideration: the ways in which *Found in the Ground* offers scenographic excess through its multiple time zones and planes of reality, sometimes presented successively, sometimes simultaneously.

The sexual encounter of Denmark and Burgteata, a scene assaultingly rich in audio-visual and conceptual content, is juxtaposed with the appearance of Knox, the spirit of a war criminal. This figure appears again and again throughout the play, retelling his murders and their development from duty to the 'material substance/ of an intellectual dispute with God' (Barker, *Plays* 166). Both Toonelhuis and Denmark interact with him, yet they never once comment on the strangeness of his apparition. At the same time, there are situations in which Knox's appearance goes entirely unnoticed by the other figures, leaving only the audience as his addressees and complicit witnesses. Similarly, Macedonia, though permanently present on stage, is rarely acknowledged. Her speeches are woven into the overall tapestry of the soundscape, yet (unlike Knox) generally trigger no reaction or response. Macedonia does interact with Denmark, urinating on him repeatedly. Initially, he does not directly acknowledge this, despite exclaiming 'I'M DRENCHED' (140) shortly after the act. However, towards the end of the piece, he addresses her directly: 'No/ Not today thank you/ I don't require your piss today' (175). Knox and Macedonia serve as examples of how Barker offers up multiple planes of reality that are conceived without distinct boundaries. These are also to some extent contingent on the audience's association of the figures with various states (dead or undead rather than alive, in what might be conventionally assumed to be the fictional present of the characters (a concept which is itself problematized)) and time zones: Knox is from another time, though he exists within what might be considered the "main" time on

stage: post-World War Two, significantly post-Nuremberg trials (since Toonelhuis is identified to be an octogenarian).

Nonetheless, Knox's 'separateness', to use the term employed by the production's lighting designer, Helen Morley (private interview on August 18th, 2014), was emphasised by light, specifically by colour choice. This visible boundary served to foil any reductive attempt at explaining Knox's presence. He is, and is not, in the same place and time. Similarly, Macedonia (supposedly a war victim, since she asserts that she is 'all the Ann Franks/ all the Ann Franks me'; Barker, *Plays* 149) should logically not exist, especially not in the main timeline that follows Toonelhuis' burning of the library, yet she is present throughout the play. In her case, the strangeness of her uncanny presence is indicated in two ways: visually through her headlessness and nakedness, and sonically, through her morphed and amplified voice. Macedonia is, and is not, existent in the other figures' consciousness or the "fictional present" on stage. One might argue that she is a remnant of memory of the woman relieving herself that Toonelhuis' glimpsed in the woods years ago, an encounter that has quasi-religious connotations for him and is the source of his obsessive repetition of the opening lines. In their multifarious, yet decisively indefinite existence, figures such as Knox and Macedonia defy traditional characterisation, instead engaging a principle of subtraction that reduces narrative cohesion and gives space to the overwhelming sensory excess that the audio-visual scenography sets out.

Time within *Found in the Ground* is further complicated by the simultaneous presence of figures that are recognisably from different points of history. Another example, and perhaps more obvious than the (possibly supernatural) appearances of Macedonia and Knox, is the fact that Toonelhuis is an ageing Nuremberg judge, yet Adolf Hitler is presented onstage as a newborn infant as well as an adult. Notably, the co-presence of infant and adult Hitler's towards the end of the play further skews any understanding of time as linear. In the

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encounter with *Found in the Ground*, we must, in the words of Lyotard, 'admit a multiplicity of current times, which necessarily gives rise to paradox' (Benjamin, 186). In this multiplication of timelines the both/and principle at play in the layering of place appears again, its overwhelming conceptual accumulation in itself a form of violent disruption of rational understanding that reflects the audio-visual and thematic violence suffusing the scenography.

Approaching an understanding of time in *Found in the Ground* might be facilitated by Lingis' notion of "catastrophic time", which 'opens up the empty endurance of the void' (122); this void, or abyss is one of the mind (cf. Lingis, 122) over which imagination throws, so Barker, a 'frail bridge' (Barker, *Death* 1). The suspension of everyday working time in the face of catastrophe allows the subject to live intensely and precariously, or as Lingis phrases it: 'Living is dying on my own and with my own forces' (Lingis, 126). The will to self-definition, as well as self-destruction, is one that many of Barker's protagonists exhibit; their recognition of subjectivity as processual, rather than fixed, echoes the scenographic indeterminacy of their circumstances. It is the encounter with that which lies beyond (fixity, completion, and rational comprehension; cf. Lyotard, *Inhuman* 185-87) that 'dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness' (Benjamin, 197) and offers instead an experiential rapture of the unfixed and perpetually *becoming* subject. This unfixedness of being and the performative nature of subject identity (a recurring theme in Barker) are furthered in the example at hand by a deliberate subtraction of narrative cohesion and traditional characterisation. In terms of these (narrative and characterisation), there are multiple ways in which Barker sets up certain expectations, only to undermine them subsequently.

Found in the Ground offers no discernible exposition; the exordium presents a preamble that offers a certain mood and perhaps thematic outline. It does not, however, offer any concrete

information regarding the content of the play. Subsequently, exordium and play melt into one another. Rather than provide clues regarding the situation with which the play proper begins, we are instead confronted with Toonelhuis' obsessive fetishisation of a woman urinating and his bizarre ritual of consuming the remains of – as we discover later – Nazis he condemned to hanging. The immediate confrontation of potential sexual arousal (through the naked, high-heeled form of Macedonia's body), uncanny disturbance (through her unsettling animation despite being headless) and disgust (in the public display of excretion) sets up a violent confrontation for the audience in terms of content as much as form. The likely contradictory emotions the exordium and the play's opening inspire in the audience are reminiscent of the process of perpetually being at the border of one's existence as a living being (cf. Kristeva 12), from which one violently recoils. By juxtaposing this repulsion with attraction, Barker's playwriting engages what Schneider refers to as 'binary terrorism' (18) in which the radical suspension of conceptual dichotomies leads to a conceptual overload, aggravated by the complexity and overabundance of sensual stimuli. The lack of any clear narrative thread in *Found in the Ground* offers a substantial contribution to this effect. The process of *the play* undoubtedly sees some developments, even some that are successive and presented as such (for example the announcements regarding the progress in burning the library, which is first mentioned at "G" in Act 1, scene 12, and ends at "Z" in Act 2, scene 4). However, the different scenes are episodic, often cyclical and by virtue of layering different times and planes of reality, it is impossible to discern with certainty any form of cause and effect. As time and place are broken, layered and reconstituted, so are the different events of the play interrupted, repeated, and reconstituted in a confusing array of iterations. The action of the play provides no respite from the overwhelming and confusing environment in which it takes place.

In particular, short vignettes focussing on the nurses (such as when they return from a funeral) become a strand of narration that does not in any way advance the overall action of the play. In contrast, Knox's continued retelling of his various murders proposes a consciously appalling sense of a linear development that counterpoints the stand-alone scenes of the nurses and the cyclical process of Toonelhuis' actions. Like the nurses' scenes, Burgteata's onstage sexual encounters with Denmark, the Workman and Lobe, and her retelling of such acts offstage with the dying, do not serve any recognisable narrative function; however they may serve to compound the sense of an ongoing crisis in which the dead and dying abound in nightmarish re-presentations. One might also argue that Burgteata stands as a sister figure to Macedonia: her identity is not entirely stripped from her, yet she is undoubtedly caught up in a system in which women are fetish objects at best and undead without identity at worst. Her nymphomania may be interpreted as her attempt to orchestrate the violence wielded against her, according to her own design; perhaps it is also the result of the sexual abuse at the hands of Lobe which she experienced as a child[3]: if such violence is inevitable, at least it becomes manageable to some degree in and through her compulsive (re)performance of it.

The repeated returns to key motifs, such as Toonelhuis' recounting of observing a woman urinating in the woods (a line that becomes a sonic as well as a visual leitmotif without offering any concrete suggestions for interpretation) and his attempted digestion of the earthly remains of the Nazis whom he sentenced to hanging, do not become any clearer over time, despite or perhaps even because of the slow introduction of further details. Yet it is likely that the recognition of preceding materials seduces the audience into repeated attempts at meaning-making, even though they will be frustrated. As such, the excess of content (conceptual as well as audio-visual), and the simultaneous subtraction of narrative cohesion

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[3] 'I did not give permission/ […] But he never asked for it' (Barker, *Plays* 200)

present a violence of writing that suffuses *Found in the Ground* thematically as much as it is rendered violent scenographically.

The convoluted strands of action, in conjunction with the multiplicity of timelines and planes of reality, enable a fictionalising of history, as well as highlighting the constructed nature of historical accounts. Thereby, history and its received terms are rendered provisional, rather than authoritative. This is particularly manifest when the adult Hitler sits to watch a 'film of extermination and execution' (Barker, *Plays* 202) that is projected onto a screen which is positioned in the location of Macedonia's missing head. Barker refuses to present the audience with traditionally conceived characters; but neither do they become archetypes upon which one might impose a concrete and socially-constructed meaning that might arise from any ready terms of mythic recognition.

The figures are highly articulate performers, self-aware and consciously manipulative of one another, like so many of Barker's figures. Their relationships to one another are complex and only revealed in the progress of the play: for example we discover that Burgteata is Toonelhuis' daughter only halfway into Act 1, whereas the full extent of her relationship with Lobe is not revealed until Act 2, Scene 4. However, and notably, these revelations do not become drivers of the action in any form. They merely add yet another conceptual dimension to the already overwhelming flood of sensory information with which the audience is presented.

In addition to these mutable relationships that deny the audience mechanisms for placing figures in an overall comprehensible constellation and guess at their motivations, genealogical uncertainties are a recurring motif in Barker's work (cf Khamphommala 2013). These serve to further destabilise relations between figures, throw into question their perceived identity, and trouble the already fraught understanding of time the audience is presented with. Alongside the consciously performative engagement with the notion of subjectivity which is a frequent

thematic thread for Barker, such genealogical uncertainties become evidence of the performed nature of identity and the constructed nature of history alike in *Found in the Ground*. The interruption of conventional constructions of identity and narrative is furthered by the instability of relations between figures, and acts as a complementary conceptual strategy to the scenographic violence Barker employs so frequently, and of which *Found in the Ground* is a prime example.

Arnold Aronson speculates about the possibility and perhaps task of scenography to constitute a 'world of mystery, but also […] a world of terror' (101), a description that is highly apt in relation to the scenographic violence of *Found in the Ground*. Barker's work highlights the way in which scenography can be employed as a 'practice of […] constant making and re-making of time-space' (23), as Brejzek phrases it. *Found in the Ground* presents the stage as an abyss, which 'returns the gaze', in accordance with Aronson's terms (1). In the image of the abyss, we might again find the simultaneous presentation of excess (in terms of unknowable potentiality, particularly of space) and subtraction (in the absence of concrete markers delimiting conceptual and physical dimensions) that are two fundamental principles in the generation of scenographic violence in *Found in the Ground* as I have detailed here. The violent sensory and conceptual onslaught presented by *Found in the Ground* denies the audience a place to hide from the collective European memory of the Holocaust, and refuses to offer conclusive materials regarding individual as well as collective truth and responsibility. Instead, we are violently confronted with the pains and exhilarations of choice, desire and radical self-determination in the face of a decaying civilisation.

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