

Political Science 710: Fall 2015

Thinking the Event: Philosophy, Politics, and Genre

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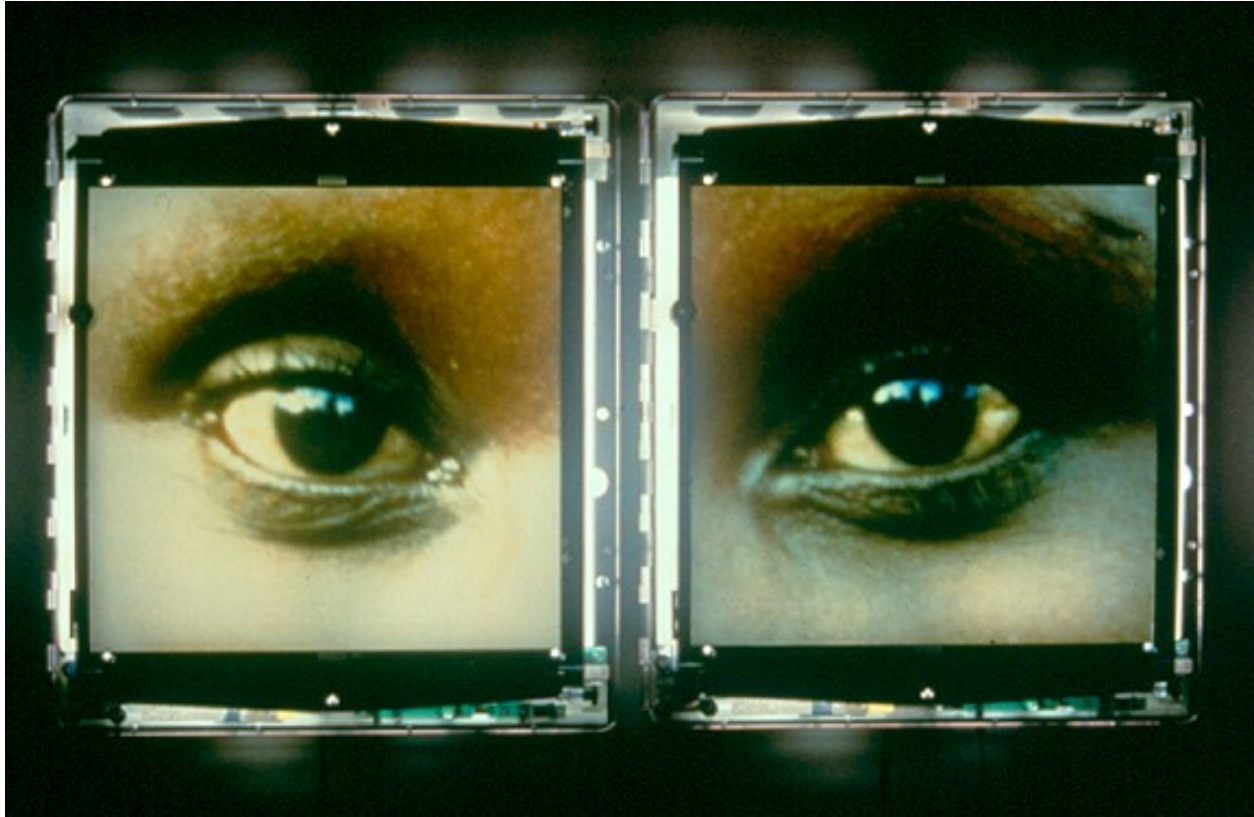
This seminar in Political Thought will be focused both on philosophical contributions to conceiving and locating events and on artistic and culture texts that treat their experiential consequences (e.g. in moments and aftermaths of the bombing of Hiroshima, Hurricane Katrina, the Cambodian genocide, the saving of North beach on West Maui, The sarin gas attack on Tokyo commuter trains, etc.).

Here are course-relevant fragments from a chapter prototype I've prepared for a book project on political temporalities:

“The Battle of Okinawa” is an event that receives relatively little coverage in contemporary reviews of the history of violence, even though its duration and civilian casualty rate looms large in the historical archive of atrocity. It’s “old news,” and as Milan Kundera has noted (through one of his fictional characters contemplating the events of brutality that he’d seen covered in recent television news broadcasts), news becomes old very quickly:

No event remains news over its whole duration, merely for a quite brief span of time, at the very beginning. The dying children of Somalia whom millions of spectators used to watch avidly, aren’t they dying anymore? What has become of them? Have they grown fatter or thinner? Does Somalia still exist? And in fact did it ever exist? Could it be only the name of a mirage?

However, as I have suggested elsewhere (in a review essay entitled “Slow Looking”), “While the momentarily timely images carried by news media may be ephemeral, the genre of the exhibition, which yields an accompanying and enduring catalogue/ text, is one in which what becomes effaced as a news event is restored, reflected on, and made publicly available for extended ethical and political negotiation.” For example, there is an installation by Alfredo Jaar that references the 1994 massacres in Rwanda, which rather than showing gruesome images of mutilated bodies, “...conceals...photographs of the Rwandan massacre in boxes (see the Figure below), after first leading visitors along corridors placing them before a huge screen of light, empty of any image.”



The Eyes of Gutete Emerita

Jacques Rancière captures the effect of Jaar's aesthetic strategy: "It is the construction of a sensory arrangement that restores the powers of attention itself." Certainly diverse media – official government releases, journal, newspaper, television and internet publications, and what is treated by a variety of artistic genres - create the conditions of possibility for what people know about atrocities, starvation, and other forms of adversity all over the planet, and each media genre has a different way of evoking or dulling "powers of attention."

Here I want to point to another genre, the documentary film, which like the exhibition, offers an opportunity for "slow looking" and extended reflection, and to note one in particular, Chris Marker's "semi-documentary," *Level Five* (1996), which brings back the Battle of Okinawa. Combining archival footage with a fictional scenario, the film is narrated by the actress Catherine Belkhodja, who as the character Laura (drawn from Otto Preminger's 1994 eponymous film), sits at a computer console building an interactive video game, begun by her deceased lover. The game is aimed at altering the battle. Combining ethnographic and aesthetic subjects - footage of Okinawan informants and victims as the former and "Laura" as the latter (who is continually onscreen, talking to her absent lover) - Marker, a "futuristic ethnologist," as well as filmmaker/ essayist, reframes the way the event will-have-been.

What is an event?

To make critical sense of an event, [I suggest that] we situate ourselves in a history of ideas, (a critical philosophical trajectory) that begins with Immanuel Kant's location of time within

subjectivity, runs through Edmund Husserl's concept of time consciousness, proceeds to Martin Heidegger's ontological location of the subject in time, and moves to versions of critically oriented philosophies of history and subjectivity by contemporary post Kantians – for example those of Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Paul Ricoeur, who displace pure consciousness with reactivated possibilities, discursive practices, counter actualizations, and narratives respectively.

Course requirement:

Seminar participants will be asked to write either completed essays or elaborately annotated essay outlines in which they identify a historical or contemporary event and provide a philosophic/political commentary on its duration: its past, present and future anterior (it's ongoing will-have-been).

Suggested Texts:

François Zourabichvili, *Deleuze: A Philosophy of the Event*,
Slavoj Zizek, *Event: A Philosophical Journey Through a Concept*
Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima After Iraq*
Haruki Murakami, *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*
Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol 3.
Sydney Iaukea, Keka'a: *The Making and Saving of North Beach West Maui*
Cathy Schlund-Vials, *Cambodian Memory Work*

I will make available essays and book fragments by Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, Michael Foucault, Jacques Ranciere, Paul Ricoeur, and Claude Romano and stories by Zaidy Smith, Daniel Alarcon, Tomas Dobozy (and others). And we will watch some feature films and documentaries, e.g., Chris Marker, *Level Five*, Alain Resnais, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Robert Greenwald, *Unmanned America*. Spike Lee, *When The Levies Broke*

Reading/discussion/viewing schedule TBA