Publication of this book was made possible by grants from Université de Montréal and from the following programs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison: African Studies Program; Center for Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia; Center for Southeast Asian Studies; Global Studies Program; Latin American, Caribbean, and Iberian Studies Program; the Anonymous Fund for the Humanities; and the University of Wisconsin Foundation.

The University of Wisconsin Press
1930 Monroe Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53711

www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress/

3 Henrietta Street
London WC2E 8LU, England

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5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The art of truth telling about authoritarian rule / edited by Ksenija Bilbija...[et al.].
p. cm.
Includes bibliographic references and index.
1. Reconciliation — Political aspects — Cross-cultural studies.
JC371.A72 2005
323.4'9 — dc22
2005001338

To a future generation of truth tellers, especially Una, Zack, Mela, Nina, and Abbe.

All profits from this book will be directed to the Scott Klaeck-Jenson memorial scholarship fund to support social justice research and internships by University of Wisconsin-Madison students from Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the former Yugoslavia.
Performing truth

Laurie Beth Clark

Perhaps because authoritarianism is performative, performance has been and continues to be a preferred mode of “speaking truth to power” in authoritarian regimes. The authoritarian state fashions symbols, ceremonies, and institutions partly as a performance of power – asserting, communicating, and celebrating its hold over the apparatus of the state and its control of society in political performances large and small. Groups in opposition to the authoritarian state are often equally performative. Throughout history, people have taken to the stages and the streets to voice, either explicitly or implicitly, their hostility to repressive regimes. Such performances produce counter narratives that challenge power by inverting the authoritarian regime’s version of the present or past, representing the regime as the threat to the nation and its values of life, liberty, and morality.
Performance is any art that requires the presence of a performer, often but not always demonstrating a skill, and reception by an audience, even if the audience consists only of the performer. The term "performance" refers to creative activities that take many forms, from subtle choices about how to walk and what to wear to massive spectacles and social dramas. Under the heading of performance we may consider conventional plays and experimental theatre, state-orchestrated performances such as truth commissions, alternative testimonial performances including storytelling, high-political action, performances including traditional and contemporary ritual forms, performance art, site-specific installations, and performances of self in everyday life.

In reviewing these models, it is important to keep in mind that not only does performance tell history, performance also makes history. The events that spectators witness enter into the consciousness of a culture as history. They provide not only pictures of turbulent cultural life but are also part of that turbulence; they are not ready-made documents or reflections of culture but events with cultural efficacy.

Ideas of all kinds — factual, fictional, and in between — may be channeled through performance, but the openness of the medium to multiple uses introduces awkward negotiations in post-dictatorship societies where recounting the facts of history has its own presumed merit. Indeed, reconciliation has been given theatrical form worldwide as government commissions stage public, orchestrated confessions, with protagonists, supporting actors, and spectators. These events give a voice to previously neglected persons, and center stage to the recounted for the individual psyche of the listeners. In Chile and Argentina, as well as in many other countries whose past has been marked by dictatorship, there are regular commemorations of the victims of state terror. The audience hears a performer read the victims' names — call attendance — of those who did not survive. Instead of silence marking absence, another voice, that of a surviving spouse, relative, or friend says, "Present." After authoritarianism recedes to the past, scars still remain visible and continue to cause pain. Probably the most common performative act has been to tell the story of one's wound. However, in all confessional performances, credibility is both socially and institutionally constrained. Because such stories are intended to produce empathetic responses from spectators, they are limited; the process favors certain kinds of stories (possibly the most horrific ones), certain kinds of simplifications of the story so that listeners' loyalties are not diminished by ambiguities and complexities, and certain kinds of storytellers (those with effective and culturally specific acting skills as well as identity positions familiar to listeners). Furthermore, insistence on humanizing atrocity through individual narratives carries with it a reduction of the importance of collective identity and collective responsibility. Finally, it may be that issues that receive most attention are those that give power to the new state. Yet, while it seems almost self-evident that truth commissions and other forums for confessional performance favor victims, there is actually some indication that such forums sometimes favor perpetrators. As 'narrative devices' on agency, the stories of those who 'do' are generally more compelling than those who are done to. Often, with the possible exception of Steve Biko or Amy Bhide, Jeffrey Benedict's confession about, and reworking of, his "warburg" form of torture in the South African police station has arguably received more coverage in the press, television, and even art pieces than any single South African victim or survivor's story.

During authoritarianism, performance can be an especially effective protest art because performers often find it easier to evade censorship under the disguise of art. A script that conforms to the letter of the law may still be performed subversively, so that its images and gestures allow audience members to read between the lines. One common strategy is to stage permissible texts, from Shakespeare or Greek tragedy, in which the audience could be helped to read social critique allegorically through choices of costume or gesture. Similarly, indigenous rituals and Christian religious rites have been used as camouflage for political critique in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe.

In post-dictatorship societies it may no longer be necessary to be surreptitious. Often, plays that were forbidden at home, but have been acclaimed abroad, make their first appearances in the row liberated societies. However, having emerged from an era of clandestine production and cryptic communication, audiences may be unsurprised to find didactic works of overt protest. Death and the
SINDIWE MAGOMA  The Necklace
Excerpt from Mother to Mother (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998).

A new phrase was coined: Verb: to necklace.

Necklace. A new phrase was born. Shiny brand new - necklace. More deadly than a gun. The necklace. That is what we chose to call our guillotine. Necklace: What an innocent-sounding noun. Who would imagine its true meaning? Just as we kept on calling, instead of calling the people who did the necklacing "children," "students," "comrades," we called a barbaric act the necklace, protecting our ears from a reality too gruesome to hear: clothing satanic deeds with innocent apparel.

Not many of our leaders came out and actually condemned the deed, indeed, there were those who actually applauded the method, the innovative manner of killing a human being, of doing away with those with whom one was in disagreement. They said it would lead us to freedom. However, to this day, I have never heard it said that even one of the oppressors was necklaced. I had not known that it was our own people who stood in the way of the freedom we all said we desired.

Meanwhile, soon others were similarly garlanded. All those singled out for this form of execution were thus summarily murdered. No due process. No recourse to defense or appeal. Human beings were summarily murdered. No, necklaced. Quite different is to saying someone has been murdered or killed. Necklaced. Is it more palatable?

The mighty police appeared impotent. They did nothing about the necklacing or did so little as to make no difference. Justice was on holiday. Or busy with more deserving matters: terrorists who, at the instigation of foreign meddlers, especially communists, were planning to overthrow the government. And, of course, always there were the pass offences.

A war was going on, the children said. They were fighting the apartheid government.

Maiden by a Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman has been enormously successful with European and North American audiences, but it met with disapproval from Chilean audiences. The play explores how complicated the process of forgetting may be when torturers still share the streets of Santiago with those they tortured. Dorfman's life in exile may have also shaped Chilean audience reaction to the play, evoking criticism of the nation's sons and daughters who "abandoned" the homeland.

There is often a thin line between spectators and performers in performances of truth and memory in post-dictatorship societies. The theatrical structure calls on spectators to take the role of witnesses, yet their very presence impinges on them the role of political actor. This is true of some of the best known performances of both authoritarian and post-authoritarian eras, which have taken the form of political actions, such as the weekly Thursday marches of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, which persist after the fall of the dictatorship as the women continue to demand state accountability for the disappeared.

Even the homes of former repressors and their supporters are sites of political performance. Escraches in Argentina and funerary walks in Chile are grassroots movements organized by the families of the disappeared. In Argentina, for example, a group called H.I.J.O.S. (literally sons and daughters) organizes public outings where well-known collaborators with the authoritarian regime are publicly denounced, their shameful history blasted through powerful speakers, and at the end paint thrown on the walls of their houses. In this way, neighbors find out who lives among them and in many cases, the collaborators and supporters of the regime are publicly shamed. During the escrache, all participants form a closed circle, and those who are watching from the sidewalks are not allowed to remain as passive bystanders. They are asked if they are with the group or not, and after the affirmative answer, they become part of the circle. In that sense the separation between the audience and performers ceases to exist.

Visits to the sites of trauma, often guided, are an important aspect of the performance of truth and memory wherever horror has occurred. Site-specific performances allow the place to "speak" its own memory of the atrocity that happened within its walls and convey that feeling to the visitors. Such works blur the boundary between monument and performance, either through the performances by guides and "actors" (sometimes even costumed reenactments), but also by the performances of the body of the spectators who engage corporeally with the site of memory. Guides at the Robben Island museum, formerly a prison for black opposition to South African apartheid, are ex-prisoners who often engage visitors with stories of their own past. The Robben Island "experience" will forever be changed when the aging prisoners can no longer lead these tours and are replaced by guides who were never imprisoned there. Furthermore, the use of a spatial idiom to perform truth extends beyond the site of trauma to other works that are "off site," such as the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., or the many Holocaust

Every Thursday afternoon in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the Mothers and the Grandmothers of the disappeared walk around the Plaza de Mayo in front of the government palace to demand justice for those committed by the dictatorship.

Source: Paul Bi Oló

Roman political prisoners had groups through the Urquiza and the Plaza buildings, located on the site of Chile's notorious clandestine torture center, Villa Grimaldi (Cuartel Terranova).

Source: Ivan Ribot
memorials throughout and beyond Europe. Whether site works are permanent like the Robben Island museum, or transient like Coco Fusco’s reenactment of the “passbook wars” with a subversive twist, The artists who use this mode to tell truth find it efficacious to perform truth with reference to the geography of terror.

Performance art, from monologue to tableau vivant, has proved a particularly fertile site for the engagement of difficult and alternative content. Many performance art strategies globally resemble avant-garde European and North American practices. For example, Ubu and the Truth Commission draws on the French Ubu stories developed by Alfred Jarry.

It would be a mistake to assume that such works are derivative because they draw upon cultural forms of expression. In fact, many “first world” artists have borrowed strategies from elsewhere or have been deeply influenced in their work by their Latin American, Asian, and African counterparts. The profound influence of Brazilian Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed” provides just one example.

In societies with surviving independent forms and viable indigenous communities, “western” experimental strategies intersect with “non-western” performative practices. Thus, traditional ritual forms continue to function alongside syncretic practices as effective strategies for the performance of cultural truth. Sometimes such traditional forms are “nationalized” as a way of providing a symbolic unified identity for the new post-colonial nation. In other cases artists who have lived in exile during the authoritarian regime return to produce work in the countries they were forced to abandon. Their diasporic and intercultural perspectives contribute yet another dimension to the complex truths of post-dictatorship societies. The rhythmic toy-toy performance, closely identified with South Africa’s liberation movements and current struggles for equality in that country, originated outside of the country in places such as Zimbabwe and North Africa, where liberation fighters trained.

Because identity shape and are shaped by material culture, even most ordinary everyday activities must be thought of as performances, and sometimes these performances are subtle but significant acts of resistance.9 In such day-to-day activities as shopping, dressing, and eating, there is a poetics of resistance towards homogenizing cultural forces, through a recombination of images and objects. For example, the Tide laundry detergent logo became the design for the Yugoslav radio station B-92, one of the few forces openly opposed to the Milosevic’s regime. Replacing the word “Tide” with “Free B-92,” nonetheless linked the radio station with the struggle to cleanse the nation of Milosevic’s stains. In Argentina, the cacerolazo has become a powerful form of popular protest in the post-dictatorship era. As a non-violent performance, it calls on large numbers of citizens to take up their empty pots and pans and bang on them in unison, as loudly as humanly possible, moving forward or standing still, in collective protest.

While many performances serve progressive functions, performance itself is not inherently progressive. In both fascist and democratic societies, performance has had a long and secure history of serving the interests of the state. This includes everything from military spectacle to musical theater. Not only may performance take conservative forms, it may also incorporate repressive content into progressive forms. Marking themselves as the new marginalized, residual right-wing groups around the world now use strategies long associated with the left to promote repressive agendas. Even some of what is done in the name of truth-telling may have anti-progressive intentions or deployments. What impact, for example, will “apartheid tourism” have on the future political policies and practices of South Africa? How can we know what pleasures spectators find in the review of atrocities? Can we really any more sure of their motives than we can of those of the collectors of Nazi memorabilia in Europe or racist statuary in the United States?

It remains a troubling question whether pain can ever be adequately or appropriately represented by a body on stage, and more so whether such representations do more to reinscribe violence than contradict it. Performances that expose the details of torture and terror may even eroticize it, as critics of the performance of Eduardo Pavlovsky’s 1990 play Pato de dos in Argentina have contended. To this day, the question remains: is the play about torture’s pervasiveness or an offering to the society fascinated by eroticized violence? Moreover, stories of activism and resistance are not told nearly as often as stories of victimization.

Whether this is because they are statistically fewer or because they are believed to be less dramatically compelling, the effect is the same, the reinforcement in the cultural imaginary of a constant state of political victimization.

Along with the exposure and replenishment of atrocities, one of the greatest contributions that performance makes in post-authoritarian societies is the insertion into the popular psyche pictures of the complex forces that make social change possible under even the most unthinkable circumstances. Since political change often is not followed immediately by economic change, the violence of poverty and unequal social relations persists in the post-dictatorship era. It may be that performance in post-dictatorship societies will continue to offer a critique of the new state, even as it celebrates liberation. The more complex and multifaceted these performances are, the more they realize performance’s promise as an integral component in ongoing social change.
**The Meaning of Style:**


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Removes.

This essay is adapted from James Banning Out, Authoritarianism: South Africa’s Human Spirit: An Analysis (March 2000), 172.

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Removes.