

Peter Falkenberg

Nothing Ever Happens Here

On the 22nd of June 1954 in Christchurch, New Zealand, Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme killed Honora Parker, Pauline's mother. They were sixteen and fifteen years old, and like many teenagers, they were dreaming of a career in Hollywood making films together. They wanted to escape from a place where they knew that nothing ever happened. They wrote and acted out theatrical plays and games together in search of an imaginary, or more "real" existence that they called the "Fourth World." Then something happened. I quote from Pauline's diary of Friday the 23rd of April 1954:

I played Tosca and wrote before ringing Deborah. [Deborah was Juliet's fantasy name.] Then she told me the stupendous news. Last night she awoke at 2 o'clock and for some reason went into her Mother's room. It was empty so she went downstairs to look for her. Deborah could not find her so she crept as stealthily as she could into Mr Perry's flat and stole upstairs. She heard voices from inside his bedroom and she stayed outside for a little while, then she opened the door and switched the light on in one movement. Mr Perry and Mrs Hulme were in bed drinking tea. Deborah felt an hysterical tendency to giggle. She said "Hello" in a very [illegible] voice. She was shaking with emotion and shock although she had known what she would find. They goggled at her for a minute and her mother said "I suppose you want an explanation." Yes, Deborah replied, I do. Well, you see, we are in love, Mother explained.¹

¹ Quoted in Julie Glamuzina and Alison J. Laurie, *Parker & Hulme: A Lesbian View* (Auckland: New Woman's Press, 1991) 73.

It seems that Juliet perhaps the same night told her mother that she and Pauline wanted to go to America for six months, and that Mr Perry gave her 100 pounds to get permits. They also told Dr Hulme about their going to America, and he did not immediately disabuse them of their plans.

It was quite different with Pauline's mother. When she refused to give Pauline permission to travel, Pauline "felt thoroughly depressed afterwards and even quite seriously considered committing suicide" (from the diary of 28th April 1954, qtd in Glamuzina and Laurie 74). Almost two months later, on the 19th of June, Pauline writes in her diary:

...our main idea for the day was to moider Mother. This notion is not a new one, but this time it is a definite plan which we intend to carry out. We have worked it out carefully and are both thrilled by the idea. Naturally we feel a trifle nervous, but the pleasure of anticipation is great. I shall not write the plan down here as I shall write it up when we carry it out (I hope)...

(qtd in Glamuzina and Laurie 75)

On the 20th of June, she wrote:

[W]e discussed our plans for moidering Mother and made them a little clearer. Peculiarly enough, I have no (qualms of) conscience (or is it peculiar, we are so mad.)

(qtd in Glamuzina and Laurie 75)

On the 21st of June, she wrote:

Deborah rang and we decided to use a rock in a stocking rather than a sandbag. We discussed the moider fully. I feel very keyed up as though I were planning a surprise party. Mother has fallen in with everything beautifully and the

happy event is to take place tomorrow afternoon. So next time I write in this diary Mother will be dead. How odd yet how pleasing...

(qtd in Glamuzina and Laurie 75)

On the 22nd of June, in the final entry, which is headed “The Day of the Happy Event,” Pauline wrote: “I am writing a little of this up on the morning before the death. I felt very excited and the night-before-Christmas-ish last night” (qtd in Glamuzina and Laurie 75).

What has happened is that the plan for making Hollywood films has been replaced, or changed, into plans for creating a “moider.” The word “moider” itself is, of course, something they took directly from watching American B movies. Note that Pauline does not want to write the plan of the murder, but she plans to write of the murder – that is, the act will provide material for her script.

I want to see what happened here as a rupture (‘irruption’ or ‘shock’) of the real. For this purpose, I turn to Slavoj Žižek and his interpretation of the Lacanian Real:

If we define the Real as [...] a paradoxical, chimerical entity which, although it does not exist, has a series of properties and can produce a series of effects, it becomes clear that the Real *par excellence* is *jouissance*: *jouissance* does not exist, it is impossible, but it produces a number of traumatic effects.²

The *jouissance* that we can read in Pauline’s diary entries may be traced in the “odd yet [...] pleasing” anticipation of the “moider” of her mother. Her impossible desire to write the murder also points to the Real that cannot be inscribed. According to Žižek, “Lacan’s whole point is that the Real is *nothing but* this impossibility of its

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & NY: Verso, 1989) 164.

inscription” (Žižek *Sublime* 173). In fact, “the Real is the writing itself as opposed to the signifier” (Žižek *Sublime* 171).

This Lacanian Real is also where one places Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. Jacques Derrida says in his essay about “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation”: “The theatre of cruelty is not a *representation*. It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable.”³ Derrida goes on to describe this Theatre of Cruelty: “[T]here is always a murder at the origin of cruelty, of the necessity named cruelty. And, first of all, a parricide” (47).

It was clear to me that if I wanted to make a film about the Parker-Hulme murder that I could not do it as a representation, as Peter Jackson did in *Heavenly Creatures* (1994). I asked two actors, Liz and Marian, to follow the footsteps of Parker and Hulme in their own way, but instead of committing a murder, they were to make the film that Parker and Hulme did not make. They were to do three things: to research the lives of Parker and Hulme and to replay and film scenes from that; secondly, to explore and film scenes from their own lives, as they might be seen to reflect Parker and Hulme; and thirdly, to make the process of making the film part of their exploration and scrutiny. This meant the introduction of three male figures into the film: myself as the director, Shahin as the cameraman, and Nick as the musician. A fourth male voice was introduced by the decision to take Genet’s *Maids* as a parallel text to the Parker-Hulme narrative.⁴ This changed the Parker-Hulme constellation considerably.

I tried to remove myself from the writing of the film by having the actors write their own diaries and work without me for long stretches of time, creating scenes and

³ Jacques Derrida, “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation.” In *Mimesis, Masochism, & Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, edited by Timothy Murray (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997) 42.

⁴ An editor was added as a fifth male voice later.

filming each other. However, I was still the director. I pushed them in certain directions for their explorations. I chose the pieces from their diaries to be included in the film. I framed the shots with the cameraman and guided the editing process. Although I refrained from the actual act of writing, I was still, in Derrida’s terms, “the abusive wielder of the logos, [...] the father” (47), who therefore becomes the target of parricide. In my own logic, Parker-Hulme’s matricide had to be replaced by patricide in my film.

The desire for the Real was what my actors shared with Parker and Hulme. One of the actors, who had a history of cutting herself with razor blades, introduced the phenomenon of cutting into the film. Slavoj Žižek writes about cutting in his essay on “Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance”:

Far from being suicidal, far from indicating a desire for self-annihilation, cutting is a radical attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality, or (another aspect of the same phenomenon) to ground the ego firmly in bodily reality against the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as nonexistent.⁵

My film begins with a reference to self-cutting, and what follows can be seen as “a violent return to the passion for the Real” against “the ‘postmodern’ passion for the semblance” (Žižek *Desert* 10).

During the preparation period for the film, the actors invited me to have a picnic with them. We went to the gardens where Parker and Hulme had played their games, and we had some food with champagne. Then they proceeded to blindfold me, led me to their car and drove off for a long while. When they stopped, they turned me several times, took the blindfold off and ran away shrieking with laughter. I found myself in the middle of a vast empty area near Christchurch at Lake Ellesmere. This

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London & NY: Verso, 2002) 10.

reminded me of another scene that happened in New Zealand in 1984, when a well-known playwright and theatre director was abducted by some women, stripped of his clothes and tied to a tree in a park with a sign that said “rapist.” In my film, this role is taken on by Nick the musician, whose body is inscribed with the words “rapist” and “artist.”

At the turning point in the Parker-Hulme story, Pauline plays Verdi’s *Tosca* before she hears the news from “Deborah.” I used the end of *Tosca* for the ride to Lake Ellesmere as well as for ending the series of scenes in which Genet’s *The Maids* is played as a mirror to Parker-Hulme. *Tosca* finds out that the shooting of her lover, which she has regarded merely as *una commedia* (only a play), is real, and she throws herself from the tower. In the film, as *Tosca*, Liz throws herself out the window after having killed Marian in an enactment of *The Maids*.

In the last scene, the cameraman is killed on the spot where Pauline Parker’s mother was murdered. The film that I tried to make not as a representation failed. There is no end of representation, neither in film nor in murder. When Parker-Hulme proceeded to “moider Mother,” they were not achieving the Real that they were after; they were repeating, or remaking, a scene from films that they had seen. One cannot escape representation, except as a fake, a remake, a repetition, or a traumatic failure. One cannot make things happen: in Christchurch, here, or anywhere.