

## **Moving Targets: An “Illogical” Theatre of Resistance in (Pre)Occupied Territory**

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The notion of a theatre of resistance implies a society of coercion. Yet it seems accurate to say that few of us – at least of my generation and younger – feel as though we live in a forceful and oppressive society. Several years ago I was studying Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed” in a university course. The lecturer asked one day that we share our own experiences of oppression upon which to base a Forum Theatre session. The students went silent. Nobody could think of an instance of oppression from his or her experience. We ended up creating Forum Theatre on other people’s behalves, such as a friend of a friend whose father mistreated him because he was gay. A partial explanation for this scenario is clearly that the students from my class, almost exclusively middle-class and white, have more in common with the oppressors than oppressed in this society. That observation, while provocative, is insufficient. Most members of my generation, myself included, seem utterly unable to think politically or even *imagine* a society fundamentally different to the present one, and one’s ability to perceive society as oppressive is severely limited if one cannot fathom any alternative.

Fredric Jameson sees nearly all art today as powerless to instigate political change because of an advanced mode of capitalism in which the cultural realm (of which theatre is a part) is inextricable from the economic and political realms. The logic of late capitalism is pervasive. It may seem counterintuitive to posit such a depoliticised society at a time when political debate and protest (and theatre) are rife. This “post-political” condition, however, is due not to a lack of political theatre,

actions, and ideas but precisely to their omnipresence.<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard claims that, since 1968, everything has become political and therefore nothing is political (9). Being “political” or “resistant” – by traditional criteria – has arguably become the norm. Many or most theatres today proclaim a politics, and yet there is widespread resignation regarding the inevitability of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> But in this society of coercion that must meet with “resistance” from the theatre, it is clearly capitalism that is the predominant coercive force.

I wish to propose a contemporary theatre of resistance *à la* the French *Résistance* during World War II: radical theatre today must assume that our nations and we ourselves have been “occupied” by this coercive capitalist force and therefore must operate “underground” making tactical strikes against an overwhelming opposition. But capitalism is a daunting opponent: it dwarfs the coercive force of the German invading army yet is often completely imperceptible, fluid, constantly changing form. Paul Virilio compellingly theorised the disappearance of power into a vector of speed where any traditional notion of power – knowledge, wealth, or might – is eliminated and replaced by “moving power” (1986). The fortress of capitalism remains impenetrable because, in fact, no fortress can ever be located. I have titled this article “moving targets” because of these traits: capitalism itself is perpetually moving, shifting its loci of accountability and co-opting potentially subversive elements not by brute force and antagonism but by incorporating them into consumer society. Everything potentially threatening to dominant power, from theatre to

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<sup>1</sup> See Ryan Reynolds, *Moving targets: Political theatre in a post-political age* (University of Canterbury, 2006), from which this essay has been adapted.

<sup>2</sup> There was a time when political theatre was considered to be that which sought for revolution. With that possibility seemingly gone in the “postmodern” era, there is no consensus on what it is to be political. A glance at the latest theatre journals reveals the confusing range of what is considered political: any unconventional interpretation of Shakespeare or Greek myth, any production investigating or representing identity (what it is to be black, Chicano, male, female, homosexual, Jewish, etc.), the aesthetic spectacles of Robert Wilson, the use of animals onstage, solo performances, guerrilla theatre, performances about activism, Beckett, theatre in prison, questioning copyright law onstage, and so much more.

political movements, can be disarmed into a capitalist product – and the speed at which this happens is constantly accelerating.

The traditional and established strategies of political theatre – employed by Piscator, Brecht, many troupes of the '60s, Boal – typically had fixed targets. These theatres were most often directed at (and against) a certain target audience, being theatres for the revolutionary proletariat and against the *bourgeoisie*. As Western capitalism has evolved, however, it is now arguably peopled by a vast *petit-bourgeoisie*: those with a vested interest in following capitalist logic but victimised and limited by that very logic. The “oppressed” of this society, to use Paolo Freire’s (and later Boal’s) term, are perhaps indistinguishable from the “oppressors.” If a threatening sub-class or sub-culture arises, it quickly becomes commodified and complicit in the capitalist system. Most people today end up achieving a sense of identity through commodities – the clothes they wear or the tunes on their iPod – rather than through class alliance. Modelling a theatre on the *Résistance* enables it to be more adaptable. This theatre can seek out the moving targets of capital and track down target audiences as they move through public space, since everyone is both a potential “enemy” and a potential “ally.”

The established models of resistance above also tended to advocate a fixed political programme – such as socialism – as a solution, which was substantiated by the radical cultures of their times. Since then, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union helped usher in, or punctuate, the widespread belief that any political structure other than the present one is utterly unreasonable. This is especially true for those of my generation who cannot meaningfully recall the Cold War and a time when various social systems were vying for legitimacy. Again, the *Résistance* model provides a more apt scheme: interconnected networks with a range

of ideologies but unified by a paramount objective to disrupt dominant power without necessarily positing an alternative.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, a theatre in this fashion can *become* a moving target to avoid amalgamation into the capitalist system of exchange. Unlike the accepted paradigms, then, this flexible theatre will likely not be recognisable as a theatre of resistance.

The paradigm of the *Résistance* is useful, but must evolve to meet this new kind of coercive force, given that those wishing to mount a theatre of resistance cannot extract ourselves from the capitalist system of which we are a part, nor can we isolate its source of power. Most people do not even perceive that there is an occupying force. Perhaps, then, one could say that our nations and our selves have been both occupied and “pre-occupied” by this capitalist force: for all its violence, it is idly obeyed as though a law of nature. In a society unable to conceive of a different way of being (or why one would wish to), any action that does not conform to capitalist logic is seen as senseless disruption, attention-seeking, a form of pointless violence. Consequently, this proposed *théâtre de résistance*, un-political by traditional criteria, is doomed to be misconstrued. Conceivably, it is precisely in its inability to be interpreted that its resistant potential lay.

In seeing a need to expand ideas of what might be considered political theatre and what it might achieve, my hypothesis is on some level plainly “postmodernist”. Philip Auslander is possibly the most influential “postmodern” performance theorist. His book *Presence and Resistance*, like this essay, seeks to redefine the political. Auslander argues that the apparently un-political performances of Andy Kaufman, the Wooster Group and others were in fact political. He consistently maintains that these performers were political by maintaining ambiguity and frustrating expectations. He

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<sup>3</sup> Certainly links could be made between this proposal and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “Nomadology” and “rhizomatic multiplicities” or similar concepts that appear in the works of Negri and others.

certainly seems correct in terms of their aesthetics, as in Kaufman's refusal to drop the "mask" of his character Tony Clifton or the Wooster Group's ambiguous use of blackface. What Auslander may neglect to recognise is that, as overtly commodified art, the examples he cites paradoxically *fulfil* expectations by challenging them. Wooster Group audiences are expecting the unexpected, and paying for it. This argument does not entail that Auslander's examples are impotent, but if the argument for their political worth is that they frustrate expectations, then fulfilling expectations as a luxury or even mainstream commodity seems to undermine the argument. Theatre of the *Résistance* model frustrates expectations not only aesthetically but functionally as well, as it is unable to be interpreted in terms of capitalist logic.

My first experience in the theatre, apart from one role in a high school play, was in late 2000 when I was invited to join the University of Canterbury's end-of-year Theatre and Film Studies production called *The Last Days of Mankind*.<sup>4</sup> Rehearsals began with what was called "Boot Camp" week, which ran from 10am to 5pm every day. We students arrived on Monday morning, not knowing what to expect, and were promptly ordered to go for a 45-minute run in the rain. We were treated throughout like the stereotypical new recruits in the army. Many of the exercises were strenuous and unpleasant, mentally as well as physically. Others were nonsensical, such as facing a wall and repeating our own names out loud for 30 minutes. I was simultaneously apprehensive and excited. I found it oddly enjoyable spending long hours doing something "senseless" without having to justify or rationalise it.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Last Days of Mankind* is a World War I era social satire by Karl Kraus that he began writing in 1915. It is more than 800 pages long and generally considered unstageable. Kraus himself acknowledged the difficulty, writing in the introduction: "The performance of this drama is intended for a theatre on Mars" (3). The production in which I was involved – performed throughout October and November 2000, in association with the Free Theatre and directed by Peter Falkenberg – used little of Kraus' actual text and instead was a "devised" performance inspired by Kraus' themes and aims.

I anticipated that the oddity of this process would end after Boot Camp week, when we would begin more traditional theatre rehearsals, but the strange methods continued for weeks and culminated in a performance unlike any theatre I had imagined. For three consecutive days, we set up encampments in public gathering places in downtown Christchurch (New Zealand) and performed for 12 straight hours from midday to midnight. Even our meals were taken in character, served as military rations. The performances were free, unadvertised, unexpected, and often unwelcome. Much of the performance consisted of similarly absurd militaristic drills as those we had been doing during rehearsals, though they were now being done in public. As with the rehearsal process, this theatre engendered in me contradictory reactions of, on the one hand, terrible embarrassment and anxiety and, on the other hand, extreme feelings of liberation and joy. The source of both reactions was the same: I was publicly behaving in abnormal and improper ways.

Looking back on this experience six years later, it is astonishing to me that I underwent such a monumental process – a demanding, confrontational, and “inappropriate” performance – without once considering that it was somehow political. At the time, however, I knew only that something about *Last Days* was appealing to me, that participating in such theatre provided a sense of challenge, courage, and satisfaction that I had never before experienced. In this regard I “misunderstood” the performance, evaluating it purely via aesthetic and not political criteria. My misunderstanding did not prevent the performance from having long-term political effects, though, as it was this (aesthetic) experience that lured me to continue studying and practicing theatre, and eventually to write a PhD on political theatre. In fact, my inability to interpret the performance may have been crucial. Had I seen *Last*

*Days* as political (something at that time distasteful to me) I may not have embraced the experience as I did.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, *Last Days* provoked a range of reactions from the actors involved. Several actors were, like me, motivated to pursue more such experiences through continued work with the Free Theatre – a group whose name implies emancipation from conventions, both artistic and social. Other *Last Days* actors hated the experience and dedicated themselves to the mainstream theatre, or ran away from theatre entirely, as a result. This divergence, I think, is a sign that the experience was a political one. That which is political separates people; it cannot and will not appeal to everyone.<sup>6</sup> But it is interesting that people's "political" reactions to their *Last Days* experiences were not grounded in political awareness but in aesthetic judgements or rather indefinable "feelings." To me the process felt invigorating and "right." To others it felt embarrassing, uncomfortable, pointless, and "wrong." Neither faction, however, viewed it as a political assault on capitalist logic. *Last Days* was apparently un-political by traditional criteria – it did not offer resistance via articulate argument, head-on opposition, or by engaging with political issues – but nevertheless seems to have had a political impact.

The French *Résistance* analogy is a retrospective one, but the similarities are provocative: the structure of the *Last Days* ensemble and performance was paramilitary; the performances, or "actions," were planned in secret and executed without warning; and the object was, in whatever small way, to destabilise the power

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<sup>5</sup> Mainstream society opposes aesthetics and politics and, at least since Piscator and Brecht, makers of political theatre have struggled against the "bourgeois" tendency to de-politicise performances by discussing only their aesthetics. Perhaps there has now been an inversion: that which is *understood* to be political is the norm, and actually complicit with the capitalist system, whilst that which is (mis)interpreted or experienced only on aesthetic grounds could potentially have political effects.

<sup>6</sup> Anything universally agreed-upon is not a political issue. A local group recently did a performance of anti-Nazi cabaret sketches from Weimar Germany. While the original performances may have been political – dividing audiences, expressing controversial opinions about one's immediate society – replicating them in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christchurch is not political since everyone here already "knows" or agrees that Nazis were "bad."

of a seemingly insuperable opponent on one's home turf. Significantly, the three-day performance mentioned above was not the extent of *Last Days*. The campaign, like the *Résistance*, had been slowly gaining momentum, adapting, and moving targets for months.

We began by doing street theatre performances we called "Slow Walking" that happened roughly three days a week, for one to two hours a day, for more than two months. At various days and times between four and 15 members of the cast would dress in black business suits, ties, and black shoes, and hide on their person a plain white mask of their own face. Actors would separately make their way to a prearranged location – a parking garage or alleyway – where they would don their masks and begin walking a set route to a similarly obscure locale where they would secretly remove the masks and scatter in separate directions. The walking was very slow and stylised. A six-block walk would endure for about 60 minutes. Only the lower body was meant to move, with the upper body coasting on top as if floating. Eyes were wide open, unblinking, and focussed straight ahead. Arms were unmoving, with hands half-clenched at the waist. All turns were made at 90 degree angles. No talking was permitted. If people in the streets addressed us or asked questions, we were allowed to stop and stare at them but not respond in any other way.<sup>7</sup>

Reactions to this Slow Walking were many and varied. Interestingly, the vast majority of people ignored it – or tried to ignore it, or *pretended* to ignore it – as much as possible. Everybody was "pre-occupied" with their everyday business. Many

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<sup>7</sup> Comparisons to Benjamin's notion of a *flâneur* (Arcades Project), Debord's *dérive*, or de Certeau's analysis of walking in the city are imperfect but possibly fruitful. *Flânerie* and its parallels are clearly urban notions developed in Berlin, Paris, and New York. Christchurch is a provincial town of 300,000, primarily a sprawling suburbia unsuited to these urban forms. Moreover, a *dérive*, for instance, was not done to be seen whereas Slow Walking was first and foremost a performance intended for an audience. And the models above were all considered to be liberating experiences, whereas Slow Walking was highly stylised and codified. Despite these vast differences, the Slow Walking actors had a privileged perspective of "observing" Christchurch without participating in it, which arguably created a critical distance for reflection akin to that of the *flâneur*. Perhaps in an "open" society in which everything is permitted, freedom is found only via restrictions.



people seemed not even to look or notice. Others glanced briefly and carried on unconcerned, or even quickened their pace to avoid us. Without wishing to deny the possibility that the performance had some impact even on those who ignored or avoided it, I want to focus on the small percentage of people who stopped to watch or engage with the performance in some way. Of this lot, the desire to interpret or ascribe meaning to the event seemed great. The actors often overheard observers pondering the meaning of the action. Busking of various sorts is common in Christchurch and was probably many people's first notion of what we were doing. This interpretation would be quickly rejected. The Slow Walking did not strive to be entertaining, was not directed at an audience, and there was no mechanism for payment. We nevertheless heard observers speculate that we were actors, but that interpretation was always insufficient, never explaining *why* we were walking in this strange way. There was no advertising, no accompanying message, and no apparent purpose – aesthetically or functionally.<sup>8</sup>

Hypotheses the actors overheard were often elaborate. Someone supposed that we were drama students doing an exercise to build discipline and confidence. Someone guessed that we were a cult of religious fanatics. Someone theorised that we were advertising for a new menswear store. Someone even posited that we were a sign of the apocalypse and was visibly agitated. But no interpretation was ever confirmed or seemed fully to satisfy an observer's curiosity. Few if any ever came to a conclusive decision.

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<sup>8</sup> There seem to be surface similarities between this Slow Walking and the short-lived phenomenon of "flashmobbing" (arguably a contemporary version of Happenings). Flashmobs involved large groups of people seemingly spontaneously performing acts of nonsense, such as entering a furniture store and simultaneously saying "Oh wow, what a sofa" (BBC). While apparently purposeless, this phenomenon is *functionally* understandable: there is a common recognition that flashmobs are meant to be *fun* to participate in, and are therefore perfectly explicable as a form of exclusive leisure or entertainment. Slow Walking, by contrast, was not perceived as a leisure activity: the strict form, discipline, and long hours make Slow Walking appear a tedious occupation. Where flashmobs seem inane and fun, Slow Walking seems serious, intense, and purposeful – although that purpose is not apparent.

Watching this performance seemed to be an unsettling experience. Unable to rationalise the event, people were consistently “misunderstanding” or fearful of misunderstanding what was happening. Audiences of course tried to explain the spectacle in terms of conventional logic, the logic of capitalism. The proposal that we might be advertising suits was sincere, and sparked a conversation between two people about the marketing approach. Even the theory that we were actors doing an exercise to build confidence is a capitalist idea – that we were training to improve our marketable skills to become “successful” (paid) actors. (The coercive force of capitalism is constantly moving and adapting, steadily seeping into any new and threatening realms). Nevertheless, the uncertainty of the Slow Walking – its tendency towards misunderstandings – made it unsettling and therefore resistant to co-optation into the system of exchange.

The Slow Walking, like the *Résistance*, applied a strategy of “moving targets.” Obviously the performance itself moved through the city, changing routes day by day, targeting different parts of downtown at different times. Moreover, the technique itself evolved, adapting to its context. New rules or principles were gradually introduced. The actors studied footage of shell-shocked soldiers, and trained our bodies to dissociate – for the movement of one limb, say, to appear independent from that of the rest of the body. After several weeks an adaptation was added: during the course of a one- to two-hour walk, each actor would have one spasm in which a limb would flail uncontrollably while the rest of the body maintained the discipline of the stylised Slow Walk. Over the course of weeks, more movements were initiated. Actors would step as high as they could and lift their eyes and arms to the sky as if expecting to be lifted away. Or actors would faint forward, catch themselves with their hands, and place an ear down to the ground as though listening intently. The infrequency of the

additional movements was a key aspect of the performance. Spectators could watch for a few minutes and, just as they were coming to a point of acceptance or an understanding of our “rules,” those rules would apparently be broken. These modifications helped the ongoing performance remain a moving target against reprisal, unable to be categorised or “captured” by the depoliticising mechanisms of capitalist logic.

One particular change was made to target those numerous spectators who sought to ignore or avoid the performance. On some walks, our designated leader would pick a disinterested bystander, stop, stare, and menacingly point at him. At that signal, the other actors – often spread across an entire city block – would stop and point as well. The spectator thereby became a performer, the object of everyone’s attention. Even ignoring the performance then became an active act, and one that other spectators were invited to examine. As this spectator moved, the pointing fingers would follow him, forcing an engagement – on some level – with the performance. The adaptations, that is, helped the performance target a wider audience based upon our reconnaissance from previous walks.

Those who engaged with the Slow Walking often ended up asking for, or *demanding*, an explanation from the actors. When the performers refused to answer, ignoring the observers and continuing our focussed walk, some people got angry and stood in our way, threatened us, and even (once) poured beer on our heads and ripped a performer’s mask off. Several times someone followed us for an hour or more, all the way to our designated finishing point. These reactions and this persistence in demanding an explanation suggest that people’s inability to satisfyingly understand this performance really did shake their faith in a society they thought they knew. In searching for some explanation for this spectacle that made no sense in terms of

capitalist logic, people were pushed to think outside that capitalist logic, opening themselves up to expanded ideas of “sense.” On these terms, if this performance impacted an observer, it was precisely because it was *not* seen as being a political act. The inability to comprehend the purpose of the performance is what might, in some small way, have conjured up the possibility of an alternative logic. Had it been discovered with certainty that we were actors, the logic of the performance would still have been opaque. Even the truth of the situation, that we were voluntarily spending such long hours Slow Walking for no apparent reason or reward, was inconceivable in terms of capitalist logic.

In analysing this performance as “uninterpretable”, I might be guilty of interpreting the event somewhat against the director’s intent. In large part, this production of *Last Days* can be seen as a critique of the aestheticisation of war and a culture in which war is a defining facet in the creation of national identity. Many New Zealanders trace their identity as belonging to an independent nation, and not “merely” a British colony, to New Zealand’s participation in World War I. The number of young people today making pilgrimages to Gallipoli, the locus of New Zealand’s first major WWI campaign, is on the rise. As they ostensibly search for unique identity in an increasingly globalised Western culture, New Zealanders often define themselves through war. The last day of our *Last Days* performance coincided with Armistice Day, a commemoration of the end of the Great War, a day in which many New Zealanders were attending commemorative ceremonies and experiencing a sense of national identity. This correlation was, of course, intended by the director.

An exhaustive account of the *Last Days* campaign is impossible. It comprised numerous simultaneous actions, improvisations, adjustments for the weather and other environmental conditions, alterations due to equipment failures, and more. It was, like

the *Résistance*, always in flux. Most performers wore full military fatigues, with hair and faces painted white. The troops marched in formation to a prominent Christchurch location – the Arts Centre, Cathedral Square, Bridge of Remembrance (a war memorial) – where we unloaded two truckloads of gear and built an encampment, erecting tents and makeshift stages in a rectangular configuration thereby designating a performance area.

Audiences were free to explore the encampment. Each tent could be seen as an exploration of war as entertainment. One tent contained a salesman peddling war figurines – plastic soldiers, tanks, and guns – chattering about the thrills of staging battles and eliminating whole races, in the style of toy advertisements during children’s television. The salesman was also selling a video of buxom girls in bikinis firing automatic weapons. This video was “found” material (like much of Kraus’ text) that associates guns and war with the commodification of sex and the objectification of the body. Another station comprised a life-size painting of a dead soldier with the face cut out so that audiences could stick their faces through and get a Polaroid of themselves as dead soldiers. Using these gimmicks of advertising and tourist attractions, both war and the *Last Days* performance itself were “reduced” to entertainment, but in an exaggerated parodic manner that invited critique.

The different tents and stations, many more than described above, enclosed a central performance area that was a hive of activity throughout. There were routines from the troops that decomposed from precise marching and the singing of patriotic war songs, into shell shock and the menacing hissing of songs, and finally into macabre death scenes and moaning – while someone shouted through a megaphone: “When I want war, I want the real thing. I want to see *blood* and *guts* and rotting flesh – not some namby-pamby theatrical, impressionistic *bullshit*. You make me *sick*.”

Brecht's *Cannon Song* (from *The Threepenny Opera*, a stark questioning of the morality of capitalism), about mincing one's enemies into steak tartar, was sung by uniformed marching girls – emblems of an iconic New Zealand sport that renders war aesthetic. Through these routines, nationalist patriotism was shown to glorify the gruesome.

On the final day of the performance, the Cathedral bells rang incessantly to mark Armistice Day (nationalist patriotic) celebrations while, in our little encampment below, Maori performers conducted a *tangihanga* ceremony of mourning the dead. It was a striking image: a shirtless, barefoot Maori warrior shouting a traditional ritual while dwarfed by the large Anglican cathedral in a grey stone square. The colonisation of New Zealand was achieved with soldiers and Christianity, which were being celebrated in tandem by the Armistice Day church bells. This celebration was starkly juxtaposed with a Maori ritual of mourning – the outcome, perhaps, of that very colonisation.

In 1936, Walter Benjamin critiqued fascism for introducing aesthetics into political life, claiming “All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (‘Work of Art’ 251). *Last Days* exaggeratedly celebrated and distorted the current mainstream aestheticisations of war, super-aestheticising them, to reveal a capitalist society strikingly similar to the fascist one Benjamin analysed. The *Résistance* movement against fascism is accordingly a pertinent model for a theatre of resistance today.

Despite the ability to analyse the performance as critiquing the aestheticisation of war, it is highly unlikely that any audience member explored the encampment and decided: “It’s a comment upon the aestheticisation of war.” That “meaning” was certainly available, but *Last Days* created its own frenzied universe and logic that

likely transcended any attempt to explain it. The event was public and free. It was not advertising anything or trying to generate membership in some organisation. It clearly involved arduous physical work and very long hours, for no apparent gain. That is, despite an obvious interpretation, the event remained an overwhelming and singular aesthetic experience that was, for most people, inexplicable. And this incomprehensibility is, I contend, the source of its resistant or disruptive potential in territory that has been (pre)occupied by capitalist behaviour and logic.

I wish to conclude with the open-ended observation that the September 11 World Trade Center attack, certainly a super-aesthetic spectacle, produced a similar reaction on a much larger scale.<sup>9</sup> The event had clear and obvious interpretations – attacks on the most prominent icons of capitalist power – and yet many or most Westerners were unable to make sense of it. Perhaps, at a time in which fundamental political dissent is considered futile and irrational, a theatre of resistance will necessarily have similarities with terrorism. From the fascist perspective, what was the *Résistance* but an underground network of terrorist insurgents?

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<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard has analysed the radical prospect of suicide, an act that utterly lacks exchange-value (*Symbolic* 36-37) and even dubbed the September 11 event “*our* theatre of cruelty, the only one we have left” (*Spirit* 30). Many scholars of late have picked up on this and analyse the links between theatre and terrorism.

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