

Peter Falkenberg
Dept of Theatre & Film Studies
University of Canterbury
Peter.falkenberg@canterbury.ac.nz
<<mailto:Peter.falkenberg@canterbury.ac.nz>>
PSi 2013 – Stanford University

Quake Space as Avant-Garde Time

In the first chapter of *Fatal Strategies* (originally published in 1983), Jean Baudrillard introduces the idea of the earthquake as the most apt form of catastrophe in the postmodern era. He writes:

Time is no longer evident in its normal passing, since it has been distended, enlarged to the floating dimension of reality.[...] Nor is space any longer illuminated by movement.[...] This kind of play of systems around a point of inertia is illustrated by the catastrophic form congenital to the era of simulation: the seismic form, where the ground is missing, that of fault and failure, dehiscence and fractal objects, where immense plates, entire layers slide one under the other and produce intense surface tremors. (39)

He adds: “We dream of capturing that energy, too. But that is pure madness” (40). And then he compares “that symbolic energy of rupture” with terrorism (41).

Looking through the eyes of Baudrillard, we in Christchurch could regard ourselves as “lucky”. The earthquakes have provoked the sort of rupture essential to breaking free – at least momentarily – from the circularity and unreality of simulation. Again, I turn to Baudrillard, this time in his response to 9/11, in which he writes: “The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of the spectacle upon us. [...] This is *our* theatre of cruelty, the only one we have left – extraordinary in that it unites the most extreme degree of the spectacular and the highest level of challenge.[1] <#_ftn1> Invoking Artaud, Baudrillard compares the actions of the artist as an aesthetic, social and political revolutionary with those of the terrorist.

Henri Lefebvre made a similar comparison, in *The Production of Space* (1974), writing: “The space developed by avant-garde artists, by those artists who registered the collapse of the old points of reference, introduced itself into this fabric or tissue as a *legitimizing ideology*, an ideology that justifies and motivates” (308). After an earthquake, these old points of reference don’t appear to collapse just for the avant-garde artist, but for the whole community. I want to argue that when a city falls – as in Christchurch following the earthquakes that began in September 2010 – it is not only the buildings that collapse, but also (at least temporarily) the social and ideological structures those buildings formerly upheld.

A disaster may be seen to disrupt or rather open up and reveal the dialectics of history. People can find themselves in a kind of prelapsarian state, where they feel free from the confines prescribed by society: the boxes and routes, the hierarchies of church and state, the Darwinian demands of capitalism, where – having survived the quakes – the fight for survival is momentarily suspended. Avant-garde theatre is equally ephemeral, fleeting, trying to

create a different time from daily reality. Like a disaster, it tries to create a space where the paradoxes of late capitalism may be overcome temporarily by the experience of a communal/communist levelling of differences or a synthesis of contradictions.

Earthquakes are terrifying, but they are not acts of terror per se. Nonetheless, as with acts of terror, earthquakes demand the production of meaning. The earthquake in Lisbon on All Saint's Day in 1755 dramatically challenged the foundational certainties of European thought and philosophy, and prompted Voltaire's famous refrain about this (not) being 'the best of all possible worlds' (*Candide*). When Kleist wrote his short story 'The Earthquake in Chile' in 1807 his first point of reference, almost certainly, would have been the earthquake in Lisbon. Kleist's story is set in Santiago in 1647. The lead character, a tutor, is preparing to hang himself in prison, where he has been sent for impregnating the daughter of a nobleman, just as she is being led through the streets towards the site of her execution. At this exact moment, an earthquake strikes, and both are saved. The earthquake seems to be divine intervention, even as it disrupts the dominant moral and social order, as defined by the hierarchy of the Church. People from all walks of life, including the lovers with their child, gather together outside the city walls, looking after each other, sharing food and stories, mourning the dead and marvelling at their survival, as if: "in the midst of this horrifying time in which all earthly possessions of men were perishing and all nature was in danger of being engulfed, the human spirit itself seemed to unfold like the fairest of flowers [... and] as if the general disaster had united all its survivors into a single family" (60). To the lovers, it appears that the "old order of things" has undergone a complete "upheaval" (60).

In Christchurch, too, the feeling of community struck us with unexpected force. The warmth and support of neighbours and strangers was an experience that broke through all the formalities, passivities and alienations - the norms that we took for granted and regarded as natural. The possibility of a different way of living, a sense of commonality and communality that defied both Christchurch's unacknowledged class system as well as the depersonalisation of globalised capitalism, became for moments at least an experiential reality rather than abstract utopian thought.

But Kleist's story doesn't stop here. When the whole community gathers at the cathedral at the end of the story to thank God for their salvation from the earthquake, the preacher in his sermon takes up the subject of the city's depravity, in particular the outrage perpetrated by the two lovers, as the cause of the earthquake, stirring up a mob that kills the lovers and their child. The sacrificial blood is shed. The old order is restored - except that the mob kills the wrong child. Life goes on as before.

The Free Theatre production of *The Earthquake in Chile* was staged in October 2011, when February's earthquake experience was still raw for both performers and audience. We wanted to recreate the moment of possibility after the earthquake, when life and history seemed to stand still. Lefebvre talks of the potentialities of the artistic sphere to create "a space of counter-culture, or a counter-space in the sense of an initially utopian alternative to actually existing 'real' space" (349). We staged *The Earthquake in Chile* at St Mary's Church in Addington - one of the few churches to come through the

earthquakes unscathed, because it was a wooden colonial structure, not made of stone as so many others in Christchurch. St Mary's was built in 1867, and sits on Church Square close to the city centre. Its garden includes a bell tower, and is often used for community events, fairs and weddings.[2] <#_ftn2> Churches not only provide a space for community gatherings, in effect they stand in for the idea community, especially in Christchurch. In Lefebvre's words, the Church offered "each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage. It constituted a collective mirror more faithful than any personal one" (220). Christchurch, as a city, of course, has 'church' in its name and the Cathedral at its centre is now at the heart of a controversy over whether it should be restored, rebuilt or replaced.

St Mary's in Addington is a smaller, more intimate version of such a community centre, and we worked closely with the congregation to involve them as a communal entity in our production. In the conversation with the St Mary's community, we immediately encountered the old proprieties and fears of the unknown theatrical experience. The church's "element of repression" (in Lefebvre's words) was confronted with its "element of exaltation" (220) – which was incorporated into the performance. The audience was first accepted into the church as a congregation. They were surrounded by sacred music, sung by the actors and accompanied on the church's organ. The service was familiar but also quite strange – echoing Kleist's original setting – beginning with a procession and featuring performers in red satin robes and pointed hoods that covered their faces leaving only room for eyes. A preacher quoting Revelations, denounced the city as the 'whore of Babylon'. The young woman was brought forth with her baby to be judged. The tutor rose above the last pew to hang himself. And then the earthquake: lights bounced and went out, a large rumble of sound reverberated as the company shook the pews. In the silence that followed, the congregation was asked to evacuate in an orderly, calm fashion. (At least two people told me that they thought it was a real earthquake.)

Outside the church was something different. Here I asked Richard Gough, Artistic Director of the Centre for Performance Research (Aberystwyth) who had bravely come to post-earthquake Christchurch as a Canterbury Fellow, to stage a series of stations in which the participants would come together in different configurations to share food (cooked by our Technical Director, the celebrity chef Richard Till) and stories. Upon exiting the church, the "congregation" walked into a "night market" run by the Free Theatre actors with members of the wider community (about forty performers in all) – a rough collation of stalls, tents and tables lit by lanterns and candles, with performers offering them bottled water, soup and coffee, scarves and shelter, forms to post for missing cats, a new vision of the city composed of sugar lumps, a mad geologist explaining how earthquakes work, an itinerant preacher proclaiming the end of the world and so on. One actor roamed the site telling the Kleist story. The Different Light Theatre Group – a company of disabled actors led by Tony McCaffrey – arrived pushing the shell of an old van and, wearing half-size road cones for hats, loudly begged San Precarious for salvation.

The next station was more orderly: a circle of eight white circular tents, each fitting twelve spectators – the sold-out performances were restricted to 96

people – around a circular table inside of which stood one or two actors offering their own responses to the earthquakes in highly personalised, idiosyncratic, interactive performances including small food items that contained some surprises. So, for example: an academic used a sweet trifle to explain the layers of sediment ruffled by the earthquake while we ate equally stratified but savoury pieces of lasagne; an embracing couple revolved slowly as they tried to name their favourite restaurants, calling up the visceral experiences of those rooms and flavours while we drank wine and toasted our shared memories of those lost places and times; two women dressed as Chinese card dealers ritually invited us to place our bets as if still at the Christchurch Casino as we ate sushi; and so on. Spectators could only enter a single tent before being shuffled onto the next station, and so they could only find out about what happened in the other tents by sharing their stories with each other.

At the next station, the Bell Tower Cafe – four long tables set up around the freestanding church tower – participants were invited to call out their favourite foods as orders to the frantic staff inside. Here they were challenged to work together to pull the trays from the staff at centre to where they sat. And regardless of what they ordered, stuffed potatoes was what they got.

Finally, everyone was aligned on two sides of a very long narrow, candlelit table in a long tent, where they were invited by Richard Gough to share their memories of the first foods they ate after the earthquake while feeding each other jello using long spoons.

In the end, the church was declared safe to re-enter, and the audience once again became a congregation. They were given a kind of communion, with a small glass of sherry and biscotti, while the disabled actors of A Different Light received communion from the ‘priest’ and the company sang hymns of salvation. The play began again, the child was seized by the priest, and the performance left frozen at the moment of the priest’s raising the child over his head – whether to save or to destroy left to the audience’s imagination. The actors removed their costumes and invited the audience to join them in singing the hymn ‘Jerusalem’ whilst walking out of the church.

And so the audience came full circle. It began as a congregation and returned to its original point of departure – albeit transformed in some way, we hoped, by the journey taken. The first station was anarchic – as such, the most open, a do-it-yourself theatrical experience. One could stand aside and make a cellphone call, or talk to the cat lady or the scarf lady, or eat soup and drink coffee in the cold night...whatever. The second station was more formally constructed, but structured in ways that forced recognition that different people were having different experiences of the same event. The third brought everyone together on sides, literally, that competed for the attention of the servers and for the food that was provided only if teams worked together successfully. The fourth was a more hallowed experience, with participants joined under one tent, mirroring one another across the table and down to each end, experiencing the act of sharing as something at once intimate and collective – a very moving experience for many. The return to the church brought the audience full circle, perhaps sitting in the same seats but perhaps also more conscious of themselves as actors in the post-

earthquake drama. Thus the production repeated our experiences of the earthquakes and in that theatrical repetition offered the possibility of reflection on the lived experience. Both Kleist's story and our production closed not with a happy ending.

Richard Gough actually felt that the production should close with the moment of grace in the long tent. His utopian idea was that the community was to be created by the theatrical experience of the stations. We, who had experienced the profound rupturing and coming together of the February earthquake, were more concerned with the fear of losing our newfound sense of communality. Richard wanted to give us the experience of community and communality as something novel and new, a social aspiration performed theatrically. We had been there done that and were trying to preserve the best parts of that profound experience of rupture and repair in lived terms through the performance of our desire for its memory to be sustained in us. To return to Kleist and his refusal of the happy ending was designed as a warning to ourselves against returning to where and how we were before.

Writing this now, almost two years later, this warning was prescient. The circular form of the production could be regarded as a kind of cynical comment on our humanity, where the earthquake just brought a disruption and an illusion of transformation but where the return to the status quo ante was always already inevitable. I prefer to see the form both of Kleist's story and of our production as a dialectical process that also should be guiding the rebuild of our city. According to Lefebvre, the modern architects and city planners

offered – as an *ideology in action* – an empty space, a space that is primordial, a container ready to receive fragmentary contents, a *neutral* medium into which disjointed things, people and habitats might be introduced. In other words: incoherence under the banner of coherence a cohesion grounded in scission and disjointedness, fluctuation and the ephemeral masquerading as stability, conflictual relationships embedded within an appearance of logic and operating effectively in combination. (308–9)

And as he says in another context: “time has vanished from social space. It is recorded solely on measuring–instruments, on clocks, that are as isolated and functionally specialized as time itself. [...] Our time, then, this most essential part of lived experience, this greatest good of all goods, is no longer visible to us, no longer intelligible. It cannot be constructed” (95). But by the destruction of space, social time, at least for a time, can appear again. Quoting Lefebvre again: “From Heraclitus to Hegel and Marx, dialectical thinking has been bound up with time: contradictions voice or express the forces and the relationships between forces that clash within a history (and within history in general)” (292). In dialectical thinking, we would return to the same space, but with the recognition that this space is always ephemeral, created through us in time and changeable and changing.

[1] <#_ftnref1> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism: And Other Essays* (Verso, 2003) 30.

[2] <#_ftnref2> Thanks Naomi Campion.