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"We're All in This Together"

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"We're All in This Together": Reality, Vulnerability and Democratic Representation in Tim Crouch's *The Author*

In studies on Tim Crouch's theatre, much attention has been paid to spectators' intellectual and affective engagements.[1] However, the ethical resonances of his work have only begun to be interrogated (see Wallace 2012; 2014), and its political reverberations remain largely underexplored. As I have noted elsewhere (see Delgado-García 2014; 2015), this means that many of the timely questions raised by Crouch's work remain to be addressed: the pervasiveness of exploitation, the limits of responsibility in a globalised context, and the convivial façade of authority are among such questions. By rethinking Crouch's 2009 piece *The Author* in relation to our specific historical conjuncture, this chapter begins to resituate Crouch's work more firmly on politicised ground.

My argument is threefold. First, I contend that *The Author* articulates its ethical inquiry through a complex layering of fiction, autofiction, and recognisably real details. This spirals outwards from the performers to current Anglophone theatre practices, and also, crucially, to recent events in Anglo-American politics. Second, I show how the play lays bare the potential pitfalls of representation in both theatrical and cultural performances, and suggest that Crouch's piece articulates a universalist ethical stance through its language-driven aesthetic. Finally, I argue that *The Author* theatricalises the crises of political representation that have affected Europe in the past decade. This situates the play precisely at the moment when foreign and economic policy have augmented the material and affective precariousness of some, while indulging in a rhetoric of justice, solidarity and community. Bringing these three strands together, it is apparent that *The Author*'s ethical and political position is grounded on a distrust of representation as a means to bring about social change. Theatrical, cultural and political performances that claim to tactically portray reality or speak on behalf of vulnerable Others are pessimistically framed by *The Author* as ethically questionable and incapable of inducing nonviolence.

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1 For more on the interplay between Crouch's aesthetics and spectators' involvement, see Bottoms (2009; 2011a; 2011b), Freshwater (2011), Frieze (2013), Hubbard (2013), Radosavljević (2013: 151–161) and White (2013: 188–194), as well as Christoph Henke's chapter in this volume. Crouch has also consistently identified spectators' engagement as crucial for his dramaturgy in interviews and public conversations (see e.g. Crouch (2006; 2011a; 2011b)).

Fiction, Autofiction, Reality

Premiered at the Royal Court's Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, *The Author* follows the events surrounding the fictional run of a hyperviolent play at the Jerwood Theatre itself – a play that was never written or produced in reality, but that is nonetheless described in terms reminiscent of well-known Royal Court productions. Addressing their lines to the audience throughout, the four performers present themselves as the author, the two main actors, and one spectator of the alleged piece. In a fragmentary manner, the spectators learn that the show focused on the relationship between a man called Pavol, "[t]he abuser", played by Vic (Crouch, *The Author*: 25), and his daughter Eshna, "[t]he abused", played by Esther (28). Details of the fictional performance itself are scant, albeit evocative, but the playwright and actors self-assuredly recount how they embarked on a compulsive process of research in order to create the violent world of the play.

The author and cast of the fictional show acknowledge having tracked down and consumed images of real, extreme violence uploaded on the Internet – namely, videos of gang-rapes, torture, mutilations and beheadings taking place in the context of war. They describe their visit to the unnamed, war-scarred country where the play was set (see 37–38). They give an account of and even re-enact encounters with individuals who had undergone similar experiences to the characters in the play (see 38–42). According to the author, whom Tim Crouch names Tim Crouch,[2] these research activities were intimately linked to the aims and aesthetic of his piece, which attempted "to create a – an amateur war zone on the stage" in order to "represent what was happening in the real world" (32). Here and elsewhere, the author and cast suggest that the alleged play secured its political credentials through its direct relation to reality. As this chapter argues, unfolding events in the metatheatrical play challenge this assumption, yet *The Author*'s own political gestures ironically hinge on evocations of real events – from the War on Terror to austerity measures in Britain.

The resolute ambivalence of the image of pain enables *The Author* to problematise our artistic encounters with the real as unequivocally ethical. Tim, Vic and Esther's research on violence while working on the fictional piece is correlated with their own violent acts. Affected by his role as Pavol, Vic explains how he mistook a spectator (Adrian) for a physical threat on the last night of the run and "just lash[ed] out" (53), assaulting him. Instances of psychological abuse also abound. The most notoriously uncomfortable confession comes from the

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2 For clarity, henceforth I refer to the writer of *The Author* as Crouch, and to the character of the playwright within this piece as Tim.

playwright of the disturbing play. Tim describes to the audience how he watched a clip of child pornography while alone in his study with Esther's baby. His account crucially blurs the boundary between the actions captured by the image on the computer screen and the reality in Tim's house, and even insists on the innocuous effects of the action itself (see 56 – 58). Thus, while the characters in *The Author* frame the consumption of violent images as ethically legitimate and necessarily informative, their subsequent actions suggest that such images can also be desensitising and exploitative.

The form of *The Author* redoubles these philosophical speculations, inviting us to consider the power that the real has over our assessments of both artistic value and ethical judgement. Although the theatre show to which *The Author* refers is overtly marked as fictional, the four performers bear their own first names, appear without costume, and loosely embody characters with personal profiles similar to theirs, repeatedly addressing the audience *qua* audience.[3] The set design situates actors and spectators in the same space: occupying two banks of seats facing one another, with no stage in between. The performers' autofictional characterisation (see Angel-Pérez 2013), together with this spatial configuration, initially creates a sense of immediacy, intimacy and togetherness that is pivotal for the play's affective punch. As the characters reveal their own participation in various acts of violence, the carefully orchestrated atmosphere of conviviality is set to become increasingly questionable, perhaps resisted. The ethical questions that surround the image of suffering are therefore expanded to the narratives of violence, and to the imagined scenes these stories conjure up. Similarly, considerations about reality are extended beyond the source materials of art to include the reality of the theatrical experience, as the play invites a reflection on audiences' own engagement with fictional narratives of abuse. The listening that takes place in the theatre is absolutely real.

The Author therefore clearly grapples with a series of familiar notions in ethical philosophy. The image of violence (see Nancy 2005: 15 – 26) and the possibility of holding a "guiltless responsibility" for the lives of others (Levinas 1989: 83)

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3 During the first run, Tim Crouch played the role of the playwright called Tim Crouch, and actors Esther Smith and Vic Llewellyn played actors Esther and Vic. The character called Adrian in the script is the only exception to this overlapping of performers' professions with those of the characters: a passionate theatre-goer, the role was first played by theatre-maker Adrian Howells, renowned for his intimate theatre work. In the 2010 – 2011 tour, another theatre practitioner, Chris Goode, replaced Howells and the character was therefore renamed Chris. As specified by the text, the characters' names should always be the names of their actors, with the exception of the author, who should always be named Tim Crouch (see Crouch, *The Author*: 16). Following the published script, I refer here to the spectator character as Adrian rather than Chris.

are among these. My suspicion, however, is that to focus exclusively on how *The Author* dovetails with such theoretical frameworks is to risk missing much of its topicality and political nuance. Instead, *The Author*'s ethico-political engagement should be considered alongside its referred reality – even if this is consistently destabilised. I further suggest that the play's evoking, blurring and falsifying of the real has well-timed cultural resonances. In the next section I interrogate these ideas by placing *The Author* in the context of the War on Terror.

Against Artistic Representation: Rethinking Ethical Commitment and the Mediation of Reality

In *The New War Plays*, Julia Boll argues that changing methods of contemporary warfare have motivated a shift in the theatrical representation of conflict. These so-called New Wars are characterised by blurred beginnings and endings, elastic geographical delineations, and fighting sides that are more difficult to demarcate. While the Western world certainly participates in these New Wars, and may indeed become a target, it is not the geographical site of conflict (2013: 1–2). For Boll, plays such as Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995), Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000), and Zinnie Harris's *The Wheel* (2011) "show how the disturbing experience of war may be represented on stage and mediated to an audience that, for the most part, does not have its own war experience" (2013: 2). The commitment to reflecting theatrically (on) an obfuscated reality is particularly apparent in verbatim theatre. Writing about the rise of this practice in Britain since 2003, Chris Megson notes that much verbatim work "responded to issues raised by the Iraqi conflict and the fall-out from the 'War on Terror'" (2005: 370), which Ariane de Waal summarises as "a desire for authenticity, facts, and truthful accounts" at a time when "politicians (mis)led the UK into war" (2015: 16). It is precisely this contemporary commitment to bringing a violent and elusive reality closer to theatre audiences that *The Author* problematises.

The protagonist of *The Author*, the playwright called Tim, offers a questionable embodiment of this salient interest in mediating war for contemporary audiences.[4] Tim consistently frames his work on his hyperviolent play as an ethical imperative and a much-needed cultural intervention in social consciousness. As

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4 I am not arguing here that *The Author* itself could be characterised as a New War play in Boll's terms, but rather that the play about Pavol as described fits those parameters. *The Author* is less interested in the mediation of war for a privileged audience than in the articulation of a philosophical enquiry into universal vulnerability and a political critique of current forms of democratic participation and representation.

he recounts to audiences, when his wife expresses astonishment at his ability to bear images of abuse in preparation for his play, Tim responds: "How can we not?" (31). He thus flags up what he sees as a collective responsibility to research, cast a light on and acknowledge otherwise obscured violence in the real world: "If *we* do not represent *them*", Tim continues, "then we are in danger of denying their existence" (31; emphasis added). It is worth noting how Tim's response diverts the focus from his individual consumption of violent images to the representative duties of a tacitly imagined collective. It is crucially unclear whether this 'we' refers to artists, the British, or the privileged international communities who only experience war atrocities second-hand – but a distinction between 'us' and 'them' is nonetheless drawn. Tim's binary expression reproduces the heavily criticised humanitarian divide between helper and victim (see Wickstrom 2012: 88 – 90), but also the "the division of the world into 'civilised' and 'barbaric'" that, according to Maryam Khalid, provided the American government with "[o]rientalist justifications for intervention in the War on Terror" (2011: 20).

Tim's self-appointed duty to mediate otherwise obfuscated events strongly resonates with the implicit ethos of the contemporary New War plays studied by Boll. Yet his interpretation of ethico-political commitment relies not only on questionable self/Other binaries but also on the false dichotomy between representation and inaction. Throughout *The Author*, Tim implies that artists have two options: to represent violence or to remain oblivious to it. Vic recounts how "Tim talked about the play – about violence in a culture [...]. About how we have to recognise it, confront it, absorb it. We have to show it" (37). As described by Tim, the author's wife epitomises a wilful refusal to endure or reproduce violent scenes: "She deals with all this by cooking fabulous meals and spoiling the children! That's her way of dealing with it" (31). Her indulgence is implicitly contraposed to Tim's self-appointed martyrdom, as he explains: "I took it upon myself to look at images of abuse, at beheadings, for example! [...] To bombard myself with all the gory details!" (31), "to reveal things, things for other people to solve" (44 – 45).

As events in *The Author* unfold, it becomes apparent that research, representation, knowledge and ethical behaviour are not necessarily correlative. Reproducing images of violence does not give the playwright or cast of the fictional play a solid understanding of conflict. The decontextualised way in which these images are consumed in the process of research and documentation is in fact enveloped in an astounding lack of precision. When Esther describes a video recording of an American contractor being beheaded, she is unable to tell whether this is perpetrated by a "terrorist or soldier" (50), with the two identities implicitly presented as interchangeable. Her account evokes the recorded

beheading of Nick Berg in 2004, whose killing was presented as "revenge against abuse and humiliation carried out by US guards at Abu Ghraib prison, west of Baghdad" (Associated Press 2004). However, by presenting this as one among many instances of violence, Esther's description is at once misinformed and un-informative. Vic's encounter with the man who inspired his rendition of Pavol is equally confused, as he cannot ascertain who killed this man's son: "the militia or someone" (38). While the characters' difficulty in distinguishing between ter-rorism and military action is revealing of the features of the New Wars, the lack of clarity in these accounts suggests that aesthetic representation might be nei-ther illuminating nor empowering. Similarly, the artistic mediation of images of suffering does not guarantee ethical awakening on the audience's part. Adrian's list of atrocities contained in the theatrical canon culminates in the gleeful excla-mation: "It's such an education!" (47). What the results of such an education are remain to be specified. Hence, *The Author* offers no reassurances as to the ways in which mediating real violence through performance might inform or raise con-sciousness on either side of the stage.

The rehearsal process for Tim's play also suggests that ethical intentions can materialise in self-serving, exploitative and damaging practices. *The Author* re-currently presents the suffering of some as the conduit for others' exciting pro-fessional opportunities. The cast's research trip abroad is described in somewhat utilitarian terms: it was "amazing" for Vic, as he "really found Pavol there" and "[t]ook him into the rehearsal room" (37; 38). The suffering of the man Vic meets abroad is valued for its beneficial effects on his acting. In a more subtle way, the visit also gives Tim an opportunity to work on his public profile: writing a piece for *The Guardian* and publishing striking photographs on his blog (see 37). Es-ther's relationship with Karen, whom she met at a shelter for women who had experienced domestic violence, is coloured by the delight the actor feels at being able to mobilise some of the techniques she learnt in her training: "It was brilliant because we'd done loads of that kind of stuff at Drama Centre" (39); "[i]t was just incredibly helpful to have her as – as a reference point" (43). The creative team in Tim's play holds an egotistic and, crucially, ahistorical stance towards the world. Every experience and encounter is partially seen as a resource to further one's career, without fully registering the material and affec-tive conditions of the world they represent.

Thus, while Tim discursively vindicates the ethico-political potential of re-searching, artistically reproducing and spectating otherwise obfuscated images of suffering, *The Author* makes apparent that these representational practices are not inherently enlightening. The methodologies and impact of contemporary politicised theatre works (such as those explored in Boll's and Megson's studies) are therefore called into question. Importantly, what is missing from the charac-

ters' compulsive retrieval of violent online videos and photographs – and their transposition of such violence onto the stage – is what, in Judith Butler's thought, is necessary for any ethically and politically grounded account of traumatic events: namely, "a thorough understanding of the history that brings us to this juncture" (2004a: 10). The characters of *The Author* compulsively research bodily violence without grasping how and why it originates, or situating the institutional and ideological structures that activate and sustain it. It is in this sense that *The Author* further taps into its historical conjuncture despite its vague spatio-temporal references. The characters' expressions share the same tense and structure as contemporary accounts of New Wars, and responses to institutional and terrorist violence – from the narratives about 9/11 that focused on the injury to the social fabric but were not accompanied by a "relevant prehistory of the events" (Butler 2004a: 6) to current reports presenting the violence of the so-called Islamic State *in medias res*.

Acting Politically

The Author's problematisation of representational practices in the arts is mirrored by an anxiety about existing forms of political representation. Tim's suggestion that artists have a duty towards real suffering in the world is echoed by his cast, inside and outside the theatre. Both Esther and Vic unconvincingly reproduce existing political strategies in their fulfilment of this obligation, prompting questions about their efficacy. Early in the play, Esther tells spectators about her participation in the anti-war protests that took place in London during "an anniversary of the war starting" (27). With an indeterminacy that is typical of Crouch's writing, the war mentioned lacks specificity, but the description of the events strongly evokes the anti-war march in London in February 2003 at the onset of the conflict, and its subsequent iterations.[5] As Esther explains, London

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5 The military intervention in Iraq, initially part of the War on Terror, is evoked elsewhere in *The Author*. Early in the play, Tim mentions that "there are tanks at the airport" (26) on the day of his suicide attempt; this conjures up the unsettling images of military vehicles at Heathrow Airport, London, in February 2003, when over 400 soldiers were deployed following intelligence reports of a potential terrorist threat from Al-Qaeda (see Hopkins, Norton-Taylor and White 2003; BBC News 2003). The threat took place days before the onset of the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Later on, Tim concedes that the extreme aesthetics of his play about Pavol were prompted by his own feelings regarding a specific military conflict: "I was angry because we were at war" (32). This 'we' is, of course, indeterminate; yet, in being delivered by Crouch, a British performer aiming for a presentation of his character with a strong effect of authenticity, the line resonates with the most recent and controversial conflict in which Britain has been involved: the Iraq War.

theatre professionals joined *en masse* following an initiative from their unions or professional circles: it was "a West End or an Equity thing" (27). Esther's gleeful narration somewhat undermines protesters' sensibilities and motivations for their participation in the rally. She describes joyful cohorts of actors singing modified West End musicals while marching, her newfound sense of freedom exacerbated by the act of "having fun" while "the serious" theatre companies "looked down their noses" (27). Esther's account of the day ends with the highly charged image of protesters leaving the event and stamping on abandoned placards illustrated with photographs of one particular war victim (see 28). Her self-absorbed, celebratory narrative jars with the brutality of the war, and destabilises the ideal image of the concerned and selfless ethical subject.[6]

For his part, Vic confesses that he "never really understood" the playwright's explanations "about violence in a culture, about what happens to you when you live with that violence around you all the time" – "But it's not my job to understand", he adds (37). Alongside this unabashed ignorance of the play's ethical rationale, he is unable to comprehend and empathise with the real suffering that Tim's play is allegedly representing. When describing a visit to a war-scarred country to undertake research for Tim's play, Vic jokingly compares the wounded bodies to "Cardiff on a Friday night" (37).

Esther and Vic thus act out two well-known politicised subject positions: the public demonstrator in a cultural performance of dissent, and the artist partaking in a politically-charged theatrical performance. Their behaviour nonetheless calls into question the nature of such familiar actions: Esther is drawn to the anti-war rally by peer groups and personal excitement, and Vic takes part in Tim's show for professional reasons. These culturally-scripted forms of behaviour appear as roles to be embodied, played out. Written and premiered in 2009, after years of failed public opposition to the Iraq War, *The Author* hints at the possibility that traditional politicised subject positions and actions, both in activist

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More loosely, Tim's reference to "soldiers being flown home in coffins" (26) similarly conjures up images made familiar during the protracted military conflict in Iraq (see BBC News 2004). These references are evocative, yet ambivalent. Their openness certainly allows for readings in other contexts.

6 The dancing and singing of the West End actors while marching for peace can easily be the target of criticism for its aesthetic dissonance with the seriousness of suffering. Yet the joy produced by such acts can also be recast as politically productive and necessary. Working in the field of applied theatre, James Thomson persuasively argues for such a reconsideration of affect: "[P]articipation in the joyful is part of a dream of a 'beautiful future' [...]. Far from being a diversion, it acts to make visible a better world" (2009: 2).

and creative terrains, may have exhausted their potential.[7] I return to this in the final section of this chapter, after examining how the play's non-representational aesthetic articulates a strong ethical position.

Non-Representational Ethics

In one of the first academic responses to *The Author*, Stephen Bottoms comments on the ethical potential of the spatial design of the play. For Bottoms, Crouch's play "lend[s] credence to [Nicholas] Ridout's sense of theatre's too-infrequently realised potential for ethical encounter" (2011b: 446). The article does not focus on ethics, and therefore what this encounter may entail or whom it may involve is not pursued. Yet, his use of the term "ethical encounter" and the suggestion that this is foregrounded by spectators' being "watched in our watching" (Ridout qtd. in Bottoms 2011b: 446) is nonetheless reminiscent of the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, it is the sheer presence of the Other in a face-to-face encounter that triggers an epiphany, an ethical interpellation: the Other disarms my freedom, autonomy and self-centred apprehension of the world (see 1989: 83–84), and renders me "inescapably responsible" for their life (1989: 84). The Levinasian ethical scene is therefore resolutely centred on the Other, and demands that I act "as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself" (1989: 83). Considering *The Author* in relation to Levinas's thought, however, highlights striking differences between the two. While spectators in Crouch's play may encounter other audience members and the cast in a reciprocal and self-aware form of spectatorship, the face-to-face encounter as envisioned by Levinas pivots on facing *the suffering Other*. Arguably, in the performance space of *The Author* the Other is absent – spectators' eyes never directly meet the gaze of the victims of decapitation, the distressed foreign man, or Karen. The Other is fictionalised, on occasion ventriloquised.

However, the absence of the Other need not compromise the play's ethical commitment – in fact, this is central to its articulation. First, the non-representational aesthetic of *The Author* resonates with a different aspect of Levinas's own ethical thought.[8] As Butler reminds us, "[f]or Levinas, the human cannot be cap-

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7 See David Cortright's *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* for a reflection on the political effects of the anti-war movement despite its inability to halt the military invasion of Iraq (2008: 174–175).

8 The play's refusal to represent acts of violence mimetically has also been interpreted as an ethical strategy to avoid proliferating violent images that brutalise, desensitise and generate spectacle (see Wallace 2012: 59; 61). Writing on US reports about the Iraq War, Butler interesting-

tured through the representation" (2004a: 145). Indeed, *The Author* eschews the visual representation of Otherness, as the set design dictates that audiences are looking onto a mirror image of themselves. Whenever there is an attempt to represent the Other, the (ethical) limits of representational practices become apparent. These limits are particularly acute when Vic and Esther describe and impersonate for the audience the individuals who inspired their character work. The un-symbolisable and therefore un-representable experiences of trauma (see Felman and Laub 1992) that these individuals suffered, together with the complex socio-cultural and historical contexts in which their lives are situated, are reduced to body gestures that Vic and Esther imitate – essentially as tokens of their own craft as actors: "Her name was Karen. She was like this. Can you see that? Her tension here. Her eyes like this" (39). The characters' self-centred attempts to represent the Other mimetically demonstrate both the incommensurability of suffering and the possibility of appropriation, representational injustice or violence. Reductionist and even parasitic, these instances make apparent Levinas's suspicions as summarised by Butler: that "some loss of the human takes place when it is 'captured' by the image" (2004a: 145).

Second, structurally and formally, *The Author* reflects on how we are all exposed to violence, suffering and loss. The extent to which universal precariousness is central to the play's form is not immediately apparent. For example, Rebellato has recorded Crouch's perplexity about the fact that a lengthy description of a man's beheading in *The Author* did not receive any complaints, while the play's notorious account of child abuse generated walkouts, as well as vocal and written opposition (see Rebellato 2013: 141; see also Crouch 2011b). Crouch's surprise at the range of reactions to different evocations of violence could be read as somewhat disingenuous: babies epitomise extreme human vulnerability in their absolute dispossession and dependence on others for survival, and stories involving child abuse are therefore likely to elicit strong responses (see Freshwater 2013: 180). Yet Crouch's observation resonates with one of Butler's core theses in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* – namely, that physical vulnerability and interdependence are not contingent on a situation or a particular state of being, but are universal properties of human ontology, intricately linked to the fact that we are relational beings.

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ly notes a different withdrawal of violent images: "[T]he graphic photos of US soldiers dead and decapitated in Iraq, and then the photos of children maimed and killed by the US bombs, were both refused by the mainstream media, supplanted with footage that always took the aerial view, an aerial view whose perspective is established and maintained by state power" (2004a: 149).

Although the baby constitutes the play's most memorable figure of injurability, precariousness is ubiquitous in *The Author*'s multi-layered structure. The physical and/or emotional safety of everyone represented by or involved in Tim's fictional show is openly fragile. In the fictional play within the play, there is Eshna, abused by her father, and Pavol, victim himself of the violence of a war. In the fictional-real world, there are Karen, also raped by her father; the countless victims of real violence appearing in the videos and photographs uploaded online; and perhaps Finn, Esther's son, who may have been abused by Tim. In circumstances that reveal our affective vulnerability, there are Karen, Esther and Vic, subjected to Tim's irresponsible professional practices; Esther, whose baby son is left with Tim; and Tim himself, suicidal with the certainty that he will not be forgiven. To a lesser extent, the unsuspecting spectators of *The Author* are in a position of emotional vulnerability too: rather like Adrian in the fiction, they open themselves to receiving an unexpected blow in the theatre, "the safest place in the world!" (46). This constellation of always-already vulnerable figures, traversing both the fiction and the performance event, highlights our ontological openness to being destabilised, injured and dispossessed in bodily, affective, social or material ways. *The Author* does not visually represent but linguistically evokes the experience that our safety and well-being depend on others: that relationality and vulnerability are universal conditions "from which we cannot slip away [...] but which can provide a way to understand that none of us is fully bounded, utterly separate, but, rather, we are in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy" (Butler 2005: 101). Or, in the words of the *High School Musical* song fragment that Esther sings to the audience, the universality of precariousness implies that "we're all in this together".[9] The universality of precariousness complicates the powerful binaries at work in Tim's justification, in Levinasian ethical philosophy and in the political discourses mobilised during the War on Terror – 'us' and 'them', self and Other. It suggests the existence of a universal community that is neither represented nor representable but is nonetheless real.

Importantly, Butler notes that the essential dependency derived from our common vulnerability "require[s] not just one other person, but social systems of support that are complexly human and technical" (2012: 165). As she puts it elsewhere, "politics must consider what forms of social and political organization seek best to sustain precarious lives across the globe" (2004b: 23), and "[m]indfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-mili-

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9 The script does not specify what West End song Esther will sing, but this is indeed the piece chosen (see Crouch 2014: 74).

tary political solutions" (2004a: 29). For Butler, precariousness is then inextricably linked with social and political practices, to which the final section of this chapter briefly turns.

Democratic Representation

In line with Crouch's austere, metatheatrical aesthetics, the political context in which *The Author* was produced is not overtly portrayed; rather, it is evoked, inscribed in the experience of spectatorship. To date, however, the mode of spectatorship in *The Author* has been examined in relation to the economy of the performance event and wider artistic debates, with only two exceptions. Dilating the terms 'performance' and 'spectatorship' to embrace activities and subject positions resonant with our cultural and economic situation, James Frieze argues that *The Author* makes us consider whether we, as spectators, "are perpetuating a chain of production and consumption in which we surrender our agency and ethical responsibility" (2013: 11). As Frieze notes, if *The Author* demonstrates a collective relinquishing of ethical agency and responsibility, this is because the show actually scripts our failure to intervene in the situation (see 2013: 13). Indeed, Crouch himself has made clear that if and when audience members express discomfort and a wish for the narration of violence to stop, the performers must continue (see Bottoms 2011a: 424). Writing from a political stance, Janelle Reinelt has recently argued that *The Author* "challenges the disaffiliation of liberal citizenship or flexible citizenship that trades on its passports but does not take up responsibility for the communities with which it is linked" (2015: 47). These arguments about consumption and citizenship are compelling, but perhaps it is possible to situate the design of spectatorship in Crouch's play in other, more concrete political contexts.

Rather than re-stating spectators' scripted failure to interrupt and intervene in *The Author*, or recasting this as a sign of unresponsiveness or irresponsibility, I want to foreground the resonances between spectators' powerlessness to change the course of events and the ongoing crisis of democratic legitimacy in the UK.[10] As Richard M. Buck notes, "the fundamental characteristic of any democracy is that [...] citizens are effectively the source of the political authority of the polity", and therefore "[d]emocratic legitimacy [...] requires that the structure and actions

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[10] This is not exclusive to the UK. See Matthias Matthijs's "Mediterranean Blues: The Crisis in Southern Europe" (2014) for more on the relationship between the debt crisis and the erosion of democratic legitimacy in the European Union.

of a democratic polity reflect this collective aim" (2012: 223). A disjunction be-tween polity and collective decision-making is precisely a characteristic of the political conjuncture in which *The Author* was written.

The play premiered after the British military intervention in Iraq – which oc-curred despite the most multitudinous peace demonstration to have ever taken place in the UK (see Jeffery 2003) – and just before the first wave of austerity measures, announced by the coalition government in 2010 amidst extraordinary public opposition (see Townsend et al. 2011). *The Author* therefore playfully ab-sorbs a very contemporary dynamic between citizens and authorities. On the one hand, there is the *appearance* of political participation and consent; for exam-ple, through electoral participation and the delegation of responsibility inherent to democracy. On the other, however, there is the implementation of policy with or without public endorsement. Similarly, much of the beginning of Crouch's play is devoted to generating the experience of consensus, and the sense that spectators can indeed determine the future of the show. Adrian's opening dia-logue with the audience, and Tim, Vic and Esther's gentle requests for consent when particularly violent passages are described, contribute to this – spectators are recurrently asked: "Is this okay? Is it okay if I carry on? Do you want me to stop?" (23). Occupying two banks of seats facing one another, like Members of Parliament in the House of Commons, the experience of participation and deci-sion-making capacity is heightened at this point. However, consent is not re-quested when Tim begins his graphic description of a scene of child abuse, and the cast is instructed to proceed with the performance regardless of voiced protests, silent discomfort and walkouts.[11] The design of spectatorship therefore invokes a community whose power of resistance is eventually nullified by au-thority and preconceived plans, despite a persuasive rhetoric of equality and concern.

It would be unfounded to read the orchestration of spectatorship in *The Au-thor* as exclusively driven by a critique of contemporary processes of governance and participation. However, strong resonances with the immediate political con-text in which the play was written, staged and toured in the UK enable such a reading. Alongside references to the unheard public protests against military in-tervention in Iraq, the spectre of David Cameron's deceptively reassuring slogan since his victory as leader of the Conservative Party in 2005 – "we're all in this

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11 As any expression of spectatorial resistance to the description of child pornography is dis-regarded, audiences also experience being hostage to an unethical and non-consensual relation-ship with another. This echoes, on a different scale, the many instances of unethical and non-consensual engagements in the fiction, and lays bare the spectators' own vulnerability: our po-tential to be unheard, not represented, not counted.

together" – runs through Esther's *High School Musical* song. This resonance was particularly prominent during the 2010 – 2011 tour of *The Author* in the UK, as Cameron's slogan was consistently deployed to veneer drastic austerity measures with the language of social responsibility. Repeated as the central line of the chorus, the words "we're all in this together" simultaneously conjure up a utopian vision of community, the strained cheerfulness of the Disney musical, and the actual withdrawal of community services under Cameron's government. Haunted by its political double, the *High School Musical* song offers further opportunities for an aesthetic problematisation of discourses about community, inclusiveness and participation. Significantly, a song that celebrates togetherness is delivered first by Esther *a capella*. Furthermore, as Crouch has noted elsewhere, "Esther sings in the dark" (2014: 75), visually frustrating the verification of this togetherness. The second time that the song is used in the piece is when Vic verbally relives the moment he attacked Adrian, the character who stands for theatre spectators (see Crouch 2014: 74). On both occasions, spectators – like those who opposed austerity – are disregarded, obscured and subject to injury.

The binary us/them identified previously in the chapter is thus problematised on yet another count. It is not only the case that the helper/victim divide shuns the possibility of self-examination and criticism – that 'we' perhaps have something to do with the violence 'over there'. Neither is it simply that people just like 'us' are capable of taking part in violent acts 'here', as *The Author*'s denouement suggests. It is also that the very notion of 'us' is questioned. The play encourages a self-indulgent, even erotic construction of 'us' throughout, with constant invitations to behold our image: "Look! We're gorgeous! […] More chance of a snog from one of us than from the Prince of Denmark, don't you think!" (19), "We're all so expectant! We're all being so lovely!!!" (20), "My god, when I think about it, we're incredibly lucky" (31). Yet, the audience's scripted silencing suggests that we may need to take a long hard look at the notions of community invoked by those with authority in the game. As a matter of fact, 'we' might not be in it together.

This reading of spectatorship at the crossover between the seeming failure to intervene in the world and the appearance of participation, however, is not meant to suggest that *The Author* conceives of its audience as inherently powerless; Crouch's exegesis of his own work indeed suggests the opposite (see Bottoms 2009). Gareth White's study of participation in the piece may enable a rapprochement between *The Author*'s theatricalisation of fruitless resistance and participation, and Crouch's interest in an enfranchised experience of spectatorship. For White, "while structured and invited participation fades out of the performance, the intensity of involvement, and implication, of audiences evidently increases" (2013: 189 – 190). It may be argued that the frustration of meaningful

intervention in the piece is precisely what heightens the desire to participate. Politically speaking, *The Author* does not prefigure or represent what a collective based on social justice might look like, or what forms of resistance might work, yet it incites its audiences to disidentify with violent authority, to distrust consensus, and to value consent.

Conclusion

In considering *The Author* in its context of production, this chapter has illuminated its embedded topical critiques, and paved the way for a situated reading of Crouch's trajectory. The play loosely evokes a number of prominent events, discourses and practices in the realms of art, culture and politics between the onset of the War on Terror and the implementation of austerity policy in Britain. The us/them divide, the erasure of history in accounts of violence, and the appeal to reality and representational acts are all called into question. In its more specific critique, *The Author* theatricalises the crisis of democratic legitimacy in the UK. While political discourses insist on celebrating citizens' participation, Crouch's play hints at how dissident public opinion struggles to alter the violent, scripted course of action. The play's implied socio-political context is consistent but ultimately elusive, suggesting that these structures of thought and action are not exclusive to the UK. Similarly, I have argued that the work's non-representational aesthetic allows for the figuration of a universal community on the basis of our shared ontological precariousness. *The Author* is therefore not just about theatre and spectatorship, or consumption and responsibility, as has thus far been argued. It is also about the potential artificiality of consensus, the abuse of authority, and the slippage between intentions, discourses and practices.

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