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Source: *TDR (1988-)*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter, 1990), pp. 169-178

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146050>

Accessed: 11-05-2018 10:16 UTC

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The Concept of the Paratheatrical

Bruce Wilshire

I

We live in the age of the “para”: para-this, para-that, paramilitary, parapsychological, paramedical, paratheatrical. Traditional classifications of human activity are not adequate to contain our behaviors, and we try to convert borderline areas into more or less legitimate classes of acts. All that is solid melts into air, as Marx said in *The Communist Manifesto*. We push, bend, and overlap our categories, but we are not quite sure what they contain and what they exclude. We improvise with the “paramilitary,” for example, to capture strange activity. How about a man who is recruited through *Soldier of Fortune* magazine to fight in a revolutionary band in a foreign nation? What is his status? When he kills is this murder or killing in the line of duty? It depends on the matter of legitimacy, and this is just what is in question.

The most intriguing of the “para’s” is, I believe, the paratheatrical. In a certain way it is even the most disquieting. For when we extend the idea of the theatrical beyond its traditional confines of artistic performance we are crossing the line which divides fiction from fact and attempting to apply categories of fiction to the domain of fact. What is a human activity which is an artistic performance? An essential feature of this activity is that it be bounded and protected by a playing area of some sort. The boundaries are spatial, temporal, and cultural, and they radically limit the influences which can pass between events in the playing area and events in the outside world. Nothing is to occur in the playing area which generates consequences in the outside world that are considered there to be illegal or seriously destructive. Thus a murder which occurs as an event between characters in a play is not to involve the death of the person who enacts the murdered character, for, obviously, this person is expected to continue to exist in the larger world. Likewise, nothing is to happen in the outside world or in the audience which intervenes in the play’s “world” in a way which is considered destructive of *it*. Thus the playing area is sealed off from the outside world in ways which are sufficient to call what occurs there a fiction. However, the sealing is far from total, and much factual reality is involved in creating the fiction.

The Drama Review 34, no. 4 (T128), Winter 1990

We can now be fairly clear about what the paratheatrical is and why it is disquieting and intriguing. The paratheatrical breaches this seal between the playing area and the outside world in unexpected ways, and we are left wondering whether what occurs within it is an artistic performance, a *fiction* in the appropriate conventional sense of that term. Imagine that an animal is killed on stage, or a human physically harmed. Here artists are ahead of imagination. In 1970 Rafael Ortiz killed mice as part of *The Sky Is Falling* (an anti-Vietnam War “ritual”). Chris Burden’s 1971 *Shooting Piece* consisted of having himself shot in the arm. Stelarc puts hooks through his flesh and suspends himself in midair. In the 1970s, Hermann Nitsch’s Orgies-Mystery Theatre featured disemboweling already-slaughtered lambs. In the mid-’80s as part of their performance for the Festival Sant’ Arcangelo, the Italian experimental group Magazzini Criminali arranged to have a horse slaughtered on stage. The outcry was such that the group was dissolved—to be reformed as Magazzini Productions. These kinds of actions leave us deeply conflicted. On the one hand, we try to apply the categories of fiction to the event and fit it into the unfolding of the play’s “world.” But on the other hand, we will know that a destructive event has occurred in the larger, ongoing world of fact and we will almost inevitably interpret it as such. In our bewilderment we ask, “What has occurred?” A paratheatrical event.

Now why on earth do such things? Why deliberately produce confusion and consternation? Before we attempt to answer this formidable question let us cite at least one more example of a paratheatrical event. The examples just displayed are destructive and unsavory and alone might prejudice our inquiry. We need an example which breaches the seal between artistic fictions and the larger world of fact, but which is neither illegal nor obviously destructive.

Take war games. These have recently become quite popular, and I suppose we can call them big business. They are “staged” in rural areas and cover many acres. For a fee one can become a member of a squad that engages another squad in mock (in some sense) combat. Elaborate maneuvers are planned and their execution attempted. The participants are equipped with rifles which actually shoot projectiles—gelatinous capsules full of red dye which, if they strike an “enemy,” mark him or her and give the shooter a score of some kind. The groups are also scored as ensembles, and complex rules and criteria dictate how the “performance” will be evaluated along relevant parameters.

This can be construed as a kind of theatre. Although it is not staged in the conventional way, there is a playing area, a confined space, however large. There are also temporal confines: at some point the “play” is over and no more hits count. There is also an “audience,” a group of observers and judges. Above all, there is a radical limitation placed upon the kind of projectiles which can be shot, a seal designed to avoid the obviously destructive potential of the firing of rifles.

But the seal is nevertheless quite porous in certain ways. What if the “shooting” of others in these elaborately simulated situations begins to break down inhibitions? Couldn’t one, without being prudish, argue that after such “performances” it might be a bit easier to shoot a deadly projectile at another human being? Might not the threshold for “acting out” behavior be lowered at some future moment—just that little amount which enables frustration, otherwise containable, to overflow in obviously destructive behavior? These are not trained actors, highly disciplined performers. Is this only a fiction? At least we have an issue here, and it

produces that peculiar confusion which marks the presence of the paratheatrical.

Now, imagine ourselves in ancient Rome, sitting in the Circus Maximus. Gladiators, recruited from the ranks of felons, are performing in lethal combat. Some of our fellow spectators are construing this as play, "framing" it as a theatrical spectacle. Let us say we feel little or no confusion. We know that something is wrong. We know that some are *calling* it a theatrical or paratheatrical event, but we believe they are incorrect to call it that. The seal which is necessary for any behavior to be artistic behavior has been clearly broken. So it *is not* such behavior.

So at what point, and why, is the seal broken decisively? How could we argue that it has been? I will try to answer these questions.

And, for that matter, why do we *begin* to deliberately push, stretch, distort, and overlap our categories and produce confusion? Is it simply perverse and sadomasochistic? Not necessarily, I think. To be sure, our motivations are many and multileveled, but some go very deep, and uncovering them can reveal a good deal about us strange creatures.

II

I said that the paratheatrical is the most intriguing of the "para" activities, and in some ways the most disquieting, because we extend categories of interpretation which are definitely fictional into the domain of fact; we risk becoming dangerously confused. In any sort of theatre we play within a protected area, with specially blunted and softened instruments, and for a limited period of time; but life is for keeps. As disquieting as it is to extend the military into the paramilitary, or even the medical into the paramedical (just who will be treating us in the ambulance?), still we start with categories of the actual and factual and simply attempt to apply them to further reaches of the actual and factual. There may be confusion but it will probably not be as insidiously misleading and deceptive as can be the extension of fictional categories of theatre into the domain of fact.

Clearly, I think that the distinction which divides the fictional and the factual in human life is important. Nevertheless it now must be qualified, because the division is not as simple and neat and clean as it might appear. Only through this process of qualification can we understand why the paratheatrical is such a very intriguing and enticing matter, and why this "para" is paradigmatic in a certain way, and can throw light on the other "para's." Shakespeare's line, "All the world's a stage," should give us pause. And we should not be surprised when a sociologist such as Erving Goffman employs theatrical language as metaphor to illuminate what is happening in essential social situations of actual human life. Some features of our real lives are brilliantly illuminated when they are interpreted as "role playing," for example, within "scripted" social situations. Who can doubt the similarity of a cocktail party to a play? Vast reaches of one's personal life are masked, and the situation prescribes limits on attempts by others to probe behind the mask, the "character" one creates for the occasion. Even the time of this "performance" is specified: "From five to eight in the evening of April fifth, regrets only." This segment of real life *is* like a play in which we are cast in roles and expected to perform in certain definite ways whether we want to do so or not, and we are confirmed in our very being by the response of the relevant "audience" to our successful "performance." At least this segment of real life is like a play *to a certain extent*—which extent we must determine.

Why not call the cocktail party paratheatrical? After all, during the time in which it lasts it fosters the idealization of one's personality and the presentation of oneself as a "character." Why does all this need to occur within what we *call* a stage in order for it to *be* theatrical, at least paratheatrical? No doubt, we are surveying an overlapping and very fuzzy area, a no-man's-land. While some cases of human conduct are clearly in one area and not in another, others, such as this one, are contestable.

Nevertheless, despite the similarities between a staged paratheatrical event and the cocktail party, there is a gaping disjunction: at the cocktail party we address each other *in propria persona*, in one's own person, even though we may have adopted a "persona," a "mask," which is very artificial, as we say. For example, if I agree to meet another for lunch the next week, I am obligated to attend to this in some way after the party, whereas if I were a person in a paratheatrical production playing a character who made this agreement, I would not be. It is not just that we put some actions on a stage and *call* them theatricals in some extended sense, but by so doing they are encapsulated in space and time and buffered from the larger ongoing world to a much greater extent than are the theatrelike behaviors of everyday social life. They *are* importantly different. So even though the cocktail party behavior does occur in a kind of no-man's-land, it is on the ethical or existential side rather than the aesthetic side of this fuzzily demarcated area of paratheatrical activity (I will use the word "ethical" in a broad sense as synonymous with "existential"). Hence if we talk of fictionality at the party we must load it with heavy inverted commas to indicate how extraordinarily far we have stretched the term. Perhaps we can speak of a particle of fiction in a molecule of fact. To achieve the greatest possible clarity in this extremely fuzzy paratheatrical area, I will refer to behavior of the cocktail party type as paratheatrical-with-a-very-big-difference.

The trick is to see simultaneously both the similarities and the differences between a staged paratheatrical event and a social function. Keeping the transaesthetic or ethical facet of the party in mind, we must further develop the metaphor of the performing continuum which does link the two situations, even if loosely. Looking from one angle we see only differences of degree, but looking from another angle and getting a more adequate idea of what is being looked at, we see a difference in kind.

We have pushed far into the ethical and existential "side" of the paratheatrical. If we keep pushing can we extend beyond it altogether? If we can clearly breach the various boundaries of the paratheatrical we will begin to locate it, learn better what it is, and put it in its place.

III

Let us keep pushing with performance metaphors and theatrical metaphors and see if we can push to the terminator lines of the paratheatrical, however fuzzy and far out they may be. The applicability of these metaphors to actual human life is further evident when we realize the immensely important role of playing of all sorts in the development of human life and in the maintenance of its vitality. Throughout life "performance areas" are deeply analogous to strictly artistic performance areas. There is some sort of seal around the area. This applies also to players of games—performers in this sense. The players are to be protected from incursions from the outside world (a baseball is not to be thrown onto a football field during the game). Likewise the players are limited in how,

while playing, they can influence the outside world. Nothing is to be allowed to happen which makes demands on the players beyond the demands made by the game itself and its "world." Only through these limitations can a region for practice and achievement be opened up and excellence in playing be attained.

Play is basic to development of self. One indication of this is that all the "higher" animals play, at least while young. It is a "rehearsal" for life which is essential for its development (and with "rehearsal" we link theatrical metaphor with play generally). When a child or an animal bites in play, for example, it is not that it does not bite, but that it places limits on the bite it makes. If a tiger cub oversteps these bounds while biting its mother it will quickly be reminded of this with a cuff from her paw. In staying within the limits, the play-bite frames and denotes itself as a bite, hence the biter can practice making it. Whereas, strangely, a real bite is lost in, and absorbed by, what is denoted by it: hurt, damage, and attendant fear of reprisal—a fear that may paralyze initiative if retribution is anticipated. I have heard that young male chimps will play tricks on older dominant males when it is safe to do so; they are apparently rehearsing in the role of dominant male. One measure of our distinctiveness as a species is that the impulse to play can remain intact throughout a lifetime.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of play in the individuation of self, particularly when we see how obviously theatrical much play is, and how it supplies the basis for applying theatrical metaphor to such a variety of playful human behavior from infancy to old age. But I think we will find that we are pushing out so far through the paratheatrical that we are approaching its limits. For this playing is so consequential, so formative of our very identity as actual individuals, that we find ourselves farther and farther from the relatively encapsulated playing areas of all theatricals, bounded and buffered as they are in space and time.

Take the common case in which young children play "Mommy and Daddy." We encounter something deeply ritualistic and mesmerizing. Notice first that they are enacting the beings who have formed to a great extent their very being as younger living bodies. They have been molded and shaped by their parents' embraces and caresses, and they have imitated their movements and manners undeliberately. In my *Role Playing and Identity* (1982) I use the phrase "mimetic engulfment" to express this primal engagement which is repeated. But is this repetition of their parents in this *playing* of Mommy and Daddy simply an extension of the parents in smaller bodies? No, I think that individuation from the parents is also going on, individuation of self through *enactment* of similarity and engulfment.

Absorbed in others mimetically, how can we begin to realize our behavior as *induced* by them and yet as our *own*? The body can get others off its chest—better, out of its chest—if it can enact them at its own impulse in play and as a fiction. The playing children are not necessarily aware thematically and focally of their words and sounds as their enactments of others; but this is not important. If an other can be physically represented in that other's absence, then the actor must begin to realize both that it is a person too, for it resembles the person it represents, and that it is independent because no one need be present to play the other but the child himself, the actor. No causal coercion plays from the parent to the child actor, for the other is present merely as an enactment. This behavior must tend toward maximization of individual identity.

Unlike other animals, the process of individuation of human self

through some kind of play—often very theatrelike—occurs throughout life. Aristotle said it is human nature to be able to gain a second nature through socialization—through what I want to call mimetic engulfment and enactment. We learn who the “role models” are for different life situations, and in emulating them through enactment we insure appropriate and cohesive social behavior and individuate ourselves in the bargain. There is, then, a *particle* of fictionality within the very actuality of human life. It is, moreover, a vastly important particle, for we do not have our nature set in advance, determined mainly by instinct; it must be formed through a kind of “performance.” The theatrical metaphor is apt. If we are not confirmed in our performance by the appropriate “audience”—authorized, as I like to say—our performance will not “stick” and mold our identities.

It is a striking sign of the power of the theatrical metaphor (and of the vastness of the paratheatrical area) that we can extend this metaphor so very far toward, or even into, the domain of the ethical and existential. The consequences of these performances mold the very identities of the performers. The consequences cannot begin to be contained within the temporal confines of the performance, whereas they more or less can be in the case of staged paratheatrical events. Moreover, there is a quality of deliberateness in the staging of the paratheatrical performance, and a deliberate detachment of self, which is conspicuously lacking in the spontaneous performances of children, and even in the semispontaneous performances of adults at cocktail parties. Finally, we are clearly increasing the degree of ethical responsibility. What could be more important ethically than how we structure life for our children, or how we structure our own ongoing social arrangements? It is paratheatrical-with-a-*very*-big-difference.

The urge to grow is not merely a desire to increase in physical size—clearly—but to increase in substance *as a self* which is simultaneously individual and communal. Hence, if we remain vital, we continually push out and test the limits of our ability to “perform.” The larger the area of “play,” the more we are evaluated and authorized, and the more self is constituted. Games which keep score evaluate performance with particular decisiveness and clarity, but numbers are not necessary for decisiveness and momentousness of evaluation. Indeed, on the frontiers of performance, results will not yet be computable numerically.

We here confront a feature of the human self which is both vexing and intriguing: the unfinishable round, the unfinishable dialectic, of fiction and fact. “Performance,” with its ineliminable particle of fictionality, is essential to our *actuality* as selves. All performances in the literal sense—either theatrical or paratheatrical—and all “performances” in the hyperextended metaphorical sense which lie on the ethical side of the paratheatrical—paratheatrical-with-a-big-difference, such as the cocktail party—require a playing area of *some* sort and *some* degree of sealing and protection from the outside world of fact. Yet how are we to achieve what we so deeply want and need: the achievement of actuality and substantiality as selves in the actual, larger world? We can now see why the paratheatrical is the paradigm “para”—paramilitary, paramedical—paradigmatic at least with respect to the parameter of performance. Because there is an element of performance in all human skills and professions, the performers who are most vital will tend to push out the limits of their performances into borderline areas in order to test for increasing ability in the outlying actual world: to test, confirm, and constitute their very selves. Where there is life there is growth, and we hunger for greater actuality and substantiality of self.

The urge to grow, if sufficiently strong, is also the urge to sacrifice some of the protection of the already safely demarcated areas of performance. Surely, if we *risk* something we cannot be mere performers! Ironically, if we risk nothing, if we take no step beyond presently constituted confines, we risk insubstantiality and befuddlement in the area in which we already “successfully” behave. We risk disorientation, not knowing where we presently are, for if we cannot expand this area or step beyond it *at all*, we cannot gain that perspective which locates its boundaries and which gives determinate reality to our experience in the actual world. We become encapsulated, shriveled up, and numb.

Thus, almost inevitably, theatre tends to push into the paratheatrical, and other human activities—because they involve performance—tend to push into their “para” forms with momentous and perhaps deadly impact in the actual world. The paratheatrical is paradigmatic, at least with respect to the parameter of performance. We cannot attribute this to simple human perversity. Unless, of course, we think there is something perverse about human life as such. That may be! What could be deeper than our need to be actual? Yet if we are to be socialized and human we must always “perform” in some way, it seems. The urge to blur the line between fiction and fact stems from human life itself. Take, for example, Werner Herzog’s 1982 film about a picaresque character named Fitzcarraldo, who hauls a steamboat from river to river over a range of mountains in the Peruvian Amazon. This cinema/theatre is inevitably paratheatrical, for the characters’ dangerous adventures cannot be filmed without the persons involved in the performance being subjected to the same dangers. Before the filming is done—after years in the jungle—an immense expense has been incurred and several persons seriously injured, one permanently paralyzed. In a televised interview Herzog explains with stricken face his regret, and goes on to say that he feels an overwhelming urge to pursue this kind of art. Surely, if we risk our lives we are not simply performers. We exist, we are real!

It seems to me, however, that Herzog has failed to become aware that he has ventured very far indeed from the domain of the clearly theatrical, that he is way out in the paratheatrical, and that he is involved in serious ethical problems. If human beings are injured—and could be expected to be—then how can the venture be justified in mere aesthetic terms? The alleged playing is too serious, and too avoidable, for that. *Fitzcarraldo* is perilously close to the fuzzy boundary between theatrical and paratheatrical activities. We can say, I think, that it is an ethically and morally questionable project.

IV

The effort to extend the boundaries of theatrical performance, as well as of paratheatrical “performance” of various kinds, is understandable. Yet it threatens to become endless, and endlessly frustrating. Our need to be real is our need to be fully engaged with the actual world; but if we are to act we must “perform” in certain ways, be protected in a playing area, and carry a particle of fictionality within us. To act we must bound an area, but to do so we must leave something unbounded, sealed off from us, no matter how far we extend the boundaries of our performances. Possessed by hunger for actuality and substantiality, we risk getting caught up in a diabolical drive to bound the boundless actual world, to turn *all* of living into theatrelike performances which we master.

Needless to say, perhaps, study of the theatre and of the paratheatrical involves us sooner or later in philosophical and religious issues. Plays,

playing, and playfulness are serious matters (which in itself is oddly funny). Let us look now at one of the most serious attempts to deal with the problem of existence—that it is both fictional in certain inescapable senses and factual. This is found in that version of staged paratheatrical ventures which attempts to bridge the gap between contemporary performance and traditional religious rites and rituals. It is no accident that the origins of theatre involved the deepest interrelationship of these now divided “areas,” and the urge is to reconnect them. However, this attempt involves subtle and serious dangers. Let us investigate.

The “playing area” of traditional religious rites and rituals is a unique sort of boundedness, and it involves a unique, borderline fictionality (perhaps we can call it parafictional). For the intent of these rites and rituals is, apparently, to set up an area which bounds, in some way, the actual world itself. Immediately, of course, the modern mind is inclined to dismiss this as sheer superstition and presumptuousness: “Can’t they see that part of what is *meant* by actuality is that there is more to be known than has as yet been revealed?” “Can’t they see that life goes on after the rite has ended, and that inevitably we will be surprised by some of it?” In this the modern mind shows itself to be profoundly out of touch with the traditional mind and its mythological consciousness. As Mircea Eliade and others have shown, the traditional person does not deny linear time and its inevitable surprises, but simply treats it as profane and devalues it. What is *essential* does not change, and this is the sacred, inexhaustible source that must be ever present and ever new (meaning the ageless, the eternal present) if life itself is to be sustained.

Hence the traditional person does not experience religious rites as presumptuous at all. Of course profane time keeps rolling on its linear track, with all its bumps and surprises, but this is irrelevant. The rite reenacts, for the worshippers’ benefit, creative, founding events which occurred *in illo tempore*, in those days beyond any dating on a time line, and immemorially, ever presently. Not that there is no mystery involved. The strange playing area of the rite bounds the actual universe in the very act of finding it unspeakably awesome—boundless. That is, the failure of human life to come up to the level of divine existence is built into the rite itself. This failure demands, among other things, the unflinching repetition of the rites at the appointed dates and places of the yearly round.

Thus, for the traditional person, the boundedness and limitedness of the rite constitute a fictionality *that creates itself only to negate itself*. We are, admittedly, speaking broadly, but the failure to take in the broad contours exposes us to grave dangers of misunderstanding ourselves as we try to bridge the gap between contemporary performance in our secular society and traditional religious rites. For our background sense of actuality may contain vestiges of sacred origins, but we are, I believe, so committed unwittingly to the fundamental reality of linear time that *our* attempts to bound the boundless will tend to be presumptuous and frenzied. Our theatre—and, as far as I can tell, our staged paratheatrical ventures—do not even respect the pivotal times of our yearly calendars, the ever-repeating equinoxes and solstices which marked the holy times and places of traditional life—regulated plantings, harvests, feast days, religious rituals, rites of passage—and integrated the people with the cosmos (could it have been other than joyfully, solemnly, and thankfully?).

But can’t we, possibly, tease out and develop for ourselves vestiges of mythological consciousness? Perhaps—if we are aware of what we are up against, and if we do not expect too much too soon. Indeed, such attempts

may provide us with just that bit of stability, calmness, and centeredness which makes the difference between a completely frenzied, compulsive, egotistical life and one which is livable. Also, our enactment of the rites of other cultures may give us some inkling of their humanity, some diminution of our mountainous pride. Just so long as we do not have irrational expectations—the curse of the life that forever expects the *next* moment to be satisfying and despairs of finding a sacred place of balance and repose, a center around which all possible experience can be gathered. As Nietzsche saw, we are in danger of getting caught in a frenzied instrumentalism, a will to power, power for ever more power, endlessly, diabolically. For in losing the sacred—it can be feared—the ground of all intrinsic values and satisfactions has been cut away.

There is, finally, another way to try to contain the vexing dialectic of the fictional and the factual in human life—the dialectic of “role playing” and identity. It is to deeply realize that, for us, all theatrical *and* paratheatrical performance is inherently limited, circumscribed within a larger domain of human action and experience. This limitation applies *even* to the farthest reaches of the paratheatrical, where it fades off into something essentially different—the hyperextended metaphorical sense of “performance” in the various social situations of life. Perhaps this approach is best adapted to the secular, contemporary person for whom linear time is so fundamental and so central. The approach unfolds like this: Any performance which is in *any* significant sense theatrelike must be bounded by a temporal span. The person as performer must be expected to survive the performance and to be able to look back on a stretch of behavior which can be evaluated as performance. I think we must lend this degree of precision to the broad concept of theatrelike performance.

Now, there are crucial behaviors that I cannot look back on as performances to be evaluated in such terms. Let us say that I fall in love and make a commitment to another person. What sense would it make for me on the next day to ask her—or anybody else—“How did I do?” It would be absurd, for the very point of the ethical commitment is that it is not bounded in time, not conditional at all. Or, take something as banal but essential as falling asleep. It may be a performance in some very odd sense, a sense other than the one marked out, but I, the sleeper, am in no condition to look back at it as an achievement to be evaluated, and the more I attempt to do this, the less “successful” I will be. At some point I give way and am committed to the arms of Morpheus. If when I awaken in the morning I should want credit for falling asleep it would seem rather churlish—or slightly demented. Finally, life itself cannot end as a “performance,” for I certainly cannot outlive my own death and look back on my dying as an achievement to be evaluated. Even if I should attempt to conduct an elaborate, aesthetically refined suicide, at some point I will lose artistic control and be swallowed up in the boundless world.

None of these activities can be treated as performances if we are truly to enter into them. The primal urge for a decisive and vital identity as a self can drive us into the most abysmal self-deception—the illusion of having bounded the boundless in a performance which can be evaluated. And even when my activities *are* performances in one sense or other, I as a person cannot be reduced to them, however much I might like to be so at times. For even when performing—or “performing”—I am the being who possesses potential for more than aesthetically evaluable acts. This potential may not even be imaginable by me now, but my vague sense of the openness of my life contributes to the very actuality of it.

This second approach, I realize, may be religious in some unusual sense. It may involve a piety of a certain kind. There may even be paratheatrical and parareligious ceremony or ritual which will help prepare us for the situations into which we are thrown beyond our ability to perform and to achieve (and what a relief that would be). But to help prepare us for and to substitute for are two very different matters.

V

In this article I have tried to elucidate the concept of the paratheatrical. The ultimate point is that in the end we must bound and limit the activities which count as paratheatrical. Sanity itself requires it, I believe. We alluded above to the consternation we feel if an animal is killed onstage. But what if a human being is killed onstage as a part of an alleged paratheatrical production? Isn't it clear that *no* extension of the categories of the theatrical can encompass this act, and that we are clearly beyond even the paratheatrical? I think so. We have entered deep into the domain of ethical and existential categories, and what we see is an immoral act. I am saying that if an alleged theatrical or paratheatrical activity extends into the ethical domain, and it is clearly bad morally, we are beyond theatrical and even paratheatrical categories of description and evaluation.

If someone should insist that theatre occurs whenever we choose to frame an event as play and to call it paratheatrical, then I think we must conclude that megalomania is afoot and that a distortion of perception has occurred. There are ethical facts, I believe, and we can fail to perceive them. If certain Romans insisted on framing the deaths of gladiators in the Circus Maximus as performance and play, then that distortion of will and perception is precisely what we should mean by *decadent*. It seems to me that the essence of ethical facts is reciprocity: that the sort of thing that happens at one time to another has the same ethical nature and value as when it happens to me. If certain Romans in the circus did not see this then I think they were decadent. Even if the persons killed were convicted felons, and the authorities had determined that they were to die, it is not a playful act to kill them as a part of an alleged performance. If I were such a felon, could I regard my own death as a playful event? How could I do so in my right mind?

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