

On Document Becomings and the Documentary Theatre¹⁾

Andrew EGLINTON

Abstract : The technological and cultural changes to the constitution and usage of documents often preempt, outperform even, the capacity of institutions to validate and integrate new document formations within their orders of signification. In such instances, the document can be said to operate outside the validating frame of the institution in territories of cultural practice where it functions as a hybrid, discursive object, capable of bringing established orders of knowledge to crisis. In this paper, I analyse three specific examples of document formations across different times, peoples and practices. Particular focus is given to theatre and performance, and the 2011 documentary play *The Riots*.

Key Words : document, documentary theatre, contemporary British theatre, performance studies

Introduction

The document today is still conceived in light of its eighteenth-century²⁾ juridical status as an object that serves as proof of fact. In this conception it belongs to a culture of writing that delimits and safeguards experience through textual remains. Inscriptions on durable media surfaces, such as 'a manuscript, title-deed, tombstone, coin, picture, etc.,'³⁾ attached to a signature, time and place of production contribute to the authority of the document. It is an authority frequently exercised under the aegis of institutional power, from law courts and government departments to universities and other public and private institutions. What kinds of transformations occur when documents cross generic boundaries and are put to use in contexts which are not their own? What insight into the function of the document today can be gained from an analysis of document formations, or document becomings, in contexts of cultural practice such as the documentary theatre for example — a field in which experiment, reflexivity and risk are prevalent?

For almost a century, since Erwin Piscator's 1925 production of *In Spite of Everything*, often referred to by theatre scholars as the proto-documentary play, practitioners have confronted their audiences with what Carol Martin terms "bodies of evidence" or what is more generally known as primary source material. This material, which consists in amongst other media of texts, photographs, film and audio recordings, obtained through archival research, interviews and testimonies, is used to expose, re-examine and challenge cases of social and political injustice within the discursive frame of the theatre. The disparate trajectories of documentary practices, shifting between time, place and practitioner, share at their root a critical approach to dominant institutional discourses and the macropolitics of power. As such, the mediation of documents in performance, which is always a series of intermedial communications between stage and audience, serves on both literal and symbolic levels as a reminder of the fragmented composition of history, politics and the act of creation itself. At the same time, in the very performance of the critique of essentialist discourses, intermediality in documentary

1) A preliminary draft of this essay was given as a paper at the International Federation for Theatre Research Conference in July 2012 at the Universidad Catolica, Santiago.

2) While this etymological usage became commonplace in eighteenth century legal contexts, the OED traces a similar usage back to the mid-fifteenth-century. One might also acknowledge the records of official legal proceedings and major public events in classical Greece. See for example James Sickenger's book *Public Records and Archives in Classical Athens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p.36.

3) Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "Document."

theatre foregrounds a new problematic. Namely, to what extent can one harness the emergent properties of document hybridity, or document becomings, without falling prey to the repetition of old schemes?

Documentary theatre can thus be read as an example of theatre practice at the vanguard of ‘intermediality,’ which is a term employed by Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt to describe ‘a dominant trend in the arts and media of the twentieth century [. . .] associated with the blurring of generic boundaries, crossover and hybrid performances, and intertextuality [. . .]’ (11). In this sense, documentary plays and their creative methodologies provide the grounds to rethink the definitions and functions of the document beyond its juridical frame.

In this essay, I highlight three examples of document formations that expose distinctive capacities of the document across three different temporal and cultural contexts. Firstly, the capacity of the document to enforce the symbolic order of writing through the shift from oral to written public decrees in classical Athens; secondly, the capacity of the document to disrupt a dominant order of knowledge through the emergence of photography in mid-nineteenth century France and England; and thirdly, the capacity of the document to pre-empt the institutional integration of new documentary formations, through the example of the documentary play, *The Riots*, produced at London’s Tricycle Theatre in November 2011. The key points drawn from each example will contribute to an analysis of the relationship between document, institution and individual.

Public documents and power *in absentia*

The first example concerns the transposition of legal decrees in sixth-century BC Athens from an oral, mnemonic system, to a written, documentary one. In her study of orality and literacy in classical Greece, Rosalind Thomas attributes the gradual predominance of the written record over its mnemonic cousin, in part, to the argument that the former was deemed more ‘publicly verifiable’ than the latter and that ‘writing preserved but it also exaggerated or dignified the act it preserved’ (7). In order to arrive at this status of validity however, the State authorities responsible for entrusting the law to the confines of the document had to take a leap of faith. To inscribe a legal decree on a stone tablet for public display was to entrust the document with the capacity to assert the authority of law in the absence of the lawmaker.

This ‘presencing’ of absence in the document, or its capacity to act *in lieu* of an absent voice has a significant bearing on the use of documents in performance. On the one hand, it raises questions about the inflections and deviations that documents undergo in contexts outside their original place of production. To what extent is there an act of translation and/or adaptation at work in the adjustment of the author’s original intentionality to a new context of usage? And in what way do the statements that constitute the document change in light of this? On the other hand, and following Jacques Derrida in an interview with Geoffrey Bennington at the London Institute of Contemporary Art, the example of the stone tablet foregrounds the way in which the document can prescribe in its very structure, and also in the performance of the reading of that structure, the model of an institution (Appignanesi, 222).

Here, the document reveals its capacity to serve as an instrument of order, but how does it function? Firstly, the document does not rely on a simple command-obey relationship in conveying information, but requires a belief-act on the part of the author and its recipient. Gilles Deleuze explores this point in his lecture titled “Having an Idea in Cinema,”

When you are informed, you are told what you are supposed to believe. In other words, informing is circulating a keyword. Police statements are aptly called communiqués. Information is communicated to us; we are told what we are already supposed to be ready or able to do or what we are supposed to believe. Not even to believe, but to act as if we believed. We are not asked to believe, but to behave as if we believed (17).

The conditions for the successful communication of the order require an ‘as if’ or ‘performative’ relationship between the production and reception of the information. In this relationship, the recipient responds as much to the symbolic order of the document-produced through the specific arrangement of its component parts such as shape, size, material, typography,

strategic location and so on – as s/he does to the content of the order itself.

In sum, one can say, that in fulfilling its function as an ordering instrument, the document relies on the interrelationship between a medium, which enables the absence of the author ; a message which can maintain its validity despite this absence ; and a context in which its intended audience is willing to be seen to accept its symbolic presence.

Photographs, seriality and control

The second example concerns the invention of photography in the late 1830s, at the point at which the photograph had yet to become fully integrated in institutions as a new document type. In his essay entitled “The Body and the Archive,” historian Allan Sekula demonstrates the ways in which photography functioned both ‘honorifically and repressively’ as a ‘system of representation’ (3). On the one hand the photograph ‘promised an enhanced mastery of nature,’ (ibid, 4) such that its capacity to reproduce the real with emphatic detail presented a direct affront to the authority of other forms of nineteenth-century naturalist art — particularly painting. As such, not only did the photograph usher in the popularization of both the means of production and access to a new cultural medium, thereby destabilizing existing hierarchies, it also outpaced cultural institutions in response to the gradual modernization of society. On the other hand it is precisely through early experiments in photographic art by pioneers such as Louis Daguerre and Henry Fox Talbot, that ‘an entirely different order of naturalism emerges [. . .] a new legalistic truth, the truth of an indexical rather than textual inventory’ (ibid, 9). If the textual inventory that Sekula is referring to is understood as a system of classification that prescribes the limits of a collection of documents, then the indexical inventory is a system that enables the expansion of those limits. It is a cumulative system. Consequently, the value of the document in its indexical conception is defined less in terms of its uniqueness and more in terms of its seriality.

The systematic production and classification of photographs opened the way for the appropriation of photography by the social sciences including, though not limited to, disciplines of history, sociology, law and anthropology, where it was put to use in typological classification projects epitomized, for example, by Francis Galton’s forensic study of finger prints in 1892. According to Mary Warner Marien, the Swiss government had already used photography in the 1850s ‘to register [and thereby categorize] indigents and stateless persons,’ and by the late nineteenth century, police forces in Europe were using photography as a standard means of criminal profiling (224). In this juridical context, Sekula identifies the function of the photograph as ‘a visual document of ownership’ capable of arresting its subject, silencing it as ‘mute testimony’ (ibid, 6) and repeating this indexical process to control the ‘growing urban presence of the “dangerous classes”’ (ibid, 5).

The example of the photograph as a new document formation reveals its capacity to bring an existing cultural order to crisis, before being appropriated and integrated into the institution as an extension of its power and control.

The document re-institutionalized in the case of *The Riots*

The third example, and the one that I want to place most emphasis on here, concerns the civil unrest that occurred in various parts of England over four days in early August 2011. The riots erupted in response to the police shooting of North London resident Mark Duggan on the 4 August 2011. In the aftermath of what the British press called ‘the summer riots,’⁴⁾ as in the aftermath of any event of historic proportion, national institutions began to search for evidence of causality — including members of the British parliament, spokespersons for the British legal system, the Metropolitan Police and the British news media. Who or what caused the riots? What was the proper chronology of events? How did police forces handle the unrest? And who or what was to blame? These were the sorts of questions that each institution asked, and concealed behind the question marks was a string of pre-formulated answers. The problem facing analysts of

4) See for example an article in the Guardian online entitled “The Truth Behind the Summer Riots” <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/05/truth-behind-the-summer-riots>> ; see also the article in the Economist entitled “Hearing from England’s Summer Riots” <<http://www.economist.com/blogs/bagehot/2011/12/summer-riots-england>>

the riots was not where to look for information since data was readily available on the Web. The problem was how to deal with the volume of data and the multiplicitous nature of its production and dissemination. In other words, it was a question of how to fit new documentary formations into pre-existing vocabularies so that the ideological agenda of each institution could be maintained.

The problem of multiplicity was also at the centre of the Tricycle Theatre's documentary play, *The Riots*. The former artistic director of the Tricycle Theatre, Nicholas Kent, is well-known for directing a series of documentary plays in the 90s and new millennium known as the Tribunal Plays. Kent commissioned novelist and past collaborator Gillian Slovo to write a play about the summer riots based on interview material that Slovo and her research assistant would gather just a few months after the events. The result was a verbatim play simply titled *The Riots*. It ran at the Tricycle from the 17th of November to the 10th of December to great critical acclaim.

The documentary can be read as the unfolding of a topological space in relation to an event or events of sizeable proportion that generate a complex network of utterances and actions, a small portion of which is recorded on an array of media. One of the key points of contention in documentary theatre, and at the same time, one of the main elements of dramatic tension that underpins this form, is derived from what is included in this topology or on this map. It is the tension between what is often referred to by documentary practitioners as a self-imposed rule, that is, the desire to honour the source material word for word, whilst at the same time making tactical decisions as to the dramatic potential of chosen statements that drive the narrative of the play. Gillian Slovo echoed this idea in an article for *The Arts Desk* on the construction of the play, by saying that the purpose of documentary theatre is 'to have a more informed conversation about [the Riots] and to give people a good time in the theatre.'

What was significant about the Tricycle production was the way in which an old documentary methodology which consists of piecing together excerpts of interview transcripts in a chronological narrative — a methodology that audiences have come to expect at the Tricycle Theatre — was superimposed with a range of digital documents that appeared at strategically chosen moments as projections on a screen at the back of the theatre. A clear example of this appears in the play's first stage direction :

Large and prominent : photographs and moving footage. The most dramatic that can be found of the riots in progress. Shops being looted, shopkeepers defending themselves. Anarchy on the streets of England. Loud surround sound coming at the audience from different directions. Noises of riot. Of sirens. Helicopters. Shouts. (8)

In addition to video and audio material, a digital map of the riot affected areas in London and England was displayed to consolidate the spoken narrative of the play. Twitter messages were used to demonstrate one way in which events were mediated via the Web.

Each of these digital documents functioned as supplements to the production so that there was an unmistakable emphasis on people's 'real voices,' the voices of participants, of rioters, looters, police officers, politicians, community members, religious figures and so on. The decision to keep the digital media in a parasitical position was perhaps partly an issue of limited resources at the Tricycle, but partly also Nicholas Kent's critique of the mainstream news media ; in particular the limitations of 24 hour news loops, the overemphasis of certain images which take on an archetypal quality, and the scaremongering in terms of the role of social media in coordinating the riots.

It is important to stress the range of technologies, definitions, locations, timings and perspectives involved in the recording of data. A large part of the production of data on the summer riots at source was heterogeneous and non-hierarchical. It was captured as much by bystanders and participants as it was by people in positions of authority. As such, traditional media distinctions between amateur and professional and public and private were held momentarily in abeyance. It was only in editing these fragments 'downstream' that news agencies and commentators could apply hierarchical weightings to the content. Even then, it was entirely possible for a member of the public to derive an account of events based on video, audio and textual material in circulation outside dominant media discourses. Furthermore,

updates on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as mobile text messaging services, particularly Blackberry BBS, operating in both peer-to-peer and ground-to-cloud formations, enabled the interlinking of information across different networks. Consequently, the 'nodes' or 'data clusters' that formed across these networks served as 'micro sites' of virtual action.

One of the outcomes of this data complexity, is that events 'on the ground' were in some cases informed by and led by information circulating 'in the cloud'. In this sense, and not wanting to undermine the severity of acts of violence, it is possible to read aspects of the riots as the staging of a transgressive script written and rehearsed in real time across distributed digital networks. The answer to the question — for whom were these 'radical performances' staged? — is the point at which discourses on the riots disperse. There was no single architect, no director and no author to speak of. There was instead and as we shall see in a moment, 'heterodoxy' at work.

Paradoxically though, a significant constituent of this audience demographic was the mainstream media. Out-resourced by the density of data and unable to control access to its narratives, traditional broadcast agencies (television and radio) took on the role of critic or commentator on these violent performative acts. Consequently, what was also in the spotlight was the latency between event transmission and event narrative. The narrative of the riots was all the more difficult to construct given that the documents produced in the wake of events could not be conveniently presented or represented on paper. One might call this disparate, interconnected collection of digital documents 'hypermedia'.

Hypermedia and 'heterodoxy'

In order to further expose the obstacle that hypermedia presented to institutional integration, it is useful to approach it through the concepts of *doxa* and *heterodoxy*. Both terms are well-known in the context of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological writings, but by way of clarification, Terry Eagleton offers a succinct definition in his book on ideology and is worth quoting at length here :

What Bourdieu calls *doxa* belongs to the kind of stable, tradition-bound social order in which power is fully naturalized and unquestionable, so that no social arrangement different from the present could even be imagined. Here, as it were, subject and object merge indistinguishably into each other. What matters in such societies is what 'goes without saying', which is determined by tradition ; and tradition is always 'silent', not least about itself as tradition. Any challenge to such *doxa* is then *heterodoxy*, against which the given order must assert its claims in a new orthodoxy. Such orthodoxy differs from *doxa* in that the guardians of tradition, of what goes without saying, are now compelled to speak in their own defence, and thus implicitly to present themselves as simply one possible position, among others. (157)

The point at which hypermedia became *heterodoxy* in discourses on the riots was in the realization that hypermedia communications were as much constitutive of events as they were commentative on them. In order to maintain authority, news media organizations must produce a credible framing of the real, which is reliant on the successful dissimulation of the borders of this frame — a seamless merger of 'studio time' with 'street time'. While the affect of event mediation is medium-specific, what connects all forms of controlled mediation is the event-time ratio of 'liveness.' Liveness, as Philip Auslander argues, blurs past distinctions between the live and the mediated : 'whereas mediated performance derives its authority from its reference to the live or the real, the live now derives its authority from the mediated' (44). Even though the event-time ratio continues to decrease in quantitative terms as the capacity and velocity of data streams across integrated networks increases, the narrative of liveness must still be constructed and latency must still be dealt with. In constructing these narratives, news media organizations revealed themselves as simply one possible position in a vast array of others ; in short the seamlessness of the news media network was disrupted.

Caught in a 'double bind'

What we see in each of these examples of document formations is evidence of a 'double bind' structure whose effects can be extended to all document types operating in the name of the institution. The double bind hypothesis was proposed by Gregory Bateson and colleagues in a research paper in 1956 as a way of describing a power relationship between parent and child, in which the child's developmental process is caught between conflicting communicative signals which leave no room for his/her subjective agency. Consequently, 'the child is punished for discriminating accurately what she [the mother / authority figure] is expressing, and he is punished for discriminating inaccurately—he is caught in a double bind' (Bateson, 215). Doubling on this hypothesis, and reorienting it to territories of cultural practice, including the field of documentary theatre, I claim that the document in formation is suspicious of validation processes, that it has the ability to undermine and outmaneuver the restrictive nature of such processes, but at the same time, in securing its own survival, it submits to institutional validation. The heterogeneity of the photographic document, epitomised in the second example by its capacity to provoke new ideas, to generate new modes of practice, to cross formalistic boundaries and to disrupt dominant cultural codes, gives rise, in the expression of its potential, to a degree of autonomy. It is this autonomy that brings adjacent orders of knowledge to crisis. At the same time, contained within this autonomy are the beginnings of structural closure ; so that one could say that the process of document formation, is a process of exposing the constitutive boundaries of the document — its forms, functions, capacities, and differences with its others — and once exposed, it can then be integrated into the institutional order of signification and serve as an extension of its power.

Schizophrenia and 'anarchives'

One of the outcomes that Bateson and his colleagues identify in the repetition of the double bind is the development of schizophrenic tendencies in the child's communicative behaviour. Bateson notes that while schizophrenia is 'an isolable phenomenon,' it tends to be defined by way of extreme difference with a perceived sense of normality. In contrast, Bateson's own work departs from the observation that 'schizophrenia involves general principles which are important in all communication' (Bateson *et al*, 222). This enables his research group to extend the reach of their analysis beyond clinical psychology, to literature and theatre as the following passage from their report indicates :

The entire field of fictional communication, defined as the narration or depiction of a series of events with more or less of a label of actuality, is most relevant to the investigation of schizophrenia. We are not so much concerned with the content interpretation of fiction—although analysis of oral and destructive themes is illuminating to the student of schizophrenia—as with the formal problems involved in simultaneous existence of multiple levels of message in the fictional presentation of "reality." The drama is especially interesting in this respect, with both performers and spectators responding to messages about both the actual and the theatrical reality. (Bateson *et al*, 223)

While the document is by no means a conscious, acting agent, but rather an object through which processes of consciousness, subjectivation and action are channeled, in specific contexts of cultural practice, such as the documentary theatre, where documents are brought into contact with their others, a schizophrenic regime can be produced. It is a regime of disordering order, or what one might describe as an 'anarchive,' a declassified space in which the document functions as a component part in a new assemblage. There inside, its order of signification is reoriented and its capacity for communication reawakened, such that it can be said to display positive schizophrenic tendencies in its communication with its others, and such that the bind that locked its coordinates prior to this encounter is momentarily loosened.

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