



‘In discussing protest events we are likely to be dealing with mediations of those events, rather than the events themselves’.
Using at least two examples of onstage or offstage riotous performances, evaluate the ways in which reporting of events come to substitute for the events themselves: and ask how far can we know what *really* happened?

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Guy Debord stated that, ‘[i]n societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation’¹. Most events nowadays are experienced indirectly by the masses through historical or journalistic media; these mediated representations are distanced from the events they portray, and are subject to nuance and bias. This essay will discuss the mediated representations of two riots, which have generated various interpretations: the riot at the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* on the 29th May 1913; and the 2011 London Riots which occurred between the 6th and the 10th of August 2011. I will examine which factors have influenced both riots’ representations, and how these account for their historical significance. I will discuss how these processes problematise the extent to which we can know what really happened.

Alain Badiou asserts that human representations can never be objective. He states that, since human experience is filtered through individual subjectivities, objective truth is inaccessible – in recounting an event, humans are ‘suspended’² from it. He defines this process as ‘subjectivization’;³ no matter how faithful to the event the subject tries to be, his representation is ‘subjectivized’.⁴ Thus, every human truth, or representation, is idiosyncratic, relative to the interpreter’s subjectivity, and cannot be totally neutral. Of course, Badiou’s framework assumes a particular definition of truth, which is debated; others argue that truth only equates to human experience, since this is all that can be comprehended.⁵ However, I prefer Badiou’s framework for this essay, because he illustrates the natural subjective processes inherent to historical representation. Of course, representations may also be consciously adapted according to the reporter’s subjective motives; Michel Foucault’s ‘power-knowledge’⁶ nexus dictates that those who document history assume power over it, thus suppressing or emphasising factors as they see appropriate. History, then, is relative to those who represent it, and is susceptible to varying degrees of nuance.

¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, (London: Rebel Press, 1992) p. 7

² Alain Badiou, ‘On a Finally Objectless Subject’, in *The Symptom*, Vol. 10 (Spring 2009) <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/alain-badiou/articles/on-a-finally-objectless-subject/>> [Accessed 02-05-12]

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (London: Routledge, 1947), for an argument against ‘absolute truth’; or see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), for the assertion that truth is a mere simulation, a product of human ontology.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 27

- 8 Using at least two examples of onstage or offstage riotous performances, evaluate the ways in which reporting of events come to substitute for the events themselves: and ask how far can we know what *really* happened?

Numerous people were present at both my chosen riots, each forming distinct subjective accounts. The media reports and reviews that documented these events are markedly nuanced or even starkly opposed; as such, discerning the exact details of each riot is problematic. The five days of looting and street violence that formed the 2011 London Riots received comprehensive media coverage. The range of reports demonstrates Badiou's multiple subjectivities; numerous people from varying political, social and economic standpoints offered divergent interpretations. Some blamed the riots on racial tensions; Gus John noted 'resentment towards the police'⁷ on behalf of the London black community. Others cited the recent government spending cuts; Labour politician Ken Livingstone wrote that '[t]he economic stagnation and cuts being imposed by the Tory government inevitably create social division'.⁸ Some regarded the riots as a result of mere criminal opportunism; John Pitts noted that looters 'quickly see that police cannot control the situation, which leads to a sort of adrenalin-fuelled euphoria'.⁹ It seems there were several possible incentives.

Certainly, the subjects' individual viewpoints affected the factors they focussed on – but this focus may have been contrived to suit their political motives, in accordance with Foucault's 'power-knowledge' nexus. This concept especially applies to two accounts by opposing MPs, which offer contrasting interpretations for seemingly the same issue. While Conservative Home Secretary Theresa May asserted that the riots were symptomatic of 'worklessness, illiteracy and drug abuse',¹⁰ Labour leader Ed Miliband referred instead to 'poverty and lack of opportunity'.¹¹ It is likely that this semantic variance was contrived – both highlighted different factors which ascribed different levels of blame, compliant with their ideological perspectives.

We see that representation is never neutral; each reporter will document an event according to their ideological standing, distancing their representation from the truth. The exact factors that influenced the rioters are thus debatable – no single factor from the broad spectrum of interpretations can stand for the collective opinion. In many cases, opinions were broadcasted by people who were not actually present at the riots; these representations are distanced even further. This notion of distancing is also an issue when analysing reports of the riot at *The Rite of Spring*. In most cases, we are dealing with translations of French reports – thus, the nuance of the translator creates a further subjective frame. Furthermore, these reports are limited to those written by the few reviewers who claimed to be present. This means that the spectrum of reports available is more restricted and less representative of the mass opinion. The key facts are therefore still difficult to qualify; especially since these are contested across the available sources.

Some assert that the riot at the premiere was caused by the audience's dissatisfaction of the performance. The music, written by Igor Stravinsky, was violently dissonant, and the dance, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, was angular and arrhythmic. This primitive piece opposed the sophisticated nature of ballet; Carl Van Vechten, a critic for the *New York Press*, wrote that the audience 'was thrilled by what it considered to be a blasphemous attempt to destroy music as an art'.¹² He implied that the music deeply affected the audience members,

⁷ Gus John, in Guy Jackson, 'Depraved or deprived? UK split on riot causes', *AFP* [12th August 2011]

<<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gZ67UWu3mGjnb3TfN-jVwN77VevQ?doclid=CNG.1dbda76336400d092358c2558c36e01d.4e1>> [Accessed 02-05-12]

⁸ Ken Livingstone, 'Ken Livingstone statement on Tottenham riots', *Labour List* [7th August 2011]

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⁹ John Pitts, in Alexandra Topping, 'Looting 'fuelled by social exclusion'', *Guardian* [8th August 2011]

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/08/looting-fuelled-by-social-exclusion>> [Accessed 02-05-12]

¹⁰ Theresa May, 'Theresa May: speech on riots', Home Office Speeches, in 'homeoffice.gov.uk' [11th August 2011]

<<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/media-centre/speeches/riots-speech>> [Accessed 02-05-12]

¹¹ Ed Miliband, in 'Riots: Miliband blames 'me first' culture', *BBC News* [12th August 2011] <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14503023>> [Accessed 02-05-12]

¹² Carl Van Vechten, in Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: the composer and his works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 214-215

citing a man sat behind him who ‘began to beat rhythmically on top of my head with his fists’.¹³ He also implied that the choreography influenced the riot, referring to the prima donna’s sacrificial dance of ‘religious hysteria [...] seemingly to the accompaniment of the disjointed ravings of a mob of angry men and women’.¹⁴

However, other factors of Van Vechten’s account contradict this interpretation. He wrote that the riots left the orchestra ‘unheard’¹⁵ – a notion supported by Gertrude Stein, who wrote that ‘one literally could not, throughout the whole performance, hear the sound of music’¹⁶. With these accounts in mind, the extent to which the music could be heard – and thus the extent to which it influenced the riot – becomes questionable. Similarly, we must question how influential the choreography was; Bronislava Nijinska, Nijinsky’s sister, wrote that the prima donna’s dance was met with relative quiet.¹⁷

It is also important to note the status of the writers when assessing these reviews. Modris Eksteins posits that these artistically-trained critics would have focussed on the artistic elements;¹⁸ their accounts are biased towards their intellectual status, and their critical drives. Accounts may also have been more politically appropriated, consistent with Foucault’s ‘power-knowledge’ nexus; for example, Nijinska’s familial relation to Nijinsky may have consciously influenced her account. Moreover, it is possible that some accounts were wholly fabricated; Eksteins suggests that Van Vechten saw the performance on two consecutive nights, and that his review merges accounts of two performances; this would explain why some facts in his account differ so strongly from others.¹⁹ Similarly, Stein implied she was present at the event when she clearly was not, in order to appear part of the ‘scandale’.²⁰ We see any historical account must be considered with caution.

Historical documentation is affected by both the natural subjectivity that Badiou noted, and the deliberate revision that Foucault observed. Discerning objective fact from these representations is made more challenging by our own inherent subjectivity; Christopher Blake writes that, ‘even if the personal bias of the historian can be overcome (which many doubt), it is still inevitable that what is written must be relative to the tastes, customs and prejudices of the creative moment’.²¹ When interpreting an event, the historian can only use the subjective accounts available, and assimilate them in the way he subjectively considers to be most credible. Thomas Postlewait’s ‘EVENT=CONTEXT’²² framework illustrates this common practice of historical interpretation. Postlewait regards events as consequences of their particular context; when interpreting an event, the historian must consider the contextual factors surrounding it. This also applies to analysing the reliability of and motives behind representations of events. Nevertheless, this practice is also reliant on Badiou and Foucault’s notions of subjective influence – the historian will highlight contextual factors that he considers, or indeed wants, to be relevant.

When analysing the contexts of both my chosen riots, there are myriad factors to consider. The reports of the 2011 London Riots cited numerous socio-political contexts. The ongoing racial tensions in London may have been influential; after police shot black man Mark Duggan on suspicion he was armed, a peaceful protest was performed on the 6th August

¹³ Ibid., p. 215

¹⁴ Van Vechten, in Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* (New York: First Mariner Books, 1989), p. 13

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gertrude Stein, in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p. 14

¹⁷ Bronislava Nijinska, in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p. 13

¹⁸ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p. 15

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Christopher Blake, ‘Can History be Objective?’, in *Mind Association* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Vol. 64, No. 253 (Jan, 1955), p. 61 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2251044>> [Accessed 02-05-12]

²² Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 9

- 10 Using at least two examples of onstage or offstage riotous performances, evaluate the ways in which reporting of events come to substitute for the events themselves: and ask how far can we know what *really* happened?

2011 by his friends and relatives to request a suitable enquiry into his death.²³ These protesters allegedly became more violent after policemen attacked a sixteen-year-old girl in their demonstration.²⁴ If this is considered the trigger of the riots, this suggests they had a racial undertone – this interpretation is strengthened if we consider a wider context of racial tensions between the police and the black community, including previous racially-charged riots such as the Brixton riots in 1981, the Broadwater Farm riot in 1985, and the Tottenham riots in 1999. Yet, the rioters comprised people of all races,²⁵ and other reporters consider wider social issues to have been more influential – namely the economic recession, wide scale unemployment and recently increased education fees. Indeed, these issues provoked the UK student protests in November 2010 – this event would have been in the cultural memory, thus perhaps placing the notion of riot in the forefront of the general public’s consciousness.

The context of the riot at *The Rite of Spring* is equally complex; moreover, being a more historically distant event, historians are subject to indirect knowledge of a more distant past. We could consider the political unrest at the turn of the century, resulting in the Russian Revolution in 1905 and the first Balkan War in 1912; the year after the riot also saw the start of the First World War. This was also a time of increasing industrialisation and scientific advances, which hugely disrupted the social organisation of daily life. From this social turbulence emerged a modernist cultural philosophy, defined by Justus Nieland as a culture of ‘sensation’.²⁶ By acknowledging this cultural climate, it becomes probable that *The Rite of Spring* was intended to be scandalous, and thus anticipated some disorder; indeed, Eksteins defines the riot as a ‘landmark of modernism’.²⁷ Interestingly, Nijinsky wrote to Stravinsky in the early stages of the ballet’s production, asserting that the performance would be, ‘a jolting and emotional experience’,²⁸ a fact which strengthens this interpretation.

However, in this artistic climate, one must question how outraged the audience really would have been. Nijinsky was recognised for his sensationalist performances, following his scandalous productions of *Prelude à l’après-midi d’un faune* in 1912 and *Jeux* earlier in 1913. Given his reputation, it is likely that *The Rite of Spring* would have been expected to be shocking. It is possible, though, that the riot itself was the desired sensation. Some reports suggest the presence of *agents provocateurs*; Jean Cocteau wrote that the Russian aesthetes present at the premiere ‘would applaud novelty at random simply to show their contempt for the people in the boxes’.²⁹ This suggests that the riot was not caused by the ballet, but was triggered instead by its supporters. Cocteau provocatively concluded that the audience that evening had played ‘the role that was written for it’,³⁰ implying that such a ‘scandale’ was organised.

As Postlewait acknowledges, ‘a determining context makes the event a mere effect of whatever external factors the historian identifies’³¹. The context of any event is too complex to objectively determine an event’s contributing factors – the assimilation of different contextual factors can completely change the sense of the event. The context that the historian employs is at best a simplified overview, since historical factors are only considered if they appear to link thematically with the event. The bias of both the historian and the reporters – whether this is natural or premeditated – will affect historical interpretation.

²³ Paul Lewis, ‘Tottenham riots: a peaceful protest, then suddenly all hell broke loose’, *Guardian* [7th August 2011] <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/07/tottenham-riots-peaceful-protest>> [Accessed 02-05-12]

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Justus Nieland, *Feeling Modern: the eccentricities of public life* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 8

²⁷ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p. xiv

²⁸ Vaslav Nijinsky, in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p. 41

²⁹ Jean Cocteau, in Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p. 11

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12

³¹ Postlewait, *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre Historiography*, p. 11

Though Postlewait's EVENT=CONTEXT paradigm is inherently inadequate for objective historical interpretation, this practice is inevitable. The process of simplification is systematic of human nature; Paul Ricœur writes that understanding is 'mediated by signs, symbols and texts [...] understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms'.³² We interpret our environment by recognising signs and symbols, which assume relevance within a pattern of causality. Facts which support a particular interpretation are foregrounded – thus, events are reduced to representations which correspond to contextual patterns. As Charlotte M. Canning and Postlewait note, 'actions attain their meaning for us by means of some kind of narrative plot that links and joins credible actions'.³³ Past reality becomes a narrative; history is organised into a logical, end-orientated structure – akin to Aristotle's *mythos*, which dictates that narratives should have a clear beginning, middle and end which are causally linked.³⁴

As demonstrated, various narratives can be ascribed to both my chosen riots – these narratives are further elucidated when we consider later events that were seemingly influenced by them. After the 2011 London Riots started, 'copy-cat riots' ensued in other British cities such as Bristol, Manchester and Nottingham. The motives disclosed for these riots reveal which alleged factors behind the London riots were retained; one black Mancunian rioter admitted, 'I'm angry because the police nick me for stupid things [sic]',³⁵ continuing the narrative of racial tensions. Another Mancunian rioter, however, admitted to looting because the police 'can't do nothing to us today [sic]',³⁶ continuing instead the narrative of criminal opportunism. Of course, these copycat rioters may not necessarily have admitted their genuine motives to the media – certain narratives will be appropriated to suit a particular ideological purpose, according to Foucault's theory. Nevertheless, these copycat riots illustrate the social and cultural outcomes of the 2011 London Riots, and the significance they have assumed in cultural narratives. Whatever the initial motives behind the London Riots were, they instigated a widespread desire to rebel against authority.

The accounts cited of the riot at *The Rite of Spring* also demonstrate that details can be created to suit a particular ideological motive; reading the riot within a modernist narrative also implies a desire for scandal and revolution. Indeed, this desire for scandal continued after this event; for example, Erik Satie's ballet *Parade* in 1917 utilised noise-making instruments, which were intended to shock his audience.³⁷ George Antheil's unconventional orchestral work *Ballet Mecanique* caused a similar riot in 1926; one reporter commented, 'Paris hadn't had such a good time since the premiere of Stravinsky's 'Sacre du Printemps''.³⁸ Regardless of the actual facts of the riot at *The Rite of Spring*, its cultural legacy demonstrates its position in a narrative of scandal-orientated performances.

In sum, in accordance with Badiou and Foucault's interpretive frameworks, it is impossible to know the objective details of any event, since all human representations are subject to bias and simplification. Factors are emphasised and repressed, either consciously or unconsciously. However, it is this interpretive aspect of history that is most significant; as Jacques Derrida acknowledged, a historical archive 'produces as much as it records the event'.³⁹ An event is not significant unless we give it meaning – it is this meaning that comes

³² Paul Ricœur, *Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), p. 15

³³ Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, *Representing the Past: essays in performance historiography* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2010), p. 18

³⁴ Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 198

³⁵ Mike McCarthy, *Sky News* [9th August 2011] <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lft78O95Bw&feature=related>> [Accessed 02-05-12]

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Alan Gillmore, *Erik Satie* (Michigan: Twayne Publishers, 1988), p. 194

³⁸ Lynn Garafola, *The Ballets Russes and its World* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 257

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 17

- 12 Using at least two examples of onstage or offstage riotous performances, evaluate the ways in which reporting of events come to substitute for the events themselves: and ask how far can we know what *really* happened?

to stand for the event and, in turn, influence future events. While we cannot know the objective details of a historical event, we can comprehend its representations, and the cultural significance that results from them. Postlewait's EVENT=CONTEXT paradigm may be intrinsically limiting, but it illustrates that history is the context that we assign to it.

We have seen that the conflicting motives surrounding the 2011 London riots cannot be objectively simplified to one determining factor, since it is possible that each rioter was influenced by a different cause. Nevertheless, the riots' social legacy indicates some social unrest, and the desire to reject the prevailing authority, whatever particular factors were considered. Similarly, we cannot be sure of the actual nature of the riot at *The Rite of Spring*, since it is possible that some key details were fabricated in order to strengthen a particular narrative. However, even if they were fabricated, this still implies that a scandal was at least desired. Even if the riot was planned, and not spontaneous, this highlights the desire for scandal that later composers maintained.

In conclusion, history is relative to those who document and interpret it. Consequently, representations will be influenced by inherently partial human subjectivities – by both conscious and unconscious drives. Past events are arranged into a logical narrative of causality; it is this narrative that creates history. The narratives ascribed to both my chosen riots merely elucidate their cultural relevance – this is all that we can truly know.

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- 14 Using at least two examples of onstage or offstage riotous performances, evaluate the ways in which reporting of events come to substitute for the events themselves: and ask how far can we know what *really* happened?

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