

T. NIKKI CESARE SCHOTZKO

Learning How to Fall: Art and Culture After September 11th

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BENJAMIN GILLESPIE

In *Learning How to Fall: Art and Culture After September 11th*, T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko creates an archive of feeling—or, perhaps more appropriately, an archive of *falling*—through the analysis of performance art, photography, visual art, and film created in the decade after the fall of the Twin Towers. In her critical analysis, Cesare Schotzko demonstrates how the experience of event documentation offers a skewed mode of representation precisely because of the ways in which these traces circulate through culture, referring to this process as “the economy of the event” (5). Considering how event documentation often falls prey to aesthetic considerations, she convincingly theorizes how our perception of the real, and the ways in which the real is (re)presented to us publically, is an always-already mediated process of cultural circulation that drafts new forms of social memory. According to her argument, contemporary society has developed “an inability to discern *what* we see from *how* we look” (5), making any event a phenomenon that is extant only through its intersubjective response. Through technological reproduction, our perception of history and memory are reformed to the extent that context and meaning have been abstracted into the virtual.

Each chapter is organized thematically rather than chronologically, focusing on a set of case studies put loosely in conversation with one another. Cesare Schotzko refers to her organizational approach as dramaturgical, employing diverse examples to create a *mise en scène* rather than a linear narrative. A single image haunts her critical analysis throughout the book: Richard Drew’s *Falling Man*, a photograph that captures an anonymous victim falling to his death on September 11th. As a constant point of reference, Cesare Schotzko reveals how the aesthetic nature of this image (especially in the critiques that followed its release) relates to our own subjective encounter with the event it supposedly documents: “The Falling Man’s descent is infinitely repeated in our continued engagement with and bearing witness to his image” (36), turning it into a kind of performance we are forced to repeatedly critique. In large part, her book offers an example of how the act of bearing witness often allows us to construct different, albeit necessary, histories that, for better or worse, get repeated again and again in separate but related contexts. For example, in Chapter One, she considers how Drew’s image has been reinterpreted through subsequent projects, such as Carolee Schneemann’s *Terminal Velocity*, making any apparent truth of the event exist in discord with our experience of its documentation.

Cesare Schotzko continues to call attention to this performative layering of truth in subsequent chapters. In Chapter Two, pulling from Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, she argues that the masquerading of art within the culture industry is an “*untruth of style*” (77), which is predicated on marketability rather than originality, highlighted through the example of reperformance in Marina Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* at MoMA in 2010. Her reading of Abramović’s immensely popular retrospective installation, as well as its marketing campaign premised on Abramović’s marathon labour, offers a vivid example of

how “the art world [. . .] is always already ensconced within the service economy” (68). Additionally, she highlights the circulation of the subsequent documentary film and an earlier appearance of a stand-in Abramović—played by comedian Beth Lapidés on HBO’s *Sex and the City* in 2003—among other examples, as evidence of how Abramović has come to fetishistically represent the entire genre of (highbrow) performance art in mass culture, now consumed through a plethora of media that complicates our understanding of presence by continuously packaging the copy as the real thing. In Chapter Three, she focuses on two controversial events: Aliza Shvarts’s contentious Yale dissertation project, *[untitled] senior thesis*, and a Steubenville, West Virginia rape case, both of which show how subjective response frames the truth of an event, even when what is real remains contingent on the documentation available.

Chapter Four considers Aaron Sorkin’s popular television series *The Newsroom* and its dramatic (re)broadcasting of real life political events for entertainment—most notably the death of Osama Bin Laden—, effectively recasting our memories of real world news into the virtual world of the show. “The hazard here,” she states, “is not so much that we will forget that truth is an illusion, but that we will forget that the illusions [. . .] were ever, actually real” (153). Here, *The Newsroom* and Fox News offer two examples of the commodification of real world events that demonstrate how “the viewers’ interest, and therefore their affective investment [. . .] depends almost exclusively on [the event’s] circulation” (150). In the final chapter, she considers the AMC hit *Mad Men*’s problematic 2012 advertising campaign, which featured an anonymous ad man (presumably Don Draper, the show’s protagonist) falling in a similar fashion as the subject in Drew’s image, a vivid example (as is *The Newsroom*) of how mass culture manipulates reality in order to reconstruct our memory via economic means.

While the book is bracketed by September 11th, Cesare Schotzko also considers events that are unrelated in order to contextualize her theoretical approach and methodology, especially in relation to existing performance studies scholarship. For example, in Chapter Two, she revisits the NEA 4 controversy at length in order to yoke together her understanding of the mass circulation of the “real” with debates surrounding the ontology of performance. The book pays great homage to Peggy Phelan’s critical legacy within the field, offering a range of references to her criticism, as well as an “Afterword, After Phelan,” in which she analyzes her own experience at the University of Toronto while teaching the performances she discusses in her book; here, she demonstrates how a supportive pedagogy might become an act of bearing witness that allows for real affective engagement within the academy.

In light of the global implications of 9/11, one potential criticism of the book may be that it is almost entirely US-centric, offering only a few Canadian examples outside of the majority of New York City-based artists that it surveys. However, I see this focused analysis as a result of its proximity to the event that brackets Cesare Schotzko’s study, as well as the author’s own proximity as a witness to the attacks while living there. *Learning How to Fall* is a timely contribution to the field and will be a provocative resource for students and teachers alike in theatre and performance studies, especially in the current trend of theorizing “the real.” This book continues important conversations happening in multiple disciplines theorizing the circulation of negative affect, and also offers new insights into our growing perceptions of the effects of technology in our everyday lives. Indeed, in a new millennium that has

been largely defined by the fall that marked its beginning, Cesare Schotzko provides us with a unique space to land.

TONY NARDI

TWO LETTERS ... And Counting!

Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2013. 387 pp.

ROBIN C. WHITTAKER

You know a Canadian theatre scene when you see one ...

... where actors whisper ‘who they are’ and ‘what they do’, realizing there’s no respect for actors in a country with no respect for culture ... (Letter Two 173)

At the heart of Tony Nardi’s *TWO LETTERS ... And Counting!* are the texts to three solo performances—Nardi calls them “documentary monodramas” (321)—written and read by Nardi in Toronto and Montreal between 2006 and 2008. *Letter One* is based on a fourteen-page email he wrote to a casting director who wanted him to audition for a racially stereotyped character in a television sitcom set in Toronto’s Little Italy; *Letter Two* is based on a seventy-five-page email he wrote to two prominent theatre reviewers about a Toronto production of Carlo Goldini’s *The Amorous Servant* in 2006; *And Counting!* is “an actor’s letter to himself” (321) evaluating Canada’s arts funding. These three works are surrounded by sundry supporting material: a “Thank You!” by Nardi, a brief introduction by his friend and high-profile constitutional law lawyer Rocco Galati, two selected reviews of Nardi’s *Letters*, a fifty-page essay by Nardi glossing the *Letters*, an afterword by Galati, Nardi’s biography, and five pages comprised of fourteen selected quotations from critics and peers. To aid the reader in approaching the performance text, innovative QR codes tagged to each play and on the back cover lead to *YouTube* clips of Nardi performing brief segments of his work (a technique that might be used to great effect in future play publications).

Taken together, this is a *magnum opus*, a *tour de force* by an actor turned Siminovitch-nominated playwright featuring three exhaustive performances set in curated conversation with critics, artists, audiences, and Nardi himself that is meant to unsettle Canada’s theatre, film, and television professions, force reexamination, and instigate renewal. Throughout, Nardi rejects a hierarchical orthodoxy in which producers, directors, publishers, and critics make pawns of actors. He then places all of them in a field of his own anecdotes, assigns blame to them (only the critics are named), and plays them for fools. Here, the theatre community is a disciplined Bourdieusian ecology, with agents—Nardi calls them “ghosts”—trading informal knowledge (gossip) of their restricted field of cultural production in order to commit career position-taking.

Swaddled beneath Guernica Editions’ cover, featuring Francis Ellington Nardi’s marker and crayon sketch entitled “Mr. Multipants,” these three first-person pieces amount to sustained actor polemics the likes of which we have hardly seen in this nation. (Think Artaud