



*The Case of the Spectator*,  
created and performed  
by Maria Jerez, Teatro  
OUTOFF, Milan, 2009.  
Photo: Amedeo Novelli/  
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SUE-ELLEN CASE

## MY SCREENS ARE KILLING ME, OR WATCHING HURTS

*Maria Jerez and The Case of the Spectator*

Spectators come to Maria Jerez's performance piece, *El caso del espectador*, or *The Case of the Spectator*, bringing with them a specific genealogy of spectating that informs the pleasure and pain of watching the piece. Actions and images in the performance plant clues as to exactly what crimes of spectating, or spectating of crimes, have formed this genealogy, and much of the humor, or irony, of the piece, as well as comprehension of its meanings, depends on that genealogy at work. Rather than using the term *genealogy*, which I take from Foucault, I propose the term *spectonics* to refer to the shifting, compact nature of Jerez's reception references. Borrowing from the sense of plate tectonics, a study dear to the heart of anyone from Los Angeles, the land of earthquakes, I perceive that Jerez's *The Case of the Spectator* is composed of shifting levels of spectonic references—historically produced knowledges of how to look. What Jerez invites us to view are witty, compact images of and narrative references to threats and violent acts against women. The historical referents she offers are located, loosely, in mid- to late twentieth-century pop cultural iconography and pulp mystery novels. Her major beats are drawn from pulp mystery book covers and titles, as well as from the queen of twentieth-century female iconography: Barbie.

Jerez sets up her spectonics with the arrangement of her set pieces and her opening action. First, she sets up the audience with her set. The audience discovers a comfortable chair facing a screen. The chair has turned its back on the audience, perhaps to illustrate its surrogate status, serving as an indexical sign of the seated position of the spectators themselves. It is a large, comfortable chair, designed for hours of sitting. Its design signals the durational domestic spectating of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Accordingly, it is facing a screen; this is a chair in which one sits for hours before a screen. It's a blonde chair, and blonde is a trope of the piece, as we will see. It is a midcenturyish chair; not a BarcaLounger but, as we will discover, a blonde

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Barbie lounge. The vaguely period chair sits next to a landline telephone that is not cordless—in the DVD I watched, the phone was turquoise. The phone is another sign of the midcenturyism, invoking a certain nostalgia, or sign of nostalgia, for the earlier apparati of communication. Techno-nostalgia, or the simulation of techno-nostalgia, like the phones in *Battlestar Galactica*, say—on a spaceship, but with phone technology from the mid-twentieth century. Across the “room” stands a bar with martini-like mixings on it. The martini is another of those nostalgic signs, reminding us of 007 or of period lounge bars. By now, spectators are familiar with shows that use elements of this period, from TV shows like *Mad Men* to Lois Weaver’s underground performances of Tammy Whynot. Familiar with so-called postmodern performance art pieces, the audience does not expect to see a period piece, but a piece with a period or two in it.

The ubiquity of midcentury elements in postmodern performance art situates Jerez’s performance securely within the genre. Midcentury styles signal the *dernier cri* of modernism as well as the beginning of the long affair with the aesthetics of new technologies, and their perforation of the domestic space. The sleek lines and shiny surfaces of midcentury vacuum cleaners and refrigerators constitute a “shroud,” as Alluc-quère Rosanne Stone calls it, within which the working elements recede inward, out of sight, no longer displaying their function or the tactility of their operations; instead, the streamlined shiny, colorful shroud organizes the pleasure of the gaze.<sup>1</sup> The turquoise telephone, for example, or the shiny martini shaker, or the simple, Naugahyde chair illuminate surface and hide the hints of production, as Jerez will both display and hide her own production of images in the piece, to our delight. And, as she will demonstrate, this techno-shroud was an apparatus of anonymity, through which the uninvited stranger, or strangler, could penetrate the woman’s private domestic space. Jerez’s clear production and response to the anonymous “breather” who calls, the unseen stranger who is ringing the doorbell, and the violence on the screen that comes into the home perform the threatening anonymity that these new, domestic technologies provide. They compose, literally, the techno-shroud of the woman who sits alone in her comfortable chair. Midcentury design, the corporate partner of new advertising techniques, marked the seduction and strangulation of women in the new private/public realm, where women became the targets of corporate economics, and, as advertising objects of desire, fixed the pleasure and danger of the normative heterosexual gaze. Women entered the society of spectacle, as the Situationists identified it, where the hyper-gendered dominant codes of normative het power relations were made seductive and also where the peekaboo aesthetics of minoritarian sexual practices were spanked. Jerez will also perform both the peek and the boo.

Into this set, this *mise-en-scène*, or *mise-en-abyme*, Maria Jerez enters. Seemingly, and I will return to this later, she enters without “affect.” As in midcentury design, her function, not her interiority, is foregrounded. As we will discover, she will perform as what Augusto Boal called the spec-actor—a combination of the spectator



and the producer of the piece. Jerez takes her seat in the Barbie lounge and dons a blonde wig. The blonde, as Hitchcock repeatedly filmed her, is the rightful object of the filmic gaze, whose whiteness fleshes out the role of the cool, classy victim. Blondeness helps to compose one of the spectonic plates of the piece. Blondeness shifts laterally along a plate that includes those midcentury objects: the interior retreats inward, while the surface remains seductive and intriguing. The blonde's surface reflects the desire and violence of the threatening male, in the pulps and in Jerez's piece. She organizes, as feminist film critics in the 1970s and 1980s theorized it, the male gaze. Thoroughly manipulated, that midcentury blonde "doll," as she was written into pulp, soon became literally a blonde doll: Barbie, who first appeared in 1959 and will appear at the beginning of Jerez's screenic inventions. Barbie was the success child of Madison Avenue, who attained the perfect combination of spectacle and consumerism. By the turn of the millennium, Barbie's consumer statistics were something like ten dolls per child, and it was estimated that, in the United States, one Barbie doll was sold every second.<sup>2</sup> Barbie also became a globalized success, disseminating blondness around the world—a phenomenon the Spanish-language aspect of Jerez's performance plays upon. Barbie toyfully celebrated the American dream. Embodying the pleasures and dangers of the gaze, Barbie is the seductive, sexualized, anorexic plaything—an avatar of consumerist/nationalist/global spectacle and spectating.

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In blonde wig, then, Jerez clicks the screen on with her remote control and images begin to play. The audience soon discovers that Jerez is also the image producer: she has a handheld camera in her lap and with it creates the image that appears on the screen. The spec-actor, in this case, is more twenty-first than twentieth century. Laterally along the spectonic plate, we can think YouTube, or Facebook, where thousands of spec-actors create and receive the play of the screen. The pleasure resides also in the funky quality of the images—the low-budget, daily pleasures of one’s own domestic space at play.

The first image on the screen is that of the beat-up blonde on the cover of the aptly titled Erle Stanley Gardner pulp mystery novel, *The Case of the Black-Eyed Blonde*. This is the first in a series of images from pulp fiction from roughly the 1940s. I will return to a consideration of the role this genre plays in the performance, but for now, I retain the focus on the blonde and Barbie. Jerez’s camera then captures a Barbie whose mouth is taped shut; her dress has been violently jerked down to reveal her breasts, and she has the black eye of the title. Barbie is the bruised, beaten blonde, the victim of sexual violence. Now, the camera moves up and down on her, increasing its speed. Jerez’s breathing matches the camera’s rhythm and we understand that the camera is actually raping Barbie. Here’s the scene—the violence of objectification, the male gaze, the spectacle, and the commodification of seduction are all literalized in this section. The camera hurts. The gaze hurts. And the audience, on the DVD I watched, laughed.

To understand *The Case of the Spectator* in this moment, I return to the genealogy of spectating that the audience brought with it in that laughter. This is, again, a genealogy of movies—one of the major spectonic plates in Jerez’s production. In the decade of the 1990s, spectators began enjoying a genre of movies composed of violent scenes that organized an ironic distance from representations of violence as the viewing pleasure. These movies celebrated the surprise of a casual killing, which might be in error or without purpose. The movie *Pulp Fiction*, for example, the title itself invoking a similar non-nostalgic citation of pulp detective novels as that used in this performance, played its viewing pleasures through murders and non-consensual sadomasochistic scenarios. In later films, the ubiquity of murder and violence, its repetition, added another dimension to spectatorial distance and pleasures: think of *Die Hard 2* in which Bruce Willis kills 264 people, or *Robocop 2*, during which 81 people are killed, or the *Kill Bill* series that orientalizes and aestheticizes killing in an array of settings and methods. Or think of digital gaming, in which killing is a point maker, a sign of success in the game. This ironic distance, this sense of pleasure in violence, the sense of the game, is the genealogical trace found in the audience’s laughter at the camera’s rape of Barbie. In one sense, the laughter could be understood as a sign that performance-art aficionados want to celebrate the downfall of the dominant, commercial Barbie. But I think it is more than that—it’s a pleasure in the image of violence.

Jerez has created a performance that takes on this pleasure throughout the piece. In fact, the performance congeals around instances of violence against women, including screams, hands around her own throat, and fearful looks. Although these instances of violence are decontextualized and fragmented, they produce moments in the performance where the fear and violence congeal; they create a snapshot—a stoppage in the pleasure of semiotic slippage. Violence is where the system congeals. And by system, I mean more than Jerez's own structure: I mean the social system. Michael Taussig describes the social order as, literally, a “nervous system” where the only “illusions of order [are] congealed by fear.”<sup>3</sup> The social order appears in the violence. It is at those moments that the social order is seen.

Now, in order to emphasize influence of this structuring of the social, I move out from Jerez's piece to another performance that, I hope you will agree, operates somewhat similarly.

#### BIG ART GROUP

Caden Manson's Big Art Group in New York created a work titled *Flicker*, which they performed from 2002 to 2005. In *Flicker*, two “movies” collide into each other and bleed onto a single screen. In one narrative, voyeurism and softcore sadomasochism spin out of control, while the B-story follows a group of city friends who find themselves lost in a wilderness that turns mythic and murderous. As the two films intersect, a dark tale of disjunction emerges, exploring the need to comprehend ubiquitous violence against women. Also, it is designed to invoke a kind of knowing laughter, or amusement.

There are several differences between Jerez and the Big Art Group. First, the iconography of *Flicker* cites horror films more than detective mysteries. Second, the piece is more invested in the fragmentation of the live body—its perforation—by the screen. They reveal how the body and a film are coproducing one another—what Jason Farman has described as a dialogic relationship between the real and virtual body. Farman goes on to theorize both the filming of bodies in pain and the spectating of them as voyeuristic, or fetishistic. However, Farman does develop the relationship between that voyeuristic gaze and its object of the woman as the specific, genderized victim. How the multitracking in the piece congeals around those violent moments with the woman as object.<sup>4</sup>

But Jerez's piece plays both sides of this violence: its pleasure and its danger. I do not mean to suggest, however, that there is any simple, direct relationship between representations of violence and “real” violence, although certain feminist critiques and activist movements have done so, calling for the censorship of pornographic displays of violence against women, for example. And early feminist film theorists did have social stakes in mind, when discussing the scopophilic operations of the camera and suggesting, through it, the violence of the male gaze. I don't necessarily intend to align

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this reception of the piece with the results of the psychological research projects in the 1990s, which established a direct relationship between violence in games and on film and real violence. In the light of audience laughter to the camera's rape of Barbie, such approaches reek, somehow, of old-fogeyism—postmodern humanism, or a puritanical response. “Close the theaters!” as they once said a few hundred years ago, “because they are a bad influence!” “Don't laugh at that scene where Barbie is raped by the camera! Pleasure in it will produce actual rapes!” Fogey censorship, indeed. It is a bygone era that would bring social figures such as 17.6 percent of women in the United States have survived a completed or attempted rape and, of these, 21.6 percent were younger than age twelve when they were first raped, and 32.4 percent were between the ages of twelve and seventeen; or figures offered by the National College Women Sexual Victimization Study that estimate that between one in four college women experience completed or attempted rape during their college years.<sup>5</sup> Fogey feminism would bring these figures to a study of representations of violence, but not the youthful, dapper I.

Today, the spectacles that test the moral relationship between the reception of representations of violence and real violence are not feminist critiques, but nationalist ones. There are numerous critical considerations of the photos of prisoners taken by handheld cameras, shot in Abu Ghraib and distributed across the Internet. These shots of the victims of state torture were imagined as “fun” and playful by the us Army participants who shot them. The ethical considerations of reception are not so much



Big Art Group's  
*Flicker*, ps 122, New  
York, 2002. Photo:  
Caden Manson

about gender as of the national subject and its objects. The key term, in critical discourse today, that is used to signify the terms of an ethical response to such images, the term that has displaced the feminist use of the gaze, or my earlier considerations of distant irony, is “affect.” Fredric Jameson famously characterized postmodernist culture by “the waning of affect.” But affect has made a comeback in this post-post-era of Abu Ghraib. What Sara Ahmed and others, rejecting the Freudian model of individualist emotions, calls the “cultural politics of emotion.”<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler suggests that “transitive affectivity” could describe what Susan Sontag was wrestling with in her attempt to see if photos of suffering could incite an ethical or political response.<sup>7</sup> Affect and emotion are the terms debated and deployed. Brian Massumi in *Parables for the Virtual* describes affect not as emotion but as intensity.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Ahmed, Massumi understands emotion as personal and subjective, whereas affect, he argues, is intensity—intensities are social nodes. As intensities, unlike emotions, affective states are not structured narratively, as Lawrence Grossberg has argued.<sup>9</sup> And thus, we might view Jerez’s compacted, decontextualized moments of violence as these intensities. They are designed to travel by “transitive affect” to invoke an ethical response from the spectator. Like the Abu Ghraib photos, as Jasbir Puar considers them, Jerez’s strangulations and rapes produce an exaggerated theatricality—perhaps part of their irony and humor—but also part of their ethical affectivity. Puar regards such pleasurable “takes” as revealing the “keen ecstatic eye of the voyeur, the haunting surveillance . . . the speed of transmission—aphrodisiacs unto themselves”<sup>10</sup> that take part in a flow of violence. But they can also hail the socially responsible citizen at the same time.

In Jerez’s performance, these images are also placed within references to narratives. Why does she take her images from the covers of pulp novels? Why, specifically, detective novels that celebrate the very engine of narrative development? The pulp mysteries depend on a violent act, most often murder, to set their almost Industrial Age plot engines chugging, whose integrated, whole forms, in an age of cut and paste, cover bands, Milli Vanillis, and multitasking, have become a source of citational amusement. The compressed referent, here, though, is merely a short, suggestive dialogue and a projected image. Its compact flashform offers the pleasure of speed and distance—like looking out the airplane window to see the train winding across the prairie below. The narrative, like the little engine that could, has ambition and chugs toward a successful arrival. Its best years were those in which people were striving for one thing or another, in the first-world countries where the form proliferated. People needed to do better, could do better, imagined doing better. Narrative, in its earnest chugging uphill, promised that all its work was going somewhere and it would successfully arrive. In this sense, we can see how its distribution also worked well in developing countries. The American detective and American violence were sold as part of a long, successful story. The signature elements, such as the beat-up blonde, the chase, and the shooting, were its fashion plates—its spectonic toughness and its formula for success.

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Holding onto that narrative keeps the success story in the bag, while its fragmentation opens up two possible modes of reception that are ineffably linked: first, a cynical attitude toward such notions of progress, perhaps even toward the institutions of progress and, second, an entertaining release from them. This release from progress can be pleasurable for a generation pushed relentlessly toward achievement since preschool, or after school, or during school, working relentlessly toward that test score, that successful application, and that perfect grade average. Who wants to travel on that little engine that could, when looking (literally) for a good time? Celebrations of progressless yet energetic happenings come with representations of causeless, casual killings, the surprises that go nowhere. Moreover, these spectators may be haunted by the fact that perhaps the economy will not sustain or support all the determination, the tutoring, the weekends and evenings saturated with striving. So fragmenting the ever-striving

successful form of the narrative and extracting its violence can produce a humor that strikes back at the omnipresence of achievement (read authority), in a social *mise-en-scène* that is saturated by it—everywhere testing and calculating. Watching violence on the screen is more pleasurable, say, than entering the classroom or the workplace with a gun. Those actions are painfully careful in their aim—too much like the world of cause and effect. Rather, the pleasure of playing with repeated images of senseless violence and establishing a distance from the overdetermined moral response, or responsibility, can effect a much-needed time out.

Now, let me abandon this theoretical *über* view of the performance for a brief look at two individual sections.

#### TWO STRANGE WOMEN — THE LESBIAN ENCOUNTER

The “Two Strange Women” section allows the viewer to enter the peekaboo closet of the midcentury. Jerez stages the furtive pleasure between the blonde Barbie and the black-haired—well, I’m looking in vain for a name for the butch here—maybe she’d be called just Barb—anyway, Jerez produces a make-out scene with two dolls. One of them keeps thinking she is being watched—is afraid. The other seems to insist that there is pleasure somewhere outside the scopic economy. This “somewhere outside” once theorized by Teresa de Lauretis would be the fruits of the closet, one might pun, an exception to the scopic hetero violence. Barbie can enjoy a consensual sex scene with her dark-haired counterpart. The dolls even promise love, for an instant. But then, the husband of one of them has entered and, again, violence. Still, it’s important to note that Barbie and Barb do not brutalize one another, but it is the surveillance of the compulsory heterosexual contact that brings the pair in proximity to violence. These are dolls, however, only surrogates of the sensual, and as hypergendered figures, they reproduce the image of a lesbian encounter that forms part of the scopic pleasure of the pulp. There is a peekaboo pleasure in the perverse. Yet, it is important to remember that it was not lesbians who were visible—here are some from the period (photos of lesbians)—but the titillation of hypergendered perversion. Jerez’s spectator sees only the stereotype—the pleasurable boundary/anxiety of the straight economy, which is finally strangled as well—murder by melancholia.

#### THE CHINESE VISITOR

The section of the performance known as “The Chinese Visitor” is the one strictly oral encounter. Here, the phone relations are inverted—she who answers becomes the subject, and the words of the man on the other end are, at first, untranslatable, un-understandable. Although he has access to communication technologies, they require

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the English language. Global English is the MacDonald's or the Levis of imperial orality. Although China is calling, at the moment, and there is an appointment in the future, it must be on our terms, literally.

The pulp cover that Jerez uses was published in the 1960s, but it is reminiscent of the popular detective of the early and midcentury, Charlie Chan. Chan, played by a Swedish actor in yellow-face, was actually based on a real detective in Hawaii. Yet, his popularity was in his foreignness: his simple, pigeon-English language that nonetheless reflected the logic that solved the mystery. The midcentury was haunted by Asian influences—in the architecture, its elements, lines, and lighting—and in the ceramics. There is another way to see this section, though—as a displacement of the Spanish references in the piece. In fact, the DVD version of the performance I viewed was in Spanish. This brought an entirely different perspective to the blonde Barbie, the pulp mysteries in translation, and so on. The spectator, it was presumed, knew Spanish. One could imagine that this performance was outside the United States, on the one hand, and inside it, on the other. Living in a city called Los Angeles, with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, and a population of roughly 9 million, 50 percent of which speak Spanish, I can imagine that this performance could be about looking at gringolandia from within. The elements of the production are the TV images, the dolls, the popular fiction, and the violence that support gringoland and, more, hail the spectator as a gringo, encourage consumption of these elements and identification with them. The distance the fragmentation effects could be an ethnic one.

And on this note, I will recede.

## NOTES

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