

Understanding Precarious Lives

**Empathy for the Criminal in *Pornography*
and *The Events***

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Introduction

While nothing is easier than to denounce
the evildoer, nothing is more difficult than
to understand him.

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

In a world that claims to be increasingly globalised, borders and limitations are supposed to progressively vanish, giving place to a global humanity and identity. However, the liberalisation of the capitalist market has brought with it, at the social, economic, and political levels, a feeling of unrest that seems to be looking for the reinforcement of borders and the construction of walls to stop dangers coming 'in' from 'out there'. Since the War on Terror started, and particularly after 9/11, the Western world has been on guard against potential attacks, not daring to accept the Other. The threat of mass terrorism has become a constant and a reason for many to voice objections to immigration. The introduction of an unknown Other coming from an unfamiliar elsewhere seems to be an unequivocal source of evil. In these recent decades, external policies and international conflicts have certainly been the cause of many tragedies and, therefore, responsible for the deaths of thousands of people/s. But what happens when the one who makes an attempt on people's lives is a local, one of 'us' and not the Other?

The process of othering has been used in diverse discourses throughout history. It implies the dehumanisation of the Other, the one who is ontologically different. It is based on the dichotomy of 'us' vs. 'them' and, as a result, 'our' humanity is contrasted with 'their'

bestiality. Depriving the Other of this humanity makes discrimination legitimate and, with it, disregard for their life. In this way, when the perpetrators of atrocities like mass murders are defined as such, it is easy to judge them in the light of the irrelevance of their lives. Someone who dares commit such an act against humanity cannot be part of it and thus deserves no compassion.

Simon Stephens's *Pornography* (2008) and David Greig's *The Events* (2013) confront this discourse by presenting episodes of mass killing carried out by members of the community involved. Denying their humanity would pose questions about the community itself and the causes of such an action. In order to avoid this confusion, criminals are generally thought – or expected – to lack empathy, this being a way of justifying their behaviour which at the same time disputes their individual humanity. In their respective plays, Stephens and Greig present criminals whose main source of violence is not their lack of empathy but their utter vulnerability in a world that is in constant change and danger. By doing so, they both centre their attention on the role of society in the construction of unstable identities like those of their protagonists. Through theatre and defamiliarisation, they ask audiences to focus on this and pose questions about their own reality too, seeing that the figure of the Other stretches further – and closer – than expected and that distance should not be a determining factor in understanding them.

DEFINING EMPATHY

Some say being human means being *intrinsically social*, and therefore interconnection among people is definitely core to the human condition. That interconnection goes beyond the mere physical sharing of space and time: one has to appreciate and accept the existence of those other beings cohabitating in that space and time, and a commitment must be made between them all. The basis for cohabitation thus implies the acknowledgement of the Other, recognising them and what conditions their lives, and, in some way, making that part of one's own reality. Broadly speaking, and among the many other elements key to that interconnection, empathy and the understanding of the Other are thought to be indispensable. As a matter of fact, as Pedwell mentions in the following quote, empathy is thought to be the best medicine for atrocities in today's society:

Where there is oppression or violence empathy can heal. Indeed, within the contemporary 'Western' socio-political sphere, empathy is framed as 'solution' to a very wide range of social ills and as a central component of building cross-cultural and transnational social justice (PEDWELL, 2014: X).

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed focuses on the emotional nature of human and social relations, or rather, the relational nature of emotions: 'Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of "towardness" or "awayness" in relation to

[...] objects' (AHMED, 2004: 8). In psychology, emotions are considered to originate in the individual and, consequently, they are seen as 'a possession' that comes from 'within', following an 'inside out' process (AHMED, 2004: 9). Emotions, however, require an object to be affected by, and that makes the 'without' essential for their foundation. As such, we should be talking about a process of 'outside in' rather than 'inside out' (AHMED, 2004: 9), which is, however, still problematic in itself. This alternative portrayal of emotions continues to conceive them as possessions that can be passed on and, for that precise reason, they are considered superficial or artificial, not 'true feelings' coming from the subject but the result of social pressure. To avoid these incomplete conceptions, Ahmed's model of sociality focuses on emotions as in fact the way to delimit inside and outside: 'emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place' (AHMED, 2004: 10). At the same time as being demarcated, inside and outside are also connected through emotions themselves, which are created within the individual, yet inevitably shaped by objects and events on the outside. Object and subject are thus simultaneously linked and differentiated, and as such are not a consequence of cohabitation and socialisation, but the cause of it.

This conception of emotions could quickly be misunderstood and considered a universal human condition that is the basis of a perfect society in which conflict does not exist, yet one must also take into account that emotions are not always about love and care. The perception and interiorisation of the outside and the Other do not necessarily imply acceptance, and this is a misconception that can be easily spotted in preconceived ideas about empathy and cohabitation. Hatred, anger, revenge, and fear are also emotions where connections are founded, and this must also be critically analysed. Being able to be affected by the outside, living, and acknowledging its historical, economic, geopolitical, and social conditions, does not directly involve understanding or approval. On the contrary, it is the

source of insecurities and a sense of vulnerability, which can also lead to fear and refusal of the Other.

According to Butler, '[n]o one escapes the precarious dimension of social life' (2012: 148) in terms of one's own vulnerability, the Other's vulnerability, and what each implies. For her, precariousness is ontological in the human being: '[T]he body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality – including language, work, and desire – that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing' (2009: 3). This exposure to the outside makes life dependent on it and, therefore, subject to its changes and their consequences, whether they be beneficial or not. Whereas a person might not realise their own precariousness and vulnerability when they are in a privileged position, according to Levinas, we are all precarious and vulnerable. This makes us bound to the Other, one who we do not know, we do not choose, and would probably have never chosen (see Levinas in BUTLER, 2012). By seeing and recognising 'the face' of the Other, one comes to realise the exposed nature and helplessness of human life and has, inevitably also according to Levinas, an inclination and obligation to preserve their life. It is only through this ethical command that the 'I' makes sense, never prior to this urge to act for the Other (BUTLER, 2012: 142). Recognising the Other's vulnerability provides a moment of introspection and self-recognition, while also having an impact on the way one responds to others. Butler, however, disagrees with Levinas, arguing that the way the 'I' responds to the face of the Other is not necessarily through caring and helping: '[T]he apprehension of precariousness leads to a heightening of violence, an insight into the physical vulnerability of some set of others that incites the desire to destroy them' (BUTLER, 2009: 2). Thus, this acknowledgment of the face has several outcomes: a) it makes us realise our own vulnerability and the evanescent nature of our own existence; b) it creates an ethical demand on us that requires an action to lessen that precariousness of the Other (see BUTLER, 2012), and c) it can contrarily be

a source of violence that takes advantage of the Other's unsafe position (see BUTLER, 2009).

This perception and recognition of oneself in the Other is core to what is commonly and broadly called 'empathy'. According to Moore and Hallenbeck, 'by positively investing in interpersonal relationships, by becoming aware of our own and other's emotions, desires and intentions, and by sharing experiences and meaning, mutual empathy and understanding are enhanced' (2010: 472). However, empathy is an ambiguous term that has been defined differently throughout history and by different scholars and studies. Besides being a widely studied concept in numerous contexts nowadays – mainly in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience – it is indeed a basic requirement for cohabitation. In general terms, empathy is considered a core emotional intelligence competency that enables one to understand the Other and care about them. Nonetheless, it is also a concept that is difficult to define precisely due to the countless definitions that have been given of it. In "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena" (2011), Batson mentions eight different 'phenomena', as he calls them, that have fallen within the definition of empathy, despite them not involving exactly the same processes, causes and consequences. In spite of the significant challenge that defining empathy poses, he comes to the conclusion that '[t]he processes whereby one person can come to know the internal state of another and can be motivated to respond with sensitive care are of enormous importance for our life together' (BATSON, 2011: 13).

According to Keen, empathy can be defined as 'a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect [that] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading' (2006: 208). The term itself entered the English lexicon in the early twentieth century, coming from Lipps' concept of *Einfühlung*, a German term used to refer to the process of '[i]-maginatively projecting oneself into another's situation' (BATSON,

2011: 8). While the term empathy is somewhat arduous to define, it is also easily confused with sympathy because '[a]s the term [empathy] has become so widely employed in media, politics, art, medicine, education and business during the last few decades, its meaning has become diluted and sometimes even contradictory' (LINDHÉ, 2016: 22). Empathy is both a cognitive and affective process that goes beyond the concept of theory of mind – a term coined by Premack and Woodruff in 1978 that refers to how an individual may infer other people's feelings or thoughts and anticipate how they might act as a consequence – by also going through a process of emotional contagion and feeling the Other's emotions. Sympathy, on the other hand, recognises those emotions, and other sentiments of compassion arise in response to them (see KEEN, 2007: 4-5). The affective component of empathy has been connected to the concept of 'mirroring', which refers to how individuals copy the emotions of another and live them as theirs. For Posick et al., '[m]irroring can be both unconscious and conscious' (2015: 575). Babies crying without thinking when hearing other babies cry is an example of the 'primitive' and unconscious stage of empathy that requires no cognitive recognition of emotions. Later in life, humans develop the capacity to acknowledge the emotions of other human beings as they are happening, also considering the conditions surrounding them, and this is a conscious process (POSICK et al., 2015: 575).

Accordingly, empathy creates bonds between people by making them equal and letting them see themselves in each other. As has been previously mentioned when talking about Butler and the recognition of the Other's vulnerability, this acknowledgement of the Other, their 'face' and their situation, has ethical consequences. As Stein stated, '[t]he world in which we live is not only a world of physical bodies but also of experiencing subjects external to us, of whose experiences we know' (1989: 5), and it is this awareness of these experiences that creates an urge for the self to act and protect the Other. For Butler, particularly when analysing and quoting Levinas on this

aspect, this 'ethical demand' is an imposition from the outside that 'implies a dispossession of the egological' (BUTLER, 2012: 136). This ethical obligation, therefore, leads to social bonding and cohabitation. Butler's concepts of precariousness and ethical obligation can thus be linked to empathy, and it can be said that empathy allows cohabitation to take place. For Harrison, the ethical consequences of empathy are 'altruism and prosocial behavior, moral development, interpersonal bonding and improved intergroup relations' (2011: 256).

The access to the emotional situation/condition of the Other provided by empathy allows understanding and, subsequently, a better social, emotional, and cognitive connection. Nonetheless, this connection can be manipulated in the same way that it is in advertising or in clearly biased pieces of news and information:

These are times when, in spite of ourselves and quite apart from any intentional act, we are nevertheless solicited by images of distant suffering in ways that compel our concern and move us to act, that is, to voice our objection and register our resistance to such violence through concrete political means. In this way, we might say that we do not merely or only receive information from the media on the basis of which we, as individuals, then decide to do or not to do anything. We do not only consume, and we are not only paralyzed by the surfeit of images. Sometimes, not always, the images that are imposed upon us operate as an ethical solicitation (BUTLER, 2012: 135).

Through the careful selection of images, the media takes over the realm of emotions, deliberately creating a 'face' for the Other and consciously expected – and constructed – affect from spectators. Being witness to these media-curated events, images and, predominantly, suffering, spectators are forced to feel a sense of responsibility that may – or may not – trigger their need to act against injustice. The outcome of this solicitation will be that the subject affected by such images will not only have the urge to act to preserve the life of

that suffering Other, but emotions of hatred and fear will also arise towards the originators of that unethical reality. Therefore, in the same way that empathy and emotions can 'open up lines of communication' (AHMED, 2004: 182), they also '[re-establish] distance between bodies' (AHMED, 2004: 63).

As has been previously mentioned, the acknowledgement of one's own vulnerability can produce feelings of both care and protection towards the Other, who is also seen as vulnerable and therefore in need of my protection, as Levinas claims, and feelings of fear of the threat that the Other, who is different to 'me', poses. If such feelings of caring and their ethical demand can be linked to empathy and rules of cohabitation, are we still bound to protect and preserve the life of an Other that we feel afraid of? According to Levinas, that is indeed the case, but how is it, then, that violence among human beings exists if such caring is supposed to be a universal aspect of the human condition?

This Manichean aftermath is clearly and more visibly seen in fiction, where emotions are deliberately created towards specific characters, producing fondness or aversion towards them. Literature – among other arts – is a means to question, discover and show the human experience. As such, literature, being to a certain extent a mirror of human nature, has to be included in the reality of empathy as a way to dig deeper into it.

EMPATHY AND THEATRE

Besides being a process of social interaction and connection among humans in real life, empathy can also be – and is – applied to art. For James Harold, empathy is 'a phenomenon common to our experiences both in friendship and in fiction' (qtd. in HARRISON, 2008: 256). Not surprisingly, the dichotomy of empathy having both a caring and fearing face can clearly be seen, and has widely been argued,

within literature. Keen introduces the topic of 'narrative empathy', which is a process of perspective-taking triggered by the characters and events in a fiction (see KEEN, 2006). For some, this narrative empathy inevitably comes with a behavioural and civilizing effect, as a teaching moment to facilitate society becoming more empathetic and, thus, unavoidably good. This, however, seems a rather naive thought and has indeed been challenged, despite the fact that empathy has an irrevocably essential role in literature as a means to make the reader relate to the characters and events in the story and to then feel as they do and question these feelings.

As regards theatre, which is what this work specifically deals with, Nicholas Ridout talks about the potential theatre has to talk about ethics – ethics meaning being 'good and staying good by acting well' (RIDOUT, 2009: 11). He mentions the 'encounter with the face' (RIDOUT, 2009: 53), a term that has a Levinasian resonance, and which refers to the elevated potentiality of theatre to be a space within which to connect with the Other. The fact that theatre is performed by real bodies in front of spectators makes it easier and inevitable for that Levinasian face to be acknowledged, together with its ontological vulnerability and precariousness. In theatre, empathy is required first by the actors, who have to acquire someone else's precarious condition, as well as by the spectator, who is going to be addressed by that acquired vulnerability. It is this embodiment of theatre that allows the spectator to go beyond mere fiction and into the reality behind it. Consequently, spectators, who are now witnesses to that other reality, are asked to go beyond and act. This is what Lehmann calls 'aesthetics of responsibility/response-ability' (2006: 185). In theatre, spectators are not affected by their reading of a performance and their individualistic imagination only. The 'face' they encounter is a physical one, which directly addresses them and asks them to see the need for an ethical command. Being affected by sound, image, true faces, and the emotions that emanate from the rest of the audience, this command is more consistent than ever. The members of

the audience now have an obligation, so there is something for them to do.

Opposing a certain resistance to these conceptions, and in this way connecting with the ambiguity and dichotomies of empathy, Keen questions whether ‘responsibility/response-ability’ – although she does not use these precise terms – does truly exist and whether that moral improvement is effectively evoked in the reader/audience by simply encountering the face and feeling the Other (see KEEN, 2007). Educational philosophers believe in ‘social imagination’, as a way to ‘[allow] the reader the possibility of identifying with “the other” and thereby developing modes of moral understanding thought to build democracy’ (Megan Boler qtd. in PEDWELL, 2014: 94). As Lindhé presents, Keen is highly critical of the altruism-empathy hypothesis because of the lack of evidence there is in relation to the effect fiction actually has on the receivers of images and how much their behaviour in real life changes (2016: 20). After all, ‘[i]nvestigating the impact of literary reading on behaviour in the real world through empirical studies is a project in its infancy’ (KEEN, 2014: 29).

Another element to be considered when examining the altruistic effects of fiction on social behaviour is the fact that ‘self’ and ‘Other’ are clearly and deliberately demarcated by authors in the way that emotions are intentionally fostered by them in order to make the reader or spectator feel a certain way towards a specific character. This character, however, is not always fundamentally good. How many times has a chauvinistic character been seen as the hero of the story? Or the actions of a psychopath been justified? Are these supposed examples of heroes to be followed just because understanding is there for them? Are these behavioural patterns to be copied? One has to think that emotions are easy to manipulate, the media being a clear example of this, and empathy is, as we have seen, a double-edged sword. Readers are compelled to receive certain types of images and feel a certain way in response. Besides, when readers/audiences are asked to feel themselves in the situation of a particular