Reading an Event After Patty and Jim

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It is possible to present the image of [a woman and a
man] in three anecdotes; I shall try to emphasize three
anecdotes in each [turn] and abandon the rest.
—*Friedrich Nietzsche*

Every *front story* has a *back story* (also spelled as *backstory*). We
are taught this distinction about virtually everything in terms of visual
(invisible) existence, but especially about developing characters in
stories or imagining characters in acting. Every character or scene or
drama has a back/story: Some story that leads up to or that is really
behind the story, motivating characters, but is seldom directly reported,
made known. This distinction is paralleled with other similar distinctions
such as foreground and background, surface, and depth.

The visual *images* used, especially in psychologies of the visible
and invisible, include the vase and two faces, the duck and the rabbit.
But here's one that I especially like, given my interests in media and
communication:

What do you see here? Or hear? I see and hear three leftover pac-men,
from ages ago, standing off from each other, backed up to their corners
or walls, perhaps in a dis.curs(e)ive, critical exchange. What I see
when I flip the image is a triangle in the middle held in place by the
three brackets. The question now becomes, What do you make of
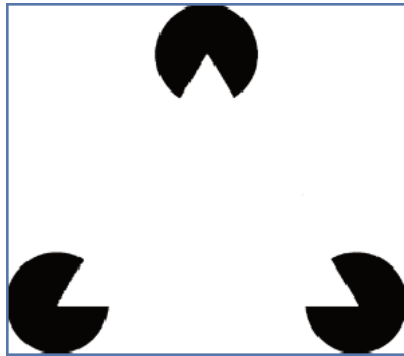this arrangement? What's happening? While you are thinking about

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this matter, let me tell you What I make of it: Variously, I see three pa*cmensch* not only talking, perhaps kibitzing, or engaging in arguments, agonistics, while trying to maintain a communications triangle. You know: encoder-decoder-reality-code. And yet, as they attempt to maintain this exchange, through homeostasis, they try—that is, each of them tries—to take over, chew up, the triangle itself. I mean it's a fierce struggle. It's a *critical* ex-change. I mean this X-change is going to piss-off each of them and then they will depart for home and perhaps spend weeks, thereafter, brooding. People who make things, as some say, have *to brood*. (The verb form, to brood, is a good form to say what I mean to say here, but the noun form is just as important: Brood, as in "The children in one family." So please think both when receiving this message.)

But I see and hear even a great deal more. I'm not sure how to report it other than as embedded (if we can even use that word anymore!) stories that reach me, most forcefully less through a thesis and more through perhaps a kinesthesis, or kinesthetic rhetorics, if not also by ways of proprioceptive rhetorics. (I've always, or is it all ways?, wanted to use those words in something I've written. I do think that they fit quite well here.)

Okay, well, then, all of this is my *front story* for my *back stories*, which have everything to do with Patricia (Patty) Harkin and James (Jim) Sosnoski. Whom I've known now—let's say—for many years. It's been my good fortunate to have worked with them on many occasions. In keeping with Nietzsche's notion of settling on the image, or conceptual personae, of people (great movers and shakers), I will give three anecdotes to capture, though never near will I be able to capture enough of, the image that Patty and Jim make together. I see the image of them in not only complimentary, but also in complementary, ways. Though, to be sure, they are separate human being with their own best virtues and qualities, I would want to speak of their image as collaborative.

First Anecdote: I think the event was in 1981. It was, if I'm not mistaken, a Society for Critical Exchange (SCE) event on "theories of reading" and it was hosted by Indiana University and directed by David Bleich. (What I will say, I will say with a *hesitating syntax*, for I would not wish to realize it as a done deal.) It was a spectacular conference, a spectacle in itself, filled with totally new "academic" experiences for me. I had finished by doctorate in 1975, and was still a neophyte, not really knowing if we academics should fight and, if so, how we should fight with proper academic-vocabularies. At the time, I had not a clue of the special format developed for SCE: Brief position statements, as if impromptu, were put forth by speakers with everyone present in a room, listening intensely, and then breakouts for "caucuses," wherein there were exchanges like no other I had previously witnessed in public/private. (I had lived such a "protected" life! I would recall here, in my account, a couple exchanges, but the details might bring this piece to a point of "truth" that would be better not made public. In a word I can say that what took place was *bare* honesty like I had not experienced before.) Thereafter, each caucus returned to the large group and various appointed interlocutors from

each caucus stood up to *speak the differences*. They would say what not only had not been said, but wanted to be said. For me, let me repeat, it was an "event" not unlike the kind we refer to as "writing [living] the event [*Ereignis*]." In a sense it was *too soon* for me and then when I realized what had taken place, way afterwards, still to this day, it was *too late*. (Freud refers to it as *Nachträglichkeit*. And yet, this is, as Rainer Nägele would say, "reading after Freud.")[1] But I can return and resituate myself back into that middle position at times, perhaps kinesthetically and proprioceptively, re-living and re-experiencing what took place. Many of the people I saw then, witnessed in their leaping up in the large crowd, and speaking their differences, I finally can say became my *colleagues-friends across differences*: some rather agonistic and eristic, yet heuristic and euristic (But that's what we do: colleagues come together to argue over *their* differences!) It has become clear to me that it is not really possible to argue over an important issue with just anyone. It takes years of communicating and building trust with colleagues to let go and say what is on *y.our* mind. This, I have learned in the aftermath of my first SCE event. Further, I've come to understand that someone would be a rich person if s/he had at least two or three such "colleagues" in a lifetime of events. But there, in '81, I saw all these people *at it*. There was so much life, living, going on in that crowd (*demos*)—which was, at times, the rowdy crowd. (I loved every second of it. I knew I had discovered my home.)

I just reread this *up there* and had a good laugh at my own expense. Trying to capture in writing some of the naïve, wide-eyed experiences I was having back then can only appear as sentimental reportage. As I said, to capture the *too soon* can only be achieved in the *too late*. But I will not revise it. For it is "true" to my experience at the time, though, nonetheless, a "fiction" of that "truth." I failed then as well as now to grasp what was *taking place*. A primal scene of sorts.[2] Taking over, while challenging, so many different conceptual starting places. *Topoi*.

To continue: And then, standing before the large crowd, about mid-day, David Bleich introduced Patty (who had spoken her mind, on a panel with Jane Gallop, et al.) and introduced Jim (who had remained silent) to us. David said simply, if I recall correctly, that Patty and Jim were the *founders* behind the protocol for SCE and consequently, with an eye-wink, he said, behind the *scenes*—or as we might say now, they were the motivating force in the *back story*— responsible for all this energy being let loose on "reading." Or, to put it another way, they were the ones who had established the conditions for the possibilities of "challenging reading." But then, of course, those who were invited to speak and to respond had to dis/engage in the very performative acts of reading that would challenge. Perhaps through *polydissoi-logoi* readings. Productive explosions and implosions.

Second Anecdote: Which is less an anecdote and more an application. I decided to try, with the help of Patty and Jim, to hold a conference on "Writing Histories of Rhetoric." A number of us had devoted ourselves to attempting to point out—critically—that the much-

needed history of rhetoric that was finally being written was informed by a writing protocol of *current-traditional rhetoric*. For some of us, this was a scandal that need to be dealt with face to face. So we organized a conference for 12-15 Oct. 1989, sponsored by The Center for Rhetorical and Critical Theory, at the University of Texas at Arlington. About 100 participants and attendants showed up, ready for the exchanges. We followed the protocol developed by Patty and Jim, and just sat back and let that protocol take the various forms it wanted to take—*on its own*. And I can say it took place—on its own. Jim did help to introduce the procedures—positions statements, caucuses, and then a return of the repressed ideas back to the large group. But the procedures took on lives of their own. Much of what had happened in Bloomington happened in Arlington. There were lots of people who were pissed, to say the least. I remember seeing someone at another conference much later and her telling me that she thought back then that I was a most unruly person but thought now that I was okay! I remember Jim telling me that all was as it was meant to be. He said these people would go home and write themselves into further being pissed yet happy. Much, he said, would come of the dissensus. And of course it has. First, there was the collection of articles in *Writing Histories of Rhetorics*. Then, there were more and more publications that uncovered new places. To speak from and to dis/engage in contestations. Which continues to this day.

Third: The third antidote must be left for whatever is to come. Between *too late* and *too soon*.

In retrospect, the framing device of the *front story* and but especially the *back stories* that we started with can be seen now as not just *ergon* as Aristotle would have it in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (i.e., as a proper function, task, work: 1098a.30), but also *parergon* as Derrida would mis-identify it in *The Truth in Painting* (54). Function becomes dysfunction. Work becomes Unwork, or worklessness as in *désoeuvrement*.[3] (How we frame things, how we contextualize them, creates so much extra stuff, or excess, that appears to be dysfunctional, though its improper-proper function is to challenge the dominant task at hand. And it does. For it eternally returns. Presencing one *mis-representative antidote* after another. Those are the conditions for the possibilities that Patty and Jim and, I'm sure, so many others have given (gifted) us. A life of living-thinking-writing dangerously but with grace.

NOTES

[1] I take the expressions "too soon" and "too late" from Žižek, *Parallax* 20.

[2] I'm thinking less Freud and more of Blanchot's "primal scene?" that takes place in "the oscillating, intermediary zone," *Writing* 125-26.

[3] At this point (or pointless), we rebegin a new conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and a gaggle of Italians. I take this French word *désoeuvrement* from the titles of Nancy and Blanchot's works: Respectively, The Inoperative Community and *The Unavowable Community*, along with the Italians, and their "potential

politics" of a refusal to work. Or unwork. Saying: We will not to conduct business as usual. And we must not forget Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*.

Special note: I would like to acknowledge the people at www.sapdesign-guild.org/resources/optical_illusions/foreground_background.html for the use of their image of "pacmen and triangle."

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