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Performance and Theatrical Affect in Steven Millhauser's Short Story "The Knife-Thrower"

Abstract: Audiences and performances figure prominently in Steven Millhauser's short stories whose plots are often structured around some form of public entertainment (e.g. magic or freak shows, museum displays or automaton dramas). "The Knife Thrower," "August Eschenberg," "The New Automaton Theater" or "The Dream of the Consortium," to name only a few of his numerous "theatrical" pieces, use performance to explore the relation between the figure of a charismatic artist and his spectators. As will be shown in close reading of "The Knife Thrower," the writer's representation of a magician's performance is complexified through his choice of a plural narrative voice which creates a unique subject position for his fictional audiences. Another aspect of the theatrical mode in Millhauser's story is that the narrative is informed by the tension between stage and offstage realities, with the dramas often "bleeding" into reality and contaminating the characters' everyday lives. The aim of my inquiry is to look into the aesthetic and moral implications of Millhauser's use and abuse of performative codes, with a special focus on the role of the collective narrator, the relation between production and reception of art and dramatizations of the porous boundaries between performance and life. The methodological angle adopted for the analysis derives from affective studies of theatrical experience.

Keywords: Steven Millhauser, American short story, performance, audience, theatrical feeling, plural narrator

The intention of this article is to examine the relationship between artistic performance and its audiences, as thematized and represented in Steven Millhauser's short story "The Knife Thrower" from his collection *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories* (1998). Although the source material for the inquiry can be found in numerous texts of the author, "The Knife Thrower," in my view, best exemplifies Millhauser's use of style, structure and narrative perspective to create a space which intertwines aesthetic distance and collective feeling—both central to the categories of theatrical affect which have been adopted as the dominant methodological angle for the following analysis.

As pointed out by his critics,¹ Millhauser's popular reception in the American literary tradition has been surprisingly slow, capricious, if not reluctant, and many

1 See for instance Marc Chénétier's introduction to *Steven Millhauser: La précision d'impossible*; Douglas Fowler's essay "Steven Millhauser: The Minaturist," and Alexander et al.

aspects of his oeuvre, including its obsessive engagements with the issues of art and theatricality, have remained underresearched. Although the writer debuted in 1972 and since then has published four novels, numerous short stories, three volumes of novellas and won the 1997 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Martin Dressler: A Tale of An American Dreamer*, he has remained on the margins of the post-war American canon and keeps escaping critical categorizations as well as popular attention (Alexander et al, 7-9). As observed by one of Millhauser's critics, Douglas Fowler, "[i]t would be difficult to name a writer more exotic, fey, perversely playful, allusive, literary, structurally elaborate, and philosophically speculative than Millhauser" (5). In a review of *We Others*, the collection of Millhauser's new and old stories, Jonathan Lethem thus defines his "protean" practice: "his characteristic method mingles dreamlike and often morbid or perverse fantasies with meticulous realist observation"; "his prose temperature is coolly feverish, drawing equally on Nabokovian rapture, Borgesian enigma and the plain-spoken white-picket-fence wistfulness of Sherwood Anderson" (np). Described by J.D. O'Hara as a "Mandarin" stylist, whose dense, descriptive form goes against the most recent taste shaped largely by the minimalist, Hemingwayesque tradition of the American short story (O'Hara cited in Alexander et al., 7), the author is still waiting for a wider and more sustained critical recognition.

The select group of contemporary critics interested in Millhauser's work has found three major keys to classify and contextualize his unique style and literary practice: the Gothic/fantastic, magic-realist and postmodernist. "The quasi-Gothic hauntedness" of his fiction, and his frequent use of the fantastic, as observed by Alicita Rodríguez, reveals the writer's indebtedness to the Gothic short story tradition of Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, James and Lovecraft (Rodríguez in Alexander et al., 7). Indeed, claiming that the writer's work "exceeds realism," Marc Chénétier has proposed to read it in terms of "a mimesis of the fantastic" (in Alexander et al. 10-11). Due to his frequent use of irony, his revisionist approach to literary conventions, visible, among others, in a multi-layered allusiveness, inter- and meta-textuality of his prose, as well as his strong "predilection for the fabulous and self-delightedly artificial" (Fowler 146), Millhauser is often linked with the experimental tradition of modernist and postmodernist fiction—e.g. Franz Kafka, Jorge Louis Borges, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Vladimir Nabokov, or Robert Coover. Interestingly, however, his "intellectually and linguistically complex" (J. D. O'Hara in Alexander et al., 7) works have never received popular attention comparable to the one enjoyed by his contemporaries. The only monograph in English is Earl Ingersoll's recent *Understanding Steven Millhauser* (2014); there is one more book-length study in French, and, somewhat curiously, it is France which has given Millhauser a more sustained critical acclaim, making the collection *Knife Thrower and Other Stories* part of the French national teacher examination program, which certifies secondary-school teachers in specialized areas (Alexander et al., 7). Remarkably, this recognition further links Millhauser's reception to that of another unique stylist in the American canon—Edgar Allan Poe—whose work was also championed by French poets of the

Fin de Siècle before it entered the consciousness of American critics and readers.

The element which binds all of the above contexts and traditions is the heightened focus on the role of art and artists, and this issue will be the main subject of the present inquiry. Artists, performers and writers belong to Millhauser's favorite protagonists, and his novels could easily fit into the category of a *Künstlerroman*.² What is more important for the present analysis, however, is that Millhauser's work frequently foregrounds aspects, metaphors and themes of theatricality and performance. As observed by Pedro Ponce, who studied the topic more broadly in his article "A game we no longer understood': Theatrical Audiences in the Fiction of Steven Millhauser," audiences, theatrical settings and performances figure prominently in his short stories, whose plots are usually structured around some form of public entertainment (e.g. magic or freak shows, museum displays or automaton dramas) (91). The stories such as "In the Penny Arcade," "The Knife Thrower," "Eisenheim the Illusionist," "August Eschenberg," "The New Automaton Theater" or "The Dream of the Consortium," to name only a few of Millhauser's numerous "theatrical" pieces, feature diverse forms of spectacles and displays, using performance to problematize the relation between the figure of a charismatic artist and his spectators.

The particular focus of my own investigation of the selected aspects of "theatricality" in Millhauser's prose is the distribution of affect between the stage and the auditorium and the possible functions of "emotional labour" provoked by artistic performance. Those issues will be exemplified by a close analysis of the short story "The Knife Thrower." As indicated above, I shall employ the terminology and methods of affective studies related to the nature of emotion in theatrical performance, as they offer a particularly productive paradigm for an interrogation of the complexity of the audience's responses within and beyond the space of an artistic spectacle. As will be shown in the following argument, Millhauser's meticulous and mesmerizing dramatizations of performance, coupled with a frequent use of theatrical conventions, metaphors, mechanisms and scripts, create a unique emotional space and subject position for his audiences as well as readers. This position, enhanced by his choice of a plural narrative voice, is used by the author of *Martin Dressler* to problematize a dubious nature of human morality and the ethics of participation. Another aspect of the theatrical mode in Millhauser's stories, as pointed out by Ponce, is that the narratives are informed by the tension between stage and offstage realities, with the dramas often haunting and contaminating the characters' lives (94). Creating a form of "theatrical continuum" which entails diverse social rituals and practices, the stories

2 For example, his first novel, *Edwin Mulhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer, 1943-1954*, by Jeffrey Cartwright (1972) as well as his second novel, *Portrait of a Romantic* (1977), are parodies of a nineteenth-century literary biography and memoir, respectively; whereas his Pulitzer winning *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer* (1996) is a story of a visionary entrepreneur, the eponymous Martin Dressler, who turns his business ventures into fantastic artistic projects exceeding the limits of imagination.

reveal how communal values and attitudes both “assert and question themselves” (Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato vii). Thus, the aim of my study is to look into the aesthetic and moral implications of Millhauser’s use of performative codes, with a special focus on the role of the collective narrator, the relation between production and reception of art and dramatizations as well as functions of the porous boundaries between performance and life.

According to Ridout, who studied the relationship between theatre and feeling in his 2007 book *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*, theatre is “an affect machine” which creates “hothouse conditions” for the collective emotion. According to the critic, theatre helps us feel even when it is not trying, when the designs, acting and lighting fails. Actors conjure emotions on stage, lighting designers create color and light effects, sound designers and musicians similarly work to evoke an emotional mood (Ridout in Hurley 7-9). The affective impact of a performance which opens up a space of “heated intersubjectivity” (Hurley 9) is thus inevitable—theatre makes, manages and moves feeling, captivating our imagination and stimulating affective responses. As noted by Hurley in *Theatre and Feeling* (2010), “theatre’s emotional labour also performs social work,” for “via the work of feeling theatre intervenes in how we as a society come to understand ourselves, our values, our social world” (10). Erika Fischer-Lichte defines this relation in her influential study *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, using the term “autopoietic feedback loop” which “ties the living process of the theatrical event back to the fundamental processes of life itself” (Fisher-Lichte in Carson 8).³

In “The Knife Thrower” (1998), the story which has been chosen for the present analysis, Millhauser explores this affective and social potential of performance, using the language of description, narrative perspective and structure to serve his purpose. The author employs a popular form of entertainment, which is frequently the case in his tales (see for example “Eisenheim the Illusionist” whose main protagonist is a magician); here it is a knife-throwing show in which the charismatic and somewhat notorious artist captivates his audience by a series of ever-more daring challenges. Hensch, for this is the name of the artist, is “an acknowledged master of his art”⁴, and, as the narrator tells us further on, his shows are surrounded by an aura of mystery and transgression because of a certain propensity to “step boldly... over the line never before crossed by knife throwers” (“The Knife Thrower” 287).

For the effect of a concentrated feeling, the narrative in “The Knife Thrower” preserves the Aristotelian unity of time and space and it is carefully structured to

3 The studies dealing with the cognitive and behavioral approaches to “theatrical emotion” have been kindly suggested to me by dr. Dagmara Krzyżaniak, who works in the field of theatre and drama studies at the Faculty of English of Adam Mickiewicz University. I wish to thank her for her generous assistance and for allowing me to peruse her private library for the purpose of this article.

4 All the quotations from Millhauser’s short stories come from the collection *We Others: New and Selected Stories* (2011).

follow the rhythm and design of a live performance. For most of the story, Millhauser keeps his audience within the circumscribed space of the theatre, masterfully playing on the audience's and the readers' expectations as the story moves from the excited anticipation of the show, through a series of suspenseful moments towards its dark and highly ambiguous climax. The power of the enchantment is reinforced by the author's meticulous rendering of the knife thrower's virtuosity in increasingly more daring challenges. The descriptions, in which there are no spare words, have a truly mesmerizing effect, as they skillfully capture the atmosphere of excitement and the performers' movements onstage, seducing the reader with their mimetic force and delight in atmospheric detail. This is visible, for example, in the presentation of Hensch's assistant:

Long-legged and smiling, she stepped from the fallen gown and stood before the black partition in a spangled silver leotard. We thought of tightrope walkers, bareback riders, hot circus tents on the blue summer days. The pale yellow hair, the spangled cloth, the pale skin touched here and there with shadow, all this gave her the remote, enclosed look of a work of art, while at the same time, it lent her a kind of cool voluptuousness, for the metallic glitter of her costume seemed to draw attention to the bareness of her skin, disturbingly unhidden, dangerously white and cool and soft. (285)

The description, a work of exceptional craftsmanship itself, beautifully substantiates the entire scene for the reader, orchestrating the woman's strong sensual impact with the viewers' desires, memories and expectations. The latter, as shown in the fragment, are informed by a peculiar mixture of erotic attraction and nostalgic longing for childhood innocence—"the blue summer days," filled with "the smell of sawdust and cotton candy" (284). The musical rhythm of the passage, created by repetitive, paratactic structures and catalogues⁵ which simultaneously move the narrative forward and stall it through an interplay of difference and repetition, enhance the hypnotic, trans-like effect of the spectacle.

Using the dynamic shifts of perspective between the actions on stage and the audience's collective response, Millhauser not only focalizes the spectators' attention, making their fascination and engagement "eerily palpable," as aptly put by Pedro Ponce (103), but works also to exhibit the dynamics of collective desire, here channeled and intensified by the increasingly artful performance. The following passage, describing the opening stages of the show, nicely captures Millhauser's hyperrealist technique:

Abruptly, Hensch strode to the centre of the stage and turned to face us. His assistant pushed the table with its box of knives to his side. She left the stage and returned pushing a second table, which she placed at his

⁵ Millhauser's peculiar penchant for repetition and cataloguing has been explored, among others, by Cecile Roudeau (2004) and Arthur M. Saltzman (1996).

other side. She stepped away, into half-darkness, while the lights shone directly on Hensch and his tables. We saw him place his left hand palm up on the empty table top. With his right hand he removed the knife from the box on the first table. Suddenly, without looking, he tossed the knife straight up into the air. We saw it rise to its rest and come hurtling down. Someone cried out as it struck his palm, but Hensch raised his hand from the table and held it up for us to see, turning it first one way and then the other: the knife had struck between his fingers. Hensch lowered his hand over the knife so that the blade stuck up between his second and third fingers. He tossed three more knives into the air, one after the other: rat-tat-tat they struck the table. From the shadows the woman in white stepped forward and topped the table towards us, so that we could see the four knives sticking between his fingers.

Oh, we admired Hensch, we were taken with the man's fine daring; and yet, as we pounded out our applause, we felt a little restless, a little dissatisfied, as if some unspoken promise had failed to be kept. For hadn't we been a trifle ashamed of ourselves for attending the performance, hadn't we deplored in advance his unsavoury antics, his questionable crossing of the line? (284)

As noted by Marc Chénétier, who has been one of the devoted French champions of Millhauser's fiction, "through the simple sharing of a sustained exercise of concentration, the writings of Steven Millhauser alter one's vision" (*Le précision* 88). Indeed, the intense focus of the descriptions leading us through the ever more dangerous demonstrations of Hensch's skill probe the emotional boundaries of both the fictional audience and the readers, inviting us to participate and become complicit in the artist's transgressive game.

In the fictional reality of the tale, this game involves getting a signatorial "mark of blood," a memento of the performance in the form of a physical wound. The first "target" is a butterfly which the knife thrower "drove against the wood, where those in the front rows could see the wings helplessly beating" (7). However, with the progression of the show, Hensch moves to human subjects, targeting his assistant's hands and neck, which produces "red trickle, which ran down to her shoulder" (11), to finally turn to the members of the audience. The first volunteer, the young woman named Susan Parker, is just grazed by the knife:

Hensch lifted a knife and threw. We heard the muffled bang of the blade, heard Susan Parker's sharp little gasp, saw her other hand clench into a fist. Quickly the dark woman stepped in front of her and pulsed out the knife; and turning to us she lifted Susan Parker's arm, and displayed for us a streak of red on the pale forearm." (285).

But the violence increases with the second volunteer who receives "a memento" in the form of a deeper wound straight through his hand. The reaction of the audience is

structured by an instinctive anticipation of a potential entropy and voyeuristic wish to see more violence and more blood-letting:

Even as the performance seemed to taunt us with the promise of danger, of a disturbing turn that should not be permitted, or even imagined, we reminded ourselves that the master had so far done nothing but scratch a bit of skin, that his act was after all public and well travelled, that the boy appeared calm; and though we disapproved of the exaggerated effect of the lighting, the crude melodrama of it all, we secretly admired the skill which the performance played on our fears. What it was we feared exactly, we didn't know, couldn't say. But there was the knife thrower bathed in blood-light, there was the pale victim manacled to a wall; in the shadows the dark woman; and in the glare of the lighting, in the silence, in the very rhythm of the evening, the promise of entering a dark dream. (289)

The plural perspective, the we-narrator, has a curious emotional effect, creating a unique "sensory ecology," to borrow from Martin Welton, allowing a feeling of one kind to "nest within others" (105). Similarly, in *Emotional Contagion*, Elaine Hatfield et al. observe that people "synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person, and consequently... converge emotionally" (5). "An important consequence of emotional contagion," the critics argue further on, "is an attentional, emotional, and behavioral synchrony that has the same adaptive utility (and drawbacks) for social entities (dyads, groups) as has emotion for the individual" (5). Millhauser demonstrates the dangerous power of such emotional convergence: in "The Knife Thrower," it results in the silent witnessing, succumbing to and consumption of violence by the audience. There is no restorative, supplementary faculty of emotion in the story which would take the reader to the safer sphere of subjective truth and individual reflection; instead we are drawn into a collective experience of a growing nightmare—"the realm of forbidden things" ("The Knife Thrower," 286)—which leads to the macabre escalation of injury, violence and suffering until the climatic open ending—"the ultimate sacrifice" which is the mortal wounding of the last volunteer (or what seems to be a mortal wound, because the ending remains unresolved, leaving both the fictional and actual audience in a state of uncertainty as to what had really happened).

The we-vision, which leads to the intersubjective blending of emotion, but also includes each individual consciousness, has a deep moral dimension for Millhauser. In an interview with Chénétier, the writer thus explains his preference for the we-narrator:

What interests me (about the 'we' perspective) is the way moral indecisiveness or questioning may be given more weight or significance by attaching itself to a multiple being. A single narrator might have multiple interpretations of an event, or might try to evade moral choice in numerous ways, but the same kind of uncertainty in an entire community becomes public, societal, even political, and carries a different weight.

I would argue that the moral wavering of the ‘we’ in ‘The Knife Thrower’ is more disturbing than the moral wavering of an ‘I’ would have been, or disturbing in a different way. (Millhauser in Chénétier, “Interview” np)

The we-narrator, the writer adds further on, “acts rather like a chorus, a mysterious plurality chanting in unison.” The chorus simile is developed by Millhauser, who traces back the origin of his mode to “the chorus in Greek tragedy”:

I found myself increasingly drawn to this pronoun... because it allowed me to enact the drama of an entire community set against a person or group that threatens it, and... because the pronoun felt new and exciting, a pronoun that didn’t drag in its wake one hundred billion stories, as in the case of an ‘I’ or a ‘he.’ It strikes me as a barely explored pronoun, full of possibilities. (Chénétier, “Interview” np)

As noted by Ruth Maxey, who explores the recent popularity of the plural narrator in American fiction, “[a]s a formal device, the first-person plural narrator is both enigmatic and technically demanding; and historically it has been rare in US fiction. After all, who is ‘we’ in the United States?” “The first-person plural narrator,” the critic continues, represents a paradoxical, mysterious and unsettling voice which is inclusive and exclusive, everyone and no-one, all-seeing yet strictly limited” (Maxey np). Evoking the collectivity of experience and the conformity of the spectators, the plural first person implicates the reader as an addressee (Maxey np) and, in “The Knife Thrower,” also as a participant in Hensch’s displays of violence. As observed by Maxey, the polysemic narrator “lends the collective atmosphere of the story a sinister sense of mass indoctrination: the ‘we’ of a cult.” “We” functions as a “mask,” as the author proposes (Millhauser in Chénétier, “Interview” np); it serve to “show unity and togetherness and a way for individual I voices [and moral responsibilities] to hide” (Maxey np). The contagious convergence of reactions puts a pressure on individual participants who might have doubts about Hensch’s penchant for crossing acceptable boundaries but who seek explanation in the “art” of illusion, absolving themselves from the consideration of the show’s grim outcome.

In *Moving Viewers*, a study of the spectator’s experience in film, Carl Plantinga has coined a useful term “artifact emotion,” which should be distinguished from “fiction emotion” (74). The latter is related to the emotions evoked by the fictional narrative; whereas the former emerges in reaction to the artificial status of the spectacle, when the spectators step back from their involvement in the fictional reality of the performance, “unblending their actor/character integrations to enjoy performances in other ways” (Plantinga 74). The audience’s diverse reactions and the ironic tone of some comments in the story also exhibit instances of such “unblending” and recognition of artifice, as in the remarks that the knife thrower “had the right to develop his art,” or that “the final act had probably been a set-up, the girl had probably leaped smiling to her feet after the curtain fell down” (“The Knife Thrower” 291).

However, the powerful "mystique" of the knife thrower and his assistant, as well as the open ending of the spectacle, which merges with the ending of the tale, leaves the audience and the reader emotionally disturbed and uneasy: "Black against black they stood there, she and he, bound now it seemed in a dark pact, as if she were his twin sister, or as if both were on the same side in a game we were all playing, a game we no longer understood" (287). The spectacle performed by "the black master and his pale maiden" (285) produces a sensation of unreality which conceals and neutralizes the dark costs of the audience's enchantment; at the same time, however, the show's quasi-occult atmosphere, repeatedly stressed by the Gothic *mise-en-scène*, props and light effects, unsettles the viewers.

According to Pedro Ponce, "[if] there is one thing linking the spectators present at Millhauser's magic shows, automaton dramas, and other entertainments, it is the experience of leaving the theatre – or, more accurately, trying and failing to leave the theatre" (94). And indeed, although Hensch's audience leaves the auditorium, it cannot quite shake off the unsettling effect of the show:

But when all was said and done, when the pros and cons were weighted and every issue carefully considered, we couldn't help feeling that the knife thrower had really gone too far. After all, if such performances were encouraged, if they were even tolerated, what might we expect in the future? Would any of us be safe? The more we thought about it, the more uneasy we became, and in the nights that followed, when we woke from troubling dreams, we remembered the travelling knife thrower with agitation and dismay. ("Knife Thrower" 289)

The experience has "shattered the safe boundaries" between life and illusion (Ponce 94), with the "troubling dreams" becoming an extension of the "dark dream" the audience has collectively succumbed to during Hensch's performance. The irony of the situation which Millhauser skillfully plays off here resounds in the question "would any of us be safe?"—the true portent of it lies in the audience's immediate implication in Hensch's daring acts—after all, despite the growing confusion, doubt and anxiety, no one has protested against the escalation of violence onstage, even when they heard the young woman's cry and realized that there was no sound of the knife hitting the wooden partition against which she was placed. Thus, the question "would any of us be safe?" and the remark "if they [transgressions] were even tolerated" strike a deeper cord—as they reveal the audience's "abdication of responsibility" (Ponce 104) and remaining in a convenient denial about their own involvement in the performance based on the collective "consumption" of violence. As aptly summed up by Ponce, "Hensch gives the people what they want, however much they refuse to admit it" (102). The narrative reveals thus the doubleness of the human spirit expressed in the interweaving of the shared communal entertainment (which subtly moves towards a ritualistic sacrifice of the selected volunteers)—and the cruelty of the community's complacency and silence after the dramatic finale of Hensch's transgressive show.

In the article cited above, Ponce explores Millhauser's dramatizations of the audience's responses and perceptions also in other stories belonging to "theatrical pieces," which include, for example, "The Eisenheim the Illusionist" and "August Eschenburg." To supplement the critic's list and analyses, I would like to add a more recent story titled "The Slap," from the collection significantly titled *We Others* (2011), which seems to be closer to "The Knife Thrower" in the way it manipulates the point of view and breaks the boundaries between the performer and his (in this case unwilling) audience. In the story, a mysterious and unnamed "performer," who appears on one September evening at the local parking lot, terrorizes a deceptively idyllic commuter town in New England by slapping randomly chosen residents. Although the slapper and his reasons remain elusive throughout the narrative, his attacks haunt the victims and the whole community, gradually contaminating and destroying the pastoral atmosphere of the town and triggering both personal and collective soul-searching for the explanation behind the mysterious happenings. The repeated and ever bolder assaults of the "serial slapper," who, as the narrator admits, looks like any other man in town and smacks people even in broad daylight, encroaching also on the privacy of their homes, turn the entire neighborhood into a peculiar "theatrical continuum," in which everybody is onstage and nobody is safe from the "slap." The town-turned-spectacle is sieged with mutual distrust and draws people to reconsider the limits as well as myths of their "pastoral" idyll and small town morality:

In one sense, it seemed to us, a slap is a form of withholding, of refusal; it presents itself as the deliberate absence of a more damaging blow... Looked at another way, the slap doesn't merely withhold: the slap imparts. What it imparts is precisely the knowledge of greater power withheld. In that knowledge lies the genius of the slap, the deep humiliation it imposes. It invites the victim to accept a punishment that might have been worse—that will in fact be worse if the slap isn't accepted. The slap requires in the victim an unwavering submission, an utter abnegation. The victim bends in spirit before a lord. ("The Slap" 18)

The violent "mark" of the mysterious provocateur—that "sign of blood, without the blood"—(18) tears deeply at the fiber of the community. The lingering violence of 'the performance,' which the narrator reads as "a sign of the greater pain not inflicted" (18), affects the townsfolk even when the mysterious "slaps began to recede" ("The Slap" 30):

As the slaps began to recede, as even their echo in our minds was becoming fainter and fainter, we wondered whether we had emerged successfully from our ordeal. To call it an ordeal was of course something of an exaggeration. After all, we hadn't been murdered. We hadn't been raped, or beaten, or stabbed, or robbed. We had only been slapped. Even

so, we had been invaded, had we not, we had felt threatened in our streets and homes, we had been violated in some definite though enigmatic way. ("The Slap" 30)

The "enigmatic," indefinite nature of the "field of performance" (Hurley 26) and the slap's unsettling "collective" effect become perfect metaphors of art's power to force its audiences out of their comfort zones and stimulate diverse emotional responses. Using the affective loop between the "performer" and his audience, Millhauser probes the latter's complacent attitudes, offering the reader a subtle web of observations concerning human nature and community which can function both as refuge and nightmare. The focalization and the plural narrative voice serves the writer to dramatically shape his audiences' involvement in the stories' grim climaxes, foregrounding also the ethical and moral consequences of participation.

Erin Hurley contends that, "via emotional labour, theatre intervenes in how we as a society come to understand ourselves, our values, and our social world" (10). Popular forms of entertainment, the critic continues, "confirm at the level of feeling the dominant moral ethos of the culture" (62). As has been shown, in the story "The Knife Thrower," as well other stories evoked in the analysis, Millhauser uses theatrical scripts and the immersive power of performance, along with the dynamics of emotional and conceptual blending characteristic of theatrical audiences, to rethink social rituals, intersubjectivities and the ethical questions of participation, communal responsibility and belonging. The mode of attention which the writer often chooses for his narratives, namely the plural consciousness, becomes a "black mirror" which conjures the intensity of the theatrical emotion, at the same time helping to expose the anxieties, forbidden desires, dubious moralities and hypocries of his protagonists and the communities to which they belong.

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