Performance Anxiety:
An exploration of spectacle, spectatorship and moral panic
in the twenty-first century

by

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution

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Renée Newman-Storen
It is difficult to adequately acknowledge all the people who have helped me during the course of this project. I shall start with university friends – particularly Jo, Dani and Nat, whose conversations were always welcomed. To all my friends who have provided me with laughter and hugs, particularly Tim, Adam, Sam Longley, Libby, Damon, Talei, Thomas, Felicity, Susan, Sam, Sally, Serge, Roger, Cassie, Sam Baker, Robin, Alan and Em. To my ‘best’ girls – Kerry, Bec, Andrea, Kiah, Oda, Ingrid and Caitlin – I can’t thank you enough. To Wendy, thank you for getting me over the line, really, thank you. To the Storens (and extended family), thank you for all your love and encouragement. To my grandparents, Beryl and Stuart Hogan and Betty Newman, you are nothing short of inspirational. To Mum, Dad and Sam, your love and support will never be forgotten or taken for granted. To my best friend and sister, your guidance, humour and intelligence have helped me immeasurably. Thank you to Janna, Josie and Lilah, for lending Christy to me from time to time. Helena, thank you, for pushing me when I needed to be pushed and hugging me when I needed to be hugged and, ultimately, getting me to where I am today. Finally, to my husband, Mark, my partner in all things and a truly extraordinary intellect and artist, you fill me with joy every day.
Abstract

In the last decade there has been an explosion of new technologies that enable discourse, power and truth formations to be produced, contested and dispersed. As communication and information technologies continue to evolve, so too do the ways in which individuals construct identities and form communities. The notion of a moral panic is utilised to describe those critical moments in time and space when social norms are perceived to be under threat. I suggest that the complex interplay of spectacle, spectatorship and moral panic involved in such instances can be both conceptualised and interrogated as performance. This dissertation draws upon two distinct performance paradigms – one theoretical and the other practical – to inform a critical reading of three significant ‘social events’ of the last decade: the drug-trafficking trial of Australian woman Schapelle Corby in Indonesia in 2005, the end-of-life legal case focused on American woman Terri Schiavo, which culminated in 2005, and the race relations associated with the ‘Redfern riots’ which occurred in Sydney in 2004. Informed by a range of theoretical positions from Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Baz Kershaw, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, this dissertation fleshes out contemporary understandings of mediatised spectacle and spectatorship, with the aim of revealing the ways in which they contribute to creating and sustaining moral panic. A critical finding of the dissertation is that through both subjectification and objectification processes the central players and the spectators become indivisible from the spectacle itself, thus maintaining the interweaving cycle of spectator, spectacle and moral panic. By exploring the ways in which people interpret and respond to social phenomena, the possibilities for performance and social theory can be extended.
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Life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same
time; everybody is an audience all the time

Introduction: In the beginning

The contemporary social and political landscapes of the Western world are a matrix of globalisation, media, technology and performance. As Jon McKenzie writes:

> The spectacular development of performance concepts over the past half century, the movements of generalization in such divergent areas as technology, management, and culture, the patterns of joint performance challenges – all these suggest that the world is being challenged forth to perform – or else (2001: 158).

The acts of consumption and commodification, identity formation, the rituals within everyday life and communicative interaction are enactments of performance today. Taking guidance from Zygmunt Bauman, I argue that we are living in liquid modern times (2002; 2003; 2006) in which all kinds of performances are circulating. Performative acts are intricately enmeshed within networks of discourse and power. I am interested in fleshing out three instances of spectacle where communities within this technologised performative landscape were propelled to question what the event meant for them. Ultimately, the task of this dissertation is to interrogate the role of discourse and power in relation to the notions of spectatorship, spectacle and moral panic in the twenty-first century.

Performance theorist Richard Schechner suggests that: “just about anything can be studied ‘as’ performance”. Something “is a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is” (2002: 30). Diana Taylor argues that:

> To say something *is* a performance amounts to an ontological affirmation. ... On another level, performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyse events *as* performance. Civic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example, are rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere. To understand these *as* performance suggests that performance also functions as an epistemology. Embodied
practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing (2003: 3).

The paradigm proposed by Taylor is a central point of inspiration for the conceptual framework of this dissertation. The performance of social iterability – the ways in which individuals and communities engage with and understand each other through repetitive performative acts – is a form of knowledge. I understand knowledge to be an assemblage of discourses that influence how we speak, act and think. To study this knowledge, to examine the performances of our daily lives, is to continually investigate the machinations of social life. Thus, I assume that not only can social phenomena – which include cyber technologies, social media and mediatised spectacles – be read as performance but that this is also a useful trope to use in investigating the larger issues relating to the contemporary subject within the globalised context.

To begin with, I draw from the aforementioned separate but interrelated components: the as and is of performance. The first component (chapters one to four) comprises a theoretical examination of the three social events mentioned above as performance. The second component (chapters five and six) transforms the notion that an enactment is a performance by locating these events in performance in the form of an original performance text that responds to each event. A bridging chapter (chapter six) links the theoretical analysis with the performance script. Ultimately, I explore the interplay between social and political discourses in the manifestation of moral panic in the age of information, mediatisation and mass consumerism. I do this via an examination of the specific circumstances surrounding these three events that were representative of perceived deviations from moral and social boundaries and in the process I explore notions of spectatorship, spectacle and subjectification.
In the beginning...

The three events examined were of great social and political significance for their audiences. The first is the trial of Australian woman Schapelle Corby, who was convicted of drug smuggling in 2005 in Indonesia. The second case is the legal debates surrounding American, Terri Schiavo, who died in 2005 after fifteen years in a Persistent Vegetative State (PVS). Finally I examine the representation of the race-based riots in the Sydney suburb of Redfern in 2004. I selected these cases because of a particular set of responses from audiences that led in different ways to a challenging of social normativity, which I believe indicates something greater about the capacity of the subject to interpret and respond to social phenomena.

In 2005, I – along with a vast array of Australians – observed the trial of Australian woman Schapelle Corby in Indonesia. As I was in the process of developing a thesis topic, this case struck me as an excellent example of the behaviour of contemporary media audiences and the role of spectacle and performance for these audiences. What interested me was not my personal deliberation over her guilt or innocence, but rather how the event accelerated into a spectacle. I realised that this spectacle was a perfect opportunity to apply performance theory to make sense of this kind of event. Thus, I decided to explore two additional events – one Australian (the Redfern riots that had occurred the previous year) and the other international (the Terri Schiavo case) – to see how moral panic played out in other instances.¹

¹ It is important to note that the use of the term 'riots' is used throughout the dissertation because this was how the media tended to refer to the unrest.
As I proceeded, the depth and complexity of each case became more apparent. I began to realise that these three social events led to a perceived threat to morality or ‘public interest’; a moral panic. The furore over these three examples raised questions about the nature of mediatised representation, morality and power, leading me to ask what were the social, cultural and political issues that the audiences to these events faced that in some way contributed to the eruption of a moral panic? I was also compelled to investigate the different ways in which this moral panic played out in each case: these responses varied from virulent judgement to rapturous celebration and everything in between. These events provided an opportunity to examine the prevailing social, historical and political conditions in each context that led to the questioning of normative social values.

The consumerist imperative is enmeshed with the impact of globalisation and the evolution of technology. Within this context, there is a plethora of instances where mediatised events have influenced the nature and role of both spectacle and spectatorship. However, not only because of the constrictions of time and space in this dissertation, my investigative scope centres on those social events that at the time of their enactment had a significant impact on the surrounding social landscape. The influence of each event was different from the other, yet what struck me as fascinating were the similarities. I discovered that the cases were indicative of the changing nature and role of spectatorship. Bauman argues: “The way present-day society shapes its members is dictated first and foremost by the duty to play the role of the consumer. The norm our society holds up to its members is that of the ability and willingness to play it” (1998: 80). As individuals and communities, we are ‘judged’ by our capacity to perform to certain social norms and to consume anything and everything from objects to
sensations and experiences. I found that the shifting qualities of spectatorship are linked to the consumerist imperative and the evolving influence of mediatisation. Thus, I argue there is a need to address both spectacle and spectatorship in the consumerist and globalised context for contemporary media audiences. As my research progressed, I also began to understand that linked to the moral panic expressed by audiences associated with each event, were the objectification and subjectification processes of both the spectator and the individuals directly involved in the events. Thus, this dissertation became not only concerned with the investigation of these three social events specifically but also with the very nature of the subject and of spectacle in the twenty-first century.

Paul Levinson identifies ‘old media’ as print, radio and television, ‘new media’ as the Internet and ‘new new media’ as the types of recent technology that not only provides information but is a vehicle for the production of information by the user (2009: 1). Levinson also points out that many technologies defined as new media were not available five years ago, which is particularly relevant considering that the case studies are based on events that took place five or more years ago. Throughout the dissertation, I refer to old media and new media only in order to avoid confusion for the reader and to acknowledge that many of the social networking devices that are so influential today were only beginning to be used at the time these events occurred. However, it is as equally important to point out that the predecessor of what might be known as ‘Twitter’ today, and other social media devices, was at the time of the case studies, the weblog (blog). I was continually faced with a prolific number of blogs, a wide spectrum of uses

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2 While I note the complexity of these issues I refer to the objectification and subjectification processes that determine how a person might be considered a socially acceptable subject or equally, rendered as an object.

3 It is important to note that the terms ‘performance’ and ‘spectacle’ are not treated in this dissertation as interchangeable but are rather considered as highly significant notions within cultural and social theory. Both terms are recognised as containing potent and contested meanings that are extremely useful in this context.
(with diverse backgrounds) and content that fluctuated between deliberately confrontational messages and engaging critical debate. Thus, I felt it was imperative to include as much of these commentaries as research as was possible. This is because not only did they provide key information about the cases but the blogs and their users were emblematic of the evolving nature of the spectatorship in the construction of modern media spectacle. At the conclusion of the dissertation, I bring the notion of moral panic up to date in relation to new new media.

In gathering information regarding the conditions of each event, I examined predominantly information from the media, including national and international periodicals (magazine and newspaper feature articles, editorials and letters to the editor), transcripts of Australian radio programs, and webcasts of Australian and international television programs.4 Newspapers evidenced were the Gold Coast Bulletin (Queensland), Sunday Mail (Queensland), Courier Mail (Queensland), West Australian (Western Australia), Sunday Times (Western Australia), Herald Sun (Victoria), Daily Telegraph (New South Wales) and Sun-Herald (New South Wales) in the tabloid format, while newspapers such as The Australian (New South Wales), Sydney Morning Herald (New South Wales) and The Age (Victoria) are in the broadsheet format. With both formats come different readerships influenced by class, gender, age and other demographic factors.

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4 The majority of media material was accessed via the Factiva full text electronic database.
Supplementary material was located on the Internet.⁵ They included court proceedings, medical and coronial reports, parliamentary discourse, legislation, and published speeches by both politicians and interest groups. Other forms of commentary included popular biographies of key figures by journalists or autobiographies by the individuals themselves. However, as already mentioned, the main sources of internet commentaries were cyber conversations among ‘ordinary people’ on weblogs (hereafter ‘blogs’) and websites.⁶ It is important to note here that I draw from sources that might be considered shock-jock journalism with sensationalist and opinionated perspectives alongside critically informed engagements of each of the events presented in this dissertation. It is not that I do not differentiate between the two but rather that these divergent commentaries are in fact diverse sources enabling me to unpack the extent of the moral panic in each instance. These sources are interwoven throughout the case studies as spectatorial responses to the events and in the performance text as dialogue. In reference to the theoretical framing of the dissertation, I drew from disciplines including sociology, cultural studies, media studies, gender studies, philosophy, history and of course, performance studies.

Chapter one is a theoretical overview contextualising the mediatised and technologised landscape of the twenty-first century; I locate the three case studies within this context and the major theoretical points for the overall analysis. The contemporary phenomenon of the mass media means that not only is the media intricately linked to the performance

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³ The Internet can be traced back to studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) that suggested a network of computers could advance simultaneous communication. This proposal was taken up by the United States military investigating the potential for this kind of interaction in the event of an atomic attack. From here, the science industries joined the military in exploring the possibilities for enormous data collection, as well as advanced communication. What followed was the involvement of private enterprise and the Internet was launched by the mid nineteen-eighties. In the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries the Internet has become an integral and dynamic information network for most late capitalist Western societies.

⁶ There was no restricted time frame to the year of publication; anything that seemed of relevance to the case studies was included in data collection. Throughout the dissertation, the information from such sources as blogs and letters to the editor is reproduced in the original format including capitalisation and spelling.
of spectacle and spectatorship, but linked to the creation and proliferation of a moral panic.\(^7\) The media continually negotiate subject formation, spectatorship, discursive truths and power relations. Media organisations and media technologies are inseparable from the contemporary “performative society” (Kershaw 2003: 595), in terms of the consumption of sensations, subject formation and the social event as performance. Therefore, chapter one explores the nature of moral panic, and the role of the spectator and mediatised spectacle in responding to and sustaining this moral panic. I find that Michel Foucault’s work on discourse and power is particularly useful in unpacking the significance of mediatised performance events and the effect on individual and collective spectatorship. In this sense, I understand power to be informed by culturally encoded discourse, which as a body of knowledge, enables how we act, think, speak and understand things to be true (Foucault 1980). Thus, intricate networks of knowledge, discourse, power and mediated representations of truth are at work in each of these social events.

Foucault’s work often involved the exploration of certain fears regarding difference – whether concerning the body, criminality, sexuality, or difference of any kind – and it is this point that I find particularly useful in explicating the notion of moral panic and how it might be made manifest. In chapter one, I discuss the notion of discourse and power and briefly explore the reasons why I apply three Foucauldian concepts of the ‘panopticon’, ‘biopower’ and ‘heterotopia’ to the case studies. I conclude the chapter with further questions to be addressed throughout the dissertation on the nature of subjectification and objectification evident in all the cases.

\(^7\) Whilst I note that media discourse might operate within organisations, institutions and technologies, the ‘media’ are not to be misunderstood as a homogeneous entity.
In chapter two, the first case study, I apply the notion of the panopticon to the representation of Schapelle Corby. I explore how the figure of Corby is influenced by the surveillance of the media and public and inscribed by discourses of consumerism, gender, race and sexuality. I argue that this continual surveillance results in a spectacle that surrounds her: where the notion of surveillance and spectacle coexist. However, I question the success of this surveillance-as-spectacle by suggesting that Corby is capable of moving beyond the position of the subjugated object by deliberately manipulating her image, dress and behaviour. The question becomes how effective or sustained is Corby’s pursuit of agency.

In chapter three, I examine the Terri Schiavo case in relation to Foucault’s notion of ‘biopower’ (1980). The chapter explores mediatised statements, opinion pieces, and interest groups in their regulation of the ‘truth’ in relation to debates surrounding the right to life/death movements, specifically in the USA. This chapter draws upon the understanding that biopower is an institutional and discursive form of discipline surrounding the regulation and control of populations, of the subject and the value of life. In reference to the notion of biopower, Brad Evans suggests that: “the biopolitical specifically referred to the political strategization/technologization of life for its own productive betterment” (2010: 415). My argument is that the mediated representation of Schiavo, and what she came to mean for so many, overtook the situation of the actual incapacitated subject herself. Drawing from the work of Giorgio Agamben, I also argue that the discourse of biopower can lead to the celebration of some lives in opposition to the “states of exception” that render others as ‘bare life’ (1998: 159). Ultimately, the Schiavo case reveals the ambiguity of the subject/object relationship and the ubiquitous
nature of biopower as a system regulating the value of the subject in the new millennium.

In chapter four, I explore the Redfern riots in relation to the representation of the Other as criminal and animalistic. Importantly, I understand that the mediatised construction that occurred in the days after the riots might have led to an overshadowing of the causes of the unrest that took place in the inner city suburb of Sydney in 2004. However, while the riots can be read as a space of disruption, they can also be interpreted as an opportunity for the transgression of normative social order. A key concept for understanding this transgression is heterotopia – sites, events and situations that are liminal and ambiguous – as originally formulated by Foucault. Teresa Davis argues that: “Heterotopias have a mirror-like quality of reflecting, yet refracting, distorting and inverting images of space and time. It is utopian, yet questioning of the very utopia it reflects, reflecting both what are real places and what are imagined ones” (2010: 663). The riots’ contravention of social normativity and what I refer to as a ‘memorial of graffiti’, inspired a temporary but subversive heterotopic space where both real and imagined space were inverted and thus highlighted. Heterotopia is a useful concept for examining the tension between resistance and dispossession in reference to the issues surrounding the Redfern riots.

Chapters five and six explore the performative retelling of the three unique events. Chapter five, the performance, *Three Interrupted Lives*, is an original work utilising verbatim text and fictional dialogue. In one way, I endeavour to encourage a nuanced response to the events as opposed to a replication of the polarised judgements that existed for many spectators in the context of the original moral panic. In another way, as
I endeavour to represent moral panic itself, this polarisation of opinion needs to be present in the performance. Ultimately, the performance piece is concerned with the relationship between the performance and the spectator and with fleshing out the potential meaning of spectacle and spectatorship in the actual live performance event. Chapter six explores the function of performance as a form of social commentary by analysing relevant performance practitioners and performance theory in relation to particular choices in my writing and the risks taken in a performative representation of real life events. Following Diana Taylor’s assertion that performance is an “ontological affirmation” (2003: 3) of the act itself and Baz Kershaw’s description of contemporary performance as a “spectacle of deconstruction” (2003: 595), I argue that Three Interrupted Lives is an attempt at a meaningful expression of spectacle, moral panic, and mediatisation in the contemporary global arena.

It is important to realise that these cases studies were significant events at a particular point in (recent) history, shaped by specific social, political and historical conditions that indicated a much larger machination of discourse, power and normativity. Keeping these unique circumstances in mind, it becomes possible to investigate how spectatorship, spectacle and moral panic operate today. Thus, the conclusion to the dissertation is also a commentary on the technologies available since these events took place. I explore the changing media and technological landscape, particularly in reference to new new media, and question the impact of these evolving devices, networks and processes on the creation and propagation of moral panic.
Conclusions

I examine how an event can generate particular responses, the social and political issues that these responses raise and the nature of mediatisation, spectatorship, spectacle and subjectification in the twenty-first century. I explore how each component of these three events is interconnected – both producing and reinforcing discursive truths that reflect the larger machinations of society. I also ask what performance as a creative mode of critical inquiry can contribute to furthering this investigation. Such questions involve exploring the role of normalising strategies in the matrices of discourse and power, as well as fleshing out how moral panic is propagated within this context. In the postmodern instance where there is often no clear or absolute distinction between spectator and performer – where the spectator is increasingly actively engaged in the social phenomena they observe – I attempt to tease out the notions of subjectification and objectification and the nature of agency. Ultimately, I ask questions about how social performance is manifested in the Western globalised zeitgeist.
...the world is being challenged forth to perform – or else

(McKenzie 2001: 158).