

The Bodies of Others: Essays on Ethics and Representation

Jose A. Sanchez, Translated by David Sanchez Cano

Bloomsbury

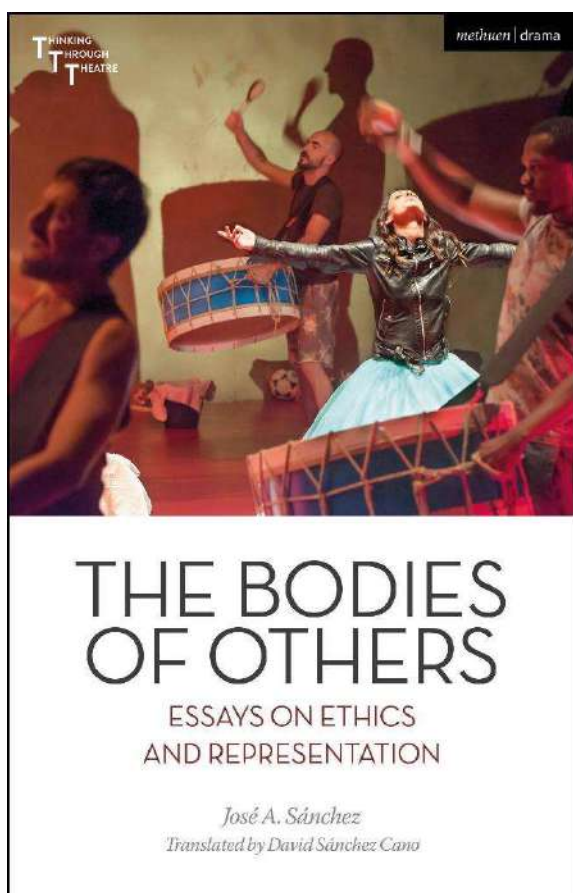
Published: February 2022

Reference: 240 Pages

Hardback ISBN: 9781350250628

Ebook ISBN: 9781350250635

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The question of ethics is always timely, always futural. This monograph, first published in Mexico in 2016, newly translated by David Sanchez Cano, is a recent addition to Methuen's *Thinking through Theatre* series. The series intends to advance theatre and performance 'by exploring the questions it is uniquely capable of asking'. Here, Jose A. Sanchez examines how theatricality may be uniquely capable of producing ethical encounters through complex practices of representation. Context for these practices is largely situated, geographically and culturally, in Latin America. Part of Sanchez' contribution to the series is to 'think from the south.' This is not only contextual, but methodological, a critical, affirmative gesture, and a reckoning against his dissatisfaction with his own earlier research, shaped by a Eurocentric conception of modernity. It is also exemplary of a decolonist perspective.

The monograph comprises 27 essays, moving from a distinction between ethics and morality to sustained reflections on the body and representation, memory and witnessing. In the essay *Representing Ourselves*, Sanchez outlines 'experiences, intuitions, readings, thoughts, affections'. Sanchez imagines the reader, as the reader might imagine the writer. We imagine he is writing at the same time we are reading. Sanchez positions this 'co-temporality' against the sense immediacy with which performance is often described. In the theatre we are between the time of the body and the time of representation.

My own context for ethics, as a branch of philosophy, is largely defined by Rosi Braidotti (2019), Elizabeth Grosz (2017), Sara Ahmed (2014) and Deleuze (1988) back to Spinoza. Deleuze described Spinoza's ethics as *practical philosophy*. My other formative reference is Emmanuel Levinas, who insisted on *ethics as first philosophy*.

While Sanchez certainly acknowledges the influence of western philosophical perspectives, he locates ethics beyond a western philosophical tradition. There are references to Derrida, Bergson and, most notably, Alain Badiou's ethics of the event. Sanchez' ethics, like Badiou's, is an *immanent* ethics: We enter ethical encounters as singularities affected by an event.

The Brazilian philosopher Suely Rolnik recurs throughout, influential for her conception of two modes of politics, and two modes of subjectivity: macropolitics and micropolitics, correlative to a subjected subjectivity and an affective subjectivity. Theatricality and performativity relate to this latter mode. In the event of performance, bodies are situated, put on the line.

The work of Spanish theatremaker Angelica Liddell exemplifies the emergence, and persistence, of representation as an ethical practice. Sanchez describes Liddell's practice in terms of a critical humanism and an activist commitment, one in which, through all the powers of representation afforded by theatre, foregrounds the bodies of others. Liddell's theatre works engage with migrant bodies, with women's bodies in cultures of misogyny and femicide. He cites Liddell to affirm: 'What unites the arts is ethical principles' so that 'aesthetic renewal is an ethical question'. Liddell affirms:

True ethics is ungraspable, but that as soon as we can name it, ethics, then we can turn it into desire.

Sanchez argues that the

ethics of the artist is manifested in their constant struggle against the representations that make up culture.

He acknowledges an 'apparent contradiction' between ethics and representation. And here I am reminded of Levinas' insistence that as soon as one notices the colour of the eyes, the ethical relationship with the other lapses. Sanchez offers an ethics beyond the face, but never beyond the body. Representation as a capacity of embodiment. This is consistent with Bergson's understanding of matter itself: matter is perceptible because it represents itself. Sanchez' brief references to Bergson are, perhaps, where his close view of critical humanism and a broader posthumanist view might intersect.

Somewhere between the German terms *Vorstellung* (representation for spectators), *Aufführung* (realization in front of spectators) and *Vertretung* (putting in the place of) the ethical function on theatrical representation emerges and is starkly clarified: in theatre, embodiment and representation are concurrent, not successive. The time of the body and the time of representation coincide.

In *Perro muerto en tintoreria: los fuertes* (*Dead Dog in a Dry Cleaners: The Strong*, 2007) Liddell stages an encounter with migrant bodies. Citing Alba Rico (2007), Sanchez observes:

What bothers us about migrants, ultimately, is that they have not overcome the body, that mortal remnant.

The European citizen

prefers the image of the body, prefers that their body be an image, an image not troubled by the shadows of ugliness, pain and death.

By contrast, migrants 'do not have a right to an image'. In Liddell's performance, the actors play dogs, set against an enormous reproduction of Jean-Honore Fragonard's *L'Escarpolette* (*The Swing*, 1767) In the performance, the ideal and pleasurable life is juxtaposed against bare life. At the closing section of the performance, a young Muslim woman, Nasima, is invited into the stage. Unlike the actors, she is not masked. But she enters 'as a subject of rights'. Nasima asks: Now, ... tell me, What is Europe?' Nasima moves to a swing, hung from the gridiron, 'usurping the place reserved for European citizenry' in Fragonard's] painting. At the rear of the stage, Liddell writes:

Is there some son of a bitch that wants to kill me?

Sanchez describes ethics as a practice, emerging when we make

decisions that affect others in a specific social context, as well as the set of values and reflections that condition or justify the making of those decisions.

Sanchez renders this as 'Poner el cuerpo' – putting the body, or putting the body on the line.

One example comes from performance by *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* (*The Mares of the Apocalypse*). *Refundacion de la Universidad de Chile* (*Refoundation of the University of Chile*). Two artists, Pedro Lembel and Francisco Casas, rode naked on a mare into the university campus of Las Encinas. Sanchez describes the performance in terms of multiple substitutions:

Two naked bodies replace an armed body, a mare replaced a horse, two homosexual bodies replaced a horseman, two vulnerable bodied replaced a conquistador, two united bodied replaced single isolated one, two sexual bodies entered the asexual space of knowledge (p. 62).

Certainly the body is on the line, here. But Sanchez resists describing the performance as direct action, but rather, 'a representation which challenges representations,' or 'a dissident representation'. Out of the poverty and exhaustion of the body, these dissident (perhaps queer) representations undermine the university as a site of knowledge. Knowledge, and desire, returns to the body.

The later essays are largely devoted to memory, against the 'perpetually looming risk of monumentalization'. Fiction, irony, humour, masking, become something more than aesthetic strategies, ethical principles. In the final essay, *Without / End*, Sanchez writes that the 'ethical turn of aesthetics and politics' can be explained as the 'inversion of historical time as conceived by modernity'. Between the time of the body and the time of representation, there is another, revolutionary time. Sanchez describes a cut: only when this cut is no longer situated in the future does the ethical option seem an option for endless mourning. He concludes:

Representation is one of the possible tools of play and involvement.

The generosity of this book is to propose theatricality as a means of survival, and something more, a way of asserting freedom. Sanchez affirms ethics as proliferate, elaborative life. Sanchez' ethics is rounded in a critical humanism. This is a vital, revitalizing, treatment of ethics. Yet everything that figures as human in Sanchez' treatment of representation can be figured differently, beyond the human. His conception of a simultaneous presence and representation is derived from Bergson. If representation is a bodily capacity, it is because matter itself is an aggregate of images.

Sanchez' treatment of theatricality might be read in sympathy with Carl Lavery's recent research. Sanchez describes how theatricality becomes an ethical practice. Lavery's emphasis is on theatricality as an ecological practice, first described in his contribution to *Thinking through Theatre and Performance* (2019). The ethical and the ecological each emerge in recognition, with differing emphases, of the call to life.

I imagine a moment
in which you
are reading
at the same time I
am writing,
some other book
from some other life
where life is figured differently

What we once called ethics will be proven no more, and never less, than desire. Two queers astride a mare, entering a university campus, in some remote semester of a still-possible future, re-founded.