Conceptualising Event: Some theoretical reflections on the foundations for a critical approach to event studies

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This is going to sound a little like a therapy session – but here goes:

My name is Ian, and I am a lecturer in events management in the School of Events, Tourism and Hospitality, which forms part of the Carnegie Faculty of Leeds Beckett University. In that setting, I would consider myself a research academic interested in the study and analysis of events. Given all that, you would probably assume that I have a clear handle on what the term *event** refers to. It seems a completely reasonable assumption to make. Is it not perfectly sensible to suggest that a basic requirement for studying anything is to have some grasp of the object you wish to investigate? Here comes the confessional: I am now three years into this career and I can, hand on heart, say…*don't rush me; I am still working on it*. Whilst it is neither the purpose nor the function of this paper to speculate as to why, within the context of events management, the literature connected to the study of events does not give much consideration to the production of a clear conceptualisation of *event*, it is worth spending a few moments reflecting on why the absence of a grounded understanding of what constitutes *event* might be problematic in event studies.

It was Don Getz (2007) who first began using the phrase 'event studies'. In his foundational work, he suggested that the field of events management needed to move beyond purely operational concerns; it needed to begin studying 'planned events' (his term). In his book *Event Studies: Theory, Research and Policy for Planned Events*, Getz defines *event* as '…an occurrence at a given place and time; a special set of circumstances; a noteworthy occurrence' (18), earlier suggesting that:

Event Studies is the academic field devoted to creating knowledge and theory about planned events. The core phenomenon is the experience of planned events, and meanings attached to them. Event Studies draws mainly from the social sciences, management, the arts, humanities and a number of closely related professional fields.

From this position, he develops a typology of planned events in which 'Cultural Celebrations', 'Business & Trade Events' and 'Sport Competitions' dominate. Lesser significance is given to events under the headings of 'Arts and Entertainment', 'Educational & Scientific' and 'Recreational'/'Private Events'; with 'Political' events strongly connected to 'state' functions and celebrations. Significantly, a review of what

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* In this paper, I use both the word "event" in italicised and non-italicised forms. Where the word is italicised, I am referring to event conceptually; in such instances the word also appears only in a singular form (as in the *event*), with the view of this representing an abstraction – it is almost a universalisation of *event*. In such an instance, the plural form (events) would be conceptually nonsensical. Where the term is not italicised, it refers to something akin to a planned event; event as a taking placedness of something – such as a festival, a sports game, a theatrical performance, a demonstration, the occupation of a site etc. In such a construal of *event,* it would be perfectly sensible to talk about a range and variety of events (plural) taking place.

drives the conceptualisation of *event* in that work, for Getz, is less an attempt to grasp what the term refers to, and more a wish to ground a study of events that supports the dominant paradigmatic frame within which current events management, and event tourism, operates. Despite his overview of the use of event in different fields of scholarship, he still locates event studies as a field of research with *event*s management and event tourism at its heart. By doing so, he appears to be commodifying *event* within what Bob Jessop (2010, see also Sum & Jessop 2015) refers to as the prevailing hegemonic frame of reference dominated by a neo-liberal cultural political economy. However, even within current scholarship critical of event management (Rojek, 2013), there is very little effort expended on trying to articulate to what it is that *event* refers. As such, 'event' seems to be ontologically light; that is to say, following Frege (2003), it is a word which we can say has a sense, or a range of senses, in that Getz and others would suggest we can indicate different things as *types* of *event*, but when it comes to trying to frame its referent… Meh! An alternative route would be to adopt a Wittgensteinian mode and argue that there is no single referent to 'event' that stands as a definitive ontological prop for a typology of 'events'. Instead, there is a sort of family resemblance (1953) that loosely connects event types. Fine – but then we should ask what it is that makes many scholars in *event* studies think that some things, say a parade as part of Leeds Pride, are of value to study as an *event,* whilst others, such an anti-war blockade of Faslane Naval base or the 2011 Tottenham riots, are not.

As Getz rightly points out, 'event' is not a new term, as it already occurs as a concept in a number of areas of human inquiry. A few brief examples will suffice to illustrate this. In the physical sciences, for example, it is already used in a number of ways, and we will see discussion of quantum *event*s where quantum states, upon observation, collapse; moving from a probabilistic state to being at an identifiable location. In cosmology, we may overhear theoretical physicists discussing an *event* horizon around a Black Hole, as that boundary beyond which light cannot escape. In economics and statistics, an event occurs when something that only had a statistical probability of happening actually happens; its likelihood moving from probable to certain. So it is with the tossing of a coin. Before it is tossed, and whilst it is in the air, there is only a probable outcome. However, on landing, it becomes a definite Head or Tail. An economic event, such as a stock market crash, can be statistically calculated. But once it *has* crashed, the percentage likelihood becomes a certainty. There are even events in computing where the pressing of a key, the movement of a mouse or the swipe of a finger across a touch-sensitive screen, can all be considered informational events.

I will be musing a little on event in some philosophic frameworks, adding a layer of reflection to develop an idea of *event* that is relevant as a foundation for critical event studies (CES) research. Though my focus is to develop a clearer understanding of event's referent within my own field of research, the formulations of 'event' I explore and, to an extent, the one I propose as workable for critical event studies, opens up

'event' to be a core concept of value in the arts, humanities and social sciences. In so doing, event studies can come to be understood as a truly multidisciplinary field that sits at a juncture between all those other areas of scholarly activity. It is important to make an initial point of clarification here. Whatever construal of 'event' is to be adopted, it must be one applicable to those areas of inquiry interested in human action and interaction in that it is to be distinguished from those disciplinary uses already identified. Where to begin? One possible starting place is the etymology of the word itself. According to Cunliffe (1920) *event* has its roots in the Latin *eventus*, meaning 'to happen'. It is related to the word *adventus*, which meant to arrive somewhere, that is, to be transported from one place to another. The *event* of arriving somewhere new being the *advent* of an *advent*-ure.

For Heidegger (2013; 2005 [1962]), the *advent*-ure, the primordial *advent*-ure, begins with an *event*, one that lies at the core of our being. He uses the German word *ereignis* to refer to this formatively fundamental *event*, making it ontologically foundational. Ereignis is our awareness of being as that which has a locatedness in the world, our there-being or *Dasein*. With Dasein comes a recognition of our mode of being as that which does not simply exist, but one that opens up a clearing in existence so as to consciously encounter itself as in, and part of, the world. This is difficult to grasp, so Heidegger suggests we need to look back at Plato's allegory of the cave (Heidegger 2002), as articulated in The Republic. In Book VII Plato uses a fable, his famous allegory of the cave, to ask us to imagine prisoners in a cave, looking at a distorted pattern of shapes that appear on a wall in front of them. Those shapes are actually produced by a parade of objects in front of a fire that they cannot see, as it is behind them. Having only experienced those images, the prisoners take them for reality. Plato then proposes that one of the prisoners is released from *his* chains; *he* then sees the fire and recognises the distorted images on the wall as false. What was originally taken as being real was nothing more than an illusion. This is a profound shock, one that forces the prisoners to completely revise their thinking about the world they had previously assumed that they fully understood. For the released prisoner, realising for the first time that what they took to be real was in fact a shadow-play on the cave wall and, beyond that, that the cave itself was a small and somewhat insignificant element in a rich, colourful and vibrant world beyond its mineralist maw, is a radical rupture with everything that preceded it. It is a fundamental awakening to the prisoner's true orientation to reality; one that shatters all that was previously recognised as real. All meaning prior to their release becomes nonsense in the revelation of *his* true orientation to the world in which *he* is located. Sadly, following their profound revelation, the prisoner's language bears no relation to that of their former associates; so much so that, though they try to tell those other shackled subjects, their language sounds like that of madness and raving. Thus, if we were to adopt a Platonic/Heidegerrian frame of reference for *event* it would be one that articulates it as a foundational metaphysical rupturing, reorganising ones ontological state and orientation so fundamentally that it cannot be easily grasped by a language better

suited to handling the mundane concerns of ordinary life, as such it can only be communicated through allegory.

Echoes of this primordial quality of *event* can be found elsewhere in twentieth century philosophic thought. A construal of *event* as a rupturing and an opening up of the world to mean that we encounter the Real appears in the work of Jacques Lacan (1985). The Real, which he juxtaposes with the Imaginary, is one that also resonates through a lot of poststructuralist thought. This locates *event* as being in an oppositional relationship to structure, and as such, it reaches beyond Lacan, through Derrida (1978), to the contemporary philosophic thought of Badiou, Deleuze, Ranciere, Zizek, and beyond.

There are a number of routes that can be taken here, all of which will lead to the place I wish to reach, but such a rhizomatic meandering journey is a far greater project than one to be managed in the confines of a short paper so I will hover briefly over just one of them by tracing a trajectory that emerges from the Lacanian idea of the 'mirror stage' and considers it through Zizek's take on ideology.

At its core, the Lacan/Zizek route rests on the construction of the self as other, i.e. our *self* as an object of our own experience. For Lacan, a critical event, one that enables us to construct an individual identity, is established through what he refers to as the 'mirror stage'. Lacan outlined his initial thinking behind the mirror stage in a lecture delivered to the 14th International Congress on Psychoanalysis in 1936 (Burnett 1985 and Lacan 2004[*]). For him it acted as a means of understanding how the self becomes both disassociated from the world, whilst recognising it is also part of the world – that is to say, it is a model for making comprehensible the objectification of the subject. Initially conceived as an actual stage in the development of a child, the moment when it first recognises its own reflection in a mirror, over the course of the development of his thinking the *mirror stage* became more allegorical – indicating a structural re-orientation, one that objectifies the subject, forming the self in an *event* that disconnects the subject through a construal of it as other within its own gaze. For Lacan, the mirror stage replaces the Platonic cave as a metaphor of the *event.* Through it, we objectify ourselves, making of ourselves an object for our own gaze and that of others. We become ano*ther* in a world we are part of, and through that, we gain the recognition of an *I* that is distinguishable from the world, whilst resident in it. Such a transition produces in us an unquenchable desire to return to an unattainable unity; one that breaks the division of self and world. My interpretation of Zizek (2014 and 2009) is that the mirror stage is associated with a cloaking of the Real through an ideologically articulated Imaginary. We construct ourselves through the gaze of the other within an ideological framework, commodifying our self; the *event*, for him, being that which ruptures that ideological frame of reference. *Event* is that which brings back into focus the structures within which the self and the other are being constituted. In

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[*] The reference here is to the iteration of the idea of the 'mirror stage' presented at the 16th International Congress on Psychoanalysis in 1946. I was unable to locate an English source for the 14th Congress.

this interpretation, both Lacan and Zizek share a positioning of the referent of *event* as ontological and axiological with a more materialist orientation, rather than the more idealist orientation apparent in Plato and, to some extent, Heidegger.

Both the Plato/Heidegger and, to some extent, Lacan/Zizek routes do not easily lend themselves towards a social understanding of *event*, which was an earlier stated requirement, nor do they immediately suggest how the study and analysis of *event* can lead us towards empirical research. So some interpretation of them that can connect them to a sense of *event* which can be of value to a critical study of *event*s; one that can act as a foundation for empirical investigation, is required. This is something I am still working through, though where I am at the moment in developing these thoughts and ideas is bearing some fruit. My current working understanding of the referent for *event*, whilst associated with the Plato/Heidegger and the Lacan/Zizek trajectories, requires some minor adjustments drawing on a consideration of Bourdieu and Foucault. Let us begin by thinking about the conceptualisation of *event* as 'rupture'. Rupture not only suggests a breaking, a gushing forth from a single fracture, but, crucially, something that is commonly connoted as violent and somewhat uncontrolled. This is apparent in the imagery of the *event* we have encountered so far, the breaking of the prisoners' chains, the shock of recognising yourself in your own reflection. Whilst an *event* can be violent and uncontrolled, it is by no means a universal characteristic. When we consider events such as those associated with culture or sport, a demonstration through the streets of a city or the occupation of space in a financial district, the objective seems to be to coordinate disorder so that it becomes articulated in a way conducive to the hoped for outcome of the event. And whilst I do not want the referent of *event* to suggest that all outcomes are, in an operationalist or corporatist sense, managed; if we are to understand *event* as being applicable to social action and interaction, then we do want an interpretation where some sense of organisation, applicable to *event*, is available to us. This is difficult as I also want to try to avoid the commodification of *event* that leads immediately to the sort of hegemonically restricted typology *event* studies and event management currently operates within.

My current suggestion is that *event* is that which *intervenes* structure. For critical event studies, that structure needs to have some of the characteristics of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of a social realm composed of multiple, intersecting fields, where the actors within them exhibit patterns of behaviour, language and senses of rationality appropriate to the field(s) in which they are acting and interacting - their habitus. It is through intervening that *event* exposes structure. But more needs to be said on the idea of *structure* if we are to understand event as intervention. Crucially, with a nod towards Badiou, structure should not be seen as singular with regards to ontology; it is fundamentally multiple (and in some sense fractal – where apparent simplicity is only complexity from a different perspective). Just as structure is multiple, so is *event*, and thus so are the exposures emergent from *event*'s intervention (disruption) of structure. And what is exposed when event intervenes/disrupts structure? Discourse,

in a wide-ranging (non-linguistic) Foucauldian sense; the 'form of life', if we were to take a Wittgensteinian attitude; the dominant hegemonic frame of reference if we were a Gramscian or, even, the revelation of the articulation of how the life world has been colonised, if we were of a Habermasian frame of mind. Within the dominant paradigm of neoliberal *event*s management, many of the *event*s Getz and his peers discuss are *planned interventions*, where there is an attempt at having a substantial level of control over the structures exposed. They are, in a practical sense, attempts to manage, direct and manipulate the discourses exposed as a result of intervention. However, as *event* is multiple, *the event* is always more than that which is planned; the structures exposed are always more than those the 'manager' tries to manage, and the management of the exposed structures/ontologies is never complete. As *event*s management attempts to control the structures exposed, it also generates discourses of specialisation, technologies of truth, around *the event.* In doing so, it intrinsically entangles language and power with the cultural, social, ethical, political and so forth; producing a contested space in which the *managed event* tries to contain and, in some instances, heal the disruptive impact of the intervention(s) that constitute an identified 'event'. A study of the event as multiple, how it intervenes, what is exposed by that/those interventions, how the healing of the exposure is handled – by whom and for what purposes, is central to a critical approach to the study of *event*s. A critical event studies is thus not only a field with rich potential for empirical investigation, it should also be an essential element of inquiry and teaching in *event* management.

A construal of *event* as that which intervenes structure places the political and social right at the heart of event studies as vital elements of contextual critique. It widens the scope for what is to be considered relevant material for scrutiny and extends the range of methodological approaches relevant to it by making it a truly interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research area. For me, and the areas I am personally interested in exploring, this refreshed potentiality opens up new doorways in how I can work alongside colleagues active across other social sciences, the humanities and the arts; extending the reach far beyond its existing frame of reference in *event* management discourse. Let me illustrate this with a few sketched examples. The first is actually a comparison of two incidents that would not normally fall within the purview of event studies. First, and most recent, is the killings at the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo in January 2015. Second is the murder of 77 people by Anders Breivik in Oslo and on the Utoya in Norway in 2011. Neither of these would normally be considered events within the scope of event studies, yet both are consistent with the short definition of event as offered by Getz. Equally, though neither comply with the implicit subtext within his framing of them, both were undeniably *planned* events.

Both tragedies resulted in a senseless loss of life. Neither would be of interest, as an area for research, to the majority of those working within event studies, and why should it? It neither fits easily into their typology of event, nor are they amenable to the more common forms of analysis such scholars use. However, they represent a fascinating opportunity for someone interested in understanding them from a critical event studies

perspective. Interpreting these events as complex interventions in complex structures (traversing contexts that include media, social, political and, importantly in these cases, the lived structures of those affected), opens up new research questions and approaches that can help us better understand the impact those events had. How were those events 'managed', not just by the perpetrators of those atrocities, as some dark and disturbingly skewed interpretation of event management might take it, but, significantly, by societal, political and media institutions? Why were the demonstrations that followed soon after them articulated in the media the way they were? One, for example, was attended by a plethora of world leaders marching for 'freedom of speech' along the streets of Paris, the other attended, mostly, by families and a community in mourning. One was declared to be an act of Islamist extremists out to, ostensibly, undermine everything that lies at the heart of freedoms enjoyed in late capitalist democracies (though the part those same leaders are playing in restricting free speech and freedoms to protest seem to have been carefully overlooked). The other a lone, assumed to be psychotic, individual on a solitary 'crusade' against what he believed was a Europe in decline due to growing Islamisation. Who were identified as appropriate speakers and figures of authority in 'public' presentation of discussion around how to resolve the 'issues' exposed by those events? What different discourses around identity, place and otherness have been revealed? Both expose structures across multiple hegemonies and ontologies – attempts to 'manage' the aftermath of those *event*s were, and are being, articulated through diverse discourses – both will leave scar tissue that will never truly heal.

On a less sombre note, interpreting event as that which intervenes structure also opens up the possibilities of applying a critical event studies lens to scholarship and practice in the creative arts as well. How, for example, do the *event*s in a work of fiction expose the structures the characters are inhabiting? My own practice as an actor, in developing a persona, is to consider how the character I portray reacts and responds, manages, the exposed structures events reveal during the course of a play. A painting, sculpture, installation, poem – what is the milieu in which the work art itself emerges? In what ways does a work of art intervene? What structures does it expose? Is there, then, a sense that a work of art is an *event*?

Whilst my proposal that we should identify the referent for *event* as that which intervenes structure does open up the field of *event* studies, moving it to a central position as a new analytical lens working alongside others across a variety of other fields and disciplinary areas does come with an associated risk, exemplified by the Don Alhambra quote (from Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Gondoliers*): 'When everyone is somebody, then no one's anybody.' Similarly, if we are not careful, the proffered interpretation of *event* risks becoming one where everything is *event* and, consequently, drops out of sight for any inquiry by its shear blanket ubiquity. This is one of the reasons why I see myself as still developing my understanding of just what is meant by the term, a project where I feel assured in saying 'Don't rush me…I'm still working on it.' It may be that *event* does not actually reference in the sense that it

names some*thing*, or some state of affairs. I am rather open to the idea that it is a lens, a filter to help us gain fresh insights into the way the social world is working, a set of heuristic tools for developing new research questions and research approaches. It is with some degree of confidence that I can say that if you come back to me in another three years I will have responses to those questions. However, I am equally confident that a host of new, associate, questions will have arisen, and their number and complexity grown, exponentially.

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