OMG – WTF are *event*s anyway?

This is going to sound a little like a therapy session – but here goes: My name is Ian; I am a lecturer in *event*s management in the school of *event*s tourism and hospitality, part of the Carnegie Faculty of Leeds Beckett University. In that setting I would consider myself an *event* studies research academic. Given all that you would probably assume I have a clear *handle* on what the term *event* refers to. It seems completely reasonable. Surely a basic requirement for studying something is to know what it is you are studying. Well, three years into this career and I can, hand on heart, say – don’t rush me…I am still working on it. Without going into detail, because that is not my focus in this presentation, the event studies literature does not give much consideration to producing a clear conceptualisation of *event*.

It was Don Getz (2012) who first suggested the field of events management needed to move beyond operational concerns to the study of (his term) ‘planned events’, that began using the phrase “event studies”: developing a typology of events in the process. Significantly, what drives the conceptualisation of *event* for Getz is less an attempt to grasp what the term refers to and more a wish to ground a study of *event*s that supports the dominant paradigmatic frame within which current events management 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 tourism at its heart; commodifying *event* within what Bob Jessop (2010, see also Sum & Jessop 2015) refers to as the prevailing cultural political economy. Even Chris Rojek (2013)a recent critic of *event*s management, does so without even attempting to say what *event* refers to. 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 if senses, in that Getz and others would suggest we can indicate different things as *types* of *event*, but when it comes to its referent…Meh! We could adopt a Wittgensteinian mode and argue that the referent behind the typology is a sort of family resemblance (1953). Fine – but then we should ask; what is it 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.

*Event* already occurs as a concept in a number of areas of human inquiry. In the physical sciences, for example, it is already used in a number of ways. For example, in physics we have quantum *event*s where states collapse, upon observation, from a superposition to a stable state; or an *event* horizon around a Black Hole, that boundary beyond which light cannot escape. In economics and statistics *event*s occur when probabilities become actualities; the crash in a market or the tossed coin has landed and becomes a definite *Head* or *Tail*. In computing we have data *event*s such as a data input event when a key on the keyboard is pressed.

In this presentation 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 *event* studies research; claiming that such a construal of *event* opens it up to be one of the core concepts of the arts, humanities and social sciences. I suggest such an interpretation of *event* studies makes it a multi-disciplinary field that sits at the juncture of all those areas of scholarly activity. To begin let us ponder the etymology of the word itself. *Event* has its roots in the Latin – *eventus*…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 begins with an *event* that lies at the core of our being. He uses the German word *ereignis* to refer to this primordial *event*, making it ontologically foundational. Ereignis is that awareness of our locatedness in world, our there-being or *dasein*; recognition of our being as a being that opens up a clearing in existence so as to consciously encounter itself as in, and part of, the world. To grasp this Heidegger suggests we need to look back at Plato’s allegory of the cave, as articulated in The Republic. In Book III Plato uses a fable, his famous allegory of the cave; he 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, 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 false. What they took for real was mere illusion. For the prisoner released and, for the first time, realising that what they took for real was a shadow play on the wall of the cave in which they were incarcerated 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 - a fundamental awakening to the prisoners true orientation to reality is recognised. Within such a Platonic/Heidegerrian frame *event*s are a foundational metaphysical rupturing that can only be articulated through allegory.

The thought that *event* is a rupturing and an opening up of the world to mean we encounter what Lacan (1985) would refer to as The Real, juxtaposing that with The Imaginary, is one that also resonates through a lot of post-structuralist thought. *Event*’s as placed in an oppositional relationship to structure reaches beyond Lacan, through Derrida (1978), to the contemporary philosophic thought of Badiou, Ranciere and Zizek. *Event* as rupture and awakening make the *event* the ultimate OMG-WTF moment.

There are a number of routes that can be taken here, all of which can bring us to the place I am leading, but time will neither permit such a rhizomatic meandering journey today, nor space permitted in the subsequent paper; so I will hover briefly over just one of the possible pathways. Though, as with all the routes I’ve been mulling over, it is still, very much, a work in progress. The trajectory I trace out here 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. Lacan outlined the thinking behind the mirror stage in a lecture delivered to the 14th International Congress on Psychoanalysis in 1936 (2004[[1]](#footnote-1)\*). For him it acts 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, the objectification of the subject. Initially conceived as an actual stage in the development of a child, when it first recognises its own reflection in a mirror, 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 by construing them as other within its own gaze. We objectify ourselves as other to the world we are part of through the recognition of an *I* that is distinguishable from the world whilst resident in it: producing a desire to return to an unattainable unity 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 this interpretation, both Lacan and Zizek share a positioning of the referent of *event* as ontological and axiological with a more materialist, rather than a more idealist orientation apparent in Plato and, to some extent, Heidegger.

Both the Plato/Heidegger and, to some extent, Lacan/Zizek routes do not automatically lead themselves towards empirical research in event studies. So how to connect these 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? Though I am still working on that, where I am at the moment is working through a construal of *event* that whilst associated with both, requires a minor adjustment to the language. Rupture not only suggests a break but, crucially, something that is commonly connoted as violent and somewhat uncontrolled. A gushing forth from a single fracture. And whilst I don’t want the referent of *event* to suggest that all outcomes are, in a pragmatic and corporatist sense, managed, I do want one where there is the possibility of a dimension of management available. This is difficult as I also want to try to avoid the commodification of *event* that leads immediately to the sort of ideologically restricted typology *event* studies currently operates within.

My current suggestion, and it is only its most recent iteration, within that fluid space that exists in a sort of mad-hatters tea party of ideas in my mind, is that *event* is that which *intervenes* structure. It is through intervening that *event* exposes structure. Crucially, with a nod towards Badiou, just as structure is multiple (and in some sense fractal – where apparent simplicity is only complexity from a different perspective) so is *event*, and thus so are the structures exposed. Within an *event*s management frame of reference, 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. However, as *event* is multiple, *the event* is always more than that which is planned; the structures exposed are always more than those being managed, and the management of the exposed structures/ontologies is never complete. As *event*s management attempts to control the structures exposed it generates discourses of specialisation, technologies of truth, around *the event.* In so doing it intrinsically entangles language and power with the cultural, social, ethical, political and so forth. Producing a contested space which the *managed event* tries to contain and, in some instances, heal. Hence a critical approach to the study of *event*s not only becomes possible, but an essential element of *event* management.

A construal of *event* as that which intervenes structure reaches far beyond its existing frame of reference in *event* management discourse to offer a referent for *event* that makes it a key term within the arts, humanities and social sciences; positioning critical *event* studies as a truly trans-disciplinary field that can work with those areas of human inquiry. Let me take two relatively recent examples relating to the social sciences. The first, and most recent, is the killings at the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris earlier this year; the second is the murder of 77 by Anders Breivik in Oslo and on the Utoya in Norway, in 2011.

In Paris at 11:30 on the 7th January this year two brothers forced their way into the offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. Once inside the building they killed 11 people, injuring a further 11. The gunmen, who identified themselves as being part of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda killed a further 6 people before they themselves were shot by police in the Iil-de-France region. On the 11th January 2 million people, together with more than 40 world leaders, paraded through the streets of Paris in a rally of national unity, in defence of the right to free speech under the banner – Je suis Charlie.

On the 22nd July 2011 Anders Breivik, who described himself on his blog as a Christian and a *modern-day crusader,* though opposed to formal church institutions, feltcalled to act against what he perceived to be the Islamisation of Norway. Dressed as a police officer he set off a bomb outside government offices in Oslo, killing 8 people. He then went to the island of Utoya where he began shooting participants at a Workers’ Youth League summer camp. By the time the police arrived on the island he had killed a total of 77 people, injuring a further 329.

Both tragedies resulted in a senseless loss of life. How were the structures exposed by those *events* managed? One was attended by a plethora of world leaders marching for freedom of speech along the streets of Paris, the other attended by families and a community in mourning. One was the act of a group who genuinely believe they are creating a better world by eradicating what they see as anti-Islamic sentiment; the other an individual who believed he was creating a better world by defending his country against what he perceived as a growing Islamisation. Both expose structures across multiple hegemonies and ontologies – attempts to manage those *event*s were, and are, articulated through diverse discourses – both leaving a scar tissue that will never truly heal.

*Event* as that which intervenes structure gives us another way in to the analysis and interpretation of what happened in France and Norway, a trajectory that, hopefully, could aid our understanding of them.

As well as the social sciences and humanities the proposed construal of *event* also can play a part in inquiry in the arts. 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? In what sense is a work of art an *event*?

The proposal that the referent for *event* as that which intervenes structure may open up the field *event* studies, moving it to a central position across a variety of other fields and disciplinary areas, but it is still only a working definition, one I am wrestling with. Whilst I feel convinced that a conceptualisation of *event* is central to many fields of human inquiry I am not as strongly convinced even by my current working construal. It may be where I am at the moment but in answer to the question ‘OMG WTF are *event*s anyway’, I still want to answer…don’t rush me, I’m working on it.

Thank you.

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1. \* 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)