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Towards a Theory of Cruel Britannia: Coolness, Cruelty, and the 'Nineties

The explosion of 'in-yer-face' theatre that dominated the British stage in the 'nineties has had both vocal champions and detractors. Here, Ken Urban examines the emergence of this kind of theatre within the cultural context of 'cool Britannia' and suggests that the plays of writers such as Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane explore the possibilities of cruelty and nihilism as a means of countering cynicism and challenging mainstream morality's interpretation of the world. Ken Urban is a playwright and director, whose plays *The Female Terrorist Project* and *I ♥ KANT* are currently being produced by the Committee Theatre Company in New York City. His play about the first US Secretary of Defense, *The Absence of Weather*, will premiere in Los Angeles at Moving Arts Theatre Company, which has named it the winner of its national new play award. At the request of the Sarah Kane Estate, Urban directed the New York premiere of her play *Cleansed*. He teaches Modern Drama and Creative Writing in the English Department at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. An early version of this article was first presented at the 'In-Yer-Face? British Drama in the 1990s' conference at the University of the West of England, Bristol, in September 2002.

THE INK on the theatre annals remains damp, the official story of 'nineties British theatre not yet agreed upon, the mythology not yet secure. Accounts remain torn between critics such as Michael Billington and Benedict Nightingale, who want to make a case for a movement with an impact akin to that of John Osborne and the Angry Young Men, and those who see 'in-yer-face' theatre as having 'almost nothing to say' (Peter Ansorge) because it 'gives up any attempt to engage with significant public issues' (Vera Gottlieb).[1]

As Aleks Sierz argues in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, a sensibility rooted in shock dominated British theatre in the 'nineties, when writers as diverse as Sarah Kane, Philip Ridley, and Martin McDonagh were part of this avant garde of new drama. The plays which he finds to be best described as 'in-yer-face' portray victims as complicit in their own oppression: they obsess about the crisis of masculinity, shun clear political statements, and reject any notion of political correctness.

However, given the formal disparity of the plays, the case for a movement is hard to make. An artistic movement needs a shared sense of purpose, a collective will, a manifesto, or at least a figurehead with whom the artists align themselves. Sierz prefers to see 'in-yer-face' as a theatrical sensibility that, while the norm for a brief period of time, was neither a coherent aesthetic project nor the only kind of theatre being made during the period.

In 2001, when I asked Mel Kenyon, the agent who represents and mentored playwrights including Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, about the so-called movement, her response was, 'It's a load of old shite. There's no movement. They are all completely individual. But there is a moment. There *was* a moment.'[2] While Kenyon asserts the individuality of these young writers, she also notes what unites them: a historical moment. She calls the 'nineties 'a time of fragmentation' and 'of complete uncertainty', when the 'certainties of the left proved to be bogus'. As a result, 'similar themes and issues' recur in the plays of these writers.

But what is this elusive moment when 'in-yer-face' theatre took centre stage? How can we characterize this 'time of fragmentation'? And why was such violent theatre so popular at a time when, despite ideological uncertainty, England was in the midst of a period of

  DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X04000247

economic certainty and cultural resurgence? This same question is often raised in relation to the plays of Middleton, Webster, and their fellow Jacobeans, whose work combined scenes of torture with dazzling language and theatrical intensity. As in the debates regarding works such as *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, critics cannot agree whether these cruel plays are decadent or profoundly moral – while perhaps neither of those options is satisfactory.

This latest 'golden age' of British drama arose during a unique moment in the cultural history of the country – the reign of 'cool Britannia', when Britishness became Britain's favoured fetish. In the mid-'nineties, London became ground zero for a revitalization of British art and culture. The world took notice and politicians such as Tony Blair took advantage of the rebranding of London as the global capital of cool. 'In-yer-face' theatre, along with the visual arts and pop music of the time, heralded the return of 'swinging London'. Yet the intersection of coolness and cruelty that characterizes a prevalent strand of the work attests to a tension within 'cool Britannia'.

Far from giving up any engagement with 'significant public issues', as some critics contend, this 'cruel Britannia' undertakes an exploration of nihilism's ethical possibilities. It is no coincidence that *Variety*'s critic Matt Wolf initially dubbed such playwrights as Kane and Ravenhill the 'new nihilists'.[3] Although the British press, not best known for its semantic specificity, threw around the word 'nihilism' in a pedestrian sense, as a synonym for 'depressing' or 'hopeless', the journalists were saying more than they knew.

This investment in the possibilities of cruelty and nihilism connects Britain in the late-'nineties with other significant moments in modern art and thought: the essays of Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille in France in the 1930s; the debate between Martin Heidegger and Ernst Jünger in postwar Germany; and the final writings of Friedrich Nietzsche in Germany during the 1880s. In this essay I shall bring together these strands to create a theory of cruel Britannia. In the theatre, music, and art that 'twists' the cool Britannia phenomenon, coolness, cruelty, and nihilism come together to form an ethical vision, as opposed to a moral one, and in the process cruel Britannia conjures a contemporary experience of the *tragic* for audiences at the end of the bloodiest of centuries.

New Labour and the Culture of Brands

Tony Blair didn't invent cool Britannia. By the time he came to power in May 1997, the phenomenon was quickly moving towards its terminal phase. But New Labour under his stewardship seized a golden opportunity. By 1994, the media had begun to take notice of the sudden revitalization of British arts and culture. A burgeoning art scene was making its presence felt in London as early as 1988, with the much-discussed *Freeze* show, conceived and curated by the Goldsmiths' student Damien Hirst. By the early 'nineties, the Freeze generation, which included Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Rachel Whiteread, and Marc Quinn (to name but four), was receiving international attention. Likewise, British pop music, while it was overshadowed in the early 'nineties by American grunge rock, was poised to make a comeback in 1994, with British bands moving from alternative playlists to American mainstream radio.

By 1996, the media hype machine had kicked into full gear. When the American newsweekly *Time* anoints London the 'coolest city in the world', and Ben and Jerry's launches a new ice cream called Cool Britannia, *and* both events occur within seven months of each other, the cultural signposts are impossible to ignore: 'swinging London' is back. And for a brief span of time, it was: Oasis and Blur, the Spice Girls and Girl Power, Charles Saatchi and the Young British Artists (YBAs), Alexander McQueen and the clothes of 'Highland Rape' – this cocktail of British culture was sold across the globe as cool Britannia.

Blair not only wanted to guzzle this distinctively British brew, he wanted New Labour and cool Britannia to become synonymous. By aligning itself with this youthful movement, New Labour was able to distin-

guish itself generationally from both Old Labour and the Tories, and court younger voters. This act of distinguishing the parties became increasingly important since Blair's Third Way economic policies muddied such differences, leaving the party open to accusations that Blairism amounted to little more than Thatcherism lite. In truth, what New Labour and the Clintonian Democrats in the USA succeeded in doing was marrying free-market economics and social liberalism, or to put it more succinctly they created a vision of counter-cultural individualism – the 'sixties without the stink of the collective.

To sell a revamped Left, New Labour emphasized a love of youth culture by joining the cosmopolitan 'rebranding' of Britain. The UK has never been able to shake off completely the image that it is a backwards-looking island of stodgy tea parties and frumpy monarchs. By placing 'creative industries' and 'lifestyles' at the centre of a government-sponsored campaign, Blair hoped that Britain's image would change, accentuating a vitality and creativity at odds with the old, nostalgic vision of Merrie England. New Labour looked at Britain as a brand, a commodity, to be managed and marketed.

Since the mid-'eighties, beginning in the USA, there has been a steady shift from an *economy of production* to a *culture of brands*. Companies no longer see their primary function as selling sneakers, personal computers, and mugs of coffee; they now sell a 'lifestyle', a 'business solution', an 'experience'.[4] Rather than a product with which consumers have a utilitarian relationship, a brand forges a connection with consumers by representing ideals and values appealing to specific communities and, as a result, creates the idea of brand loyalty on the part of consumers. Realizing the economic potential of this 'deeper' connection, companies funnelled their economic power towards creating an image, buying their products from outside manufacturers as cheaply as possible and then branding them in order to give the faceless product an aura of social value and cultural importance.

In the mid-'nineties, New Labour took note of this economic shift and developed a theory of culture to accompany it. Blair wrote in July 1997 that Britain was 'leading a creative revolution', much like the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, but rather than exporting the fruits of industry, New Britain was taking America and Europe 'by storm' with '*our* rock music', '*our* musicals'.[5] Blair's vision of Britain returning to superpower glory is not rooted in a dream of economic or geographic expansion, but in the language of advertising. Anneke Elwes, then Planning Director for the ad agency BMP, wrote, 'The cultural output of countries is like a large advertising campaign on behalf of that country.'[6]

New Labour saw possibilities in fully embracing the consumer culture of American capitalism for specifically British ends, making 'cultural output' a brand that could be sold to the world at large. Taking the advice of the ad execs to heart, New Labour wound up, in the words of John Gross, 'elevating the commercial to the ideological', and applying 'supermarket language to a whole society'.[7] No longer would Britain be the land of bad food and crooked teeth; London was now to be the epicentre of a cultural renaissance, its inhabitants no longer citizens of a fading imperial power, but the vital members of a country blazing into the new millennium high on a rush of newness. The fruits of British cosmopolitanism would be an alternative, a rival even, to American culture, which had been the maker and breaker of all things cool since the 'fifties, which could be marketed to the world like the Nike swoosh or the Golden Arches. Thus a few weeks after Blair's victory over John Major in the general election, Culture Secretary Chris Smith proclaimed that cool Britannia was here to stay.

Rebranding Theatre

Although the rebranding of Britain tended to focus on music, fashion, and the visual arts, the popularization of 'in-yer-face' theatre as a cool and youth-driven phenomenon sits well with cool Britannia. Robert Hewison, writing in 1998, nicely sums up the dizzying excitement of the moment:

> From Brit-pop to Bryn Terfel, from Stephen Daldry to Damien Hirst, from Jenny Saville to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000247 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nicholas Hytner, from Rachel Whiteread to Mark Wigglesworth, there is a renewed sense of creative vigour and excitement. . . . We are on the threshold of either a decadent *fin de siècle* or the breakthrough that characterizes Vienna in 1900.[8]

With this kind of press, it is easy to see why New Labour was eager to be associated with the phenomenon: it was all about the new. Modernism had always been eyed with suspicion by the authorities of British culture. In the case of British visual arts, for example, art critic Richard Shone argues that there is a curious lack of a modernist tradition. 'Realism and subjectivity maintained their preeminence' throughout the twentieth century, Shone writes, despite the occasional bursts of experimentation. Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticists, the quirky canvases of Stanley Spencer, the fertile culture of Pop Art, these are the exceptions to the rule, for the 'insular traditions of picture-making' never fully gave way to European avant-gardism.[9]

Yet in the mid-'nineties, the drive for newness typically associated with modernism had finally taken hold, and although Hewison and others wondered whether it was a case of cultural renaissance or just unbridled depravity, the force of the modernist impulse in arts and culture could not be ignored – but this was not newness against the marketplace, but in the service of it. Casting aside figurative painting, the visual artists tended to embrace installation art and irony. Popular music, on the other hand, managed to have it both ways, looking nostalgically back at the guitar rock of the 'sixties, while at the same time embracing samplers and sequencers in order to capture the excitement and danger of raves and German discos.

In Hewison's hit parade, high-profile stage directors such as Stephen Daldry (with the 1992 revival of *An Inspector Calls*) and Nicholas Hytner (with *Miss Saigon* and *The Madness of George III*) earned a place beside young artists such as Damien Hirst and Jenny Saville, and classical music stars such as Bryn Terfel and Mark Wigglesworth. This line-up attests to the fact that theatre's presence was far from paltry in the marketing of the phenomenon. David Edgar called theatre the 'fifth leg of the new swinging London', taking its place alongside 'pop, fashion, fine art, and food', but it earned such recognition 'not for revivals of de Vega and deconstructions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'.[10] While Hewison listed directors in his article, it was the playwrights who were getting all the attention in the mid-'nineties.

The artistic home for many of the 'in-yer-face' playwrights was the Royal Court, run by Stephen Daldry from 1993 to 1998. During his first year as Artistic Director, Daldry asked, 'Why is [the Court's] audience so fucking middle-aged? We are not telling the right stories.' His solution: 'We have to listen to the kids.'[11] Daldry worked hard to create a 'cult of youth', and in light of the controversy surrounding Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and the ensuing ticket sales, he did his best to keep the Court in the press. Daldry's philosophy might be summed up: do lots of new work, do it for short runs so that houses are full every night, always invite important people, and if a play bombs, remember that it will close before the Court loses too much cash.

The result: new plays become events and producing new writing, deemed risky at the start of the decade, now becomes immensely marketable, with a good deal of cultural cachet to boot. Thanks to such a philosophy, Daldry and his team fully mastered the art of the transfer, moving shows from the Court to bigger houses, spurred on by the consumer demand created by the length of the initial runs.

Daldry was not alone in his desire to make the theatre cool again. The Bush's Dominic Dromgoole and the Traverse's Ian Brown were equally excited by the prospects of a new writing culture which was unfettered by ideology or mainstream tastes, and both of these theatres debuted the work of an impressive number of new playwrights. But it was the Royal Court that became known as the home of 'in-yer-face'.

'Gentrifying the Avant-Garde'

That such 'in-yer-face' work could become part of a marketable cultural identity may seem odd at first, but, in truth, the 'nineties were all about peddling the provocative. This was

the decade when the alternative went mainstream. Writer Michael Bracewell calls this phenomenon 'the gentrification of the avant-garde', where 'experimentalism' becomes the 'new conformism'.[12] The 'in-yer-face' playwrights were a Brit Pack modelled on the 'bad boy' image of pop musicians; the YBAs challenged New York for art-world supremacy thanks to the help of a wealthy patron, former ad man Charles Saatchi; and in both instances, a radical aesthetic, or at least challenging subject matter, was not viewed as anathema to the marketplace but, thanks to catchy slogans, highly profitable.

Pop music, art, and theatre were the jewels in the crown of a changed Britain, and their modernism and formal experimentalism were not signs of an oppositional stance, but rather part of the work's exciting newness, something which late capitalism embraces with surprising agility. That much of this work wasn't necessarily new *per se* – shock long having been the *modus operandi* of modernist art and letters – did not seem to hinder the critics' enthusiasm. The art felt new because of the young fashionable people making it.

That much of this cultural rebranding still relied on America as its source of cool inspiration – the influence of American artists Bruce Nauman and Jeff Koons on the art of the YBAs, the frequent name-dropping of American film director Quentin Tarantino by 'in-yer-face' playwrights – did not hinder the formation of this new British identity. The art appeared British because of the context.

If we accept Shone's thesis about the lack of a true modernism in Britain, then we can see the 'nineties as pure postmodernism, and such a marriage of avant-garde and commerce, depending on your perspective, as a modernism defanged, a modernism for the kids, or a bit of both. The erasure of the once-impenetrable divide between pop culture and high art, so often predicted by postmodernists, had finally come about in London in the 'nineties in events as various as Max Stafford-Clark's production of *Shopping and Fucking*, all neon letters and club music, and the furore surrounding the *Sensation* exhibition of YBAs at the Royal Academy of Art: art as media spectacle, and media spectacle as art.

While theatre benefited from its rediscovered cool status, the hoped-for political union between New Labour and cool Britannia met a sour end. There would be no fraternal bond between Tony and the brothers from Oasis. Nothing is crueller than coolness when it feels exploited by the Man. Coolness, as Dick Pountain and David Robins succinctly define it, is 'a permanent state of private rebellion'.[13] Marked by a libertarian attitude of 'Whatever', cool is highly individualistic, preferring the role of detached onlooker to the passionate commitment of politics; and the 'nineties saw this attitude become the 'dominant mindset of advanced consumer capitalism'.[14]

'Cool' Capitalism

New Labour used coolness as the means by which to reconcile the basic contradictions of capitalism: the need to work and the desires of the individual. 'Cool,' Pountain and Robins write, 'dissolve[s] the categories of left and right by decoupling the economic and social assumptions that have been more or less fixed since the French Revolution'.[15] The 'uncertainties' that Mel Kenyon spoke of are clearly part of this 'decoupling'. In the 'nineties, being laissez-faire in economics *and* on social issues makes complete sense to politicians but, to voters, the boundaries which had separated the party of Thatcher from the party of Harold Wilson were no longer clear.

The culture of cool Britannia demonstrates this erosion of left and right. The products of Brit Pop, for instance, resemble little more than cultural recycling; the styles and sounds of the 'sixties without any oppositional content. Much Brit Pop was fuelled by a nostalgia for a 'swinging London' that is most assuredly white and dominated by men. Case in point: Oasis, the Brit Pop band *par excellence*, reportedly circulated their demo cassette with a cover displaying the Union Jack. When asked about the choice of cover, Liam Gallagher replied, 'It's the greatest flag in the world. It's going down the shitter, and we're here to do something about it.'[16]

Given Liam's laddish public persona, it does not take much imagination to figure out why the UK was 'going down the shitter'.

Ian (Neil Dudgeon) in the final moments of the 2001 production of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. Photo: courtesy of the Royal Court Theatre.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000247 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The rejuvenated quest for authenticity in the laddish pop culture of the 'nineties allowed retrograde gender and racial politics to be simply a musician or a writer 'showing things how they *really* are', a move that simultaneously equates realism with dysfunction and disavows an artist of any need to be critical of that culture.

Marketing Coolness

In the case of the new British art, the *Sensation* generation largely embraced the artist-as-celebrity stance. The show's catalogue is a testament to this fact, with the artists' photograph accompanying the reproductions as important as the art itself; the image of the artist smoking, looking pensive, or talking on the phone affirms the work's coolness, subtracts the alienating quality from the art's formal abstraction. No longer incomprehensible modernist rubbish, the sculptures of Abigail Lane, the canvases of Glenn Brown, the videos of Sam Taylor-Wood, are all made palatable with the stamp of cool once their makers are glimpsed to be young and fun.

The 'in-yer-face' playwrights were not opposed to marketing schemes or getting their names in the papers either. As theatre legend goes, *Shopping and Fucking* existed first as a title, as the answer to Stafford-Clark's inquiry about whether Ravenhill had a full-length play, even though Ravenhill had not yet written any such play. Or the story that Stephen Daldry's main artistic note to director Ian Rickson during previews was to add male nudity to his production of *Mojo*. And certainly if you want to remain a serious writer, you don't tell Sean Connery to 'fuck off', as Martin McDonagh did in 1997 during a drunken night at an awards ceremony, and then brag about it to a reporter afterwards. Is the real drama onstage or off?

It is unsurprising, then, that critics of 'in-yer-face' such as Ansorge and Gottlieb have labelled such theatre 'reactionary', and this renunciation is motivated by a rejection of all things cool Britannia. This new kind of artist, who was not afraid of the media but instead confidently used it as just another artistic tool; who did not wait for government assistance but rather courted sponsors in the corporate world; who showed little concern for purity of form, but instead swiped inspiration from sources both high and low – this kind of artist does not sit well with any romantic vision of the outsider obeying only the whims of his own genius.

This artist was just the kind of marketplace aesthete that the cool Britannia phenomenon could easily exploit. In Gottlieb's estimation, the whole thing could be neatly summed up as follows: 'The media and the market "named" something, then "made" something – and subsequently "claimed" something.'[17] Hers is rather a hermetic hermeneutic, leaving little room for any consideration of actual aesthetics.

In the end, *Blasted* and the installations of Damien Hirst are not the same as *Men Behaving Badly* and the Spice Girls' 'philosophy' of Girl Power. These cultural artefacts may be linked by a historical moment and the mindset of cool, but the work that they do in culture is crucially different. I sympathize with the detractors, sharing their dislike for commodity culture and their revulsion at the transformation of aesthetics into a brand or fad. Yet such anger has tended to reduce important differences to banal similarity. The cruel spectacles of a production of *Blasted* or the intensity of standing within Hirst's *Mother and Child Divided* are a far cry from the dismissive 'Whatever' of a cynic, and an account of the cool Britannia moment must recognize this fact, while refusing to ignore the economics and ideology that brought the work to a wide audience. That is why we must distinguish a counter-thread that runs throughout this hyped-up culture of cool.

The role of violence remains the uniting feature in most discussions of late 'nineties drama. Certainly, many of the plays feature violent scenes, from the eye-sucking of Kane's *Blasted* to the burning of the asthmatic baby with cigarettes in Ravenhill's *Handbag*, from the breaking of Cosmo's finger in Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* to the boiling oil of McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. These four examples could easily be joined by many more. But to talk about moments such as these as mere representations of vio-

lence renders them one-dimensional; they become about shock and shock alone.

Cruel Britannia

Rather than violence, the unifying feature is cruelty. Though sometimes associated with sadistic pleasure, cruelty is primarily characterized as the wilful causing of pain. In each of the four examples, one individual causes another to suffer. While it may seem a mere adjectival substitution to move from violent to cruel, on the contrary it opens these plays up to a larger conversation that a focus on violence alone forecloses. Consider three other examples, from theatre, art, and popular music, all falling within the moment of the cool Britannia phenomenon.

In Anthony Neilson's play *Normal* – about Peter Kurten, a German serial killer known in the 1920s as the Düsseldorf Ripper – there is a lengthy scene without any scripted dialogue called 'The Art of Murder', in whch Kurten directs his defence lawyer Wehner to kill his wife. The stage directions read, 'There follows a long murder scene, [and] it is quite relentless.' At one point, Frau Kurten escapes from the lawyer, 'invading the audience space', but to no avail, as Wehner catches her and 'drags her kicking and screaming back to the stage'.[18] When the play was first staged in London at the Finborough Theatre in October 1991, in a production directed by Neilson, the murder scene lasted over six minutes, but reviewers noted that it seemed much longer. Neilson said, 'We deliberately did it as long as you could bear it – and then some.'[19]

Marcus Harvey, a member of the Freeze Generation whose work had found its way into the Saatchi collection, spent the early 'nineties creating a series of controversial paintings. *Golden Showers* and *My Arse Is Yours* (both 1993) feature his trademark style of placing thick finger-painted swirls atop a black outline of a female figure, which, in the first piece, is urinating in a sink and, in the second, proffering her arse to the viewer. It was Harvey's 1995 painting *Myra*, however, that brought him large-scale media attention. This portrait of the serial child-killer Myra Hindley is created entirely out of children's handprints. Taken alone, the painting is a simple portrait done in white with muted blues and blacks, but with the title giving the female figure a name and a history, it takes on a cold and sinister tone. The painting angered many – four Royal Academicians resigned when it was shown at the Academy, and on two separate occasions, angry spectators hurled ink or eggs at the canvas. When I saw the painting in the *Sensation* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999, I had the unnerving experience of hearing a young child explain the image to his fellow classmates who were seeing the show as a class trip.

The band My Bloody Valentine became the pioneers of the 'shoegazer' sound in the late 'eighties and early 'nineties. (The term came from the band's propensity to stare down at the ground while playing, ignoring the audience.) The band's guitarist Kevin Shields created a distinct sound through the use of the 'glide guitar' (the band's phrase). The guitar is taken out of its usual role of playing chords and its sound is made to 'float around' and shift tones through the use of the whammy bar and tremolo effects. To undermine the conventions of pop music, Shields and fellow singer-guitarist Belinda Butcher mixed their voices so they were the same volume as the backing track, rendering their lyrics nearly indecipherable and the gender of the singer ambiguous.

By the early 'nineties the sound had been much copied, and Shields wanted to move beyond the confines of 'shoegazer' sound. During their 1992 tour in support of their album *Loveless*, the band, while playing the song 'You Made Me Realize', would extend the middle section of the song by playing a single D-chord for over twenty minutes at an ear-splitting volume. The foursome called this moment 'the Holocaust'. Shields said that they wanted to use sound to create the sense of 'imminent danger', forcing the audience to experience the 'physical changes' that occur when the body is subjected to loud sounds for lengthy periods of time.

A sound engineer remarked on the band's 'attritional attitude towards their audience'

during these shows.[20] Having seen the band play during this tour, I can attest to the bodily impact of such noise. But it was not just audience members who experienced the pain. During one performance, the sound was loud enough to burst the eardrum of guitarist Butcher, despite precautionary earplugs.

Neilson's 'in-yer-face' theatre, the art of the YBA Harvey, and the British pop music of My Bloody Valentine all exhibit cruelty as the motivating aesthetic force. The audience at the small Finborough pub theatre are confronted with their inability to help Frau Kurten escape her death, as Neilson brings the stage action into the domain of the spectator. The viewers of *Myra* recognize the infamous serial killer, her image made in the palm prints of her preferred victims, and we are made uneasy by the canvas's complete lack of commentary on its subject, giving us nothing more than an empty stare that taunts and provokes. The audience at the My Bloody Valentine concert are physically assaulted by sound to the point of fear. Cruelty here creates a complicated relationship between artist and audience and, while shock is part of the experience, the dynamic between the giver and receiver of pain is definitely a two-way street. The cruelty seems driven to an end other than simple pain.

The Philosophy of Cruelty

Antonin Artaud remains the first thinker one consults on all matters theatrical and cruel. In his essays collected in 1938, *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud writes about the theatrics of physical pain with ferocious clarity, his own tortured body the constant reminder of the hell when mind and body refuse to be one. In his writings, he envisions an 'essential theatre' which he likened to the plague,

> not because it is contagious, but because like the plague, [the essential theatre] is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized.[21]

This theatre, then, 'brings forth' the hidden cruelty found in all of us, but for Artaud, cruelty is not to be conflated with 'blood':

> The word 'cruelty' must be taken in the broad sense, and not in the rapacious physical sense. . . . Cruelty is not synonymous with bloodshed, martyred flesh, [and] crucified enemies.

Instead, 'cruelty signifies rigour, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination'; it is a 'higher determinism, to which [even] the executioner-tormenter is subjected and which he must endure when the time comes'.[22]

Cruelty is part of consciousness itself, affecting both the receiver and the giver. To be determined by one's body, to execute thought and action only to wind up one's own executioner: this is cruelty for Artaud. Cruelty is the violent awakening of consciousness to the horrors of life that had previously remained unconscious, both unseen and unspoken. Artaud hopes to end this predicament by making mind and body one, but it is a feat that is always doomed to failure. The curse of consciousness, Artaud realizes, is the unbridgeable gap between being a body and having a body.

Artaud's contemporary Georges Bataille extends and complicates this perception of cruelty. Bataille views cruelty's bringing-to-consciousness in a materialist fashion by envisioning what he calls the 'practice of joy before death'. Here, 'a succession of cruel splendours . . . robs of meaning everything that is an intellectual or moral beyond', and rather than cruelty crushing the individual, it does the complete opposite; annihilation becomes the exultation of material existence.[23]

> 'Joy before death' belongs only to the person for whom there is no beyond; it is the only intellectual honest route in the search for ecstasy. Besides, how could a beyond, a God or what resembles a God, still be acceptable [after such an experience]?[24]

Like Artaud, Bataille sees cruelty as 'stripping away all external representation', unleashing the 'pure violence' from within, but where destruction leads Artaud to physical strife, annihilation for Bataille leads surprisingly to joy: 'One night, dreaming, X is struck by lightning; he understands that he is dying

and he is suddenly, miraculously, dazzled and transformed; at this point in his dream, he attains the *unexpected*.'[25] In the face of annihilation, 'life can be glorified from root to summit', freeing the individual from any servitude to metaphysical comforts, such as God and his false promise of salvation. In that freedom, the individual 'finds the unhoped-for strength to turn his [or her] agony into a joy capable of freezing and transforming those who meet it'. What Bataille offers is the possibility of a joyful cruelty.

When read together, Artaud and Bataille form a nuanced theory of cruelty. While violence posits a passive relationship, cruelty can be transformative. Although Artaud's theory is characterized by pathos and Bataille's by bodily ecstasy, they are united in their shared sense of cruelty's ability to affect both giver and receiver as well as those who bear witness to its effects. Cruelty is the force that violently awakens consciousness to a horror that has remained unseen and unspoken, or wilfully repressed. Bataille and Artaud share the belief that in unmasking such pain, cruelty makes a space for ethical possibility, for change – even for joy; but such possibility does not allow any escape or metaphysical hope. If cruelty makes change possible, Bataille and Artaud remind us that it leaves scars.

The recurrence of cruelty in the culture of cool Britannia demonstrates such ethical possibility. Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, for instance, brings the horrors of Bosnia to a banal hotel room in Leeds, while Damien Hirst's animal pieces, where slaughtered animals are transformed into Sea World monuments, function as a kind of populist existentialism, reminding viewers as we walk through the corpses of a severed cow and calf that we are little more than future corpses. This art is part of the phenomenon of cool Britannia and yet in such images – of Ian's eyes being sucked from his head, of walking inside a dead animal – cruelty emerges as a competing force, eroding cool detachment.

For within cool Britannia exists what I call cruel Britannia. While coolness is associated with a cynical state of disinterestedness, cruelty is a very different affect. Although it may appear cold, cruelty carries with it the possibility of transformation. Using the shock of consciousness that cruelty sets in play, the culture of cruel Britannia takes up an ethical struggle and, far from 'giving up' on political engagement or demonstrating reactionary tendencies, as Gottlieb suggests, the art that aligns itself with this cruel undercurrent is invested in social concerns, in issues of life and death.

But what disturbs critics of 'in-yer-face' theatre is that it does so without any moral framework or ideological certainty. Cruelty's bringing-to-consciousness is a nihilistic one. That is why Cruel Britannia can never be transgressive or radical; but this need not necessarily mean that it is also apolitical or reactionary.

The Logic of 'Verwindung'

Just as the essays of Artaud and Bataille in the 1930s prove useful in thinking about cruelty, shifting to another historical moment can help us elucidate a different way of thinking about art's force within culture, outside our dominant model that perceives it as either oppositional or reactionary, as either outside the mainstream and therefore authentic, or popular and therefore a 'sell-out'. If 'nineties Britain is a period that experienced intense economic and cultural changes brought on, in large part, by American influences, the same can be said about Germany following the Second World War. Within this cultural landscape, a debate occurs between two friends on the occasion of their respective birthdays that illuminates terms central to this discussion.

In 1950, Germany was still reeling from its defeat and the concomitant recognition of the horrors of the death camps. While the years immediately following the war's end produced a renewed interest in a unified 'highbrow' German culture, that soon ended; and many intellectuals feared that Germany was becoming increasing 'westernized' or, to put it more plainly, 'Americanized', as was confirmed in 1949 with the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany, better known as West Germany. The increasing

popularity of mass culture, the rise of crass materialism, and a general sense of technological alienation: all of these things were seen as proof to intellectuals that something was being lost. The apocalypse did not seem too far-fetched a possibility.

It was against this backdrop that the writer Ernst Jünger presented his friend Martin Heidegger with an essay on nihilism, published as part of a *Festschrift* celebrating Heidegger's sixtieth birthday. Nihilism was hardly an esoteric topic for German thinkers. During the war, nihilism was frequently invoked by the Nazis to describe thinkers they perceived as 'threatening' to the movement. Heidegger knew about this personally. Ernst Krieck, in his gamble to be the official philosopher of National Socialism, publicly criticized Heidegger in the pages of the periodical *Volk im Werden*:

> The meaning of [Heidegger's] philosophy is downright atheism and metaphysical *nihilism* of the kind that used to be represented in our country by Jewish literati – in other words, an enzyme of decomposition and dissolution for the German people.[26]

It was a criticism that Heidegger could never fully shake, and despite his early enthusiasm for Hitler's party, and the party for him, charges such as Krieck's led to Heidegger being put under surveillance. In the years following Germany's defeat, however, nihilism became a codeword for Hitler and anything tainted with his regime of death.

With the American government constantly reminding German citizens of the concentration camps, with footage shown before motion pictures and images prominently featured in the Allied-controlled press, the German people spoke about the unspeakable by invoking the shorthand of nihilism; and Heidegger was again associated with this term, though now as a philosopher facing the Denazification Committee, which would remove him from teaching until 1949.

Jünger also had critics to face because of the Nazi appropriation of the title of his pre-war text *Totale Mobilmachung* (*Total Mobilization*, 1931) as a militaristic catchphrase; and Jünger's support for fascism in his early work now seemed a poor judgement, to say the least. The stakes in this discussion of nihilism could not have been higher for both Heidegger and Jünger.

In his contribution to Heidegger's *Festschrift*, entitled *Über die Linie* (*Over the Line*, 1950), Jünger proposes his desire to 'roll back' the onslaught of nihilism which, quoting Nietzsche, Jünger says has devalued the 'highest values', exploiting the worker to the point where he has become a 'zero point', an 'automat'. The essay presents Jünger's vision of a 'heroic soldier' who will 'cross the line' into a post-nihilistic Germany; Jünger's hope was that overcoming nihilism would leave behind 'treasures' that made all the suffering worthwhile.[27] In many ways, this essay is an extension of Jünger's earlier work, presenting the soldier and worker as both the figure of persecution and the site of its overcoming.

The Essence of Nihilism

Heidegger responded to Jünger's essay five years later, in a *Festschrift* to celebrate his friend's sixtieth birthday. In *Über 'die Linie'* (*Concerning 'the Line'*, which he later slightly expanded and re-titled *The Question of Being* in 1960), Heidegger argues against Jünger's stalwart optimism, claiming that nihilism cannot be overcome. Although he agrees with Jünger's diagnosis of modern culture, Heidegger claims that thought cannot move beyond or cross that demarcation between our nihilistic world and one which has overcome nihilism.

Heidegger writes, 'Such overcoming [of nihilism] takes place in the area of the restoration of metaphysics' for 'the attempt to cross the line [out of 'complete nihilism'] remains inhibited in a conception which belongs in the area of the dominance of the oblivion of Being'; in other words, it remains trapped within the prison of western metaphysics, and to Heidegger, 'that is a repelling thought'.[28]

Heidegger's advice: 'Instead of wanting to overcome nihilism, we must first try to enter into its *essence*.'[29] In other words, rather than crossing over the line, we must consider the line itself. As Elliot Neaman notes, 'For

Heidegger, nihilism is not an external phenomenon, but . . . part of human practices in the modern world.'[30] This move to consider the line itself is what philosopher Simon Critchley characterizes as a 'delineation' of nihilism that 'forbids us the gesture of transgression'.[31] Instead of overcoming, Heidegger advocates 'twisting' or 'turning aside' (*Verwindung*), a 'delineation' of nihilism that transforms but does not wish to transcend.

In short, it is Heidegger's call to immanent critique, a call to a critical self-awareness that does not eradicate what it calls attention to because that would do little more than give false comfort, but instead its calling attention makes us reflect on the possibility of change, even if, as in the case of nihilism, such change cannot be imagined as a complete escape or overcoming. The logic of *Verwindung*: change is possible; redemption is not.

Cruel Britannia is a case of the logic of *Verwindung*. In the commingling of coolness and cruelty, the basic elements of the cool Britannia phenomenon are upset when coolness is unmoored by cruelty. Cool Britannia is not overcome or transcended in such a move; in fact, it remains inextricably linked to it. The culture of cruel Britannia is not oppositional in the sense of being outside and opposed to 'nineties commodity culture. Cruel Britannia exists within that phenomenon, but through its invocation of cruelty it is able to comment upon this historical moment; it works, to borrow Critchley's reading of Heidegger, as a *delineation* of the moment occurring within the moment itself.

The Heidegger–Jünger debate highlights a thinking that is not ruled by overcoming, and it also begins to elucidate the third term central to our discussion: nihilism. While it has hitherto remained in the background, the problem of nihilism has never been far from the conversation. It is at the heart of Artaud's and Bataille's discussions of cruelty, for cruelty's bringing-to-consciousness results in nihilism, while nihilism is an over-arching concern in the work of both Heidegger and Jünger. The thread that unites these four diverse thinkers is Friedrich Nietzsche, the first thinker of modernity who saw the dawning of the age of nihilism and whose diagnosis of the problem casts a wide shadow in twentieth-century thought and art.

Nihilism, the 'Uncanniest of All Guests'

'Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?'[32] Nietzsche, in a series of notes written from the autumn of 1885 to 1887, attempts to answer this unsettling question. Defining nihilism is no small task. Jünger himself quipped that 'a good definition of nihilism would be the equivalent of revealing the cause of cancer'[33] and, certainly for Jünger and Heidegger in the 'fifties, it was a task of that serious a nature. Even today, nihilism raises many eyebrows – as does the name of Nietzsche.

Paging through some of the critical literature on this subject, it is not hard to find a sentence such as this one: 'The death camps were constructed at the desks of German nihilistic philosophers.'[34] Though this is a strong example, it does exhibit a general tendency toward overzealous denunciation when it comes to all things nihilist, and the misappropriation of Nietzsche by the Nazis, thanks in large part to Nietzsche's sister, means we still need to endure the myth that Nietzsche was an anti-Semite or a proto-Nazi. ('I am just having all anti-Semites shot,' Nietzsche wrote to his friend Overbeck in 1889, hardly a sentiment to endear him to the future Führer.)[35]

But perhaps the greatest problem facing any exegesis of nihilism is not its suspect connotations but the fact that the word itself signifies a competing set of meanings. The word means not one thing, but ideas that can appear mutually exclusive. Nihilism's essence, Heidegger might say, is one of conflict. What I shall attempt here is a genealogy.

Nietzsche, in a note from 1887, gives nihilism a handy gloss: 'What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; "why?" finds no answer.'[36] Where one expects to find something – a god, a higher power, a unity, a reason – one instead finds an absence. Value is bestowed on material existence through a true, unchanging metaphysical system. But

over time comes the realization that the 'true' world, this metaphysical world, this unchanging one, with its Platonic forms and higher powers, is a fabrication, nothing more than a comforting fable. When the comfort of unity, of the higher goal, is revealed to be false, it leaves one with the feeling that the world is valueless, without meaning, and this sense of meaninglessness could *not* be experienced as such had it not been for morality's interpretation of the world in the first place.

In Nietzsche's history of nihilism, there is a 'first nihilism' which precedes Christianity, and is manifested in the thought of the pre-Socratics like Democritus, who perceived reality as chaos and the essence of Being as without meaning. Christianity (and this is what Nietzsche admired about the religion) created new values; that is where its power lies, in its ability to create. But where Christianity went wrong in 'rescuing' man from nihilism was in its 'will to truth', in purposefully disguising its fictive nature and coupling that deception with a belief in a higher world existing beyond our physical one. This is Christianity's 'unhealthy' quality. Ultimately, however, it is that Christian 'will to truth' which eventually leads to the realization that God is a fiction, and morality a fable. The result: the world is plunged into a 'second nihilism', what Nietzsche also calls 'European nihilism'. Now that the moral code which presented itself as truth is revealed to be a lie, the world once again appears meaningless.

Nihilism as Pathology – and Possibility

Concomitant with Nietzsche's discussion of nihilism are two other influential uses of the term. As a pathology, the psychiatric-medical community deems nihilism 'a psychical factor', a symptom of severe depression, this use first appearing in a medical journal in 1888, and whence the pedestrian sense of nihilism as a synonym for 'depressing' or 'hopeless' derives. As a political designation, the Russian Nihilists, the radical anti-tsarists of the 1850s and 1860s made famous in Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*, were the precursors to our modern-day terrorists and anarchists, who see destruction as the basis for change.

In this genealogy, nihilism appears as a philosophical problem, an affect, and an ethical-political stance, and for Nietzsche all nihilism can take two forms. In its reactive state, nihilism appears as the most life-hating of enterprises, giving rise to fascist or totalitarian world views: because there is nothing, then nothing matters. An active nihilism, however, could provide the ground for goodness to emerge from cruelty. But unlike the 'true' good of metaphysics, nihilism's conception of goodness is grounded in the here and now – as that which, to quote Bataille, 'belongs only to the person for whom there is no beyond'.

Nihilism's possibilities are grounded in the here and now. This was Nietzsche's hope in his late writings, where he begins to develop his doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence and the *Übermensch* as an affirmative response to the period of 'second nihilism' in which he found himself. In an unfinished note from 1887, Nietzsche suggests:

> Nihilism. It is ambiguous. . . . [A]s active nihilism . . . it can be a sign of strength . . . a sign of increased power of the spirit; . . . nihilism *could* be a good sign.[37]

But nihilism for Nietzsche is always uncertain, always in a struggle between the active and reactive forms, with neither emerging as the ultimate victor. Nihilism serves as an active force when it transforms the desire to overcome, but such an active force can never fully wipe out the reactive ones which create that longing for redemption: an infinite struggle between divided forces.

This struggle is why nihilism is inherently *adialectical*: it may move towards dialectical reconciliation (the 'a' in its sense of 'in the direction of' or 'towards') where the reactive conquers the active, where difference is subsumed into sameness; but at the same time nihilism thwarts this move, making a space for non-dialectical thought ('a' in its Greek sense, of 'without or not'). Here, nihilism's force resists the very idea of overcoming, allowing difference to remain as difference. Identity, according to dialectics, is consti-

tuted by the relationship of an idea or thing to its own internal opposite. But nihilism is the 'not' itself; its logic is that of struggle.

Yet, the very thinking of nihilism remains within language, within the thinking of identity. So we find ourselves in a double bind. Hence, nihilism's adialectical nature. To be *adialectical* is to be both 'not dialectical' – the dialectic of the not, of negation, which is, by nature, anti-dialectical – as well as 'not not-dialectical' – that which must move in the direction of dialectical reason, towards the productive and the affirmative. But in the end, nihilism wills its own failure; it always rejects closure and certainty. The nihilist's gamble rests in the hope that something truly other may come into existence.

Nihilism may more often fail, but that failure may possess more ethical value than success. This 'will to failure' makes nihilism, by necessity, anti-transcendent. Transcendence, to borrow from the Christian writer Gabriel Marcel, 'relieves' humanity of the burden of having to be 'everything' to one another; that is the comfort that religion brings.[38] Nihilism robs us of that comfort, deems it a false hope, and in doing so asks us to take on that burden of being everything for one another, even if it is an operation doomed to setbacks and failures.

This is why cruelty's unleashing of nihilism produces a feeling of horror in us: it forces us to recognize our fragility. It is an experience both dizzying and terrifying; yet its intensity can be life-altering. Yes, it may awaken a longing in us for a time when there was certainty. This would be a reactive path. But if we pursue the harder struggle, it can make possible a new ethical relationship with the people around us. In either case, we cannot turn back. Foremost, nihilism is a sensation, in that it can break us or it can force us to a new state of becoming. That is its challenge. Its motto would be Beckett's 'You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.'

Nihilism and 'In-Yer-Face'

Coolness and cruelty's intersection in the phenomenon of 'in-yer-face' theatre presents a powerful example of nihilism's potential. Its use of shock makes it part of the world of cruel Britannia and we can see the 'twisting' or 'turning' that Heidegger advocates in his debate with Jünger. Consider four examples of 'in-yer-face' theatre from the height of the cool Britannia phenomenon (1995–96).

In Joe Penhall's *Pale Horse*, Charles cannot cope with his wife's accidental death. He tells his vicar that there is no God because, if there were, 'none of this would have happened' and, furthermore, his own redemption is pointless since he has 'been bad' for his whole life.[39] Charles becomes involved with prostitute Lucy who seduces the lonely widower to help her murder an ex-trick.

Ian Rickson's production at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in October 1995 featured the well-known actor Ray Winstone as Charles. The underclass sensibility, made so popular both in the films of Alan Clarke and Ken Loach and the theatre of the 'angry young men', was in clear evidence, but what was previously associated with a socialist sensibility had become subsumed by a cool ennui-filled atmosphere. Interrupting the existential musings of Charles and his lads, however, was a recurring sense of violence that eventually erupts in a key scene between Charles, Lucy, and an unnamed drunk. When I saw the production, a number of audience members left the small space during the fight scene, which, though short on blood, was high on tension and, because we were sitting a stone's throw from the stage action, was amplified to painful levels.

In *Phaedra's Love*, Sarah Kane's adaptation of Seneca, Hippolytus is presented as a spoiled royal who spurns his stepmother's advances. His violent self-loathing comes from his inability to accept any degree of hypocrisy and, since no unsoiled truth exists, life has no meaning for him. The play is a series of scenes where Hippolytus is cruel to both the people who love him and those who claim to have his interests at heart. Hippolytus's cruelty, however, comes not out of malice, but from a desire for complete honesty. His belief in a metaphysics of absolute truth does not allow him to function in the material world; his crippling depression renders everyone into a liar.

After his stepmother Phaedra accuses him of rape and kills herself, Hippolytus refuses to defend himself against Phaedra's charge, since his cruelty led to her suicide; he would be a fraud like the rest of his society if he did not pay for his actions. The play concludes with a crowd of angry plebeians tearing him to pieces. Just before a vulture feeds off his corpse, Hippolytus looks up at the sky and says, 'If there could have been more moments like this.'[40] Kane's production at the intimate Gate Theatre in May 1996 was a mess of stage blood and fake intestines.

Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* concerns a group of barely-functioning urban dwellers, all named after the members of boy band Take That. Its episodic fourteen scenes, more filmic than Brechtian, show a world of rampant consumerism, of Thatcherism writ large. Mark, a recovering druggie kicked out of rehab for having sex, meets Gary, a fourteen-year-old rent boy abused by his stepfather. Mark falls for Gary, while Mark's previous purchases, Lulu and Robbie, try to get by without their father figure Mark. Their schemes fail and the pair end up owing a gangster money for a botched Ecstasy deal.

In the play's most extreme moment, Mark realizes Gary will never love him because the boy desires his absent father. But rather than love, Gary's fantasy is to have his absent father fuck him up the arse with a knife. Gary tells Mark: 'I've got this unhappiness. This big sadness swelling like it's gonna burst. I'm sick and I will never be well. . . . I want it over. And there's only one ending.'[41] Gary demands Mark fulfil his wish because Gary is paying him and, as Mark himself has said, when money is exchanged, an act becomes a 'transaction' and, therefore, 'doesn't actually mean anything'.[42] Max Stafford-Clark's 1996 production, full of neon-lights and loud club music, left Gary's fate a mystery: has Mark satisfied the desire and killed Gary, or has it just left Gary wounded, but still alive? Or could Mark even perform such a violent act? Ravenhill and Stafford-Clark refused to reveal the answer.

The revised version of *Mojo* by Jez Butterworth, which opened shortly after Ravenhill's play, features a similar crisis of affect. Baby, the son of the recently deceased manager Ezra, reveals that his cruel and erratic behaviour stems from the violent abuse he received at the hands of his father. The result is that he cannot feel that any action in the world has any meaning; nothing has any impact on him. He tells the crying Mickey: 'I'm numb. I lie there, and my mind spins on nothing. I hear people next door . . . fighting or laughing and I can't feel their . . . pain or nothing. . . . Sorry Mickey. I just can't feel your pain.'[43] Shortly after this confession, Baby shoots the young Skinny in the head when the once subservient Skinny tells his former idol, 'None of us want you.' The nonstop humour of *Mojo* finally ceased during this final moment when the linguistic wordplay of Rickson's production gave way to naked brutality.

Coolness and Cruelty

The melding of coolness and cruelty is clear in these productions. The stance of ironic detachment gives way to a violence that impels a sense of commitment. The plays demonstrate nihilism as a *philosophical world view* and as an *affect*. There is a crisis of meaning and it produces a profound state of psychological turmoil:

CHARLES (*to Vicar*): I don't have any faith.
I have faith in love, yeah.
But I don't have anyone to love. (*Pale Horse*)

HIPPOLYTUS (*to Priest*): I can't sin against a God
I don't believe in.
A non-existent God can't forgive.
I've lived by honesty let me die by it.
(*Phaedra's Love*)

ROBBIE (*to Gary*): I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. . . . But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them. (*Shopping and Fucking*)

BABY I'm numb. I hear people next door, in the next one along, fighting or laughing and I can't feel their . . . pain or nothing. (*Mojo*)

Where something *should* be, there is absence. The religious beliefs of the Vicar in *Pale Horse* and the Priest of *Phaedra's Love* elude the protagonists of Penhall and Kane, leaving Charles

lost and Hippolytus embracing destruction. Ravenhill's Robbie mourns the loss of the metanarratives of God, Enlightenment, and Socialism, taking comfort in the 'little stories' we make, although he tells Gary we are still left feeling 'lonely'. And even the basic emotions that characterize the human as a feeling creature are no longer accessible to Baby in Butterworth's play. 'I just can't feel' – it is a sentiment that recurs throughout the plays of the 'nineties with startling frequency.

The Ethics of Nihilism

The *ethical* possibilities of nihilism become clearer when these moments are taken as a whole. These four plays were first staged within a year of each other, between October 1995 and October 1996, and in production nihilism's ethics emerge as a surprisingly visceral experience.

In *Shopping and Fucking*, although it is unclear whether Gary's desire kills him, now that Gary is gone Mark can again become emotionally attached. The play's final scene shows Mark, Lulu, and Robbie feeding each other a microwave dinner, an echo of the play's first scene but, unlike that opening, where Mark vomits up the gift of food, still too sick on heroin to keep anything down, this time the trio has become a family of sorts, sharing the meal. Stafford-Clark emphasized this development by having identical staging for both moments. But if this is a moment of ethical possibility, it is, of course, a very fraught one, for this kindness would not be possible without Gary's sacrifice.

Hippolytus, in the final moment of *Phaedra's Love*, experiences an embodiment that cures him of his hatred of life. When the stage bird descends, Kane and her production at the Gate showed us, through humour, how ridiculous it is that Hippolytus can only experience a life-loving sensation through self-destructing. The mess of limbs and innards undercuts Hippolytus's ethereal last line. For if death is the only thing that gives life meaning, Hippolytus's realization comes too late: you can only die once.

In *Pale Horse*, the widower Charles finds comfort, albeit temporarily, in Lucy and a will to violence that helps him cope with his wife's death. After giving up on the Vicar, Charles can now apologize to his dead wife at her grave for what he did wrong while she was alive, the play ending with the possibility that Charles can move on. And, finally, in *Mojo*, after Skinny dies, Baby does show some compassion to the singer Silver Johnny, who at the start of scene he had hung upside down like a piece of meat. After making sure that Silver Johnny is 'all right', the twosome walk off 'into the light' together to get a 'nice cool drink'.

The experience of such moments in the confines of the theatre makes an impact that is tragic in the Nietzschean sense. The tragic, for Nietzsche, is that which turns suffering into an affirmation of life. But this comes about only as a result of a cruelty that strips away any metaphysical fiction, as in Hippolytus's 'joy before death', where destruction affirms. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes:

> The desire for destruction, change, and becoming can be an expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with the future . . . but it can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited and underprivileged, who destroy . . . because what exists . . . outrages and provokes them.[44]

The choice is one between an active and reactive nihilism, and in the case of its active form, nihilism serves as the ground by which an ethics of materiality can take root. Active nihilism, therefore, is a stage that one passes *through* in order to achieve what Nietzsche variously calls the 'Dionysian', the 'tragic', or the *Übermensch*, and that same, perhaps romantic, desire to move *beyond*, while also remaining *bound* to this existence is found in these plays: an impossibility which art strives towards even in its impossibility.

A Contemporary Vision of the Tragic

In the works following *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche returns to tragedy, the subject of his first book, but in these later writings, tragedy now refers to every healthy art form that seeks no 'ultimate solution', instead finding its strength in the power of persevering. This theory of art runs counter to Aristotle

and his notion of catharsis. Though the word appears only twice in the *Poetics*, catharsis remains at the heart of many theories of modern drama. Catharsis is defined as either a *pharmakon* that creates intense emotions in order to purge us of them, or a pacifier that reminds us that the universe is ultimately rational and that order does exist.

Regardless of which meaning you ascribe to Aristotle's catharsis, in both cases there is move toward closure, towards certainty. As with Christianity's 'will to truth', Nietzsche deems this 'unhealthy', advocating rather an endurance that does not condemn suffering and cruelty but instead, like Bataille's 'practice of joy before death', one which realizes that painful experiences present us with an opportunity to affirm this world by turning agony into joy.

It is just such a world view that allowed Nietzsche to write, in 1888:

> 'I' seize the hope that one day things will be still more evil and painful than they have been until now.[45]

Pain should not be condemned: Nietzsche sees potential in suffering, and tragic art plays a part in making us recognize this 'open horizon' of possibility; in Heidegger's logic of *Verwindung*, Bataille's 'joy before death', and in Nietzsche's later philosophy, there emerges a theory of the tragic as that which cheerfully endures the unthinkable, not to overcome it, but to embrace it as that which is 'pregnant with the future'.

The tragic is the aesthetic of *Verwindung*; the tragic's exploration of nihilism performs a 'twisting' or 'turning' of pain into potential joy, but it is never pain's overcoming. This is, I believe, our contemporary experience of tragedy, and we can see it at work in the cruelty of 'in-yer-face' theatre and how the plays make an audience undergo an experience with nihilism. The experiential quality of this drama, its use of the black-box space and its relationship with the audience, returned a tragic sensibility to the theatre during the final decade of the twentieth century. It gives no ideological certainty; it does not seek to be in complete opposition to or outside of commodity culture. That is why cruel Britannia is always also cool Britannia. But what cruel Britannia does is provide the possibility for ethical change in light of the suffering that the spectator has undergone; that is the immanent critique that it performs on the world of the cool.

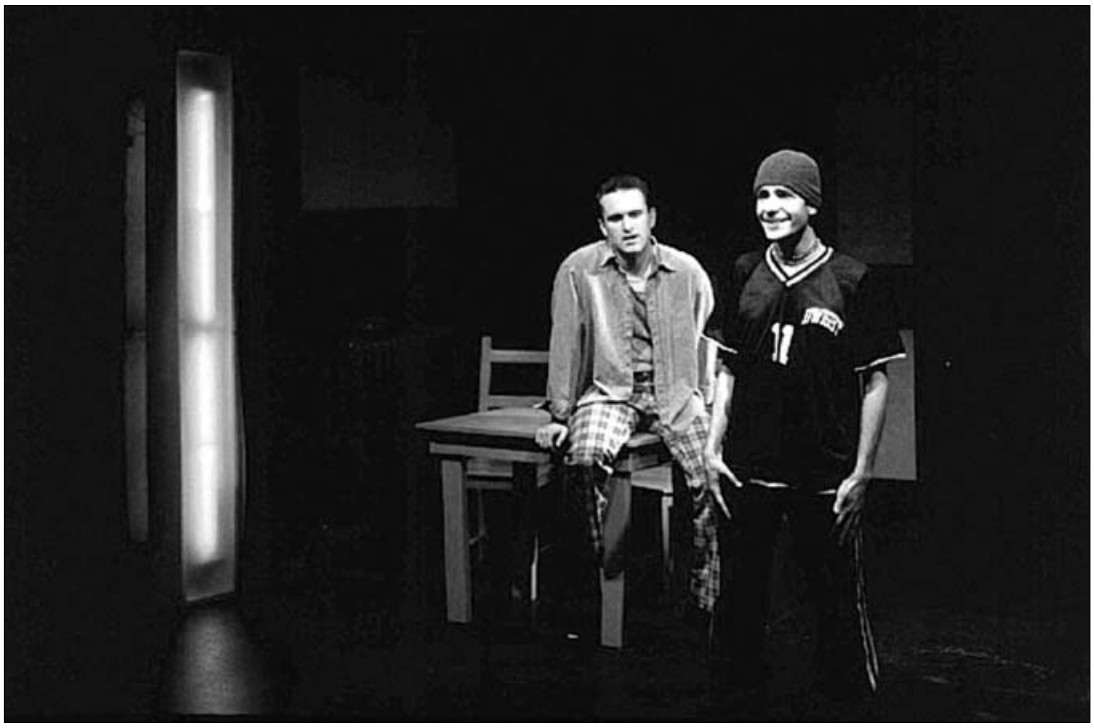
Final Thoughts on 'In-Yer-Face'

Many critics continue to deem 'nineties culture cynical and amoral. I would agree when it comes to the question of morality. These plays largely reject morality's interpretation of the world, but this amorality does not necessarily entail cynical dejection. While cynicism and nihilism are united in a suspicion of truth and a dislike of any whiff of idealism, the two are vastly different affective experiences. The experience of cynicism is one of detachment, a coolness of affect, while the cruelty at the core of an active nihilism is the furthest thing from the indifference of a cynic.

Take, for instance, James Macdonald's revival of *Blasted* in 2001. This production was staged in the Royal Court's larger auditorium, and Macdonald was able to use the proscenium space to give the audience sufficient distance to get across the play's investigation of the social structures of violence, while staging the play's moments of unadulterated cruelty with such ferocity that a detached viewing experience was almost impossible. When Tom Jordan Murphy's Soldier raped Neil Dudgeon's Ian, the experience was harrowing. The sounds that Murphy made as he transformed Ian's body into his dead girlfriend Col, coupled with the duration of the sequence, was unlike any other experience that I've had in the theatre. Such a moment is many things, but it is not cynical. It makes an argument about our notions of sexuality and violence, an argument that is *felt*, not heard: no dialectical conversations, instead, the power of the image, of Dudgeon's exposed buttocks and Jordan Murphy's incessant sobs.

The same can be said, for different reasons, of the 2002 New York revival of *Shopping and Fucking* directed by Blake Lawrence. The

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000247 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Mark (Jay Aubrey) and Gary (Jeffrey Landman) in the 2002 revival of Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* at Theatre 22, NYC, directed by Blake Lawrence.

Stafford-Clark production echoed the club world of its characters to such a degree that any critique that the play presented about a world over-determined by economics was sometimes lost amid the neon signs, where Lawrence's small off-off-Broadway production was able to emphasize the characters in a more naturalistic fashion. Ironically, in downplaying the play's more postmodern elements, the story of Mark and Gary carried more weight: they were no longer ciphers, but three-dimensional characters, despite the allegorical tendencies of Ravenhill's text. As a result, the ambiguity of Mark's gift to Gary presented a real ethical conundrum for the audience, especially since Gary's death was presented on stage in the form of a stylized tableau before a blackout.

It makes one wonder if it is wrong to consider 'in-yer-face' theatre from a strictly literary or textual perspective. This is impossible, of course, as any critical enterprise inevitably textualizes the phenomenon it investigates. Yet, these plays desire to give language a body, a shifting physical presence, real but changeable. Aleks Sierz is right to dub the plays of the 'nineties 'experiential theatre', their full impact dependent upon the presence of actors and spectators. This facet suggests a kinship between 'in-yer-face', the installations of the YBAs, and the noisy experiments of avant-pop musicians, all of which are audience-dependent.

An active nihilism can be found in these various cultural productions, each countering the reactive cynicism of cool Britannia. While characters utter numerous variations of Kane's line, 'I feel nothing' (C in *Crave*), or singers mumble sentiments akin to Tricky's refrain, 'Can't stand to feel/Hate to feel' ('Vent' from *Pre-Millennium Tension*), the work of artists as diverse as Anthony Neilson, Tracey Emin, the Inventory art collective, even Radiohead's Thom Yorke, all screams: 'I want to fucking feel something.' Perhaps, the eye-gouging and arse-licking, dead sharks and feedback swells were more than titillation dressed in a cool black turtleneck.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000247 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'There is a moment. There *was* a moment.' Mel Kenyon's statement continues to resonate. The moment of cool Britannia is also that of cruel Britannia. Within a time of cultural recycling and political uncertainty, there emerges a sustained investigation of ethics in that intermingling of coolness, cruelty, and nihilism. And theatre was leading the way by letting the world-weary culture vultures in all of us have a taste of the tragic, even at this late date.

Notes and References

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3. Matt Wolf, 'London's Unnerving Nihilists', *American Theatre*, September 1997, p. 44–5.
4. See Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2000; reprinted with new afterword, 2002) for an insightful analysis of the new economy of brands as well as the growing resistance to it.
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7. John Gross, 'The Emperor of Ice Cream', *New Criterion*, June 1998.
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9. Richard Shone, 'From "Freeze" to *House*: 1988–94', in *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 13–14.
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11. In January 1993, the *Evening Standard* quoted Daldry as saying, 'Why is our audience so f***ing middle-aged? We are not telling the right stories. . . . We have to listen to the kids. A younger audience – that's vital.' It is unclear if Daldry ever said exactly that, but he carried such sentiments into his time at the Court. Quoted in Wendy Lesser, *A Director Calls* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 90.
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15. Ibid., p. 172.
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17. Gottlieb, 'Lukewarm Britannia', p. 209.
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25. Ibid., p. 239.
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