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Posturing Fear in a World of Performed Evil: Terrorists, Teachers and Evil Neo-liberals

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Abstract

Since Mohammad Sidique Khan, a teacher from the UK, appeared posthumously in the much viewed post-7/7 suicide bomber video, the links between education, terror and posturing are being drawn in the *Theatre of Fear*. We seek to make these links at a global level of meta-posturing through examining of representation, gesture and posture of international leaders. In this paper we explore the concept of *posturing* in performance, drawing on a number of theoretical traditions including queer theory, critical race theory, and “in-yer-face Theatre.”¹

We consider that white supremacy and capitalism are objective, inhuman systems of exploitation and oppression whereas ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are performed social constructs. Ideologically, members of the white ruling class of these systems have returned to pre-modern conceptions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ aligning themselves with the former. Educators have been allocated a role by the state in policing what is seen as ‘evil’. In constructing resistance to capital, racial and other forms of oppression we consider that educators could reclaim and ‘queer’ the meaning of ‘evil’ for subversive, revolutionary purposes.

Using contemporary theatre and performance, through the filter of contemporary culture, we explore this posturing of evil, in the context of contemporary, live, and recorded drama. We argue that transgressive performance in ‘uncontrolled’ public space is potentially transformative and presents an opportunity for drama educators, working with young people, to renew educational use of Boal, Brecht and Marxist theories towards a *Theatre of Revolutionary Change*.

Key words: Fear, 7/7, performance, whiteness, suicide bomber video, Mohammad Sidique Khan, critical race theory, queer theory, critical pedagogy, Marxism.

1. Introduction - A World of Performed Evil

I had planned to start by referring to the great US writer, Don DeLillo, but....I recently entered the *Theatre of Fear*.² The United States of America. Since leaving London Gatwick on route to the USA in February I entered this new theatre. I have been cast as a potential threat to Western

culture. This multifaceted character is a tough part to play in that, as with all acting, I have to suppress my personality. So, although I left the UK as an independent political woman of London's social centre, after undergoing two UK and three US body inspections and a number of intimidating verbal interrogations, having my photograph and fingerprints taken, being verbally abused by a US immigration officer and likened to and treated as an animal; yes, after these scenes from the theatre of fear I emerged performing a character of subjugated terror: I felt confused. I missed Europe and I craved Asia.

In my hotel room in Columbia, South Carolina later that night, I watched the Shiite religious rituals in Iraq on CNN and felt suddenly elated by the aggression of Islamic ritualistic performance, in the *Theatre of Revolutionary Change*. I thought of our paper, and of my creative writing, and the Theatre of Fear treating me, an atheist, as a potential Islamic terrorist, allied with the fear on the streets of a small town in South Carolina, that first night where we realised that 'no one' walks and if you do you are a foreign alien. And somehow the trigger of the Shiite energy led me back to watching my 'favourite' suicide bomber video, that of Mohammad Sidique Khan, the leader of the 7/7 suicide bombers.³ Before exploring MSK, and to contextualise this, I shall return to DeLillo:

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence....I used to think that it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated....News of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative. News is the last addiction before what? I don't know. But you're smart to trap us in your camera before we disappear.⁴

DeLillo's *Mao II* prophesied the beckoning chasm of artistic endeavour after 9/11 in a fictional conversation between a novelist and a photographer. The dominant motif of this novel is the crowd; we have been fascinated by posture and gesture over the power of the crowd, in particular in the third week in January 2006 as the Middle East entered a new era with the democratic success of Hamas⁵ in Palestine and the Occupied Territories. UK news bulletins devoted sombre coverage to Western doom-mongering on evil - Rice, Bush, Netanyahu - interspersed with jubilant and ecstatic scenes of Palestinian crowds waving green flags and celebrating their democracy.

The over-riding theme of Western commentators and politicians was of Hamas as an evil 'terrorist' organisation, responsible for numerous suicide attacks. One of the major aspects of "human consciousness"⁶ which the force of the crowd encounters in the time we are dealing with, and which is also at the heart of the ideology behind groups like al-Qaeda, is the fight against the enduring double standards of the imperialism of the past, alive and kicking in the era of the neo-conservatives. For the West there is a hierarchy of death and terror, in that humans are not equal and have to remain that way for capitalism to survive. Baudrillard detailed how the new terrorism has brought together the crowd, modernity and spectacle amidst the terror and fear of the neoconservative century:

We have to face facts, and accept that a new terrorism has come into being, a new form of action which plays the game, and lays hold of the rules of the game, solely with the aim of disrupting it...they have taken over all the weapons of the dominant power. Money and stock-market speculation, computer technology and aeronautics, spectacle and the media networks - they have assimilated everything of modernity and globalisation, without changing their goal, which is to destroy that power.⁷

The meta-drama of evil in 2005-6 is reflexive. Those who are labelled 'evil' perform 'good,' but are then in turn seen as 'evil' by the people they in turn label as 'evil' who are also performing 'good' *mise-en-abîme* (and these *are* performances, there is nothing essentialist about good and evil). These performances have become cyclical, rather like the cycles of violence and death performed by students and monitored by teachers which we have explored elsewhere.⁸ Good and evil are performances, and although this fact gives states power to classify teachers performances as 'good' or 'evil' it also opens a possibility for drama teachers to use 'evil' and 'posture' against empire. This is one potential escape from a nihilistic cycle of a *Theatre of the Depressed* (rather than 'of the oppressed'⁹) which we counter with a potential *Theatre of Revolutionary Change*.

2. Meta-posturing Fear: Terrorists and Evil Neo-liberals, and Meta-gestures

Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood.¹⁰

I'm sure by now the media's painted a suitable picture of me; this predictable propaganda machine will naturally try to put a spin on things to suit the government and to scare the masses into conforming to their power and wealth-obsessed agendas.¹¹

Since Mohammad Sidique Khan, a UK teacher ('learning mentor' and youth worker), appeared posthumously in the prime time favourite post 7/7 suicide bomber video, links between education, terror and posturing are being drawn. We seek to make these links at a global level of meta-posturing through considering issues of representation, gesture and posture of international leaders and the value judgements placed on hierarchies of evil performance.

The video by MSK (UK intelligence shorthand for Mohammad Sidique Khan, the assumed 'leader' of the 7/7 suicide bombers) is interesting as a launching point for looking at the performed gestures and postures of 'evil', and towards unmasking the clichés of performed evil – if evil as a term is used to describe those who kill, and we are looking at meta-theatre evil-killings from 7/7 to the Occupied Territories to the mountains of Pakistan.¹² MSK uses a soft tone, speaking with a broad Yorkshire accent to the global crowd. This was one of the aspects of his performance which most enthralled the UK media and audience – that a terrorist could speak with a UK accent, a Yorkshire accent (stereotyped in the UK as being associated with warmth, trustworthiness and straight talking), and in English, and on al-Jazeera. One of the 'evil' aspects of this 'performance' was that Britishness had changed (a New Labour vision since 1997), and that it was changed by a suicide bomber video. Of course what is more frightening is that it took this for people to wake up and ask the questions that need to be asked about media and the political representation of so called 'ethnic minorities'. The other key aspects of the MSK video are the soft, persuasive 'teacher' style of his delivery, his use of a pen to make points and the softened but definite gangsta rap style of gesture which have become a part of UK teen performance of debate insofar as Jerry Springer has de-educated teenagers on debate (because shouting, posturing over your opponent and Springer / Blairite 'final thoughts' fake sincerity is now accepted as debate). In a recent interview, the director of Liberty, also UK-Asian like MSK and of a similar age, reflected what many Asian people in the UK felt upon watching the MSK video:

He pushes the liberal's buttons by saying you've tortured and murdered my Muslim brothers and sisters and now you too are going to taste the reality of this situation. I imagine ...I would say: because innocent lives have been taken in Iraq, that doesn't mean you're allowed to take innocent

lives in London. If that word terrorist is about anything it is about people who say the ends justify the means. That's why we can't compromise our values because if we do we rob ourselves of the ammunition in the propaganda struggle against terrorism.¹³

Drawing together these strands - a soft-spoken style combined with persuasive rhetoric of terror-violence - leads us to the recent performative spectacle of the Iranian president (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) announcing to a student audience in Iran, that Israel should be "wiped off the earth." He used what seemed like very little physical gesture to emphasize his verbal posture (not a new posture but rather a repeated one), whereas the UK Prime Minister used the paternalistic verbal and physical posture (the point of the finger at the imagined foe, the wild but melancholic eyes to indicate that choice is taken away, and the up-turn in the voice - "this is not a question, but I'll make it sound like one"), to say to the global audience that the pacifists will stop asking about the UK/USA military intentions towards Iran and instead ask, "what are you going to do?" Blair's speech was of course performed to an audience of EU members in the hall of Hampton Court, a site that launched hundreds of years of colonial incursion by harnessing one working class against another, but in the global market it was really (like the Iranian message) performed to the global TV crowd, to the weapons makers, to the epic audience. So that the global TV has become a vast stage where wars are threatened, where terror and evil are performed and postured.

Using our earlier work on posturing¹⁴ as a starting point, and developing a critique of our key textual references, we intend to demonstrate a path through post-modern culture towards the challenges for drama education in the twenty-first century, towards a *Theatre of Revolutionary Change*. As Baudrillard wrote:

If terrorism arises... out of this excess of reality and its impossible exchange, out of this profusion for which nothing is given in return and this forced resolution of conflicts, then the idea of extirpating it as an objective evil is a total illusion since, such as it is - in its absurdity and its meaninglessness - it is the verdict this society passes on itself, its self-condemnation.¹⁵

'Evil' performance and performativity are currently used both by new imperialisms and those aiming at a change of status quo, to regulate global and national public space.

3. **Re-making Whiteness by Performing 'Good' / Forming 'Evil'**

Performing good or evil is work. Evil is a form of aesthetic and emotional labour where the aesthetics and emotions are twisted away from that which is outwardly pleasing and accommodating. There are various commercialized performances of evil in contemporary culture: actors, dancers, pantomime villains (in the British context); popular music performers who base their personas on portrayals of 'evil' (Marilyn Manson, Eminem, wrestling, Death Metal, Goth); theme park characters (Captain Hook in Disneyworld); and there is academic work in documenting and presenting evil. Whilst there is not an 'evil' industry to speak of, there is at least a growing market for the consumption of evil personas and characters.

The converse of evil (good) is also performed, and ruling-class whites (Blair, Bush, and corporations promoting various commodity racisms re-aligning whiteness as multicultural, clean and efficient) have in their political posturings mirrored whiteness with the concept of 'good', thus returning to Victorian conceptions of whiteness and 'purity'. Without denying that whiteness is exploitative, we note that it is not necessarily monolithic and shows the capacity for movement over time - slippery, flexible, whiteness.¹⁶ Its movement and apparent accommodation is one of the ways in which white supremacy hides its true nature. Although it is often the white working class which has been subject to ethnographic and historical investigation in terms of relocations of whiteness¹⁷ it is the members of the ruling class who have most recently returned to pre-modern formations of whiteness and 'goodness', propagating this ideology throughout society. As Alastair Bonnett explains, this primitive hyper-white formation was associated with "religious devotion and purity," "health" and "expansionist capitalism."¹⁸ This has resurfaced as flexible racist whiteness¹⁹ which enables ruling class hyper-whites to appear neutral - indeed that they transcend racism, disappear from race - by naming 'evil'. 'Good' has become synonymous with Christian, capitalist whiteness. The contemporary use of the converse (evil) is an example of the way in which race is fixed "...so that denotations are submerged and hidden in ways that are offensive through identification."²⁰ The use of the term 'evil' ("the new evil in our world," "the forces of good and evil," "an evil ideology") has been made by Blair several times since 9/11. In that Blair and the New Labour government have identified that there are ideologies which are 'evil', education workers have been allocated a unique role in identifying and regulating that evil in schools and universities. Teachers and lecturers are bound up in this by 'regulating' those whom the state deems to be evil, with certain universities (such as Imperial College, London) banning veils, motorcycle helmets and hoodies. Other measures include: the identification and control of extremist attitudes on campuses; strong, compulsory and prescriptive values education in

schools; and a general attack on academic freedom of speech. Those who supported UK school strikes by young people over Iraq, and who speak out against capitalism and imperialism at universities are classified (and monitored) as 'evil-doers' or 'terror apologists'.

4. **Queering Evil, Embracing Evil: Teachers and Critical Pedagogy**

In current circumstances, where teachers are being co-opted in the performance of hegemonic hyper-whiteness, critical pedagogy may seem to offer an alternative to teachers whether of the critical theory, multi-cultural, feminist or Marxist variant. An insight from queer theory is that what may seem to be essentialist roles are actually performances and as such, are always contingent.²¹ In performing hegemonic hyper-whiteness, both Blair and Bush's performances are also performances of white negatives - the capitalist vampire, the rich white trash (Bush), the white mask of death (Both), the arrogant public school boy (Blair). While these contradictions can be used to *their* advantage (for example, Bush's homely way of speaking appealing to rural white people). These images are also recycled and performed by protesters, forming a basic insight of critical pedagogy - that the established order is not as it seems. However, whilst relying on these contradictory images to inform the content of lessons involving critical pedagogy, teachers need to be aware of internal contradictions of their own performances. A casual observation that we have made about practitioners of critical pedagogy is the extraordinary levels of worthiness with which they pursue their task- as if to counter the 'evils' of the world it is necessary to set themselves up as universally 'good' or 'neutral' people - an unattainable, and frankly, quite frightening objective. As a performance, teaching is often reliant on the Judeo-Christian persona of 'good' or 'neutral' (educative) in order to maintain its symbolic power. In counterpoint, we argue that teachers using critical pedagogy should consider whether there is something about performing, playing with and using evil (and it is after all a performance - there is nothing essentialist about this role) as a posture in the classroom / lecture room and in civil society which could be used as a political tool. In terms of the drama lessons we observed,²² this could be as simple as picking up and using the manifestations and citations of 'evil' - the subversive - which the pupils made in their lessons. However, teachers and lecturers could go further, such as outing themselves as supporting those with supposedly ideologically evil views, or at the very least supporting their right to express such views. Teachers could subversively embrace rather than reject their positioning as evil and ideologically driven.²³

5. Posturing Fear in Contemporary 'Drama': Performance of Evil

What can thwart the system is not positive alternatives, but singularities.....not necessarily violent, and there are some subtle ones, such as those of language, art, the body or culture.²⁴

Performance as *studied evil* in the 21st century runs from evil as acts morally wrong (deaths caused by allied troops or terrorists) to 'excellent or outstanding' as seen in contemporary British cultural terminology ('wicked'), reflecting a cultural range from 90s Madonna, (sex as evil posturing, the clash of Jean Paul Gaultier conical bra and Christian symbolism), to the 'evil' posturing of gang culture caught in a cycle of manufactured romance and death as educative career in Dibb and Johnston's *Bullet Boy*.²⁵ In our earlier study we outlined what we see as a *Theatre of the Depressed* which reflected the atmosphere, themes, culture and narratives we witnessed in youth improvised drama in London schools after 7/7, and the vicious performative culture and the *student/teacher axis of evil*:

Teacher: If you're performing, the commitment is to your audience. What you want them to think, to feel.
 Student: What if I just want to scare them?
 Teacher: No, maybe what you're trying to teach someone is that murdering someone is bad...you don't actually do it.
 You can use suggestion, metaphor.

As the above vignette indicates, there was a constant tension between education and terror. The major themes of our ethnography were of a never ending sex-crime-violence-death cycle in 'the system', reflecting a culture influenced by gangsta rap and at the same time absorbed in the beauty of death as ballet, of movement where a gun / cell phone is an extension of the hand and the voice is drowned out by music, gun shots, and women's tears, - posture in the death of beautiful young people. In many ways this is in a direct performance line with the 'In-Yer-Face-Theatre' of the 90s,²⁶ the work of Modern British Artists²⁷ and mass cultures' portrayal of terror as middle-eastern or black. Ridley's *Mercury Fur*²⁸ was one of the first new contemporary plays to stage white terror / evil, reversing the current media cliché whilst echoing Pinter and Bond.

A new *Theatre of Revolutionary Change* would require teacher and students to be equals in connection with possible texts or theories, as dialogic chorus figures, and in intention towards an audience. What we are positing here is a theatre that takes on the powerful meta-postures of our times: the

lyricism of the suicide bomber video, with its shared gesture, posture and emotional link with the global arena of the political address, whilst sharing a stage with the chorus of yesteryear - the Shakespearean, the Greek - and being the interlocutor of stories of the street. We see the *Theatre of Revolutionary Change* enacted by Dario Fo in his work in Milan using theatre buildings, school buildings, plays and addresses to ferment change; we see it also in Pinter's turning to poetry and the political demonstration, and in the Stop The War movement's staged picnics in Parliament Square as a means of getting around the new British ban on protest around parliament. But above all we see the *Theatre of Revolutionary Change* as being the scenes of dance and drama in urbanoid sites where teenagers act and re-enact the tortures of the teacher / student / west / east *axis of evil*: the confusion and double standards by which they learn to submit to the system, or to rebel.

Notes

¹ A Sierz, *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today*, Faber and Faber, London, 2001.

² This paper is a step for us towards writing in the area of Critical Race Theory which employs experience, storytelling and scholarship to reveal the truth that capitalist societies are *constructed* on the basis of racism, and to suggest confrontational strategies by which white supremacy and other systems of oppression can be overthrown. See G Ladson-Billings, 'Critical race theory' in *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Multicultural Education*, G Ladson-Billings and D Gillborn (eds.), Routledge, London, 2004, p. 51.

³ After the presentation of the South Carolina paper we were told by a number of US participants that they had not heard the phrase, 7/7, and did not know what it referred to. It refers to the 7 July 2005 co-ordinated suicide bombings in central London, UK.

⁴ D DeLillo, *Mao II*, Vintage, London, 1992, pp. 41-2.

⁵ Hamas gained control of the Palestinian Authority on 26th January 2006. BBCi, "Hamas sweeps to election victory", 26 January 2006, viewed on 3 July 2006, <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4>.

⁶ DeLillo, op. cit., p. 41.

⁷ J Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Verso, London, 2002, p. 19.

⁸ N Chakrabarty and J Preston, 'Posturing on the street is the new theatre: teens, queers and transgressive performance in 'uncontrolled' public spaces.'

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⁹ A Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Theatre Communications Group, New York, 1985.

¹⁰ BBCi, 'London Bomber Video aired on TV', 2 September 2005, viewed on 3 July 2006, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206708.stm>>. The quotes are the words spoken on the video by Mohammad Sidique Khan.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Since the October, 2005 earthquake in Pakistan many people have died from the cold whilst awaiting help.

¹³ S Jeffries, 'Freedom Fighter,' *London Guardian*, 10 December 2005, viewed on 3 July 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/terrorism/story/0,,1664188,00.html>>. Quotations are from Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty.

¹⁴ Chakrabarty and Preston, op. cit.

¹⁵ Baudrillard, pp. 104-105.

¹⁶ L Zeus, 'The souls of white folk: critical pedagogy, whiteness studies and globalization discourse' in *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Multicultural Education*, G Ladson-Billings and D Gillborn (eds.), Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 117-136.

¹⁷ A Bonnett, in *White Identities: Historical and International Perspectives*, Prentice Hall, London, 2000) at least deals with other class fractions. For a discussion of reformations of class and whiteness see: John Preston, 'White Trash Vocationalism? Formations of Class and Race in an Essex Further Education College,' *Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, vol. 5, 2003, pp. 6-17.

¹⁸ Bonnett, op. cit., p. 33.

¹⁹ Leonardo, op. cit., p. 127.

²⁰ G Ladson-Billings, 'Critical race theory' in Ladson-Billings and Gillborn, op. cit., p. 51.

²¹ Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer' in *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, L Goodman and J de Gay (ed.), London: Routledge, 2000, 167-171.

²² Chakrabarty and Preston, op. cit.

²³ Politically, this would need collective support from teachers, as in the UK in 2003 teacher job security was called into question for those who directly opposed the 'good' war in Iraq.

²⁴ Baudrillard, op. cit., p. 96.

²⁵ S Dibb and C Johnson, *Bullet Boy*, Video Collection International Limited, London, 2004, videorecording.

²⁶ Sierz, op. cit.

²⁷ R Allison, '9/11 wicked but a work of art, says Damien Hirst,' *London Guardian*, 11 September 2002, viewed on 3 July 2006, <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,11711,790058,00.html>>.

See also: C Longrigg, 'Sixty Minutes, Noise: By Art's Bad Girl,' *London Guardian*, 4th December 1997, viewed on 3 July 2006, <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/turnerpeoplespoll/story/0,,1057896,00.html>>.

²⁸ P Ridley, *Mercury Fur*, Methuen, London, 2004.

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