

## Violence not on body but through body-image: Mark Ravenhill's some explicit polaroids

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### **Abstract**

*In-yer-face theatre arising in the 1990s in Britain is generally renowned for displaying extreme and explicit images of violence and sexuality on stage without any censorship. This paper focusing on renowned in-yer-face playwright, Mark Ravenhill's play, *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999), will attempt to eliminate the reductionist approach that in-yer-face theatre produces nothing but provocative, filthy, extreme images of violence and sexuality on the stage. Ravenhill surprisingly excludes any form of physical violence from the action on the stage; however, it should be noted that this exclusion is not done under the name of propriety or censorship; rather, it is a strategic move to attract attention to another form of violence. This play examines the concept of violence not in the form of physical violence perpetuated by an agent but as what Slavoj Žižek calls "systemic violence" caused by the current economic or political system. Ravenhill unveils the impossibility of experiencing reality in itself in a system of post-modernist global capitalism by displaying the discrepancy between the real physical body and the myth of the body or the body image that is perpetuated and acknowledged to be real for survival in the global capitalist system. Namely, this paper on Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids* will focus on the mechanisms through which the social system causes victimization of the individual in a gradual and imperceptible way.*

**Keywords:** Ravenhill; In-yer-face theatre; Violence; Body-Image

### **Violence not on body but through body-image: Mark Ravenhill's some explicit polaroids**

In-yer-face theatre arising in the 1990s in Britain is generally renowned for displaying extreme and explicit images of violence and sexuality on stage without any censorship. This paper focusing on renowned in-yer-face playwright, Mark Ravenhill's play, *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999/2001), will attempt to eliminate the reductionist approach that in-yer-face theatre produces nothing but provocative, filthy, extreme images of violence and sexuality on the stage. Ravenhill surprisingly excludes any form of physical violence from the action on the stage; however, it should be noted that this exclusion is not done under the name of propriety or censorship; rather, it is a strategic move to attract attention to another form of violence. This play examines the concept of violence not in the form of physical violence perpetuated by an agent but as what Slavoj Žižek calls "systemic violence" caused by the current economic or political system (p. 1). Ravenhill unveils the impossibility of experiencing reality in itself in a system of postmodernist global capitalism by displaying the discrepancy between the real physical body and the myth of the body or the body image that is perpetuated and acknowledged to be real for survival in the global capitalist system. Namely, this paper on Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids* will focus on the mechanisms through which the social system causes victimization of the individual in a gradual and imperceptible way.

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To start with the characters in the play, there are two groups of characters in *Some Explicit Polaroids*. Ravenhill himself defines these groups in his piece on writing called "A Tear in the Fabric". The first group includes "Nick and Helen—genuinely adult people who can remember the political commitment of a lost age"(p. 90). These two characters help Ravenhill to show "what was" (a civilization of *logos*) and "what is"(a civilization of *non-logos*) in the society. The most effective way to portray the present culture and its effects on the individual is to compare it to the lost age and Nick and Helen help Ravenhill's portrayal of postmodern society as a civilization of trash. The second group including Tim, Victor and Nadia, are called "adult-children" by Ravenhill himself in the same piece:

Nobody in these plays is fully adult. They are all needy, greedy, wounded, only fleetingly able to connect with the world around them. Consumerism, late capitalism – whatever we call it – has created an environment of the infant 'me', where it is difficult to grow into the adult 'us'. (p. 90)

So, these "adult-children" characters are representative of the postmodern world in which we live in. Their experience of the world around them is a reflection of loosely connected snapshots without any grand narrative. This experience is the source of the victimization in this play; in other words, the society, the culture is the one applying violence to its members and life itself becomes a form of torture. These characters constitute the epitome of postmodern world, which is devoid of any sense of grand meaning. The most eccentric, colorful character of the play, Victor the rent boy, vocalizes this stance as he tells Nadia: "Everyone in London gave up on the meaning bullshit years ago, you know? And now, they enjoy themselves. I love trash, okay? I like it when everything is trash. Trash music, trash food, trash people. I love these things"(p. 241).

The postmodern and urban society working on the principles of capitalism is chaotic, fast and without meaning; everything is trash, every product is pastiche, not art. In line with this, the structure of play imitates the content. The play is made up of swift running scenes, which can be equated with the polaroids. Thus, the name of the play *Some Explicit Polaroids* refers to the play itself. The desired effect of the use of polaroid-like scenes is to imitate the perception of the contemporary audience; after all, Ravenhill's audience is the generation experiencing everything in a fast motion. His audience is the first generation to participate in social media- a new platform for communication using not the reality of the individuals but their own articulation of their identities through the use of images on the Internet. These articulations of identities, or the images they present to their followers online are not representations of the real but products of what Baudrillard in his seminal book, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981/1994) calls hyperreality (p. 47).

Polaroid is not only symbolic of the nineties' society and the structure of the play but also a recurrent motif in the play that helps us to see the difference between the reality of the body and the myth of the body that is body-image. Particularly, the character Victor, a rent boy loving the trash culture, is identified through polaroid as the manifestation of the body image. Victor defines his identity, his potential and his relationships with other people in terms of his body image not his personality. The first time he is shown on the stage, in his conversation with Nadia, we see the significance of physical body and its perception for Victor. To quote from the play:

Nadia: I think you're a very beautiful person.  
Victor: You like my body?  
Nadia: On the inside. Beautiful on the inside.

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Victor: You don't like my body?

Nadia: Of course, you've got a great body.

Victor: I've got a fucking fantastic body. I could have been in porno. Body like this I could be huge porno star. Guys go crazy for my body.

...

Victor. Boyfriends, yes. Many boyfriends. They go crazy for my body. But also my father, yes? My father and my brother go crazy for my body.

...

Nadia: A very loving family.

Victor: Yes, I think so. Yes... (pp. 239-240)

What Nadia means by "inside" is the inner quality that corresponds to moral, ethical and emotive features of the individual; it is part of metaphysics since it cannot be observed or measured. Thus, the inner qualities being invisible is trivial for the postmodern nineties society with its materialistic system. In this age, what matters is what is seen – the image- and accordingly internal beauty does not mean anything for Victor since the society values a person in terms of external qualities rather than internal ones. So, Nadia's praise for Victor's inner beauty is demeaning and Victor needs the validation of his physical beauty. Nonetheless, this need does not stem from Victor's vanity but the way society views and constructs his identity. His intimate relationships with partners or family members rely on their vision of his body. To quote from Amnon Jacob Suissa's article "Addiction to Cosmetic Surgery: Representations and Medicalization of the Body"(2008): "Although the body is a priori a physical object, one must also speak of the social body, since the social gaze on the body is a determining factor in the process of judging what is acceptable"(p. 620). In this play, this concept of "vision" or "social gaze" finds its materiality in the motif of polaroids. The dialogue that has just been quoted from the play continues with Victor's explanation about his "loving family":

Victor:... My brother, he likes to photograph me, you know? Polaroid? Since I was fourteen. Polaroid of my body. See? (*Offers Nadia the Polaroids.*) See? Fucking fantastic body. (p. 240)

The love between the family members, which can be seen as the most absolute form of unconditional love is even conditioned with the vision of Victor's body by his brother. However, even this vision is not direct. It is obstructed; the medium of polaroid becomes the intermediary through which they perceive each other. So, here polaroid in this sense refers to a lack of communication between the individuals who are imprisoned in 'trash' culture; the polaroid as a product of the trash culture functions as an obstacle against the possibility of genuine emotion between the individuals. This impossibility of genuine emotion between the individuals can be perceived in the encounter between Victor and Tim, who is the one purchasing Victor- or rather, Victor's image. Towards the end of the play, Tim, an AIDS patient refuses to take his pills and gets frustrated at Victor as his caring way coaxes him to take his pills to survive, and Tim says: "That's not why I downloaded you. I didn't download you because of that. I downloaded you because you wear little shorts and you gyrate to trash. Because you are trash" (p. 283). It is clear that Victor is not even purchased as human chattel; he is downloaded as an image on Internet. Victor's image described by Tim is an explicit polaroid, bordering on pornographic image. So, sex in a capitalist system becomes another domain where the genuine emotion is hindered through the image.

The dialogues between Nadia and Victor, as well as Victor and Tim quoted previously shed some light upon the historical facts of the British society in the 1990s. The correlation between

sex, capitalism and the image is hereby materialized with the historical fact of pornography. Victor correlates having a fantastic body not with aspirations like being an actor or a model but being a porn star and Tim's "download" of Victor echoes Victor's being a pornographic object. Pornography at the time in British society was not treated as a dirty, hidden secret anymore; it was domesticated. To quote from *Modern British Playwriting - the 1990s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (2001) on the issue of porn becoming a part of everyday life through the mediums like TV or Internet:

Domestication of porn: the growth of internet makes pornography widely available. Likewise, television channels, such as Channel 4 and the new Channel 5, screen more programmes about porn. Channel 5 in particular becomes notorious for broadcasting programmes such as *UK Raw*, *Compromising Situations* and *Sex and Shopping*. (Sierz, p. 7)

Especially the name of the last programme does not sound unfamiliar to the readers of Ravenhill's plays. The book *Porn Studies* (2004), a compilation of essays, begins with Linda Williams' *Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene: An Introduction*. Here, Williams describes the standing of pornography in the late 1990s and 2000s: "Feminist debates about whether pornography should exist at all have paled before the simple fact that still and moving-image pornographies have become fully recognizable fixtures of popular culture"(p. 1). Pornography with its power to duplicate sexual intercourse represented as real is another example of simulacrum experienced in the contemporary culture. Pornographic images are actually representations, or imitations; however, they are not experienced as representations signifying an original, they are experienced as real. The image once again surpasses reality in itself and becomes the only reality known. Moreover, pornography has the intrinsic value of capitalism as well; so it correlates with Ravenhill's idea of interdependency of shopping and fucking wonderfully. Through pornography, sex becomes another commodity marketed legally to the masses; it is turned into becoming a necessity, a natural need for people. The massive market share of pornography which proves the (re)definition of pornography as a natural need in the contemporary world, is put into detail by Linda Williams:

Pornography revenues – which can broadly be construed – which can broadly be construed to include magazines, Internet Web sites, magazines, cable, in- room hotel movies, and sex toys – total between 10 and 14 billion dollars annually. This figure, as *New York Times* critic Frank Rich has noted, is not only bigger than movie revenues; it is bigger than professional football, basketball, and baseball put together. With figures like these, Rich argues, pornography is no longer a "sideshow" but "the main event". (p. 3)

Pornography is not a form of entertainment or a representation enjoyed by some segment of society; it is re-contextualized in postmodern world as an essential for human beings. Accordingly, Williams inquires this situation "Who is watching all this pornography? Apparently all of us"(p. 3). So, here we have a new insight to the postmodern world portrayed by Ravenhill.

Another field, through which the representation loses its referential reality and image becomes, in Baudrillard's terms, simulacrum (p. 6), is the field of cosmetics. The significance of the body image for the individual can be seen in the scene where Nadia, harmed off-stage by an ex-lover, wants to pretend as if nothing happened and go watch Victor dance in a cage. To take closer look

at the scene:

Nick: But I can't do it. I can't look at you. I can't look at the bruises while he gyrates.

Tim: Well of course you won't be looking at the bruises. That's what makes-up was invented for.

Nick: Make-up, Victor.

*Exit Victor.*

Nadia: Cover up the nasty stuff. And there'll be plenty of make-up on.

Nick: But it won't make them go away.

Nadia: Out of sight. (p. 275)

As we can see in this scene, not the reality but the perception of the physical body is important. Just as Victor's confidence in his body is contingent on being photographed, Nadia's well being is contingent on her being seen as healthy through the make-up. What matters is not the reality of the bruises, "the nasty stuff", but its being "out of sight" since image dominates or rather becomes the reality. Make-up makes up for the reality in a very postmodern fashion; the image of healthy, beautiful Nadia that is created by the use of cosmetics is not a representation, it is the reality, the simulacrum they experience. Thus, through the obsession of these characters with the image in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Ravenhill creates a microcosm of the society he and his audience live in. We need to mention Nick's approach to the issue of hyperreality in the postmodern world since he is a newcomer to the postmodern world; his character differs greatly from this little community of Victor, Nadia and Tim. At the beginning of the play, Nick has just come out of prison; so, he did not have any interaction with the world of Victor, Tim or Nadia; he is like a figure frozen in a time capsule and let loose in an alien, future world. Nick is the embodiment of an age that is dead, an age in which ideology and truth mattered; so, he cannot empathize with the members of postmodern capitalist society or understand their mindset that values body image over the physical body. His contradicting perception can be understood through Baudrillard's following point: "It is always the goal of the ideological analysis to restore the objective process, it is

always a false problem to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum"(Baudrillard, p. 27). This is the reason why Nick searches beneath the make-up; for him, the bruises will not disappear, they will still be there whereas for Nadia, Tim and Victor, the make-up as an illustration of simulacrum is, as Baudrillard says, "[m]ore real than the real" and "that is how the real is abolished" (p. 108) in the postmodern world Ravenhill depicts and writes in.

In *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Ravenhill employs imagery to portray a subtle kind of violence that is inherent in the society our characters live in and this is the reason why, unlike his contemporary writers, he excludes the physical violence from his stage. This peculiarity can be explained by Slavoj Žižek's categorization of violence in his book, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008). Žižek makes a distinction between two main types of violence: "subjective" and "objective" violence, which also contains two types, "symbolic" and "systemic" violence. Subjective violence is directly visible to human eye and mind since it is "performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (Žižek, p. 1), and this is the type of violence that is easy for the individuals to perceive. As Žižek indicates, the subjective violence is marked by the interruption of the "normal" whereas objective violence is "inherent in the "normal" state of things"(p. 2). Namely, whereas "subjective" violence is visible, "objective" violence is not since it poses as the "normal", it is the status quo. Objective violence is manifested in two ways; the first one is through language and the second one is through the system. "Systemic" violence, "the often catastrophic consequences of the

smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (Žižek, p. 2) is the violence that is portrayed by Ravenhill in *Some Explicit Polaroids*. The play exposes the violence on the individual perpetuated by the system of global, capital postmodern world. In the play, this “systemic” violence is depicted through the “body image”. Žižek argues that “systemic” violence as a part of the social system reveals that the individuals are also the victimizer and not just innocent victims since they are the ones maintaining the system that victimizes them. In Ravenhill’s play, the “body image” is a site that exposes this duality of the individual with regards to violence. To illustrate, Victor is victimized by the view of the others as a trash boy with a fantastic body; however, he maintains the status quo and repeats others’ view of him. So, he becomes both the victim and the victimizer of the “systemic” violence of global capitalist society that values only the image of an individual.

A noteworthy issue regarding the depiction of violence in the play is the deliberate exclusion of physical violence from the stage, which contrasts with in-her-face theatre’s explicit depiction of physical violence on-stage. One of the perpetrators of physical violence like Simon, Nadia’s lover, is hidden from the sight of the audience altogether; we never see him, we just hear from (through the record of answering machine, not from himself) or about him. Nick is also a character associated with the physical violence; however, Nick’s violence is removed from the temporality of the stage since it took place in 1984. Nonetheless, the audience sees the bruises, blood of Nadia, Simon’s victim. What matters in this play is not the act of physical violence but the marks the body bears because of the violence. In order to stress the image of the body as the most valued feature of the 1990s culture, Ravenhill intentionally removes the act of physical violence, which is parallel to Žižek’s “subjective” violence, to emphasize the “systemic” violence perpetuated by “life” in the postmodern capitalist society. The physical violence applied on Nadia and Jonathan is the representative of “subjective” violence since they are acts of crime and are visible with the marks on the body of the individual. However, Ravenhill does not attempt to portray the “subjective” violence and that is the reason the violence perpetuated by Simon on Nadia happens off-stage. Thus, all his characters are both the victims and perpetrators of the apparatuses of the society they live in and the life itself becomes the site of “systemic violence”.

One can argue that an instance of physical violence is visible on the stage when Victor hits Tim’s body several times after Tim dies. This seems to be a deliberate inclusion of physical, “subjective” violence since the fact that the victim of physical violence is dead means that he is freed from the “systemic” violence. What Ravenhill wants to talk about is not the physical violence on the physical body but the “objective” violence on the “body image”, which seems to be the medium through which the individuals experience and maintain the absolute form of violence perpetuated by the postmodernity, capitalism and globalization. Only when Tim is freed from his suffering under the reign of global capitalist society, Ravenhill can show the physical violence on the stage. Hence, the “subjective” violence needs to be eliminated so that the audience can grasp the “objective” violence exposed on the stage without any distraction.

Furthermore, the concept of “normality” as the site of “systemic” and “symbolic” violence can be imitated by structure of the play. In such an application, “subjective” violence can be correlated with a physically active climax or a revelation whereas “objective” violence does not have such an animated climax, a revelation or a change. *Some Explicit Polaroids* is clearly in the second category. What Ravenhill portrays is the violence the characters experience through “the invisible background of this systemic violence” (Žižek, p. 10) and this invisibility of “systemic violence”

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in the background is exposed by the lack of an animated climax in Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids*.

To conclude, Ravenhill explores what Clara Escoda Agustí, in *Martin Crimp's Theatre: Collapse As Resistance to Late Capitalist Society* (2013) calls the "irreversible impact of globalization – of the market and of technology – on contemporary individuals and relationships" (p. 15). Ravenhill targets the postmodern global capitalist world as the source of invisible "systemic violence" inherent in the "body images". Thus, he achieves to put what is invisible (systemic violence) to the foreground, rendering it visible to the eyes of the audience.

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