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Çağlayan DOĞAN

Okutman | Instructor
Gümüşhane Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Bölümü, Gümüşhane -Türkiye
Gümüşhane University, Department of Foreign Languages, Gümüşhane-Turkey
orcid.org/0000-0001-9596-2998
caglayandogan@gumushane.edu.tr

The Reflections of American Dream and Postmodern Consumerism: Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and F*ing* and *Faust Is Dead* ***

Abstract

This study aims to focus on Mark Ravenhill's some significant plays in which the concept of American dream and contemporary consumerist culture are seen. Ravenhill puts forward the perception of American dream and consumerism by emphasizing the dissatisfaction of contemporary postmodern milieu. In his plays, Ravenhill refers to the concept of American dream that enables to establish a bound between much more consumerism and opportunities that it served. Therefore, this study tries to put forward how American dream and contemporary society is mirrored within the current theatre perspective.

Keywords: Mark Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing*, *Faust is Dead*, Postmodern Consumerism, American Dream.

Postmodern Tüketim ve Amerikan Rüyasının Yansımaları: Mark Ravenhill'in *Shopping and F*ing* ve *Faust Is Dead* Adlı Oyunları**

Öz

Bu çalışma bazı önemli eserlerinde Amerikan rüyası ve çağdaş tüketim kültürünün görüldüğü Mark Ravenhill'in ilgili oyunları üzerine odaklanmayı amaçlar. Ravenhill tüketim algısını çağdaş postmodern ortamın doyumsuzluğuna vurgu yaparak anlatır. Amerikan rüyası algısı sunduğu imkanlara ve daha fazla tüketim ile doğrudan bir bağ kurulmasına olanak tanıdığı için Ravenhill tarafından kullanılıyor. Bu nedenle bu çalışmada Amerikan rüyası algısının ve çağdaş toplumun yeni tiyatro perspektifinden nasıl görüldüğü ortaya çıkarılmaya çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mark Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing*, *Faust is Dead*, Postmodern Tüketim, Amerikan Rüyası.

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Introduction

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* that "marks the real break-through of the new drama into the British theatre" (Innes 1992: 98) is considered the turning point of the contemporary British theatre after long-awaited silence. Likewise, In-yer-face theatre is one of the most significant period in British stage, because it is described as "the second renaissance of contemporary English drama, which is always surprising, ever challenging and, on occasion, a tad messy" (Boles 1999: 25), and it refers to aggression, addiction, postmodern consumerist society, and sexual violence on stage. Aleks Sierz points out "it is a type of drama [that] uses explicit scenes of human emotion. It is characterized by stage images that depict acts such as [...] rape, child abuse, drug injection, cannibalism, and vomiting. It also has a rawness of tone, a sense of life being lived on the edge" (Sierz 2002: 19). In plays, shock tactics are applied to show the problematic sides of contemporary twentysomethings, De Buck explains that "the main aim of these new [...] [aesthetic] is to make the spectators react to the moral problems discussed in their plays. It is no longer possible to simply enjoy watching a play without being provoked and feeling the need to respond" (2009: 5). It can be said that In-yer-face theatre is a sense of theatre that is inevitable, and reproduces the aggressive side of contemporary society. In this study, it is intended to find out the perception of postmodern consumerist culture and American dream in order to draw our attention to the contemporary social milieu in Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing* and *Faust is Dead*.

Since extremely violent and bold acts are usually seen in this theatre aesthetics, it can be asserted that In-yer-face theatre intends to rock the audience with immoral relationships, social corruptions by indicating extreme violence, sexuality, and postmodern consumerism. In-yer-face theatre is any drama which grabs the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message" (Sierz 2000: 4). In this respect, In-yer-face theatre "[...] is not a clearly delineated movement, but rather a theatrical sensibility" (De Buck 2009: 5). Ravenhill supports this idea as follows: "[...] we had no intention of being a school. I hadn't met Sarah [Kane] until well after the

first production of *Blasted* in 1995, and I had neither seen nor read her play when I wrote *Shopping and F***ing*" (Ravenhill 2006: 2). These playwrights are considered as new nihilists, new Jacobean and cool writers in British theatre society. The playwrights of these period wrote about the problems of postmodern society, consumerism, and "selected their characters for their plays as reflections of the imminent milieu of British society which consisted of ribald, impertinent, troubled, and isolated members" (Doğan 2016: 120). In-yer-face playwrights generally refer to the conflicts among characters that represent postmodernist discourse. "In most of his plays, Ravenhill focuses on the absence of reliable ideologies and the link between sex and consumerism. Sexual transactions, omnipresent in contemporary British society, are emphasized, whereas political viewpoints are neglected to entirely left out" (De Buck 2009: 4). Here it is seen that his plays evoke the immorality of consumerist society that is successfully depicted in his plays. Although it is said that the political viewpoints are ignored in above quotation, Ravenhill makes his ideas clear about the political agenda in his interview with Eric Monforte:

There were massive changes happening in Britain all the way during my education at university, with the country moving from being a society with a mixed economy and an anachronistic consensus about politics- a consensus about a form of state capitalism- to a free market economy. I was the first country in Europe to do that so aggressively and to do it very quickly. The whole fabric of the country was transformed, and that had a huge effect on everybody. Those kids in *Shopping and F***ing* are at the very tail end of what that wild free market, that western capitalism does" (2007: 95).

Mark Ravenhill who is definitely one of the most prolific playwrights of In-yer-Face Theatre is considered that "giving potent voice to a generation disillusioned by national civic life and facing the complexities of an emerging global marketplace, Ravenhill questions the possibility of moral action. With volatile emotion and dark humor, his plays seek the ethical in a postmodern, post-ideological world" (Wade 2008: 284). In his twenties, he discovered that he was not a great actor, and he said that "I originally wanted to act, [...], but I quickly realized that other people were better than me" (Sierz 2001: 122). Ravenhill has always been concerned with theatre in different roles; therefore "he had taken jobs as director, administrative assistant, drama teacher

and freelance director before he decided to become a playwright" (Goethals 2010: 26). In his plays, he generally creates a system criticism through characters that have signs of postmodernist discourse, and satire about cultural, political, and sociological issues since he was one of the witnesses of depressed social and economic period, Aleks Sierz clarifies this as follows:

One way of understanding the point of view of a young writer is to do a thought experiment. Imagine being born in 1970. You're nine years old when Margaret Thatcher comes to power; for the next eighteen years –just as you're growing up intellectually and emotionally- the only people you see in power in Britain are Tories. Nothing changes; politics stagnate. Then, some time in the late eighties, you discover Ecstasy and dance culture. Sexually, you're less hung up about differences between gays and straights than your older brothers and sisters. You also realize that if you want to protest, or make music, shoot a film or put on an exhibition, you have to do it yourself. In 1989, the Berlin Wall falls and the old ideological certainties disappear into the dustbin of history. And you're still not even twenty. In the nineties, media images of Iraq, Bosnia and Rwanda haunt your mind. Political idealism you remember Tiananmen Square and know people who are road protesters is mixed with cynicism your friends don't vote and you think all politicians are corrupt. This is the world you write about (2000: 237).

*Shopping and F***ing* that is concerned with three main characters tells a story of the three young home-mates' problematic relationships. They have drug addiction and Mark, the protagonist, aims to go to a rehabilitation centre in order that he want to have his disorder cured, but he is not successful to do this, and finally, they dismiss him because of violation of the rules of the centre. When he turns back, he forgoes all emotional commitment; nevertheless, when he meets Gary, a fourteen-year-old prostitute, he falls in love with him. Lulu, who is the only female figure, she has some emotional conflicts that she doesn't want to share anything with anyone else. In doing so, she creates a layer between the other characters since indeed she objects to male figures' opinions. As for Robbie, he is a bisexual character, so capricious and the most indifferent figure in the play. Gary, whose stepfather abuses him when he was a child, therefore, wants paternal love because he is really devoid of it. As the play goes on, Robbie freely hands out all the ecstasy pills that are given him to sell, it makes Brian who is the capitalist figure in the play nervous, and then, he demands his money. In

order to compensate Brian's debt, Lulu and Robbie lead a telephone sex line by satisfying people's fantasies. At the end of the play, Brian forgives their debts since they understand his capitalist ideology that "Money is civilization, civilization is money" (Ravenhill 2001: 87). In this respect, Clare Wallace propounds that "in particular, the role of consumption and commoditization in the plays produces a problematic commentary on contemporary selfhood and responsibility (Wallace 2005: 268). Apart from depression, corruption, and great confusion in the society are referred to in the plays; the problematic sides of consumptions and commoditization are also appealed as it seen in above quotation.

In the play, it is easily realized that the things we don't pay for are crappy and pointless. In this respect, it can be said that in the contemporary society everyone knows prices but they cannot grasp the actual value of them. Indeed Ravenhill insistently focuses on the worthlessness of current milieu, this corrupted social unit that is drown by the play symbolizes that current society does not have any moral order. In this play there are plenty of example of transactions and selfishness, but real love, being virtuous are underestimated in contemporary society. In this respect, it is asserted that the play strictly criticizes this relentless capitalism that is directly referred to consumerist culture; it is obvious that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into a commodity production generally and consequently such a market demands aesthetic innovation and experimentation" (Jameson 1998: 316). This play reflects Ravenhill's theatre aesthetics that is seen sort of commoditization from top to bottom. There is no doubt that both characters that are from variant backgrounds and the plot that indicate relentless capitalist perspectives refer to the consumerist culture. Fredric Jameson brings forward that "I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late consumerism or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of this particular social system" (Jameson 1998: 11). In this sense, it is clear that the play insistently proposes capitalism for the agenda because all his characters obviously stand for this capitalist perspective. In parallel, Ken Urban underlines that "Ravenhill's

characters are over-determined by economics. But while money is crucial for survival, it has paradoxically robbed the world of its meaning, of its value" (2007: 46). As for this play, this idea finds its mirror in Brian lines: "We must work. What we've got to do is make the money. For them. My boy. Generations to come. We won't see it of course-that purity. But they will. Just as long as we keep on making the money" (Ravenhill 2001: 88-89).

In the play Ravenhill consciously selects his characters from teenager age group in order to reverberate with this bleak, imminent, and capitalist milieu. He asserts a pseudo family unit concept to show their problematic, despairing relationships. It finds its resonances in Mark's lines in the play: "I used to know what I felt. I traded. I made money. Tic Tac. And when I made money I was happy, when I lost money I was unhappy" (Ravenhill 2001: 33). It is seen that the power of money is the only self-motivation for the characters so as to survive this sort of relentless capitalist aura. In this respect, it reminds us of America and American dream because it is the birthplace of capitalist movement and it has a motto that it provides every citizen to have a chance to be rich in this territory. However, it is no doubt that Ravenhill does not think this side, when it is got together, it easily brings to mind America and its system because of its strategies about people's lifestyles. All characters in the play come from almost the same level, they approach everything within the scope of the power of money. Their consumerist lifestyles symbolize the people who try to find happiness through consuming everything from emotion to commodity. In this regard, another figure in the play, Brian who is also the mouthpiece of consumerist society, meticulously drops his ideology as follows:

Brian: Tell me, son, says my dad, what are the first few words in the Bible? I don't know, Dad, I say, what are the first few words in the Bible? And he looks at me, he looks me in the eye and says: Son, the first few words in the Bible are... get the money first. Get. The Money. First. It's not perfect, I don't deny it. We haven't reached perfection. But it's the closest we've come to meaning, Civilization is money. Money is civilization. And civilization-how did we get here? By war, by struggle, kill or be killed. And money-it's the same thing, you understand? The getting is cruel, is hard, but the having is civilization. Then we are civilized. Say it. Say it with me. Money is... (Ravenhill 2001: 87)

As it is clearly seen above lines Ravenhill's characters portray their capitalist point of views with their line spaces, thereby, he reveals the significance of this commoditized system. In this respect, Wallace underlines that "the language of consumption is used most strikingly to express the relationships around which the play is structured. These might be classified as familial, business and sexual, though notably the categories are often indistinct and overlap in a variety of patterns throughout the play's fourteen scenes" (Wallace 2005: 271). As it is seen above lines, the discourses of consumption from business to emotional issues are dominantly applied in the play.

As for *Faust is Dead*, it is one of the most significant plays in contemporary British stage, and revolves around three main characters that are successfully get together. The play "is a free adaptation of the Faust story, [which] featured Alain, a French postmodernist philosopher who is on the American chat-show to publicize his book on the Death of Man and the end of history" (Sierz 2000: 134). It is a play in which Alain, representing Michel Foucault, "quits his university post after upsetting the institution's sponsors, and hooks up with Pete, the wayward son of a computer software magnate. Together, they meet Donny, a disturbed boy who cuts himself. Challenged to prove his authenticity, Donny kills himself. Alain is then hospitalized and Pete returns to his father" (Sierz 2000: 134). In this play, Alain is described as a wanderer philosopher, represents Michel Foucault. *Faust is Dead* is a play that shows the end of history theme by referring to related philosophical discourses. In the play, the world's most famous philosopher arrives in Los Angeles and is greeted as a star. He appears in a round of chat show; he talks about the Death of Man and the End of History that evoke Jean Baudrillard and Francis Fukuyama's ideas. One day, he meets a significant leading software magnate, and they set out a voyage across America. As is it seen, in this play Ravenhill emphasizes postmodernist discourses and obviously uses them in order to reverberate the postmodernist tenets that are seen in the expressions related to postmodernism or evocative features in the play. Moreover, the title of the play sounds postmodernist and especially it is stressed by using the end of one of the most well known stories, and of its representative character, Faust. In this respect, Ravenhill's

play is the reproduction of the Faust myths in a postmodernist way, and unveils the end of the character even in its title.

It is easily seen that Ravenhill creates a connection between the end of history and chaos that forms this play from beginning to the end. Ravenhill builds his opinions by shaping a chaotic environment to stress on the terrible conditions the world confronts. In the beginning of the play, the chorus shows highly significant resonances about the end of history that symbolizes a chaotic mood:

Thinking about all this stuff in the world-about the riots and the fighting and the angry people and all- and I just couldn't sleep. And sometimes I'd cry- partly because I really wanted to sleep and I was mad that I couldn't sleep but partly because of all those bad things going on. And my mom would come into my room and be just like so totally freaked that I was crying night after night. What's wrong, poops? Is one of the teachers at the school doing bad things to you?. Until eventually I'm like: No, Mom, it's not the teachers at the school. I'm crying for the world, because the world is such a bad place. And Mommo is like: I know, poops. It's bad now but it's getting better. It's gonna get a whole lot better. We're going to live in a better world. I know, Momma. And so I pretended to sleep and my mom went off to bed. And after that I taught myself to cry in a special way that meant she wouldn't hear me ever again. (Ravenhill 2001: 97).

According to Oxford English Dictionary (OED), American dream is described: the ideal that every US citizen should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and property through hard work, determination, and initiative. There is no doubt that as for the perception of American dream, it is regarded every American traditionally has opportunities, freedom, equality, and they are given an opportunity to have a life of personal happiness and comfortable lifestyle. Ravenhill in his play *Faust is Dead*, puts forward that America is a place where people are really alive, it finds its mirror in Alain's lines: "because in America, only in America, am I truly at home. For me, and for so many children of this twentieth century, it is only in America that we really believe that we are alive, that we are living within in our own century" (101), and he goes on that "In Europe, we are ghosts, trapped in a museum, with the lights out and the last visitor long gone. And so I am going to America" (Ravenhill 2001:101). After Alain's lines, Pete responds that "because in America ... just America ...is... really ...

home. For me, and for children in the twentieth century (for kids? What's the ...it is only America belief in being alive (right), living in the century (century that we -what?-own). In Europe, we are spooks (phantoms, ghosts, yeah), something in a some ... (shit he's getting ...shit), lights off and the some such something (101). events are virtual." In these above lines, the author underscores the importance of living in America. In this part, he alludes to the perception of American dream by delineating good sides of living in America because America attracts a lot of people from different parts of the world. In this regard, Ravenhill defines America as a place where people can achieve their ambitions.

Conclusion

In short, it is obvious that Ravenhill generally reflects the postmodern consumerist society in his plays. In *Shopping and F***ing*, Ravenhill reverberates a symbolic world which obviously shows the postmodern consumerist society. The play that has very chaotic mood harbors the contemporary problematic human relationships that are brought by postmodernism. Although the end of grand narratives and the other postmodernist discourses are continuously emphasized in the play, Ravenhill also criticizes the relentless capitalist views of contemporary decentered world. In *Faust is Dead* that is one of the most significant plays of in-yer-face theatre predominantly reflects postmodernist characteristics that are seen in the related theorists that Ravenhill frequently refers to them. In addition to this, the themes of consumerism and American dream are significantly shown in his plays in order to indicate the relationships between postmodern consumerist culture and American dream that are obviously dealt with his plays. It is concluded that Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing* and *Faust is Dead* reproduce the postmodern consumerist culture and the perception of American dream so as to draw our attention to the current social environment.

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