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## **Responsibility and Postmodernity: Mark Ravenhill and 1990s British Drama**

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Mark Ravenhill has been claimed by Aleks Sierz as “one of the quintessential writers of the 1990s.” Considered by some reviewers as another *provocateur* like Sarah Kane, Ravenhill’s work has largely been defined by its use of sensation and spectacle. This paper will examine the ways in which his plays are driven by both the appropriation and assimilation of postmodern superficiality and a critique of these same features and values. Specifically it will explore the ways in which Ravenhill stages consumption and commodification in the plays in order to comment upon selfhood and responsibility in a postmodern age.

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As is now widely acknowledged, in the 1990s British theatre experienced a vibrant period of rejuvenation, the effects of which have been felt on stages across Europe. Aleks Sierz in his influential account of the period, *In-Yer-Face: British Drama Today*, has claimed that what defines the new writing of the nineties are its visceral tactics of provocation to convey a modern social critique. The playwrights discussed by Sierz were credited with producing a “theatre of sensation” which was “experiential not speculative” and which “[q]uestion[ed] moral norms, [...] affront[ed] the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage [...]” (Sierz 2001: 4). My focus here is on some of the work of one of the most popular of the 90s new writers – Mark Ravenhill – who has been widely translated and produced. Ravenhill’s engagement with contemporary consumer society is explicit in his best known play, *Shopping and Fucking*, but is also central to *Faust is Dead* and *Some Explicit Polaroids*, where as Jozef De Vos states, “contemporary uprootedness and lack of values are [...] directly and expressly put in the context of postmodernism” (De Vos 2002: 48). I will examine the ways in which Ravenhill’s plays are driven by both the appropriation and assimilation of postmodern superficiality or depthlessness, and a critique of these same features and values. In particular, the role of consumption and commodification in the plays produces a problematic commentary on contemporary selfhood and responsibility.

At the outset I would contend that Ravenhill's drama is less involved with theatrical postmodernism as practice, than with postmodernity as a subject. In fact, although the plays flaunt references to pop culture blended with allusions to and borrowings of ideas from critical texts on postmodernism, and are structured around rapid sequences of scenes and visceral images, a relatively coherent narrative usually unfolds in a manner structurally indebted (at least superficially) to television or cinema. Rather than being formally innovative, Ravenhill does not significantly break with the conventions of plot, character and narrative. Instead, the hub of provocation tends to be the thematic and visual content of the work. Typically, the message of the plays is amplified. So while Dominic Dromgoole praises Ravenhill's visual and verbal wit, he worries that "[i]t's perilously close to soap, where everyone knows and describes what they're feeling" (Dromgoole 2002: 236). Sierz, too, has noted the way in which "characters openly proclaim their worldview" (Sierz 2001: 148). And it is this surface tension that renders the plays' messages problematic.

Ravenhill openly defines himself as a materialist committed to social observation and compelled to write about the present. More precisely, he characterises his objectives as follows:

I want [...] to capture the truth of this new world we live in [...]. To write about the virtual markets of images and information spinning around us and threatening to drag us into perpetual postmodern giddiness. To write about the hypocrisy of our calls for universal freedom and democracy as we destroy the world for profit (Ravenhill 2003).

Before turning to the topicality of Ravenhill's subject matter, and setting aside the pyrotechnics of shock and provocation, one might do well first to tune into the echoes of a perhaps less fashionable predecessor, one who seems to have little truck with experiential theatre. George Bernard Shaw's attempts through his plays to provide "a means of public thinking on the ideological conflicts of his time" (Kaufman 1965: 7) have had a profound impact on modern Anglophone drama. This might be traced through the work of playwrights like John Osborne, David Edgar, Howard Brenton and, perhaps Ravenhill's most immediate precursor, David Hare. As Christopher Innes describes, although "[e]lsewhere in Europe symbolic or psychological themes predominated. By contrast, the mainstream of [...] English drama has continued to reflect the realistic treatment of social questions that Shaw promoted" (Innes 2002 [1992]: 14). This commitment to the debate and critique of values with an emphasis, as Innes puts it, on discussion rather than on denouement, can be identified in modified and updated form in Ravenhill's drama, despite a top layer of experiential viscosity. Like Shaw, Ravenhill provokes with a view to generating an awareness, in his audience/readers, of "imperative historical realities" (Kaufman 1965: 3). In addition, Ravenhill's work is similarly tinged with a sense of despair in relation to the society he depicts. By the end of the twentieth century an early Shavian "confidence in the force of progressive intellectual enlightenment" (Innes 2002 [1992]: 20), significantly seems misplaced in a world defined, in Ravenhill's words, by a "sense of materialism and [...] moral vacuum" (Sierz 2001: 124).

*Shopping and Fucking*, *Faust Is Dead*, and *Some Explicit Polaroids* each reflect a world that reverberates with the spectacular unrealism noted by Guy Debord where social relations have shifted into commodity relations (Debord 1967). This is perhaps most apparent in the first of these three plays, where Ravenhill's starting point was a group of "characters whose whole vocabulary had been defined by the market, who had been brought up in a decade when all that mattered was buying and selling" (Sierz 2001: 123). The characters, Mark, Robbie, Lulu, Brian and Gary, are sketched with the minimum detail; their identities are delineated primarily by their roles in a system of commodities and commodification. They

are, as Ravenhill has stated, “the sum of their actions” (Sierz 2001: 131) and, it might be added, only the sum of their actions in the present moment. This sense of presentness and transience chimes with the playful references of their names – as the playwright confesses, the characters were named after the members of the now defunct, but erstwhile phenomenally successful, boy band Take 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. The central group consists of Lulu, Mark and Robbie who live together in an ill-defined family unit; their relationship is explained only by means of a “shopping story” that frames the play, in which Mark ‘buys’ his companions:

It’s summer. I’m in a supermarket. It’s hot and I’m sweaty. Damp. And I’m watching this couple shopping. I’m watching you. And you’re both smiling. You see me and you know sort of straight away that I’m going to have you. You know you don’t have a choice. No control. Now this guy comes up to me. He’s a fat man. Fat and hair and lycra and he says: See the pair by the yoghurt?

Well, says fat guy, they’re both mine. I own them. I own them but I don’t want them—because you know something?—they’re trash. Trash and I hate them. Wanna buy them? [...] So I do the deal. I hand it over. And I fetch you. I don’t have to say anything because you know. You’ve seen the transaction. And I take you both away and I take you to my house. [...] And we live out our days fat and content and happy. (Ravenhill 2001: 5)

This embedded narrative functions as an abstract synopsis of all relationships in the play, and introduces a sense of self-conscious performativity at the outset, where identity is considered in terms of ownership of oneself or others.

The fiction to which the central characters subscribe operates on a number of levels that are entangled with commodification. First, it is easily recognisable as a somewhat warped love-at-first-sight narrative that exaggerates a vocabulary of possession commonly and popularly applied to love. But it also is based on a notion of consumer choice. In this case the prospective lovers are rather unromantically chosen as products in a supermarket thus setting the tone for the ensuing relationships in the play. While the shopping story expresses a fantasy of objectification, it is significantly the means by which Lulu Robbie and Mark negotiate and perform identities in the alternative family unit as is emphasised by its revision and retelling at the end of the play as a type of coda.

Above all the result of the dominance of consumerism at every level of experience in the play is a creeping sense of social atomisation. Perhaps the most poignant evidence of the characters’ isolation from one another is their perpetual consumption of pre-prepared, individually wrapped meals in the form of takeaways or microwave dinners. This convenience food serves, quite obviously, as yet another ambivalent example of consumer choice. As Lulu says when she encourages Robbie to eat: “you’ve got the world here. You’ve got all the tastes in the world. You’ve got an empire under cellophane. [...] In the past you’d have to invade, you’d have to occupy just to get one of these things” (Ravenhill 2001: 61). The main characteristic of these meals is not, however, their exotic flavour, but the fact that they cannot be shared. This seems symptomatic not only of the characters’ apparent inability to “form any kind of connection with one another” (Rebellato 2001: xi), but of the fundamentally isolating quality of the consumer system. According to Jean Baudrillard, “[w]hereas the directed *acquisition* of objects and commodities is individualising, atomising, and dehistoricising. [...] As a consumer, humans become again solitary, cellular, and at best

*gregarious* (for example in a family viewing TV [...])” (Baudrillard 1988: 54). The characters’ feeding of each other at the end of the play obviously is intended to suggest an attempt to overcome this condition in some small way, nevertheless the gesture is mitigated by the fact that they are still eating individualised portions of convenience food.

*Faust Is Dead*, similarly, pays ample tribute to sense of displacement brought by a globalised ahistorical unreality where the “abstract vision of the world is shaped by a massive mediation of products/commodities” (Birringer 1991: 4). The Faustian pursuit and consumption of experience in the play is most strikingly an experience of mediation and hyperreality. This is underlined by Ravenhill’s use of television, screens and projections and, most importantly, the layering of a video chorus with the onstage action. Throughout the play the wandering European philosopher, Alain, with the assistance of a young American slacker, Pete, encounters a world he has previously only known in abstract terms. The chorus counterpoints these with a number of clearer parables of the postmodern society about which Alain theorises, foregrounding processes of “simulation, depersonalisation and dehistoricisation” (Callens 2000: 170).

Similar to Mark in *Shopping and Fucking*, Pete is happy only when experience can be mediated and consumed under restricted conditions, and preferably filtered through convenient commodities. In the world of consumer hyperreality, the word ‘real’ has lost its meaning. For instance, Pete fantasises, without apparent irony, about all the “totally real experiences” he will buy when he sells the “chaos” computer programme back to his father, all of which are markedly unreal:

I’m gonna keep the peace in Bosnia. I’m gonna take Saddam Hussein out for a pizza.  
I’m gonna shoot pool with the Pope and have Boris Yeltsin show me his collection of  
baseball stickers. (Ravenhill 2001: 112)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Pete’s closest relationships are with objects, namely his camcorder and computer. Arguably this dependence on the camcorder demonstrates succinctly Debord’s hypothesis that spectacle now constitutes social relations. The video recorder is as Johan Callens notes, his “best friend, a roving mechanical eye” (Callens 2000: 170), and functions in a complex manner, both in mediating reality and by creating it.

With *Some Explicit Polaroids* Ravenhill reconsiders a similar thematic terrain. In place of the core device of the transaction, the action of this later play is derived from a Rip Van Winkle premise, which allows Ravenhill to contrast the values of an earlier era with those of the present. As Sierz has aptly noted he “combines a seventies state-of-the-nation play with an acerbic critique of both nineties youth culture and traditionalist leftist militancy” (Sierz 2001: 144). Set in contemporary London, *Some Explicit Polaroids* follows Nick, who has just been released from prison after fifteen years, and his adjustment to postmodern society. He finds the social geography he knew has been replaced with rampant individualism, consumerism and as Michael Billington puts it “a scorched-earth attitude to the day before yesterday” (Billington 1999). A former socialist activist, Nick was imprisoned for the kidnap and torture of a wealthy businessman and asset stripper. Upon release he seeks the friend who encouraged him to carry out the attack, only to find that she is now a New Labour city councillor and is hoping to become an MP. Helen’s political ambitions have been reduced to fighting for public transport between housing estates and shopping centres. Though Nick’s first encounters with the minutiae of everyday life leave him disorientated, Helen refuses to be his guide in this new age. All she can advise him to do is to “start with the little stuff [...] [b]it by bit, you do what you can and you don’t look for the bigger picture, you don’t generalise” (Ravenhill 2001: 236).

Nick wanders through the city only to find the attitudes of the younger people he meets infuriatingly incomprehensible. Nadia and her friends Tim and Victor introduce him to the new world of postmodern “trash” culture of consumption at its most self-indulgent. Their celebration of the inauthentic, the kitsch and the frivolous clashes with his apparently hopelessly outdated values and politics. Like the portions of food in *Shopping and Fucking* which cannot be shared, Tim warns Nick that responsibility is now a matter for individuals only (Ravenhill 2001: 269). They mock his concern with politics and justice which Tim describes as outmoded, very “nineteen eighty-four” (Ravenhill 2001: 267).

By contrast, Nick’s former enemy, Jonathan, is the spokesperson for an alternative to the shallow individualism espoused by the younger generation and to the exhausted oppositional politics of Nick. In an echo of Alain’s theory of chaos in *Faust Is Dead*, Jonathan presents his perspective on survival in a world driven by consumption:

you embrace the chaos [...] you see the beauty of [...] the way money flows, the way it moves around the world faster and faster. Every second a new opportunity, every second a new disaster. The endless beginnings, the infinite endings. And each of us swept along by the great tides and winds of the markets. (Ravenhill 2001: 293)

This is, evidently, the apotheosis of capital and the end of humanism. When Nick and Jonathan finally meet, they acknowledge a nostalgia for the dichotomy of socialism versus capitalism they once identified with. But Jonathan has found new bearings in a territory that has been transformed by globalisation. Although it is possible to “[r]ush around, regulate a bit. Soften the blow for a few of the losers,” he argues that it is better to accept that “this is the way things are” and “ultimately the market is the only thing sensitive enough, flexible enough to actually respond to the way we tick” (Ravenhill 2001: 311).

In *Some Explicit Polaroids* Ravenhill returns full circle to some of the questions provocatively posed about the nature of contemporary urban life in *Shopping and Fucking*. Throughout Ravenhill’s 1990s work a vision of consumerism and postmodernity is developed that, while often sardonically humorous, is far from positive in its diagnosis. He portrays a generation that is morally and politically adrift “with no values but economic ones, media-fixated and self-obsessed” (Rebellato 2001: xiii). Nick’s question to Jonathan, “There’s nothing better?” (Ravenhill 2001: 311), seems to sum up Ravenhill’s sense of ambivalence. The moderate optimism of *Shopping and Fucking*’s final scene dwindles in each of his subsequent plays. Although *Some Explicit Polaroids* ends with would be MP Helen declaring that she “want[s] to make [Nick] into what [he] used to be” (Ravenhill 2001: 314), that is activist and angry, it is Jonathan’s speech (cited above) that fatefully resonates to the play’s conclusion.

Ravenhill only thinly disguises the texts and ideologies he incorporates with a number of salient consequences, also knotted with the matter of commodification. First, such a practice renders the terms of debate accessible allowing a broad band of the audience the knowing satisfaction of recognition. Second, these sound bites and slogans are at times so well polished and self-consciously parodic that their abrasive complexity and variety arguably vanishes. Citations and references, then, serve less as legitimating gestures or integral parts of an aesthetic project, than as signposts Ravenhill erects to guide his audience/readers to or through the problems or social scenarios he wishes to examine. These are both trivial and significant, both overt and, occasionally, covert. Ravenhill is not only an able pasticheur, he excels in generating humorous dissonance through juxtaposition and displacement, as the blending of reference to the Disney film *The Lion King* with quotation from Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* in *Shopping and Fucking* demonstrates.

Perhaps most notorious are Ravenhill's borrowings from and pastiche of postmodern theory and some of its propagators. Both *Shopping and Fucking* and *Some Explicit Polaroids* allude to Lyotard's theory of micronarrative as a means of broaching the postmodern debate around meaning and reality. Again Ravenhill barely conceals his sources – in *Shopping and Fucking* Robbie tells teenage rent boy, Gary:

I think we all need stories so that we can get by. And I think that a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories. Little stories. It comes out in different ways. But we've each got one. (Ravenhill 2001: 66)

As discussed above, the play is framed by versions of a performative story through which the three housemates affirm their relationship. In addition, in at least ten of the play's fourteen scenes characters relate stories to one another. In *Some Explicit Polaroids* the younger generation deliberately ignores anything that might develop into a larger explanation of their lives. Tim comforts Nadia with the pointedly hollow assurance that “[n]othing's a pattern unless you make it a pattern. Patterns are only there for people who see patterns, and people who see patterns repeat patterns.” (Ravenhill 2001: 278). The inability or refusal of the characters in these plays to join up the stories that constitute their existence into a bigger picture entails a levelling of reality and unreality and a profound disempowerment that is the target of Ravenhill's scepticism.

In *Faust Is Dead* the figure of Alain is an all too obvious a reanimated version of Michel Foucault using ideas adapted, primarily, from Jean Baudrillard's work. As Sierz among others notes, the play is partly based on the story of Foucault's trip to the US (Sierz 2001: 135). Ravenhill's recourse to historical and contemporary personages involves a collapsing of their ideas and lives into a single, popular amalgam. Although the intention may be to highlight postmodern abdication of responsibility, the force of the gesture is mitigated by the over-simplification and superficiality that haunt the play. Ravenhill's *Foucaudrillard* ultimately functions as a sensationalist straw man who propounds the end of history (suggesting Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*) and the death of reality (suggesting Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*). This is not to suggest that much postmodern theorising is unproblematic, but that the citational practices inherent to Ravenhill's critique are subject to some of the same questions of responsibility and representation.

Ravenhill's theatrical vision is a political one ambivalently realised. These plays in various ways struggle to account for and question a mode of existence that is detached, disempowered and unreal. For some critics he fails in this objective because his work seems compromised by the very processes it attacks. Vera Gottlieb dismisses *Shopping and Fucking* on the grounds that “the politics are implicit and the values seem to be represented by sexual obsession on the one hand – and consumerism on the other: both are ‘neat’ points about today, but it loses itself and a sense of direction by providing little challenge, debate or provocation on the level of serious analysis” (Gottlieb 1999: 211). In contrast, Dan Rebellato stresses Ravenhill's committed leftist politics, going so far as to argue that he “is profoundly moral in his portraiture of contemporary society. His vision is elliptically, but recognisably social, even socialist. He addresses not the fragments but the whole, offering us not just some explicit polaroids but the bigger picture” (Rebellato 2001: x). While this certainly seems to overstate the playwright's achievements, it does appropriately align him with the genealogy of political theatre. Problematically the plays both critique, but also are prone to, a sense of

postmodern superficiality and fragmentation. Ravenhill's irony does have a target, and the intertextuality of his work tends towards a pursuit of meaning rather than flatness and sheer play. However, the reception of the play reveals that this is not always the message that audiences (especially the youth audiences the play has attracted) choose to take as Sierz documents. Critique is all too easily understood as ironic celebration.

A central and unresolved difficulty is that, like Baudrillard's apocalyptic closed system, Ravenhill never presents any convincing alternative, while his satire is weakened by either reliance on sentiment, or on unlikely or hasty character transformation. In *Shopping and Fucking* Brian's return of the money to Robbie and Lulu is in the realm of soap opera fantasy. The play's conclusion, in which the reunited flatmates feed each other ready meals, is overshadowed only marginally by the suggestion that Mark may well have killed Gary (as hinted by the splash of blood on his face that Robbie points out in the play's closing moments). In *Faust Is Dead* the harsh finale of Alain's journey is modulated by Donny's return as a nurturing ghost. Nadia in *Some Explicit Polaroids* for all her previous self-delusion only requires a brief conversation with Jonathan to set her on a path to a more honest and realistic self-awareness. While it might be argued that it is not the playwright's responsibility to provide such solutions, his implicit avocation of responsibility and agency is weakened by this ambivalence.

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