

Grotesque Images in British Theatre of the 1990s

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Abstract

The 1990s has become the most widely reviewed and contested decade in recent British theatre history. A significant amount of freedom was given to young writers by London theatres such as the Royal Court, the Bush, Hampstead, and to a lesser extent by Edinburgh's Traverse and Pleasance theatres during the period. For better or worse, their work was quickly associated with a generational theatrical style which subsequently attracted a number of labels, the most commonly used being Aleks Sierz's term 'in-yer-face theatre'. Sierz's definition identified the extreme use of violence and sex as the distinctive features, of this style, and a number of plays and playwrights have since been closely examined in relation to these categories. The nineties was definitely an era of experimentation in new writing, and a significant number of plays generated mixed emotional reactions including surprise, shock, horror, outrage and disgust. Through an exploration of key plays and practitioners, my thesis seeks to expand current understanding of this work by viewing it explicitly through the lens of grotesque theory because, I want to argue, the grotesque, as a conceptual and aesthetic category, facilitates enhanced readings of the plays than currently exist.

The playwrights covered are three pioneers of 1990s new writing: Anthony Neilson, Philip Ridley, and Sarah Kane. My research will investigate three plays by each dramatist all of which were originally produced between 1991-1999. This deliberately narrow focus will allow a concentrated assessment of prevailing cultural and political attitudes and enable a robust understanding of these young writers' concerns in relation to this cultural context. In addition, close readings of the plays will support my central argument that a revival of the grotesque is present in the work, and moreover, that this theatrical manifestation of the grotesque is an explicitly ethical and political phenomenon. In-yer-face writers use the grotesque to critique an age which is always and already consumed by violence and atrocities.

Keywords: In-yer-face theatre, Sarah Kane, Philip Ridley, Anthony Neilson, the grotesque.

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Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother Ayşe Nermin and my mother Aynur.

The patriarchal oppression cycle on our generational blood ties is now broken.

Chronology for the Plays

| | |
|--------------|---|
| January 1991 | Philip Ridley, <i>The Pitchfork Disney</i> , Bush Theatre, London |
| August 1991 | Anthony Neilson, <i>Normal</i> , Pleasance Theatre, Edinburgh |
| May 1992 | Philip Ridley, <i>The Fastest Clock in the Universe</i> , Hampstead Theatre, London |
| August 1993 | Anthony Neilson, <i>Penetrator</i> , Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh |
| April 1994 | Philip Ridley, <i>Ghost from a Perfect Place</i> , Hampstead Theatre, London |
| January 1995 | Sarah Kane, <i>Blasted</i> , Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London |
| May 1996 | Sarah Kane, <i>Phaedra's Love</i> , Gate Theatre, London |
| April 1997 | Anthony Neilson, <i>The Censor</i> , Finborough Theatre, London |
| April 1998 | Sarah Kane, <i>Cleansed</i> , Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, London |

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Introduction

The 'In-yer-face Theatre' Label

Aleks Sierz's *In Yer Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001) is among the most impactful publications in British theatre studies of the last twenty or so years. In it, he argues that a new generation of young playwrights had transformed the face of contemporary drama in the mid-1990s, and insodoing had reinvigorated it after a period of relative stasis. His central thesis is that there is 'a new aesthetic - more blatant, aggressive and confrontational - that opened up new possibilities for British drama.'¹ In this section I outline the key debates around British playwriting in the 1990s, particularly insofar as they reinforce or contradict Sierz's thesis, because this provides the context for my own critical intervention.

'How long does it take for a string of individual plays to become identified as a "movement"?' asked John Bull in his review of Sierz's book in *Contemporary Theatre Review*.² For Bull, this was largely a rhetorical question, however, after the publication of Sierz's book a consensual view quickly emerged that something unprecedented had happened in playwriting during the 1990s, no matter if it was best described as a movement or not. Mireia Aragay, writing in 2007, captured something of that feeling:

Writers write the plays they want to, sometimes in one style, sometimes in another - it's chaos. No one is in control. [...] The idea that there was a renaissance of new writing in the early 1990s is clearly true.³

The playwright David Eldridge argued in his review of Sierz's book that the shared perspective of the new generation of playwrights could be identified in their reaction to 'culture with dismay and anger' in the era of Cool Britannia.⁴ In fact, a perceived attempt to use theatre as a means of responding to the political zeitgeist was the focal point of much academic discussion of new writing in the 1990s. On the other hand, a number of older more

¹ Sierz, Aleks, *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001), p. xii.

² Bull, John, 'Review of In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today by Aleks Sierz', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 13:1 (2003), p. 123.

³ Aragay, Mireia and Pilar Zozaya, 'Aleks Sierz', in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics*, ed. by Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enric Monforte, Pilar Zozaya (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 141.

⁴ Eldridge, David, 'In-yer-face and After', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 23:1 (2003), p. 55.

established critics, such as Vera Gottlieb, were more sceptical about its political contribution, preferring instead to see the work produced by this group of young playwrights as evidence of a political ‘malaise amongst their generation.’⁵ According to Gottlieb, playwriting in the ‘Nineties was less creative, positive or radical than some critics might concede.’⁶ Moreover, she did not ‘see a renaissance in British theatre’ within the upsurge of new writing in this period because she assumed that emergent writers such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Jez Butterworth simply copied language, style and images from earlier dramatists like Edward Bond, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett, Howard Barker and Howard Brenton, without really understanding their political aims.⁷ Regarding content, she also addressed what she saw as the failure of playwrights to reflect explicitly on subjects like the free market, global warming, drug culture and Aids, all of which were live in the political arena at that time. For Gottlieb, even if the new generation of playwrights engaged with contemporary issues — like consumerism and sexual obsession in Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) for instance — the work was still marked by ‘little challenge, debate or provocation on the level of serious analysis.’⁸ As a result, according to her, what was missing from the new wave of writing was an explicit ideological standpoint from which to question issues related to the lives of the general public.

A similar verdict was reached by the theatre critic Benedict Nightingale. In his view, the key difference in new playwriting between the 1980s and the 1990s lay in the subject matter:

But unlike their predecessors, these dramatists had no obvious ideology, no political credo, no social agenda. If their characters launched into generalization, it was more likely to be about drugs or drink than the sins of the Establishment.⁹

Peter Ansorge added to the sense that these new playwrights were not serious, by noting that their content was shaped by the trends of television and film: ‘even seemingly controversial work, like *Mojo* or *Trainspotting*, appeals to a targeted young audience who share the writers’

⁵ Gottlieb, Vera, ‘Lukewarm Britannia’, in *Theatre in a Cool Climate*, ed. by Vera Gottlieb and Colin Chambers (Oxford: Amber Lane, 1999), p. 212.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Nightingale, Benedict, *The Future of Theatre* (London: Phoenix, 1998), p. 19.

and directors' relish for Tarantino and the drug culture.'¹⁰ Stressing the need for serious analyses of these new plays, on the other hand, he rightly noted, in 1997 that there was 'no real debate about these new plays or their subject matter.'¹¹ This was the gap that Aleks Sierz's book was to fill.

In 2001, Sierz famously named the theatrical style of the preceding decade in his book, *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today*. Contrary to Gottlieb, Sierz claimed that this new wave of experimental theatre constituted a response to the crises of the modern world, and that the use of shock tactics, unusual tone and structure, along with the extremely brutal depiction of violence — and particularly sexual violence — were implicitly if not explicitly political. Whilst he asserted that in-yer-face was 'a new phenomenon', Sierz also provided a 'brief history of provocation' in Western theatre to demonstrate that such tactics had their roots in the ancient Greek tragic tradition.¹² He proposed that the strategies employed by the new generation of playwrights served the purpose of tragedy as a 'form of shock therapy', because they involved 'putting yourself through hell in order to exorcize your inner demons.'¹³ In perhaps his most cited phrase he argued the term in-yer-face could be used to describe 'any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message.'¹⁴ Sierz also claimed American sports journalists had used the term in-yer-face as 'an exclamation of derision or contempt', and as 'mainstream slang during the late 1980s and 1990s, meaning aggressive, provocative, brash.'¹⁵ In the aftermath of the publication of Sierz's book and the responses to it covered in this brief introductory discussion, a large corpus of critical writing on the 1990s boom in new writing emerged. Although staying on the same page about what was meant by new writing of the period became increasingly difficult as the field became more complex and fractured, Sierz's label nonetheless retained currency even as it was challenged, perhaps because theatres continued to use the term for marketing purposes.

The major problem with Sierz's categorisation is, in Mary Luckhurst's words, 'the difficulty he has in providing sufficiently distinctive common features for a very large number

¹⁰ Ansorge, Peter, *From Liverpool to Los Angeles: On Writing for Theatre, Film and Television* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 140.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19.

¹² Sierz, p. 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Retrieved 1 August 2018 from <http://www.inyerfacetheatre.com/what.html>

of playwrights.’¹⁶ The structure of Sierz’s book supports this claim. Although, Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Anthony Neilson were each given a dedicated chapter, sixteen other playwrights are covered in the remaining four chapters. The chapter ‘Shock-Fest’ includes discussion of Philip Ridley, Phyllis Nagy, Tracy Lett and Harry Gibson; ‘Boys Together’ covers Naomi Wallace, Jez Butterworth, Simon Block and David Eldridge; ‘Sex Wars’ examines Nick Grosso, Patrick Marber, Che Walker and Richard Zajdlc and a final violence-themed chapter under the title ‘Battered and Bruised’ includes Joe Penhall, Judy Upton, Martin McDonagh and Rebecca Prichard. As Luckhurst’s remark suggests, assembling such a large number of playwrights under one banner inevitably leads to tensions and contradictions in Sierz’s argument, as well as omissions. In seeking to stress what the plays have in common he overlooks some major dissimilarities.

Writing in the journal *New Theatre Quarterly*, the playwright Mark Ravenhill stressed the differences between the nineteen playwrights in Sierz’s study, in the process undermining any notion of a movement or a school of playwriting:

I think it’s the diversity of their voices that is more striking than the similarities: that what is impressive is that a series of unique, strong voices all emerged at the same time – not they can be linked as a movement or a school.¹⁷

Similarly, Mel Kenyon, the literary agent of both Ravenhill and also Sarah Kane, points out their individuality insisting, there was, ‘no movement. They are all completely individual.’¹⁸ Further comment on the strained patchwork-like group constructed by Sierz came from Graham Saunders who noted that ‘these dramatists are more disparate than he[Sierz] argues and that they are going off on their own journeys.’¹⁹ Sierz, himself, acknowledges the individuality of the playwrights included in his study noting that ‘although many share similar tendencies, they are all highly individual, as the diversity of their plays shows.’²⁰ Nonetheless, as John Bull observes, Sierz’s attempt to ‘lock the different writers into a united movement in

¹⁶ Luckhurst, Mary, ‘Infamy and Dying Young: Sarah Kane, 1971–1999’, in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain 1660–2000*, ed. by Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 123.

¹⁷ Ravenhill, Mark, ‘A Tear in the Fabric: The James Bulger Murder and New Theatre Writing in the Nineties’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 20:4 (November 2004), p. 310.

¹⁸ Cited in Ken Urban, ‘Towards a Theory of Cruel Britannia: Coolness, Cruelty, and the Nineties’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 20:4 (November 2004), p. 354.

¹⁹ Klein, Hildegard, ‘Graham Saunders’, in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics*, ed. by Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enric Monforte, Pilar Zozaya (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 175.

²⁰ Sierz, p. 238.

spite of his insistence on the individuality of the writers' was neither coherent nor consistent.²¹

Beyond the acknowledged diversity of the plays and playwrights included in Sierz's book, it is logically correct to say that 1990s drama in its entirety cannot be represented by nineteen playwrights. Sierz's argument is spectacularly metropolitan in focus and is more or less confined to work produced in a relatively small number of theatre venues in London, most notably the Royal Court, the Bush, the Gate, the Finborough and Hampstead Theatre. As a number of critics have shown, 'in-yer-face was not the only kind of drama being written and produced over the 1990s.'²² Other playwrights regularly produced in the 1990s include established writers such as Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Daniels, David Edgar, David Hare, Tom Stoppard or Harold Pinter; and new ones like Neil Bartlett, Martin Crimp and Kevin Elyot, not to mention Scottish playwrights such as David Greig and David Harrower, whose style was markedly different from their London-based counterparts. It has also been argued that the label does not even suit all of the work of the nineteen playwrights included. For example, the distinctive poetic structure and thematic concerns of Sarah Kane's play *Crave* (1998) does not really fit in the in-yer-face bracket. Also, the label is not helpful when analysing the plays of Patrick Marber, Joe Penhall or Phyllis Nag or Anthony Neilson and Ravenhill's later plays.²³ Indeed, discussing the mid-1990s moment in British theatre with the specific purpose of attesting a unified voice requires framing that may be beneficial to the cause of Sierz's study, but inevitably results in deliberate omissions oversights. In short, his label does not cover a wide range of playwrights of the 1990s nor their oeuvre.

Another concern was raised in relation to the definition of in-yer-face as an art movement. As Ken Urban notes, for instance, a specific prevailing philosophy or goal must be followed by a group of artists, because 'an artistic movement needs a shared sense of purpose, a collective will, a manifesto, or at least a figurehead with whom the artists align themselves.'²⁴ There was no satisfactory example to be found in Sierz's analyses, and consequently no consideration of the essential core of a 'movement' was present in his claim. Amelia Howe Kritzer arrives at a similar conclusion when she suggests 'the playwrights included in descriptions of in-yer-face theatre do not, of course, speak as one; nor do they

²¹ Bull, p. 125.

²² Aragay, Mireia; Pilar Zozaya and Enric Monforte, 'Introduction', in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics*, ed. by Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enric Monforte, Pilar Zozaya (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. x.

²³ See 'Introduction' and 'Graham Saunders' in Aragay, Klein, Monforte, Zozaya (Eds).

²⁴ Urban, *Ibid.*

acknowledge a common cause or profess loyalty to any ideology.’²⁵ Indeed, far from following a common purpose or philosophy, according to Kritzer, the only thing the playwrights shared was the attempts to depict the British culture in the 1990s. Indeed, the uncertain outlook of the decade paved the way for their disparate interpretation(s). Sierz’s description of the cultural context — ‘Britain was seen as a bleak place where families were dysfunctional, individuals rootless and relationships acutely problematic, a place where loners drifted from bedsits to shabby flats’ — might be supposed as accurate enough, in this sense and might even be considered a shared backdrop for a group of dramatists that did, however, not share any single ideology.²⁶

The limitation of Sierz’s definition as a critical tool, is also apparent in his own rather trite description:

How can you tell if a play is in-*yer-face*? It really isn’t difficult: the language is usually filthy, characters talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each another, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent.²⁷

If any violent play with sexually explicit imagery, and explicit language is considered in-*yer-face* or if sex and violence are a must for in-*yer-face* plays, then how can we distinguish them from Theatre of Cruelty, or Theatre of Catastrophe, or any kind of experimental theatre which includes nudity and strong language? Such questions expose a key problem with Sierz’s argument: its one-sided focus. Extreme violence was the key feature in Sierz’s categorisation of playwrights as in-*yer-face*. Throughout the book, his discussion of the plays lays great emphasis on violence. For instance, he argues that ‘with *Blasted*, it’s easier to list the play’s contents — anal rape, masturbation, micturition, defecation, fellatio, frottage, cannibalism and eye-gouging — than to appreciate the disciplined savagery of its language.’²⁸ Similarly he notes that in *Shopping and Fucking*, there is ‘anal kissing - with the stage direction “pulls away. There’s blood around his mouth” (p. 24) - and male rape.’²⁹ These are only two examples but suffice to note that stressing one aspect of a play inevitably leads to other aspects being downplayed or overlooked. Sierz’s goes on to argue, for instance, that “‘in-*yer-*

²⁵ Kritzer, Amelia Howe, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing, 1995-2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 28.

²⁶ Sierz, p. 238.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁹ Sierz, Aleks, ‘Cool Britannia? ‘In-*Yer-Face*’ Writing in the British Theatre Today’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 14:56 (November 1998), p. 330.

face” drama is not strong on either plot or characterization’ a view that can be easily contested with reference to a number of plays included in his study, not least Anthony Neilson’s *The Censor*.³⁰ He argues instead that in yer face’s ‘power lies in the directness of its shock tactics, the immediacy of its language, the relevance of its themes, and the stark aptness of its stage pictures.’³¹

On the face of it the discussion above might seem to support Gottlieb’s, Nightingale’s and Anson’s claims about the plays’ lack of depth, recalling Jack Tinker’s notorious review headline for *Blasted* (1995): ‘this disgusting feast of filth.’³² Sierz certainly did not intend to misrepresent and underrate the playwrights’ achievements, however, since his whole purpose was to argue for the significance of in-yer-face 1990s drama. Nonetheless, as Urban rightfully shows, ‘to talk about moments such as these as mere representations of violence renders them one-dimensional; they become about shock and shock alone.’³³ The playwright Anthony Neilson, is rather more sanguine and sardonic about Sierz’s characterisation of his work but his comments nevertheless support Urban’s argument. ‘As far as I can tell’ Neilson writes, ‘In-yer-face was all about being horrid and writing about shit and buggery. I thought I was writing love stories.’³⁴ Dan Rebellato also draws attention to the negative impact of repeatedly and excessively focusing on sex and violence in the plays, because as he argues, it ‘detracts from the gentler, the poetic, the metaphysical, the aesthetic, the ethical dimensions of these playwrights’ work.’³⁵ In-yer-face playwrights were about more than extreme stage images. Nevertheless, images such as the blinding of Ian in *Blasted* and the anal rape of Gary in *Shopping and Fucking* were striking and extraordinary, and they certainly raised questions about the social, political and cultural milieu of the period. ‘Why did these images proliferate in the 1990s?’ Rebellato asks, and ‘why was violence [...] the way in which the new generation chose to establish its distinctiveness?’³⁶

Sierz asked this question himself: ‘Why did this happen in the nineties?’³⁷ In an attempt to answer it, he alluded to the new political environment of the decade:

³⁰ Ibid., p. 333.

³¹ Ibid.

³² See Jack Tinker, ‘This Disgusting Feast of Filth’, *Daily Mail*, 19 January 1995.

³³ Urban, pp. 360-61.

³⁴ Neilson, Anthony, ‘Don’t Be So Boring’, *Guardian*, 21 March 2007.

³⁵ Aragay, Mireia and Pilar Zozaya, ‘Dan Rebellato’ in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics*, ed. by Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enric Monforte, Pilar Zozaya (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 169.

³⁶ Rebellato, Dan, ‘Because It Feels Fucking Amazing: Recent British Drama and Bodily Mutilation’ in *Cool Britannia?: British Political Drama in the 1990s*, ed. by Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 193.

³⁷ Sierz (2001), p. 36.

The short answer is that the decade was characterized by a new sense of possibility that was translated into unprecedented theatrical freedom. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the exit of Margaret Thatcher [...] the end of Cold War ideological partisanship freed young imaginations.³⁸

Later in the study he argues this freedom was informed by an increasingly powerful nihilism as people became aware of:

... news of war and killing: terrorist bombs, ethnic cleansing and mass graves, [...], the murder of toddler Jamie Bulger by two ten-year-old boys in February 1993, [...], Srebrenica, Basra and Waco; Omagh, Dunblane and Cromwell Road, Gloucester; [...], the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence at the hands of a gang of white youths in April 1993.³⁹

There is some tension in these positions, of course, which Sierz never really addresses. Nonetheless, for Sierz the unsettled and unsettling state of the nation fed into the form and content of in-ye-face plays. He argues that by concentrating on the effects of radical change on the personal rather than the political, through personal stories, the playwrights managed to capture the zeitgeist. This is a view shared by other critics who argue, that far from disengaging with social and political issues, as Gottlieb's would have it, 'the 1980s mantra of the personal is the political' looms large in 1990s drama to particularly powerful effect.⁴⁰ Moreover, new writing in the 90s shared strategies with British political playwrights in 1980s, such as Caryl Churchill, by 'retreating into the realms of domestic relationships and personal stories rather than rational analysis.'⁴¹

Although it seems plausible to assume that the bleak social and political contexts of the decade can be identified as a source of inspiration, Rebellato finds Sierz's proposed cause-effect relationship between extremely violent and sexually explicit stage images and the depicted atmosphere in Britain unconvincing because 'dreadful though these events were, one might reasonably point to equally appalling acts in previous decades that did not prompt such

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 206.

⁴⁰ D'Monté, Rebecca and Graham Saunders, *Cool Britannia?: British Political Drama in the 1990s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 4.

⁴¹ Ibid.

a response.⁴² The idea of a prevalence of violence on stage in the 1990s as some kind of artistic breakthrough was not tenable in any case. As David Pattie argues, ‘terms like [...] “in-yer-face theatre” [...] might capture a pervasive sense of violence and desperation in new writing, but violence on stage is hardly new.’⁴³ David Rabey, also stresses that:

Aspects of this tradition can be traced through Greek, Shakespearean and Jacobean tragedy, to Grand Guignol and Schnitzler’s *Reigen* and *Genet*, to Rudkin, Bond, Barker and many of the distinctive dramatists considered in the book you are reading.⁴⁴

Sierz includes a brief exploration of the parallels between violence as manifest in earlier plays and in-yer-face theatre, as mentioned above, but he is unable to uncover distinctive features of the new playwrights’ work in any significant depth or detail because he is so focused on similarities.

Although there is already enough written to challenge the usefulness of the in-yer-face label, it nevertheless persists, and few scholars would engage with British drama of the 1990s without considering Sierz’s book as a definitive text. The utility of Sierz’s project in assembling new playwrights in order to shine a light on their work should also be mentioned. Stephen Daldry, the artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre between 1992-98, noted for instance that, ‘In-yer-face was a historical moment, even if the label is often used pejoratively.’⁴⁵ Saunders also conceded that ‘the term “in-yer-face” suited the moment at which it was coined. Sierz’s book offered people a convincing way of contextualizing what was going on during that period.’⁴⁶ Even if Sierz has difficulty sketching a clear taxonomy for his term, then, his book surely remains an important introductory survey. As Rebellato rightly points out, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* is a ‘really valuable mine of information.’⁴⁷ It was the first major study of new writing in 1990s and it includes interviews with playwrights and detailed readings of the plays. The information contained in it, especially on Kane, Neilson and Ridley is a crucial to the assessment of their works. By proposing a new critical exploration of the

⁴² Rebellato, *Ibid.*

⁴³ Pattie, David, ‘Theatre since 1968’, in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880–2005*, ed. by Mary Luckhurst (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 394.

⁴⁴ Rabey, David Ian, *English Drama since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 2003), p. 195.

⁴⁵ Aragay, Mireia and Pilar Zozaya, ‘Stephen Daldry’, in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics*, ed. by Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enric Monforte, Pilar Zozaya (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 8.

⁴⁶ Klein, *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Aragay and Zozaya, *Ibid.*

works of the nineteen playwrights, Sierz also presented an opportunity for scholars to rethink the 1990s dramatists' contribution to (post)modern theatre. His book provoked new publications and increased public interest in the drama of the 1990s.

In the next section, I turn my attention to the idea of the grotesque, because it is through this critical lens that I want to reread some of the plays included in Sierz's original study. It is not my contention that a new categorization or label is required for the playwrights under discussion. My contention is that grotesque theory can shed new light on the plays without overstating the similarities between them thus avoiding some of the problems that weaken Sierz's thesis.

Grotesquerie

The theater, being a combination of natural, temporal, spatial, and numerical phenomena, is itself outside of nature [...] the theater itself is essentially an example of the grotesque. Arising from the grotesque of a ritual masquerade, the theater inevitably is destroyed by any given attempt to remove the grotesque — the basis of existence — from it.⁴⁸

As is well known, a number of the 'in-yer-face' plays staged in the 1990s were so intense that reviewers were shocked by their graphic scenes of rape, violent language and acts. The critical hysteria that surrounded some of the plays can be exemplified in the reviews of Sarah Kane's debut play *Blasted* (1995), which caused a sensation and was, in the words of James Macdonald — the play's director — 'perhaps the least seen and most talked about play in recent memory.'⁴⁹ Charles Spencer claimed that the show provoked 'a record number of walk outs.'⁵⁰ Nick Curtis described it as an 'atrocious exhibition' while John Gross insisted 'you would need to be deaf, dumb and blind not to be disturbed by it.'⁵¹ Roger Foss requested that someone 'pass the sick bag!' and Paul Taylor compared the experience as 'having your face

⁴⁸ Vsevolod Meyerhold Cited in Ralf Remshardt, *Staging the Savage God: The Grotesque in Performance* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), p. 2.

⁴⁹ Cited in Luckhurst (2005), p. 111.

⁵⁰ Spencer, Charles, 'Night the Theatre Critics Cracked', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 January 1995.

⁵¹ Curtis, Nick, 'Random Tour in a Chamber of Horrors', *Evening Standard*, 19 January 1995. Gross, John, 'John Gross on 'The Dance of Death', 'Dangerous Corner' and 'Blasted'', *Sunday Telegraph*, 22 January 1995.

rammed into an overflowing ash tray, just for starters, and then having your whole head held down in a bucket of offal.⁵²

Critics of Philip Ridley's plays sometimes shared the same tone. In his review of *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991), for example, David Nathan conceded, the 'arousal of disgust is as legitimate a dramatic objective as the arousal of any other strong emotion' but nonetheless labelled Ridley's output 'the Theatre of Yuk', while Benedict Nightingale, in his review of *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (1992), suggested 'a sickbag should be kept in the wings, ready to catch the ugly imagery his characters sporadically throw up.'⁵³ Anthony Neilson provoked similar responses. Jo Graham found, *Normal* (1991) 'brutal, shocking and distressing in its prolonged fumbling' and for Louise Doughty *Penetrator* (1993) was definitely 'out to shock.'⁵⁴ A similar intention might be located in the grotesque, in relation to what Ralf Remshardt describes as its propensity 'to baffle, intimidate, and shock the viewer.'⁵⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the term was used by Sarah Hemming in her review of *Blasted*, which she described as a 'grotesque little play' and by Benedict Nightingale in relation to *The Pitchfork Disney* which he labelled a 'grotesque comedy.'⁵⁶

As the above examples illustrate, the term grotesque is generally used, as Remshardt notes, 'in an attempt to communicate what a text, image, metaphor, or performance does to us.'⁵⁷ The connection between in-ye-face theatre and the grotesque can be postulated by their shared focus on felt experience, then. For Philip Thomson, the grotesque can manifest as 'a sudden shock, which is likely to stun, bewilder or nonplus' after which 'the mind takes a few seconds to function dispassionately again.'⁵⁸ Wolfgang Kayser, in his important study *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957), suggests that as an aesthetic category the grotesque provokes 'surprise and horror' and 'an agonizing fear in the presence of a world which breaks apart and remains inaccessible.'⁵⁹ In what follows I give a brief summary of the development of the grotesque as an aesthetic and literary concept. I do not intend to offer a complete

⁵² Foss, Roger, 'Review of *Blasted*', *What's On in London*, 25 January 1995. Taylor, Paul, 'Courting Disaster: Review of *Blasted*', *Independent*, 20 January 1995.

⁵³ Nathan, David, 'Review of *The Pitchfork Disney*', *Jewish Chronicle*, 11 January 1991. Nightingale, Benedict, 'Review of *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*', *The Times*, 21 May 1992.

⁵⁴ Graham, Jo, 'Review of *Normal*', *What's On in London*, 09 October 1991. Doughty, Louise, 'Review of *Penetrator*', *Mail on Sunday*, 23 January 1994.

⁵⁵ Cited in Remshardt, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁶ Hemming, Sarah, 'Blasted by Violence', *Financial Times*, 23 January 1995. Nightingale, Benedict, 'Review of *The Pitchfork Disney*', *The Times*, 07 January 1991.

⁵⁷ Remshardt, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Thomson, Philip, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 47.

⁵⁹ Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans by Ulrich Weisstein (Gloucester, Mass: P. Smith, 1968), p. 31.

history of the grotesque, which is a very old tradition. I do not discuss in any great detail its interpretation within medieval or visual arts, for instance. Reflecting on the need to concentrate on how the concept has been transformed through time, and in different political and cultural contexts, some of the key arguments presented by scholars will be covered, nonetheless. As will become clear there is no consistent or stable definition of the grotesque on which to draw. The modern revival of the grotesque that I seek to locate in these plays contains some elements from earlier definitions but moves in new and interesting directions as the end of the twentieth-century approaches.

The word grotesque is derived from the Italian noun *La grottesca(o)*, a derivative of the word *grotta(o)* which means cave. It is thought the aesthetic term was originally coined to describe Roman cave paintings discovered in the fifteenth-century, which contained a distinctive mixture of men with animal, vegetable, machine, and other unusual fusions. Ondrej Pilný explains:

Around 1480, the remains of Emperor Nero's Domus Aurea were excavated in Rome, a grandiose palace that was to reflect Nero's image as a sun god. The excessive residence was found to be decorated by ornaments that freely combined elements of the animate and inanimate worlds, whose incongruity in the eyes of the Quattrocento which gave rise to a reaction typical of the grotesque: a mixture of disgust and attraction. The ornaments became universally referred to as *grottesche*, as they were found in what by then was an underground space resembling a cave.⁶⁰

The decorative grotesque style was quickly spread by well-known Italian Renaissance artists like Pinturicchio, and Raphael to 'the countries of north of the Alps and conquered all the artistic genres susceptible to the ornamental style: drawing and engraving as well as painting and sculptural decoration.'⁶¹ This also led to a broadening of its meaning by its application in other languages and culture. For instance, in the Dictionary of the French Academy, its adverb form was described as 'in a silly or extravagant manner' and in the German language, its adjective form was referred to 'the monstrous fusion of the human and nonhuman elements.'⁶²

⁶⁰ Pilný, Ondrej, *The Grotesque in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 2.

⁶¹ Kayser, p. 22.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 24, 26.

Wolfgang Kayser, a prominent Germanist and scholar of literature, describes the grotesque as ‘the estranged world.’⁶³ His focus, in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, is on the grotesque forms mostly in the age of Romanticism. He also includes short analyses of Friedrich Schlegel’s *Conversation on Poetry* (1800), Jean Paul’s *Introduction to Aesthetics* (1804), Victor Hugo’s preface to his drama *Cromwell* (1827), Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) and Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck* (1836). His main contention is that: ‘the grotesque instils fear of life rather than fear of death.’⁶⁴ Kayser argues the Romantic world is unreliable and the grotesque is ‘the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe.’⁶⁵ As a result, the grotesque in Romanticism is closely ‘linked to the emotions of horror and repulsion.’⁶⁶

By contrast, Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian philosopher, literary critic and primary theoretician of the literary grotesque, interprets the grotesque in Pre-Romanticism and Romanticism as ‘a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism.’⁶⁷ While Kayser’s primary emphasis is on the Romantic period, Bakhtin turns to the literature of the French Renaissance— specifically the work of François Rabelais (c1483-1553) — to coin ‘the carnival-grotesque’ in his pioneering work, *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Crucially, because Bakhtin’s thesis is developed through an analysis of Renaissance folk carnival culture, his notion of the grotesque is inextricably linked to laughter. Bakhtin writes:

The medieval and Renaissance folk culture was familiar with the element of terror only as represented by comic monsters, who were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic. Folk culture brought the world close to man, gave it a bodily form, and established a link through the body and bodily life, in contrast to the abstract and spiritual mastery sought by Romanticism. Images of bodily life, such as eating, drinking, copulation, defecation, almost entirely lost their regenerating power and were turned into "vulgarities".⁶⁸

⁶³ Ibid., p. 184.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

⁶⁶ Pilný, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans by Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). pp. 36-7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

Accordingly, body images play a significant role in Bakhtin's assessment of the grotesque as combining laughter and terror. In his theory of the grotesque body, the body is an unfinished project attached to an unceasingly renewed world and the bond between body and world is illustrated using hyperbolic bodily forms which belong 'not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic "economic man", but to the collective ancestral body of all the people.'⁶⁹

Looking beyond its evaluation in time and culture, Geoffrey Harpham simplistically presents the grotesque as 'the slipperiest of aesthetic categories' since it constantly grows out of any definition in any age.⁷⁰ In his study entitled *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982), he diverts attention from its function to its inherent uncertainty: 'before we can ask how the grotesque "functions" or how it is "used", we must recognize that grotesques have no consistent properties other than their own grotesqueness.'⁷¹ Indeed, arising out of the lack of one clear-cut definition, grotesque explicitly builds on its own critical perception; the term is 'always on the verge of transformation [...], and it possesses a core instability that resists and even mocks definition.'⁷² Thus it is no wonder that grotesqueness leads us down 'many routes into multiple readings.'⁷³

In a similar vein, Frances Connelly considers the grotesque, in her book, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (2012), as 'an inconsistent and vague property that exists solely in the eye of the beholder' because it is 'culturally relative, and the notion of what constitutes the grotesque can vary from one culture or era to another.'⁷⁴ This is an astute observation. The term grotesque has, after all, been 'widely applied to painters such as Hieronymous Bosch and Pieter Breughel the Elder; to elements in the works of many writers, including Shakespeare (the characters Caliban and Shylock), Dickens (Fagin, and the Miss Havisham episodes in *Great Expectations*), and Franz Kafka ("Metamorphosis").'⁷⁵ In fact, the great variety and richness of its deployment from the 1500s

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁷⁰ Harpham, Geoffrey, 'The Grotesque: First Principles', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34:4 (Summer 1976), p. 461.

⁷¹ Harpham, Geoffrey, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton; Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 3.

⁷² Remshardt, p. 9.

⁷³ Edwards, Justin and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 3.

⁷⁴ Connelly, Frances, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 4.

⁷⁵ Abrams, Meyer Howard and Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2012), p. 156.

to the modern era signals the importance of understanding it within specific socio-historical contexts.

My argument in the following chapters aims to reach a working definition of the grotesque as a tool for the analysis of 1990s drama, which sheds light on how the plays analysed challenge the limits of human behaviour and also the limits of what can be reasonably represented on stage, pushing boundaries vis-à-vis conceptual questions about what it means to be human or what normal is. As Connelly points out: ‘grotesques come into being by rupturing cultural boundaries, compromising and contradicting what is “known” or what is “proper” or “normal”.’⁷⁶ Likewise, Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund observe the dissolution of borders in the grotesque: ‘this erasure of common distinctions speaks to debates over stigmatization and normalcy, what it means to exist outside the norm, and what the norm is.’⁷⁷ A lack of willingness to resolve border crises is one element the plays have in common, and it often manifests as artistic freedom rather than the following of stylistic conventions. Seeking to understand how the plays skilfully challenge harmonious boundaries by embracing the grotesque, this research is thematically developed around three archetypal aspects of the grotesque: the body, hybridisation, and distortions of time.

The first chapter will identify and analyse iterations and images of the grotesque body and its essential traits in plays by Ridley, Kane, and Neilson. Three features that contribute to conceptions of the grotesque body— the face, deformations, and sexuality — will be discussed insofar as they function to destabilise the boundary between normal and abnormal bodies. Despite their supernatural and fantastic origins — Greek mythological figures like the Chimera, the Cyclopes, or Centaurs; or monsters in classical texts by Ancient Greek writers such as Aristotle, Herodotus and Homer — grotesque bodies offer more than just unnatural, repulsively ugly or distorted images. The grotesque body is regarded as an incomplete canvas with many components on the surface as well as various internal working mechanisms. In the Bakhtinian grotesque, a particular attention must be given to body parts like the eyes, mouth, nose, belly, bowels, anus, genitals and skin because they are ‘open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.’⁷⁸ In the grotesque, the body exceeds its own limits and the violation of its borders happens intentionally. This dissolution of the border is further evident in elements of the disharmonious, deficient, and even animalistic qualities of the

⁷⁶ Connelly, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Edwards and Graulund, p. 9.

⁷⁸ Bakhtin, p. 26.

human body, an exploration of which constitutes this chapter's discussion. Broadly inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's purpose behind his sketches of independent grotesque head studies, the first section takes a look at the in/ability of expressing emotions through the face and the use of masks. Then, the transgressions between outside and inside deformities will be explored with a focus on sickness and dismemberment, as they are conceived in the plays, and which are closely associated with atrocities committed by grotesque characters. Lastly, the grotesque sexual body will be considered, addressing both distortions of sexual behaviour and also of sexuality insofar as they constitute genuine grotesqueness.

The role of hybridity in grotesque discourse will be the starting point for my second chapter. Radical juxtapositions of incongruous components are a key characteristic noted by all interpreters of the grotesque across time. My purpose in this chapter is to discover and explain how the grotesque hybrids depicted in selected plays challenge standard social frameworks, by creating deliberate confusion between what is real, what is human, and what is normal. The playwrights' preoccupation with complex human nature, unstable gender roles, and dysfunctional families, will be the overarching focus of the chapter. The first segment will focus on grotesque identity, with a particular emphasis on the interweaving of self and other in single personas. The second section will investigate the grotesque in relation to the rupturing or transgression of boundaries between reality and fantasy, and eventually the dissolution of reality itself, broadly inspired by a sixteenth-century term, 'the dreams of painters [*sogni dei pittori*]', which Kayser defines as 'the dissolution of reality and the participation in a different kind of existence.'⁷⁹ These contradictions inherent in the grotesque are also enhanced by the dissolution of normality, which will be identified as the third component of grotesque hybrids.

My third and final chapter will seek to understand temporal distortions as grotesque aspects of my chosen plays. These distortions are created by recurring motifs such as nostalgia or the traumatic loss of any sense of time, as well as the resetting pattern of routines and rituals. I develop the novel concept of 'estranged time' which places emphasis on depictions of traumatic pasts, dystopic presents, and non-redemptive futures. In general, grotesque discourse lacks a temporal focus; therefore, my goal in this chapter is to fill a gap in scholarship by identifying and describing how temporal distortions are fundamental to grotesque discourse and how temporal components, in addition to physical and psychological aspects, contribute significantly to the creation of the grotesque's estranged world in drama of

⁷⁹ Kayser, p. 22.

the 1990s. Broadly inspired by Harpham's observation that 'the grotesque [...] impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future,' and following the pattern set in earlier chapters, I propose three features that contribute to estranged time: distorted nostalgia, momentary limbo, and continuous loops.⁸⁰ I first examine the theme of nostalgia which recurs in Ridley's plays through the characters' obsession with narrating the past. Focusing on getting stuck between the past and the present, the second section then investigates grotesque limbo which is formed by extended periods of inaction, or very long pauses, or the loss of a sense of time in its entirety, especially under crises. The final segment will investigate loops as a temporal distortion which is characterised by the absence of progress and application of repetitive routines wandering in a circle.

Finally, a consideration of the 1990s plays through the lens of modern grotesque theories and practices rather than its archaic deployments will considerably advance my theory which is that the plays discussed have more to offer than the trite shock tactics. In fact, this theatrical manifestation of the grotesque is an explicitly ethical and political phenomenon which 'in-yer-face' writers use to critique a neoliberalist age which is already consumed by violence and atrocities. The next section briefly looks at the political dimensions of the argument, specifically in respect of neoliberalism and its traces in/on the worlds of these plays.

Neoliberalism

British playwriting in the 1990s was particularly important for compelling a careful consideration of social changes and uniquely challenging them. A constant source of inspiration for the plays was the bleak social and political changes of the decade; in this case, they were motivated by, to borrow from Graham Saunders, 'two opposing forces: political revolution globally and political inertia at home.'⁸¹ Indeed, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, the end of the decades-long Cold War, and the rise of consumerism in communist China all contributed to 'the unprecedented dominance of the neoliberal model in the 1990s' worldwide.⁸² Furthermore, Francis Fukuyama proposed the 'end of history' hypothesis. His thesis claims that humanity has reached to 'the end point of mankind's ideological evolution' and 'the universalization of Western liberal democracy as

⁸⁰ Harpham (1982), p. 16.

⁸¹ Saunders, Graham, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work* (London: Faber, 2009), p. 12.

⁸² Steger, Manfred B. and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 10.

the final form of human government.⁸³ With the resignation of Margaret Thatcher, the first female prime minister in British history, the 1990s saw the end of Thatcherism, the dominant political ideology of the 1980s. Mrs Thatcher's downfall, however, did not halt the implementation of her neoliberal policies, which had far-reaching consequences for the country. In this section, I define neoliberalism and its employment in the plays to demonstrate the link between grotesque images and neoliberalism in the plays. I do not intend to provide a comprehensive history of neoliberalism, or to go into great detail about its effects on political and economic contexts, for instance. Rather, the question will be how and why the grotesque provides an appropriate lens through which to apprehend this critical dimension of the plays.

First, the term neoliberalism must be defined. David Harvey, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), offers the basic definition:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.⁸⁴

Neoliberal rationality- according to Wendy Brown- in fact refers to its close association with 'a bundle of policies privatizing public ownership and services, radically reducing the social state, leashing labor, deregulating capital, and producing a tax- and- tariff-friendly climate to direct foreign investors.'⁸⁵ For Andy Lavender, neoliberalism is 'a story of the political-economic system that has come to define how we live' and also 'how we think' because it is 'both an economic approach and an ideology or way of understanding the world' which 'radically affects people's daily lives.'⁸⁶ The main problem with neoliberal thought, for Lavender, is that it 'actually supports the liberty of those best placed to succeed', or to put it differently, 'it doesn't spread resources amongst more people but concentrates power, privilege, and resources in the hands of a few who are already privileged.'⁸⁷ Simply put, neoliberalism leads to harmful socioeconomic consequences such as increased poverty, unemployment, and deterioration of income distribution. Accordingly, Brown recognises

⁸³ Fukuyama, Francis, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (Summer, 1989), p. 4.

⁸⁴ Harvey, David, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

⁸⁵ Brown, Wendy, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 18.

⁸⁶ Lavender, Andy (ed.), *Neoliberalism, Theatre and Performance* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 1-2, 15.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

neoliberal policies as ‘the contemporary attack on society and social justice in the name of market freedom and moral traditionalism.’⁸⁸ Jen Harvie rightly observes that this neoliberal agenda of ‘the individual’s right to seek self-fulfilment’ is resonant with Thatcher’s famous claim, ‘There is no such thing as society.’⁸⁹ This political encouragement of an increasing focus on the individual at the expense of the collective also explains the central role of individual response in new writing of the 1990s, which can be read as a response to the decade’s onset of neoliberal hegemony.

Julie A. Wilson describes neoliberalism as ‘a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life.’⁹⁰ This centring of competition, according to Wilson, participates in deteriorating daily life. She claims: ‘Every aspect of our lives, even those facets that do not necessarily have anything to do with money or the economy,’ has become market-driven, ‘from our education to our friendships to our very sense of self and self-worth.’⁹¹ Consequently, life becomes ‘so insecure and uncertain’ in this competitive world.⁹² Brown unanimously states that such neoliberal ‘figure of the human as an ensemble of entrepreneurial and investment capital’ can be seen ‘on every college and job application, every package of study strategies, every internship, every new exercise and diet program.’⁹³ This neoliberal marketisation of all facets of social life is also represented in the plays.

Rather than following a common ideology or philosophy — as discussed earlier in this chapter- the playwrights of the decade shared a reaction to the social and cultural milieu in the neoliberal environment in the nineties. Indeed, the playwrights managed to capture the zeitgeist by their preoccupation with the socio-effects of neoliberalism, or in Aleks Sierz’s words, by portraying ‘a fragmented society and alienated individuals.’⁹⁴ According to Sierz, some ‘artistic responses’ to the dramatic socioeconomic changes of the 1990s include ‘a retreat into private concerns, a dismissive cynicism or a renewed criticism of consumer capitalism.’⁹⁵ For example, according to Trish Reid, Anthony Neilson’s response to neoliberalism is to present ‘a form of hyper-competition that rewards a certain kind of

⁸⁸ Brown, p. 13.

⁸⁹ Harvie, Jen, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 12. Key, Douglas, ‘AIDS, Education, and the Year 2000: An Interview with Margaret Thatcher’, in *Woman’s Own* (31 October 1987), pp. 8-10.

⁹⁰ Wilson, Julie A., *Neoliberalism* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 2.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Brown, Wendy, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 36.

⁹⁴ Sierz, Aleks, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1990s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), p. 58.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

entrepreneurial masculinity and marginalizes and punishes others' in his plays.⁹⁶ Despite avoiding to relate these 'to any explicitly political agenda,' Reid argues that his characters are precisely 'symptomatic perpetrators of the malaise represented.'⁹⁷ In short, 'the affective structures of neoliberalism' can be found in the plays' portrayal of 'the notion of precarious existence – one lacking in predictability, job security, material or psychological stability.'⁹⁸ In this sense, the plays are replete with mixed feelings of helplessness, frustration, alienation, loneliness, and a lack of meaning or control over one's own life, which characterises the failure or refusal to adjust to the realities of neoliberal malaise. For example, one character in *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) states, 'There's nothing we can do to save ourselves. That's what scares me.'⁹⁹ Another in *Phaedra's Love* (1996) looks at the sky with a smile at the vultures descending and embraces death contently, stating, 'If there could have been more moments like this' as his final line.¹⁰⁰

It is not surprising, then, that the playwrights draw on the grotesque to depict such an unsettling environment. Firstly, the depicted neoliberal tableaux fits Kayser's definition of the grotesque as 'the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe.'¹⁰¹ Kayser further explains:

We are so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world. The grotesque instils fear of life rather than fear of death. ... We are unable to orient ourselves in the alienated world, because it is absurd.¹⁰²

As observed in both the grotesque and neoliberal milieu, such alienation spurs the playwrights to innovate and experiment with new writing styles. Geoffrey Harpham offers a similar view on this function: 'if we resign ourselves to life in a fallen world, we can see that grotesque forms present great opportunities for the imaginative intellect, for they are pre-eminently interpretable.'¹⁰³ Shared images of an unsettled world populated by grotesque bodies, grotesque hybrids, and grotesquely estranged time in the chosen plays — addressed in the

⁹⁶ Reid, Trish, *The Theatre of Anthony Neilson* (London: Methuen Drama, 2017), p. 15.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁹⁹ Ridley, Philip, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 2012), p. 30.

¹⁰⁰ Kane, Sarah, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 103.

¹⁰¹ Kayser, p. 185.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

¹⁰³ Harpham (1982), p. 19.

following chapters— demonstrate the importance of the grotesque as a tool for cultural critique of the neoliberal age and society. In fact, the grotesque does not praise or criticise any political doctrine; rather, it depicts the multifaceted human predicament as a result of neoliberal hegemony.

Secondly, the grotesque, as Philip Thomson claims, specifically dominates ‘societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation’ which makes it pertinent to the neoliberal age and society.¹⁰⁴ The grotesque, according to Frances Connelly, is ‘the leading edge of cultural change,’ as well as ‘the weapon of choice for social protest and a voice for those oppressed by traditional social boundaries’ in the modern era context.¹⁰⁵ As the plays demonstrate, by focusing on individual experiences, protest can be simply a view from a fractured society. In brief, Kayser rightly asserts ‘the art of our day shows a greater affinity to the grotesque than that of any other epoch,’ because the grotesque allows playwrights to reflect on the complex and intricate nature of their contemporary life.¹⁰⁶ I have considered how the grotesque manifested in all selected plays enforces a re-consideration of the impacts of neoliberalism on people and society by focusing on personal experiences. The next section presents the research methodology used in this study.

Methodology

In this section, I will clarify my methodology and specific approach to analysis, in order to demonstrate its benefits to my research design. The thesis offers close textual readings of nine plays through the lens of grotesque theory. Adopting careful textual readings in light of grotesque theory is an interpretative research method that offers a new dimension to both the critical reception of contemporary drama and the grotesque. I engage in an extensive range of scene analyses which enables the discovery of overlooked or unnoticed grotesque images in the texts. These close readings also enable me to detect parallels and divergences that assist in pinpointing the presence of particular grotesque patterns in the plays.

The materials used in this research also include published interviews, theatre performance reviews, and critical articles from the 1990s. This multitude of voices helps understand how critics received new writings in the early 1990s. Original production reviews, for example, provide insight into the media and theatrical context in which the plays are

¹⁰⁴ Thomson, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ Connelly, p. 18.

¹⁰⁶ Kayser, p. 11.

created. Seeking to map the provocative strategies more comprehensively, the outcry of the reviewers is an obvious starting point for understanding the reception of the plays. However, it is necessary to note that some of the reviews were biased due to media or political ideology. There are clearly certain limitations to using theatre reviews as evidence, such as misrepresenting or exaggerating the contents of the play and failing to conduct any meaningful analysis of the performance itself. Indeed, my chosen plays have elicited a substantial number of negative comments that were pejorative and dismissive of their artistic value. However, I have focused on the felt experience the critics expressed about some particular scenes which I have chosen to analyse in relation to the grotesque in the following chapters.

The research scope is confined to three playwrights: Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, and Philip Ridley, all of whom are acknowledged as pioneers of 1990s new writing. Kane, arguably the most well-known and certainly among the most widely critiqued playwright of the 1990s, directly and indirectly reflects the decade's primary issues in very confrontational ways. It is nearly impossible to talk about the 1990s without mentioning her and her dramaturgy. Neilson offers notable examples for an increasing focus on the individuals in exploration of neoliberal impacts on people. Ridley provides the first examples of new writing, at the very beginning of the decade, with his debut which is structured around ambiguity and contradiction. Despite the minimal critical attention given to Ridley's works, he is an eminent writer of the 1990s with a distinct style and images. The inclusion of these three playwrights gives a rich amount of material and viewpoint on thematic analysis.

The research engages in the plays written in the 1990s. It does so for two reasons; firstly because this permits a concentrated assessment of contemporary manifestations of dominant cultural and political attitudes. Second, it enables a robust understanding of these young writers' early works in relation to their artistic perspective on the zeitgeist. As a result, assessing various representations of grotesque images will allow me to show clearly how this theatrical manifestation of the grotesque is an explicitly ethical and political phenomenon in new writing across these periods.

Chapter One

Grotesque Bodies

My aim in this chapter is to apply existing theories of the grotesque body to readings of the playwrights and plays I have selected with the intention of uncovering new insights. I will begin by offering a summary of Bakhtin's influential thinking on the grotesque body because his remains the most influential critical intervention. By way of context, I will then offer synopses of the plays under discussion in this chapter and finally, I will undertake close readings of specific moments in particular plays through the lens of theories of the grotesque body. In this way I hope to demonstrate how the grotesque, as manifested in all selected plays, enforces a re-consideration of neoliberal focus on the individual and personal experiences. The plays' critique of neoliberalism is achieved by their grotesque manifestation of the dissolution of borders on what it means to be human, with the help of selected scenes in which the individual challenges socially constructed norms of bodies, particularly in relation to the face, deformation, and sexuality.

On the grotesque as a critical category, and on the grotesque body in particular, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* remains the authoritative text. For Bakhtin the most vitally important aspect of grotesque theory is attributed to the body through which the death-life cycle is celebrated in spirit of carnival, which he describes as 'the feast of becoming, change and renewal.'¹⁰⁷ Thus linked to everlasting 'nature', the body is presented as an open and uncompleted canvas. As part of his reflection on the concepts of the ever-unfinished body, Bakhtin examines the connection between birth and death in an ancient image:

In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is the grotesque concept of the body.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Bakhtin, p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

The combining of two opposing stages of life — pregnancy and senility — in one figure substantiates Bakhtin's assertion that the grotesque body in representation is, 'never finished, never completed [...] is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body' and consequently 'outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body.'¹⁰⁹ According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body highlights the destabilisation of bodily boundaries since the desire to transcend borders is an essential element to the grotesque art.

Bakhtin, seeking to understand how the grotesque body can transgress its limits, shifts focus on to body parts which are 'open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.'¹¹⁰ In representations of the grotesque, 'the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose' are intentionally emphasized because the borders between inside and outside are naturally broken down through these parts.¹¹¹ Basic bodily functions such as 'eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body' are the activities of the grotesque body in which 'the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven.'¹¹²

The bodily celebration of the life cycle is essentially related to another of Bakhtin's key terms, 'grotesque realism', which is marked by a tendency to 'degrade, bring down to earth' and turn the 'subject into flesh' with a focus on 'the bodily lower stratum.'¹¹³ Grotesque realism is directly concerned with the body's 'topographical connotations', and this upper and lower body split will be analysed in detail in the next section.¹¹⁴ More precisely, in grotesque realism, upper and lower body parts are assigned different and specific meanings. The downward body, for example —equivalent to 'the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks' — is related to earth, 'an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts).'¹¹⁵ Thus, the grotesqueness of the body is typically presented in 'the zone of the genital organs, [...] the fertilizing and generating stratum.'¹¹⁶ By focusing on this renewing function, Bakhtin stresses

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 317.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

the positive character of grotesque realism because ‘degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one.’¹¹⁷

In Bakhtin’s thinking ‘upward’ body parts, on the other hand relate to ‘the face or the head’ which in turn connotes ‘heaven.’¹¹⁸ For Bakhtin, the nose and mouth have the most significance in the upper level. In particular, the open mouth constitutes ‘one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body’ through which ‘man tastes the world, introduces it into his body’ and ‘makes it part of himself.’¹¹⁹ In this way, the ‘limits between man and the world are erased, to man’s advantage.’¹²⁰ Special attention is also directed at the nose because of its association with male genitals, referencing of an old belief that ‘the size and potency of the genital organs can be inferred from the dimensions and form of the nose.’¹²¹ In sum, in Bakhtinian world all ‘these convexities and orifices of the body’ gain a grotesque quality only when they contribute to the demolition of ‘the confines between bodies and between the body and the world.’¹²²

Bakhtin’s thesis on the grotesque body has been picked up and developed by other critics and has been applied widely to analyses of literature. For example, with a focus on images of bodily decay and renewal, Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund offer Mary Shelley’s famous novel *Frankenstein* (1818) as an example for the generative quality of the grotesque body in a Bakhtinian world where ‘the system of grotesque imagery death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole.’¹²³ The story of Doctor Victor Frankenstein and the creature he creates from dismembered corpses, is an exact illustration of Bakhtin’s understanding of the grotesque body spurring ‘a death that gives birth.’¹²⁴ Beyond this however, according to Edwards and Graulund, rendering the dead human body parts into a non-human life-form and conducting experiments on the capacities of that body is as grotesque as the monstrous being itself. The physical deterioration of the creature in Shelley’s novel calls to mind other motifs in Bakhtin’s grotesque. Grotesque deformations of the body are unsurprisingly essential sources of the grotesqueness because, as Ralf Remshardt reminds us, the body is represented not only as ‘the map of the universe, temple of the soul, and

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 317.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

isomorph of divinity, but also as the seat of vices and object of corruption.’¹²⁵ Thus ‘distortion, disproportion, and disfiguration, which are closely associated with the shape and misshape of the human body’ are indispensable features of the grotesque art.¹²⁶

In summary, then, Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque is highly corporeal. The grotesque body, for Bakhtin, is concerned with pushing bodily limits in the context of an eternal life cycle. This introductory section has concentrated on Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque body and its basic characteristics. My purpose in this chapter is to identify and explore instances of the grotesque body at work in the plays of Philip Ridley, Sarah Kane, and Anthony Neilson which I argue, with their distinctive representations of the distorted body, make extensive use of grotesque. I focus on three distinct features of grotesque body which I sketch briefly below: the face, physical deformities, and sexuality.

In his study of the grotesque body, Bakhtin does not devote much time to the grotesque face except for a brief mention of ‘the gaping mouth,’ which is, for him, ‘related to the image of swallowing, this most ancient symbol of death and destruction.’¹²⁷ Remshardt’s thinking about the face, on the other hand, provides a suitable starting point for my own analysis: ‘If the language of the human body is the preferred vocabulary of the grotesque, the face is its exclamation mark.’¹²⁸ The face, without a doubt, is not only a vital site of communication but also the centre of attention in the theatre. Ridley, in particular, employs facial images to challenge distinctions between the human and the non-human, the normal and the aberrant. One character in *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) discusses a full-face transplant procedure, adding, ‘There’s nothing left of your face. Nothing. But don’t worry. We’ll give you a new one.’¹²⁹ Another in *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (1992) questions the basic utility of the face, stating, ‘Sometimes I wonder if it’s worth having a face at all.’¹³⁰ The second aspect I have chosen to focus on in this chapter is the deformed body. Distorted bodies in representation are often associated with monsters, and this link offers a useful basis for my exploration of grotesque deformations. Remshardt mentions that ‘the monster’s Latin root is *monstrare* (to show, expose), but there is an echo, too, of *monere* (to warn),’ and concludes that ‘all theatre is based as well on this double discourse of showing (*monstrare*) and warning (*monere*).’¹³¹ A similar dichotomy is seen in deformed bodies which both expose physical

¹²⁵ Remshardt, p. 34.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹²⁷ Bakhtin, p. 317, 325.

¹²⁸ Remshardt, p. 34.

¹²⁹ Ridley, p. 75.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹³¹ Remshardt, p. 62, 65.

deformity and also warn against moral deformity. Sarah Kane explores external and internal distortions with characters suffering from terminal lung cancer and gouged eyes, a stress-related stutter and fainting episodes in *Blasted* and a series of dismemberments in *Cleansed* (1998). This chapter makes the final claim that sexual distortion is a vital component in staging the grotesque body. This body, as Remshardt observes, is ‘a body in flux, a body of excess, constantly exploding into new orifices, ingesting, protruding, indecorously spilling into the environment with its unbounded mutability.’¹³² Thus, ‘the lower stratum of the body, the suppressed place of defecation, copulation, pregnancy, and birth’ is important in the creation of ‘an eternal cycle of self-destruction and self-renewal.’¹³³ The world of Anthony Neilson’s *Normal* (1991) and *The Censor* (1997) depicts grotesque sexual imageries at its extremes: from uninhibited sadism to complete sexual repression. This section has reviewed three key aspects of grotesque body. In the next section, I will look more closely at Ridley’s two plays in relation to their grotesque preoccupation with the face. By way of context, I will also provide a plot summary of the plays under discussion and an overview of their critical reception, both by newspaper critics and by the scholarly community.

1. The Grotesque Face

The face has long been considered one of the richest and most powerful communication instruments, as well as the main site for evaluating a person’s mental state through their facial expressions. Silvan Tomkins, a psychologist and personality theorist who has devoted himself to the observation and study of human faces through affect theory, observes that ‘the body image is dominated by the face image’ and that the face is ‘the most likely seat of “self”-consciousness’ because of its expressive qualities.¹³⁴ As a visual artist, Ridley shares this viewpoint, as evidenced by his exhibitions of photographic portraits in the corridors of theatres during runs of his plays, such as *Leaves of Glass* (2007), and the revival of *Vincent River* (2000). In response to Sierz’s question about how his photography exhibitions relate to his writing process, Ridley emphasises the importance of face expressions:

I’ve always taken lots of photographs of my friends when they have come round and we dressed up. I got them to adopt characters, feelings, expressions, [...] and it was helpful

¹³² Remshardt, p. 47.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Tomkins, Silvan S., *Affect Imagery Consciousness: Volume I, The Positive Affects* (London: Tavistock, 1962), p. 114.

for them to start seeing their faces as a tool of communication. But it was also part of my process of getting these characters that I was creating to be absolutely one hundred per cent real in my mind.¹³⁵

In the stage directions of his plays, Ridley does provide detailed descriptions of physical appearance such as costumes, body postures, and facial expressions as a guide to understanding the characters. Some characters have distinct contrasts in their appearance and behaviour. This lack of cohesion in regard to personality is most visible in the features of faces, their expressiveness, and questions of the true identity behind it. Because the face in these plays is usefully thought of, in Kayser's words, as indicative of an estranged world, I refer to this quality as the 'grotesque face.' Ridley creates conflict between notions of the normal and abnormal in regard to the human face and its expressiveness in this context. His characters' persistent retreat into storytelling and fantasy, implies deep alienation from the present moment, and creates a duality of illusion and reality which Ridley partly sustains by making use of motifs of the grotesque face.

The grotesque face is also achieved using masks in Ridley's work. Masks are ancient artefacts with numerous uses and shapes. Eli Rozik explains the underlying link between the usage of masks and theatrical performance:

The actors are always real, whereas the characters are always evoked. This duality indicates the textual nature of a theatre performance and is part of the spectators' aesthetic experience. Therefore, the use of a mask in the theatre is not only nonessential but even superfluous. When used, however, the mask basically indicates this duality. Acting emphasizes the juxtaposition of the mask and the face.¹³⁶

This dichotomy can be interpreted in a variety of ways. First, the mask 'conveys the message that the wearers are temporarily not expressing or representing themselves,' allowing a performer to simply become anonymous or someone else for a limited time.¹³⁷ Second, the use of masks also 'makes possible the expression of what is suppressed and not actualized in

¹³⁵ Ridley, Philip, 'Putting a New Lens on the World: The Art of Theatrical Alchemy', Interview by Aleks Sierz, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 25: 2 (May 2009), p. 110.

¹³⁶ Rozik, Eli, *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), p. 212.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

their selves,’ or in other words, ‘the mask, instead of concealing the “true” self, reveals it.’¹³⁸ Third, as Kayser notes, this ‘contrast between the social appearance of a man (his mask) and his real Self (his face),’ leads ‘the division of the Self’ and, eventually, ‘the estrangement of Self.’¹³⁹ As a result, the unity of personality is distorted by the mask, a distortion which Bakhtin refers to as ‘the essence of the grotesque.’¹⁴⁰ In the next section, I will examine how the grotesque asserts itself in Ridley’s theatrical debut in terms of its fixation with face.

The Pitchfork Disney

Premiered at the Bush Theatre, London, in January 1991, Philip Ridley’s theatre debut, *The Pitchfork Disney*, is a one act play the action of which unfolds in a dystopian near future, in a ‘dimly lit room’ in the East End of London, where everything is ‘worn and faded.’¹⁴¹ The play has four characters, Presley and Haley Stray, twenty-eight-year-old twins who live in the flat, and the intruders Cosmo Disney and Pitchfork Cavalier. While engaged in the routine of exchanging fantastic stories, dreams and traumatic childhood memories, Presley and Haley — both dressed in black T-shirt and jeans — also continually describe the outside world in apocalyptic terms: ‘the whole world is a wasteland. Black sky. Black earth. Black nothing. [...] we’re the only two left. [...] And this house is the only house standing.’¹⁴² The relative peace of the twins’ world is disturbed by the entrance of very attractive eighteen-year-old Cosmo Disney, wearing a bright red rhinestone and sequin jacket which ‘is dazzling in the colourless room’ and a white shirt with a black bow tie.¹⁴³ He is followed by his work-partner Pitchfork Cavalier who is dressed the same as Cosmo but with a black leather bondage mask with holes for eyes and mouth. Cosmo and Pitchfork describe how they work together in pubs as entertainers. They meet ‘man’s need for the shivers’ and a ‘daily dose of disgust’ by singing and eating live insects in the process making the audience ‘feel queasy’ because ‘the queasier it gets the more they pay.’¹⁴⁴ In the encounter between Ridley’s characters, the central focus is Cosmo’s sexual attraction to Haley — who spends much of the play in a sedative-induced sleep — and Presley’s desperate efforts to build a connection with Cosmo through storytelling, which is his key method of communication.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹³⁹ Kayser, p. 137.

¹⁴⁰ Bakhtin, p. 40.

¹⁴¹ Ridley (2012), p. 9.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67, 62.

Confined to one room, the action is structured around, several stories told by the characters, including a post-apocalyptic landscape narrative; Haley's memory of getting lost in the zoo; Presley's narration of cooking and eating his pet-snake in a frying pan; Haley's story of being chased by pack of wild dogs; a dream about everything being made out of chocolate; Presley's childhood fantasy about being an astronaut, and his story about a fictitious murderer. The play's title references Presley's five-page-long monologue about a handsome serial killer named 'the Pitchfork Disney' which is, of course, a combination of names of the intruders.¹⁴⁵ The invented name of Presley's serial killer evokes the grotesque by bringing together two conflicting identities. Cosmo Disney's beauty, his 'perfect face. Like a Hollywood movie star. Sun tan, sparkling teeth, glistening eyes, shiny hair' and Pitchfork's menacing look, suggestive of malicious intent to 'kill all the children in the world.'¹⁴⁶ The literal meaning of the compound of two names is also planted in Presley's story as a mixture of two seemingly incompatible actions: the murderer's stabbing the children 'to death with a pitchfork' and then putting 'a rubber model of a cartoon character on the mutilated body.'¹⁴⁷

In *The Pitchfork Disney*, Ridley creates an openly grotesque figure, Pitchfork Cavalier, who wears a leather bondage face mask which we learn he removes in front of audiences during performances in pubs making 'women faint and grown men vomit.'¹⁴⁸ His working partner — '*a menacing, angelic beauty*' — Cosmo Disney accompanies this unmasking with a routine in which he eats 'Caterpillars. Maggots. Worms. Beetles. Moths. Goldfish. Slugs [and] Spiders,' sucks 'live snails from shells', bites 'wriggling eels in two,' and gnaws 'heads from live mice.'¹⁴⁹ Combining Pitchfork's external deformation with Cosmo's internal bestial nature — not least in the play's title — Ridley gives us a perfect pair of grotesque characters who operate beyond the margins of civilised humanity. Cosmo transgresses the boundary of what is edible, even for money, while Pitchfork's grotesque qualities including his 'terrible howl - half-human, half-animal', his gnawing 'someone's ear off' without 'a tooth in his head', and his lack of 'vital parts', blur the line between human and monster.¹⁵⁰ Ridley's characters are grotesque because the boundary between normal and abnormal is destabilised in both their appearance and behaviour. The *Sunday Times*'s John Peter describes the play as a 'Hansel and Gretel story retold in a style of working-class baroque,' while for Paul Taylor

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-8.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32, 62.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84, 87, 88.

of the *Independent*, *The Pitchfork Disney* is a ‘surreal fantasy’ in ‘the apocalyptic punk-baroque style.’¹⁵¹ The critics’ shared vocabulary evokes the close link between the baroque and the grotesque. The baroque relates to ‘anything irregular, bizarre, or otherwise departing from established rules and proportions,’ and ‘until the late 19th century the term always carried the implication of odd, grotesque, exaggerated, and overdecorated.’¹⁵² The impression of the play’s baroque-ness, which was picked up by the critics, I would suggest, emanates from the prominence of grotesque imagery in Ridley’s play, from its characters with their bizarre stories, unusual jobs, and unusual physical appearance.

Dreamlike stories are another significant feature in Ridley’s theatrical style as regards the rupture of the borders. Since the plot of *The Pitchfork Disney* is largely structured around the characters telling a series of stories, the boundary between reality and fantasy is effectively destabilised. As David Ian Rabey points out, Ridley’s characters ‘(re-)order their past through a repeated activity of storytelling which wilfully obscures any reliable boundaries between truth and fiction.’¹⁵³ Some even suggest that, as Dan Rebellato notes, that ‘the nightmare unfolding before us is taking place in the dreams of the play’s female character’ because Haley has slept through the arrival of the strangers and the following incidents.¹⁵⁴ Andrew Wyllie goes even further offering the ‘in-yer-ears’ label to describe the comprehensive use of storytelling with a focus of the role of memory in the play. Ridley’s characters, for Wyllie, choose storytelling as a vehicle for ‘an escape route from their ever having to confront the present.’¹⁵⁵

The Pitchfork Disney is generally considered an early example of in-yer-face. Dominic Dromgoole, the Artistic Director of the Bush Theatre between 1990-1996, describes it as ‘one of the first plays to signal the new direction for new writing.’¹⁵⁶ For Dromgoole, Ridley has ‘no politics, no naturalism, no journalism, no issues’ and in their place offers ‘character, imagination, wit, sexuality, skin and the soul.’¹⁵⁷ Rebellato also suggests that Ridley is

¹⁵¹ Peter, John, ‘Review of *The Pitchfork Disney*’, *Sunday Times*, 13 January 1991. Taylor, Paul, ‘Review of *The Pitchfork Disney*’, *Independent*, 7 January 1991.

¹⁵² Retrieved 1 December 2020 from <https://www.britannica.com/art/Baroque-art-and-architecture>. For more specific research on the Baroque Grotesque, see Frances K. Barasch, ‘Definitions: Renaissance and Baroque, Grotesque Construction and Deconstruction’, *Modern Language Studies*, 13:2 (Spring 1983), pp. 60-7. Shun-Liang Chao, *Rethinking the Concept of the Grotesque: Crashaw, Baudelaire, Magritte* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2010).

¹⁵³ Rabey, p. 196.

¹⁵⁴ Rebellato, Dan, ‘Philip Ridley’, in *Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, ed. by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 441.

¹⁵⁵ Wyllie, Andrew, ‘Philip Ridley and Memory’, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 33:1 (2013), p. 67.

¹⁵⁶ Dromgoole, Dominic, *The Full Room: An A-Z of Contemporary Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 241.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

‘politically disengaged’ but finds his debut play ‘a ferociously funny and unsettling vision of a 1990s culture shot through with uncertainty, absence and loss.’¹⁵⁸ According to Rebellato, Ridley marks the ‘first signs of a move away from explicit political commentary towards a new emphasis on ambiguity, metaphor and the employment of harsh, vivid and often beautiful imagery to provoke reflection on the state of our common life.’¹⁵⁹ Elsewhere, Ken Urban makes a connection between the ‘ongoing debates about nostalgia in British culture, from Thatcher’s call for a return to Victorian values to the rise of Tony Blair’s New Labour party and its championing of Cool Britannia, which looked back to 1960s Swinging London as its model’ and Ridley’s characters who he sees as ‘sick with [a] nostalgia’ that results in ‘a dismissal of the present and an abdication of the future.’¹⁶⁰ In his chapter on Ridley in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* (2011), Rebellato is the first person to make the connection between Ridley and grotesque theory. He briefly quotes from Wolfgang Kayser and Philip Thomson to reinforce his thesis that Ridley’s style is structured around ambiguity and contradiction and he reaches the conclusion that the grotesque is pertinent to Ridley’s plays. Assigning a full chapter to Ridley in his book *The Grotesque in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* (2016), Ondřej Pilný stresses the vivid contrast between ‘the dilapidated settings of his plays and the extravagant costumes and heightened language of many of his characters.’¹⁶¹ For Pilný, Ridley deploys the grotesque ‘as a means of soliciting deeper engagement of individuals with the moral, social, and political deficiencies of the present-day era.’¹⁶²

Building on these insights I want to argue that the particular characteristics of faces, their expressiveness and the question of the reality behind the mask, are exploited in *The Pitchfork Disney* through deployment of elements of the grotesque. For example, towards the end of Presley’s story about the serial killer, he adds himself to the narrative by including the fictional loss of his own face in an accident, and the transplanting of Pitchfork Disney’s face on his by surgery:

A doctor looks at me and says, “There’s nothing left of your face. Nothing. But don’t worry. We’ll give you a new one.” [...] I stare at my reflection. A perfect face. Like a

¹⁵⁸ Rebellato (2011), p. 428.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

¹⁶⁰ Urban, Ken, ‘Ghosts from an Imperfect Place: Philip Ridley’s Nostalgia’, *Modern Drama*, 50: 3 (Fall 2007), p. 327.

¹⁶¹ Pilný, p. 31.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

Hollywood movie star. Sun tan. Sparkling teeth. Glistening eyes. Shiny hair. They've given me the face of the Pitchfork Disney.¹⁶³

The grotesque in this scene relates partly to the loss of Presley's identity and its simultaneous replacement with someone else's. Having lost his innocence and being now stuck in a murderer's identity, Presley has to take responsibility for the murderer's actions: 'The whole world hates me and there's nothing I can do about it. The whole world is chanting, "Die! Die! Die!"'¹⁶⁴ In a nightmarish scenario, the face transplant in Presley's story serves a grotesque function by combining his real identity with another much more sinister one. His narrative concludes with him embracing the new identity that comes with the new face. As he flees the angry mob and police pursuit, he initiates a nuclear war to save his own life, destroying mankind and leaving himself as the 'last living thing in the world.'¹⁶⁵

Although, not as explicit as the face transplant — 'the essence of the grotesque' — is also present in the play through Pitchfork's black leather bondage mask.¹⁶⁶ At one point Cosmo explains the function of Pitchfork's mask in their performance:

Presley What's wrong with his face?
Cosmo Oh, it's ... what can I say ...? How can I describe it? ... Imagine your nightmare, Mr Chocolate.
Presley ... Yeah.
Cosmo Now multiply it by the number of stars in the universe. That's how bad his face is.
Presley So ... what does he do in the act?
Cosmo I take it off.
Presley What?
Cosmo His mask.
Presley That's all?
Cosmo That's enough, believe me. I've seen women faint and grown men vomit. Earns a fortune. He walks on to the stage, sings a little ditty, then I go to take his mask off.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Ridley (2012), pp. 75-6.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁶⁶ Bakhtin, p. 40.

¹⁶⁷ Ridley (2012), p. 82.

In Pitchfork's case, the mask serves to disguise his severely deformed face and thus to make him look less terrifying. Nevertheless, his real face is hidden behind an object, the mask, which gives him an inhuman appearance, and encourages the audience to speculate about the hideous visage underneath. His real identity, including his facial expressions and associated emotions, is not visible to the world, which is in itself a distortion. In his study on the grotesque, Ralf Remshardt quotes the semiotician B. L. Ogibenin's observation about the mask:

[...] the mask represents a "deformation of the traits of a human face . . . which conserves the general similarity between the mask and the face, although the entire appearance of the mask indicates that it must be understood simultaneously as another face, *opposed to the human one*".¹⁶⁸

This underlying function of the mask in hiding the original and offering otherness suggests an identity confusion which is a wellspring for grotesque art. It is this aspect of the grotesque that Ridley draws on for his disturbing characterisation of Pitchfork. For Bakhtin, the mask is closely associated with 'transition, metamorphoses [and] the violation of natural boundaries.'¹⁶⁹ Through wearing a mask, the dissolution of the unity of personality occurs, since the mask always hides as well as reveals. It 'always points to two subjects, namely the one it means and the one it conceals.'¹⁷⁰ It is not easy to see where Pitchfork's real identity ends and the invented one begins. This ambiguity about his identity is staged both through the implied grotesqueness of his facial features, and also by the grotesqueness of the mask which conceals them.

In summary, in *The Pitchfork Disney*, Ridley mobilises the power of grotesque transgression through the story of the facial transplant and the use of mask, both of which disrupt the supposed sense of unity on which stable personal identity is built. The effects is disturbing, as reviews of the original production demonstrate. In the next section I show how Ridley continues to explore the motif of the grotesque face in his second play.

¹⁶⁸ Cited in Remshardt, p. 41.

¹⁶⁹ Bakhtin, p. 40.

¹⁷⁰ Erika Fischer-Lichte Cited in Remshardt, p. 41.

The Fastest Clock in the Universe

Ridley's second stage play *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* opened at Hampstead Theatre, London in May 1992. It has three male and two female characters. The flatmates: 'a young-looking thirty-year-old' Cougar Glass whose hair is 'roughly styled in a quiff' and a forty-nine-year-old 'severely balding' Captain Tock; their landlady Cheetah Bee who is 'eighty-eight years old, very wrinkled and virtually toothless'; and two visitors, fifteen-year-old Foxtrot Darling who has 'fragile good looks,' and seventeen-year-old Sherbet Gravel, an unwelcome guest.¹⁷¹ Like Ridley's first play, the action is confined to one 'dilapidated room' in this case 'above an abandoned factory in the East End of London.'¹⁷² Unlike *The Pitchfork Disney* the play has two acts.

The Fastest Clock in the Universe opens amid preparations for Cougar Glass's birthday party. Cougar is 'wearing only his (very sexy and stylish) underpants and sunglasses.'¹⁷³ His flatmate Captain Tock, 'wearing a button-up white shirt (without tie) and suit,' is setting the party table.¹⁷⁴ The first act explores the nature of the relationship between the flatmates and outlines their party plans. It becomes clear they regularly celebrate Cougar's nineteenth birthday, and in this instance, they are expecting only one guest, the fifteen-year-old Foxtrot Darling to whom Cougar is sexually attracted. Their usual plan is to make the guest have a few drinks, and then for Captain to pretend he has a meeting, in order to leave, and allow Cougar to get intimate with the guest. The play's major conflict is introduced at the end of the first act when Foxtrot 'wearing a school uniform' arrives with his pregnant fiancée Sherbet Gravel signalling the probable failure of Cougar's seduction plan.¹⁷⁵ The second act focuses on the characters' sharing stories, memories and desires. The play ends with Sherbet's announcing Cougar's real age — which she has discovered — and her miscarriage as a result of Cougar's violent attack.

As in *The Pitchfork Disney*, the characters in *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* tell stories, the veracity of which are typically difficult to judge. These include Captain's rotten magpie story, Cougar's story about his first orgasm, Cheetah's memories about the closed fur factory downstairs and a TV programme, Foxtrot's fantasy about his dead brother, Cougar's invention of a fictitious dying wife at the hospital, the story of Captain's visit to the abandoned factory in downstairs and Captain's story about a prince. This last story, about a

¹⁷¹ Ridley (2012), p. 105, 135, 140.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

prince who is looking for the fastest clock in the universe gives the play its title, and hints both at the characters' entrapment in a fantasy world, and also their preference for stay in the magic realms of fairy tales and memories, rather than in the present. The dismissal nature of the present is also implied in the setting. Captain, who is the owner of an antique shop, has a collection of 'stuffed birds, china birds, paintings of birds' which makes the room 'somewhere between museum and aviary.'¹⁷⁶ This staging of a 'ruined' present, is perhaps the play's most obviously political aspect and it is given greater emphasis by the characters' refusal of the future.

The recurrent theme of a resistance to aging is explored primarily through the character of Cougar. For Cougar the clocks must be smashed, all his grey hairs must be removed and his real date of birth must not be mentioned at any cost since he 'turns into a wild animal when you say his age.'¹⁷⁷ During a quarrel in which Captain suggests that Cougar 'can't be a teenager all [his] life', he has 'got to accept [his] age,' Cougar launches into a fit of hysterics and can be soothed only by senile Cheetah Bee with comparisons between her being 'at the end' and his being 'at the beginning' of life.¹⁷⁸ Cougar's denial of his age is picked up on by the critics. For Andrew Wyllie, the character, can be read as 'the echo of *Peter Pan*' while for Lee Levitt he is 'a Dorian Gray for the 1990s.'¹⁷⁹ Pilný rightly observes that Cougar yearns 'to become an immortal picture of his youthful self' which of course makes him 'monstrous.'¹⁸⁰

In his analysis of the play in *Modern British Playwriting: the 1990s* (2012), Sierz argues that Ridley's style creates 'a distinctive Ridleyland, a place which characteristically throws together the normal and the abnormal.'¹⁸¹ Similarly, Rebellato emphasizes 'the extremes of age difference' between the characters in the play, which leads him to his discussion of the grotesque in Ridley's work. He also suggests that the sharp contrasts in Ridley's style are:

... not merely between narrative elements (the very old and very young, for example, and in this play between homosexual and heterosexual), but they are also aesthetic

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 134, pp. 136-7.

¹⁷⁹ Wyllie, Andrew, 'The Politics of Violence after In-Yer-Face: Harold Pinter and Philip Ridley' in *Pinter Et Cetera*, ed. by Craig N. Owens (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 66. Levitt, Lee, 'Review of *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*', *Jewish Chronicle*, 29 May 1992.

¹⁸⁰ Pilný, p. 37.

¹⁸¹ Sierz (2012), p. 100.

(extremes of beauty and ugliness), stylistic (realist settings and surreal imagery), and moral too, in the repeated juxtaposition of infantile and adult sexuality.¹⁸²

Ridley uses grotesque images to address the dissolution of the border by depicting opposites together such as Cougar's extreme desire for eternal youth and Cheetah Bee's senility; and a few others which will be covered in more detail later in this section like animals being skinned alive for fur and the charm of a fur coat, and Sherbet's youthfulness and her adoration of traditional things. Most obviously, Ridley gives us a contemporary version of the grotesque in the character of Cougar whose deep obsession with his own physical beauty in combination with his intention to rape a schoolboy, points to irresolvable tension between outside charm and inside deformity. Indeed, the character explicitly states: 'Who gives a fuck about my insides? Can have a gut full of maggots for all I care, so long as I've got a suntan.'¹⁸³ Ridley's interest in 'the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of the gross and the grotesque', to borrow Sierz's phrase, is explored at length in the figure of Cougar.¹⁸⁴ However, this exploration is apparent in other aspects of the play.

The vividly grotesque images in Ridley's plays warrant investigation in relation to their close links to visual arts not least because Ridley is 'a successful visual artist who studied painting at St Martin's School of Art in London.'¹⁸⁵ In terms of grotesque realism's focus on the upper bodily stratum, for instance, Leonardo da Vinci's sketches of grotesque heads provide a key to our understanding of Ridley's presentation of the grotesque. With his 'highly developed awareness of physiognomics', Leonardo is concerned with the physical variety in his paintings and that is why he 'systematically records the morphology of the human face in accordance with temperament and character.'¹⁸⁶ As a result, his grotesque heads are interpreted as 'his art-theoretical emphasis on the expressiveness [...] not only by revealing emotions and mental states through bodily and facial movements, but also by reflecting character through the external appearance appropriate to it.'¹⁸⁷ In common with Leonardo's emphasis on facial expressiveness in his grotesque heads, the grotesque faces of Ridley's characters are formed around close links between their temperaments and their expressive facial qualities, especially in relation to vanity. The concept of the grotesque head

¹⁸² Rebellato (2011), p. 431, 432.

¹⁸³ Ridley (2012), p. 117.

¹⁸⁴ Sierz (2001), pp. 40-1.

¹⁸⁵ Pilný, p. 30.

¹⁸⁶ Kwakkelstein, Michael W., 'Leonardo da Vinci's Grotesque Heads and the Breaking of the Physiognomic Mould', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 54 (1991), p. 132, 133.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

is first analysed through the lenses of physiognomy in Leonardo's independent grotesque head studies. In his experiments with facial forms, even in his dissection of 'at least 19 corpses' during 'twenty years of study from c.1489 to the end of his life', da Vinci's main concern was 'to use external features of physiognomy as expressions of the inner workings of the mind and soul: fear, hope, anger, deceit, indeed the whole range of human emotions.'¹⁸⁸ By extending the focus to 'the outer extensions of man's expressions to explore the enormity of an inner world,' his study of grotesque faces explores human nature by representing character and emotion on the face.¹⁸⁹ Ridley offers a similar exploration through characters and their narratives which are steeped in grotesque images.

The title, *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*, is drawn from a story Captain tells towards the end of the play about a narcissistic prince:

Captain: And then, one day, the Prince met a Wizard. The Prince told the Wizard how he was adored by everyone and how funny he found it. Because he — the Prince — cared for no one. The Wizard said, "You might be the most beautiful thing in the world, but you are also the most cruel. Your face shows no expression. It is hard and emotionless. Like the face of a vulture. To punish you, Prince, I will put a spell on you." [...] The Wizard changed the Prince's face into the face of a vulture.¹⁹⁰

Thereafter, the Prince is obliged to search for the fastest clock in the universe, which he needs to break a wizard's spell.

This story provides yet another example of the grotesque at work in the play. First, like Cougar, the Prince is a grotesque combination of external beauty and inner cruelty. Furthermore, according to the Wizard, he deserves to have a vulture face because of the lack of human emotion and expression on his face. In this way a lack of facial expression is related to an inhuman nature because the human face is understood as an expressive canvas. As Remshardt notes, 'anything may be projected onto the face and everything reflected by it.'¹⁹¹ The essential feature of the human face is its ability to express emotions consciously or unconsciously and its related capacity to read and interpret other people's emotional states

¹⁸⁸ Veltman, Kim H., 'Leonardo da Vinci: Studies of the Human Body and Principles of Anatomy', in *Gepeinigt, begehrt, vergessen. Symbolik und Sozialbezug des Körpers im späten Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Klaus Schreiner (Bad Homburg: Werner Reimers Stiftung, 1992), pp. 287-308.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ridley (2012), pp. 176-7.

¹⁹¹ Remshardt, p. 36.

through their facial expressions. Thus, without the expression of emotion, the human face is not dissimilar to a non-human face, in this instance, the face of a bird. A similar moment occurs earlier in the play when Sherbet gets a chance to take a look at the apartment which is full of '*birds - stuffed birds, china birds, paintings of birds, etc.*,' and proceeds to share her thoughts on birds.¹⁹²

You know what gets me about birds? Their faces. They never show any feeling, do they? I bet you could put a bird through a mangle feet first and the look on its face wouldn't change one jot.¹⁹³

Here again, the inability to express feelings on the face is posited as a disturbing animal characteristic. Returning to the vulture-faced Prince in Captain's story, the transposing of animal features into the human face is grotesque because, as Remshardt points out, the 'art of the grotesque' relies on the assumption, or perhaps the anxiety, that the human is, in the words of José Ortega y Gasset, 'always on the point of not being man.'¹⁹⁴ Because of its primacy in displaying human emotions the face is often a crucial factor in the grotesque transformation of human to nonhuman which is 'one of the most ancient grotesque forms.'¹⁹⁵

On the other hand, there is not necessarily a need for facial transformation to depict the grotesque human face. A pronounced absence of appropriate emotion can suffice. Another example of the grotesqueness manifesting on the face, is given by Cougar's landlady Cheetah Bee, the widow of the owner of the old fur factory downstairs:

One day, I went down to the factory to see how the animals were killed. I saw my husband take an animal from a cage. He held the animal by its back legs, then he swung it hard against the floor. The animal was stunned but it was not killed. Then my husband hung the animal from a metal hook and started to cut the fur from its body. He ripped the skin away as easily as peeling off a rubber glove. The animal struggled and screamed. There was no expression on my husband's face at all.¹⁹⁶

This vivid and shocking description is gruesome enough but, the face of Cheetah Bee's husband showing no expression is particularly disturbing and is another example of Ridley's use of the grotesque. In its lack of reaction, the husband's face is more nonhuman than a

¹⁹² Ridley (2012), p. 105.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁹⁴ Remshardt, p. 40. Cited in Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Bakhtin, p. 316.

¹⁹⁶ Ridley (2012), p. 192.

human, in grotesque terms. The husband is not given a name in the play. In contrast, Cheetah Bee's name is an unusual combination of two animals. A large cat known for its speed and a flying insect known for its ability to make honey combine to create a grotesque flying cat image. In contrast to her husband, she is aware of the horror of what she has witnessed: 'the cruelty of what I saw that day still chills me.'¹⁹⁷ However, she embraces the face of the cruelty which the fur coat represents in her very last words in the play: 'But – oh . . . *Feels her fur coat. It is beautiful.*'¹⁹⁸

The above examples evidence Ridley's recurring use of the face as an index of humanity, by referencing its expressiveness or more typically its lack of expressiveness. At one point, Cheetah Bee, questions whether having a face is actually necessary:

There's a programme on television tonight. About a boy born in a jungle. Some place. Some time. Born without a face. He's adopted by a surgeon who performs endless operations on him. Gradually, the boy gets a nose, a mouth, ears, eyes. Now he can go to school and do all the things other children do: inject himself with chemicals, watch pornography, arm himself with razor blades, get drunk, get old, wither, die. Sometimes I wonder if it's worth having a face at all.¹⁹⁹

In this story of the faceless boy — which is actually based on a true case — the realm of the grotesque is evoked when his face becomes open to the world via the surgical operations.²⁰⁰ In Cheetah Bee's perverse interpretation, having acquired a 'normal' facial appearance, the boy can transgress his body borders with his nose, mouth, ears and eyes which, according to Bakhtin we might recall, are 'the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.'²⁰¹ From Cheetah's gloomy perspective, this means he is open to transgressive experiences. In this image creating the normal out of the abnormal does not prevent disharmony or resolve conflict between inside and outside.

Exploration of the mask's relationship with the grotesque, can also be found in *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* in a sequence at Cougar's birthday party:

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 192-3.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁰⁰ The boy's name is David Lopez Jackson. For more information, see 'The Boy David Story' (2003) documentary directed by Alex McCall.

²⁰¹ Bakhtin, p. 317.

Sherbet *Pulls out plastic glasses with false noses attached.* Masks! Well, almost masks. Plastic glasses with noses. But they were so funny, I just had to get them. [...] We'll all wear masks. Our faces will be hidden. Who knows what we're thinking? Or what we might do? My, anything could happen. Anything at all. *The mask is on.*²⁰²

Sherbet thus inaugurates a grotesque realm in which the masks instantly establish a sense of theatricality within the entertainment. In the following scenes, the theatrical show starts with Captain's narration of the story about the prince, and the characters are transferred to this fantasy world by putting on their masks. However, Cougar sees the chance to seduce Foxtrot but only initiates this action after removing his and Foxtrot's masks: '**Cougar** *removes their masks and hats. He puts his hand on Foxtrot's knee.* [...] **Cougar** *is masturbating Foxtrot.*'²⁰³ That is to say, while Captain and Sherbet continue to enjoy the fictional world while wearing masks, Cougar and Foxtrot remain in the real world by removing theirs. While Sierz draws attention to the party mask's capacity to disguise, suggesting that they are 'a metaphor for Cougar's desire to change the laws of nature by concealing the truth about both his age and his desires,' they also reveal Cougar's seduction of a teenager, even in the presence of everyone in the room.²⁰⁴ The grotesque masks in this instance, function both to hide and reveal the truth simultaneously. Upon his realisation of the situation, Captain stops telling the story immediately. It is now Sherbet's turn to unmask her real self.

Sherbet is cognisant of Cougar's preliminary preparations for the night. She knows Cougar has made up a dying wife called Savannah Glass in order to get close to Foxtrot at the hospital where Foxtrot's terminally ill brother is being treated. In this invented reality, Cougar's wife and Foxtrot's brother died on the same day. In an unexpected twist, instead of challenging this fantasy, Sherbet opts for playing along with Cougar's pretended mourning:

Sherbet ... *Removes mask and hat.* I have a secret I want to tell. Something not even my Babe knows.

[...] And ... and this is my secret. *Pause.* I met Savannah Glass.

Captain *removes mask and hat.*

Captain What's going on here?²⁰⁵

²⁰² Ridley (2012), pp. 170-1.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 178, 179.

²⁰⁴ Sierz (2012), p. 102.

²⁰⁵ Ridley (2012), p. 184, 186.

By using Cougar's imaginary wife against him, Sherbet assumes control of the action. When Sherbet accepts the fictional wife as a real person, Captain gets confused and removes his mask. Since all the characters are unmasked, no more fictions or tales can be told, the truth must be faced by everyone. Sherbet reveals her intention to come to the party was: 'to unmask Cougar as a thirty-year-old man.'²⁰⁶ She achieves her aim by claiming Savannah told her Cougar's real age: 'Happy thirtieth birthday, Cougar.'²⁰⁷ This final reveal signals the end of her pregnancy — because Cougar attacks her — but the masks have performed their function, nevertheless. In a highly theatrical trope, the characters remove their masks only when they are forced to face the present reality. The characters reach their full grotesqueness first by being disguised behind masks, and then by manifesting without them.

These selected moments demonstrate that the face is an exigent feature of grotesque art. Ridley uses grotesque images to depict his characters on a fragile threshold between normal and abnormal, human and monster. He draws in particular on grotesque images of the face, and the grotesque potentials of the mask in both *The Pitchfork Disney* and *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*. In *The Pitchfork Disney*, Presley's story about a handsome serial killer named 'the Pitchfork Disney' combines Pitchfork's external deformation with Cosmo's internal bestial nature, but Presley's identity is also distorted by the grotesque face transplant after the fictional loss of his own face in an accident. The face transplant in this case definitely serves a grotesque function by blending his true identity with a considerably more malevolent one. On the other hand, the face of Pitchfork Cavalier, who makes a living by revealing his grotesque face to audiences during performances in pubs, is hidden behind an object, the mask. *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* offers more examples of Ridley's recurring implementation of the motif of the grotesque face. Most obviously, the play's title refers to a wizard's curse that transforms the hero's face into a vulture. Cougar's fixation with his own physical beauty, along with his intention to rape a schoolboy, produces tension and contradiction between his exterior appeal and interior deformity. The party masks Sherbet brings at Cougar's birthday party, in place of grotesque masks, function both to conceal and disclose the characters' true intentions. As a result, the boundary between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the real and the fantastic, the normal and the abnormal, especially as regards the human face is blurred in Ridley's plays.

In contrast to Ridley's extended comparison between the beauty of the flesh and the monstrosity of the soul, Sarah Kane provides different interpretations of the grotesque. In the

²⁰⁶ Urban (2007), p. 333.

²⁰⁷ Ridley (2012), p. 188.

next section I extend my analysis of grotesque bodies by focusing on the second feature identified above: bodily deformation.

2. Grotesque Deformations

In this chapter I analyse the representation of diverse bodies in the grotesque employing the terms ‘deformity’, ‘deformation’, and ‘deformed’ bodies. The connotations of physical impairment that these terms suggest, however, must be addressed first to clarify the use and understanding of ‘deformity’ in the thesis. Disability is a somewhat contested term used to describe individuals whose bodies do not conform to societal understanding and representations of what is seen to constitute a ‘normal body’, that is able-bodied. This has been critiqued by disability theorists who have highlighted that what society defines as normal varies greatly across history and cultures. According to David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (1997), ‘bodily differences classified as nonnormative, monstrous, or disabling also shift from one epoch to another.’²⁰⁸ For example, the medieval and early modern ideas of physical difference depend on reading the body as metaphor or trope for moral significance, such as the body of King Richard’s character in William Shakespeare’s play *Richard III* (c.1592–1594), or the monstrous character of Caliban in *The Tempest* (1611). Such an interpretive pattern establishes an understanding of body and physical difference that takes bodily anomalies as evidence of deeper moral truths. Since there is a long history of display of deformity and disability on stage as a metaphor or trope, the key point here is its endeavour to challenge the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about corporeal otherness, which contributes to the grotesque discussion. My intention is not to conflate physical difference with negative associations, or to challenge the understanding of a limited physical body; instead I focus on how the representation of corporeal diversity in the plays can be viewed through grotesque theories of the body. This chapter employs images of physical otherness induced by psychological trauma, disease, or dismemberment. In sum, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reminds us, ‘in a turbulent era of social and material change’, here the advent of neoliberalism, ‘the spectacle of the extraordinary body stimulated curiosity, ignited speculation, provoked titillation, furnished novelty, filled coffers, confirmed

²⁰⁸ Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder, ‘Introduction: Disability Studies and the Double Blind of Representation’, in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 3.

commonality, and certified national identity,' just as the grotesque body examples do in the sections that follow.²⁰⁹

The physical form of the body has been linked to the soul by Western philosophers since ancient times. Aristotle observes, for example, that 'soul and body react on each other; when the character of the soul changes, it changes also the form of the body, and conversely, when the form of the body changes, it changes the character of the soul.'²¹⁰ Aristotle's claim is affirmed and extended in later centuries. For instance, Neil Rhodes, in his discussion of Elizabethan grotesque, asserts that 'the prevalent idea at this time that physical and moral deformity are interdependent' paves the way to read the grotesque as 'an attempt to externalize the inner, moral deformity of man.'²¹¹ Philip Thomson notes that, 'the grotesque has a strong affinity with the physically abnormal.'²¹² The grotesque body comes into being when the bodily frame's normative harmony and unity are disrupted. Physical abnormalities involving genetic disorders, diseases and dismemberments are included in definitions of the grotesque and consequently can be analysed as part of the representational framing that foregrounds the relationship between violations of the body's physical integrity and the soul. Kayser sums up this link: 'the play of grotesque distortions does not exist merely for its own sake but serves as a perverted moral tract.'²¹³

In the contemporary context, as Dan Rebellato rightly points out, the grotesque is seen in 'plays and performances that draw attention to the body [...] through enacting grotesque acts of physical cruelty.'²¹⁴ The use of the grotesque in Sarah Kane's plays supports Rebellato's assertion. In the following section, I examine how Kane deploys this trope via a staging of deformed bodies in *Blasted* and *Cleansed*. I begin by introducing each of the plays and giving an overview of their original critical reception.

Blasted

Blasted is arguably the most famous and controversial British play of the 1990s and certainly among the most widely critiqued. It opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London, in

²⁰⁹ Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, 'Introduction: From Wonder to Error-A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity', in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (London: New York University Press, 1996), p. 4.

²¹⁰ Aristotle, 'Physiognomics', in *Aristotle, Minor Works*, trans by W. S. Hett (London: W. Heinemann, Ltd.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 105.

²¹¹ Rhodes, Neil, *Elizabethan Grotesque* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 14.

²¹² Thomson, p. 9.

²¹³ Kayser, pp. 132-3.

²¹⁴ Rebellato (2007), p. 193.

January 1995. It is a one-act play of five scenes set in ‘*a very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world.*’²¹⁵ It has three characters. A forty-five-year-old tabloid journalist Ian and naïve twenty-one-year-old Cate, who are ex-lovers, and an unnamed soldier. Costumes are not specified, but only implied by the social status or occupation. For example, Cate is described as ‘*a lower-middle-class Southerner*’ and the soldier carries ‘*a sniper’s rifle.*’²¹⁶ The opening scenes of *Blasted* explore the verbal and sexual abuse of Cate by Ian, and finally his raping her after she has persisted in rejecting his sexual advances. The sudden arrival of a soldier at the end of Scene Two is foreshadowed by Cate’s observation from the window: ‘*Looks like there’s a war on.*’²¹⁷ The soldier appears unannounced at the door and invades the room whilst Cate escapes through the bathroom window. The power dynamics in the room are completely altered as Ian loses his dominant status. ‘*Our town now*’, the soldier remarks, as ‘*he stands on the bed and urinates over the pillows.*’²¹⁸ The second scene ends with ‘*a blinding light, then a huge explosion*’ which transforms the hotel room into a war zone.²¹⁹

Scene Three opens with this abrupt shift in atmosphere: ‘*The hotel has been blasted by a mortar bomb. There is a large hole in one of the walls, and everything is covered in dust which is still falling.*’²²⁰ Ian and Soldier, who are lying in the ruins, smoke cigarettes and talk about the atrocities Soldier has witnessed and perpetrated. The Soldier then rapes Ian, sucks out his eyes and eats them. At the beginning of Scene Four Ian is lying blinded next to the dead body of the soldier who has taken his own life. Cate returns with a baby she has found. The baby later dies. The final scene opens with Cate burying the baby under the floor. Cate then leaves in search of food. Ian, left alone in the ruins, is pictured in a series of grotesque tableau interspersed with blackouts: ‘*masturbating*’, ‘*strangling himself*’, ‘*shitting*’, ‘*laughing hysterically*’, ‘*having a nightmare*’, ‘*crying*’, ‘*hugging the **Soldier**’s body for comfort*’, ‘*lying very still, weak with hunger.*’²²¹ Eventually ‘*he eats the baby*’ and ‘*dies.*’²²² *Blasted* ends as Cate, having returned with food, feeds the now helpless Ian.

As is well documented, the sudden change in form and tone in the middle of the play is partly Sarah Kane’s response to the real events happening in the Balkans in the early 1990s.

²¹⁵ Kane, p. 3.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3, 36.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

²²² *Ibid.*

Kane stated that the play was ‘about two people in a hotel room’ originally, but during the writing process she was deeply moved by tragic images in the ruins of Srebrenica shown on the television news. She desperately wanted to make ‘the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what’s happening in Bosnia’ and sought to connect the two: ‘One is the seed and the other is the tree.’²²³ Graham Saunders gives more detail about the political situation in the Balkans during that time:

In 1991, the Russian Soviet Union (USSR) also dissolved. [...] Civil war broke out after Serbia fought neighbouring Croatia and Slovenia both to prevent their independence and also as a reaction to perceived threats to Serbian strongholds in the Krajina region of Croatia. [...] A new phase in the conflict took place in April 1992 [...] a renewed war broke out between Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia. [...] Despite troops being deployed by the United Nations and its official designation as a safe area, Serbian forces carried out what was euphemistically called ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Bosnian Muslims in enclaves such as Srebrenica, with the mass killing of an estimated seven thousand Muslim men.²²⁴

Blasted is a reaction to the Serbian war, then, but not necessarily about a particular event in that conflict. In the early drafts of the play, the soldier is named Vladek and the reference to the Bosnian conflict made clear with his line, ‘This is a Serbian town now.’²²⁵ The later removal of these details aims to eschew the notion that the play is about a particular conflict. James MacDonald, who directed the original production, notes that Kane directs her anger about the violence in Yugoslavia to her experiments with form and her knowledge of sexual violence in the UK in the 1990s. For him, this makes Kane ‘the first younger writer’ who approaches ‘the political entirely through the personal.’²²⁶ Kane’s formal innovation is to insert a bomb in the middle of the play and blast the established dramaturgy into pieces, creating a shift, in the words of her agent, Mel Kenyon, ‘from socio-realism to surrealism, to expressionism.’²²⁷ Kane explains further:

²²³ Cited in Sierz (2001), pp. 100-1.

²²⁴ Saunders (2009), pp. 12-3.

²²⁵ Cited in Graham Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 53.

²²⁶ Cited in Ruth Little and Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre: Inside Out* (London: Oberon Books, 2007), p. 304.

²²⁷ Cited in Saunders (2002), p. 40.

The form is a direct parallel to the truth of the war it portrays – a traditional form is suddenly and violently disrupted by the entrance of an unexpected element that drags the characters and the play into a chaotic pit without logical explanation. [...] The unity of place suggests a paper-thin wall between the safety and civilisation of peacetime Britain and the chaotic violence of civil war. A wall that can be torn down at any time, without warning.²²⁸

Blasted addresses, to borrow MacDonald's phrase, the 'needs to debate the central issues of our time' which include 'an increased fascination with and glamorisation of violence.'²²⁹ The boundaries of the ordinary hotel room are destroyed in order to show how violence can and does erupt abruptly. There is no explanation for the soldier's existence or his bringing wartime atrocities to the hotel room. The bomb blast following the soldier's arrival also transforms a familiar hotel room, which is considered as a private place to spend the night, into an abominable chamber, or as Wolfgang Kayser characterises the grotesque an 'estranged world.'²³⁰ *Blasted* also evokes Harpham's notion that the 'grotesque forms place an enormous strain on the marriage of form and content by foregrounding them both, so that they appear not as a partnership, but as a warfare, a struggle.'²³¹ This struggle is created by 'the clash between the "the virtuous" limitations of form and a rebellious content that refuses to be constrained'.²³² Cate and Ian are forced to confront the destructiveness of war in this alienated site which '*could be anywhere in the world.*'²³³ Kane's extension of the cruelty of an individual case of rape, a crime against the person, to the chaotic violence of war has drawn a considerable amount of critical attention.

Aleks Sierz and Graham Saunders are the first critics to thoroughly examine Kane's work. Sierz's book *In Yer Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001) explores her plays in relation to the excessive use of violence and sex on stage and dedicates a chapter to her. Saunders' book *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (2002) extends the focus on Kane to an entire book, with close readings of the plays augmented by exclusive interviews with actors and directors with whom Kane worked. Saunders also includes an afterword by Edward Bond, who was a vocal supporter of Kane and her work.

²²⁸ Stephenson, Heidi and Natasha Langridge (eds), *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), pp. 130-1.

²²⁹ MacDonald, James, 'Blasting Back at the Critics', *Observer*, 22 January 1995.

²³⁰ Kayser, p. 184.

²³¹ Harpham (1982), pp. 7-8.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²³³ Kane, p. 3.

Sierz calls *Blasted* ‘the most notorious play of the decade’ by way of evidence for this assertion referencing the negative, even hysterical, criticism of the original production in newspaper reviews and the media.²³⁴ As is by now well known, the press failed to consider the play’s formal innovations and political purpose in context. The use of onstage violence was revised by *What’s On* by Roger Foss as a list of horrors: ‘graphic simulations of child sex abuse, oral sex, defecation, urination, buggery, self-strangulation, eyes being sucked out of their sockets and then swallowed, and, to cap it all, the eating of a baby’s corpse.’²³⁵ The *Daily Mail*’s Jack Tinker furnished the famous headline ‘this disgusting feast of filth’ in his review and confessed to being ‘utterly and entirely disgusted’ by the play.²³⁶ These two examples can stand for many, and the negative force of the initial response to *Blasted* has attracted critical attention in its own right. Elaine Aston interprets the uproar as ‘an acute anxiety on the part of critics to deal with a play that was breaking new ground.’²³⁷ Kane’s images, for Aston, are bold and combative ‘purposefully to show a violent world.’²³⁸ She ‘outmonsters the monstrous to make it “real”’ and in so doing ‘fights fire with fire.’²³⁹ Elsewhere, Ken Urban recognizes *Blasted* as ‘a wake-up call’ for the critics to see ‘changes occurring in British playwriting.’²⁴⁰ He claims that Kane offers ‘a world of catastrophe’ and crucially the possibility that ‘an ethics can exist between wounded bodies [and] that after devastation, good becomes possible.’²⁴¹ Similarly, Saunders links Kane to Western classical traditions which aim ‘to shock us into regaining our humanness.’²⁴² Kane evokes, in his argument, ‘Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists [...] whose protagonists likewise often encounter and embrace violent catastrophe.’²⁴³ Edward Bond also locates the classical in Kane’s depiction of ‘the confrontation with the implacable’ as a gateway to ‘seek to understand what humans are and how they create humanity.’²⁴⁴

²³⁴ Sierz (2001), p. 93

²³⁵ Foss, *Ibid.*

²³⁶ Tinker, Jack, ‘This Disgusting Feast of Filth’, *Daily Mail*, 19 January 1995.

²³⁷ Aston, Elaine, ‘Reviewing the Fabric of *Blasted*’, in *Sarah Kane in Context*, ed. by Laurens De Vos and Graham Saunders (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 20.

²³⁸ Aston, Elaine, *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights, 1990–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 82.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ Urban, Ken, ‘An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane’, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, PAJ 69, 23:3 (September 2001), p. 37.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² Saunders, Graham, ‘Out Vile Jelly: Sarah Kane’s ‘*Blasted*’ and Shakespeare’s ‘*King Lear*’’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 20:1 (February 2004), p. 76.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ Bond, Edward, ‘Afterword: Sarah Kane and Theatre’, in *‘Love Me or Kill Me’: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, Graham Saunders (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 191, 190.

Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier, with her chapter in *Sarah Kane in Context* (2010), is the first person to draw an explicit connection between Kane and the grotesque. While analyzing the role of rituals in Kane's play, she describes the figuring of the grotesque thusly:

In *Blasted*, the soldier's threat to shoot Ian in the anus, the raping of Cate and her aggressive fellatio can be interpreted as extreme versions of grotesque bodies swallowing the world and being swallowed by the world themselves. The relation between eating and sexuality is naturally a close one as the mother breastfeeds her baby. In *Blasted*, Kane heightens this into a grotesque excess by Ian eating the baby that Cate has found. This can be seen as an extreme attempt to hold on to life, as a grotesque body swallowing the product of the womb. Kane seems to argue that the process of renewal might never end in spite of death, since Ian joins it before he dies when he eats the baby and again after he has died, when he is fed by Cate and ends the play with his words "Thank you" (61).²⁴⁵

It is perhaps not surprising that Brusberg-Kiermeier finds a link between *Blasted*'s imagery and the generative quality of the grotesque body in a Bakhtinian world where 'death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole.'²⁴⁶ In fact, she makes a strong point by discussing the infamous baby eating scene through the lens of the grotesque body's renewal processes. The baby's corpse feeds Ian's dying body which symbolizes the death-life cycle, in grotesque terms. Moreover, the grotesque is probably the only viable explanation for the closing scene in which Ian appears to be resurrected. David Ian Rabey offers a clue to the meaning of this final moment in his observation that 'Ian's continued existence, with its mockery of desecrated absolutes, is a *tour de force* example of the tragedy of the grotesque.'²⁴⁷ Thus, the ending could be better understood in Bakhtin's phrase: 'Even the struggle of life and death in the individual body is conceived by grotesque imagery as the struggle of the old life stubbornly resisting the new life about to be born, as the crisis of change.'²⁴⁸ In its uses of the grotesque, *Blasted* offers routes for further interpretation.

For example, in the play the theme of disease is explored through the character of Ian in relation to grotesque bodily deformations. Ian drinks and smokes heavily in spite of a

²⁴⁵ Brusberg-Kiermeier, Stefani, 'Cruelty, Violence and Rituals in Sarah Kane's Plays', in *Sarah Kane in Context*, ed. by Laurens De Vos and Graham Saunders (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 83.

²⁴⁶ Bakhtin, p. 50.

²⁴⁷ Rabey, p. 205.

²⁴⁸ Bakhtin, *Ibid.*

severely damaged lung. The corruption of his body is introduced in his very first line in the play, 'I've shat in better places than this. (*He gulps down the gin.*) I stink.'²⁴⁹ His bodily deformation is depicted in more detail later:

Cate Whenever I think of you it's with a cigarette and a gin.

Ian Good.

Cate They make your clothes smell.

Ian Don't forget my breath.

Cate Imagine what your lungs must look like.

Ian Don't need to imagine. I've seen.

Cate When?

Ian Last year. When I came round, surgeon brought in this lump of rotting pork, stank. My lung.

Cate He took it out?

Ian Other one's the same now.

Cate But you'll die.

Ian Aye.

[...] I'm fucked.²⁵⁰

In the earlier draft version of the play, a more detailed account of Ian's diagnosis is given: 'When the surgeon opened me up he was sick. The smell. Afterwards he showed it to me. It was white with cancer.'²⁵¹ Ian's bodily deformation is, as Saunders noted, 'a deliberate metaphor' which 'function[s] as manifestations for the moral corruption' he represents.²⁵² Certainly, his terminal lung cancer matches his grotesque moral corruption. For Ian, the city 'stinks' because of 'Wogs and Pakis' or in his other expressions 'coloured brethren', 'coons', 'conkers' and 'Sooty.'²⁵³ He calls Cate's learning disabled brother 'retard', 'spaz', and 'Joey.'²⁵⁴ He insults Cate on many levels, calling her 'stupid' and 'lesbos,' and claiming that he owns her because she has 'slept with [him] before.'²⁵⁵ There is even implied paedophilia in this brief moment: '**Cate** We always used to go to yours. / **Ian** That was years ago. You've

²⁴⁹ Kane, p. 3.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁵¹ Cited in Saunders (2002), p. 43.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ Kane, p. 4, 5, 12, 16.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8, 7, 16.

grown up.²⁵⁶ Finally, after several attempts to seduce her, he sexually assaults Cate over the night that separates Scenes One and Two.

Ian's physical deterioration parallels his moral corruption and is described in the second scene:

He takes the first sip and is overcome with pain.

He waits for it to pass, but it doesn't. It gets worse.

Ian *clutches his side – it becomes extreme.*

He begins to cough and experiences intense pain in his chest, each cough tearing at his lung.

[...] **Ian** *drops to his knees, puts the glass down carefully, and gives in to the pain.*

It looks very much as if he is dying.

*His heart, lung, liver and kidneys are all under attack and he is making involuntary crying sounds.*²⁵⁷

This is a relatively straightforward externalization of Ian's inner monstrosity on his body, and it is no accident that the deformation of his soul manifests on his body the morning after he has raped Cate. 'Don't worry' he reassures her, 'I'll be dead soon.'²⁵⁸ In fact, Ian has been attempting to conceal the evidence of his internal corruption since the beginning of the play, but, in as Rabey observes, 'his repeated showering does little to suppress his tendency to "stink".'²⁵⁹

Another example of Ian's grotesque physical deformation is his blinding. Scene Three closes with this brutal image: '*The Soldier grips Ian's head in his hands. He puts his mouth over one of Ian's eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. He does the same to the other eye.*'²⁶⁰ The specific act of violence in this sequence is taken directly from an incident of football hooliganism which Kane read about in 'Bill Buford's *Among the Thugs*.'²⁶¹ While this act of cannibalism is direct attack on Ian, it is also arguably, as Sierz suggests, 'a symbol of the media's moral blindness' towards horrific real events.²⁶² This link is made explicit in

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁵⁹ Rabey, p. 205.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁶¹ Cited in Sierz (2001), p. 102.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Scene One when Ian dictates a story to his newspaper over the phone. His account of the horrific murder of a teenage girl in New Zealand is delivered without sympathy:

A serial killer slaughtered British tourist Samantha Scrace in a sick murder ritual comma, police revealed yesterday point new par. The bubbly nineteen-year-old from Leeds was among seven victims found buried in identical triangular tombs in an isolated New Zealand forest point new par. Each had been stabbed more than twenty times and placed face down comma, hands bound behind their backs point new par. Caps up, ashes at the site showed the maniac had stayed to cook a meal, caps down point new par.²⁶³

Ian's emotional detachment from the awful story is made conspicuous through his meticulous attention to punctuation. Mark Taylor-Batty correctly observes that Ian's 'necessary utterance of the punctuation and paragraph sections' creates 'an estrangement of the text as heard, emphasizing its content and foregrounding its intended status as a textual item divorced from the actuality it represents.'²⁶⁴ Ian's callous indifference to the suffering of others is highlighted to enhance the significance of the blinding as 'a kind of castration' because a reporter's main tool is the eyes.²⁶⁵ In this way, Ian's narration of news stories is linked to the grotesque loss of his sight. Overall, his various grotesque bodily deformations match his corrupted soul. As Saunders observes, Ian is 'literally representative of a diseased male identity – a crude racist, misogynist and homophobe' who, suffers from terminal lung cancer, sexual assault and gouged eyes.²⁶⁶ He is not the only character who presents abnormal physical symptoms.

Cate suffers from a stress-related stutter, thumb sucking and seizures which can also be read as grotesque bodily deformations. The early example of Cate's stutter occurs when Ian insults her brother:

Ian Glad my son's not a Joey.

Cate Don't c- call him that.

²⁶³ Kane, p. 12.

²⁶⁴ Taylor-Batty, Mark, 'How to Mourn: Kane, Pinter and Theatre as Monument to Loss in the 1990s', in *Ethical Speculations in Contemporary British Theatre*, ed. by Mireia Aragay and Enric Monforte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 65.

²⁶⁵ Kane Cited in Sierz (2001), p. 103.

²⁶⁶ Saunders (2009), p. 18.

Ian Your mother I feel sorry for. Two of you like it.

Cate Like wh- what?

Ian (*Looks at her, deciding whether or not to continue. He decides against it.*)²⁶⁷

Later, Ian decides to persist in insulting her, which causes her first seizure:

Ian (*stops laughing and looks at her*)

Cate. You're stupid. You're never going to get a job.

Cate I am. I am not.

Ian See.

Cate St- stop it. You're doing it d- deliberately.

Ian Doing what?

Cate C- confusing me.

Ian No, I'm talking, you're just too thick to understand.

Cate I am not, I am not.

Cate *begins to tremble. Ian is laughing.*

Cate *faints.*

[...] (*Sits bolt upright, eyes open but still unconscious.*)

[...] (*Bursts out laughing, unnaturally, hysterically, uncontrollably.*)

[...] (*Collapses again and lies still.*)²⁶⁸

As the psychological stress intensifies, Cate's ability to control herself becomes compromised. She notes by way of explanation that the fainting '[h]appens all the time. / Since dad came back.'²⁶⁹ It is not clear that, therefore, genetic abnormalities contribute to her physical deformation but clearly trauma does. In response to Ian's systematic pressure, and in other contexts, she escapes unwanted humiliation by fitting. She removes herself because, as she confesses, during seizures the 'world don't exist. Not like this. Looks the same but -/ Time slows down. / A dream I get stuck in.'²⁷⁰ She attempts to protect herself by losing consciousness for a few seconds rather than by confronting the real threat. Even when she is brave enough to stand up to Ian after being raped by him, and points his gun at him, she cannot handle the stress:

²⁶⁷ Kane, p. 5.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Ian Easy, easy, that's a loaded gun.

Cate I d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d-

Ian Catie, come on.

Cate d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d-

Ian You don't want an accident. Think about your mum.
And your brother. What would they think?

Cate I d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d-

Cate *trembles and starts gasping for air. She faints.*²⁷¹

Peter Buse reads Cate's fainting fits as 'a mechanism for immediately repressing or disavowing a thought or memory that is too distressing to contemplate.'²⁷² For Cate fainting functions as a survival skill, then. This bodily deformation allows her to enter an estranged world, that in Kayser's formation 'appears in the vision of the dreamer or daydreamer or in the twilight of the transitional moments.'²⁷³ This is a good example of how *Blasted* mobilises the association of physical deformations with a dystopian version of Bakhtinian grotesque bodies.

In sum, Kane illustrates bodily deformations in *Blasted* by establishing a relationship between violations of the body's physical integrity and the soul. In the section that follows I show how she continues to explore grotesque deformations in *Cleansed* (1998) particularly through images of dismemberment.

Cleansed

First performed at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in April 1998 — at the Duke of York's on St Martin's Lane because the Sloane Square theatre was in the process of being refurbished — Sarah Kane's third play *Cleansed* entwines multiple parallel stories in twenty compact scenes. The action is located in several rooms of a former university, which has been turned into some kind of residential institution. Each room is clearly assigned to a specific relationship or function in the play. Four love stories are depicted. An incestuous one between twins Grace and Graham takes place in 'the White room – the university sanatorium' and a

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁷² Buse, Peter, *Drama + Theory: Critical Approaches to Modern British Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 181.

²⁷³ Kayser, p. 186.

love affair between a gay couple Rod and Carl in *'the patch of mud by the perimeter fence.'*²⁷⁴ A platonic love story between Robin, who is illiterate, and Grace plays out in *'the Round Room - the university library,'* and another between Tinker and a dancing woman in a booth in *'the Black Room – the showers in the university sports hall converted into peep-show booths.'*²⁷⁵ There is no specified costume or age, with the exception of Robin, who we learn is nineteen and Rod who is thirty-nine.

The play opens with the death by overdose of Graham, an addict, immediately after Tinker injects heroin *'into the corner of Graham's eye.'*²⁷⁶ His twin sister Grace arrives at the university to collect her brother's clothes six months after his death. Grace puts on her brother's clothes and wants to stay at the university asking Tinker to treat her as a patient which he accepts. After her admission to the institution, Grace is able to see Graham's spirit. They talk, dance, then make love after which, according to the stage directions *'a sunflower bursts through the floor and grows above their heads.'*²⁷⁷ Subsequently, Grace is beaten by *'an unseen group of men'* and raped by one of them, at which point daffodils grow out of the ground bursting *'upwards, their yellow covering the entire stage.'*²⁷⁸ The interaction between Robin and Grace take place in the library where Grace teaches him how to read and write. When Robin learns to count, he discovers it will be thirty years, before he can leave the institution and hangs himself. The story of Rod and Carl begins with a discussion, which is secretly watched by Tinker, about the meaning of their three-month-old relationship. Thereafter, the commitments and promises of love between Carl and Rod are tested by Tinker. First, Carl is beaten by the same unseen group of men who assault Grace in *'the Red Room – the university sports hall.'*²⁷⁹ Then, a number of brutal tortures involving pushing a pole up Carl's anus, cutting off Carl's tongue, making Carl swallow Rod's ring, cutting off Carl's hands and feet and cutting Rod's throat, are performed by Tinker. In the Black Room, Tinker puts tokens into the mechanism to watch a woman dancing while he masturbates. He calls her Grace and eventually they make love and confess love for each other. The final scene, located in the patch of mud, shows Grace, on whom Tinker has performed a sex-change, and Carl. Grace is transformed into *'Grace / Graham'* which means that she *'now looks and sounds exactly like Graham'*, while Carl is wearing Grace's old clothes.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁴ Kane, p. 112, 129.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123, 121.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

As in *Blasted*, the characters in *Cleansed* are confined in enclosed spaces. Only Tinker can access every room and is able to control what happens there by observing and/or interfering. Tinker's role or title in the institution is unclear. In the opening scene he tells Graham, 'I'm a dealer not a doctor', but the other characters consistently refer to him as doctor.²⁸¹ He definitely has authority over people at the university. He 'consult[s] a file' when Grace has asked about Graham's personal belongings, for instance, and more strikingly decides the fate of characters by punishing, mutilating, killing and transforming them from one sex to another.²⁸² The ambiguity of the surveillance and disciplinary role assigned to Tinker is consistent with the ambivalence of the play's setting. The university functions as a hospital or prison where the residents are 'treated' and crucially not allowed to leave. Their entrapment in this prison-like institution evokes the idea of Tinker as jailer, or prison guard. The setting connects to the play's theme. According to Sierz, one of Kane's 'starting points was Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*' in which at one point Barthes 'compares the situation of a rejected lover with that of a prisoner in Dachau.'²⁸³ Each of Kane's characters is in search of love but gets torture and pain in reward.

Cleansed is mostly structured around images rather than dialogue. Its director James Macdonald notes that words 'are literally only a third of the play' and 'the bulk of the meaning is carried through the imagery.'²⁸⁴ The text, as Kane acknowledges, is open to more than one interpretation.²⁸⁵ It is more or less episodic in structure, and Ken Urban even suggests that it might be played 'in a variety of orders' since the scenes 'could exist almost independently', without recourse to cause and effect, or any over-arching narrative structure.²⁸⁶ Saunders reads *Cleansed* as 'a further retreat from realism.'²⁸⁷ Its challenging, and essentially unstageable, theatrical images include the rape of Grace 'by one of the voices'; the sunflower blooming right after Graham and Grace make love, and the rats running around after Carl's dismembered body parts, 'eat[ing] **Carl's right hand**' and 'carry[ing] **Carl's feet away**.'²⁸⁸ By her own account Kane created these images in reaction against a perceived

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁸³ Sierz (2001), p. 116.

²⁸⁴ Cited in Saunders (2002), p. 88.

²⁸⁵ Cited in Sierz (2001), p. 114.

²⁸⁶ Urban (2001), p. 42.

²⁸⁷ Saunders (2002), p. 87.

²⁸⁸ Kane, p. 132, 130, 136.

preponderance of ‘naturalistic rubbish’ and in order to make a play ‘that could never ever be turned into a film’ or ‘a novel.’²⁸⁹

In contrast to *Blasted*, *Cleansed* suggests purification in its title and has been read as a metaphor for love’s survival even in the most grotesque circumstances. ‘If people can still love after that’ Kane explains, ‘then love is the most powerful thing.’²⁹⁰ She points to a clash of the opposites in her personal life during the writing process as impetus:

When I was working on *Cleansed* I was in a very extreme state. I was going through the most appalling depression, but on the other hand I was so completely and utterly and madly in love.²⁹¹

In *Cleansed*, violence is a metaphor for a kind of ritual cleansing in the context of love, then. For Kane, the play is ‘never about the violence,’ but ‘about how much these people love.’²⁹² Amelia Howe Kritzer rightly observes that *Cleansed* is mostly focused on ‘oppositions such as love and hatred, or pleasure and torture, but torn by the continual and confusing mixing and melding of these oppositions’ and Kane is certainly earnest in her search for the ‘truth in the portrayal of pain.’²⁹³ The unusual coupling of love and violence that characterises the play, makes space for the grotesque.

The prolonged and systematic torture enacted on Carl is itself grotesque because of its over-emphasis on the violation of the body. Since each violent act is figured as a test of love, it is worth considering the relationship between Rod and Carl in more detail. In this romantic relationship Carl offers his everlasting love to Rod: ‘I’ll always love you. [...] I’ll never betray you. [...] I’ll never lie to you.’²⁹⁴ Rod on the other hand approaches the relationship much more pragmatically: ‘I love you *now*. I’m with you *now*. I’ll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you. Now. That’s it. No more. Don’t make me lie to you.’²⁹⁵ Tinker who has been watching this interaction initially has Carl tortured by heavy beating. Then a pole is pushed up Carl’s anus, after which he breaks his earlier vow about giving up his own life for Rod. Carl begs Tinker not to kill him but to kill Rod instead. In response to this

²⁸⁹ Cited in Saunders (2002), p. 87.

²⁹⁰ Cited in Saunders (2009), p. 74.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-2.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ Kritzer, p. 37.

²⁹⁴ Kane, p. 110.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

betrayal Tinker ‘*produces a large pair of scissors and cuts off Carl’s tongue.*’²⁹⁶ This is an act of literal removal of Carl’s ability to make vows to Rod, because he now seems incapable of honouring them. Moreover, after being silenced, Carl is no longer able to lie or apologise to Rod for his betrayal. Nonetheless, Carl makes every effort to apologise to Rod, but after each attempt, Tinker dismembers Carl further:

*A single rat scuttles around between **Rod** and **Carl**.*

Rod Baby.

Carl (*Looks at **Rod**. He opens his mouth. No sound comes out.*)

[...] **Carl** (*Tries to speak. Nothing. He beats the ground in frustration.*)

Carl *scrabbles around in the mud and begins to write while **Rod** talks.*)

[...] **Tinker** *is watching.*

*He lets **Carl** finish what he is writing, then goes to him and reads it. He takes **Carl** by the arms and cuts off his hands.*

Tinker *leaves.*

Carl *tries to pick up his hands - he can't, he has no hands.*

[...] **Rod** ... *He reads the message written in the mud.*

Rod Say you forgive me.²⁹⁷

After the loss of his voice, then, Carl loses his ability to write, hold, touch and feel. He can no longer touch or feel Rod nor ask for his forgiveness.

Eventually, Carl’s determined search for a way to prove his love for Rod leads to a dance of love:

On the other side of the fence a child sings – Lennon and McCartney’s ‘Things We Said Today.’

Carl and **Rod** *listen, rapt.*

The child stops singing. Then begins again.

Carl *stands, wobbly. He begins to dance – a dance of love for **Rod**. The dance becomes frenzied, frantic, and **Carl** makes grunting noises, mingling with the child’s singing.*

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

The dance loses rhythm – Carl jerks and lurches out of time, his feet sticking in the mud, a spasmodic dance of desperate regret.

Tinker is watching. He forces **Carl** to the ground and cuts off his feet. He is gone.

Rod laughs.

The rats carry Carl's feet away.

*The child sings.*²⁹⁸

The combining of extreme violence with a child's innocence, a romantic song and the presence of the rats exemplifies Kane's deployment of the grotesque in *Cleansed*. In addition, the specific dismemberments — tongue, hands and feet respectively — direct focus to love's adaptability and its (in)ability to survive the destruction of its expressive language. Deprived of the ability to speak, touch and take steps, Carl is reduced to a grotesque distillation of his former self. Nonetheless, after witnessing the violation of Carl's body, Rod affirms his everlasting love and makes love to the mutilated Carl. When Tinker separates them and asks, 'You or him, Rod, what's it to be?', Rod replies 'Me. Not Carl. Me,' at which Tinker cuts his throat.²⁹⁹ Rod's sacrifice in this context can be read as evidence of his love for Carl, but he is also aware that Tinker 'can take away your life but not give you death instead.'³⁰⁰ For Rod, after all, death 'isn't the worst thing they can do to you.'³⁰¹ This plot strand of *Cleansed* is a love story that is depicted substantially via grotesque body dismemberments. Tinker's brutal acts on the body evoke a realm of experience wherein, as Sierz suggests, 'love is the one basis of hope in an evil world' just as the lyrics of 'Things We Said Today' stress that 'though we may be blind, love is here to stay and that's enough.'³⁰² The play's title can be interpreted as gesturing towards 'a purification of love, a reduction of life to its essentials, and a triumph of mind and soul over the body,' according to Brusberg-Kiermeier.³⁰³

To conclude this section, the physical abnormalities, diseases and dismemberments of the characters in *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, are expressions of interior distortions on the body. Ian's encounters with grotesque physical deformations in *Blasted* – fatal lung cancer and blindness – validate the notion of the grotesque as 'an attempt to externalize the inner, moral

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² Sierz (2001), p. 114.

³⁰³ Brusberg-Kiermeier, p. 87.

deformity of man.’³⁰⁴ Cate, on the other hand, is unable to cure her traumatic past and its reflection on her body, but she manages to exploit the deformations as a survival technique by withdrawing herself in grotesque transitional moments through fainting episodes. In *Cleansed*, grotesque dismemberments, are used to put the human capacity to express love under extreme pressure, with a particular focus on the relationship between Carl and Rod. Kane’s experiments in form and content revolve around dystopian versions of Bakhtin’s grotesque bodies. In the following section I explore my third category of the grotesque in relation to the body — sexuality — in the works of Anthony Neilson.

3. Grotesque Sexuality

In his book *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (1989), Robert Stam reinterprets Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque body for the modern world. The main focus of his study is sexuality which is not discussed at any length in Bakhtin’s reading of the body. Bakhtin does identify ‘the three main acts in the life of the grotesque body’ as ‘sexual intercourse, death throes [...] and the act of birth’ and Stam correctly observes that ‘Bakhtin’s attitude toward sexuality is inseparable from his attitude toward the body in general.’³⁰⁵ However, Bakhtin mentions the sexual body only with emphasis on ‘the apertures or the convexities,’ or in other words ‘the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus.’³⁰⁶ Bakhtin deliberately resists the urge ‘to speak of sex per se’ which is interpreted by Stam as ‘significant and productive’ in that it leaves space for further discussion and analysis.³⁰⁷

Focus on ‘the bodily lower stratum’ in plays of the period under discussion, is often related to grotesque sexual behaviours. Presley’s gruesome fascination with snakes considered in relation to his lack of sexual development, is one example of distorted attitudes to and perceptions of sexual identity in *The Pitchfork Disney*, for instance. As well as symbolising the grotesque body’s focus on renewal by shedding its skin, the snake is also used typically as a metaphor for sexual desire. In Ridley’s play, Presley’s yearning for sexual experience is implied in his experiment with a snake:

³⁰⁴ Rhodes, p. 14.

³⁰⁵ Bakhtin, p. 353. Stam, Robert, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 161.

³⁰⁶ Bakhtin, p. 26.

³⁰⁷ Stam, *Ibid.*

Presley [...] I saved my pocket money for three weeks. [...] I went to a pet shop and bought this tiny green snake instead. A grass snake they called it. [...] So I got a frying pan and I put it on the gas stove. I put a bit of butter in the pan and turned the gas up full. The fat started to crackle and smoke. I dropped the snake into the frying pan. It span round and round. Its skin burst open like the skin of a sausage. It took ages to die. Its tiny mouth opened and closed and its black eyes exploded but ... oh, it was wonderful to watch. [...] When the snake was dead I put it on a plate. I cut the snake into bite-size pieces. I tasted it. Like greasy chicken. I ate it all and licked the plate afterwards.³⁰⁸

The snake has long been considered to be the most significant symbol of the male reproductive organ, and Presley's story indicates an unhealthy, warped even, relationship with his own. The snake draws on the lexicon of the grotesque body by rejecting dead skin and reborn in new skin. Presley's sexuality is figured in snake motifs on several occasions. The story of a visit to the zoo's reptile house and a television broadcast on a snake worship cult, are just two examples. Presley's sexual repression is relatively innocuous, however, especially in comparison with that of Anthony Neilson's characters. The latter tend act on their grotesque sexual impulses, without the help of snake imagery. Neilson's early plays explore sexuality at its most extreme: from uninhibited sadism to complete sexual inhibition. In the following section I will examine how Neilson deploys grotesque sexual imagery in *Normal* (1991) and *The Censor* (1997). As usual, I will begin by offering a precis of each play and an overview of its original critical reception.

Normal

First performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, at the Pleasance in August 1991, and later transferring to the Finborough Theatre, London, in October of the same year, Neilson's *Normal* is a thirty-one scene play set in Germany in the late 1920 and early 30s. The play is partly based on historical fact and features three characters: Peter Kurten, a real-life German serial killer — known as The Vampire of Dusseldorf or the Dusseldorf Monster who was convicted of nine counts of murder and executed in 1931 — Frau Kurten his wife and Justus Wehner, his defence lawyer. The plot, which focuses on Kurten's trial and conviction, is structured around a series of interviews between the lawyer and the criminal, but shifts from

³⁰⁸ Ridley (2012), pp. 23-4.

realistic exchanges between them, to an expressionistic mode where the murders are depicted using mannequins and dummies. Wehner's inner journey is also shown through a series of letters home to his parents. Initially, the young lawyer is established as naïve, as knowing 'everything of the law, little of life and less of love.'³⁰⁹ Kurten, who spent his childhood in a one-bedroom apartment with abusive parents twelve siblings, is described in Neilson's text as an 'immaculately dressed [...] handsome man, in his late forties.'³¹⁰

Normal opens with Wehner in an unspecified future-time. Addressing the audience, he recollects 'the memory of a memory' provoked by the sight of a coin-operated version of Peter Kurten holding 'a pair of ludicrously-oversized scissors' in an amusement arcade where he has taken his children.³¹¹ The third scene titled 'a waltz back through time' transports the story to the year 1931, when Wehner meets the Dusseldorf Monster and his wife. Wehner then begins to relate his conversations with them and his conviction that the case 'might easily' have been 'won ... in those still liberal times.'³¹² Wehner's case for the defence relies on establishing Kurten's insanity, which he argues is a direct result of the latter's experiences of abuse in childhood. However, the court finds Kurten fully in control of his actions and consequently legally sane. This means he is competent to stand trial. He is convicted, receives nine death sentences, and is executed.

Unlike Sarah Kane's ambiguous war references in *Blasted*, Neilson takes the real-life Kurten story and keeps many of its original details. The Wehner character is his invention, however. The horrific details of the murders are drawn directly from Kurten's testimony at his trial in 1931. As suggested in the play's title, Neilson explores the hegemonic concept of the 'normal' via a study of Kurten, his sadistic acts, and his treatment by the authorities. The ideologically driven Wehner acts as a foil to Kurten but also as a societal voice, asking 'do we bear monsters? Or do we create them?'³¹³ *Normal* seeks to find an answer to this question, or at least to encourage its audience to reflect on it. In the course of the play Wehner gets dangerously close to the mindset of Kurten in order to gain a better understanding of the serial killer. Signalled by changes in lighting, scenes move between Wehner's exploration of the motivation and actions of the Dusseldorf ripper, and the inquiry's increasingly negative impact on his inner psyche. Kurten's admission of zoosadism, strangulation, arson, rape, the fetishism of blood through stabbing or hammering are awful enough, but his ability to seep

³⁰⁹ Neilson, Anthony, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 1998), p. 5.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

into Wehner's subconscious is the primary concern of the play. In the second half this movement is clearly evidenced, to borrow from Trish Reid, with 'extended stichomythic exchanges' in which two or three characters take turns voicing a single speech.³¹⁴ Kurten and Wehner complete each other's sentences while they narrate Kurten's first recorded murder in Scene Eleven, for example. Later, in Scene Eighteen, even the owner of the voice in his head is not clear to Wehner: '**Kurten** appears behind him and the way that **Wehner** reacts to him **Kurten** may as well be just a voice in his head.'³¹⁵ In the following scene, titled 'The reign of terror', they speak in unison during the narration of Kurten's brutal acts. In Scene Twenty-Five, Kurten takes control of Wehner's voice. As '**Kurten** speaks the words, **Wehner's** lips move' and subsequently, having achieved full control of Wehner's actions, '**Kurten** simply directs **Wehner** in the act' of fantasising the brutal murder Frau Kurten.³¹⁶

According to the stage direction, Wehner kills Frau Kurten with 'a surreal and hideous-looking' hammer in 'a long murder sequence' which should be 'quite relentless.'³¹⁷ Aleks Sierz recalls that this sequence 'lasted about six minutes' in performance, but adds that it 'felt much longer.'³¹⁸ Sierz is most disturbed by the moment when 'Frau Kurten jumps off the stage and rushes into the audience' an action that shatters the fourth wall.³¹⁹ Reid reads this attempted escape as Neilson's 'challenge to his audience's sensibilities' arguing it brings to mind 'what Edward Bond termed "aggro-effect" in which [the] boundaries between stage and spectator are transgressed.'³²⁰ This effect, for Reid, is intentionally 'designed to physically disturb the spectator, maximising her awareness of herself as an observing body in real time and space.'³²¹ Neilson explains:

For my part, all the taboo-busting that went on was an attempt, however crude, to break down the entrenched detachment of audiences, to disable cerebral defences and force them to *engage*.³²²

³¹⁴ Reid, Trish, 'Anthony Neilson', in *Modern British Playwriting: the 1990s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*, Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), p. 144.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50, 52.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49, 52.

³¹⁸ Sierz (2001), p. 70.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ Reid, Trish, 'Deformities of the Frame: The Theatre of Anthony Neilson', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17:4 (2007), p. 495.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² Neilson, Anthony, 'Foreword', in *Theatre & Scotland*, Trish Reid (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. xii.

In his account of the play, John Bull asserts a link between *Normal*'s audience and the arcade version of the Dusseldorf Monster in the opening scene by noting, 'the machine presents its violent story only if money is fed into the slot: in paying to enter, the audience, too, are exhibiting a desire to see the horror dramatised on stage.'³²³

Neilson is often thought of as progenitor of in-*yer-face*. In *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, Sierz notes that 'long before Sarah Kane', Anthony Neilson was 'exploring the darker side of the human psyche.'³²⁴ Like Ridley, Neilson sees himself primarily as storyteller, and even suggests the playwright is 'the natural descendant of the village storyteller.'³²⁵ He differs from his contemporaries, as Reid correctly observes, because of his focus on the individual psyche, and because of his privileging of subjective realities. He repeatedly stages 'a battle between inner and outer realities, one in which inner realities are privileged.'³²⁶ Neilson's chief concern is 'how to express or represent interiority on stage, how to allow the audience to get inside the heads of the characters' as he does in *Normal*.³²⁷ To achieve this, Neilson draws on his own tendency 'to notice the extremities of life: the extreme brutality and the sweetness of it.'³²⁸ His push towards extremes introduces grotesque elements.

Normal explores grotesque sexuality through the staging of a serial killer whose primary motive in committing criminal acts, is sexual pleasure. Kurten's sexuality is grotesque in that it transgresses and exceeds socially constructed sexual norms. The play offers a chronology of its development which is rooted in childhood trauma. Kurten learns early that 'brutality belongs to love' by observing his father who is jailed for repeated sexual harassment of one of his daughters.³²⁹ Kurten describes the conditions in his childhood home:

Wehner (pause) Tell me about your sisters.

Kurten Unattractive mostly, save one who had the roundest of bottoms and the fullest of mouths.

That was the one thing that my father and I agreed upon.

Wehner Your father was imprisoned for attempting to rape one of his daughters.
Was that her?

³²³ Bull, John, 'Anthony Neilson', in *Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, ed. by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 347.

³²⁴ Sierz (2001), p. 68.

³²⁵ Neilson (1998), p. x.

³²⁶ Reid (2012), p. 140.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³²⁸ Neilson, Anthony, Interview by Caroline Smith, *Brand Literary Magazine* 2 (2008), p. 78.

³²⁹ Neilson (1998), p. 12.

Kurten *does not answer.*

Wehner Did you also attempt to rape her?

Kurten Rape?

Living in one room, Dr Wehner, there is little space for

Inhibition.

Most of my sisters made advances towards me

and only on that one occasion did I reciprocate.

[...] (*pause*) You see, Dr Wehner

When my father wanted to

take my mother he took her

In that room

In full view of us all.

That was my family.

I was never

an innocent.³³⁰

As a child Kurten is also befriended by a dog-catcher who lives downstairs in a charnel house, where the remains of stray dogs are stored.

After school he helps the catcher torture animals, and also becomes aware of his own unusual sexual urges:

Kurten [...] I made an astonishing discovery;

that the spilling of blood

its coppery smell, its deep colour,

caused a pleasing sensation in my crotch.

I became quite addicted to that sensation.³³¹

Realising that shedding blood triggers sexual arousal, he seeks other sources of pleasure. For instance, he discovers that he can also experience sexual excitement from arson attacks: 'I set a barn alight. / So I could watch the people try to put it out. Their distress aroused me. And the flames were very beautiful.'³³² Later, he returns to his fixation with blood. Interestingly,

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-5.

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

one particular incident suggests that he does not necessarily need to kill the victims if he achieves orgasm early. He recollects the specific event:

Kurten [...] I set about a young couple out strolling, this time
employing a small hatchet.
I didn't kill them,
merely spoiled their evening,
but the sight of their blood on the cobblestones
led me to a most powerful discharge.³³³

Kurten's yearning for new sexual adventures drives him to new acts of grotesque cruelty. The event which earned him the title 'The Vampire of Dusseldorf' is a case in point.

Wehner Attacked two women and a man
Kurten I drank blood from his forehead
Frau Kurten The monster is a vampire too
Wehner Or so the papers said
Kurten But all that I was trying to do was keep my love life fresh.³³⁴

It becomes clear that there is nothing Kurten will not do to satisfy his sexual desires. His cruel experiments with animals during adolescence have sown the seeds of his grotesque sexuality which is entirely dependent on the pain of others for arousal and release. Kurten is proud of this history:

Kurten [...] Do you know what I was doing in my teens
When you were getting all confused at the sight of your mother's bloomers?!
I was fucking dogs and sheep and pigs whilst sticking them with knives
Pigs were the best, you know why?
The noises they made –
*And Kurten suddenly begins to squeal like a pig at Wehner.*³³⁵

³³³ Ibid., p. 25.

³³⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

³³⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

The sexual pleasure he gets from zoophilia prepares the way for Kurten's later crimes against people. Even his last wish before execution is to 'live just long enough to hear [his] own blood gushing from [his] neck.'³³⁶ The sexual corruption of German serial Peter Kurten is explicitly depicted in the play via an account of his trial and execution and the title of the play implies an exploration of accepted societal norms. Thought of in this context, the execution of Kurten, who is clearly insane, is in itself a grotesque act. Neilson continued to explore sexual distortions in his later work, at a more personal level.

The Censor

The Censor opened at the Finborough Theatre, London, in April 1997, and transferred in June of the same year to the Royal Court Theatre, Downstairs, which was at that time at Duke of York's in St Martins Lane. It is a play of fourteen-scenes set in the eponymous protagonist's office and at his home. Although the time is unspecified the setting appears to be contemporary. *The Censor* features three characters, the censor whose job is to determine whether or not films get a license for distribution; Miss Fontaine who is the director of a pornographic movie; and the Censor's wife. There is no information about the age or costumes of the characters except that the wife is in her dressing-gown and Miss Fontaine wears a skirt.

The play begins with a voice-over. As in *Normal*, the protagonist recalls the events that triggered the play's action. For *The Censor* it started with his receiving 'a pornographic film' which 'was hard-core and unpassable as it stood.'³³⁷ The filmmaker, Miss Fontaine, visits the censor in the basement office, a '*shit hole*' where 'the sickest, most extreme material' is sent for review.³³⁸ Over the course of several encounters, she seeks to 'challenge the ruling' by persuading him of the film's artistic merits. She does so by attempting to engage him sexually by, for example, removing her blouse in the first scene. In this instance, the censor shows no interest.³³⁹ In the second scene the censor talks to his wife in the kitchen about her late nights out. It is clear they have marital problems. In the next scene, he calls Miss Fontaine back to the office to suggest thirty-five minutes need to be cut from her movie in order for it to be classified as a Restricted Eighteen, which will ensure its availability in sex shops. She refuses any cuts, claiming her movie is not 'just one sex scene after another' as the

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

censor insists, but ‘the story of the lovers.’³⁴⁰ She then masturbates him ‘*for some time,*’ but ‘*to no avail.*’³⁴¹ When the censor rejects her offer of sex at their next meeting, she assumes the reason behind his refusals is a sexual dysfunction. Ignoring his denial, she guesses correctly that he harbours a sexual fantasy of which he is deeply ashamed, and which is the source of his impotence. Eventually, she figures out his fantasy is coprophilia. When she defecates in front of him, he is able to have sex with her. The play ends with the censor’s wife reading a newspaper report of Miss Fontaine’s murder in New York. Upon hearing this news, the censor bursts into tears which his wife misunderstands as signalling the possibility of emotional intimacy in their broken relationship. Having now overcome his sexual repression, in the final scene the censor ‘*sits in his office, watching the film. And, after a while, he smiles.*’³⁴²

As the title suggests, the censor is the play’s main focus and his sexual liberation the key concern of its narrative. Miss Fontaine, by Neilson’s account, is ‘the least important character’ and the absence of contextual information about her directs ‘the audience’s attention’ towards the censor.³⁴³ For his exploration of ‘the idea of self-censorship’, Neilson focuses on the relief of the censor’s sexual repression by Miss Fontaine.³⁴⁴ This narrative is frequently interrupted by very short conversations with his wife, who is not given a name or any opportunity to tell her side of the story. Each of the five brief moments at home scattered throughout the play are replayed as the penultimate scene. It thus becomes clear that the fragments of his domestic life belong to only one moment when he talks to his wife in the kitchen while she reads the morning paper. The poor condition of his marital relationship is mentioned in passing during his interactions with Miss Fontaine: ‘My wife and I have a very specific policy regarding infidelities in our marriage. / She tells me about them.’³⁴⁵ He has no objection to her infidelities, presumably because, as a result of his impotence, they ‘don’t really [...] do it that much.’³⁴⁶ He is aware that his wife is having an affair with a man named David and claims his marriage ‘isn’t based on sex.’³⁴⁷

In parallel to his sexless marriage, the censor is trapped in his office, in a very confined basement room with no windows, and no sign of the outside world. There is no

³⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 249, 256.

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 253.

³⁴² Ibid., p. 285.

³⁴³ Cited in Sierz (2001), p. 85.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 83.

³⁴⁵ Neilson (1998), p. 254.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 269.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 270.

sense of the season or time of day. He has been working in this isolated office for ‘six years’, we learn, because ‘everybody starts here.’³⁴⁸ However, he later admits he and his colleagues are ‘virtually lepers down here. I go to the canteen, people move to another table. I don’t even have access past the third floor.’³⁴⁹ This lack of power and status at work and home is linked with his low self-esteem which is in turn closely associated with his repressed sexuality. Consequently, his liberation from mental and sexual repression contributes to the play’s main theme of the importance of self-actualisation. Indeed, his forename, Frank, is disclosed along with that Shirley Fontaine in the thirteenth scene, supporting the premise that personal identification does not exist without the recognition of sexual identity, or, in Frank’s case, the end of sexual repression.

Reid accurately suggests that Neilson is genuinely motivated by ‘the desire to fashion a new world in which personal liberation becomes the ultimate value’ within the 1990s context.³⁵⁰ In this sense, she adds, *The Censor* is not a love story or a socially concerned play about censorship, but instead ‘a narrative of repression and liberation.’³⁵¹ As in *Normal*, Neilson continues to explore the main character’s inner struggle towards finding his true self. In this instance it is achieved by the censor’s surrender to manifestly transgressive sexual desires. Therefore, the closing image of him with a smile suggests that, as Reid notes, ‘the Censor’s rehabilitation’ is completed with ‘a greater understanding, not of the film but of himself.’³⁵² Sierz also contributes to our understanding of the final scene via a focus on Miss Fontaine’s death. For him, Miss Fontaine serves the function of ‘an angel of mercy who cures the Censor’s hang-ups’ and later ‘conveniently vanishes’ at the end of the play.³⁵³ Sierz also comments on Neilson’s mixing of style which are not based on clear distinctions such as ‘either a love story or a sex story’ but a combination of ‘the two genres.’³⁵⁴ John Bull understands the play’s setting as a metaphor for ‘not just an underworld, but the site of the subconscious’ where ‘everything that happens in the play is essentially a product of his own fantasies.’³⁵⁵ Bull’s interpretation of the whole narrative as the censor’s sexual fantasy intensifies focus on Neilson’s exploration of ‘general questions about male and female

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

³⁵⁰ Reid (2012), p. 157.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁵³ Sierz (2001), p. 85.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁵⁵ Bull (2011), p. 354.

sexuality, desire and fantasy' which in turn pave the way for its elucidation via the grotesque motif of coprophilia, and pornography more broadly.³⁵⁶

In his 1989 book *Subversive Pleasures*, Robert Stam argues that pornography can be seen as 'a contemporary version of Bakhtin's "carnival", overthrowing puritanical taboos,' with its characteristic 'close-up attention to male and female genitalia' which are, in his reading, equivalent 'to the "protuberances and orifices" of the Bakhtinian body.'³⁵⁷ Linking Bakhtin's vision of the grotesque body with the contemporary, Stam rightly suggests that while carnival 'is not a cure for AIDS, nor can it substitute for political action or medical research,' its ability to 'nourish the principle of hope and the possibilities of community in an age tending toward private defeatism and apocalyptic despair' enables it to withstand the test of time.³⁵⁸ Arguably, it is only through this grotesque interpretation, that the final image of *The Censor*, can be truly understood. There is no proof that the relationship between the censor and his wife is set to improve, or that he is freed from sexual repression by one act of sexual release. However, there is hope in his smile that suggests his self-censorship is revealed at least to himself.

Problematic sexuality manifesting as grotesque bodily deformation is a recurrent trope in Neilson's plays. *The Censor* explores grotesque distortions of sexuality through two contrasting characters: the sexually repressed censor and the sexually liberated Miss Fontaine. For her part, she insists on making him see beyond the surface of the explicit images by insisting, for instance, that a 'penis is not just a penis.'³⁵⁹ In the world of pornography, sex is always available, even at the office and with complete strangers. Miss Fontaine offers to turn this fantasy into reality in the opening scene: 'Tell me you haven't dreamt of this: a woman you hardly know offering herself to you?'³⁶⁰ Her offer is not welcomed by the censor even though he 'spend[s] all day staring at women's breasts' for work.³⁶¹ However, not least because she seems to be available for sex at any time, the censor subconsciously relates her to the world of erotic fantasy rather than real world. 'I can't imagine you travelling here' he tells her, 'I can't imagine you sitting on a bus or going shopping. Doing anything normal.'³⁶² In this sense Miss Fontaine is herself a grotesque creation in that she consistently exceeds the limits of conventional female sexuality.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Stam, p. 166.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Neilson (1998), p. 260.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 246.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid., p. 263.

Considerable sexual tension develops between the censor and Miss Fontaine from the outset because they have very different, even conflicting, notions of sex. For him, sex cannot exist without romantic love. In her view, sexual intimacy might happen outside of the romance context.

Censor [...] No, nobody's trying to eradicate sex, Miss Fontaine. There's just a few of us who still believe it should be about love. I know that's terribly old-fashioned...

Fontaine It's not old-fashioned.

Censor (*pause*) No, well I'm –

Fontaine It's just completely stupid. Love is an emotion, sex is a means of expression. You can't restrict a language to one emotion.³⁶³

Confronted by these very different opinions about sex, the censor becomes more and more anxious about his own sexuality, especially when Miss Fontaine is so eager to break him out of his comfort zone. She continues to attempt to initiate sexual contact while he pushes hard for the possibility of emotional connection. The fact that he is unable to perform sexually even when all conventional triggers are present manifests in his fragmented speech:

Fontaine Look at my vagina if that helps.

Pause.

Censor Miss Fontaine – I'm just not that sort of ... It's not that easy for me to just ... you know. I'm not one of those men that can just do it at the drop of a hat. Never have been.

[...] I'm just ... not that easily ... you know ... stimulated.³⁶⁴

This is precisely the narrative of repression. In an attempt to distance himself from the truth about his impotence, and the fact that he is unable to get aroused in conventional sexual contexts, he makes up excuses:

Censor It's like I said: I've never been that ... physical a person.

Pause.

I know men are supposed to be obsessed with it, and ready to do it

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 263-4.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

whenever, wherever, with whoever. But I think that's a bit of a myth.³⁶⁵

The underlying reason for his rejection of sexual intimacy is revealed at the play's climax.

In her brilliantly, indeed uncannily, acute summing up of the censor's sexual disfunction, Miss Fontaine relates his struggled to understand the relationship between love and intimacy to the lack of sexual intimacy between his parents when he was a boy. As conventional marital relations should involve both physical and emotional intimacy, and his parent's relationship was not physical, he cannot build a strong bond with his wife. Miss Fontaine uses her almost superhuman capacities as a detective to diagnose his sexual condition:

There were many infidelities because of that illness. You saw how sex can destroy lives. But they loved each other too, and that was the most confusing thing. Because for all your talk about sex meaning love, it's *you* that can't bring them together. If you could, you wouldn't still be with your wife. No, sex is as much a mystery to you as happiness is. Something you can only watch and envy. But all that's obvious. There's something more specific. Your impotence isn't medical. This is about shame.³⁶⁶

Subsequently, Miss Fontaine '*lays newspaper down on the floor*' and '*it takes her a while, but eventually she defecates*' which leaves the censor '*in a state of extreme arousal*.'³⁶⁷

For Bakhtin the scatological image is 'ambivalent' and 'the element of reproductive force, birth, and renewal is alive in it.'³⁶⁸ Images of defecation are recognized as something 'intermediate between earth and body [...] the living body and dead disintegrating matter ... being transformed into earth, into manure.'³⁶⁹ Placing images of sexual stimulation alongside those of defecation, intersecting realms of pleasure and contamination, precisely constitutes the grotesque and it is this lexicon that Neilson is drawing on in his play. Ewa Kuryluk, in her study *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex* (1987), emphasizes the anatomy of the human reproductive system in relation to the Bakhtinian lower body parts as a site of natural grotesqueness. She notes that:

³⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 269-70.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 275.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 276, 277.

³⁶⁸ Bakhtin, p. 175.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

... because of the nature of human anatomy, with the genitals situated next to the anus and the urinary tract, even the most sublimated fantasies of the mystical interiors of love are constantly threatened by the shadowy presence of the dirty, obscene, and ridiculous.³⁷⁰

Miss Fontaine recognises the liberating power of the grotesque in her acknowledgement of the censor's fantasy as 'absolutely beautiful.'³⁷¹ The censor, however, remains sensitive about it after sex is over and she has announced she is leaving for New York:

Censor All of a sudden you just have to go? And that's nothing to do with the other night?

Fontaine No. Nothing.

Censor Liar. I can see the disgust in your eyes.

Fontaine No –

Censor No, it's all right. You dug down into me and now you're disgusted by what you found. But it's you that did it. I didn't ask you to. It's you that squatted there with everything showing and did it, so maybe you should save some of that disgust for yourself – !³⁷²

This form of aggressive self-assertion is a sign that he is not fully released from sexual shame. By virtue of Miss Fontaine's actions, he is able to go a step further in understanding sexual release but is unable to move on from the shameful feelings attached to it. He does not remain stuck in his repression but needs time to fully manifest and accept his sexual identity.

Obviously, unlike Kurten, the censor should not be condemned for his sexual preferences, nor should he be ashamed. Bakhtin quotes Montaigne to show that sex is natural and hardly in the same category as murder:

What harm has the genital act, so natural, so necessary, and so lawful, done to humanity, that we dare not speak of it without shame, and exclude it from serious and orderly conversation? We boldly utter the words, kill, rob, betray: and the other we only

³⁷⁰ Kuryluk, Ewa, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex: The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Techniques* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1987), p. 21.

³⁷¹ Neilson (1998), p. 276.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 280-1.

dare utter under our breath. Does this mean that the less of it we breathe in words, the more are we at liberty to swell our thoughts with it?³⁷³

Neilson's plays often include themes of sexual liberation and the negative effects of sexual repression. In *The Censor*, he shows that sexual repression, and not transgressive but essentially harmless sexual fantasies, is in fact grotesque in the pejorative sense of the word.

The role of individual response is particularly central to interpretations of the grotesque in new writing of the 1990s, and we might read this as a response to the onset of neoliberal hegemony which since the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 had proceeded at pace. This political context encouraged an increasing focus on the individual at the expense of the collective and earlier ideas of social solidarity. Staging the deep engagement of individuals in explorations of grotesque sexuality is one concern in Neilson's early plays, which reflects this wider context. *Normal* presents a serial killer with grotesque sexual appetites whose pleasure is entirely dependent on the pain of others. His sexuality may be grotesque in that it transgresses and exceeds socially constructed sexual norms, but it is a product of a world view in which the individual takes precedence. In *The Censor*, Neilson explores the idea of self-censorship through his sexually repressed protagonist. Unlike Kurten, sexual stimulation of the censor is harmless, but it still challenges socially constructed sexual norms. The censor tries to hide his coprophilia because in its combining of the intersecting realms of pleasure and contamination, it clearly constitutes the grotesque. His liberation can be interpreted positively, of course, but it also speaks of a culture in which individual fulfilment is held in higher value than social consciousness.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to explore some of the ways in which Ridley, Kane and Neilson, by employing grotesque imagery, challenge the limits of what can be reasonably represented on stage. They do so in part by pushing at borders and boundaries vis-à-vis conceptual questions about what it means to be human and what constitutes 'normality'. Ridley achieves this dissolution of borders by depicting characters on a fragile threshold between normal and abnormal, human and monster, drawing especially on images of the face images in both *The Pitchfork Disney* and *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*. Kane extends this focus to include a wider range of grotesque bodily deformations in *Blasted* and *Cleansed*. In *Normal* and

³⁷³ Cited in Bakhtin, p. 320.

Cleansed, sexuality is depicted at its grotesque extremes: from uninhibited sadism to complete sexual repression. All of these plays, in their own ways, reflect a world in which ethical and political certainties are unstable, or absent, and in which characters are consequently alarmingly adrift. In this context it is unsurprising that playwright reach towards the grotesque as an aesthetic category. As Connelly reminds us: ‘grotesques come into being by rupturing cultural boundaries, compromising and contradicting what is “known” or what is “proper” or “normal”’.³⁷⁴ It is entirely possible to argue, as many critics have done, that neoliberalism in its rampant commitment to the marketisation of all facets of social life, fits Connelly’s definition of the grotesque. In the next chapter I extend my analysis by considering the utilisation of grotesque hybrids in the plays under discussion, thus identifying an additional articulation of the grotesque.

³⁷⁴ Connelly, p. 2.

Chapter Two

Grotesque Hybrids

Following my established pattern, my aim in this chapter is to apply existing scholarship on the idea of the ‘grotesque hybrid’ to readings of my chosen playwrights and plays. I will begin by offering a brief summary of grotesque theory in relation to the concept of hybridisation. Then, I will introduce six plays accompanied by an overview of their critical reception. Finally, I will undertake close readings of specific moments in the plays through the lens of grotesque hybridisation. In this way I uncover the plays’ critique of neoliberalism within their depictions of alienated individuals. The chapter’s argument is based on the deliberate confusion of identity, reality, and normality, caused by neoliberalism’s alienating effects, such as the dissolution of familial bonds and disintegration of personality.

The term grotesque was originally used to describe the style of ornamentation — with its unusual mixture of the animate and the inanimate — in the antic decorations of Emperor Nero’s Golden Palace, the Domus Aurea which was excavated in Rome in the late fifteenth-century. Over the centuries, definitions of the grotesque style have one fundamental principle in common: the presence of a radical combination of incongruous elements. Hybrids are consequently a distinguishing characteristic of the grotesque as a category, and they have duly received a good deal of attention from critics. This hybridity was not welcomed with open arms in its own time. The Roman poet Horace, in *Ars Poetica* (Art of Poetry), refers to it as a ‘sick man’s dreams [*aegri somnia*]’ while the Roman architect Vitruvius, in *De Architectura*, adds to the attack by insisting: ‘[s]uch things ... never existed, do not now exist, and shall never come into being.’³⁷⁵ Picking up on this theme of anti-realism Wolfgang Kayser, a key scholar in the field, acknowledges that the grotesque presents ‘a world totally different from the familiar one—a world in which the realm of inanimate objects is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the law of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid.’³⁷⁶ Kayser also points to a sixteenth century term, ‘the dreams of painters [*sogni dei pittori*]’, which refers to ‘the dissolution of reality and the participation in a different kind of existence, as illustrated by the ornamental grotesques.’³⁷⁷ For Philip Thomson the impact of the grotesque can be interpreted as ‘*alienation*’ since ‘something

³⁷⁵ Cited in Connelly, p. 26. Cited in Kayser, p. 20.

³⁷⁶ Kayser, p. 21.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing.³⁷⁸ This is Thomson argues is ‘the fundamental conflict-character’ of the grotesque.³⁷⁹ He claims in addition that if there is ‘no suggestion of the *confusion* of heterogeneous and incompatible elements,’ or ‘no sense of the intrusion of alien elements’, then an object or image is not grotesque.³⁸⁰ For subsequent critics, such as Geoffrey Harpham, ‘the essence of the grotesque’ is likewise ‘the sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together.’³⁸¹ Elsewhere, Frances Connelly considers hybridisation as illustrating the ‘self-eating character’ of the grotesque because ‘an effective grotesque’, must concentrate our ‘attention on an existing boundary, making the contours of the familiar and “normal” visible to us, even as it intermingles with the alien and unexpected.’³⁸² The grotesque ‘turns received ideas, normal expectations, and social and artistic conventions against themselves.’³⁸³ For this reason Connelly recognises the grotesque as both the ‘complete contradiction of the core values of the classical tradition’ and also as ‘exciting new possibilities for reinventing that tradition in startling ways.’³⁸⁴ As Thomson rightly reminds us, ‘the play-urge, the desire to invent and experiment for its own sake, is a factor in all artistic creation,’ yet ‘this factor [is] more than usually strong in grotesque art and literature, where the breaking down and restructuring of familiar reality plays such a large part.’³⁸⁵ Because of its foregrounding unfamiliarity, contemporary literature arguably has closer affinity to the grotesque than that of earlier periods. Dieter Meindl, in *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (1996), observes that ‘the blurring of the distinction between the animate and the inanimate, the corporeal and the spiritual, the conscious and the unconscious’ is closely linked to the creation of both the grotesque and modern experimental literature.³⁸⁶

In the grotesque hybrids that feature in new British plays of the 1990s, two extremes are typically presented at the same time, and attention is focused on the confusion between what is human, real, and ‘normal’ in contemporary life. The contradictions inherent in the grotesque enable the dissolution of standard notions of reality, allowing the dreams of the artists, as Kayser has suggested, to be manifested. In the vividly imagined fictional worlds of

³⁷⁸ Thomson, p. 59.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁸¹ Harpham (1982), p. 11.

³⁸² Connelly, p. 12.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁸⁵ Thomson, p. 64.

³⁸⁶ Meindl, Dieter, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (Columbia, Mo.; London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p. 16.

Kane, Ridley and Neilson, the preoccupation with complex human nature, gender roles, and dysfunctional families can be understood in terms of the traditions of the grotesque and in terms of the political and cultural art of the 1990s. Neoliberalism metaphorically transforms people into hybrids — part human being, part commodity — and the grotesque, with its focus on hybridity and destabilisation, is consequently extremely well suited to exploring this tensions. By creating deliberate confusion between what is real, human, and ‘normal’ the playwrights stage an unsettled world populated by grotesque hybrids, revealing the grotesque as an important tool for cultural critique in the 1990s.

This short introductory section has been concerned with outlining the concept of grotesque hybrids and their essential attributes, which I will later apply in analysis of a selection of plays. In the next section, I focus on how notions of hybridisation shape conceptions of subjectivity in Neilson’s *Normal* and Kane’s *Cleansed*. I argue that these plays utilize the grotesque by generating hybrid-selves that disturb notions of unified consciousness and fixed gender identity. I begin with brief discussion of current understandings of grotesque identity.

1. Grotesque Identity

In contrast to Bakhtin’s celebratory reading of the death-life cycle — as in the famous Kerch terracotta figures (see page 24) — Geoffrey Harpham, in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982), emphasises its darker side, which he also locates in the ancient rituals of the cave, or *grotto*:

From such evidence as the arrangement of skulls and the configuration of footprints, scholars have inferred that both burial and initiation ceremonies were conducted in the caves. There is no incongruity in such a coupling, for both rituals expressed a recycling ideology in which death in one mode was followed by rebirth in another. Cave-burials frequently involved the practice of brain-eating, a custom that extended in some areas for over a quarter of a million years. The brain of the dead man was extracted, generally through the nose [...], and consumed so the living could acquire the merits and even the identity of the dead.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁷ Harpham (1982), p. 59.

This image of cannibalism is one of grotesque hybridity, as individual identity is compromised and intertwined with others. In this combination, personal identity gains a grotesque quality because its boundaries have been violated. While he does not identify personal identity as a key characteristic of the grotesque, or integrate it into his main discussion, Bakhtin briefly mentions its significance during the Romantic period:

Romanticism made its own important discovery - that of the interior subjective man with his depth, complexity, and inexhaustible resources. This *interior infinite* of the individual was unknown to the medieval and the Renaissance grotesque; the discovery made by the Romantics was made possible by their use of the grotesque method and of its power to liberate from dogmatism, completeness, and limitation. The *interior infinite* could not have been found in the closed and finished world, with its distinct fixed boundaries dividing all phenomena and values.³⁸⁸

Bakhtin's notion of the interior infinite is analogous with the individual's unconscious inner world populated as it is by complex emotions, feelings, thoughts, experiences, memories, and dreams. Awareness of this inner world enables us to identify personal identity not just in terms of physical body but also its complex and unique set of beliefs, desires, fears, memories, and so on. Marking this shift, in *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (1989), Bernard McElroy, suggests that 'the source of the grotesque has moved inward' and now it can be 'found in the fears, guilts, fantasies, and aberrations of individual psychic life.'³⁸⁹ This leads McElroy to conclude that 'the modern grotesque is internal, not infernal, and its originator is recognised as neither god nor devil but man himself.'³⁹⁰ His description of 'the grotesque inner life of twentieth-century man' is worth quoting at some length:

Not supernatural demons or devouring chimeras, but external powerlessness and psychic dissolution are the fears with which the modern grotesque plays, and that is the most modern thing about it. Awareness of the gulf between self and other has become total and obsessive, but if the other is sterile and dehumanising, the self is abject and contemptible; and yet contemptible as it may be, the self is the only thing man has left

³⁸⁸ Bakhtin, p. 44.

³⁸⁹ McElroy, Bernard, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 21.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

to fight for if he wishes to retain some semblance of control over his actions and identity.³⁹¹

Kayser, likewise, detects this conflict, or in his term, ‘the split personality,’ by depicting a darker picture of a man as ‘only a puppet in the hand of fate’ in ‘a world of ominous darkness that is ruled by blind fortune.’³⁹² He continues, ‘in the grotesque theatre, the division of the Self has become the guiding principle of characterization, and the notion of the unity of personality is completely abandoned.’³⁹³ My analysis of hybrid identities in the work of Neilson and Kane supports McElroy’s thesis. In the following section I examine how Neilson’s play *Normal* and Kane’s *Cleansed* deploy this grotesque trope.

Normal

As discussed in Chapter One of this study, in Neilson’s play the action unfolds through the eyes of Justus Wehner, the serial killer Kurten’s young defence lawyer. Wehner is the play’s narrator and its protagonist. The play tells the story of Wehner’s failure to save Kurten from execution, but focuses, to borrow Trish Reid’s phrase, on ‘the increasingly unsettled mind of the protagonist.’³⁹⁴ For Joyce McMillan *Normal* can be read as ‘a kind of education sentimentale’ in which Wehner ‘learns about the brutal under currents in his own sexuality’ through his relationship with Kurten.³⁹⁵ In his review for *The Times*, Jeremy Kingston notes the twin-like appearances of Wehner and Kurten with their matching ‘grey suits and sombre ties,’ and suggests this visual similarity foreshadows later events in which ‘the actions of [*Kurten*] soon inflame the fantasies of [*Wehner*].’³⁹⁶

In her analysis of the play, Reid rightly suggests that Neilson’s intention is to stage ‘a battle between inner and outer realities’ in *Normal*, noting that this struggle is ‘one in which inner realities are privileged.’³⁹⁷ She argues further that there are essentially two levels of reality in the play:

The outer action is the historical narrative that relates Wehner’s failed attempt to save Kurten from execution by proving him insane. The inner action, which comes to the

³⁹¹ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁹² Kayser, p. 135.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Reid (2017), p. 48.

³⁹⁵ McMillan, Joyce, ‘Review of *Normal*’, *Guardian*, 13 August 1991.

³⁹⁶ Kingston, Jeremy, ‘Review of *Normal*’, *The Times*, 04 October 1991.

³⁹⁷ Reid (2012), p. 140.

fore in the second half of the play, is concerned with the psychological effect of the encounter with Kurten on Wehner.³⁹⁸

This inner world of Wehner — the *interior infinite* of the individual in Bakhtin's term — is the central focus of the play. In the opening scene, Wehner recalls the being assigned to the case:

Still in my twenties, I was their most prided and precocious son and it's true
I knew everything of the law.
Little of life and less of love
But I knew everything of the law.
The year was 1931.³⁹⁹

His lack of life experience does not initially appear to be an obstacle for him, but instead allows for an attitude of openness, and lack of prejudice when meeting the serial killer. Wehner expresses himself idealistically at their first meeting, for instance: 'You're still a human being, Mr Kurten. Whatever you've done.'⁴⁰⁰ However, during subsequent meetings the young lawyer's voyage of self-discovery runs parallel to his drawing closer to Kurten's dark mindset. At first, he is utterly convinced of Kurten's insanity and retains his trust in the societal values in which he was born and raised. He is the son of liberal academic parents. During the investigation, Wehner writes to his parents not only to share his thoughts and feelings about the case but also to revisit memories triggered by it. According to stage directions, these moments are performed by spotlighting solely Wehner in order to convey his inner voice. They are also important in allowing the audience to track the process of change he undergoes as a result of his interviews with Kurten. His first letter home is in Scene Six:

Dusseldorf, March 1931

Dear Mama

Dear Papa

As you must know, I have been appointed defence in the Ripper case and today I met Kurten face to face. I felt strangely unafraid

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 146.

³⁹⁹ Neilson (1998), p. 5.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

But it is just as you guessed; he has indeed endured an insufferable upbringing.
 I think we have an excellent case and I know already the angle I intend to use.
 Victory would be certain were it not for the rather worrisome change I detect in the air.
 I'm counting on you and your colleagues in the Humanitarian League to put pressure on
 those that count.
 [...] P.S. Have you heard anything of Eva? She must be all grown up now. Ask her to
 write to me should you see her. For some reason, our summers together have returned to
 my mind.⁴⁰¹

This letter functions to reveal the young lawyer's initial state of mind: courageous in front of
 a killer he humanises, confident about his defence strategy, dependant on the liberal group's
 help, and obliged to suppress his own sexual feelings. Crucially, his recollections of Eva are
 evoked only after his conversation with Kurten about the latter's unhealthy upbringing, during
 which he regularly witnessed his parents having sex. While Wehner finds this situation
 extremely disturbing, Kurten remains nonchalant. Wehner's own childhood by contrast
 unfolded in a much more conventional manner:

Wehner [...] I went straight from school to studying law
 It's paid dividends professionally but it's left me little time
 For anything else.
 [...] My parents were highly principled, you see.
 The only way to change a system is from within.
 There were times when I wished my life had not been quite so taken up
 with academia but on the whole I feel it's been to my ...

Frau Kurten Advantage?

Wehner *(pause)* Yes.⁴⁰²

The stark contrast between their upbringings is significant because it intensifies the impact of
 their coming together, in the scenes that follow, as a kind of grotesque psychological hybrid.

Tension is further heightened in Scene Twelve, when Kurten questions Wehner's
 choices:

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-1.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Kurten Have you ever wondered why it is
that a young man like yourself should choose to defend the guilty?
Choice, you see
that's the heart of it
You choose to believe that I am insane
because you choose not to believe in evil
Yet you know that they are both only terms of convenience and distant
relations of truth
Why do you support the structures you distrust?⁴⁰³

Elzbieta Baraniecka, in her book *Sublime Drama: British Theatre of the 1990s* (2013), describes this as 'an eye-opening experience for the inexperienced young man' which helps him to understand reality 'from a perspective that Wehner never acknowledged before.'⁴⁰⁴ She goes on to observe that this realisation forces him to enter a 'liminal space between the conscious and subconscious realms of his mind.'⁴⁰⁵ Wehner's letters home offer a kind of index to his deterioration. The shift in tone in his letters is evident in his second letter in Scene Eighteen:

Dusseldorf, April 1931
Dear Mama
Dear Papa
Will you be coming to Dusseldorf?
I need to talk to you.
[...] I am not sleeping well, and as a result I am not
thinking clearly I can't seem to remember what brought me to this point
It's as if my thoughts are not my own, never were.
[...] Please write to me.
I cannot confide in my colleagues.
Your loving son
Justus.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰³ Ibid., pp. 24-5.

⁴⁰⁴ Baraniecka, Elzbieta, *Sublime Drama: British Theatre of the 1990s* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2013), p. 123.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 117.

⁴⁰⁶ Neilson (1998), p. 34.

Wehner is increasingly defenceless against Kurten's influence. The clash between the conscious and subconscious realms of his mind are made visual in the stage directions: '**Kurten** appears behind him and the way that **Wehner** reacts to him **Kurten** may as well be just a voice in his head.'⁴⁰⁷ In the following scenes distinctions between which character is speaking become blurred and Kurten's brutal crimes are explicitly described using what Reid terms 'the stychomythic technique,' in which Kurten and Wehner complete each other's sentences.⁴⁰⁸

One particular sequence in Scene Nineteen demonstrates Wehner's surrender to Kurten:

Kurten } But I didn't tamper with her 'til after she was dead
Wehner } But he didn't tamper with her 'til after she was dead

Wehner is aghast with himself for joining in.

Wehner Her body found dumped on a building site

[...] **Kurten** continues to dance round **Wehner**.

[...] **Kurten** has grabbed **Wehner's** shoulders and they are rising up and dropping down alternately. **Wehner** allows him to do this. He cannot help but smile.

[...] And now **Wehner** is quite carried away with it.

[...] Now they are playing a bizarre form of pat-a-cake.

Kurten Now the Bavarians know how to make a knife

On this last word, **Kurten** slaps **Wehner** on the face. **Wehner** stands stunned, horrified at the realisation of what he's been doing.⁴⁰⁹

Perhaps the scenes during which Wehner and Kurten complete each other's sentences are the product of Wehner's imagination. In any case, the young lawyer finally comes to the realisation that his inner speech and actions are being controlled by Kurten and his personal identity is under attack. Baraniecka suggests 'the young man feels this foreign presence, the voice of the other, in his mind but still does not know how to classify it, melds the two men into one subject.'⁴¹⁰ Yet, he remains aware that something is wrong, and this awareness confirms the presence of a grotesque hybrid identity: his naïve old self, and the suppressed impulses awakened by Kurten. This stage in Wehner's transformation certainly supports McElroy's claim that 'the modern grotesque is internal' and that 'the self is the only thing

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Reid (2012), p. 145.

⁴⁰⁹ Neilson (1998), pp. 38-9.

⁴¹⁰ Baraniecka, pp. 132-3.

man has left to fight for if he wishes to retain some semblance of control over his actions and identity.⁴¹¹ Wehner must choose between submission to Kurten and taking charge of his actions to protect his Self. Scene Twenty-one shows makes this choice particularly stark when Kurten encourages him to act upon his suppressed desires by having sex with Frau Kurten:

Kurten *appears behind Wehner.*

Kurten You only have to touch her, Justus.

[...] What harm could there be in it?

[...] Two lost people finding solace in each other.

[...] Taking comfort from the touch of skin against skin.

[...] You only have to touch her.

Wehner *pulls her to him and kisses her. She resists only for a moment. His hand grasps at her breast. They sink to the ground and the lights fade with them. In the darkness, we hear Kurten's laughter.*⁴¹²

The laugh indicates that Kurten has successfully awakened transgressive desires in Wehner's subconscious. Before acting on his repressed sexual impulses — which are expressed in his earlier letters home in which asks repeatedly about his childhood sweetheart Eva — Wehner learns that Kurten's wife is also named Eva, a detail that enables a collapsing of the distinction between the two women in Wehner's mind. This blurring of distinctions between one person and another, between inner desires and social norms, is one of the ways the grotesque operates in this play.

After the seduction, Frau Kurten is included as a narrator of Kurten's crimes. In scene twenty-three, a single sentence is divided between all three characters. The stage direction imply she has become another voice in Wehner's head:

Lights up on Wehner and Frau Kurten. During the next scene, Wehner touches her, examines her as if she is no more than a piece of meat, or a rag doll. Her voice is dead.

Wehner August 29th, he killed Maria Hahn

Kurten I stuffed her vagina with earth and leaves

Frau Kurten Attempted to crucify her on two nearby trees

Wehner But the body was too heavy

⁴¹¹ McElroy, p. 21, 22.

⁴¹² Neilson (1998), pp. 43-4.

Kurten So I hid her in a shallow grave
Frau Kurten To which he sometimes would return.⁴¹³

Clear distinction between the characters, especially between Kurten and Wehner, break down at speed. In scene twenty-seven — entitled the ‘Verdict,’ — gives the clearest indication yet of identity confusion and Kurten’s ascendancy. The serial killer addresses the jury perhaps in Wehner’s imagination — as if he and the lawyer had swapped roles:

Kurten Members of the Jury
 You know what this man has done
 [...] He is insane.
 He is insane.
 And if you should find different
 then God help us all.

Wehner *looks to the audience. He seems quite deranged.*

Wehner Stop it! Stop it!
 I am not on trial here!
 I AM NOT ON TRIAL!!!⁴¹⁴

In Scene Twenty-eight, after the Jury has declared that Kurten is normal, and not insane, Wehner writes a final letter to his parents in which he demonstrates that Kurten has succeeded in gaining control of his psyche :

Dusseldorf, June 1931
Dear Mama
Dear Papa
I’ve just learned that the appeal has failed
This is just to say that I won’t be requiring you to write to me any more
I have a new father now.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ Ibid., p. 45.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 52-3.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

Undoubtedly his last letter to home is ‘a farewell letter of a broken man,’ to borrow from Baraniecka, ‘who though gained some knowledge about human nature, also lost his innocence and idealism with all its carelessness and certainties.’⁴¹⁶ We assume his new father figure is Kurten who has demonstrated his ability to shape the naïve young lawyer’s mind by penetrating his subconscious and imprinting his own grotesque desires. In their final encounter, after the verdict which condemns Kurten to death, Wehner wryly describes Kurten’s hold over him as ‘a dying man’s last spit in the face of life’ labelling them ‘two dead men in a room’ presumably because the naïve version of Wehner has also died.⁴¹⁷ Because Neilson’s play is comprised entirely of Wehner’s memories, and his personal experience is this foregrounded, his encounter with grotesque hybridity allows the audience to question preconceptions about human nature and widens conventional notions of monster within the human in a way that troubles easy distinctions between good and evil.

The Jury’s verdict in which Kurten is found to be sane and thus ‘normal’ also quite obviously questions the credibility of the justice system and given the evidence, is in itself grotesque. ‘Such deliberate reversal of the polarities of the familiar world’, as McElroy suggests, is one attribute of the grotesque.⁴¹⁸ McElroy also, and quite helpfully, explains the role of the grotesque in shaping conceptions of the ‘normal’:

Fiction of the modern grotesque does not merely attack the possibility of a reasonable world, but attacks the reader and his desire to live in such a world, shocking his sensibility, reversing conventional values, and insisting that supposedly “normal” people are normal only because they lack the courage, honesty, or intelligence to see themselves as they really are.⁴¹⁹

This could serve as a thesis statement for Neilson’s play. As its title suggests, *Normal*’s core topic is the idea of normalcy, as explored through a series of encounters between the extremes of a serial murderer and a young lawyer. The killer’s invasion of the lawyer’s identity, which triggers an extreme conflict between latter’s inner and outer selves, results in the creation of a grotesque hybrid, neither Wehner nor Kurten, but both. Such extreme psychic conflict and monstrous hybridity can also occur between characters of different genders. As the following section illustrates this is the case with the twins, Graham and Grace, in Kane’s *Cleansed*.

⁴¹⁶ Baraniecka, p. 143.

⁴¹⁷ Neilson (1998), p. 55.

⁴¹⁸ McElroy, p. 29.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-9.

Cleansed

As detailed above, Kane's third play *Cleansed* tells four unconventional love stories. Its action unfolds, according to the published text, in 'a university.'⁴²⁰ The characters' search for love results in unlikely outcomes. Graham dies from a drugs overdose; Grace undergoes gender reassignment surgery; Robin hangs himself and Carl is mutilated by Tinker. Rod sacrifices his life for Carl, and Tinker's declaration of love to the erotic dancer is reciprocated. Tinker, who plays a key role in disciplining other characters within the confines of the 'university', is the only link between these individuals. The characters are exposed to extremely harsh physical and psychological endurance tests, as though they are being tutored toward a fuller understanding of the cost and value of love. For a more comprehensive synopsis and critical overview, see page 55.

Newspaper critics summarise the play's setting and plot variously as 'a desperate group of people struggling to save themselves through love' and 'a prison, disguised as an educational institution, which trains you with the utmost brutality for nothing much else than dying.'⁴²¹ In *The Guardian*, Michael Billington describes *Cleansed* as 'the reduction of human beings to lab rats' in a 'chamber of horrors', where 'love is tested to its limits in a series of cruel experiments.'⁴²² Despite the cruelty, David Benedict sees how 'moments of pure goodness ... the warmth of sunlight or the sudden appearance of upon row upon row of daffodils' work 'to counterbalance the horrors of a society which kills love.'⁴²³ Susannah Clapp, also notices these deliberate contrasts which, I want to suggest, borrow from the vocabulary of the grotesque. In her review for the *Observer*, Clapp notes that 'when the set opens out, it is to show a huge tiled wall streaming with blood. Seconds later, a host of daffodils hurtle through the air like torpedoes, and plant themselves noisily in the ground.'⁴²⁴ Clapp interprets 'these short, gory scenes' as 'visual slogans.'⁴²⁵ Such slogans, according to Robert Gore-Langton, are Kane's 'traditional purveyors of stage filth' but such commentary tells us as more about the prejudices of the reviewer than it does about the play, and these

⁴²⁰ Kane, p. 107.

⁴²¹ Benedict, David, 'Review of *Cleansed*', *Independent*, 09 May 1998. Peter, John, 'Review of *Cleansed*', *Sunday Times*, 10 May 1998.

⁴²² Billington, Michael, 'Cleansed Review – Katie Mitchell Plunges Us into Sarah Kane's Chamber of Horrors', *Guardian*, 24 February 2016.

⁴²³ Benedict, *Ibid.*

⁴²⁴ Clapp, Susannah, 'Review of *Cleansed*', *Observer*, 10 May 1998.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

grotesque hybrid images are, I want to argue, integral to both its style and its affective power.⁴²⁶

With *Cleansed*, Robert Butler observes ‘a striking development’ in Kane’s style, which he notes consists primarily in a change in ‘the ratio of stage directions to lines of dialogue.’⁴²⁷ The ‘script itself might take 15 minutes to read out loud,’ he notes, but the play on stage ‘runs for an hour and 35 minutes.’⁴²⁸ He concludes that, because of its reliance on the visual, *Cleansed* might be more effective as ‘an installation in an art gallery.’⁴²⁹ Graham Saunders interprets this stylistic development as further evidence of ‘Kane’s eschewal of realism in language, which had begun in *Blasted* and *Phaedra’s Love*.’⁴³⁰ He notes that this tendency became ‘even starker in *Cleansed*’ and where it impacts ‘the depiction and function of character.’⁴³¹ Indeed, the characters in the play are typically rendered through ‘theatrical imagery’ which adds ‘a further dimension to linguistic meaning.’⁴³² Aleks Sierz rather glibly suggests that the play can be best described as ‘Kane’s gender-bending trip through postmodernism’s crisis of identity.’⁴³³ More pertinently, for him, this journey is ‘wild and strange’ and also ‘occasionally annoying’ but is nevertheless ‘confrontational theatre at its cruel best.’⁴³⁴

Grace’s fluid gender identity which expresses itself as a desire to become her brother, offers more than what Samantha Marlowe describes as ‘a series of grotesque, [...], *tableaux*,’ but rather gestures — in contrast to *Normal* — toward the utopian potentials of grotesque hybridity.⁴³⁵ At the beginning of the play, Grace arrives at the university to collect the personal effects of her dead brother, Graham. On seeing his clothes, she expresses her desire to put them on, which might at first be considered as a way to cope with her grief. However, she then demands to take his place at the institution: ‘I want to stay/ I look like him ... you thought I was a man.’⁴³⁶ Shortly thereafter Tinker grants permission for her to remain as a patient and ‘puts a pill on her tongue.’⁴³⁷ She then enters a dream-like world in which Graham’s spirit talks to her, even instructing her in how to resemble him more closely:

⁴²⁶ Gore-Langton, Robert, ‘Review of *Cleansed*’, *Express*, 10 May 1998.

⁴²⁷ Butler, Robert, ‘Review of *Cleansed*’, *Independent on Sunday*, 10 May 1998.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁰ Saunders (2002), p. 88.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

⁴³² *Ibid.*

⁴³³ Sierz, Aleks, ‘Review of *Cleansed*’, *Tribune*, 15 May 1998.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁵ Marlowe, Samantha, ‘Review of *Cleansed*’, *What’s On in London*, 13 May 1998.

⁴³⁶ Kane, p. 114.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*

Graham More like me than I ever was.

Grace Teach me.

Graham *dances – a dance of love for Grace.*

Grace *dances opposite to him, copying his movements.*

Gradually, she takes on the masculinity of his movement, his facial expression. Finally, she no longer has to watch him – she mirrors him perfectly as they dance exactly in time. When she speaks, her voice is more like his.

Graham You're good at this.

Grace Good at this.

Graham Very good.

Grace Very good.

Graham So/ very very good.

Grace Very very good.⁴³⁸

Grace does not stop at putting on her brother's clothes and accurately mimicking his voice and movements. She goes further by initiating lovemaking with his spirit: '*She kisses him very gently on the lips. Love me or kill me, Graham. / He hesitates. Then kisses her, slowly and gently at first, then harder and deeper.*'⁴³⁹ Later, she announces she wants to combine her inner desire for Graham and his outer appearance in one identity, hers. 'If you could change one thing in your life what would you change', Robin asks, and Grace answers, my 'body. So it looked like it feels. Graham outside like Graham inside.'⁴⁴⁰ The synchronising of their bodies is then signalled visually when Grace is beaten in Scene Ten:

Graham *presses his hands onto Grace and her clothes turn red where he touches, blood seeping through. Simultaneously, his own body begins to bleed in the same places.*⁴⁴¹

In the aftermath of this severe beating, Grace claims that '[her] balls hurt.'⁴⁴²

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125, 126.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Considered together, these scenes and images move toward a hybrid gender identity that combines Graham and Grace. Graham inside and Grace outside becomes Graham inside and outside — which is what Grace desires — when Tinker performs crude and brutal gender reassignment surgery:

Grace *lies unconscious on a bed.*

She is naked apart from a tight strapping around her groin and chest, and blood where her breasts should be.

Carl *lies unconscious next to her. He is naked apart from a bloodied bandage strapped around his groin.*

[...] **Tinker** *helps Grace up and leads her to the mirror.*

[...] **Graham** It's over.

Tinker Nice-looking lad.

Like your brother.

I hope you –

What you wanted.

[...] You'll get used to him.

Can't call you Grace any more.

Call you . . . Graham. I'll call you Graham.⁴⁴³

The closing scene depicts Grace's sense of contentment with new body and identity:

Grace *now looks and sounds exactly like Graham. She is wearing his clothes.*

[...]

Grace/ Graham Body perfect.

Chain-smoked all day but danced like a dream you'd never know.

[...] Here now.

Safe on the other side and here.

Graham.

(A long silence.)

Always be here.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., pp. 145-6.

Thank you, Doctor.⁴⁴⁴

This final image is not so much about the blurring of gender identities, but their erasure. Grace/Graham are finally able to find a safe place where their previously separate identities can exist in one. In this sense, *Cleansed* is not about loss of self but rather about the utopian dream of finding another and beloved self and merging with it. Kane offers the final image as one of critical utopia, which refuses the legitimacy of the status quo social system — especially fixed gender binaries — and rejects the conservative utopia that defends the existing social order. She refuses bourgeois rationalism and instead embraces irony and self-parody. In *Cleansed*, Kane is preoccupied with ‘politics of the soul,’ to borrow Kritzer’s term, which she explores through the character Grace, ‘who transcends boundaries, overcomes victimization, offers love, and through this love effects change in a violent and hate-filled world.’⁴⁴⁵

In Kane’s desolate and violent world, grotesque hybrids are often created in ‘the unequal struggle between the self and ... a hostile environment.’⁴⁴⁶ In this instance, the university offers the ground for often violent bodily experiments on each character which enable them to reach fuller understanding of themselves and others. Extensive use of grotesque imagery often signals a preoccupation with our powerlessness in an inconsistent and unpredictable modern world. This trope is summarised by McElroy:

Man is usually presented as living in a vast, indifferent, meaningless universe in which his actions are without significance beyond his own, limited, personal sphere. The physical world of his immediate surroundings is alien and hostile, directing its energies to overwhelming the individual, denying him a place and identity even remotely commensurate with his needs and aspirations, surrounding him on every side with violence and brutalisation, offering him values that have lost their credibility, manipulating and dehumanising him through vast, faceless institutions, [...].⁴⁴⁷

Examples of the grotesque hybridisation of identity in *Normal* and *Cleansed* support McElroy’s contention that ‘the modern grotesque is internal,’ and occurs when the ‘awareness of the gulf between self and other has become total and obsessive’ and individual identity is

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 149-50.

⁴⁴⁵ Kritzer, p. 38.

⁴⁴⁶ McElroy, p. 17.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

compromised and intertwined with that of others.⁴⁴⁸ In the next section, I explore how Ridley deploys grotesque hybrids by creating a deliberate confusion between the real and the fantastic in his plays *The Pitchfork Disney* and *Ghost from a Perfect Place*.

2. Grotesque Reality

Most critics agree that grotesque hybrids are the product of the highly imaginative minds of artists, or as Wolfgang Kayser's puts it, of 'the dreams of painters [*sogni dei pittori*].'⁴⁴⁹ They are typically associated with a rupturing or transgressing of the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and consequently with the dissolution of reality itself. This is something different from fantasy in the purest sense. Philip Thomson notes, for example, that 'if a literary text "takes place" in a fantasy-world created by the author, with no pretensions to a connection with reality, the grotesque is almost out of the question. For within a closed fantasy-world, anything is possible.'⁴⁵⁰ Thomson offers a more nuanced reading of the possibilities of the grotesque in fantastic settings, by quoting German puppeteer and academic Gerhard Mensching's doctoral thesis, titled *Das Groteske im Modernen Drama (The Grotesque in Modern Drama)* (1961), to emphasize the distinctive qualities of the grotesque when the story is considered as fantasy:

... as long as the narrative perspective is retained unbroken it will be pure fantasy. Such a story might become *grotesque*, not because of some extraordinary bizarreness of invention, but because of the alternation or confusion of different perspectives. The hallmark of the grotesque in the realm of the fantastic is the conscious confusion between fantasy and reality.⁴⁵¹

This indeterminate realm in which no clear fantasy-reality distinction persists, provides a space, for grotesque reality to emerge. Frances Connelly describes the operation of the grotesque in this in-between space: 'If we understand that the grotesque ruptures the boundaries of disparate realities, then the contested space created between the two is where the grotesque creates meaning.'⁴⁵² Moreover, she emphasises the element of playfulness by borrowing the term, *Spielraum* — which means 'elbow room' or 'room to play' — from the

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁴⁹ Kayser, p. 22.

⁴⁵⁰ Thomson, p. 23.

⁴⁵¹ Cited in *Ibid.* pp. 23-4.

⁴⁵² Connelly, p. 12.

psychologist Erik Erikson. This interaction between the grotesque and the element of playfulness is exemplified in the creation of grotesque hybrids.

To further understand the functioning of grotesque hybrids, we can turn to the famous polymath of the Victorian era, John Ruskin. Ruskin again underlines the significance of imagination in the formation of the grotesque:

A fine grotesque is the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself only; the gaps, left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character.⁴⁵³

Ruskin's emphasis on the creative imagination is echoed by McElroy when he argues that the grotesque is 'by nature something exceptional, something set apart or aberrant, and in its most extreme forms,' and accordingly 'situated in the realm of fantasy, dream, or hallucination- in the realm, that is, of unreality.'⁴⁵⁴ Importantly, for McElroy, the aim of 'the mainstream of the modern grotesque,' is 'to expose reality by dramatizing fantasy, to distort surfaces in order to depict the monstrous existence beneath them, to reject the deterministic, knowable world and replace it with a more primitive, magical intuition of reality.'⁴⁵⁵ This is exactly, I want to suggest, how grotesque reality is employed in the plays of Philip Ridley.

The above reflections on the dissolution of the borders between reality and fantasy coincide at a confluence point in the notion of grotesque reality. In the following section, I explore how Ridley deploys the grotesque by consciously creating confusion between the real and the fantastic in *The Pitchfork Disney* and *Ghost from a Perfect Place*.

The Pitchfork Disney

As noted above, Ridley's debut play concerns a very unusual encounter between Presley and Haley Stray — twenty-eight-year-old twins who live in isolated flat behind a bolted door — and Cosmo Disney and his associate Pitchfork Cavalier, who earn a living by performing a grotesque cabaret act in London pubs. For the detailed analysis and critical overview of the play, see page 30. The distinction between reality and fantasy in this play is so effectively

⁴⁵³ Cited in *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁴ McElroy, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

blurred it led to confusion among the original reviewers. According to Lyn Gardner, for instance, ‘what is desperately needed,’ is ‘a sense of reality and a few concrete explanations’ in the story.⁴⁵⁶ For John Peter, in *Sunday Times*, *The Pitchfork Disney* is the story of ‘a nightmare fantasy about people who live in nightmares and fantasies.’⁴⁵⁷ Melanie McDonagh understands the whole play as ‘a depiction of the agonies of schizophrenia,’ the mental illness in which someone cannot understand what is real and what is imaginary.⁴⁵⁸

This deliberate blurring of the boundary between fantasy and reality is what gives Ridley’s play its peculiar power to unsettle, and it constitutes in my view a careful and effective deployment of the grotesque. As Ondřej Pilný observes, the Stray siblings ‘have trapped themselves in a pathological world of fantastic stories,’ which effectively hinders ‘them from moving on in any way.’⁴⁵⁹ The starting point for their total submission to this fantastic world is their parents’ mysterious absence. Left alone in the flat, they develop a fictional reality as a defence against the truth of their past and the harsh realities of the outside world. Presley gives a flavour of their situation in an early exchange with Cosmo about Haley:

Cosmo How old is she?

Presley My age.

Cosmo And what's that?

Presley Oh ... about ... er ...

Cosmo About? Don't you know?

Presley I've lost count.

Cosmo Don't you have birthdays?

Presley Not since Mum and Dad went.

Cosmo How old were you when Mum and Dad went?

Presley Eighteen.

Cosmo And that was how many years ago?

Presley Ten.

Cosmo So you're twenty-eight.

Presley Must be.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁶ Gardner, Lyn, ‘Review of *The Pitchfork Disney*’, *City Limits*, 10 January 1991.

⁴⁵⁷ Peter, *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁸ McDonagh, Melanie, ‘Review of *The Pitchfork Disney*’, *Evening Standard*, 07 January 1991.

⁴⁵⁹ Pilný, p. 35.

⁴⁶⁰ Ridley (2012), p. 44.

The disengagement with real-world time Presley demonstrates here, highlights the twins' commitment to their own mythologized version of the past. There is a direct link between the absence of parents and twins' extreme attachment to memories of them. Ken Urban observes that 'the words of Mummy and Daddy' are as same as 'the word of God' for the twins and further, that this obsession 'has imprisoned them' in the flat and isolated them from the world outside.⁴⁶¹ Indeed, Haley is petrified of the outside world and becomes hysterical when imagining what life might look like without Presley:

I'll have to get the shopping, that's what. [...] I'll have to carry it home. I won't have anyone to open the door for me. [...] I'll have to talk to the postman. I'll have to let the gas man in and pay electric bills. I'll have to take the rubbish out and say good morning to the neighbours. The hairdresser's – [...] She'll hate me. She'll spread nasty rumours. A mob will come here with burning torches. They'll smash all the windows and kick down the front door. [...] They'll hurt me when I'm asleep. Do terrible things to me. With razor blades and broken glass. They'll kiss me and cut me and ...⁴⁶²

Daily routines and chores are figured as perilous because they involve talking to strangers who, according to her, are always a threat. She only feels safe in their fictional world behind the bolted door. The disappearance of the parents in *The Pitchfork Disney* is never fully explained. Presley tells Cosmo: 'They're dead/ Years ago' but later contradicts this version:⁴⁶³

Cosmo So when did you start being ... like this?

Presley After Mum and Dad lost us.

Cosmo Lost us?

Presley No, left us.

Cosmo You said "lost us".

Presley Didn't.

Cosmo Did.

[...]

⁴⁶¹ Urban (2007), p. 336.

⁴⁶² Ridley (2012), p. 29.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., p. 37.

Presley I couldn't have said "lost us". That makes no sense. How could they lose us?
They died.

Cosmo Ten years ago.

Presley That's right.

Cosmo And they died in the same year?

Presley On the same day.

Cosmo The same day!

Presley That's right. One day they went out and never came back. We waited a very long time.⁴⁶⁴

Dan Rebellato reads this moment as evidence of a traumatic experience. For him, the parents probably have died 'at the hands of a serial killer' with the result that 'Haley and Presley's imaginations and memories have been shattered and fragmented.'⁴⁶⁵ Rebellato's claim, is supported by the fact that towards the end of the play Haley states, 'Mum and Dad – oh, they were so good. Who would want to hurt them like that? For no reason. No reason.'⁴⁶⁶ The trauma of parental loss also attests, for Rebellato, to 'the proximity of Ridley's story-worlds to fairytales, which are filled with parents losing or abandoning their children.'⁴⁶⁷

This theme is further emphasized and fictionalised in the character of Cosmo who denies he ever had a childhood or parents:

Presley No mum or dad?

Cosmo Nah.

Presley You must have.

Cosmo Why?

Presley How else were you born?

Cosmo I wasn't. I was hatched. Never saw my parents. I was hatched from an egg and what you see is all I am. Once I had the skin of a baby and now I got this skin. I unzipped my old skin and threw it away. One day I was shitting my nappy, the next I was earning money. I had no childhood.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 55-6.

⁴⁶⁵ Rebellato (2011), p. 428.

⁴⁶⁶ Ridley (2012), p. 96.

⁴⁶⁷ Rebellato, Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ridley (2012), p. 66.

The images of him being hatched from an egg, shedding and throwing away the baby skin are clearly grotesque. Cosmo's snake metaphor is echoed in Presley's recollection of his experience in a reptile house in a zoo:

I can still remember the snakes. One of them – it was about ... oh, ten feet long and as thick as my arm. Its skin was all brown and flaking. As we watched, it struggled out of it. Underneath ... underneath was new skin. Bright red. In another tank there was a brown mouse. It was being pursued by a snake. Dad explained that the snake had to eat live things in order to stay alive.⁴⁶⁹

The description of a snake shedding to reveal bright red skin also mimics Cosmo's arrival in a long black leather overcoat which he later removes to reveal 'a bright red, rhinestone and sequin jacket.'⁴⁷⁰ Cosmo also gnaws 'heads from live mice,' as a part of his performance in pubs where he eats other live things such as insects and small animals as long as they are alive because 'that's the whole point' of his show.⁴⁷¹ Beyond offering a manifestation of a grotesque human-animal hybrid, Cosmo's character also operates in the in-between space, the *Spielraum*, where the lines between reality and fantasy are deliberately and playfully blurred.

The grotesque also manifests in Ridley's plays through the repeated telling of fantastic stories. 'Only we invent a new world' Presley confesses to Cosmo, 'we imagine it's after the nuclear holocaust and we're the only two left alive.'⁴⁷² Ridley creates play worlds in which imaginary events, in the words of McElroy, 'are depicted as actually taking place' and 'in which the fantasy of the characters is so intermingled with the action of the story as to be quite inseparable from it.'⁴⁷³ This is the grotesque reality in which the Strays have chosen to live:

Presley [...] The whole world is a wasteland. Black sky. Black earth. Black nothing. Some areas are still smouldering, cooled only by the gentle snowfall.

[...]

Haley And this house is the only house standing.

[...] Standing like a dark tower in the middle of a wasteland.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., p. 62, 65.

⁴⁷² Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁷³ McElroy, p. 20.

[...] But why did we survive the end of it all, Presley?

Presley Because we were good children, that's why. What did Dad always say to you?

[...]

Haley Mum and Dad said we were the best children in the world.⁴⁷⁴

That this narration is repeated several times in the play, positions *The Pitchfork Disney* in what McElroy calls 'the mainstream of the modern grotesque.'⁴⁷⁵ The siblings 'reject the deterministic, knowable world and replace it with a more primitive, magical intuition of reality.'⁴⁷⁶ The deliberate confusing of reality with fantasy and fiction and a reliance on the vocabulary of the grotesque, are also features of Ridley's third play which is discussed in the following section.

Ghost from a Perfect Place

Ridley's third stage play, *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, premiered at the Hampstead Theatre, London in April 1994. It features one male and four female characters. An old gangster Travis Flood, aged seventy-eight and wearing '*a black, shot-silk suit, white shirt (with gold cufflinks), black tie (with gold tiepin) and black leather shoes.*'⁴⁷⁷ Torchie Sparks, aged seventy-six, and her twenty-five-year-old granddaughter Rio Sparks who is '*hauntingly beautiful*' with '*a gold lamé miniskirt, a denim jacket (decorated with gold sequins and rhinestones) and boots (painted gold).*'⁴⁷⁸ The remaining characters, seventeen-year-old Miss Sulphur and twelve-year-old Miss Kerosene, are two members of a local girl gang known as The Disciples. In honour of leader of their gang, Rio — or Miss Sparks as they call her — they wear '*gold lamé miniskirts and have blonde hair.*'⁴⁷⁹ Like Ridley's earlier plays, the action is confined to a '*room in the East End of London*', in this case with '*a large area badly scorched*' which indicates that '*there has been a fire sometime in the past.*'⁴⁸⁰ Like Ridley's previous play *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*, *Ghost from a Perfect Place* is structured in two acts.

As the play opens, Travis Flood arrives in the Sparks' house at Bethnal Green for his appointment with the young prostitute Rio, who he has encountered at a graveyard earlier that

⁴⁷⁴ Ridley (2012), p. 22.

⁴⁷⁵ McElroy, p. 20.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ Ridley (2012), p. 204.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 237.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 244.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 203.

morning. He is carrying ‘a bunch of white lilies.’⁴⁸¹ Rio is out, but her grandmother Torchie, who is well aware of Rio’s profession, allows Travis to wait inside. After a while Torchie recognises the old gangster who was apparently once a formidable figure in the local community. He has even written his autobiography which he gives to Torchie as a present. The first part of the act details the forging of a connection between Torchie and Travis, through their telling of nostalgic stories about the past, which they describe as the great ‘heydays’. The play’s major conflict is introduced towards the end of the first act, however, when Travis recollects his rape of Torchie’s fourteen-year-old daughter Donna, who was apparently trying to protect her father from Travis and his men. While Travis is processing his recently acquired knowledge of the tragic results of his past atrocities — including Donna’s death in childbirth and Torchie’s bringing up the baby Rio alone after her husband goes mad from grief — Rio arrives and makes Torchie leave the flat. Travis, for obvious reasons, has lost interest in his earlier agreement with Rio and tries to leave without paying. She does not welcome this turn of events, however, and gives a flashing lamp signal to her gang from the window. As the second act opens Travis is tied to a chair and the gang members are chanting around him. He belittles them and their rituals. They then torture him by repeatedly stabbing cigarettes out on his face. Rio prepares to kill him with a pair of scissors, but he claims to know her father which stops her in her tracks. She calls proceedings to a halt and dismisses the gang. Travis then tells how he met and raped her mother. The play ends with Torchie’s arrival, and Travis’ release. Rio decides to keep the truth of her conception to herself.

The play’s resolution, in which Rio learns the details of her conception elicited a range of critical responses. For Urban, the closing image in *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, unlike Ridley’s earlier plays in which the characters ‘are so enamoured of fictions of the past that they go to violent ends to preserve them,’ features no violence but offers ‘the cure for nostalgia’ which lies in embracing the truth.⁴⁸² Travis is forced to face up to the impact of his past crimes. In this way he is able to recognise his real self and thus is ultimately ‘cured of his nostalgia.’⁴⁸³ For Rio, on the other hand, the myth of Saint Donna — which relies on the idea that ‘[n]o man did anything in the creation of [Rio]. No man touched [Donna]’ — is shattered and loses its function in her life as a protection from the ugly truth.⁴⁸⁴ Urban considers this ending as indicating ‘the forward-looking possibilities of nostalgia’ in which change is

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁴⁸² Urban (2007), p. 326.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁴ Ridley (2012), p. 270.

possible for each character.⁴⁸⁵ The theme of nostalgia is also picked up by other critics. Ridley's recurring use of nostalgia as a primary motif, according to David Ian Rabey, is achieved through a 'repeated activity of storytelling' that 'wilfully obscures any reliable boundaries between truth and fiction.'⁴⁸⁶ For the playwright himself this grotesque effect is a simple consequence of the fact that 'the three main characters have all been deluded or lied to themselves about the past'.⁴⁸⁷ Sierz rightly spotlights their conscious dismissal of traumatic past events, by noting they are 'fictionalising their past and fantasising their present' with the result that change requires 'a catastrophic rupture of the wholeness of a fantasy past.'⁴⁸⁸ Sierz also recognises Ridley as 'a master of the uncanny' defining the uncanny as:

... that which turns rationality into the irrational, familiar into unfamiliar, certainty into uncertainty, real into unreal, life into literary words, where the literary – words as spoken on stage as much as the playtext – is odder, more disturbing, than life.⁴⁸⁹

Sierz's definition also evokes Kayser's characterisation of the grotesque as 'the estranged world', of course, a world in which conventional notions of the familiar and reliable are abandoned.⁴⁹⁰ The play's uncanniness, which is picked up by Sierz, emanates, I would suggest, from the prominence of the grotesque, especially insofar as characters are dependent on the unreal and consciously choose to live in a dream world.

The characters in *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, like those in Ridley's previous plays, delight in fictionalising the past and the present. The play includes narration of the fire outbreak in the Sparks' flat; Travis' giving the white lily from his lapel to a crying six-year-old Donna on the street; Donna's death during the birth of Rio; the suicide attempt of Torchie's husband, Mr. Sparks and Travis' retirement in Hollywood. Ridley relies on this pattern of storytelling to create a series of grotesque hybrids that thrive on the confusion of the real and the fantastic. The fire which has wrecked the flat, for example, is recalled quite differently by Torchie and Rio. Torchie recollects the tragic event which damages her leg as a tranquil scene:

⁴⁸⁵ Urban (2007), p. 342.

⁴⁸⁶ Rabey, p. 196.

⁴⁸⁷ Cited in Sierz (2001), p. 45.

⁴⁸⁸ Sierz (2012), p. 107.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁹⁰ Kayser, p. 184.

One night I woke up and the air was full of fireflies. Jesus, they were beautiful. Then one of the fireflies landed on my blanket. It turned into a flame. And I just lay there, Mr Flood. In a burning bed. Watching. That does look pretty, I thought. My face was tingling in the heat. My eyes were watering. But did I move? No. I just lay there. Calmly watching the whole world burn up around me. And you'd know something? It was the most peaceful I'd ever been.⁴⁹¹

Torchie claims a kind of agency in her decision not to try to escape from the fire. Instead of accepting the pain and destruction caused — her leg is 'melted like the legs on burnt dolls' — she prefers to believe in a fantasy world full of pretty fireflies.⁴⁹² Rio tells a quite different story:

Listen! I'm in Bethnal Green Road. The shop windows are smashed. Cars are overturned. Lamp posts are knocked down. There are dead bodies in the gutter. Hundreds of them. [...] I can hear screaming and crying. Oh, something terrible has happened, my sisters, but I don't know what it is. "What's done all this?" I ask. A priest comes out of the ruined church. He tells me, "We are sinners. God is angry with us. He needs a sacrifice." The priest points at me. "No!" I start to run. The priest grabs my arm. He drags me into the church. I'm tied to the altar. What's that smell? Petrol! The priest strikes a match. He throws it at me. I'm burning. I'm burning – I wake up. I'm here. In this room. I've been sleepwalking. I've set fire to the curtains. The flames are crawling across the walls. Across the ceiling. It's like a fiery octopus. Blazing tentacles reach Gran's bedroom! I hear Gran scream. I run to her. Gran is trying to get out of bed and she - Oh, my sisters, can you see my tears?⁴⁹³

Rio's version is more obviously marked by a dream-reality confusion, that points towards the grotesque. It offers a sharp contrast with her grandmother's fond memories of fireflies. Later, Torchie shares with Travis the reality of how painful having a burnt leg is: 'I would have given ten years of my life for it to've just been "nasty". There were times I screamed "Cut it off! I'd rather hop around than go through this!" A terrible time.'⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹¹ Ridley (2012), p. 211.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

Another conscious confusion between the real and the imaginary is depicted in the formation of the girl gang, Disciples of Saint Donna. Rio transforms her dead mother, whom she has never met, into the ‘Saint Donna Who Saves Lost Girls.’⁴⁹⁵ She tells the story of Donna’s ghost appearing to her in the graveyard:

The wind is getting up more and more. Trees are beginning to creak and sway. Leaves plucked from branches. Flowers whipped off graves. Everything is getting sucked up, up, up towards the heavenly whirlpool. Look, my sisters! The whirlpool is becoming a tornado. [...] And then – a flash of gold in the tornado. Another one. Tiny explosions. All fizzing and popping like fireworks. More and more until the whirling funnel is glowing gold and – What’s that? A figure! Someone’s in the tornado. [...] It’s a girl. She’s got blonde hair. She’s wearing a gold miniskirt. It’s my mother.⁴⁹⁶

Thereafter, the spirit addresses Rio and tells her to form a girl gang from ‘lost girls’ who are trying to survive ‘in the ruins.’⁴⁹⁷ The ghost also claims to be a virgin mother:

[...] No man did anything in the creation of you. No man touched me. I willed myself to have a child and you started to grow inside me, my daughter. I am the start of a new breed of woman. All praise.⁴⁹⁸

The ghost of Saint Donna introduces another grotesque hybrid in its combining of the living and the dead. Yasuhiro Ogawa, in a chapter entitled ‘Grinning Death’s-Head: *Hamlet* and the Vision of the Grotesque’, suggests that the grotesque ‘contradicts the very laws which rule our familiar world’ especially in its evocation of the ghost which ‘has violated the very law of temporal irreversibility that dictates our everyday reality.’⁴⁹⁹ As discussed in previous chapter, in relation to death and dead bodies, the life-death cycle is interpreted as a positive attribute in the grotesque. But the return of the dead destroys the clearly delineated line between life and death, on which the grotesque relies. We also experience Kayser’s alienation in this liminal space. For Rio, however, this grotesque realm provides a protection from grim reality in

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 262.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 269-70.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 270.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ogawa, Yasuhiro, ‘Grinning Death’s-Head: Hamlet and the Vision of the Grotesque’ in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*, ed. by James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates (Grand Rapids, Mich; Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 220.

which her mother died giving birth to her. She chooses to live in a make-believe world by forming the Disciples of Saint Donna. The girl gang members, who are victims of male violence, are inducted into this world by saying 'I believe in Saint Donna' and from then on expect to be protected by Donna's spirit.⁵⁰⁰

Travis is another character who collapses distinctions between what is real and what is not. He writes his autobiography, he claims, in order to discover his real self, but its title, *The Man with the White Lily*, is designed precisely to efface the cruelty of his life as a gangster. Yet, his return to Bethnal Green offers him an encounter with the real in the form of an unexpected meeting with his daughter. After he admits to raping Donna, he shares the story of his escape from the neighbourhood and his life afterwards. He details the illusion he has created for the book and his decision to reject it in his final lines:

... I grow a beard. I change my clothes. I talk about a past I've never lived. A past full of farms and village fetes. It's like living in a dream. But as years pass ... the dream becomes real. It's my other life. This life here – that feels like a dream. Was there ever a place called Bethnal Green? Did I ever walk the streets and have people point me out? Was I ever the man who wore a white lily?

Slight pause.

So ... I write a book. My life here. How I remember it. I pay to publish it myself. Just a few copies. I think, At least it won't be as if I never existed – Oh, I wasn't supposed to do it, of course! I was supposed to keep quiet about the past. I was supposed to fade and die but ... what the hell?! Eh? What've I got to lose now? What more can they do to me? I will go back home one more time. I will walk those streets. I will wear those clothes. I will have a white lily in my lapel. For one more day before there are no more days ... I will be Travis Flood.⁵⁰¹

Travis's desire to return to a familiar place, may be read as nostalgic and the answer to his question about what more can be done to him finds an answer in his torture at the hands of the girl gang. This represents a reckoning of sorts, but Rio's final decision to let him go also offers a ray of hope, in that it suggests her letting go of the past and moving into a future.

⁵⁰⁰ Ridley (2012), p. 266.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

Ridley revises his plays for each publication, there are small differences between the editions, which shed further light on the character's development. For example, the 2002 Faber edition has more definitive versions of Travis' life after his flight from Bethnal Green:

There ain't no fortune. Never was. . . . No swimming-pool. No Cadillac.
No speedboat. Nothing. Just an endless succession of petty jobs.
And always moving. And everywhere I go I change my name. Invent new
stories about myself. In the end, I begin to forget who I am. Who I was.
[...] Now I know who I am.⁵⁰²

In both versions, his final confession liberates Travis, and allows him to describe his life as a conscious confusion between reality and fantasy — a grotesque hybrid. He has repeatedly chosen to invent a past in which his gangster days never existed. With the help of Torchie and Rio, he finds his true self and for the first time is able to acknowledge the very real damage he has caused. Arguably, this is his punishment. His life is spared by his daughter, but he is made to live with the knowledge of who he really is. His final line, and the last line in the play is: 'I will be Travis Flood.'⁵⁰³

In this section I have explored Ridley's use of the grotesque through his intentional blurring of the boundary between fantasy and reality, especially his characters' conscious choice to live in a liminal state. *The Pitchfork Disney* depicts the Stray siblings' disengagement with real-world and extreme attachment to their memories of childhood which results in developing a fictional reality as a defence against parental absence and the realities of the outside world. In *Ghost from a Perfect Place* Travis' return to his old neighbourhood leads to the disruption of the fictional past and the present for both Travis and Rio. In the next section, I examine the range of ways in which Neilson and Kane deploy grotesque tropes in their exploration of love, family, and friendship in *Penetrator* (1993) and *Phaedra's Love* (1996). In particular, I focus on the way they problematise standard social and familial norms. This in turn I understand as another example of the use of grotesque hybrids for theatrical effect, and affect. I begin by offering a brief account of the role of (ab)normality in the grotesque.

⁵⁰² Cited in Urban (2007), pp. 340-1.

⁵⁰³ Ridley (2012), p. 278.

3. Grotesque Normality

The grotesque, as discussed elsewhere in this thesis, characteristically disturbs clear distinctions between the normal and the abnormal. As Connelly reminds us, ‘grotesques come into being by rupturing cultural boundaries, compromising and contradicting what is “known” or what is “proper” or “normal”.’⁵⁰⁴ Edwards and Graulund concur, noting that in the grotesque: ‘this erasure of common distinctions speaks to debates over stigmatization and normalcy, what it means to exist outside the norm, and what the norm is.’⁵⁰⁵ Graulund argues further that ‘one of the few universal and fundamental qualities of the grotesque is that it is abnormal, unbounded, and unstable.’⁵⁰⁶ The abnormal is consequently key to the creation of the grotesque. Thomson offers a more nuanced definition:

The abnormal is a secondary factor, of great importance but subsidiary to what I have outlined as the basic definition of the grotesque: *the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*. It is significant that this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque: we might consider a secondary definition of the grotesque to be “*the ambivalently abnormal*.”⁵⁰⁷

The grotesque is then, by definition, formed by the intertwining of normal and abnormal elements. In what follows I call this intertwining ‘grotesque normality.’ In relation to grotesque normality’s in-between quality, Connelly is helpful in describing it as ‘breaking open what we know and merging it with the unknown.’⁵⁰⁸ She concludes that ‘the one consistent visual attribute of the grotesque is that of flux’ adding that ‘grotesques are all in a transitional, in-between state of being.’⁵⁰⁹

The liminality of the grotesque, its radical in-betweenness, is quite obviously manifest in grotesque hybrids. Arthur Clayborough explores the confusion inherent in their formation by quoting the philosopher George Santayana from the latter’s study *The Sense of Beauty* (1896):

⁵⁰⁴ Connelly, p. 2.

⁵⁰⁵ Edwards and Graulund, p. 9.

⁵⁰⁶ Graulund, Rune, ‘Grotesque’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature Online*, 30 October 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1067>.

⁵⁰⁷ Thomson, p. 27.

⁵⁰⁸ Connelly, p. 5.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

What appears as grotesque may be intrinsically inferior or superior to the normal. That is a question of its abstract material and form. But until the new object impresses its form on our imagination, so that we can grasp its unity and proportion, it appears to us as a jumble and distortion of other forms. If this confusion is absolute, the object is simply null; it does not exist aesthetically, except by virtue of materials. But if the confusion is not absolute, and we have an inkling of the unity and character in the midst of the strangeness of the form, then we have the grotesque.⁵¹⁰

This idea of a lingering quality of coherence as a constituent aspect of the grotesque serves as a suitable starting point for my idea of the distorted normal. Grotesque normality, as I will argue, functions beyond simply challenging normative concepts. It offers distinct insights that contribute to the estranged world but also to our understanding of conventional normality, particularly through an exploration of social interactions and familial ties. Dysfunctional personal relationships — between family members and friends — are key themes in my chosen plays and this section will focus on how they are represented in tension with traditionally accepted norms. In *Reinventing the Family: In Search of New lifestyles* (2002), Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim observes that since at least the late-sixties it has not been clear ‘who or what constitute[s] the family. Which types of relationship should be described as a family and which should not? Which are normal, which deviant?’.⁵¹¹ She argues further that in the final decade of the twentieth century, ‘the situation has become even more confused’ because ‘the boundaries are becoming unclear, the definitions uncertain.’⁵¹² Her argument about the blurring of boundaries calls to mind the grotesque, of course, and it is this aspect of Neilson’s *Penetrator* and Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love*, that I am to examine in the next section with particular reference to grotesque normality and a focus on dysfunctional relationships between friends and family members.

Penetrator

First performed at the Traverse Theatre, as part of the Edinburgh Fringe in August 1993, and transferring to the Finborough Theatre, London, in the same year Anthony Neilson’s second play *Penetrator* was later revived at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in January 1994. It is an

⁵¹⁰ Cited in Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 16-7.

⁵¹¹ Beck-Gernsheim, Elisabeth, *Reinventing the Family: In Search of New Lifestyles*, trans by Patrick Camiller (Oxford: Polity, 2002), p. 1.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

intense play in five scenes which tells the story of flatmates, Max and Alan, and Tadge, a boyhood friend of Max's who visits them unexpectedly. The action is confined to a living room, and takes place in what we assume to be Edinburgh. The play is structured around the dynamics of male friendships between Max and Alan on one hand and between Max and Tadge on the other. There is no specified costume or age, but the reviewers specifically indicate that the flatmates are twenty-something.

Like *Normal* and *The Censor*, the play begins with a voice-over, but it is not the voice of the narrator, or the protagonist. In *Penetrator* a voice describes 'a young man' hitchhiking with 'an army rucksack,' who is picked by a remarkably accommodating and sexually voracious young woman, with whom he has intercourse.⁵¹³ The second scene reveals the voice-over as text drawn from a pornographic magazine over which Max is masturbating in his grubby flat. In one sense this opening operates as a joke, therefore, but it also establishes an absence of reliability in the narration, and, in the figure of the soldier, it prefigures Tadge's arrival. When Max's flatmate Alan returns, the everyday lives of the flatmates are shown in some detail including shared jokes and general bonhomie. This lasts until scene four when Tadge appears at their door unexpectedly. It seems that Tadge has been discharged from the army but has been traumatised by his experiences in the military. He claims that a militant group named the Penetrators who 'stick things up you' has tortured him in a darkened room.⁵¹⁴ Later, Tadge accuses Alan of being one of the Penetrators and produces a 'big, ugly hunting knife: a knife to end all knives' with which he holds Alan at knifepoint.⁵¹⁵ Alan is finally released only after Max confesses, at Tadge's insistence, that he and Tadge had a sexual encounter in the woods during childhood. Max also discovers that Alan slept with his ex-girlfriend and subsequently rejects him, telling him to 'get out.'⁵¹⁶ In the final scene, Max is left alone with Tadge. An unusual sort of domestic harmony is established.

In the original production, Neilson played the role of Max and also directed. According to his notes in the published text, *Penetrator* is a 'very personal project' which is 'loosely based on a real-life event,' and performed by himself and his 'two long-standing friends', James Cunningham and Alan Francis.⁵¹⁷ Neilson's play proved influential. Brian Logan notes that 'Sarah Kane was directly influenced' by it for instance.⁵¹⁸ However, as John

⁵¹³ Neilson (1998), p. 61.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁵¹⁸ Logan, Brian, 'Anthony Neilson: Promise? I Was Showing That Years Ago', *The Independent*, 24 November 2002.

Bull rightly observes, Neilson's use of 'an essentially childlike view of the world, albeit a frequently nightmarish view: to offer fantasy and uncertainty' makes his style very distinctive.⁵¹⁹ Neilson's dramaturgy is deliberately transgressive. The pornographic fantasy at the beginning of *Penetrator* is, according to Sierz, 'the kind of thing that men normally read in private' and 'hearing it read in public' certainly breaks 'a powerful taboo.'⁵²⁰ Reid also understands the opening image as planting a tiny seed that blooms later with Tadge's arrival in the story. In this way, she continues, the title is 'a metaphor for Tadge's function in relation to the action', for his penetration of 'feelings that exist beneath the surface reality' of the relationship between Max and Alan.⁵²¹

The knife sequence in which Tadge threatens Alan is unquestionably the most highly charged in the play. Louise Doughty described it as 'one of the most nail-biting scenes that [she has] ever watched in a theatre.'⁵²² Sierz recalls the experience as 'relentlessly frightening' because of 'the acute sense of imminent danger and the real possibility of actors injuring themselves or one of the spectators' with 'the vicious knife flashing through the air.'⁵²³ The sequence is also reminiscent of the extended murder sequence of Frau Kurten in *Normal*, but in this instance, according to Neilson, it is 'designed to be played at the highest pitch of intensity.'⁵²⁴ He advises producers of the play to 'bear in mind that it will take a long time to reach that pitch.'⁵²⁵ The knife scene 'generates extraordinary tension in the expectation of violence, and involves an extended sequence' but, as Reid rightly observes, *Penetrator* 'contains very little actual violence.'⁵²⁶ After all, nobody is injured or dead at the end of the play.

Reid argues that Neilson often depicts 'unusually intense and dysfunctional personal relationships involving troubled men.'⁵²⁷ These men typically 'occupy margins and extremes' and their identities are invariably 'under pressure and therefore relatively unstable.'⁵²⁸ This is most clearly the case with Tadge. Rachael Newberry assumes that Tadge is suffering from

⁵¹⁹ Bull (2011), p. 343.

⁵²⁰ Sierz (2001), p. 75.

⁵²¹ Reid (2017), p. 20.

⁵²² Doughty, *Ibid.*

⁵²³ Sierz (2001), p. 75.

⁵²⁴ Neilson (1998), p. 119.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁶ Reid (2012), p. 153.

⁵²⁷ Reid (2017), p. 14.

⁵²⁸ Reid (2012), p. 141.

‘post-traumatic stress disorder after serving as a “squaddie” in the 1991 Gulf War.’⁵²⁹ Elsewhere, Bull observes that Tadge is ‘quite unable to distinguish reality from fantasy.’⁵³⁰ Indeed, he is not sure about his identity, certainly insofar as identity is based on stable memories. For this reason, he wishes to revisit his childhood with Max, in an attempt to make a distinction between what is real and not. He relies on Max to remind him who he really is. For Tadge, Max is the ‘inkling of the unity and character in the midst of the strangeness’, to borrow from Santayana, which defines the play as grotesque.⁵³¹

Tadge and Max’s relationship is represented through their recollections, which are in turn driven by Tadge’s continual urge to recall the past. Max was ‘the brains’, and Tadge was ‘the brawn,’ Tadge recalls, they were ‘friends,’ ‘real friends.’⁵³² While Max seems to be less thrilled about their past, he recalls small details about him such as how much sugar Tadge puts in his tea: ‘[he] used to take four.’⁵³³ When Max left childhood home to attend college, the nature of their connection altered, but Tadge recognised the change as desertion: ‘You walked away!’ he states accusingly.⁵³⁴ Alongside his disillusionment with friendship, Tadge displays suspicion of familial bonds:

Tadge *(pause)* Have you seen my dad?

Max Ronnie? *(Pause. Shakes his head.)* Not for years.

A long pause.

Tadge He’s not my dad.

Max *stares at him. Pause.*

Max Ronnie’s not your dad? *(Pause.)* How do you know?

[...]

Tadge *(pause)* It was in my file. I saw it written in my file. They know everything about everybody. It was in my file.

[...]

⁵²⁹ Newberry, Rachael, ‘The Last Rolo: Love, Conflict and War in Anthony Neilson’s *Penetrator*’, in *After In-yer-face Theatre: Remnants of a Theatrical Revolution*, ed. by William C. Boles (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 59.

⁵³⁰ Bull (2011), p. 351.

⁵³¹ Cited in Clayborough, p. 17.

⁵³² Neilson (1998), p. 108.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Max (pause) But you *look* like Ronnie. Everyone's always said. (Pause.) Have you asked your mum about it? (Pause.) She *is* your mother though?⁵³⁵

Later, Max tells Alan that 'Tadge is the spitting image' of his father.⁵³⁶ Tadge claims, instead, that his father is Norman Schwarzkopf, the United States Army general who led all coalition forces in the first Gulf War. He insists this connection explains, 'why [the Penetrators] were filming me. To blackmail [Schwarzkopf].'⁵³⁷ This fantastical invention of a new father is clearly an attempt to rewrite his own past, through dissolution of existing family ties.

Such behaviour evokes a neurotic symptom Sigmund Freud called 'family romance' in his short paper of the same name, in which he described various phases of a neurotic child's 'estrangement from his parents.'⁵³⁸ Freud describes how the youngster employs his imagination to get 'free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing.'⁵³⁹ The entire aim of 'replacing the real father by a superior one' represents 'the child's longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men.'⁵⁴⁰ This idea might shed light on Tadge's fantasy of a father figure who is an important military figure. Within the logic of his own fantasy Tadge's choice of a better parent, on the other hand, causes him to be badly beaten and tortured. His disenchantment with family is not so easily resolved.

The disintegration of 'normal' familial bonds is also foregrounded by Max when he recounts the story of his friend Pete, who is 'is selling his *jism* for fifty quid a shot.'⁵⁴¹ On one level this is simply laddish banter — Pete 'sells some *here* and then gets the cheap bus over to Glasgow and sells some. So that's a hundred undeclared quid a week for *two* hand-shandies' — but on the other, Max's flippancy reveals a deeper concern about the crisis in male relationships that marks the late-twentieth century.⁵⁴² As Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim observes:

Thanks to the advances of medical technology and the various modes of artificial insemination, the very concept of "parenthood" ... has become unclear ... We now have the sperm donor who is nothing other than a progenitor (and even that only by a

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵³⁸ Freud, Sigmund, 'Family Romances', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908)*, p. 238.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵⁴¹ Neilson (1998), p. 68.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*

technological detour), who often has not even met the mother – not to speak of having physical contact with her.⁵⁴³

Max's reference to *jism* introduces imagery drawn directly from the grotesque, of course insofar as it directs our attention to the lower stratum and basic bodily functions.

Alan's family relationships seem to function if at a more mundane and conventional level. He enters carrying a bin-bag full of laundry which he has collected on a visit to his mother, demonstrating continued dependence on her, or at least a willingness to continue to exploit her good will, for instance. He confesses that he has not told her he is a vegetarian and that consequently she continues to offer him tins of meat. In contrast to Tadge, Alan maintains family ties through ongoing visits to the family home and keeping his teddy bears, which are an obvious link to childhood, since the teddy bear is generally associated with childhood and is a symbol of affection and love. Neilson exploits this symbolism to trouble normative assumptions about childhood. Even before the physical destruction of the teddies — which will be analysed later in this thesis — their symbolic innocence is disrupted by Max's humour:

Alan Do you want to play or not?

He nods, gathering up the cards and shuffling them flashily.

Max If you lose the teddies fuck.

Alan (*smiles, shaking head*) No they don't.

Max (*smiles, nodding*) They do. They go at it like bunnies. Teddies, hung like donkeys, going at it like bunnies, doggy-style.

[...]

Max What do you think they *do* on their picnics? After the food's gone and they're tanked up on Bucky? They're beasts of the wild.

Alan They're *not* beasts of the wild. They're part of the family.

Max Families are *built* on fucking. Fucking and secrets. [...] ⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴³ Beck-Gernsheim, p. 3.

⁵⁴⁴ Neilson (1998), p. 69, 74.

The sexualising of the teddies creates a transgressive hybrid of sexuality, combining adulthood desire with the innocence of childhood. Kane's *Phaedra's Love* offers more extreme iterations of the themes of family and love, which I discuss in the next section.

Phaedra's Love

Sarah Kane's second stage play is a rewriting of the Roman philosopher and dramatist Seneca's adaptation of an earlier version of the classic Phaedra myth by the Greek tragedian Euripides. It tells the story of Phaedra, the wife of Theseus King of Athens, and her sexual passion for her stepson Hippolytus. *Phaedra's Love* opened at the Gate Theatre, London, in May 1996 as part of a season titled New Playwrights, Ancient Sources. Kane directed the production herself. It consists of eight scenes and is set in a Royal Palace. Although the time-period is unspecified, the setting appears to be contemporary. The play features six main characters and a crowd consisting of two men, women and policemen, and a child. Theseus, the king leaves the palace after his marriage to Phaedra, who is left alone with his son Hippolytus and Strophe, her daughter from a previous marriage. Hippolytus, who is twenty years Phaedra's junior, spends his time in his darkened room watching TV and eating junk food.

The play opens with a typical day in the life of Hippolytus, during which he indulges in masturbation into a dirty sock and eats junk foods in front of the TV in a room strewn with *'expensive electronic toys, empty crisp and sweet packets, and a scattering of used socks and underwear.'*⁵⁴⁵ His stepmother is concerned about his health and calls the royal doctor to examine him. It also becomes clear that it is Hippolytus' birthday. After looking him over, the doctor suggests that Hippolytus change his diet and get a hobby since 'there's nothing wrong with him medically.'⁵⁴⁶ In search of sympathy, Phaedra confesses her strong feelings for her stepson to her daughter Strophe. Shocked, Strophe tells her the obsession 'isn't healthy' and warns her 'no one must know' it.⁵⁴⁷ Undeterred, Phaedra visits Hippolytus' room to give him a special birthday present which is the confession of her love for him. She performs fellatio on him whilst he watches *'the screen throughout and eats his sweets.'*⁵⁴⁸ Outraged, but still sure of her feelings for him, she leaves. Later, Strophe informs Hippolytus of her mother's suicide, and more crucially about the note Phaedra left claiming Hippolytus raped her. Despite

⁵⁴⁵ Kane, p. 65.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71, 73.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Strophe's insistence, Hippolytus refuses to deny Phaedra's accusation which he regards as 'her present to [him]', he chooses instead to bear the consequences of false accusation of rape.⁵⁴⁹

In the second half, the play descends into an orgy of violence. In Scene six, a priest visits Hippolytus in a prison cell to make him repent of his sin for the sake of 'the stability of the nations' morals' but instead, also finds himself performing oral sex on the young prince.⁵⁵⁰ In the penultimate scene, Theseus returns to the palace and at Phaedra's cremation, promises to kill Hippolytus. A crowd gathers outside the court to watch the trial of the rapist prince. Disguised among his people, Theseus provokes them to attack Hippolytus. Strophe, also in disguise and part of the angry mob, tries to defend Hippolytus, but is punished by Theseus who fails to recognise her. He rapes her and slits her throat in front of the cheering crowd. Meanwhile, Hippolytus's genitals are cut off and thrown onto the fire. As a final intervention, Theseus slits Hippolytus from groin to chest. Thereafter, upon the horrible realisation that he has raped and killed Strophe, Theseus slits his own throat. The play ends with the image of '*the three bodies [lying] completely still*' and Hippolytus looking at the sky with a smile at the vultures descending. 'If there could have been more moments like this' is his final line.⁵⁵¹ For much of the early part of the play Hippolytus is 'filling up time' and 'waiting' for 'something to happen.'⁵⁵² Phaedra's love offers him a 'life at last' even as he takes the last breath.⁵⁵³ In his introduction to Kane's play, David Greig emphasises the importance of the contrast between the two central characters as a structuring device: 'in Phaedra and Hippolytus, Kane marked out the two poles that are the extremes of the human response to love.'⁵⁵⁴ These extremes — excessive passion and excessive apathy — both of which might be considered grotesque distortions of normality, lead, according to Kritzer to the 'destruction of the family.'⁵⁵⁵ The family holds a particularly prominent position in discourses of 'normality', of course, and is often held up as an ideal in ways that exclude and marginalise those who do not conform to its strictly heteronormative values. For this reason it is fertile territory for the grotesque.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102, 103.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵⁵⁴ Greig, David, 'Introduction', in *Complete Plays*, Sarah Kane (London: Methuen, 2001), p. xi.

⁵⁵⁵ Kritzer, p. 34.

There are plainly parallels to be drawn between the dysfunctional and unpleasant central male characters in *Phaedra's Love* and *Blasted*, and these have not gone unnoticed by scholars. Saunders notes, for instance, that the later play is 'a continuation and expansion of the issues and concerns that preoccupied *Blasted*, concerns that involve the dissection of a male sensibility that is diseased and nihilistic.'⁵⁵⁶ Ian and Hippolytus are, for Saunders, 'both nihilistic representations of a masculinity that sees little point to daily existence.'⁵⁵⁷ Similarly, Urban interprets Hippolytus as a 'nihilist who sees no value in the world' which 'only has meaning when he takes his very last breath before becoming a meal for a bird.'⁵⁵⁸ He does find meaning, however, and it is with this in mind that Kritzer reads Hippolytus as delivering 'signs of hope' through which Kane points to 'the possibility of meaningful action in situations of extreme powerlessness.'⁵⁵⁹

The public execution of Hippolytus in the final scene is more than a depiction of bloodbath. In performance the boundaries between stage and audience are deliberately transgressed when, as Charles Spencer notes in his review of Kane's original production, 'people we have previously taken to be members of the audience transform themselves into a vindictive mob, howling for vengeance.'⁵⁶⁰ David Nathan expands also comments wryly in his review for *Jewish Chronicle*, that 'Phaedra's Love is more in-yer-lap,' than in-yer-face because of 'the people sitting near you being apt to turn into actors.'⁵⁶¹ Saunders recalls the intensity of the experience of 'the slaughter of Hippolytus' in performance, and the 'bleeding body parts chucked over the audience's heads.'⁵⁶² Samantha Marlowe also argues the audience is locked into the experience because 'the seating is dispersed so that involvement is unavoidable.'⁵⁶³ This sequence, with its shattering of the fourth wall, calls to mind the murder of Frau Kurten in Neilson's *Normal* and both might be seen as grotesque not just in content but in the way in which they destabilise the conventional boundary between stage and auditorium. The closing image of Hippolytus with a smile signalling his eventual finding of meaning in a meaningless world is echoed in the censor's smile in the final scene of Neilson's play. Both are reliant, as are all of the play's discussed in this thesis, on an assumption that

⁵⁵⁶ Saunders (2002), pp. 72-3.

⁵⁵⁷ Saunders (2009), p. 22.

⁵⁵⁸ Urban, Ken, 'Sarah Kane', in *Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, ed. by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 309.

⁵⁵⁹ Kritzer, p. 36.

⁵⁶⁰ Spencer, Charles, 'Review of Phaedra's Love', *Daily Telegraph*, 21 May 1996.

⁵⁶¹ Nathan, David, 'Review of Phaedra's Love', *Jewish Chronicle*, 31 May 1996.

⁵⁶² Saunders (2002), p. 80.

⁵⁶³ Marlowe, Samantha, 'Review of Phaedra's Love', *What's On in London*, 29 May 1996.

traditional values have been eroded to the extent that they are not easily distinguishable from perversions and lurid fantasies. This is the territory of the grotesque.

A closer examination of the relationships between characters in *Phaedra's Love* through the lens of the grotesque as it relates to notions of normality can, I want to argue, extend existing understandings of Kane's treatment of the themes of love and family. The trigger for the play's action is Phaedra's inappropriate sexual passion for her stepson Hippolytus:

Phaedra Can feel him through the walls. Sense him. Feel his heartbeat from a mile.

Strophe Why don't you have an affair, get your mind off him.

Phaedra There's a thing between us, an awesome fucking thing, can you feel it? It burns. Meant to be. We were. Meant to be.

[...]

Strophe He's twenty years younger than you.

Phaedra Want to climb inside him work him out.

Strophe This isn't healthy.

Phaedra He's not my son.

Strophe You're married to his father.

[...]

Phaedra Can't deny something this big.
[...] Can't switch this off. Can't crush it. Can't.
Wake up with it, burning me. Think I'll crack open I want him so much.
I talk to him. He talks to me, you know, we, we know each other very well, he tells me things, we're very close.⁵⁶⁴

This dialogue explicitly shows that Phaedra's passion exceeds the boundaries of the normal both in the that the object of her obsession is off limits and also insofar as it is more consuming than a typical sexual obsession. Strophe warns Phaedra about its abnormality and the likely consequences of its being revealed. She insists that 'no one must know. / Not even

⁵⁶⁴ Kane, pp. 70-1.

Hippolytus.⁵⁶⁵ She reminds her mother of the precarious position of the royal family in relation to public opinion:

- Strophe** Mother, this family -
Phaedra Oh I know.
Strophe If anyone were to find out.
Phaedra I know, I know.
Strophe It's the excuse they're all looking for.
 We'd be torn apart on the streets.
Phaedra Yes, yes, no, you're right, yes.
Strophe Think of Theseus. Why you married him.
Phaedra I can't remember.⁵⁶⁶

Her motivation for marrying Theseus has been erased, or effaced, by the abnormal power of her passion for his son. Even within existing paradigms of illicit love — not least those established by the Phaedra myth — the relationship between Kane's queen and her stepson is not typical. Kane's Hippolytus is not only an inappropriate focus for the queen's love because of the age difference or the familial connection. Whereas in earlier versions of the myth Hippolytus is virginal and outdoorsy, although somewhat passive, in *Phaedra's Love* his character is marked by introversion, self-indulgence, laziness, nihilism and 'violent detachment.'⁵⁶⁷ All that seems to matter to him is sex — by his own admission he is 'a fat boy who fucks' — but even in this activity he seeks to expend minimal energy.⁵⁶⁸ Indeed, sex is most often figured as a gift bestowed on him by others, a gift which he takes entirely for granted. His use of sexualised language in his conversations with Phaedra is nevertheless striking when compared to earlier stage versions of the myth:

- Hippolytus** When was the last time you had a fuck?
Phaedra That's not the sort of question you should ask your stepmother.
Hippolytus Not Theseus, then. Don't suppose he's keeping it dry either.
Phaedra I wish you'd call him father.
Hippolytus Everyone wants a royal cock, I should know.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁷ Urban (2001), p.42.

⁵⁶⁸ Kane, p. 76.

[...] Or a royal cunt if that's your preference.⁵⁶⁹

The abnormality of their interaction is obvious in this conversation, but even Hippolytus' behaviour does not damage Phaedra's grotesque love for him. In the end, her declaration of love is met merely with mild curiosity:

Phaedra I love you.

Silence.

Hippolytus Why?

Phaedra You're difficult. Moody, cynical, bitter, fat, decadent, spoilt. You stay in bed all day then watch TV all night, you crash around this house with sleep in your eyes and not a thought for anyone. You're in pain. I adore you.

Hippolytus Not very logical.

Phaedra Love isn't.

[...] **Phaedra** I'm in love with you

Hippolytus Why?

Phaedra You thrill me.⁵⁷⁰

Hippolytus response to the revelation that she is in love with him, is: 'Don't be. I don't like it. / Don't even know me.'⁵⁷¹ In a final effort to prove her love, she passionately performs oral sex on him, but his response is typically blasé.

For Phaedra the price of this abnormal sexual transgression is her life, and although suicide might seem an extreme response to rejection and humiliation is not unheard of in fiction. Hippolytus, on the other hand is finally moved by the extremity of her actions, less by the suicide, than by the false accusation of rape, which he understands is likely to have serious consequences for him, the kind of consequences he craves as an escape from his daily drudgery:

Strophe She loved you.

Hippolytus (*Looks at her.*) Did she?

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 78-9, 80.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., p. 81, 82.

Strophe Tell me you didn't rape her.

Hippolytus Love me?

Strophe Tell me you didn't do it.

Hippolytus She says I did and she's dead. Believe her. Easier all round.

Strophe What is wrong with you?

Hippolytus This is her present to me.

Strophe What?

Hippolytus Not many people get a chance like this. This isn't tat. This isn't bric-a-brac.

[...] **Hippolytus** Life at last.

[...] **Hippolytus** She really did love me.

[...] **Hippolytus** Bless her.⁵⁷²

Hippolytus understands, as Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier notes, that 'Phaedra's slander is not a betrayal, it is a sign of love.'⁵⁷³

In the character of Strophe, Kane offers her audience a contrast to Hippolytus's impassivity. Strophe's willingness to sacrifice herself for a family of which she is not really a part also exceeds established norms, however:

Strophe Burn with you.

Hippolytus Why?

Strophe Sake of the family.

Hippolytus Ah.

Strophe You're my brother.

Hippolytus No I'm not.

Strophe To me.

Hippolytus Strange. The one person in this family who has no claim to its history is the most sickeningly loyal. Poor relation who wants to be what she never will.

Strophe I'll die for this family.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷² Ibid., p. 90, 91.

⁵⁷³ Brusberg-Kiermeier, Stefani, 'Re-writing Seneca: Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*', in *CDE Volume 8: Crossing Borders: Intercultural Drama and Theatre at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. by Bernhard Reitz and Alyce Von Rothkirch (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2001), p. 171.

⁵⁷⁴ Kane, p. 88.

She later makes good on this last promise during her attempt to protect Hippolytus from the angry mob. In her exaggerated filial loyalty and her desire for ‘normality’, Strophe represents, however obliquely, ‘unity and character in the midst of the strangeness.’⁵⁷⁵ This is a quality that underpins the grotesque.

Kane’s decision to stage a dysfunctional royal family — Theseus and Hippolytus are examples of impassive modern royalty which seeks only to satisfy its own desires without regard for any negative impact on others — has obvious resonances with contemporary events since the 1990s were a particularly turbulent decade for the British royal family. Her portrayal of excessive sexual passion pushes purposefully into the realm of the grotesque, however, and representations of the abnormal are undoubtedly key to her dramaturgy. The grotesque, according to Thomson, is ‘the ambivalently abnormal’, and this statement might easily serve as a description of Kane’s ethical vision in this play, which is also in one sense a grotesque adaptation of Seneca’s original.⁵⁷⁶ *Phaedra’s Love*’s more disturbing effects are achieved through the intertwining of normal and abnormal elements, or, as Connelly would have it, by ‘breaking open what we know and merging it with the unknown.’⁵⁷⁷

Grotesque normality, as I have argued in this section, is a function of the grotesque hybrids’ dramatic in-betweenness. Tadge’s personal neurosis is examined in *Penetrator* through his complete inability to separate reality from fiction, and through his subversion of the ideals of family. Neilson also tests the boundaries of ‘normal’ friendship by introducing Tadge and it is the abnormal version that triumphs when Alan is excluded. In *Phaedra’s Love* Phaedra’s abnormal yearning for her stepson destroys everyone, but also brings normative notions of family and sexual love into question.

Conclusion

The plays and playwrights on which I have focused in this chapter employ the grotesque to draw audiences’ attention to disjunctions in society, such as the alienating effects of neoliberalism, the psychological violence that results from sexual repression, and the breakdown in family relations that marks late-capitalism. With the exception of *Penetrator*, and to some extent *Ghost from the Perfect Place*, the plays eschew realism, often in favour of deliberately confusing dramaturgical strategies. One effect of the fusion of ostensibly incompatible elements which characterise them, is an undermining of ontological divisions.

⁵⁷⁵ Santayana Cited in Clayborough, p. 17.

⁵⁷⁶ Thomson, p. 27.

⁵⁷⁷ Connelly, p. 5.

My arguments in the chapter, largely proceed from McElroy's statement that in our time, 'the source of the grotesque has moved inward' and the 'awareness of the gulf between self and other has become total and obsessive.'⁵⁷⁸ In different ways *Normal* and *Cleansed* explore the disintegration of the autonomous personality. *Normal* depicts the serial killer's shockingly powerful influence over the naive young lawyer who is obliged to engage in painful self-exploration, and *Cleansed* depicts extreme distortions of physical boundaries, as a metaphor for more widespread societal breakdown and suffering. As David Mitchell reminds us, the 'grotesque—those physical and cognitive anomalies, malformations and deformities placed in the service of symbolic social and artistic meanings—is a fantasy that invokes physical aberrancy as a visible symptom of social disorganization and collapse.'⁵⁷⁹ Elsewhere, *The Pitchfork Disney* and *Ghost from a Perfect Place* spotlight confusion between fantasy and reality. In each case, as Connelly notes, 'the contested space created between the two is where the grotesque creates meaning.'⁵⁸⁰ Grotesque reinventions of the past and grotesque obsessions with the past proliferate in these plays and might be seen as symptomatic of a weakening of history in culture, and a kind of thickening of the present which characterises neoliberal time. In the next chapter, I move on to develop the idea of estranged time, in more detail, and to argue that it constitutes a contemporary articulation of the grotesque.

⁵⁷⁸ McElroy, p. 22.

⁵⁷⁹ Mitchell, David, 'Modernist Freaks and Postmodern Geeks', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 348–365.

⁵⁸⁰ Connelly, p. 12.

Chapter Three

Estranged Time

In this chapter my aim is to develop a new concept I call ‘estranged time,’ as a means of both highlighting and unpacking the grotesque preoccupation with time that marks the work of Kane, Neilson and Ridley in the mid-nineties. By way of context, I begin by revisiting some of Bakhtin and Kayser’s writings on the grotesque — on which my earlier chapters are based — before exploring grotesque interpretations of specifically temporal concepts, and then providing close readings of individual moments in specific plays. In general grotesque discourse lacks a temporal focus, beyond its focus on the life cycle in general terms, and consequently I will also draw on related approaches that can be used to build connections between the grotesque and the concept of time. It is the absence of a focus on temporal distortions in existing literatures of the grotesque, and the gap this leaves, that offers the opportunity to develop the original insights that form the main body of this chapter. This chapter also addresses the plays’ reflection on the neoliberal malaise in which the individual takes precedence in contemporary life. The plays’ portrayal of personal experiences of hopelessness or the feeling that nothing can change are exacerbated by temporal distortions such as loss of time sense, excessive obsession with the past, and dismissive of the present or future.

The body, in its broadest sense, is the central subject for the study of the grotesque in Bakhtinian thought. Bakhtin’s emphasis on the fundamental physical processes of human life, draws attention to the rhythm of a constantly renewing life cycle. So, for instance, Bakhtin detects a ‘typical and very strongly expressed grotesque’ in the ancient terracotta figurines of senile pregnant hags (see page 24), because of the mix of ‘senile, decaying, and deformed flesh’ and ‘the flesh of new life, conceived.’⁵⁸¹ Bakhtin defines this grotesque image as ‘a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming.’⁵⁸² As we have seen, Bakhtin is the primary theorist of the literary grotesque, but his interest in literature extended well beyond this focus. In his essay ‘Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel,’ he coins the term ‘chronotope (literally, “time space”)’ to describe the intersection of time and space in the narrative structures of Western

⁵⁸¹ Bakhtin, p. 25.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

novels.⁵⁸³ Each narrative, according to his argument, has an ‘intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships’ which creates ‘a concrete whole.’⁵⁸⁴ In another essay, Bakhtin notes a contradiction during his examination of the idea of renewal: ‘every truly significant step forward is accompanied by a return to the *beginning* (“primitiveness”), or more exactly to a *renewal of the beginning*. Only *memory*, [...], can go forward. Memory returns to the beginning and renews it.’⁵⁸⁵ For Bakhtin, cycles of recurrence have a significant impact on concepts of the grotesque and of memory. I want to argue that the unpredictable rhythms of memory — moving back and forth and often getting stuck — generate estranged time in my chosen plays and are examples of what I will refer to as distorted nostalgia. ‘Any second of the heydays is more real to me than anything that’s happened since,’ says Torchie in Ridley’s *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, ‘when I think of the heydays it’s like thinking of ... of another place.’⁵⁸⁶

According to Kayser, the presence of the grotesque opens the door to a new world that involves ‘reality destroyed, unlikely things invented, incompatible elements juxtaposed, [and] the existing world estranged.’⁵⁸⁷ In the context of theatre, this estranged world places its audiences in a situation of radical uncertainty. They are never sure whether they are in ‘the vision of the dreamer or daydreamer’ or lost in ‘the twilight of transitional moments.’⁵⁸⁸ Both Kayser and Bakhtin offer invaluable insights into how the grotesque operates, its emphasis on the physical body and psychological states of ambiguity and ambivalence, which I have already applied in my readings of plays in the preceding chapters. However, despite numerous definitions and explanations of the grotesque being developed across the centuries, extant studies do not consider temporal aspects in any significant depth or at any significant length.

In general terms, my goal in this chapter is to fill this gap by identifying, describing, and demonstrating, how temporal distortions are fundamental to grotesque discourse. Suffice to say, I am not greatly interested in elaborating on existing structural theories of narrative time, which are beyond the limits and aims of this research project. Instead, I focus closely on time distortions in relation to explicitly grotesque elements in selected plays. My aim is to

⁵⁸³ Bakhtin, Mikhail, ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics’, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁵ Bakhtin, Mikhail, ‘The Art of the Word and the Culture of Folk Humor (Rabelais and Gogol)’ in *Semiotics and Structuralism: Readings from the Soviet Union*, ed. by Henryk Baran (White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976), p. 293.

⁵⁸⁶ Ridley (2012), p. 222.

⁵⁸⁷ Kayser, p. 161.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

demonstrate that temporal components, in addition to physical and psychological aspects, contribute significantly to the creation of the grotesque's estranged world. In the plays of Ridley, Kane, and Neilson, specific perceptions of time function as obstructions to both the truth of the present and also the likely realities of the future. These distortions are achieved through recurring themes of nostalgia, for instance, or traumatic loss of any sense of time, and the resetting patterns of routines and rituals. Undoubtedly, while these plays are not primarily about time, they are filled with moments of limbo between the past and the present, and frantic imaginings that lead to disruptions and distortions in normative and conventional perception of time. Time is warped and subsumed into their estranged worlds. For this reason, I have chosen to refer to this grotesque characteristic as 'estranged time.'

Harpham's brief observation about the impact of the grotesque on perceptions of time offers a useful point of departure for my concept of estranged time: 'resisting closure, the grotesque object impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future.'⁵⁸⁹ He notices the grotesque's time-warping capacity. Similarly, he reads Bakhtin's senile pregnant hags as 'images of instantaneous process, time rendered into space, narrative compressed into image.'⁵⁹⁰ With this in mind, and with an emphasis on the disjunctive experiences of time depicted in the plays, I propose three features that contribute to estranged time: distorted nostalgia – mentioned above —, momentary limbo, and continuous loops. These three traits have been chosen because they reflect the three divisions of time —past, present, and future — through nostalgic pasts, frozen presents with no progress, and the denial of hope or redemption in the future.

Extended periods of inaction, or very long pauses, or the loss of a sense of time in its entirety —especially under crises — create momentary limbos, and consequently contribute to textures of estranged time on stage. Broadly analogous to what Trish Reid refers to as 'isolated time' in her article 'The Dystopian Near-Future in Contemporary British drama', grotesque limbo is formed through 'the strange temporality inherent in the dramaturgy of unwelcome futures, and the schism that separates the audience from those futures,' which, for Reid, draws our attention to 'the horrors of the present.'⁵⁹¹ The horrors of the present as depicted in *Penetrator* and *Blasted* are good examples of grotesque limbo. 'The world don't exist, not like this,' Cate observes *Blasted*, 'time slows down' like a 'dream I get stuck in.'⁵⁹²

⁵⁸⁹ Harpham (1982), p. 16.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁹¹ Reid, Trish, 'The Dystopian Near-future in Contemporary British Drama', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 7:1 (May 2019), p. 75.

⁵⁹² Kane, p. 21.

This theme of getting stuck, extends to other features of estranged time. Grotesque loops are the final aspect I have chosen to focus on in this chapter. The worlds of *The Pitchfork Disney* and *Phaedra's Love* depict time as marked by the absence of progress, which is replaced by repetitive routines wandering endlessly in circle. Unlike Bakhtin's grotesque's eternal cycle of birth and death, there is no chance of new life or redemption in these repetitions. Thus, grotesque loops, to borrow from David K. Danow, are depicted 'as something discontinuous, a repetition of repeated reversal.'⁵⁹³ Thought of in these terms, estranged time, I propose, reshapes conventional notions of temporality in the theatre using intentional distortions which create a variety of effects. One exchange in Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* reads:

Cosmo Yeah, well, a lot can happen in years.

Presley It can. But sometimes ... it don't.⁵⁹⁴

Noël Carroll's definition of grotesque forms as 'violations of our standing categories or concepts' is a useful reference point here.⁵⁹⁵ In this opening section I have sketched three key aspects of estranged time. In the next, I look more closely at two Ridley plays in relation to their grotesque preoccupation with memory.

1. Grotesque Nostalgia

In this section I argue that Ridley deploys the grotesque in his exploration of memory in *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* and *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, in ways that chime with and utilize my notion of estranged time. In my previous chapters I suggest that Ridley's characters can be usefully considered grotesque because they evince not only unclear boundaries between the normal and the abnormal but also a deliberate confusion between fantasy and reality. Ridley's use of estranged time is another key feature of the grotesque in Ridleyland.

The inherent connection between theatre and memory has been recognised since ancient times. Aristotle's claim, 'tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action,' is affirmed and extended in later centuries.⁵⁹⁶ David Wiles, in *Theatre & Time* (2014), revisits this fundamental link:

⁵⁹³ Danow, David K., *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), p. 145.

⁵⁹⁴ Ridley (2012), p. 41.

⁵⁹⁵ Carroll, Noël, 'The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes toward a Taxonomy', in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. by Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 297.

⁵⁹⁶ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, ed and trans by S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1898), p. 23.

The audience is aware both of the performance in the here-and-now and of the action in some prior place and time that is being imitated. In this sense theatre cannot escape being an act of memory. On a superficial level, actors remember their lines and moves learnt in rehearsal; on a deeper level, all plays are retellings of old stories, and the audience calls back to memory a cultural myth.⁵⁹⁷

Wiles goes on to argue that ‘the great dramaturgical change, distinguishing modernity from the age of Marlowe, was to take the audience into the present of the hero’s memory rather than accompany the hero in his epic journey along the road of time.’⁵⁹⁸ Indeed, in the contemporary context, audience are no longer witnesses to tragedies enacted upon the stage, instead they are typically exposed to the vividly depicted memories of modern characters. This increases the likelihood of a fabricated or distorted recall of events. False memories in this theatrical context might be totally or partially imagined or purposefully manipulated. As a result, depending on the dramaturgical strategies of the playwright, distinguishing between fictional and actual memories may be more or less difficult for an audience. Because the grotesque emerges when harmony and wholeness are interrupted, a deliberate distortion of memory can contribute to the building of an estranged world. Remshardt usefully draws our attention to the symbolism of grotesque art in relation to its origins:

The historical coincidence that these shapes of the grotesque quite literally sprang from the underground allows us to read them as a metaphor of the unconscious as well, as its issues are by turns repressed and liberated. We are reminded that the grotesque touches the substrata of our own emotional and rational “underground”, that it connects with the grottoes, caves, and sunken vaults of our being.⁵⁹⁹

Thus, the realm of the grotesque provides a perfect arena to display both repression of and liberation from memories, often combining these tropes by creating a clash between opposites.

Ridley’s work is characterized by the centering of stories and storytelling. Cath Badham argues ‘the stories that are told between the characters on stage’ in his plays cause ‘a

⁵⁹⁷ Wiles, David, *Theatre and Time* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 43.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁵⁹⁹ Remshardt, pp. 6-7.

rupture in identities and relationships.⁶⁰⁰ Often such ruptures, I want to suggest, are built on distortions of time, particularly of memory. Andrew Wyllie also identifies this preoccupation with the past as a signature of Ridley's work for the stage arguing that 'Ridley's plays are united by a concern with memory.'⁶⁰¹ He also observes that 'memories of the past cause the reality of the present to be lost' for many of Ridley's characters.⁶⁰² These characters, according to Urban, are fed stories, yet are 'sick with nostalgia' which manifests in their 'dismissal of the present and an abdication of the future.'⁶⁰³ Accordingly, Ridley's obsessive use of the past, or perhaps more properly his characters' fixation on telling stories about the past, recalls Harpham observation that 'the grotesque ... impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future.'⁶⁰⁴

The Fastest Clock in the Universe

Ridley's second stage play *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* tells the story of a birthday party. For a more detailed analysis and critical overview of the play, see my commentary on pages 36-39, but for the purposes of this section, and by way of a reminder, the plot is as follows. The party hosts are the youthful thirty-year-old Cougar Glass, and his forty-nine-year-old flatmate Captain Tock. The only invited guest is fifteen-year-old Foxtrot Darling who brings a surprise companion, his pregnant seventeen-year-old fiancée Sherbet Gravel. The party is one among many celebrations for Cougar's nineteenth birthday, each of which centres on a sinister plan to seduce a young boy, in this instance, Foxtrot. The party concludes with Sherbet's announcement her discovery of Cougar's real age and her miscarriage as a result of Cougar hitting her in the abdomen. In response to the original production, newspaper critics variously read the play as being about 'the destructive power of love' or as the story of 'an attempt to hijack time' or as a cautionary tale about 'the danger of trying to stop the biological clock.'⁶⁰⁵ Ridley's use of hyperbole and excess was also noted. Benedict Nightingale called *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* a 'grotesque comedy' which operated

⁶⁰⁰ Badham, Cath, 'Tales from the East End: Dialogic and Confessional Storytelling as Therapy (?) in the Plays of Philip Ridley', in *After In-yer-face Theatre: Remnants of a Theatrical Revolution*, ed. by William C. Boles (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 185.

⁶⁰¹ Wyllie (2013), p. 65.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶⁰³ Urban (2007), p. 326.

⁶⁰⁴ Harpham (1982), p. 16.

⁶⁰⁵ Morley, Sheridan, 'Review of *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*', *Herald Tribune*, 27 May 1992. Kellaway, Kate, 'Review of *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*', *Observer*, 24 May 1992. Billington, Michael, 'Review of *Ghost From a Perfect Place*', *Guardian*, 14 April 1994.

‘on the cusp between cartoon and reality’, for example.⁶⁰⁶ In his later commentary, Sierz expresses a similar view by suggesting that Ridley creates ‘a new world, similar to many aspects of the real world, but also distinct and different’ with a mixture of ‘the gothic, the surreal and the grotesque.’⁶⁰⁷

To create his estranged world, Ridley begins by assigning original names to his characters, many of which evoke, according to Pilný, ‘nicknames originating within a closely knit group of people, such as teenagers or criminals (or indeed characters in a comic book)’.⁶⁰⁸ Pilný also notes that the surnames share ‘a tinge of symbolism’ for instance, ‘the heartless and cruel’ Cougar Glass, Sherbet Gravel with ‘her worldly nature’, and Captain Tock with the echoes of ‘the tick-tock of a clock.’⁶⁰⁹ The estranged world is also conjured through the characters’ memories. The recurring theme of nostalgia is not only evoked via Cougar’s refusal to accept the present realities of aging, but also through the Captain’s extensive collection of birds. Indeed, the central visual feature of the set is, as stated in stage direction, ‘*birds—stuffed birds, china birds, paintings of birds, etc.*’, which creates the impression of ‘living inside a huge, cracked egg.’⁶¹⁰ Captain, we learn, has been collecting his ‘babies’ for years, ‘since before [*Foxtrot was*] born.’⁶¹¹

As Sierz notes, Ridley has ‘an artist’s understanding of animals as symbols,’ but birds do not stand for freedom or peace in *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*.⁶¹² Instead, birds are stuck in time or place. They include a rotten magpie ‘caught in some wire or something’ under a bridge, and the stuffed birds which decorate the set, and which are literally frozen in time.⁶¹³ Captain’s collection demonstrates a desire to preserve birds in mint condition which he is unable to do for himself since, we learn, he went bald at the age of eighteen. The story of the vulture-faced prince’s, whose quest for the fastest clock in the universe gives the play its name, is also infused with avian imagery. Along with the fairy-tale elements, which exemplify Ridley’s exploration of the grotesque body as discussed above, in this story the clock is a symbol for timeless love. Unsurprisingly, the story includes another image of a birds at its centre: ‘The Wizard changed the Prince’s face into the face of a vulture. His hair fell out and was replaced with feathers. His nose grew longer and harder and turned into a

⁶⁰⁶ Nightingale (1992), *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁷ Sierz (2012), p. 102.

⁶⁰⁸ Pilný, p. 34.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁰ Ridley (2012), p. 105, 142.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁶¹² Sierz (2012), p. 102.

⁶¹³ Ridley (2012), p. 105.

beak.’⁶¹⁴ In the story’s resolution, the spell is broken and the Prince regains his human face only when he finds true love. Captain finishes telling this tale in the final moments of the play: ‘and the Prince and the Blind Girl lived ... happily together. And the years flew by them. Years became hours. Hours became seconds. Because The Fastest Clock in the Universe is’, Cougar completes the sentence, ‘love.’⁶¹⁵

The end of the Captain’s story also offers a clue to the nature of the unspecified relationship between him and Cougar. Before telling the story, Captain explains to Sherbet that he ‘made this [story] up many years ago. For someone [he] met. Someone [he] cared for a great deal. Someone who did not care for [him].’⁶¹⁶ But regardless of whether Captain wrote the story for Cougar or not, he remembers their once special bond:

Captain: I have . . . I have this memory, Cougar. Of what it was like. Perhaps it was only for a week. Or day. Near the beginning of . . . us. A moment when you gave me something. Remember that, Cougar? The Fastest Clock in the Universe. You gave it to me once. Will you ever give it to me again?⁶¹⁷

Captain, like his stuffed birds, seems to be trapped in the past, a period in which he believes he had a meaningful moment with Cougar. His preoccupation with the past causes him to remain with Cougar in the hope that they may have a similar experience again someday. Captain appears to be more concerned with potential than with probability. Holding on to this hope, his time is reserved only for Cougar. Despite his complaints in early stages of the play — ‘What d’you think I am? Your skivvy? [...] I’ve got better things to do with my time’ — he keeps himself busy getting everything ready for Cougar’s party, picking up the birthday cake, setting the table, writing fake birthday cards, and even plucking Cougar’s grey hairs.⁶¹⁸ ‘I take you seriously. I have feelings for you’ he confesses by way of explanation.⁶¹⁹ By contrast, Cougar is not willing to allocate his time to anyone: ‘Life’s too short to have feelings for people.’⁶²⁰ Even the image of a clock, which stands for eternal love in Captain’s story, cannot be tolerated in Cougar’s world where the prevalence of broken watches corresponds to

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*

his repudiation of any trace of time flow. Cougar wishes to see all clocks destroyed: ‘They deserved to be smashed! Fucking clocks! Nothing to do but to sit there ticking!’⁶²¹

Each clock is a reminder, for Cougar, of the constant movement away from the past into the present and towards the future. They also increase his awareness of the inevitability of death, and the cycle to which Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque draws attention. Cougar exists in opposition to Bakhtin’s formulation, therefore. By breaking the clocks, he maintains an illusion in which the future is endlessly deferred. This is unsustainable, of course. His fantasy is under constant threat from realities of the present which he is obliged to face. ‘It’s about time you bloody grew up’ says the Captain, ‘You can’t be a teenager all your life ... You’ve got to accept your age.’⁶²² In this instance, Cougar’s inability to confront reality manifests in a fit of hysterics: ‘**Cougar starts clutching at his head in pain. [...] Falls to his knees. He is whimpering. His sunglasses fall off.**’⁶²³ At this point Cougar can only be calmed by the landlady Cheetah Bee who is described as ‘*eighty-eight years old, very wrinkled and virtually toothless*’ and who ‘*walks with the aid of a walking-frame.*’⁶²⁴ She steps in by making comparisons between her decrepitude and his youthfulness:

Cheetah Everything about me is ruined and faded. I cannot hear properly, walk properly, and all I have before me is sickness and death. But you, everything about you, my stripling, is youthful and perfect. Your hearing is impeccable. You have the agility of an athlete. And you have nothing ahead of you but time, time, time. And why? Because I am at the end and you are at the beginning. I am at the end and you are at the beginning.

Captain (*in unison*) Because she is at the end and you are at the beginning. Because she is at the end and you are at the beginning.

Cougar is calm now.⁶²⁵

This ritualistic sequence, which Kellaway describes as, ‘a tonic chant about time,’ demonstrates grotesque time at work.⁶²⁶ Wylie reads Cheetah’s intervention as ‘a double shift

⁶²¹ Ibid., p. 110.

⁶²² Ibid., p. 134.

⁶²³ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., p. 137.

⁶²⁶ Kellaway, *Ibid.*

in memory' where Cougar's unhealthy attachment to 'the memory of his 19-year-old self' is restored after 'being reminded of the benefits of his real age' via a comparison with Cheetah.⁶²⁷ The application of two reminders in the grotesque realm, with double distortion in time, results in a 'commitment to a remembered past as a destructive denial of the present or of the possibility of living in the present.'⁶²⁸ Similarly, Urban observes that 'Cougar's fear of aging ... makes him, in essence, a quintessential nostalgic: he romanticizes his youth to the point where he spends his entire present acting as if he were still living in the past.'⁶²⁹ Cougar maintains this illusion by repeatedly celebrating his nineteenth birthday while Captain preserves the stuffed birds by 'dust[ing] them all once a day.'⁶³⁰ These descriptions of entrapment in time, frame the grotesque as a form of nostalgia.

Early in the play, Captain tries, with Cougar's help, to remember a traditional nursery rhyme:

- Captain** It's an omen. I know it. One for sorrow. That's what the old nursery rhyme says about magpies, doesn't it? One for sorrow. Remember? How does the rest go? Two for joy. Yes. That's it. Then three for a ... oh, what is it? Three for a ... girl. Yes. A girl. And four for a ... What was four for, Cougar? Do you remember? What was four for? ... What was four for? Four for a –
- Cougar** Boy.
- Captain** [...] Seven, Cougar? What was seven for? Seven for a ... ?
- Cougar** Secret.
- Captain** That's right! Seven for a secret never to be told. [...] ⁶³¹

Birds have been considered messengers of the gods, omens both for good and bad, since ancient times, and Ridley draws freely on this symbolism. For example, counting magpies has been accepted in folk culture as a means of foretelling a baby's gender: 'three for a girl and four for a boy'. Thus, the recalling of the nursery rhyme might be seen as a precursor to the introduction of the character of Sherbet. In addition, Cougar's participation in the process of remembering foreshadows the coming of a boy, Foxtrot, and a secret which Sherbet will

⁶²⁷ Wyllie (2013), p. 68.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶²⁹ Urban (2007), p. 332.

⁶³⁰ Ridley (2012), p. 142.

⁶³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

reveal at the end of the play. 'There are certain things we have got to talk about tonight. That's why I'm here' she warns ominously, 'I have a secret I want to tell. ... Cougar's real age.'⁶³² In effect, Sherbet represents the most direct challenge to Cougar's grotesque distortion of time. She is pregnant, which of course evidences a literal commitment to the future, and in direct contrast to Cougar, she celebrates the passage of time: 'Oh, what a lovely phrase. Years passed.'⁶³³ She also challenges his commitment to eternal youth declaring: 'I ain't afraid of getting old. It's only natural.'⁶³⁴

Sherbet is undoubtedly the most obviously victimized figure in the play. Her arrival is foreshadowed in the traditional rhyme about magpies, described above, and her ultimate fate by the image of the rotten magpie with which the play opens. This image is one of deterioration:

Remember that bird I've been telling you about? The one under the bridge. Down Brick Lane? Caught in some wire or something?' ... every day the bird got thinner and thinner. And the squalls got fainter and fainter. It must have been so beautiful once. And now it was just target practice for brutal children.⁶³⁵

Sherbet introduces herself as being very keen on time-honoured celebrations: 'I love traditional things ... Cake on birthdays. Eggs at Easter ... And Christmas! Oooh, I love everything to do with Christmas ... And then New Year.'⁶³⁶ Such traditional celebrations mark the passage of time, of course, and are repeated on an annual basis. They are also associated with family gatherings which create special shared memories. Sherbet directly acknowledges 'the value of traditional things' in generating these kinds of memories.⁶³⁷ She also explains her sense of time specifically in relation to the aging process:

Everyone wants to live forever these days. And look younger. Vitamins for this. Plastic surgery for that. You wouldn't think immortality and eternal youth would be too much to ask for, would you? But it is! We all get old and drop dead someday. And all the

⁶³² *Ibid.*, p. 184, 186.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105, 107.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153, 154.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

fucking surgery and all the fucking tablets in the world won't help you one fucking atom.⁶³⁸

This kind of temporal acknowledgement is obviously a complete contradiction of, and challenge to, Cougar's obsession with the past, and his eschewal of the present and the future. Sherbet further contests Cougar's distorted perception of time by giving him a carefully selected birthday present: '**Cougar** *grudgingly opens present to reveal a clock.*'⁶³⁹ The gift is surely a reminder of the passage of time, which does not stand still for anyone. As Sherbet notes, 'nature has rules and regulations and most of them are either cruel or fucking cruel.'⁶⁴⁰

Sherbet's final action in support of acknowledging the passing of time is to reveal Cougar's real age:

Sherbet [...] Happy thirtieth birthday, Cougar.

Cougar *lets out a piercing howl! He hurls himself at Sherbet, knife raised.*

[...] *Aimed at the ceiling, the gun fires! (All this happens in an instant!)*

The moment the gun fires ... all the lights (the sun-ray lamp included) start flickering violently, giving a strobe effect. And the birds start shrieking deafeningly loud. Everything exaggerated to the extreme.

[...] **Cougar** *punches Sherbet repeatedly in the stomach.*

[...] **Sherbet** *bleeds profusely between legs. The blood goes everywhere.*

[...] **Foxtrot** Oh, Babe. Not the Future One. Not the Future –⁶⁴¹

This action — Cougar's destruction of 'the future,' the unborn child — is in line with his depredation of the present which is signalled by his smashing the clocks. Since babies represent new beginnings and hope, they are the opposite of aging and death. An uninvited guest, Sherbet, forces Cougar to confront the present and the future, but he is so violently attached to the idealised memory of his youthful self and that he will protect his distorted sense of time at any cost. His attack is against not only the reality of the present but also the possibility of the future. Captain, on the other hand, is at last able to see the real Cougar, who is cruel and loveless. When Captain announces that Sherbet has lost the baby before the arrival of the ambulance, Cougar does not give any reaction, but instead '*continues to eat*

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 187, 188, 189.

cake.’⁶⁴² At this point, Captain ‘*aims the gun at Cougar*’, but lowers it when Cheetah enters the room.⁶⁴³ Just as in Rio’s release of Travis at the end of *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, Captain punishes Cougar by letting him live on in fear of aging. The universe, as Captain acknowledges is ‘One big torture chamber.’⁶⁴⁴ Urban rightly suggests that little will change, that there will be ‘more nineteenth birthday parties’ in the future.⁶⁴⁵ The ongoing rejection of the present is reinstated as the status quo. Time remains estranged and grotesque nostalgia prevails. In his next play — *Ghost from a Perfect Place* — Ridley continues his exploration of memory distortions from a slightly different angle. As the play’s title implies, this involves a deeper exploration of nostalgia, not so much a desperate attempt to freeze time, but the bringing of more illusions from the past into the present.

Ghost from a Perfect Place

Ridley’s third stage play, *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, tells the story of the visit of Travis Flood, a seventy-eight-year-old former East End gang leader, to the Sparks’ house for a sexual rendezvous with twenty-five-year-old Rio, whom he has met in the local graveyard earlier that day. Rio’s grandmother Torchie lets him in and they have ‘a good old natter’ which involves ‘reminiscing about the heydays.’⁶⁴⁶ The play ends with Travis’ confession to Rio of his rape of Torchie’s fourteen-year-old daughter Donna, Rio’s mother who died in childbirth, and Rio releasing Travis after he has been tortured by her girl-gang. For a more detailed synopsis and critical overview of the play, see page 100.

In essence, the play is structured around characters’ memories and their retelling of them in the present. Indeed, nostalgic attachment to the past is so intensely depicted here that Michael Billington complained ‘the characters are so busy recapitulating the past there is very little time left for the present.’⁶⁴⁷ The *Sunday Express*’s Clive Hirschhorn, elaborated on this theme by describing the show as ‘a memory play in which the protagonists create elaborate fantasies to supplement the meagre scraps life has thrown them.’⁶⁴⁸ Rabey calls it a ‘narrative of displacement’ in which ‘a character attempts to (re-)order their past through a repeated activity of storytelling’ that ‘wilfully obscures any reliable boundaries between truth and fiction.’ This distortion of the past, as well as the blurring of the boundaries between truth and

⁶⁴² Ibid., p. 191.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., p. 192.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 164.

⁶⁴⁵ Urban (2007), p. 335.

⁶⁴⁶ Ridley (2012), p. 238.

⁶⁴⁷ Billington (1994), Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Hirschhorn, Clive, ‘Review of Ghost from a Perfect Place’, *Sunday Express*, 17 April 1994.

fiction, attests to the presence of the grotesque in the play, which in turn makes a closer critical focus on this aspect of Ridley's dramaturgy a valuable endeavour.⁶⁴⁹

While *Ghost from a Perfect Place* has obvious affinities with the grotesque, it does not, as Pilný observes, correspond to Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque, as 'the rejuvenation of the world.'⁶⁵⁰ Instead, Ridley's grotesque, is more closely related to Connelly's in 'its assertive desire to provide "room to play" for the spectators' imagination.'⁶⁵¹ The interplay between real and fantasy worlds is enhanced by the extensive narration of memories which the characters have chosen either to maintain in their original form or to augment with fantasy elements. Furthermore, the characters (re)enact their memories, just as if the past event is actually happening again at that moment of sharing. Crucially, the distinction between past and present is blurred in these simulated moments which function as embodiments of estranged time.

Characters 'remain stuck in their depraved world' in Ridley's earlier plays, but *Ghost from a Perfect Place* 'open[s] a door out of the lies and corruption' by offering a possibility of change or redemption in the end.⁶⁵² To reach that point, ghosts from the past are initially welcomed into the home, and memories are revisited to test their utility. That is, the constant telling and retelling shapes and reshapes perceptions of time, leading to their estrangement. The character of Mr. Sparks — who never actually appears — is a good example of this effect at work because he is the character most obviously stuck in time. He 'is not dead' but 'praying', Torchie explains, and 'he ain't bloody stopped since the day Donna was buried.'⁶⁵³ He has chosen to cope with the trauma of having lost his only child by going 'mad with grief.'⁶⁵⁴ Mr. Sparks is introduced in Torchie's memories, and this introduction is quickly followed by her narration of his suicide attempt:

Torchie He's praying, Mr Flood. Endless whispered prayers. "You've got to pull yourself together. Baby Rio needs us – What's that? ... A comet? ... Where?"

Goes to window and looks out.

⁶⁴⁹ Rabey, p. 196.

⁶⁵⁰ Pilný, p. 53.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*

⁶⁵³ Ridley (2012), p. 225.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

“No. I can’t see a comet!” But he can, Mr Flood. He can see it blazing over Bethnal Green. And listen to him. “It’s the day of judgment!” And then he’s rushing out! Up to the roof. I want to rush after him. But Baby Rio is crying! She’s screaming! What shall I do, Mr Flood? Run after Mr Sparks or comfort Baby Rio? Baby Rio might be choking! What shall I do, Mr Flood? Tell me! Tell me!

Travis Comfort the baby!

[...]

Torchie Wrong! Because it’s while I’m rocking Baby Rio I hear the crash. Something has fallen from the roof, Mr Flood. Will you look out of the window and tell me what you can see, please?

Travis *hesitates.*

[...] *He goes to window and – being careful of the soot – looks out.*

Travis It’s Mr Sparks?

Torchie Yes.⁶⁵⁵

The failed suicide attempt is particularly disturbing because it has Mr Sparks ‘little more than a vegetable.’⁶⁵⁶ Torchie recalls the doctors saying he is ‘asleep inside his own body’ and ‘not aware of anything that’s going on.’⁶⁵⁷ He functions as symbol of being trapped in time, then, even as he is physically absent on stage. He is not the only thing frozen in time, however. Similar images of entrapment are evoked by Rio in her account of how amber is formed in nature. ‘This prehistoric-tree blood liquid,’ she explains, has also animals trapped in it, such as ‘Insects, [...] Dragonflies. Wasps. All frozen in time.’⁶⁵⁸ The presence of Travis during Torchie’s recollection of the suicide attempt also highlights the interplay between the present and the past and the physical (re)enactments — including Travis going to the window — highlight the instability of time as a construct in the play. Torchie’s account of the tragic event constitutes a deliberate incursion of the past into the present and Torchie incorporates Travis into the confusion by asking him to interfere in her past choices. Such sequences disrupt the progression of time and lay the groundwork for the revelation of the most significant ghost from the past, Travis himself.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-6.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 256-7.

Travis introduces himself as ‘not a gangster’ but ‘a businessman’ who offered ‘a service’ in the neighbourhood.⁶⁵⁹ He is the ghost from the perfect place who willfully edits out less favorable moments from the past. The idea of erasure is underlined in a brief moment after he finally realizes who Torchie and her husband are, and how their tragic story relates to him:

- Travis** [...] I did things ... things I couldn’t think of again.
- Torchie** I forget some things too.
- Travis** That’s not what I mean. The things I did ... I didn’t think of them again because ... I *had* to forget.
- Torchie** *Had* to forget?
- Travis** I *made* myself forget.
- Torchie** I’m ... not sure I understand you.
- Travis** In the heydays . . . The people I dealt with – your husband . . . others – they weren’t real somehow.⁶⁶⁰

Travis’s conscious dissociation from the real horror of his past actions is a function of his fight for survival in the present. He edits the past, removing everything that prevents it being remembered as the perfect place. However, as Torchie reminds him, we ‘don’t get away with anything in this life. Everything has to be paid for in one way or another.’⁶⁶¹ He learns from Torchie’s narration that he is the direct cause of the Sparks family’s troubles. He becomes increasingly aware that his idyllic past is built on fictional memories, such as his memory of himself as a sophisticated man with a white lily rather than a gangster terrorizing the neighbourhood. These illusions are shattered with the aid of Torchie’s memories, but the truth about his relationship with the Sparks remains to be exposed, generating the play’s key narrative tension.

In addition to Travis and Torchie’s re-enactments of crucial moments from long ago, the most significant re-enactment occurs between Travis and Rio towards the end of the play when he confesses to raping Donna. As Rio prepares to kill him with a pair of scissors, after her gang has tortured him by repeatedly stabbing cigarettes out on his face, he claims to know her father. This revelation makes her stop and dismiss the gang. She is desperate to know the

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

real story of her conception and to abandon the myth of her dead mother as Saint Donna. Travis then tells the story of how he met her mother:

It's Saturday night ... I'm with my two boys ... We're out collecting money. That's what we do every Saturday night. I'm standing in front of a large building. Can you see it? There's neon lights. Very bright. It's the last stop of the evening. The cinema. I go to the projection box. That's where the manager will be waiting for me. He's the man I get my money from ... "Where's my money? Speak up ... You ain't got it? Stop snivelling! I don't want your excuses. I'll hurt you, you fucking bastard" ... Someone's walked into the room. It's the man's daughter. She's looking at me. Beautiful blonde hair.⁶⁶²

Travis describes the location in detail in the process transforming the flat into the cinema building but the story has a cruel end. After seeing the gangsters hurting her dad, Donna stops them at the car park. At this point Rio joins Travis in re-enacting the scene of her mother's rape.

Travis "What d'you want? Eh? Speak up ... Why am I hurting your dad? Well ... why don't you get in the car and I'll tell you." My boys are laughing. They know what's on my mind. "Keep watch, you two! Now – get in the car ... Your dad owes me money. That's why I hurt him."

Rio Perhaps ... he can't afford to pay.

Travis Then he gets hurt some more. And so does your mum.

Rio No. Please.

[...] I'll do anything.⁶⁶³

The role-play ends with the rape of thirteen-year-old Donna and Rio willingly takes on the role of her mother. She is no 'mere passive observer' in this act of retelling.⁶⁶⁴ Her aim is to confront the realities of the past and acknowledge their impact on the present: to replace her mythologized mother with the true story of her conception.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁶⁶⁴ Urban (2007), p. 341.

The role of memory and the act of remembering are central themes in Ridley's play, and his characters return to past events which have long been distorted by fictions in order to seek the truth. Such 'confrontation[s] between mythology and truth,' as Wyllie notes, can offer 'redemption' even for Travis.⁶⁶⁵ Travis and Rio are 'released from at least some of the grip of the past' and are provided with the possibility of beginning 'to live in the present' after the ghosts of their past are confronted.⁶⁶⁶ The ending of the play is nonetheless ambiguous concerning what the characters may or may not do with their knowledge of what actually happened in the past. This unresolved tension, I suggest, is explored via a focus on grotesque nostalgia in *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, in particular in its explorations of memory. The play revisits ghosts from the past only to return to the present. As Bakhtin reminds us, only 'memory ... can go forward. Memory returns to the beginning and renews it.'⁶⁶⁷

Distortions in memory not only present grotesque hybrids of fantasy and reality but also subvert perceptions of time. They contribute to the creation of a grotesque world which is in the ever-lasting process of dissolution and estrangement. His repeated use of this trope suggests Ridley views memory distortions as quotidian, as the rule not the exception, and indeed he confirms this in an interview with Aleks Sierz:

And we've all had moments when we've talked to our mum, or our brother, or our uncle, or our aunt about something that happened twelve years ago and their memory of it is completely different to how we remember it: "That's not what happened at all."⁶⁶⁸

His plays offer a sustained exploration of this observation and its more extreme and frightening effects.

I hope to have demonstrated in this section that existing readings of both *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* and *Ghost from a Perfect Place* are enhanced by viewing them through the lens of estranged time and the grotesque more broadly. My analysis of Ridley's plays supports Pilný's contention that the playwright's work is located in 'the abyss of an uncontrollable grotesque,' and is pre-occupied with description of 'the unsavoury elements of the world', but my focus on temporal elements allow, I suggest, an enhanced reading of the plays to emerge.⁶⁶⁹ Ridley's frequent integration of the past in the present, often to

⁶⁶⁵ Wyllie (2013), p. 68.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁷ Bakhtin (1976), p. 293.

⁶⁶⁸ Ridley (2009), p. 115.

⁶⁶⁹ Pilný, p. 22.

acknowledge and confront traumatic past events and release characters from the repression of such memories, sometimes offers a glimpse of redemption, but not for every character and not in every case. Cougar, for example, remains trapped in a grotesque time distortion of his own making. In the next section I extend my analysis of estranged time by focusing on the second feature identified above: momentary limbo. I do this with reference to two examples: Neilson's *Penetrator* and Kane's *Blasted*.

2. Grotesque Limbo

As part of his discussion of the chronotope in relation to the novel, Bakhtin notes that different time-space fusions occur in different kinds of narratives. He offers Greek-romance time by way of example. In 'this kind of time, nothing changes: the world remains as it was, the biographical life of the heroes does not change; people do not even age.'⁶⁷⁰ This 'empty time', he says, 'changes nothing in the life of the heroes, and introduces nothing into their life.'⁶⁷¹ Bakhtin's description of empty time resembles Edward Bond's conception of 'accident time', a theatrical method for engaging audiences imaginatively in the generation of meaning and value. For Bond, accident time:

... is the state of extremity (usually but not necessarily tragic) ... in a sense nothing happens in Accident Time – that is, Nothingness happens in it – that in it events are clotted by Nothingness (clotted by the "fact" of the metaphor) ... so we resolve meaning from them – and then we can know how to (begin) to make humanness out of the events of our lives.⁶⁷²

The search for meaning and humanness, Bond describes, also occurs in Harpham's understanding of the grotesque as generating temporal stasis and nothingness. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, in his examination of the alienated world of the grotesque, Harpham explains how the presence of the grotesque affects time perception: 'the grotesque object impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future.'⁶⁷³ Building on these ideas, in an essay titled, 'The Chronotopic Imagination in Literature and Film,' Bart Keunen notices that 'it is not always clear to us which images are the most significant to the

⁶⁷⁰ Bakhtin (1981), p. 91.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., p. 90.

⁶⁷² Cited in Graham Saunders, 'Just a Word on a Page and There Is the Drama. Sarah Kane's Theatrical Legacy', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 13:1 (2003), p. 103.

⁶⁷³ Harpham (1982), p. 16.

narrator' but that 'those episodes and action-spaces that "stick" or "linger on" are most important.'⁶⁷⁴

Such manipulations create distortions in time perception that in turn generate particular theatrical effects and affects. More specifically, what I term grotesque limbo — a very tight concentration on the present with attendant disassociation from the past and future — combines Harpham's notion of being stuck in the present with Bakhtin's notion of empty time and Bond's accident time. Moments of limbo, without expectation of change, or the possibility of movement backward or forward in time, are characteristic of a number of plays discussed in this study. In the following section I explore how Neilson's *Penetrator* and Kane's *Blasted* generate grotesque effects by emphasizing moments of limbo.

Penetrator

As noted above, *Penetrator*, tells the story of flatmates, Max and Alan, and their unexpected visit from Tadge, an AWOL soldier and boyhood friend of Max. Tadge's arrival forces the flatmates to reconsider their relationship. After Alan is obliged to leave the flat for sleeping with Max's ex-girlfriend, the play concludes with Max and Tadge eating sweets and watching television '*lost in their own worlds*.'⁶⁷⁵ For a more comprehensive synopsis and critical overview, see page 108.

The central theme of the play is male friendship, and the absence of female characters makes *Penetrator* atypical among Neilson's plays. Critics picked up on this absence by selectively highlighting a pair of brief passages in which Tadge forces Max to relive an intimate sexual encounter they shared in the woods as children, and in which Tadge insists he was anally raped by a mysterious group named the Penetrators. In his review for *What's On*, Patrick Marmion describes the play as 'a study of male sexuality' whilst Paul Taylor goes a step further by calling it 'the warped product of repressed homosexual desire.'⁶⁷⁶ For the *Scotsman's* Caroline Donald, Neilson continues to push 'the boundaries of what is discussable on stage', this time by exaggerating sexual content.⁶⁷⁷ Obviously, the play is more than a portrayal of frustrated or repressed sexual desire. In an interview with Trish Reid, Neilson explains that his plays always begin with 'something emotional,' which is followed by 'the

⁶⁷⁴ Keunen, Bart, 'The Chronotopic Imagination in Literature and Film: Bakhtin, Bergson and Deleuze on Forms of Time', in *Bakhtin's Theory of The Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, ed. by Nele Bemong, Pieter Borghart, Michel De Dobbeleer, Kristoffel Demoen (Gent: Academia Press, 2010), p. 40.

⁶⁷⁵ Neilson (1998), p. 116.

⁶⁷⁶ Marmion, Patrick, 'Review of *Penetrator*', *What's on in London*, 13 October 1993. Taylor, Paul, 'Review of *Penetrator*', *Independent*, 18 January 1994.

⁶⁷⁷ Donald, Caroline, 'Review of *Penetrator*', *Scotsman*, 16 August 1993.

theatrical shape that will allow [him] to draw people inside so they can inhabit that feeling.’⁶⁷⁸ The target emotion for *Penetrator* is nostalgia for childhood. Childhood, according to Neilson, is a secure place ‘where you didn’t have to deal with sexuality,’ or, as Rachael Newberry’s study of the play illustrates, a sanctuary ‘untainted by war, debates about sexual identity and the proliferation and celebration of materialism and individualism.’⁶⁷⁹ In this sense, the play is about a nostalgic yearning for a return to childlike innocence rather than sexual desire of any kind. Neilson offers a portrayal of ‘penetration through the depths of memory’ into an estranged world of the grotesque.⁶⁸⁰

The presence of Tadge in the play literalises Max’s desire to return to childhood. As Reid observes, ‘the past returns to haunt the present’ through the figure of Tadge.⁶⁸¹ More than either of the other characters Tadge also exhibits grotesque characteristics, including the blurring of boundaries between dreams, fantasies and reality. He is also obsessed with bodily functions. In fact, everything about him is unstable, and this instability is the main source of tension in the play. As discussed above, Tadge is even unsure about his own identity:

- Max** (pause) I don’t know what to believe, Tadge.
- Tadge** Don’t *call* me that! I don’t want to be *called* that any more!
[...] It’s not my name!
- Max** (nods) I know. (Pause.) I won’t call you it again. I’ll call you Ronnie.
- Tadge** *That’s* not my name either!
- Max** (pause) Not Ronnie *Junior!*?
- Tadge** *No!* That’s *not* my name!
- Max** Keep you’re fucking *pants* on! What *is* your name?
- Tadge** (pause) I don’t know, *do* I? I don’t *have* a name!
- A long pause.*⁶⁸²

In this exchange the grotesque succeeds in ‘emptying the past,’ to borrow Harpham’s phrase.⁶⁸³ Communication comes to a halt. We already know that Tadge is the character’s nickname. Max explains that ‘people started calling him Tadge’ because he got an erection in

⁶⁷⁸ Reid (2017), p. 151.

⁶⁷⁹ Sierz (2001), p. 78. Newberry, p. 67.

⁶⁸⁰ Sierz (2001), *Ibid.*

⁶⁸¹ Reid (2017), p. 26.

⁶⁸² Neilson (1998), p. 98.

⁶⁸³ Harpham (1982), p. 16.

the school showers, and this nickname continued to be used ‘until nobody remembered how it had ever started.’⁶⁸⁴ In any case, connections between the present and the past either vanish or are distorted for Tadge. He occupies an in-between realm which he constructs through a process of emptying the past. His more recent memories are also questionable. It is not so much that he is lying, as that he has lost any sense of stable relationship with the truth:

Max [...] *A long pause.*

So – how’s the army life? See the world, meet new people, blow their brains out and all that?

Tadge *stares blankly ahead for a while, and then it is as if he rejoins reality.*

Tadge I’ve been discharged.

Max (*pause*) Discharged? (*Pause.*) What for?

Tadge (*pause*) They’re going to pay me eighty thousand pounds.

*He looks at Max as if he can hardly believe it himself.*⁶⁸⁵

Tadge later modifies the figure to ‘twenty thousand pounds,’ which is quickly followed by another claim for ‘half a million pounds.’⁶⁸⁶ The repetition of these insecure memories accentuates the present’s developing disparities, as tensions between the characters develop. In combination with the radically untrustworthy past, the frequent pauses add to the sense of grotesque limbo that punctuates Tadge and Max's interactions. Because the past is erroneously recalled in Tadge’s memory, his bewilderment about the present can only be conveyed in these lingering moments when nothing happens.

Tadge’s unexpected visit, like Travis’ in *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, is an attempt to rescue the remnants of an emptied past. Tadge relies on a boyhood buddy Max because he has ‘got a history with him.’⁶⁸⁷ Indeed, one particular recollection acts as bridge to his lost past. Believing him to be a member of the Penetrators, the violent army group that has tortured him, Tadge holds Alan at knifepoint and pushes him to agree that his accusations are true. After failing to get Alan to concede, Tadge turns to Max in a last-ditch attempt to re-establish a link to the present through a shared experience in the past:

⁶⁸⁴ Neilson (1998), p. 92. Tadge is an informal British term for a man's penis.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84, 89.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

Tadge [...] *A long pause.*

It was better before. Tell me about before. Tell me about the woods.

[...]

Max But I don't *remember* ... !

[...] The Woods! The Woods! (*Pause.*) It turned dark on us. We got lost. It was past nine and we couldn't get home ...

[...]

Tadge You were the brains, eh?

Max (*nods*) And you were the brawn.

[...]

Tadge You were scared.

Max So were you. We thought we were going to die. It got really cold.

Tadge What did we do?

Max (*pause*) We uh ... we huddled together. To keep warm.

[...]

Tadge And I said "Will we always be best friends?"

Max And I said "Yes."⁶⁸⁸

Following another extended moment of grotesque limbo, it becomes clear that Tadge's obvious desire is for a return to childhood, as a means of escaping from the horrors of his present. This memory and Max's acknowledgement of it, is a pivotal moment in the play. It functions both a lament for a past that no longer exists and an empowering experience for Tadge and Max. Max is compelled to confront a repressed childhood memory. Even while he initially refuses to revisit what happened in the woods, claiming he has no memory of that day, he eventually accepts the truth: 'You took my trousers down. / My pants. *A long pause.* / [...] You touched my balls. You asked me to cough. You turned me over and spread my arse.'⁶⁸⁹ As the enormity of Max's confession lands, and after a long pause, the stage directions indicate Tadge begins '*calming*' and the knife is '*slowly coming away from Alan*.'⁶⁹⁰ The thing Tadge has needed in order to temporarily repress his chaotic fantasies, is Max's confirmation of their shared moment of intimacy in the past. The distortion in Tadge's

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-10-11.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

temporal sense, never fades, however. He remains trapped in a grotesque cycle of recalling and fictionalising the past which results in dissatisfaction with and alienation from the present.

Alan, on the other hand, expresses his attachment to his childhood through his teddy bears, which he has kept with him into adulthood. For Alan, the bears are ‘a part of the family.’⁶⁹¹ Max, on the other hand, considers retaining childhood toys a sign of emotional immaturity. He is revealingly overly protective of his sense of his own adulthood and resorts to pompous statements, for example quoting quote the New Testament, Corinthians, 13:11: ‘When I became a man, I put away childish things.’⁶⁹² That Max quotes Christian scripture at this point and claims his adulthood in such an overblown way, is revealing, and signals his repression of memories that complicate the idea of childhood as straightforwardly innocent. In sum, all three characters have unhealthy attachments to childhood, and these attachments are preventing them from living fully in the present. Therefore, these attachments can be thought of as trapping them in a kind of grotesque limbo. Alan’s attachment to childhood is directly targeted by Tadge, who toys with the knife before holding Alan at knifepoint, ‘*posing about, spouting lines from films, showing off,*’ then notices Alan’s teddies and takes one of them, ‘*holding the knife at its throat.*’⁶⁹³ Tadge demands that Alan ‘confess’ or ‘the teddy will die.’⁶⁹⁴ After failing to obtain the desired confession, ‘*he tears the teddy to shreds*’ which is ‘*a vicious and frightening action.*’⁶⁹⁵ Then he dumps ‘*the disembowelled teddy on the ground.*’⁶⁹⁶ According to Newberry, this horrific sequence is a ‘physical and symbolic enactment of the destruction of [Alan’s] past, of innocence and childhood, of family and of a place that can never be revisited.’⁶⁹⁷ Tadge’s childhood-shattering action compels Alan to disengage from his nostalgic attachment to the past, forcing him to confront the present reality. As a result, he pays the price for his adult actions, including betraying Max by sleeping with the latter’s ex-girlfriend Laura. This betrayal is revealed through an exchange about another soft toy, ‘that giraffe thing’ which Max refers to as ‘Elmer.’⁶⁹⁸ When Alan tells Max that after the break-up Laura set fire to the giraffe Max had given her as a love token, Max responds that he didn’t tell anyone about Elmer. Alan’s inconsistent replies regarding how he knows Elmer reveal that he has been seeing Laura behind Max’s back.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.

⁶⁹² Ibid., p. 74.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., p. 105.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁷ Newberry, p. 63.

⁶⁹⁸ Neilson (1998), p. 74, 114.

The ending of the play depicts the flatmates' return to present realities after being stuck in the past for a long time. Not surprisingly, earlier revelations and confrontations have decisively altered the way present realities are experienced:

Max Get out, Alan. Just go.

Alan *(pause)* Where can I go?

Max I don't give a fuck. Just go. Go before I ...

Alan Before you what? Kick my cunt in?

Max *(pause)* I wouldn't do that. I'm not that sort of guy.

Alan *(softly)* No. I know you're not.

Max *(pause)* But I'd get Tadge to do it.

Wearily, Tadge lifts his head at the mention of his name. A long pause.

*Alan drops the knife on the floor and exits. A long pause.*⁶⁹⁹

Max's acknowledgement of his earlier intimacies with Tadge, are strengthened by his final rejection of Alan. As a result of their encounters with the past, all of the characters experiences breaches and subversions of their stability. Powerful attachment to childhood is a recurring theme in the play. It is represented by soft toys and their symbolic resonances and by suppressed memories, but it also creates an in-between zone, a grotesque limbo which reality inevitably threatens to disrupt. The early part of the play establishes a kind of closed world where Max and Alan play familiar games and act out silly routines purely for their own amusement. Their behaviours are marked by a pronounced and sustained childishness. In the end, even the return to memories cannot give them access to a world where childhood simplicity is transformed into adult complexity. The play's resolution is pessimistic in this regard, because in the final sequence the grotesque limbo is re-established: '*They munch on the Rolos. Tadge's foot starts to swing. Softly, perhaps unconsciously, they start to hum a tune, lost in their own worlds.*'⁷⁰⁰

Where Ridley's characters repeatedly reject the present reality in favor of an imagined past, Neilson's protagonists choose a grotesque limbo in which they struggle to balance falsely recalled pasts and presents realities. In this regard *Penetrator* chimes with Bakhtin's definition of empty time rather neatly. Neilson examines 'the vulnerability of human existence and an often-futile search for meaningful human connection' and does not arrive at

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

any firm conclusions or solutions.⁷⁰¹ Kane also delves deep in her search for meaningful human connection using the estranged world of the grotesque as her canvas. Neilson has observed that he and Kane are ‘both quite sentimental’ but primarily concerned with ‘the extremities of life: the extreme brutality and the sweetness of it.’⁷⁰² In the section that follows I show how Kane uses the grotesque limbo as a means of exploring this territory in her debut play.

Blasted

Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* premiered at the Royal Court’s Theatre Upstairs, almost precisely a year after Neilson’s *Penetrator* transferred to the venue. *Blasted* is arguably the most widely reviewed play of the period and has certainly remained in the repertoire in a way not mirrored by any other play discussed in this thesis. As is well known, *Blasted* provoked an extraordinary critical outburst, largely in response to its onstage violence. For a fuller synopsis and critical overview, see page 45. In his review, Roger Foss suggests renaming the play ‘Nightmare on Sloane Square.’⁷⁰³ Acknowledging its visceral impact, Sierz also observes that the play, ‘does make you think, but only after you’ve got over the shock of seeing it.’⁷⁰⁴ It had been a long time since a play had generated such widespread controversy and Saunders recalls that *Blasted* became ‘a reported media event throughout the British press’ and was even the topic of ‘a panel discussion on BBC’s *Newsnight* programme.’⁷⁰⁵ Not all responses were negative and some were sanguine. For David Nathan, for instance, such heated debate was ‘naturally always part of the deal,’ especially ‘when pushing forward the boundaries of art.’⁷⁰⁶ One main issue was that critics felt wrong-footed by the production and unsure what to make of its audacious dramaturgy. Kane certainly positions the audience in such a way that it is never quite sure ‘where reality starts and fantasy begins, what war is being waged and why, and if we are really in Leeds,’ as Jane Edwardes observes for *Time Out*.⁷⁰⁷ This radical ambiguity is one way in which Kane utilises the grotesque.

In his discussion of the play Pilný identifies the grotesque in Kane’s use of ‘a free association of images,’ and grotesque combinations of ‘excessive physicality and monstrous

⁷⁰¹ Newberry, p. 69.

⁷⁰² Neilson (2008), p. 78.

⁷⁰³ Foss, *Ibid*.

⁷⁰⁴ Sierz (2001), p. 99.

⁷⁰⁵ Saunders (2003), p. 108.

⁷⁰⁶ Nathan, David, ‘Review of *Blasted*’, *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 January 1995.

⁷⁰⁷ Edwardes, Jane, ‘Review of *Blasted*’, *Time Out*, 25 January 1995.

violence on the one hand' and 'expressionist technique on the other.'⁷⁰⁸ He arrives at the conclusion that the world of *Blasted*'s is akin to Kayser's 'shattered, alienated, radically disorienting, and ultimately terrifying' world.⁷⁰⁹ To create such a universe, Kane first establishes a conflict in the play's structure by placing a mortar bomb at its heart. Although entirely unexpected this formal rupture is thematically coherent in that runs in 'direct parallel to the truth of the war it portrays' with but a 'paper-thin wall' that 'can be torn down at any time, without warning', separating us from the horrors portrayed.⁷¹⁰ We begin by watching a naturalist drama, then, but with the arrival of the Soldier the play transform into something else entirely. There are strong echoes of Harpham's assessment of the grotesque here. For Harpham '[g]rotesque forms place an enormous strain on the marriage of form and content by foregrounding them both, so that they appear not as a partnership, but as a warfare, a struggle.'⁷¹¹ This war between form and content is one reason why the play provoked such hysterically negative reviews.

Like Neilson's protagonists in *Penetrator*, Kane's characters long for a setting that provides them with 'the properties of home: security, fulfillment, privacy, and belonging,' as Christopher Wixson puts it.⁷¹² However, they lose track after 'wandering within spaces that are transient, porous, and constantly under siege.'⁷¹³ In such circumstances, some characters cope with 'the alienation of the world' by retreating completely into limbo, as is the case with Cate's fits. Kayser's concept of grotesque character can help us fill in these blanks. For Kayser 'the incompatibility of world and Self could actually lead to a separation of the two, to the attempt to withdraw into an idyllic or anchoritic existence.'⁷¹⁴ When Cate has an epileptic episode, she experiences a comparable withdrawal. Her fits are depicted as a portal to 'another place': 'The world don't exist, not like this. Looks the same but- / Time slows down. /A dream I get stuck in, can't do nothing about it. / [...] Blocks out everything else.'⁷¹⁵ Her description of the seizures chimes with Kayser's concept of the estranged world and indicates distortion in not only place but also time. She explains her escape in explicitly temporal terms: 'Don't know much about it, I just go. Feels like I'm away for minutes or months

⁷⁰⁸ Pilný, p. 18.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁷¹⁰ Kane Cited in Stephenson and Langridge, pp. 130-1.

⁷¹¹ Harpham (1982), p. 7.

⁷¹² Wixson, Christopher, "'In Better Places': Space, Identity, and Alienation in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*", *Comparative Drama*, 39:1 (Spring 2005), p. 76.

⁷¹³ Ibid., p. 77.

⁷¹⁴ Kayser, p. 147.

⁷¹⁵ Kane, pp. 22-3.

sometimes, then I come back just where I was.’⁷¹⁶ During her seizures, then her perception of time is warped but nothing actually happens. This is a form of grotesque limbo.

Cate underlines the exhilarating quality of that limbo, which might otherwise be read as unpleasant: ‘Just before I’m wondering what it’ll be like, and just after I’m thinking about the next one, but just as it happens it’s lovely, I don’t think of nothing else.’⁷¹⁷ Her acceptance of this grotesque realm as an escape from present reality, can be also examined through the lens of trauma theory. Peter Buse understands Cate’s episodes as ‘a constitutive forgetting’ because sometimes her experience is ‘too extreme to be assimilated by consciousness, to enter into the regular routes of memory, and it is therefore repressed, pushed out of consciousness.’⁷¹⁸ Her fits are never fully explained, but she reveals that the fainting ‘happens all the time [...] since dad came back.’⁷¹⁹ This comment points to the possibility a traumatic event the memory of which is triggered by the return of her father, and also by Ian, who is twenty-four years older than she is, and who consequently represents the figure of the ‘bad parent’. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth observes a similar circumstance:

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most definitions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.⁷²⁰

Cate’s episodes might be credibly read as evidence of a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder, therefore, which manifests several times during her stay at the hotel with Ian. Her repeated withdrawal to a state of grotesque limbo is an emotional and physical response to an unspecified traumatic past and present. She faints twice: after Ian suggests she is not clever enough to get a job, and again when she holds a pistol to Ian’s crotch the morning after he has raped her. While Ridley’s characters’ withdraw by resorting to extreme storytelling and

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷¹⁸ Buse, p. 177.

⁷¹⁹ Kane, pp. 9-10.

⁷²⁰ Caruth, Cathy, ‘Introduction: Trauma and Experience’, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 4.

deliberate memory distortions, Cate abandons reality for a state of grotesque limbo as ‘an escape route from ever having to confront the present.’⁷²¹ Her body also manifests other distortions such as pronounced stuttering and sucking her thumb under stress.

Another aspect of temporal distortion in *Blasted* is the change of seasons between scenes. Each of the play’s five scenes ends with a blackout followed by the sounds of seasonal rain. For Iball, the symbolic use of rain to signify the passage of time is more than ‘a creative solution’ proceeding from Kane’s rejection of ‘the use of theatre music.’⁷²² In one sense these sound effects might be read as an indication of how time is passing in parallel with the play’s actions, but the symbolic relevance of the rain remains extremely ambiguous. At the end of first scene, Ian sexually assaults Cate to ‘*the sound of spring rain*’; the hotel is blasted by a mortar bomb over ‘*the sound of summer rain*’ at the end of scene two; at the end of scene three the soldier ‘*has blown his own brain out*’ to the sound of ‘*autumn rain*’; and scene four ends with Cate’s burying a baby during ‘*heavy winter rain*.’⁷²³ One obvious problem here is whether audience could differentiate between different types of rain and some productions have used ‘spoken stage directions’ and ‘broadcast [them] over the auditorium’s loudspeaker system’ as a way of drawing the audience’s attention to the passage of time.⁷²⁴

Such seasonal inferences are suggestive of Bakhtinian’s grotesque in respect of the perpetual process of life cycle. Bakhtin describes the development of the grotesque:

At the early stage of the archaic grotesque, time is given as two parallel (actually simultaneous) phases of development, the initial and the terminal, winter and spring, death and birth. These primitive images move within the biocosmic circle of cyclic changes, the phases of nature's and man's reproductive life. The components of these images are the changing seasons: sowing, conception, growth, death.⁷²⁵

He continues by noting that while grotesque images did not ‘remain at that primitive level of development,’ they did retain ‘their traditional contents: copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment.’⁷²⁶ Bakhtin’s understanding of grotesque time as related to changing seasons echoed in the events occurring Kane’s in-between scenes: Cate’s

⁷²¹ Wyllie (2013), p. 67.

⁷²² Iball, Helen, *Sarah Kane’s Blasted* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 63.

⁷²³ Kane, p. 24, 39, 50, 57.

⁷²⁴ Iball, *Ibid.*

⁷²⁵ Bakhtin (1984), pp. 24-5.

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*

rape in Spring, the disintegration of the room in Summer, the soldier's suicide in Autumn, and the death of the baby in Winter. The cycle of life, death, and rebirth is completed in the winter when Cate buries the baby, because the event signifies her burial of the past and her readiness to be reborn and to move into a new cycle. Buse recognises her desire to bury the body as 'a willingness to mourn the past rather than simply dig it up again or reenact it in all its violence. In this sense she is closer to "working through" trauma than "acting it out".'⁷²⁷

Cate is not the only character who experiences a sort of transformation through grotesque limbo. At the play's close Ian is also trapped in a similar state. This sequence is worth quoting at length:

Darkness.

Light.

Ian *masturbating.*

Darkness.

Light.

Ian *strangling himself with his bare hands.*

Darkness.

Light.

Ian *shitting. And then trying to clean it up with newspaper.*

Darkness.

Light.

[...] **Ian** *lying very still, weak with hunger.*

Darkness.

Light.

Ian *tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the boards and lifts the baby's body out.*

He eats the baby.

[...] *He dies with relief.*

It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.

Eventually.

Ian *Shit.*⁷²⁸

⁷²⁷ Buse, p. 181.

⁷²⁸ Kane, pp. 59-60.

These short filmic snapshots of estranged experience are an example of grotesque limbo because they occur in what Harpham describes as ‘the space between’ and because they depict grotesque ‘transformation or metamorphosis.’⁷²⁹ Ian is stuck in the space between where he enacts basic physical bodily functions, punctuated by darkness and light. The sequence also evokes Bakhtin’s definition of grotesque realism as manifest through the ‘human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life.’⁷³⁰ The brief array of examples provided by Kane illustrates a dysfunctional life cycle which has become endless and meaningless. Even Ian’s death changes nothing for him in this grotesque limbo. His continued existence after death also contrasts strikingly with his pronouncements earlier in the play: ‘I’ve seen dead people. They’re dead. They’re not somewhere else, they’re dead. [...] Can’t die and come back. That’s not dying, it’s fainting. When you die it’s the end.’⁷³¹ Grotesque limbo does not end with death, which Ian apparently survives.

It is not surprising, that this final sequence has drawn a great deal of critical attention. It is described by Rabey as ‘bleak, but blackly comic in its insistent consequentiality’ and ‘a tour de force example of the tragedy of the grotesque’, for instance.⁷³² Clare Wallace reads it as a ‘spiralling of scenes through seven stages ending in death’ and consequently as a reversal of ‘the seven days of creation.’⁷³³ Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier interprets the cannibalism in particular as Ian’s ‘extreme attempt to hold on to life,’ as analogous to ‘a grotesque body swallowing the product of the womb’, and as proof that ‘the process of renewal might never end in spite of death.’⁷³⁴ Even death is unable to ‘remove [Ian] from the present,’ and according to Kritzer, ‘the symbolic remains of future life,’ the baby’s body, cannot survive in this estranged reality.⁷³⁵ After witnessing extreme violence throughout the play, both Cate and Ian in the end undergo what Saunders describes as, ‘a form of rebirth which involves the almost total destruction of the old self in order to make room for the new.’⁷³⁶ Critics are not agreed, then, about whether this sequence symbolises a cycle of birth and renewal or death and an endlessly expanded present. This ambiguity is in itself a mark of the grotesque.

⁷²⁹ Harpham (1982), p. 7, 8.

⁷³⁰ Bakhtin (1984), p. 24, 18.

⁷³¹ Kane, pp. 55-6.

⁷³² Rabey, p. 205.

⁷³³ Wallace, Clare, ‘Dramas of Radical Alterity: Sarah Kane and Codes of Trauma for a Postmodern Age’, in *CDE Volume 11: Extending the Code: New Forms of Dramatic and Theatrical Expressions*, ed. by Hans-Ulrich Mohr and Kerstin Mächler (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2004), pp. 122-3.

⁷³⁴ Brusberg-Kiermeier (2010), p. 83.

⁷³⁵ Kritzer, p. 32.

⁷³⁶ Saunders (2002), p. 65.

Sean Carney suggests a direct link between *Blasted*'s final scene and 'the Greek word *Até*' which he borrows from Lacan and takes to mean 'a space beyond the limits of the human' and 'a zone between life and death.'⁷³⁷ For Carney, Kane's characters are clearly in *Até* because they can 'neither live nor die.'⁷³⁸ They have been condemned to live in *Até*, or in what I call grotesque limbo, because the border between life and death has broken down. Kane not only subverts established dramaturgical forms but does so through the generation of a grotesque limbo. She does not offer the possibility of solutions or redemption in this grotesque limbo, but rather reveals what Urban calls 'the possibility that an ethics can exist between wounded bodies, that after devastation, good becomes possible.'⁷³⁹ The final exchange between Cate and Ian provides this glimpse of goodness in the midst of destruction:

She sits next to Ian's head. She eats her fill of the sausage and bread, then washes it down with gin.

Ian *listens.*

She feeds Ian with the remaining food. She pours gin in Ian's mouth.

She finishes feeding Ian and sits apart from him, huddled for warmth.

She drinks the gin. She sucks her thumb.

Silence. It rains.

Ian Thank you.

*Blackout.*⁷⁴⁰

As Kane noted, 'sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality.'⁷⁴¹ This ending is evidence of the persistence of goodness, then, but it does not point to a better future in any obvious way. The glimpse is all we get.

In the examples above, drawn from *Penetrator* and *Blasted*, characters are depicted in the alienated world of the grotesque. Kane's violent dramaturgy arranges 'the old in such a way that you see it afresh' and is reminiscent of Bakhtin's grotesque realm in which 'the world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed.'⁷⁴² Harpham also notes that 'open endings which do not bring closure to the dramatic action signal the unfinished nature

⁷³⁷ Carney, Sean, *The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary English Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), p. 267, 268.

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁷³⁹ Urban (2001), p. 37.

⁷⁴⁰ Kane, p. 61.

⁷⁴¹ Cited in Stephenson and Langridge, p. 133.

⁷⁴² Cited in Saunders (2002), p. 28. Bakhtin (1984), p. 48.

of the conceptual processes’, and the presence of such endings in the plays is therefore also evidence of the grotesque at work.⁷⁴³ My aim in this section has been to show that in the plays of Neilson and Kane, liminal spaces where time and place are suspended and characters are trapped in the gap between real and the fictional worlds, and sometimes between life and death, can be usefully understood as grotesque limbos. In the following section I explore my third category of estranged time — continuous loops — in the work of Kane and Ridley.

3. Grotesque Loops

In this section, I explore how Philip Ridley and Sarah Kane deploy estranged time in the form of temporal loops where characters experience cycles of repetition and ritualised events that are repeatedly reset. For the purposes of illustrating this argument I focus on *The Pitchfork Disney* and *Phaedra’s Love*. Ridley has described theatre as a ‘very ritualise’ form, and in this context, he recognises himself as ‘the witch doctor’ for ‘a tribe in the middle of the jungle being afraid of the forest because of the monsters or wild animals.’⁷⁴⁴ He is responsible for telling stories ‘to make them less afraid, or at least feel that they can deal with the monsters.’⁷⁴⁵ This partly explains why his oeuvre is so replete with what Thomas Oldham calls ‘mini-rituals of storytelling’, which typically explore ‘the extremes of human behavior, pushing the audience to its limits in order to make the world anew.’⁷⁴⁶ As Saunders notes, by contrast, Kane employed the ritual qualities of theatre to ‘formalise the horrors [and] confine them within a ritualistic framework so that the agonies were distanced.’⁷⁴⁷ He describes her method as ‘ritualised cruelty’ which oscillates between the ‘extremes of love and pain.’⁷⁴⁸ Brusberg-Kiermeier agrees, arguing that in ‘all her plays Kane uses ritualised cruelty for her discussion of the human state and human relationships’ because theatre provides ‘an ideal vehicle for Kane to combine the realistic with symbolic representation.’⁷⁴⁹

In his examination of *Blasted* through the lens of trauma theory, Buse discusses Sigmund Freud’s concept of repetition compulsion. He summarises it thusly:

⁷⁴³ Harpham (1982), p. 65.

⁷⁴⁴ Ridley (2009), p. 112.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁶ Oldham, Thomas A., ‘Philip Ridley: Still In-Yer-Face’, in *After In-yer-face Theatre: Remnants of a Theatrical Revolution*, ed. by William C. Boles (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 181, 177.

⁷⁴⁷ Saunders (2002), p. 89.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 91.

⁷⁴⁹ Brusberg-Kiermeier (2010), p. 80.

In repetition compulsion a subject unconsciously relives, or even acts out, a traumatic, unassimilated experience from the past, not just once, but repeatedly.⁷⁵⁰

Buse also notes that theoretically, this pattern of repetition could aid in the recognition and mastery of ‘a trauma from the past.’⁷⁵¹ Similarly, Jean Laplanche contends in relation to Freud’s notion of psychic trauma, that the painful event must be internalised ‘even in the first moment’ and ‘then afterwards relived, revived, in order to become an internal trauma.’⁷⁵² Laplanche continues by arguing that it is ‘not the first act which is traumatic, it is the internal reviviscence of this memory that becomes traumatic.’⁷⁵³ This seems like an important distinction. The grotesque loops that appear in *The Pitchfork Disney* and *Phaedra’s Love* consist in continuous repetitions of rituals as a means of coping with traumatic events in the past.

The Pitchfork Disney

As we have already noted, Ridley’s *The Pitchfork Disney* tells the story of Presley and Haley Stray, twenty-eight-year-old twins who have isolated themselves from the outside world behind a ‘*front door with many bolts.*’⁷⁵⁴ Their questionable peace is threatened by the arrival of Cosmo Disney and Pitchfork Cavalier, business partners who perform a bizarre act in pubs which involves singing and eating live insects. For a more detailed synopsis and critical overviews of the play, see page 30 and 95.

As in *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* and *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, *The Pitchfork Disney* mixes pronounced nostalgia with an excessive dose of storytelling in a claustrophobic setting. The Stray siblings are constantly revisiting and picking over the scraps of their early life. The setting is also ‘filled with memorabilia of their childhood,’ as Urban observes, including ‘chocolate bars, the baby’s dummy, the bottle of medicine, the father’s saved wage packets.’⁷⁵⁵ In a ‘colourless room’ in which ‘everything [is] worn and faded,’ the past is a relentless and overwhelming presence.⁷⁵⁶ The dilapidated flat not only offers the twins a secure sanctuary with many locks at the door, it also protects and amplifies their deep devotion to the past and their total disengagement from present reality and future prospects.

⁷⁵⁰ Buse, p. 174.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid.

⁷⁵² Caruth, Cathy, ‘An Interview with Jean Laplanche’, *Postmodern Culture*, 11:2 (January 2001).

⁷⁵³ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁴ Ridley (2012), p. 9.

⁷⁵⁵ Urban (2007), p. 326, 329.

⁷⁵⁶ Ridley (2012), p. 38, 9.

Urban describes their situation as the ‘horrifying state of being trapped in time.’⁷⁵⁷ In contrast to Ridley’s later plays, *The Pitchfork Disney* does not question the legitimacy of the characters’ nostalgic memories — at least other characters do not question their veracity — but instead the ambiguity of past events such as the departure of the siblings’ parents is emphasised. As a result, the play does not conclude with the recovery of a real memory or the revelation of a real truth. Instead, the Strays invent a dystopian reality in which they are ‘the only two left alive’ following an imaginary ‘nuclear holocaust.’⁷⁵⁸ Thus the play’s grotesque manifestations are predicated on a collision between ‘false and true memories of childhood and the reality of present adulthood.’⁷⁵⁹

Time does not move forward for the twins. They have not celebrated birthdays, for instance, since their ‘Mum and Dad went’ ten years ago.⁷⁶⁰ Wyllie considers such tropes evidence of Ridley’s ‘concern with memory’ arguing that the characters’ strong ‘commitment to a remembered past’ eventually leads to ‘a destructive denial of the present or of the possibility of living in the present.’⁷⁶¹ This is a convincing reading. The twins are trapped in grotesque time, with no sense of progress or expectation of the future, no plan, no ambition, or hope. In this sense the play recalls Bakhtin’s Greek-romance chronotope in which, as noted above, ‘nothing changes: the world remains as it was [and] people do not even age.’⁷⁶² Cosmo correctly observes the Strays have been ‘hibernating too long’ and that this is the source of their problems.⁷⁶³ This hibernation, I want to argue, is sustained largely through their submission to and entrapment in grotesque loops.

The play begins with Haley’s plea for Presley to recite more of his stories about the post-apocalyptic world outside the flat. From the opening lines, it is evident that telling stories has become, as Urban notes, ‘a ritual in which both participants know their roles.’⁷⁶⁴ In this case, Presley’s function is to describe the outside, which was once familiar to Haley but is now an estranged reality. The pattern of recurrent narration is also immediately associated with memory distortions. The topic of Haley’s unreliable memory is introduced in their opening conversation:

⁷⁵⁷ Urban (2007), p. 328.

⁷⁵⁸ Ridley (2012), p. 70.

⁷⁵⁹ Wyllie (2013), p. 66.

⁷⁶⁰ Ridley (2012), p. 44.

⁷⁶¹ Wyllie (2013), p. 65, 66.

⁷⁶² Bakhtin (1981), p. 84, 91.

⁷⁶³ Ridley (2012), p. 35.

⁷⁶⁴ Urban (2007), p. 327.

Haley Describe it.

Presley Again?

Haley Once more.

Presley You said that last time.

Haley Did I? Don't remember.

Presley Jesus! You said *that* last time too, you know. *And* the time before that. "Don't remember." "Don't remember."⁷⁶⁵

Two layers of grotesque time running concurrently in the opening scene. In the first instance, Haley's confusion and memory loss represents a distortion of temporal conceptions. Secondly, the narration is extremely ritualised, and the characters are trapped in a grotesque loop. Their memory erasure is supported by the medication they ingest on a regular basis to detach themselves from the painful past and the present emptiness. Haley enters an altered state, a grotesque realm, by sucking a dummy drenched in medicine which makes her 'feel all dreamy and numb' and places her outside time.⁷⁶⁶ In this condition Haley might sleepwalk or even shout in her sleep: 'Mum! Dad! Where are you?'⁷⁶⁷ Their drug taking ceremony has also been ritualised:

Haley Presley! Shall we take our tablets together tonight? Like we used to?

[...] **Presley** gets bottle of tablets. He puts a tablet in **Haley's** hand. He gets one himself. They kneel in front of each other. They put tablets in each other's mouths. They swallow their tablets. They embrace.⁷⁶⁸

Repetitions and their anaesthetic potential are a constant theme, then. At the beginning of the play, and by his own account, Presley has already described the imagined world outside the flat to Haley 'five and a half [times] to be precise' because 'she's been panicky all day.'⁷⁶⁹ The twins' storytelling routines allow them to fill in gaps in their memories with invented details and crucially, to avoid addressing the trauma of losing their parents. The dystopian world they create is partly built on half-remembered facts that continue to permeate the

⁷⁶⁵ Ridley (2012), p. 9.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24, 25.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

present moment, and their fictional narration is interspersed with fragments of the past. For example, the corner shop, where they ‘got all [their] shopping’ and ‘the shopkeeper’ who called ‘Mum “Mrs Stray” and always asked how Dad was’ are consumed by the fictional conflagration, and the rest of the street is the same, ‘just burnt and blistered.’⁷⁷⁰ This narrative is repeated later at Cosmo’s request, but Presley requires a precise pattern in order to tell the story: ‘You have to ask me questions. / What things look like. / You have to begin with the sky.’⁷⁷¹ Only when the sequencing of the description is correct can the ritual practise conjure the desired effect.

For Presley the imaginary world, with its scattering of nostalgic memories, is more present than the real world. Cosmo observes that he likes ‘talking about the past’, to which Presley responds that it makes him feel ‘comfy.’⁷⁷² This comfort zone obviously forestalls meaningful engagement with the present and the future. The forward flow of time is contorted into grotesque loops, characterised by a persistent summoning of early memories and a desire to return to the security of childhood, as when Presley recalls:

Yeah. We’d go out for a ride every Sunday afternoon. There’d be Mum and Dad up front. Us two in the back seat. Blanket tucked round our legs. [...] Sometimes I think of those days and I cry. I’d love to be in that car again. Just for a few minutes. A few seconds even.⁷⁷³

An uncontrolled yearning for childhood is obviously the cause of the twins’ entrapment in this grotesque loop in which memories are constantly recycled. The present is emptied both by this fixation, and also by the catastrophic narrative which they use to convince themselves that there is no value in investing in the present or the future outside of the flat. Survival outside is not an option. The ritualised activities lead to reinforcement of memories but also signal a vicious circle of remembering the past and forgetting the present. This emphasis chimes with Ridley’s argument that ‘we can’t truly experience something until we have found a ritual.’⁷⁷⁴

Like *Cougar* in the later play, Presley regards aging as a nightmare but for different reasons. Even his dreams ritualised: ‘**Presley** ... I had the nightmare last night. /**Haley** Was it

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21, 22.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁷⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷⁷⁴ Ridley, Philip, ‘Controversial Playwright Philip Ridley Defends His Work’, Interview by Rachel Halliburton, *Theatre Voice*, 4 March 2005. Retrieved 7 July 2021 from <http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/interview-philip-ridley-the-controversialwriters-latest>

... the same? /Presley In every detail. It never changes.’⁷⁷⁵ He later describes it to Cosmo in some detail:

I have this recurring nightmare. I wake up one morning and all my teeth have fallen out. They're lying on my pillow like bits of broken china. I get up and look at my reflection in the mirror. I've aged seventy years. Suddenly I'm an old man. I go to comb my hair and it falls out by the roots. I'm so scared. I go to see Mum and Dad and they scream. They don't recognise me. They say, “What have you done with our son?” And I say, “I *am* your son. It's me. Don't you see?” Mum is crying and Dad is shouting. They throw me out of the house.⁷⁷⁶

This sequence occurs at the beginning of Presley’s longest monologue, which covers five-pages in the printed text.

Presley’s nightmare gives way to a fictional tale in which he is seduced by a handsome serial killer named Pitchfork Disney who kills children by impaling them on his pitchfork. Its various shifts in time, location and narrative focus deserve more attention. Presley walks the streets nude after being expelled from the house, which is inappropriate given his adulthood. He even attempts to fit into child clothing in his persistent rejection of adulthood but to no avail. The story concludes with him unleashing a nuclear apocalypse, leaving him ‘the last living thing in the world.’⁷⁷⁷ Then, ‘the nuclear snowfall’ transforms him into ‘a boy again.’⁷⁷⁸ The transformation is reversed, from adult to child, creating a grotesque loop. In sum, this estranged world presents both the grotesque hybrid of a fictional world and the repressed traumatic events of parental loss, which is clearly related to aging in Presley’s mind. The twins’ desperate desire to cling to the remnants of their lost past, creates a distorted present, a denial of the advancing years. Cosmo correctly summarises their situation: ‘How easy it is to stop living. Not to die, but to stop being alive.’⁷⁷⁹ Indeed, Presley reveals to Cosmo that he aspired to be an astronaut:

When I was a kid I had this book with photographs of the moon and stars. But what I liked best were the astronauts [...] Apollo Thirteen was the unlucky one. The astronauts

⁷⁷⁵ Ridley (2012), pp. 19-20.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

were trapped inside a capsule. Floating in orbit. [...] Just floating off in that silver spaceship. Into dark silence. Where no one could bother you. No, it's not so bad. [...] It was at that time I discovered the most beautiful word in the language. [...] The word is so wonderful. Even the way it feels in the mouth is special.⁷⁸⁰

The word is 'Oblivion,' Presley later states.⁷⁸¹ Oblivion means not only the state of being completely forgotten but also the absent-minded state of lacking awareness of what is happening around a person. This choice of oblivion as the most beautiful word reflects Presley's desire to be trapped in time, just like the astronauts, and to simply fade. At the play's resolution the twins are left circling in their own kind of orbit:

Presley and Haley *embrace each other.*

Presley Calm down, Haley.

Haley But it makes no sense, Presley.

Presley I know, I know.

Haley There's no meaning.

Presley I know.

Haley I'm scared.

Presley Me too.

Haley I'm scared.

Presley I'm scared.

Haley I'm scared.

Presley I'm scared.

*Fade to blackout.*⁷⁸²

This repeated declaration of fear signals their return to their grotesque reality. The final image demonstrates the Strays' 'ritualized existence', to borrow Urban's phrase, in 'their tomb-like apartment.'⁷⁸³ As a concluding picture, this last acknowledgement of fear about the present and the future does not convey optimism. Presley's experience of allowing outsiders into the flat does not offer even the potential of change to Strays' lives, but rather provides the excuse,

⁷⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁷⁸³ Urban (2007), p. 334.

if any were needed, for them to repeat their routines behind the bolted door and to ritualistically recall memories shattered and fragmented by prior traumas.

The ending certainly does not match Ridley's promise as a storyteller: 'I will lead you through this tunnel and take you back to a place of light' where 'there has to be this sense of redemption at the end.'⁷⁸⁴ In parallel with Ian's continued existence in the grotesque limbo that marks the closing scenes of *Blasted*, Presley and Haley will resume their rituals which in fact helps creating more estrangement from the present realities. For Wyllie, the twins are 'condemned to an indefinite future of terror, shut away from the world and indulging in drugs, chocolate bars and infinite regressive fantasies.'⁷⁸⁵ Ridley's staging of grotesquely ritualized behaviors, send a message about 'the necessity for us to recuperate the past and to face unpalatable truths about ourselves,' but the Strays fail to do this.⁷⁸⁶

Phaedra's Love

In spite of its title, the protagonist of *Phaedra's Love* is really Hippolytus rather than Phaedra herself, who in Kane's version is, as Kate Bassett observes, 'a psychologically messed-up queen, addictively obsessed and exploited.'⁷⁸⁷ The main focus of the action is Hippolytus's transformation from a grotesquely spoilt and depressed prince devoid of moral values to someone who can manage a smile as vultures descend and he contemplates the certainty of his own death.

Hippolytus is grotesque, both in his monstrous habits and in the way Kane positions him as both human and object, in this case an object of unsolicited and somewhat deranged sexual passion. In a way his corpulent, indolent body provides a metaphor for what Evan Calder Williams has described as the way, 'real abstractions affect real bodies.'⁷⁸⁸ Williams is discussing zombie narratives at this point in his study, and arguing that the body of the zombie metaphorically embodies the effects of late-capitalism, because zombies are insatiable and consequently represent capitalism's 'unwanted poor [and] the sick repetition of want let loose on a global scale.'⁷⁸⁹ Hippolytus is far from poor, of course, but like the zombie, he is a product of excess even if he is positioned precisely at the opposite end of the economic spectrum. Sarah Hemming, in her review for the *Financial Times* captures something of the

⁷⁸⁴ Ridley (2009), p. 112.

⁷⁸⁵ Wyllie, Andrew, *Sex on Stage: Gender and Sexuality in Post-War British Theatre* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), p. 79.

⁷⁸⁶ Wyllie (2013), p. 72.

⁷⁸⁷ Bassett, Kate, 'Review of *Phaedra's Love*', *The Times*, 22 May 1996.

⁷⁸⁸ Williams, Evan Calder, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Washington: Zero Books, 2011), p.73.

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.74.

play's decadence describing it as a 'Jacobean tragedy, splendid in its excessive response to daily corruption.'⁷⁹⁰

By making Hippolytus appearance match his grotesque behaviour, Kane provides an incarnation of the grotesque, at least as it is commonly used as an adjective to describe behaviours as inhuman. The play opens by focusing on this aspect of his character. Hippolytus '*sits in a darkened room watching television ... sprawled on a sofa surrounded by expensive electronic toys, empty crisp and sweet packets and a scattering of used socks and underwear.*'⁷⁹¹ He is eating a hamburger and then:

The film becomes particularly violent.

Hippolytus *watches impassively.*

He picks up another sock, examines it and discards it.

He picks up another sock, examines it and decides it's fine.

He puts his penis in the sock and masturbates until he comes without a flicker of pleasure.

He takes off the sock and throws it on the floor.

*He begins another hamburger.*⁷⁹²

This opening sequence seems designed to inspire revulsion and to establish Hippolytus as person of base appetites and disgusting habits. However, as I have stressed repeatedly in this thesis, scholars often note the feelings of ambivalence the grotesque inspires. Grotesque images have the potential to inspire both attraction and revulsion and while, as David Tushingham observes the 'object of Phaedra's love' in Kane's version of the myth is 'an utterly unworthy one,' he is repulsive, but he nevertheless possesses extraordinary sexual magnetism.⁷⁹³ The power of unorthodox or grotesque lust, is thus admitted, if not entirely celebrated. As Leonard Cassuto reminds us, the 'grotesque is born of the violation of basic categories. It occurs when an image cannot be easily classified even on the most fundamental level: when it is both one thing and another, and thus neither one.'⁷⁹⁴

The grotesque exists in opposition to beauty, which is ordinarily linked to social acceptance and sexual attractiveness — qualities possessed in abundance by the original

⁷⁹⁰ Hemming, Sarah, 'Review of Phaedra's Love', *Financial Times*, 23 May 1996.

⁷⁹¹ Kane, p. 65.

⁷⁹² Ibid.

⁷⁹³ Tushingham, David, 'Review of Phaedra's Love', *Time Out*, 22 May 1996.

⁷⁹⁴ Cassuto, Leonard, *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 6.

Hippolytus — but in giving us a grotesque inversion of Seneca’s prince Kane draws our attention to the existence of the grotesque as a defining feature of contemporary life. Hemming describes the play’s theme as ‘the violence, hypocrisy and apathy of the modern age.’⁷⁹⁵ Similarly, Sean Carney calls the play ‘a comic burlesque of tragedy’ and ‘grotesque *bathos*.’⁷⁹⁶ Kane’s Hippolytus chooses to exist in a state of absolute negation, which manifests as a kind of self-imposed stasis. This stasis is established via ritualised grotesque behaviours, sleeping during the day, eating junk food, watching Hollywood movies, masturbating into socks. In Scene Two, Phaedra discusses her concerns about her stepson’s health with the palace doctor:

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Doctor | What does he do all day? |
| Phaedra | Sleep. |
| Doctor | When he gets up. |
| Phaedra | Watch films and have sex. |
| Doctor | He goes out? |
| Phaedra | No. He phones people. They come round. They have sex and leave. ⁷⁹⁷ |

Hippolytus exhibits no will beyond satisfying his base appetites. He exercises no ethical responsibility and is unmoved by the demands of convention. When Phaedra visits him in Scene 4 to deliver his birthday presents, he is watching TV and playing with a toy car, an activity that signals an attachment to childhood, or at least to childish things. Yet his entrapment in estranged time is more apparent in stage directions which draws attention to his numbness: ‘*His gaze flits between the car and the television apparently getting pleasure from neither.*’⁷⁹⁸ Like the twins in *The Pitchfork Disney*, Hippolytus has no sense of ambition, joy, or hope either for the present or the future. Unlike the Strays, however, he has luxury toys and sexual encounters to keep himself occupied. He does not make up stories. He does not reminisce about the past. His daily routine consists of repeated behaviours – watching telly, eating rubbish, having sex, masturbating into dirty socks, and playing with toys. This cycle of repetition, I want to argue, is in itself a kind of grotesque loop, a glitch that repeats itself without hope of forward movement or backward reflection.

⁷⁹⁵ Hemming, *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁶ Carney, p. 272, 275.

⁷⁹⁷ Kane, p. 66.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Hippolytus's inability to get pleasure from any of these ritualistic activities also signals that he has lost any sense of feeling in this empty present. He admits to feeling bored and recognises sex as a chief displacement activity:

Hippolytus I think about having sex with everyone.
[...] **Phaedra** [...] Would you enjoy it?
Hippolytus No. I never do.
Phaedra Then why do it?
Hippolytus Life's too long.
[...] **Phaedra** You've got a life.
Hippolytus No. Filling up time. Waiting.
Phaedra For what?
Hippolytus Don't know. Something to happen.
[...] Till then. Fill it up with tat.
Bric-a-brac, bits and bobs, getting by, Christ Almighty wept.⁷⁹⁹

This disengagement with real experience in the present distorts the forward flow of time, which is converted into a kind of grotesque stasis, characterised by meaningless repetitions. On hearing about Phaedra's accusation of rape, Hippolytus sees a chance to break this vicious cycle and responds smilingly: 'A rapist. Better than a fat boy who fucks.'⁸⁰⁰ By embracing a violent end, he escapes the grotesque repetitions of his daily routine, and his smile at vultures descending is followed by the final line of the play: 'If there could have been more moments like this.'⁸⁰¹ This moment, and the plot developments that precede it, evoke Harpham's characterisation of the grotesque as 'dynamic and unpredictable,' and as offering an opportunity for development, 'transformation or metamorphosis', which Hippolytus willingly embraces at the cost of his life.⁸⁰²

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored how a grotesque preoccupation with time is evident in the plays of Ridley, Kane, and Neilson. Ridley achieves temporal distortions through his

⁷⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁸⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁸⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 7, 8.

characters' fixation on telling stories about the past, drawing especially on totally or partially imagined or purposefully manipulated memories. In both *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* and *Ghost from a Perfect Place* time distortions underpin the characters' resistance to facing the realities of their situations. Neilson and Kane extend this motif of temporal estrangement to include grotesque limbos. *Penetrator* and *Blasted* contain extended moments where nothing actually happens, almost to the point of denying the value of action. This trope might indeed reflect the wider neoliberal malaise in which the individual is figured as the object, rather than the subject of politics, and in which a sense of helplessness is consequently palpable and widespread. Finally, grotesque loops are depicted in *The Pitchfork Disney* and *Phaedra's Love*, with an emphasis on the cycles of repetition and ritualised events. All of the temporal distortions, in their way, reflect an estranged world in which ethical and political certainties are unstable, or absent, and in which characters' corporeality exposes society's hypocrisy. In the following concluding chapter, I summarise my analysis and point to new areas for investigation and discussion.

Conclusion: Putting a New Lens on the World

We must all have had that experience that you go along to see a play or a film and then when you come out the world looks a bit different. You're suddenly noticing things you hadn't noticed. And that for me is the height of theatricality, the height of art; it's about putting a new lens on the world so we see it in a slightly different way.⁸⁰³

This quote from Philip Ridley asserts the power of theatre to change the way people see the world, however briefly and in however limited a way. As the reviews of the plays under discussion in this thesis demonstrate, they certainly had an impact on audiences, although the after-effect of this impact is extremely difficult to measure and evidence. All three playwrights nonetheless continued to believe in the medium's power, and Ridley and Neilson continued to work in the theatre well beyond the period covered in this thesis.

In this final chapter, I reflect on my research and how it supports my central argument that viewing the work of my selected playwrights through the lens of grotesque theory sheds new light on, and expands our understanding of, the dramaturgical strategies employed in British theatre in the 1990s. As noted in my introduction, I am keen to avoid reproducing some of the problems that Sierz's category of 'in-yer-face' encountered and consequently, my intention is not to provide a new classification or label for the playwrights, but rather to highlight their diversity via engagement with a relatively broad selection of grotesque theories. One of the things that drew me to this approach was Sierz's unhelpfully selective focus in his seminal work *In Yer Face Theatre: British Drama Today*. As discussed in my Introduction, his examination of nineteen playwrights of the 1990s places a very strong emphasis on violence and tends to overlook distinguishing elements of the playwrights' work due to its fixation on similarities. Other critics have, of course, challenged and developed his arguments in productive directions. This is because, rather than delivering definitive answers, his strategy raises several important critical questions. For example, Dan Rebellato asks, 'why did these images proliferate in the 1990s?' and 'why was violence [...] the way in which the new generation chose to establish its distinctiveness?'⁸⁰⁴ Sierz's thesis does not respond to this question in any great detail, but my contention is that arguments about the grotesque in the second half of the twentieth century do, and they consequently can be applied to analysis

⁸⁰³ Ridley (2009), p. 112.

⁸⁰⁴ Rebellato (2007), p. 193.

of these plays in ways that provide new insights. The post-war boom in the use of the grotesque in the arts is explained by Frances Connelly in these terms, for instance: ‘it was the unprecedented violence of the two world wars that drew several English artists to take up grotesque means of expression and in the process of doing so to create ground-breaking work.’⁸⁰⁵ Greg Thorson understands the preponderance of grotesque imagery in theatre in the 1990s as a function of the way in which ‘the contradictions inherent in the grotesque allow playwrights to depict the complex and intricate nature of their contemporary life.’⁸⁰⁶ It is this intricacy and complexity that I have tried to tease out in the chapters above. I have also argued that the relative absence of optimism in playwriting of the period is an indirect response to the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony and an increasingly widespread feeling that nothing can change.

Although the grotesque has a five-century-old history it was not recognised ‘as a meaningful aesthetic category’, as Frances Barasch reminds us, until ‘the first half of the 20th century.’⁸⁰⁷ The eminent American theatre scholar Marvin Carlson, confirms this by defining ‘theatre of the grotesque’ as ‘a movement in Italian drama during and after the First World War’ which distinctively applied ‘fantasy to depict contrasts between appearance and reality, faces and masks, pathetic situations and farcical humour.’⁸⁰⁸ Moreover, according to Barasch, this utilization of the grotesque can result in ‘an irrational anxiety or depression’ because the presence of the grotesque indicates that ‘the world has moved out of its natural order and reason, and the perceiver can no longer find a hold on it.’⁸⁰⁹ The following statement from Philip Ridley about the sociocultural context of the 1990s is strikingly similar in diagnosing a wider cultural malaise:

We have entered a period where the world is astonishing and terrifying and ... the old world doesn’t apply anymore and as an artist that is very exciting ... How can you rationally and intellectually react to something that isn’t intelligent or rational...?⁸¹⁰

⁸⁰⁵ Connelly, Frances S., ‘The Grotesque Turn in Modern British Art’, in *The Grotesque Factor: Essays*, Valeriano Bozal, Martin Clayton, Frances S. Connelly and six others (Málaga, Spain: Museo Picasso Málaga, 2012), p. 103.

⁸⁰⁶ Thorson, Greg, *The New Grotesque: The Theatre of Martin McDonagh and Tracy Letts* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009), p. 7.

⁸⁰⁷ Barasch, Frances K, ‘Grotesque, theories of the’, in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. by Irena Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 85.

⁸⁰⁸ Carlson, Marvin, ‘Theatre of the Grotesque’, in *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*, ed. by Colin Chambers (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 767.

⁸⁰⁹ Barasch, Frances K, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 148.

⁸¹⁰ Cited in Oldham, p. 182.

The grotesque in this context is used by playwrights to critique an unstable contemporary moment that is already consumed by ambiguities and atrocities, or as Ondrej Pilný would have it, to elicit a ‘deeper engagement of individuals with the moral, social, and political deficiencies of the present-day era.’⁸¹¹ This thesis follows Pilný in claiming that playwrights employ the grotesque, to borrow from Nancy Hill, ‘as a means of awakening [the] readers to social concerns.’⁸¹² In order to evidence my argument, I have developed up to date articulations of grotesque theory and applied them to close readings of the plays of Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson and Philip Ridley, with the aim of showing how various but interconnected components of the grotesque are activated in their portrayal of contemporary life. My central argument has been thematically established around three distinct grotesque categories focusing on bodies, hybrids, and time, and has been expanded to reach a working definition of the grotesque as a tool for a new analysis of 1990s drama.

In the first part of the study — grotesque bodies— I show how the body is central to grotesque theory. I draw heavily on the concept of the grotesque body, as advanced by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin through his reading of the work of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais. Bakhtin famously employs representations of the grotesque body — exaggerated corporeal images — to celebrate of the cycle of life. In my opening chapter, I use interpretations of the grotesque body to explore the playwrights’ preoccupation with the blurring of boundaries between normal and abnormal bodies. More specifically, I focus on grotesque images of the human body in selected scenes which I then argue are deliberate strategies employed by the playwrights to violate boundaries in ways that questions what it means to be human. The boundaries of the human body are not exactly broken in these instances, but are transgressed through grotesque images of the face, deformations of the body, and distortions in sexuality. These elements of disharmony, deficiency, deformation, and sexual distortions, achieve a blurring of bodily borders, which constitutes the focus of my argument in this chapter.

My second chapter explores the concept of hybridisation as it occurs in grotesque discourse. Since grotesque hybrid forms challenge standard frameworks, this chapter examines contemporary complexities in human relationships and related notions of the self, through the lens of grotesque hybrids. I am especially interested in the fixing and unfixing of gender roles, and the impact of dysfunctional family relationships in the plays. Unfixing is a

⁸¹¹ Pilný, p. 165.

⁸¹² Hill, Nancy K., *A Reformer’s Art: Dickens’ Picturesque and Grotesque Imagery* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), p. 10.

recurring theme. My selected scenes often gesture towards an unstable zone by rupturing or transgressing the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and eventually, the dissolution of reality itself. My arguments in this chapter, largely proceed from McElroy's statement that in our time, 'the source of the grotesque has moved inward' and the 'awareness of the gulf between self and other has become total and obsessive.'⁸¹³ This inward turn also causes social disjunctions and crises, which I understand as reflecting the alienation effects of neoliberalism, the psychological violence caused by sexual repression and family relations breakdown.

In my third and final chapter, the novel concept of estranged time is developed, and utilised, to shed light on the plays' temporal distortions which include depictions of the traumatic past, the dystopic present, and the non-redemptive future. In the arguments I develop in this chapter, I draw an explicit parallel between the grotesque and recurring motifs such as nostalgia or the traumatic loss of any sense of time, as well as resetting patterns of routine and ritual. This focus allows me to evidence my argument that temporal distortions contribute significantly to the grotesque estranged worlds that mark one strand of British drama in the 1990s. The chosen playwrights repeatedly stage an unsettled world populated by grotesque bodies, grotesque hybrids, and grotesquely estranged time. This reveals the grotesque operating as an important tool for cultural critique in the 1990s.

The playwrights covered in this thesis are acknowledged as pioneers of 1990s new writing although Ridley is the least theorised among them. Elizabeth McCarthy and Bernice M. Murphy rightly include him as an overlooked writer in their work, *Lost Souls of Horror and the Gothic: Fifty-Four Neglected Authors, Actors, Artists and Others* (2016). Still to this day, there is insufficient critical material in the public domain on Ridley. Most recently two short chapters by Thomas A. Oldham and Cath Badham appeared in William C. Boles' edited collection, *After In-yer-face Theatre: Remnants of a Theatrical Revolution* (2020). This represents a welcome addition to the existing literature, but outside that a small number of articles and dedicated chapters in Ondřej Pilný and Sierz remain the only other significant critical interventions. Sierz claims that in making use of extreme theatrical images in *The Pitchfork Disney* Ridley was 'ahead of his time.'⁸¹⁴ He further suggests that 'all of Ridley's plays used shock, but always with a reason.'⁸¹⁵ This reason is to be found, according to Oldham, in Ridley's use of 'the strange in the familiar and vice versa' and that Ridley is

⁸¹³ McElroy, p. 22.

⁸¹⁴ Sierz (2001), p. 47.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid.

‘drawing on his vivid imagination while dissecting elements of contemporary culture.’⁸¹⁶ This assessment resonates with my arguments about the playwright’s use of the grotesque as a tool for critique. Similarly, each of Neilson’s major 1990s plays – *Normal*, *Penetrator*, and *The Censor* — show his ‘rejection of conventional linear narrative techniques; [and] insistence on the importance of fantasy to the life of the individual.’⁸¹⁷ His interest in ‘tell[ing] little stories about individuals – private, personal, erotic, violent – as opposed to big stories about ideologies and politics’ paves the way for his use of the grotesque and its explicitly ethical and political aspects, to critique an age which focuses mercilessly on the personal.⁸¹⁸ Sarah Kane is by some distance the most widely discussed playwright included in this study, but I have sought to show that reading her plays through the prism of the grotesque provides additional insight about the source of her work’s undeniable power. Kane believed that the power of theatre lay in its ability to ‘change society’ but that theatre was ‘not an external force acting on society, but a part of it ... a reflection of the way people within that society view the world.’⁸¹⁹ She utilised the grotesque as a means of exposing the complacency with which 1990s culture viewed suffering in the real world as in itself grotesque.

The most recent publications on the grotesque as an aesthetic category are from literary studies. *The Narrative Grotesque in Medieval Scottish Poetry* (2022) by Caitlin Flynn, is one example as is an article titled ‘The Philosophy and Drama of Life: The Theatrical Understanding of Dostoevsky’ by Tatiana S. Zlotnikova (25 July 2022). These examples demonstrate that the grotesque remains an important critical category in contemporary scholarship. In this thesis, I have sought to show that the concept of the grotesque, which I have examined from various perspectives, offers a valuable lens through which to consider how these plays and playwrights relate to their own particular cultural moment, expand the existing vocabulary of contemporary theatre, and consequently pave the way for later generations of young British playwrights.

⁸¹⁶ Oldham, p. 174.

⁸¹⁷ Reid, Trish, ‘Post-Devolutionary Drama’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama*, ed. by Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 198.

⁸¹⁸ Neilson cited in Reid (2017), p. 14.

⁸¹⁹ Kane cited in Sierz (2001), p. 93.

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