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Abstract:

In this paper I look at the ways that the instrumental and cautionary profile of sex and relationships education has been used to regulate the sexuality of young people in the UK. This regulation is practised partly as a counter to the commodification of sex in the mass media but also as a means to reinforce the social and cultural norms that are performed within the binary structure of gender identities as exemplified by the nuclear family. I offer an alternative strategy in which works of art become the locus for a discussion of young people's concerns about sexuality. With reference to the recent work of Paula Rego I examine the imaginary and symbolic space afforded works of art to demonstrate how acts of interpretation can provide insights into the workings of desire, and the way such acts might enable young people to discuss sexuality and the erotic. I argue that because this ambiguous space provides a certain distance, unlike the commodifying and confessional discourses of the Internet, TV and magazines, sexual norms can be questioned without either the prurient/censorial attitudes of the tabloid press or the clinical/moralising agendas of pedagogic discourse. In other words, within the discursive/hermeneutic space engendered by works of art young people are able to bypass those instrumental discourses that are unhelpful in the development of sexual well-being.

The prescriptive models of sexuality provided by the nineteenth century institutions of medicine, psychiatry and the law have been assiduously critiqued within philosophy and

the social sciences since the 1970s (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Foucault, 1973; 1976). These critiques have had only moderate effect in schools despite the liberal if normative rhetoric of British government advisory documents (DfEE, 2000) and an increasing literature promoting inclusion (see Epstein & Johnson, 1998 for a summary). Indeed, the discourses developed by these nineteenth century institutions have sedimented within sex and relationships education (SRE) to produce a form of restricted pedagogy in which teaching is reduced to a form of information delivery centred on human reproduction, sexual health and, nominally, loving relationships, a legacy at once scientific and proprietous. Despite this 'neutral' and secular profile SRE is often framed by moral imperatives based on the prohibitions of Judaeo/Christian/Islamic teaching (Reiss & Abdul Mabud, 1998). It is true that these proscriptions have been reinterpreted, transformed and liberalised within British and European law, but the laws that apply to society at large are not necessarily the same as those in local authority schools (the infamous Clause 28, now repealed, is a case in point). The tensions between these secular and religious imperatives have been further complicated by legislation that has oscillated between conservative and liberal perspectives. At best, this has produced a form of SRE where knowledge and responsibility are informed by the principles of freedom and choice (Bottery, 1998) but more usually a cautionary pedagogy is the preferred method.

This negative model is taught to young people at a time in their lives when they are commonly perceived to be both hypersexual and sexually vulnerable and thus in need of constraint and protection; as Bay-Cheng (2003) notes '...the infusion of a biologically determined hypersexuality into the identity of the adolescent succeeds in giving inevitable and natural cause for adult intervention and surveillance' (p. 62). Such intervention takes different forms. In the USA, for example, the moral guardians of the right are introducing

abstinence curricula as a necessary tool for the cleansing of America, an intervention that is apparently proving increasingly persuasive amongst middle class students (Kirby, 2001).

In Britain, however, this form of denial is less favoured; instead the dangers of sex are offered up as some sort of cautionary prophylactic. Yet young people must feel strangely positioned and repositioned within four (and more) conflicting worlds: those of the school, the home, the mass media and their desires (although within their lived experience the four are intimately interconnected if not interdependent).

It is not surprising therefore that young people are confused about how to discuss sex, sexual identity and sexuality in a public, school forum because the dominant institutional discourses to which they are subjected are so polarised (SRE is cautionary and the mass media commodifying; although religious and political discourses may complicate this easy division). Nor is it surprising that young people can be equally confused about how to practice sex as a social expression of their libidinal desire and developing sexuality because desire, as a psychic and bodily process, and sexuality, as an articulation and performance of that desire, are rarely mentioned in schools (Allen, 2001). However, if sex is spoken of with detachment or reticence within SRE, the mass media is less coy. Here the language and image of sex is unremitting; sex saturates the advertising targeted at the young and permeates the narratives of popular song, TV comedy and soap and Holly/Bollywood. It could be argued that it is partly this saturation that produces the hypersexual identity attributed to teens, an attribute produced by adults and projected onto the young. Yet this intensification and hypervisibility is paradoxically both different and similar to the illicit speech that Foucault argues was a counter effect to the rules of decorum instigated initially by the Church and more latterly the nation state (1998, p. 18). On the one hand it is different because after three centuries of surveillance in which the incitement to speak sex

was the prelude to official censure, today in the UK censure tends to emanate from a minority of private individuals or institutions characterised by the media as reactionary, odd or culturally other, that is unless censure is aimed at children. On the other hand it is the same in that such incitement has produced an accumulation of detail in which sex has permeated all cultural domains from astrology through to zoology, domains to which not only adolescents but also children have easy access. To pretend schools can protect young people from this saturation is a particularly foolish form of denial.

Whilst a heterogeneous group of moral guardians wring their hands at the state of Britain's sexual mores and urge censure, intervention and ideological returns (Riches, 1998; Ali Ashraf, 1998) the media washes its collective hands by holding up a sort of mirror; let the people have their say, we give you a platform for telling us how it is. Within this 'naturalistic' paradigm the non-celebrity talk show (of which *Jerry Springer* is the most 'baroque') acts as a public confessional where 'revelations' are paraded and performed. In effect these events are a type of confrontational and or spiteful entertainment in which sometimes vulnerable people expose intimacies and scandals in exchange for a moment of 'fame' or for a type of absolution that turns out to be nothing but a handful of platitudes. Some academics argue that such shows provide a voice for people who would otherwise be excluded from the democratic process (Gamson, 1998) or who may be opposed to the idea of consensus preferring the possibility of compromise (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). However, the discussions and interactions on shows such as *Jerry Springer* are far from critical (in the democratic sense) and are evidently controlled by the host rather than the participants. Lunt & Stenner (2005) argue that the show 'inverts the principles of the bourgeois public sphere. Rather than avoiding the potentially polluting effects of personal and institutional interest [it] embraces them and inverts the hierarchy between argument

and feeling' (p. 70). Nonetheless, it is the young and the socially marginal or dysfunctional who predominantly figure within this 'ship of fools' and they are provided with air space not to oppose the rationality of legitimate voices but to perform as the 'other' against which the majority can reinforce normative conventions, particularly in relation to sex and an economy of desire, and thereby establish their commonality.

I do not wish to add my name to the list of critics who suggest that the visibility of sex is a sign of moral decay; on the contrary I would wish to increase its visibility. What I object to is the specific profile it is given. If the abject and dysfunctional other is provided by reality TV and those tabloid journalists who pursue a prurient interest in sexual deviancy (strongly aged and non-heteronormative) its antithetical ideal is promulgated by magazines, TV and cinema in the form of youth culture, where a predominantly heterosexist sexiness (strongly gendered and raced) dominates (McRobbie, 1991). There are of course many exceptions to this rule (the androgyny of 1960/70s soul and rock stars, 1980s pop, the homoeroticism of the 1990s Calvin Klein campaigns, 1990s and later TV e.g. *Queer as Folk*, *Metrosexuality*, more recently *Sugar Rush* and the Internet supplies a polymorphously perverse array of possibility) but on aggregate the mass media peddles disturbingly stereotypical, binary models of the world (Walkerdine, 1984; Moore & Rosenthal, 1993, pp. 71-73) and sex education in schools does little to confront them. Indeed some critics have argued that it reinforces such stereotypes albeit through different apparatus. For example, in the USA, Bay-Cheng (2003) notes three objections to the comprehensive school-based sex education (a model closely resembling SRE dominant in the UK). The most pernicious of the trio is a failure 'to address the interplay among gender, race, class, and sexuality, while simultaneously propagating sexist, racist, and classist notions of sexuality' (p. 64). To this litany can be added a strongly differentiated gender bias in which girls' education is framed

by reproduction and responsibility whereas boys' is framed by pleasure and its containment (Whatley, 1992).

Sex education in schools ought to question rather than perpetuate these biases by providing a forum in which young people can discuss what it is to be a socially and culturally situated, desiring subject without fear of sanction or ridicule. Petrovic (2002) discusses models for sex education in which the naturalised status of heteronormative assumptions are explicitly countered through recognition and reasoned debate and advisory documents do exist designed to help teachers counter the heterosexist and homophobic behaviours that often surface in schools (Forrest et al, 2003). But teachers are fearful of the fullness and the humanity of these approaches and the trouble they can bring; they understandably stand off while the majority of the media shoves a caricature at the world. Petrovic is not alone and Atkinson (2002, p. 127) lists a range of educationalists arguing for proactive and challenging models. I wish to advocate a similarly critical and thus problematic approach (although more a strategy than a model), particularly as few of those cited above are argued from within visual culture studies.

But before providing an example of this approach and its strategies of visibility it is important to consider current omissions from the SRE curriculum. At present, information about reproduction and sexual relationships dominates most teaching although discussion of sexual orientation and identities is sometimes included. Beyond this liberal agenda, where choice and tolerance is central (Archard, 2000), sexual desire and erotics rarely figure even though these terms characterise young people's experiences of and feelings about sex (Allen, 2001). Allen proposes that a 'discourse of erotics' in sex education 'might offer one way of raising the status of knowledge offered by such programmes by

catering to young people's interests and drawing such information closer to their practice' (p. 120). By the erotic Allen means: 'of, concerning or arousing sexual desire or giving sexual pleasure' (p. 114). I would broadly agree contending that it is essential for young people to engage discursively with sexual desire and the desiring subject in addition to exploring sexual identities (the liberal agenda) if an understanding of sexuality and sexual well-being is the aim. In the case of identities the focus is on the process of identification, how a person is seen by others and interpolated into discourses of sexuality. Once named in this way the desiring subject wonders how their name relates to their sense of themselves as a gendered and sexual being, their place within the matrix of relations that make up social norms. In contradistinction, a focus on desire recognises the centrality of the erotic, the way that desiring is always directed at some person or thing that the subject finds sexually arousing. Desire is therefore a relational process in which the object of desire (whether manifest through the imagination, representation or as an embodied being) as well as the sexual practices enacted for the purpose of satisfying that desire, are profoundly conditioned by socio-cultural codes and conventions. But it must also be remembered that a sexual desire is not equivalent to a need, a lack that requires an instinctive response as in the case of hunger. Rather sexual desire is a drive that in psychoanalytic terms can never be satisfied because:

Desire is that which is manifested in the interval that demand hollows within itself, in as much as the subject, in articulating the signifying chain, brings to light the want-to-be, together with the appeal to receive the complement from the Other, if the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want or lack.

That which is thus given to the Other to fill, and which is strictly that which it does not have, since it, too, lacks being, is what is called love, but it is also hate and ignorance. (Lacan, 1966, p. 291)

Within the process of desiring it is quite likely that unconscious and possibly repressed feelings will surface in ways that may surprise the desiring subject, in other words, unlike the conscious act of identification, desire may seem to spring from nowhere and upset a person's sense of themselves in relation to the normative order. Although desire seems to emerge from within the subject, it nonetheless takes shape in relation to sexual practices as they are present in society, both from within the 'family romance' (Freud, 1909) and as prescribed within cultural behaviours and conventions. Within a multicultural and plural society, it is no longer possible (or desirable) to assume these conventions are unified or necessarily compatible. Rather they are characterised by a super-complexity in which heterogeneous, often contradictory, practices vie for allegiance; the desiring subject may thus be torn between different imperatives from both within and without.

If unification is out, dominant discourses do, however, condition people's imaginations. The prevalence of visual culture in the formation of desire suggests that it is here that an erotics can be usefully located and examined. Indeed, eroticism cannot be divorced from discussion of sexuality without diminishing or denying what is most compelling experientially. But young people are often reluctant to discuss their sexual feelings in a public forum, although not in peer, friendship groups (Allen, 2001). This is why the use of examples from visual culture in schools can provide a welcome distance between the object of discussion and the discussants. Further, as so much contemporary eroticism is bound up with the commercial cultures of consumption, works of art can provide a locus for

discussion because, historically and across cultures, they have been a primary vehicle for forming an erotics that is not necessarily subject to capitalist constraints (Bataille, 1957; Jones, 1998).

Given the retroversive and instrumental profile of much SRE, through what mediating vehicle and in which school forum, is it possible to discuss sexuality with young people so that it engages with their lived experiences? In particular where can the predominantly visual modality of the mass media's exposure of sex be seriously countered? Surely it is in the subject art and design, or within Citizenship, Personal, Social Health Education (PSHE) and SRE (with the assistance of art and design and or media studies specialists) that discussion of both the image as a form of representation and, specifically, representations of sexuality might find a critical home?

In the remainder of this paper I therefore wish to demonstrate how a theorised discussion around the work of contemporary artists who explore sexuality, in this instance Paula Rego and her 2004 painting *The Pillowman*, might provide a way into a critical, discursive engagement with sexuality and eroticism. *The Pillowman* is not a celebratory work, and in retrospect I am surprised by my own choice because like SRE, it too is a sort of cautionary tale. But Rego's work conforms to a critical strain in contemporary art in that it provides an alternative to the representations produced by the mass media, albeit that artists today frequently employ its lens-based and increasingly digital technologies. However, *The Pillowman* is a pastel painting in the traditional form of a triptych. My analysis is informed by art historical and cultural theory (an interdisciplinary field that increasingly engages with visual production and its meanings) but particularly by visual semiotics (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996; Bal & Bryson, 2001). In its pedagogical application this field develops

visual literacy as a necessary skill for a democratic education and it is my contention that semiotic approaches provide art teachers, and others who engage with the analysis of images in school, with a range of analytical tools that build on the interpretative processes young people are adept at using in everyday conversation, processes habituated because users are acculturated within a multimodal visual culture (Sturrock, 1993; Addison, 1999). Here the analysis is presented as a personal reading; in the pedagogic instance such a reading would emerge through an investigative, if contextualised and guided, discussion.

The Pillowman (2004)



Contexts

First allow me to provide some historical and biographical information so as to frame my analysis with some knowledge of the social and cultural contexts pertinent to the making of this triptych. Rego's work often recalls and reconfigures her childhood 1935-51, one spent within the Catholic and Fascist Portugal of Salazar's military dictatorship 1932-74, although her bourgeois and atypically liberal family were non-radically resistant. She remembers this period as one of perpetual fear; fear of the outside, fear of flies and one in which the gendered prohibitions of Catholicism allied to Fascism were stifling and, she sensed, unjust. She is reported to have said: 'in my art I try to give fear a face' (in McEwen, 1997, p. 27) and it was through drawing, perpetual even obsessive drawing from a very early age, that she rendered its profile. She was sent to London at the age of sixteen to finish her education, ending up at the Slade School of Art where she met and later married fellow painter Victor Willing with whom she had three children. For Rego,

London was the antithesis of Portugal representing a sort of freedom (nonetheless she has oscillated between the two all her adult life, receiving recognition as an artist in both countries and in Portugal as early as 1966 with her first solo show). In recent interviews she suggests that image making has acted as a sort of ‘exorcism’, a term that locates her practice within a tradition of painting, from Goya, through Beckmann to Bacon, in which social and cultural superstition, personal and psychic fears are exposed and sometimes parodied. With the latter in mind it is also significant to acknowledge the debt she feels to caricature, from Gilray to Disney. Since 1972 she has also undergone Jungian psychoanalysis.

The production of *The Pillowman* was motivated by the play of the same name by Martin McDonagh (2003) which Rego saw at the National Theatre, London. The play concerns a writer of children’s fiction who elaborates a character, a sort of bogeyman, who persuades abused children to commit suicide rather than face a life of misery. The deaths within the fiction mirror actual murders within the author’s community (a totalitarian state) and the police investigate the coincidence by interrogating the author and his brother (a man with learning difficulties who turns out to be the killer). Although McDonagh engages with taboo content, child abuse (corporal and probably sexual) and the social processes of othering and scapegoating, he refuses to satisfy or comfort his audience by providing a moral framework. The central image of the bogeyman (who is almost benign for McDonagh) is redolent of childhood fears, a fictive figure who frequently resurfaces in popular culture; consider such films as the series ‘Halloween’, ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’ and ‘Friday the Thirteenth’, where the sexual promiscuity of the young is the trigger for the vengeful activities of a perverse but redemptive figure. In these works the titillating scenarios, assertive violence and elaborate gore are the condition for a clear division

between good and evil. But, unlike these examples, within Rego's painting, like McDonagh's play, there is no space for preaching.

In terms of the characters and the props Rego draws directly from McDonagh: the Pillowman himself (although in the play he is pink), the 'girl' who thinks she is Jesus carrying her own crucifix (left and centre), the doll-like figures carved from apples (right). However, the painting is not an illustration of the play and there are even some indications in the central panel that locate it within a specific historical/autobiographical moment (a rare admission in Rego's work). The doll and the aeroplane represent a man associated with the French resistance, Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince* (1945) who visited Portugal in 1940; the cap worn by the small man to the left boasts wartime camouflage; the woman in a bathing costume is Rego's mother appropriated from a family photograph. During the time conjured here Rego would have been aged 5-10, possibly the age of the girl sleeping curled against the Pillowman.

Mis-en-scène

Nonetheless *The Pillowman* is not a reconstruction of a specific moment. The spatial context in which the characters perform their acts is clearly staged. The outer panels represent two similar, almost empty, studio environments figured by people and artefacts positioned within clearly defined spaces. In contrast, the central panel, with its flat backdrop and foreground figures tilted up towards the picture plane, recalls the unsuccessful deployment of props and accessories associated with the spatial configurations resulting from a session in a provincial photographic studio. The outer panels are illuminated as if by a spotlight in the theatre, a device that has the effect of forming a

unifying arc as it joins the points where sand meets sky in the central panel. With this device the spatial dissonance between the three panels is masked but not resolved, an effect that unsettles the act of viewing because it implies different viewing positions and thus a mobile spectator.

The characters

The Pillowman

The Pillowman is common to all three panels and dominates the central image. Despite his considerable presence he is little more than a floppy stuffed prop, a grimacing rag doll that would be lifeless if it were not for the intervention of the females who surround him.

Indeed his postures and embraces are all at their behest, the result of manipulations both on and off stage. His robe figures as an archaic or exotic accessory amongst the otherwise modern signifiers that abound elsewhere (in the centre, it is more like a smock). His netted skin is black, a colour which may refer to the way the bogeyman is racialised for historical reasons in Portuguese culture (a consequence of the wars with Islam and the subsequent colonial incursions within Africa and Brazil). This legacy has coalesced into a grotesque visual stereotype that still figures in the carnival costumes paraded through Portuguese and Catalan streets each spring (Penrose, 2005, p. 11). In all three panels the Pillowman's distended lips and phallicised head crown a surprisingly passive body; possibly sleeping, possibly blind, possibly mute. And yet, in the left panel, he appears to be uttering a sound. But the gaping mouth, easily read as a voice equivalent to his rhetorical gestures, is more likely to indicate the effects of gravity as his mouth is forced apart by the weight of his engorged head propped against the chair. In the right panel, the Pillowman has been stripped to his undergarments and sports a prominent if veiled erection, a sign that would

indicate a temporary state of arousal but which here is as permanent and constructed as his bulging nose. His various animations are therefore not his own but projections of the fantasies of his makers and manipulators; moving from left to right, notice that he is gradually undressed. This would tend to suggest that the sexual signifiers in each panel: agonised/ecstatic groan, opened fly, erection, represent female expectation rather than male desire, indeed, in the left panel the girl casts a penis-like shadow which, abutted against the Pillowman, transforms his robe into a scrotum sac. In this way the Pillowman's presence combined with the girl's projection are transmogrified into something entirely phallic.

The girl with crucifix

Yet the sexualisation of the Pillowman, the embodiment of the girl's fear, is neither of his or her volition. Rather, it is a consequence of the play of light and the spatial proximity of the two figures, a spectre unconsciously produced by the girl's action. If the Pillowman is phallicised, notice too how Rego's girl is sexed by a chance juxtaposition. The yellow sponge tied by a blue ribbon to the ladder (a window cleaner's device) is positioned between her legs, an index of her vagina, a metaphoric visibility somewhat at odds with the status of a girl in Catholic Portugal. This configuration makes reference to Picasso's *Three Dancers* (1925) in Tate Modern, where the abandoned figure at the left is similarly sexed using the visual metaphor of railings. Picasso's painting also conjures a crucifixion and its monumental, triadic violence has been interpreted in relation to mythic, colonial and autobiographical concerns (Meecham, 1996). In a traditional triptych the central panel is usually the most significant in terms of its imagery. Within Christian iconography it is the place where the crucifixion itself takes place, the central sacrificial event. The other panels are therefore viewed in relation to it, whether in a temporal and/or symbolic sense. In the left panel the anguished disposition of the Pillowman's hand and head reference the

mourning witnesses to Christ's death: usually his mother, St John and Mary Magdalen. Rego's girl takes the spatial position of one of the mourners but she doesn't appear to conform to this role. One rung of the ladder cuts across her mouth as if to prevent her from uttering a sound (a censorship typical in cases of abuse) and she is preoccupied with carrying or possibly positioning the ladder/crucifix, an action that would suggest a participation somewhat different to that of a witness. Indeed, her wary gaze, off stage to the left, suggests further witnesses unseen by viewers of the painting (in McDonagh's play the girl who believes she is Jesus is subjected to physical abuse by her relations including crucifixion). The girl also appears in the central panel (identified through the colour of her dress) carrying a crucifix from right to left, a directionality that possibly indicates a temporal sequence to the unfolding events and one that would indicate she is to be the subject of, not the witness to, the crucifixion.

The sleeping girl with red hair

The girl curled against the Pillowman appears tiny against his gigantic and looming form, a vulnerability contradicted by the ease and comfort of her sleep. She wears a wedding ring as if in role-play, an accessory that gives symbolic credibility to her imitation of adult behaviour. Notice how she embraces the Pillowman and the way her legs awkwardly entwine and phallicise his left leg, a configuration that produces an image of penetrative sex, a displacement of the phallus that might otherwise appear rising from his opened fly. Notice how it is she, not the bogeyman, who has agency here, albeit that her actions are unconscious in sleep, a product of fantasy? If colour is being used to indicate a continuity of characters across the panels, is it she who holds the pillowbaby at the right? A girl brought to maturity beyond her years as a result of an illicit union?

The woman wearing a straw hat

In the central panel the woman in the upper right holding a baby represents a figure of motherhood. Kress & Leeuwen (1996, pp. 207-208) argue that two-dimensional images are organised into zones that indicate hierarchical and temporal values. Within contemporary western culture the lower section is the zone of the real, the upper the ideal; the left the given, the right the new; such positioning is dependent on the reading direction employed within the culture of the maker. Within this taxonomy the woman in blue is evidently an ideal mother and is typical of the representations of peasant earth mothers, images of fecundity and nurture, which proliferated under Salazar's regime (Penrose, 2005, p. 13). Her proximity and connectedness to both the crucifixion and the Church make them attributes of her character and thus align her to the virgin mother of Christ, a designation that her vaguely halo-like straw hat and blue dress only reinforce.

The figures within and across panels

Rego's own mother, sunning herself left background, ignores the infant beside her in order to pose for the camera, suggesting self-centredness rather than care as the given attribute. In this way the four female characters, configured as a cross, indicate stereotypical, paired opposites: left to right, narcissism/neglect with nurture, top to bottom, sacrifice/agency with intimacy/imagined dependence. The males, boy-doll, Pillowman and dwarf, suggest neither the virtues nor vices of stereotypical males. Positioned at the centre and toward the lower left of the central panel, this trio of outsiders indicate a somewhat fragile masculinity as the given reality against which female fantasy is generated, a fantasy conditioned by the ideal masculinity projected within the patriarchal ideology of Church and Fascist state. Indeed at the very centre of the image is an embrace, but the adult, heterosexual couple of normative relations are replaced in the masquerade of girl and man/doll. To the right, a

blue dress adorns a woman who bears some similarity to the ideal figure but who is more individuated, resigned rather than serene. She too configures a moment in the narrative of Christ's passion her pose redolent of the Pietà, the image of the mother holding the dead Christ. This connection returns the viewer to the central panel where the Pillowman's splayed and awkward slumber, although not exactly a crucifixion, alludes compositionally to a Christian martyrdom, for example the skinning of St Bartholomew. Here, the Pillowman's craned neck enables him to gaze out at the viewer, along with the other dolls, the only point where Rego provides the Pillowman with any action that might suggest agency, an action that because of his blindness is painfully redundant. All the female characters conform to their normative gender role, glancing down or sideways, looking within the painting, or out at fictive witnesses, never engaging with the viewers of the painting. Only Rego's mother and some of the dolls contradict this rule although they are so tiny their returning gaze can easily be overlooked.

The girl with dolls

The girl (centre, right panel) seated precariously at the edge of the couch is almost unique in her singularity. To left and right her attributes are dolls, objects onto which children project their fantasies. In McDonagh's play she carves the apple figures as gifts for her abusive father in the knowledge that in his greed he will disrespect her authorship by eating the gift. As retribution for his cruelty she inserts razor blades into the figures and thus ensures his agonised death. In Rego's work the girl's placement and pose suggests an emergent but uncomfortable pubescent sexuality. With reference to Freud's 'Symbolism in Dreams' (1915/16, p. 191) the ladder extending vertically from her shoulder might represent her burgeoning sexuality while her pose echoes the well-known 'archetype' by Edward Munch entitled 'Puberty' (1893) its edge-of-couch uncertainty indicating the cusp between girl- and womanhood. However, in the Munch she appears at the mercy of the looming, phallic shadow that threatens to overwhelm her (a shadow redolent of Rego's left panel). Here the extrovert dolls and smiling fetishes underscore her introverted, possibly sly personality, so different to the foursquare, determined solidity of her counterpart in the left panel.

The props

The props are uniformly decrepit, an array of costumes and household furniture that might be found in a car-boot sale or junkyard. Nonetheless they serve as a fertile resource from which children might conjure a symbolic universe. The ladder, blind and sheet-bandage serve as a makeshift cruciform and along with the silken but threadbare bedspread domesticate and interiorise the mis-en-scène, even the landscape is more like a large photograph, the type used as a mural in 1960s coffee bars and which can still be found in

run-down seaside hotels. The comfy but upright chair with antimacassar at left indicates that the household is either that of an elderly person or one where the necessary culture of hand-me-downs indicates a discreet poverty. The worn leather couch references both psychoanalysis and the amateur porn movie, only the shoes worn by the females clearly position the painting historically in some moment after about 1970. The toys are clearly gendered: car, plane and boy doll with the Pillowman, dolls and fetishes with the green girl; males have technology and resistance, females only fantasy and subterfuge.

How does this descriptive analysis begin to map the network of desires, frustrations and retributions conjured by Rego in *The Pillowman*?

Images within discourse

The Pillowman constructs a claustrophobic world of abuse and mis-directed desire resulting in perverse and murderous consequences. Popular discourses around the abuse of children have effected the scapegoating of largely middle-aged, male paedophiles, marginal figures within local communities who prey on and penetrate the ideal of the nuclear family, whether through geographical or virtual (Internet) access. This stereotype belies the statistical perpetrator, usually male but sometimes female, of any age, either from within the family, a close friend, neighbour or a person whose institutional role provides them with a parental status, e.g. a teacher, community worker or priest, (NSPCC, 2005) and it is a stereotype that also hides the accumulation of historical and cultural determinants that have produced the modern abuser. Rego's bogeyman is one such stereotype, a large, overtly sexualised, black male at once abject and endearing, grotesque and familiar. His actual impotence contrasts with the sexual potency with which fantasy arms him. He is the

antithesis of the patriarchal ideal, but he populates the fantasies of the female characters because of their experience of males in life. This ideal is the product of male hegemony, here represented by an alliance between Catholicism and Fascism, whose repressive apparatus positions females within an impossible opposition, virgin mother/whore, and thus outlaws desire as sinful. Desire is therefore directed at the fictive male imago, the sinful other, whose capacity is gross and indiscriminate. The reality of this figure is the scapegoat, and Rego presents him as a sort of martyr. Indeed, what she represents overall is the downside of a repressive regime, the figures who bypass the normalising function of the law and social norms because their experiences refute the mythologies that support such fictions. She shows the consequences of not discussing sex and sexuality and a failure of the internalised self-scrutiny that Foucault proposes the Catholic Church first instigated but that has since been transformed and perpetuated through psychoanalytic and populist therapeutic practice. In some ways Rego's nightmare superficially resembles the dysfunctional confession presented on 'reality' TV, at once absurd and grotesque, spiteful and sad. But Rego's work does not perform in the same way, it does not provide a dysfunctional parade in order to establish social norms through difference, rather it reveals and simultaneously masks sex and sexuality through its complex iconography, it has of it something of the play of desire, its uncertainties and insights.

It is through an engagement with work such as Rego's that both the hegemony of the mass media and the controlling regime of schooling can, for a moment, be suspended. In their place an ambivalent alternative is presented demanding that students interpret its multiple meanings in relation to both historical and contemporary referents. A space is thereby opened up for a discussion about the relationship between personal desire and tradition, self-determination and the injustices of conventional power relations. And yet, when one

discovers that the bedspread to the upper right, with its shimmering facture and transcendent bird, was Rego's marital bedspread and therefore indicative of a marriage, that she claims was extraordinarily fulfilling (ended due to her husband's early death from MS in 1988), the triptych's ideal upper right corner becomes the domain of fulfilled rather than frustrated or misdirected desire; this domain opposes the religiously inflected fantasy and suicidal practice to its left. But fulfilment here is a lost ideal. Where we as spectators enter the picture, where we are, is to the left, and in Christian iconography this placement is at once sinister and impure (Bataille, 1957, pp. 123-124). This is a place of ill will, one that I fear sex education in schools is in danger of replicating.

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