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Fear and Anxiety in Contemporary Drama and Performance: An Introduction

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Contemporary Western social and cultural discourses are preoccupied with narratives of fear and anxiety. In contrast to the anxieties and fears that come with and are clearly linked to immediate dangers, for instance in times of religious persecution or civil war, in Western democracies fear has turned into – what we would describe as – ‘fear for fear’s sake’, whereby “being scared has become a culturally sanctioned affectation that pervades all aspects of life” (Furedi 1). The sociologist Frank Furedi even goes so far as to speak of a current “politics of fear,” which “exists as a force in its own right [...] is the inevitable consequence of the prevailing mood of political exhaustion” (123). Consequently, one might even describe fear and anxiety today as approaches to reality and modes of perception that serve as perspectives in the processes of sense making (cf. 131).

In this context, it is not surprising that there has been a significant increase in (popular) cultural production negotiating contexts, people, events, and situations that relate to these emotional states. Contemporary drama and performance have proven especially productive with regard to the negotiation of fear and anxiety, and, especially after the events of 11th September 2001, there has been a significant increase in the number of plays and productions that can be regarded as engaging in the politics of fear. To consider these phenomena as intellectual and cultural challenges and to investigate them in greater detail appeared timely, necessary even, and thus the annual conference of the German Society for Contemporary Drama in English, which took place at the University of Hildesheim from 31st May to 3rd June 2018, focused on fear and anxiety in contemporary drama and performance.

Similar to Furedi, the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed also points to the political functions of emotions when she argues that “emotionality as a claim *about* a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow

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‘others’ with meaning and value” (4). With regard to the interdependence of emotions and power, Furedi has suggested a close connection between citizens’ feelings of fear and anxiety and their general impression of powerlessness. Whether citizens perceive themselves as powerless or as having agency is a question that plays a central role in the creation and experience of emotional states such as fear and anxiety. Moreover, politicians in western democracies have to ask themselves whether they regard their citizens as the potential agents of change or whether they consider them merely to be the objects of change (cf. Furedi 3). Quite a few of the plays that are being discussed in this journal issue pivotally address this question of human agency.

Over several decades, the welfare state has gradually been transformed into what politician Iain Macleod, already in the mid-1960s, called “the nanny state” and what, more recently, sociologist James L. Nolan Jr. has termed “the therapeutic state” (1998). Every day, with the alleged motivation of ‘raising awareness,’ we encounter public campaigns that actually aim to channel or control behaviour. In a usually condescending mode, state-sanctioned posters or announcements offer patronizing forms of advice, which profess to have only our welfare in mind. The “management of public anxiety” (Furedi 138) is part of a wider endeavor that the politician Tessa Jowell has called “the new politics of behaviour” (*Observer*, 21 November 2004, qtd in Furedi 149). With the ostensible purpose of taking remedial action, campaigns might not even refrain from the use of scientific inaccuracies, exaggerations or down-right lies, which add to the citizens’ states of uncertainty, but which are being excused by the good intent they are to serve and hence reinterpreted as ‘good lies’ or as conducive to a ‘greater truth’ or the public’s ‘greater good.’

Interestingly enough, *The Greater Good* was chosen as the title of the spy film that followed the long-running TV series *Spooks* in 2015, implying that citizens might indeed benefit from surveillance in general and the espionage business in particular. Ongoing geo-political divisions, for instance into East and West, as well as state-sanctioned surveillance – especially if one takes the frequency and intensity of surveillance into account – attest to today’s all-pervading fears and anxieties. As a result, such emotional states also play a significant role in recent research in the field of surveillance and visibility studies and are in part also reactions to – what we have described elsewhere as – “the seemingly impenetrable complexities and insecurities of our contemporary surveillance environment” (Brusberg-Kiermeier and McKenzie 74). We would argue that – since we are scarcely familiar with panoptic and synoptic regimes and part of a viewer society (cf. Mathiesen) – theatre and performance should appear as quite ‘natural’ modes of communication today: whereby the interlocutor is a fairly passive audience, who watch and listen in on others without really questioning their status as voyeurs.

As the contributions to this journal issue – which are all based on papers that were presented at the annual CDE conference in Hildesheim – illustrate, this voyeur status of the audience is repeatedly taken up, played with, and thereby renegotiated in some of the plays discussed here.

Encounters with works of art are neither restricted to a cultural elite, nor a clear-cut section of society, nor are they located outside the political. As literary scholar John Brannigan writes: “culture is a field of much ideological contest and contradiction, and [...] no cultural artefact or practice is outside this political sphere” (12). Along with Patrick Duggan, we would suggest that – because of their ‘live-ness’ and immediacy – drama and performance are especially suited for the negotiation of issues involving fear and anxiety: “in the contemporary moment live performance encounters offer a means with which to attend to both discourses and politics of fear and anxiety and the effacement of reality with complexity” (Duggan 40). Many a time, our contributors refer more or less explicitly to this special potential of plays to attend to discourses and politics of fear and anxiety and their creation of what Duggan has called “a performative aesthetics of ‘dis-ease’” (40):

Although nascent, the idea of *dis-ease* tries to figure a third state, one that might be seen to take fear and anxiety together rather than separately: in a state of *dis-ease* the world is not rendered meaningless, [...] but it becomes othered, distanced and shimmers in and out of readability in an encounter that makes one feel disoriented *in* it and perturbed by the experience *of* it. (45)

Following Duggan, we contend that “the deliberate unsettling of the audience” (44) can be intellectually stimulating and help us as audience members interrogate our own attitudes toward and views of pressing political issues. The unsettling of audiences is especially significant, because the therapeutic state is increasingly constructing the citizen as such as vulnerable (Furedi 74) or even neurotic (cf. Saunders, in this volume). We suggest that there is a huge difference between the construction of the individual as vulnerable in the political sphere – which is not a choice made by the citizens – and the encounter with an art-work that has an unsettling effect – and is a question of choice. Thus, we would argue that the theatre offers the members of the audience the possibility of being vulnerable in a safe space.

There are numerous examples for contemporary plays that negotiate issues that can cause fear and anxiety and offer the potential of unsettling the audience – either in more or less explicit ways. In-*yer-face* theatre, for instance, is defined by its direct impact on the audience with regard to the creation of *dis-ease* or disgust and has often chosen to explore the limits of dramatic representation with regard to the characters’ strong emotional states of fear and despair. In the 1990s, dra-

matists such as Philip Ridley or Sarah Kane, for example, took great care not to attribute their characters' fears and anxieties to clear political or social causes, as Graham Saunders explains in his contribution to this volume. This, however, does not imply that they do not negotiate political or social issues in the wider sense. Kane's characters frequently react with ritualized actions in order to cope with experiences of violence that stylize the use and abuse of bodies and are symbolically highly charged (cf. Brusberg-Kiermeier 80–81). At the same time, some productions of Kane's dramas have made clear that a realistic mode of representation of emotionally strongly charged key moments – and especially of the characters' extremely violent actions – can paradoxically weaken the plays' impact on the audience (cf. Brusberg-Kiermeier 80–81). This paradox also sheds light on the boundaries of the creation of fear and anxiety in the theatre. As Ondřej Pilný argues in his contribution to this volume, the spectators' discomfort may be so strong that they become mentally and emotionally paralysed. He shows that the audience might have feelings of disempowerment to such an extent that the theatrical encounter cannot trigger any impulses for social or political action.

While some of the plays that our contributors decided to focus on may create fairly strong impressions of dis-ease in the audience, there are also a number of plays discussed in this volume that employ quite unspectacular modes of representation, which might induce milder forms of fear and anxiety, such as unease. Plays such as Lucy Prebble's *ENRON* (2009), for example, deal with concrete political problems and still develop creative ideas how to discuss historical, fear-inducing happenings in modes of representation that are not realistic. Prebble, for instance, chooses to use managerial language to describe human interaction and to depict ENRON's accountants as predators. By having the executive board members appear as the "three blind mice" and the accountants as the anthropophagous animals "the raptors," Prebble vividly illustrates the inscrutability and perilousness of the financial dealings that the audience members are to a certain degree familiar with, but cannot really fathom at the same time. With its use of masks, its stage design, and its arrangement of props, *ENRON* is an example for modes of representation that can "amplify the theatricality of the work" (Duggan 48), which does not automatically indicate a reduced potential for unsettling the audience. Accordingly, we would attribute to Prebble's *ENRON* what Duggan has described as performance's potential "to interrogate the world 'as it is'" and "imaginatively to materialize a different one" (41) and suggest that plays that evoke emotional states of fear and anxiety can have a knowledge-generating impact on the members of their audiences (cf. Duggan 41).

In the first contribution, which explores the legacy of Harold Pinter's stagings of fear and anxiety, Graham Saunders offers a wide-ranging survey of what might well be termed 'dramas of menace.' Briefly positioning Pinter's earlier work as a

dramatic form eschewing overt displays of violence, Saunders argues that Pinter's focus is on the existential terror of the ordinary, the menace of the humdrum, not infrequently laced with comedic verve. He goes on to show how Pinter's influence can be detected in the playwriting of a particular group of contemporary dramatists, whom he refers to as "latter day 'childe Harolds.'" Chief among these is the output from practitioners of in-yer-face-theatre, such as Philip Ridley, Anthony Neilson, Patrick Marber, and Sarah Kane.

Following the events of 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror, Saunders discerns a post-millennial splintering of preoccupations; a series of theatrical productions that differ sufficiently from one another in approach, though many still featuring recognizable traces of the Pinteresque. Moreover, in discussing these "new masters of menace," Saunders is reluctant to use a dichotomous categorization in which dramatists are lumped into one of two neatly delineated groups: those who still labour beneath the anxiety-ridden shade of the Pinter tree, and those who are now fully out of the reach of its branches. Rather, Saunders's approach to the dramatic staging of fear and anxiety posits a theatrical spectrum which runs the full gamut of torment, from Crimp's subtle reworkings of Pinteresque unease, through Ravenhill's fear-laden "Neurotic Citizens" in *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008), and out into the blood-curdling (drama) house of horrors in Nielson's *Relocated* (2008). Finally, Saunders traces some of the more recent comedic aspects of menace and hyperbolic catastrophe explored most notably in the work of Jez Butterworth, Simon Stephens, and Caryl Churchill, thus capping off a comprehensive survey of Pinteresque fear.

In his multifaceted exploration of anxieties in recent Irish theatre, Ondřej Pilný looks at four key thematic motifs in order to describe the contemporary dramatic transformations taking place on, as well as off, the stage. Pilný argues that these theatrical changes have occurred as a direct reaction to the historical developments in broader Irish society. Hence, Pilný observes a series of seismic jolts that have sent shockwaves through the hitherto formal conservatism of a male dominated theatrical establishment. On the one hand, he describes the devastating effects of the swift emergence and even 'sudden' death of the *Celtic Tiger* in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic meltdown. On the other hand, he also remarks on the liberalisation of sexual attitudes in Ireland – most notably the 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage, as well as the even more recent legalisation on abortion. Taken together, these two legislative developments can be seen as a consequence of the damning Ryan Report into child abuse and its cover up by Catholic Church run institutions, giving the expression 'crisis of faith,' one could argue, a new and far more secular connotation.

This heightened level of fear and anxiety in Irish society at large has resulted, Pilný argues, in a number of more allegorical and abstract productions that seek

to explore, albeit with echoes of Beckettian absurdism, the ongoing insecurities and socio-economic turbulence of an Ireland in the throes of an identity crisis. To exemplify this, Pilný turns his focus to Mark Doherty's *Trad* (2004) and Michael West's and Corn Exchange's *Freefall* (2009). A further consequence of these material and spiritual upheavals, Pilný suggests, can be seen in the wider emergence of an eclectic range of dispossessed voices that had hitherto been inaudible. Pilný first turns his attention to the work of ANU Productions, for whom the performance space plays as significant a role as the lives depicted. Thus, *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012) is performed in a notorious part of Dublin long associated with criminal activity, where the spectator is led through several sites and made progressively more unsure "who, of the people they see and talk to are performers and who local residents or passers-by." Continuing to explore the elements of divested voices in Irish theatre, Pilný next turns his attention to the LGBT community, through the work of Amy Conroy in *I ♥ Alice ♥ I* (2010). Here, gender identity and homosexuality are centre stage, coinciding with the liberalisation of real world views on sexuality in Irish society, albeit historically egged on by the after-shock of moral bankruptcy undermining religious institutions due to Ryan report. Finally, in light of Brexit, Pilný concludes with an examination of the deep insecurities of unionist Ulster and, drawing on the dramatic depictions of an emotionally barricaded state, examines the "savage satire" recurrent in the work of David Ireland. Accordingly, Pilný's contribution can be read as an exploration of the existential crisis and transformations that are being staged in Irish theatre, but also, arguably, it is one that metonymically speaks to a wider (world) audience with a similar sense of fear and anxiety.

Central to Sarah Ablett's essay is the question of how disgust, with its attendant fears and anxieties of the 'Other,' can be viewed as a culturally determined response. Drawing on Tim Crouch's play *I, Malvolio* (2010), Ablett demonstrates how, by focussing on the perspective of Shakespeare's petty-minded outcast from *Twelfth Night*, Tim Crouch excavates "the underlying structures of repulsion." Using an interdisciplinary approach drawing on the work of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, as well as pioneering studies on disgust by theorists such as Paul Rozin and William I. Miller, Ablett sets out to show how designating 'the other' as disgusting has a long and notorious political history that still finds echoes in the discriminatory rhetoric of political demagogues such as Donald Trump.

Accordingly, Ablett begins by highlighting how Trump, through his populist and emotive expressions of feelings of disgust in his political rivals and minorities, seeks to engender a fear of 'contamination' in his support base. In this way, Ablett shows how various forms of degradation and discrimination play "a major role in how we as humans organise ourselves within social structures." Finally, Ablett investigates the audience interaction in Crouch's production in order

to argue that Malvolio's reverse-psychological tirade directed at his audience, whereby the spectators are cajoled into becoming the true target of disgust, serves up new perspectives and insights. Thus, this unsettling of the normal strictures of theatre audience interaction not only reveals the mechanisms of discrimination and its relation to fear, but also the aesthetic and redemptive possibilities of live theatrical performance in pursuit of greater understanding and acceptance.

At the heart of Marlena Tronicke's contribution lies the question of how a theatrical space can be utilized to exploit and reinforce the states of fear and anxiety inherent in any given text or performance. In her examination of Tanika Gupta's *Lions and Tigers*, which premiered at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in London in 2012, Tronicke starts out by acknowledging the apparent incongruity of setting Gupta's postcolonial pre-Partition Bengal in, at first glance, a benign candle-lit, neo-Jacobean stage steeped in nostalgia and bonhomie. Nevertheless, it is exactly this seeming incompatibility, a "staging against the grain," Tronicke suggests, that successfully engenders so much of the fear and anxiety instigated throughout the performance. A significant number of these effects are achieved by the close proximity of the audience both to the stage and to each other, with the dim candlelit performance space contributing to the overall sense of claustrophobia and unease.

In consequence, with the example of a historical play about pre-Partition India performed in a period theatre, Tronicke also offers insights into issues of site-specific theatre that Pilný already raised with his analysis of ANU Productions' *The Boys of Foley Street*. Finally, Tronicke goes on to explore how the text's implied parallels to twenty-first-century terrorism translate into a more general sense of fear and anxiety that can be framed within Sara Ahmed's concept of the cultural politics of emotions. Thus, Tronicke illustrates how the clash between historicity and intrusiveness, achieved by the incompatibility of the play's subject matter and performance space, enriches the potential reactions of the audience with regard to their own political views on current interpretations of terrorists vs. freedom fighters.

According to Furedi, today's western societies are increasingly becoming estranged from their national histories and traditions, because of their "tendency to pathologize the past" by "reinterpreting the past as a story of human abuse, atrocity, genocide, ethnic cleansing and [...] numerous Holocausts" (88). The concentration on stories of villains instead of on stories of heroes goes hand in hand with a disconcerting fascination with evil. Among the effects of this estrangement are feelings of alienation, futility or purposelessness, which can lead to an impression of what Furedi defines as being "frozen in the present" (59). In our opinion, theatre and performance can address such processes of mental and emotional estrangement, for instance by employing dramatic modes and techniques, such

as the concept of Brechtian alienation. The two following contributions focus on plays which present dystopian scenarios that combine political disruptions with a domestic setting and explore new non-realist modes of representation.

Taking her cue from the totalitarian grip that neo-liberalism exerts on contemporary society and perceptions of the world, in her contribution Trish Reid identifies a current trend in drama towards near-future dystopian settings and motifs. In a comprehensive survey of the current dramatic landscape, Reid argues that realism as a mode is no longer adequate to tackle the fear and anxiety neo-liberalism entails. Presenting various plays she subsumes under the label of “speculative realism,” Reid goes back in time to the origins of this type of play and finds them in the works of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Stanislaw Lem, and Edward Bond. The large corpus of texts Reid draws on for her observations underscores both the agenda and urgency of these near-future dystopias, which aim to help us better “understand the horrors of the present.” Drawing on Raymond Williams’s theoretical framework on dystopian scenarios, Reid offers a reading, among other plays, of Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (2016) with its surreal blend of banal everyday conversations in front of a backdrop of unease and fear. Reid argues that all plays ultimately evolve around the disruption brought to both home and identity in the context of the all-encompassing threat from the outside posed by the agenda of neo-liberalism and austerity.

In her contribution, Dorothee Birke introduces the concept of the “playhouse gothic” to theorize the heightened unease and threat in drama featuring a domestic setting. She further investigates the interweaving of domestic and political issues already raised in Reid’s contribution. Birke goes on to apply her new concept to Mike Bartlett’s *Game* and Philip Ridley’s *Radiant Vermin* (both 2015), which she reads as critical commentary on the housing crisis in Britain. She draws on reviews and recorded audience reactions after having attended the plays. Departing from the prevailing strand of plays in the realistic tradition, both examples unfold highly stylized dystopian visions of crisis and anxiety: While Bartlett envisions a perverted game-show setting, in which the audience is vicariously invited to inflict pain on the contestants, Ridley’s play attacks a neo-liberal perspective on human life as dispensable material by depicting homeless people being converted into household amenities. Birke focuses both on dramatic and theatrical space and stage design in order to demonstrate how the settings create claustrophobic spaces of fear and unease both for the characters, but also for the audience. Birke’s analysis takes into account the concrete production, theatre space, social critique, and audience response, thereby combining a wide range of perspectives on contemporary theatrical practice.

It is interesting that quite a number of contemporary plays outline dystopian future scenarios which attribute little to no agency to citizens, echoing what Fur-

edi has described as a current, generally negative view of the future in Western societies: “Whether the controversy is about the economy, the environment, health care, science or social policy, there is an assumption that society is no longer capable of making much progress towards improving the human condition” (15). At the same time, by investigating potential negative future scenarios and showing individuals in precarious situations, such plays can produce empathy and have a strong ethical as well as emotional impact on their audiences. As Duggan explains: “theatre and performance brings ‘us’ (makers/thinkers/audiences) into an ethical relationship with one another, both with the ‘staged’ images and those represented in them, as well as with the concerns raised by those representations” (43).

William C. Boles opens up the discussion of another one of these controversies and examines the fear and anxiety resulting from global climate change. Moving from media coverage to the arts, Boles notes that the medium of film appears to be ideally suited for the topic of both natural and man-made disasters. By comparison, drama appears not nearly as well equipped to deal with the topic of global warming because it does not lend itself to the kind of special-effects competition typical of Hollywood productions. To refute this perception by way of a counter-example, Boles analyses Steve Waters’s *The Contingency Plan* (2009) and argues that drama can offer a more nuanced perspective on the topic. As a case in point, Boles is interested in the character of the scientist and the interaction between science and government representatives, a motif widely neglected by disaster movies. Moreover, Boles’s analysis sheds light on the interconnections of pathological views of the past with dystopian views of the future, because in Waters’s drama memory and forgetting play a crucial role and each new climate-change-induced catastrophic event is an echo of earlier disasters. But human inability to learn leads to predictably dire results in the play, as opposing characters in the play all long for humanity to be finally wiped out and this wish is finally fulfilled. Boles’s close reading casts the connection between anxiety about climate change and a deep-seated death wish in a grim light.

With his analysis of a dance-narrative performance, Ivan Lacko offers insights into a contemporary artistic endeavour that is not text-oriented in the way the other productions discussed in this volume are. Lacko draws on numerous theoretical approaches to arrive at a nuanced discussion of stage performance and audience involvement. *Pursuit of Happiness* is an international 2017 co-production of two dance companies. Their meta-referential piece evolves around the artistic and personal problems of a dance-production company flung into two wildly differing scenarios and settings: One scenario is set in a saloon, parodying wild-west conventions, while the other places the dance group in a scenario of war and political conflict in the Middle East. Lacko focuses on the production’s

idiosyncratic mix of dance, slapstick-comedy, and philosophical musings embedded in iambic pentameter and cinematic sound effects. Lacko employs performative concepts such as Marcel Duchamp's "ready made" and the art of John Cage, as well as Jean Baudrillard's definition of the simulacrum and Pierre Bourdieu's social theory to show how the production calls for empathy in an age of fear and anxiety that pervades both the personal and the (geo-)political levels of human experience. Lacko thereby achieves a holistic reading of the whole reception experience, both on the level of intellectual and affective response.

As the contributions to this journal issue show, contemporary drama and performance are genres especially productive to illustrate that emotionality can function as a claim *about* the construction of meaning by an individual or a collective. Whether the plays investigate, for instance, issues of the therapeutic state and the politics of behaviour or threats such as terrorism or climate change, many dramas attest to our contention that fear and anxiety can be seen as approaches to reality and modes of perception that serve as perspectives in the processes of sense making. Audiences can choose to be vulnerable and become unsettled as well as emotionally and intellectually benefit from the involvement with productions that can evoke emotional states of fear and anxiety, produce empathy, and have a knowledge-generating impact.

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