

2 cruel britannia

ken urban

On 18 January 1995, the British theatre world got what it least expected: a kick in the arse, a jab in the eyeball and a punch in the gut. It came not a moment too soon. That night, Jack Tinker and his fellow critics took their seats in the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs for a performance of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, a play featuring scenes of cannibalism, eye-gouging and anal rape, a play so disturbing one critic thought he would part with his supper. Set in 'a very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind [that] is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world', the play documents an abusive relationship between Ian, a dying journalist, and Cate, a naïve young woman.¹ The play's realism is literally blasted apart when a soldier breaks his way into the room and a mortar bomb strikes the hotel. The hotel room becomes a battlefield, Leeds becomes Bosnia. Critics attacked both the play and the author, and the tabloids weighed in on the controversy: 'Rape Play Girl Goes Into Hiding', read a headline in the *Daily Express*. Writers such as Caryl Churchill, Harold Pinter and Edward Bond came to Kane's defence, and there was a growing sense that *Blasted* heralded a shift in the culture of new writing. As a postscript to the controversy, the *Observer* published a short column on *Blasted* the day after the production closed; its final sentence prophetically read, 'I can hardly wait to see what Ms. Kane does next.'²

In the months that followed the press night of *Blasted*, the critics' scepticism and hostility gave way to a deluge of praise and catchphrase. Equally shocking plays by Jez Butterworth (*Mojo*) and Mark Ravenhill (*Shopping and Fucking*) followed *Blasted* at the Court and both garnered strong notices. By 1996, critics as diverse as Michael Billington, Aleks Sierz and Benedict Nightingale heralded a new golden age of British drama, naming Kane as one of its leading voices. The early 1990s had

seen new writing fade from its prominent place, with directors and collaborative work taking centre stage, but in a few short years, things went from crisis to renaissance, thanks to writers such as Kane, Ravenhill, Butterworth, Joe Penhall and Martin McDonagh, to name but five of the many new writers who emerged during this time. The plays of these writers were shocking, full of drug use, graphic violence and simulated sex, and tended towards formal experimentation, shying away from critical realism, the mainstay of British drama since 1950s naturalism was married to 1960s political theatre during the 1970s and 1980s. Rather than a fringe movement, however, this aesthetic became a dominant sensibility during the 1990s. Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, a play whose title couldn't even be printed on publicity or written in full on a theatre's marquee, was running in the London's West End before the decade's end. This aggressive theatre became known across the globe as 'in-yer-face'.

These new writers emerged during a particular moment in British cultural history: the reign of 'Cool Britannia', when Tony Blair's New Labour Party rebranded London as the global capital of coolness, and when the British advertising industry heralded the return of Swinging London. Playwright David Edgar noted that theatre had become the 'fifth leg of the new Swinging London', and in-yer-face theatre took its place alongside pop music, fine art, fashion and food as the products of a revitalized Britain.³ Rather than being co-opted by this rebranding, however, Kane and Ravenhill are part of what I call 'Cruel Britannia', a youth-based counter-politics to the cynicism and opportunism of Cool Britannia. This chapter argues that Kane's generation, rather than turning its back on British theatre's political tradition, as some critics have charged, use cruelty as a means of both reflecting and challenging the despair of contemporary urban life, shaped by global capitalism and cultural uniformity. The cruel displays found in their plays, I would suggest, represent the ethical possibilities of an active nihilism.

coolness and new labour

Tony Blair didn't invent Cool Britannia. By the time New Labour came to power in May 1997, the phenomenon was quickly moving toward its terminal phase. But New Labour, under Blair's stewardship, seized a golden opportunity. As early as 1994, the media began to take notice of the sudden revitalization of British arts and culture. By 1996, the media hype machine had kicked into full gear. When *Newsweek* anoints London the 'coolest city in the world', and Ben and Jerry's launches a

new ice cream called 'Cool Britannia', and both events occur within seven months of each other, the cultural signposts are impossible to ignore: Swinging London is back. And for a brief span of time, it was. Oasis and Blur, the Spice Girls and Girl Power, Charles Saatchi and the Young British Artists (the YBAs), Alexander McQueen and the clothes of 'Highland Rape': this cocktail of British culture was sold across the globe as Cool Britannia.

Blair not only wanted the world to guzzle this distinctively British brew; he wanted New Labour and Cool Britannia to be synonymous. Blair wrote in 1997 that England was 'leading a creative revolution', much like the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, but rather than exporting the fruits of industry, 'New Britain' was taking America and Europe 'by storm' with 'our rock music', 'our musicals'.⁴ By aligning itself with this youthful movement, New Labour was able to distinguish itself generationally from both Old Labour and the Tories, and in the process, court younger voters. This act of distinguishing the parties became increasingly important since Blair's Third Way economic policies muddled such differences, leaving the party open to accusations that Blairism amounted to little more than Thatcherism-lite. In truth, what New Labour and the Clintonian Democrats in the USA succeeded in doing was marrying free-market economics and social liberalism, or to put it more succinctly, they created a vision of counter-cultural individualism – the 1960s without the stink of the collective.

To sell a revamped Left, New Labour emphasized a love of youth culture by joining the cosmopolitan rebranding of Britain. England had never been able to shake off completely the image that it is a backwards-looking island of genteel tea parties and frumpy monarchs. By placing 'creative industries' and 'lifestyles' at the centre of a government-sponsored campaign, Blair hoped that Britain's image would change, accentuating a vitality and creativity at odds with any nostalgic visage of Merrie England. Instead, New Labour looked at England as a brand, as a commodity, to be marketed and managed.

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a steady shift from an *economy of production* to a *culture of brands*. Companies no longer see their primary function as selling sneakers, personal computers and mugs of coffee; they now sell a 'lifestyle', a 'business solution', an 'experience'.⁵ Rather than a product with which consumers have a utilitarian relationship, a brand forges a connection with consumers by representing ideals and values, giving a faceless commodity an aura of social value and cultural importance, thus fostering 'brand loyalty' on the part of consumers.

New Labour took note of this economic shift and developed a theory of culture to accompany it. In the 1990s, Blair's public vision of England's return to glory was not rooted in economic or geographic expansion, but in the language of advertising and popular culture. Anneke Elwes, then Planning Director for the ad agency BMP, wrote, 'The cultural output of countries is like a large advertising campaign on behalf of that country.'⁶ New Labour saw possibilities in fully embracing the consumer culture of American capitalism for specifically British ends, making England's 'cultural output' a brand that could be sold to the world at large. Taking the advice of the ad execs to heart, New Labour wound up, in the words of John Gross, 'elevating the commercial to the ideological', applying 'supermarket language to a whole society'.⁷ No longer would England be the land of bad food and crooked teeth; London was now the epicentre of a cultural renaissance, its inhabitants no longer citizens of a fading imperial power, but vital members of a country blazing into the new millennium high on a rush of newness. The fruits of British cosmopolitanism would be an alternative, a rival even, to American culture, which has been the maker and breaker of all things cool since the 1950s, and it could be marketed to the world like the Nike swoosh or the McDonald's Golden Arches. Thus a few weeks following Blair's victory over John Major in the general election, Cultural Secretary Chris Smith proclaimed that Cool Britannia was here to stay.

selling the cool

That in-yer-face drama could become part of a marketable cultural identity may seem odd at first, but the 1990s were all about peddling the provocative. This was the decade when the alternative went mainstream. Thanks to the band Nirvana and the 'grunge' movement that followed them in American pop music, punk rock broke into the mainstream during the 1990s. In the UK, 'indie' was transformed from a philosophy of making music opposed to corporate rock into a mere codeword for 'guitar-based pop'. Being 'indie' or punk no longer meant that you couldn't sign with Sony or have a Top-40 hit. What was once deemed a contradiction in terms – a punk 'hit' on the radio or an 'indie' band on a major label – was now perfectly acceptable. Writer Michael Bracewell calls this phenomenon 'the gentrification of the avant-garde', where 'experimentalism' becomes the 'new conformism'.⁸ The 'in-yer-face' playwrights were a 'Britpack' modelled on pop musicians – Ravenhill referred to *Shopping and Fucking* as a 'piece of Brit-pop' and

McDonagh thought theatre should be like 'a really good rock concert' – and the plays' radical aesthetics, or at least challenging subjects, were not an anathema to the marketplace, but highly marketable, thanks to catchy slogans and the allure of the dangerous.

The artistic home for many of the 'in-yer-face' playwrights was the Royal Court, then run by Stephen Daldry. During his first year as Artistic Director, Daldry asked, 'Why is [the Court's] audience so fucking middle-aged? We are not telling the right stories.' His solution: 'We have to listen to the kids.'⁹ Daldry worked hard to create a 'cult of youth', and in light of the controversy surrounding Kane's *Blasted* and the ensuing ticket sales, he did his best to keep the Court in the press. Daldry's philosophy can be summed up: do lots of new work, do it for short runs so that houses are full every night, always invite important people, and if a play tanks, remember that it will close before the Court loses too much cash. The result: new plays become events and producing new writing is no longer deemed risky.

Daldry was not alone in his desire to make the theatre cool again. The Bush's Dominic Dromgoole and the Traverse's Ian Brown were equally excited by the prospects of a new writing culture which was unfettered by ideology or mainstream tastes, and both of these theatres debuted the work of an impressive number of new writers.

While theatre benefited from its new-found cool status, the hoped-for political union between New Labour and Cool Britannia met a sour end. There would be no fraternal bond between Tony and the brothers from Oasis. Nothing is crueller than coolness when it feels exploited by those in power. Coolness, as Dick Pountain and David Robins succinctly define it, is 'a permanent state of private rebellion'.¹⁰ Marked by a libertarian attitude of 'whatever', cool is highly individualistic, preferring the role of detached onlooker to the passionate commitment of politics, and the 1990s saw this attitude become the 'dominant mindset of advanced consumer capitalism'.¹¹ New Labour used 'coolness' as the means by which to reconcile the basic contradiction of capitalism: the need to work and the desires of the individual. 'Cool', Pountain and Robins write, 'dissolve[s] the categories of left and right by decoupling economic and social assumptions that have been more or less fixed since the French Revolution.'¹² In the 1990s, being *laissez-faire* in economics and social issues makes complete sense to politicians, but to voters, the boundaries separating the party of Thatcher from the party of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan were no longer clear.

The culture of Cool Britannia demonstrates this erosion of Left and Right. Britpop – the music of bands such as Oasis, The Verve and Blur –

often resembles little more than cultural recycling, the styles and sounds of the 1960s without any oppositional content, and they are often fuelled by a nostalgia for a Swinging London that is most assuredly white. Like the Young British Artists, the 'in-yer-face' playwrights often embraced coolness and courted celebrity, while their work erased any remaining separation between art and the marketplace. Unsurprisingly, the critics of in-yer-face theatre claimed that it had nothing to say and that the plays verged on being reactionary. Vera Gottlieb, a vocal critic of in-yer-face, thought the 'the plays of the nineties [gave] up any attempt to engage with significant public issues' and summed up the whole of Cool Britannia this way: 'The media and the market "named" something, then "made" something – and subsequently "claimed" something.'¹³ But in the end, plays like *Blasted* and *Shopping and Fucking* are not the same as *Men Behaving Badly* and the Spice Girls' 'philosophy' of Girl Power.

cruelty and nihilism

The defining feature of 1990s drama is its cruelty. While critics were quick to note the prevalence of violence in new writing, understanding the plays of Ravenhill and Kane as simply violent renders them one-dimensional; they become about shock and shock alone. The cruelty of 'in-yer-face' drama shares a kinship with the writings of Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille, two Surrealists who envisioned the transformative power of cruelty. Cruelty is the wilful causing of pain to others and, often, the self. For Artaud and Bataille, it is the force that violently awakens consciousness to a horror that has remained unseen and unspoken, or wilfully repressed.¹⁴ Bataille and Artaud share a belief that cruelty's unmasking of pain makes a space for ethical possibility, for change, even joy, but such possibility does not allow any escape or metaphysical hope. Cruelty is not redemptive: it scars. Kane's *Blasted*, for instance, brings the horrors of Bosnia to a banal hotel room in Leeds, and James MacDonald's 1995 production of the play was a far cry from the dismissive 'whatever' associated with Cool Britannia.

While coolness is associated with a cynical state of disinterestedness, cruelty is a very different affect. Though it may appear cold, cruelty carries with it the possibility of transformation, but – and this is what disturbs many critics of in-yer-face theatre – it does so without any moral framework or ideological certainty: no redemptive message, no socialist empowerment, no women running off to form a collective. Cruelty's bringing-to-consciousness is a nihilistic one. In fact, *Variety's*

critic Matt Wolf initially dubbed writers such as Kane and Ravenhill the 'New Nihilists'.

Nietzsche, in a note from 1887, gives nihilism a handy gloss: 'What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; "why?" finds no answer.'¹⁵ Where one expects to find something – a god, a higher power, a unity, a reason – one instead finds an absence. Since Plato, value is bestowed on material existence through a true, unchanging metaphysical system. This is how morality interprets the world. We judge material existence in relation to an ideal world. But over time comes the realization that the 'true', idealized world is a fabrication, nothing more than a comforting fable. When the comfort of unity, of the higher goal, is revealed to be false, it leaves one with the feeling that the world is valueless, without meaning, and this sense of meaninglessness could *not* be experienced as such had it not been for morality's interpretation of the world in the first case.

Concomitant with Nietzsche's discussion of nihilism are two other influential uses of the term: first, as a pathology, the psychiatric-medical community deems nihilism 'a psychical factor', a symptom of severe depression. This use, first appearing in a medical journal in 1888, is where the pedestrian sense of nihilism as a synonym for 'depressing' or 'hopeless' derives. Second, as a political designation: the Russian Nihilists. The radical anti-Czarists of the 1850s and 60s, made famous in Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862), these nihilists were the precursors to our modern-day terrorists and anarchists who see destruction as the basis for change.

In this genealogy, nihilism appears as a three-fold concept: it is a *philosophical problem* about value and meaning in a godless world, an *affect* of hopelessness, and an *ethical stance* where change comes from destruction. For Nietzsche, all nihilism can take two forms. In its reactive state, nihilism appears as the most life-hating of enterprises, giving rise to fascist or totalitarian worldviews: because there is nothing, then nothing matters. An active nihilism, on the other hand, is an affirmation of life; suffering becomes a way to extol existence, not denigrate it. The recognition of the valuelessness of the world, while painful, is also the opportunity to create new values, rooted not in metaphysics, but in materiality. Such an affirmation can provide the ground for goodness to emerge from cruelty. But unlike the 'true' good of metaphysics, nihilism's conception of goodness is grounded in the here and now, as that which, to quote Bataille, 'belongs only to the person for whom there is no beyond'.¹⁶ This is nihilism's ethical potential, which opposes the rule of morality. Morality functions as a stand-in for the judgement

of God, while ethics can be understood as a set of possibilities that help us assess how we act, but without the aid of any transcendental truth.¹⁷

In an unfinished note from 1887, Nietzsche sums up nihilism this way: 'It is ambiguous. . . . As active nihilism . . . it can be a sign of strength . . . a violent force of destruction; . . . nihilism could be a good sign'.¹⁸ Nihilism for Nietzsche is always uncertain, always in a struggle between active and reactive forms. Nietzsche's hope was that nihilism would defeat nihilism, that active forces would overpower reactive ones. Nihilism, then, was the final phase before the achieving of pure affirmation, or what he calls in *Ecce Homo* 'the affirmation of annihilating and destroying'.¹⁹ This desire to transform annihilation into affirmation is at the core of this dominant strand of 1990s British theatre known as 'in-yer-face'. These plays do not merely represent suffering on the stage as a way to mirror urban life; instead, the ethical possibilities of cruelty – like those discussed in Nietzsche's philosophy – become the means by which the playwrights of the 1990s critique and intervene in their historical moment.

ravenhill and kane's cruel ethics

The playwrights most associated with in-yer-face were Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane. Their two plays, *Shopping and Fucking* and *Phaedra's Love*, were produced at the height of the Cool Britannia phenomenon, and both share an investment in cruelty and nihilism, evidence of a Cruel Britannia existing within the moment of the cool.

First produced by the Royal Court in 1996, Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* was an instant sensation, if not for the title alone. By 1998, the play was running in the West End and more than twenty productions were occurring around the globe, including one featuring film star Philip Seymour Hoffman in New York. The play concerns a group of barely functioning urban dwellers, three of which are named after members of boy band Take That. Its episodic fourteen scenes, more filmic than Brechtian, show a world of rampant consumerism, of Thatcherism writ large. Like the genre of paperback fiction that gives the play its title, *Shopping and Fucking* shows a world reduced to shopping and fucking.

Mark is a drug addict kicked out of rehab for having sex, and he returns to his flat to find Lulu and Robbie, the young woman and man whom he 'bought' at a store, trying to continue their lives without him. Mark has been a father figure for these twenty-nothings and Robbie hopes Mark has come back to reclaim that place in their lives. But as

part of his twelve-step programme, Mark is not allowed to 'form an attachment' with another person, and sensing Robbie's love for him, he leaves the flat. Mark then hires Gary, a fourteen-year-old rent boy who left home after being repeatedly raped by his stepfather. Mark falls in love with Gary, but since he is paying Gary, he tells himself, 'it won't mean anything'.²⁰ Lulu and Robbie try to live a 'normal' life without Mark, but after a botched Ecstasy deal, the pair owes a gangster money. If they cannot repay him, they will pay with their lives. Mark's purchasing of Gary, Lulu and Robbie's vain attempts at earning a living: Ravenhill's characters are overdetermined by economics. But while money is crucial for survival, it has paradoxically robbed the world of its meaning, of its value.

In the play's most extreme moment, Mark realizes that he wants Gary's love, but the boy will never give that because the boy's true desire is for his absent father. But rather than paternal love, Gary's fantasy is to have this absent father sodomize him with a knife. Gary tells Mark:

I've got this unhappiness. This big sadness swelling like it's gonna burst. I'm sick and I'm never going to be well. . . . I want it over. And there's only one ending. . . . He's got no face in the story. But I want to put a face to him. Your face.²¹

Gary demands that Mark fulfil his wish because Gary is paying him, and as Mark himself has said, when money is exchanged, an act becomes a 'transaction', not an emotional attachment, and therefore, the act 'doesn't actually mean anything'.²² But Max Stafford-Clark's production, full of neon lights and loud club music, left Gary's fate a mystery: has Mark satisfied the desire and killed Gary, or has it just left Gary wounded, but still alive? Or could Mark even perform such a violent act? Ravenhill and Stafford-Clark refused to reveal the answer.

The melding of coolness and cruelty is clear in Ravenhill's play, where irony gives way to terrifying violence. The play demonstrates nihilism as a *philosophical problem* and as an *affect*. There is a crisis of meaning and it produces a profound state of psychological turmoil. Robbie tells Gary:

I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're

all making up our own stories. Little stories. It comes out in different ways. . . . It's lonely.²³

Where something *should* be, there is an absence. Robbie mourns the loss of the metanarratives of God, Enlightenment and Socialism, taking comfort in the 'little stories' we make, though he tells Gary, we are still left feeling 'lonely'. Gary understands this loneliness all too well as he suffers from a nihilistic desire for self-destruction. His 'little story' that he wants to 'put a face to' involves a violent patriarch whose cruelty ends his sadness.

The *ethical* possibilities of nihilism become clearer in Stafford-Clark's production, where a more active nihilism takes shape, allowing an image of the good to emerge as a surprisingly visceral experience. Though it is unclear whether Gary's desire kills him, now that Gary is gone, Mark can again become emotionally attached. The play's final scene shows Mark, Lulu and Robbie feeding each other a microwave dinner, an echo of the play's first scene; unlike the play's opening where Mark vomits up the gift of food, still too sick on heroin to keep anything down, in the final scene, the trio has become a family of sorts, sharing a meal with each other. Stafford-Clark emphasized this development by having identical staging for both moments. But if this is a moment of ethical possibility, it is, of course, a very fraught one, for this kindness would not be possible without Gary's sacrifice. His gift is two-fold: the money that Gary gives Mark allows Robbie and Lulu to pay off the gangster; Gary's literal disappearance allows the threesome to act with kindness toward each other, but these things are only achieved through violence. To put it crudely, the play acknowledges the horror of Gary's wish, while also suggesting that, in this instance, it might be potentially ethical to fuck someone up the arse with a knife.

With *Shopping and Fucking*, Ravenhill and Stafford-Clark created a theatre event that was pure Cool Britannia, a media spectacle where the play was almost upstaged by the publicity of the title and subject matter, and the rave-like atmosphere of the production designed to entice younger viewers. But at the same time, the play's exploration of nihilism connects it to the world of Cruel Britannia, to the possibilities of an active nihilism.

A second example of this Cruel Britannia is *Phaedra's Love*, Sarah Kane's adaptation of Seneca, presented at the intimate Gate Theatre the same year as *Shopping and Fucking*. Kane's play is a series of scenes where Hippolytus is cruel to both the people who love him and those who claim to have his interests at heart. Hippolytus's cruelty, however,

comes not out of maliciousness, but out of a desire for complete honesty. But since there is no unsoiled truth in the world, Hippolytus suffers a crippling depression. All this changes when his stepmother Phaedra accuses her stepson of rape and kills herself. Hippolytus did not technically rape Phaedra; Phaedra was obsessively in love with her stepson. Hippolytus, aware of this fact, allowed his stepmother to give him oral sex. But afterwards, he tells Phaedra that her daughter Strophe had more technique, and that she should go see a doctor because he has gonorrhoea. His cruelty, perversely, is ethical. He wants Phaedra to hate him and get over her obsession, but instead, she kills herself and calls Hippolytus a rapist in her suicide letter. Rather than reveal what occurred, an act he fears would render him a fraud, since he feels responsible for Phaedra's death, he allows the charge to go unchallenged, even though it means certain death.

Hippolytus can be seen as an example of Nietzsche's 'last man', who has killed God and substituted himself in God's place. Yet the 'last man' refuses to act, fearing risk and preferring comfort, and as a result, he is trapped by reactive nihilism, by 'a will to nothingness' that makes him hate life. Hippolytus tells the Priest, who begs Hippolytus to confess: 'I can't sin against a God I don't believe in. . . . A non-existent God can't forgive. . . . I've lived by honesty let me die by it. . . . I've chosen my path. I'm fucking doomed.'²⁴ While Hippolytus has shed himself of metaphysical comfort, he remains enamoured of a romantic notion of truth and is willing to die in its name. His hatred of hypocrisy has led him to hate life and he passively watches events unfold around him. But Hippolytus finally acts in the play's closing moment. Outside the courthouse, he hurls himself into a crowd of angry plebeians who tear him to bits. Just before a vulture feeds off his corpse, Hippolytus looks up at the sky and says, 'If there could have been more moments like this.'²⁵ The final moment of the play in Kane's production at the Gate was a mess of stage blood and fake intestines.

Hippolytus, by embracing a violent end, finally experiences an embodiment that cures him of his hatred of life. Kane's play and her production use humour to reveal how ridiculous it is that Hippolytus can only experience a life-loving sensation through self-destructing. A lifetime of disembowelments would be, to a rational person at least, hardly a life worth living. Yet that moment of extreme cruelty creates a sensation of pleasure for Hippolytus; he now understands the value of physical existence. The humour of Hippolytus's final line comes from the way it reduces the metaphysical to the bodily. This juxtaposition – between Hippolytus's ethereal longing for 'more moments like this',

and a stage covered in bloody limbs and innards – reveals that idealism cannot escape the ultimate truth of the body. For if death is the only thing that gives life meaning, Hippolytus's realization comes too late: you can only die once. Yet in willing his own destruction, Hippolytus is able to defeat reactive nihilism, if just for that brief moment before his death when the vulture descends to make a meal of him. The 'last man' transforms himself into the 'man who wants to perish'.²⁶ While the first is a reactive personality for Nietzsche, the second wants to overcome, to transform destruction into affirmation.

In the confines of a theatre, the experience of moments like Hippolytus's death or Gary's violent fantasy makes an impact that is tragic in the Nietzschean sense. The tragic, for Nietzsche, is that which turns suffering into an affirmation of life. But this ethos comes about only as a result of a cruelty that strips away any metaphysical fiction, as in Hippolytus's 'joy before death' – to use Bataille's phrase – where destruction affirms. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes:

The desire for destruction, change, and becoming can be an expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with the future . . . but it can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited and underprivileged, who destroy . . . because what exists . . . outrages and provokes them.²⁷

A choice therefore exists between an active and reactive nihilism; and in the case of its active form, nihilism serves as the ground in which an ethics can take root. Active nihilism, therefore, is a stage that one passes *through* in order to achieve what Nietzsche variously calls the 'Dionysian', the 'tragic', or the *Übermensch*; and that same, perhaps romantic, desire to move *beyond* while also remaining *bound* to this existence is found in Ravenhill's and Kane's plays: an impossibility that art strives toward even in its impossibility. At the end of *Phaedra's Love*, Hippolytus does shed his nihilism, finding joy in pain, but at the cost of his life.

nihilism as *verwindung*

If this reading of Ravenhill and Kane demonstrates the ethical investments of their work, it is important to note that Cruel Britannia is not politically radical or revolutionary in any traditional sense. It is a counter-politics existing within the moment of Cool Britannia; it is not 'outside' or 'above' the historical moment from which it emerged.

While Cruel Britannia is engaged in the significant ethical issues of the day, its cruelty and nihilism do not espouse any clear or partisan ideology. Rather, the phenomenon that I am calling Cruel Britannia can be understood as the 'twisting' or 'turning away', in a Heideggerian sense, of Cool Britannia.

Heidegger, in his 1955 essay *Über 'die Linie'* (Concerning 'the Line', which he later slightly expanded and re-titled *The Question of Being* in 1960), weighed in on contemporary debates about nihilism in postwar Germany. He was suspicious of the claims of his friend and writer Ernst Jünger that nihilism could be overcome, that Germany could 'cross the line' from its present state of nihilism into a post-nihilistic one.²⁸ Less optimistic than either Jünger or his philosophical forefather Nietzsche, Heidegger argued that thought could not move beyond or cross that demarcation between our nihilistic world and one that has overcome nihilism. 'Such overcoming [of nihilism] takes place in the area of the restoration of metaphysics', Heidegger writes, and 'the attempt to cross the line [out of 'complete nihilism'] remains inhibited in a conception which belongs in the area of the dominance of the oblivion of Being'; it remains trapped within the prison of Western metaphysics, and to Heidegger, an anti-metaphysician, 'that is a repelling thought'.²⁹

Heidegger's advice: 'Instead of wanting to overcome nihilism, we must first try to enter into its *essence*.'³⁰ In other words, rather than crossing over the line, we must consider the line itself. As Elliot Neaman notes, 'For Heidegger, nihilism is not an external phenomenon, but . . . part of human practices in the modern world.'³¹ This move to consider the line itself is what philosopher Simon Critchley characterizes as a 'delineation' of nihilism that 'forbids us . . . the gesture of transgression'.³² Instead of overcoming, Heidegger advocates 'twisting' or 'turning aside' (*Verwindung*), a 'delineation' of nihilism that transforms but does not wish to transcend. In short, it is Heidegger's call to immanent critique. It is a call to a critical self-awareness that does not eradicate what it calls attention to, because that would do little more than give false comfort; but instead this calling attention to itself makes us reflect on the possibility of change, even if, as in the case of nihilism, such change cannot be imagined as a complete escape or overcoming. The logic of *Verwindung*: change is possible; redemption is not.

Heidegger's concept helps us rethink the paradigm that views art as either radical or compromised, as either outside the mainstream and therefore authentic, or popular and therefore a 'sell-out'. The displays of cruelty found in certain strands of Cool Britannia culture, particularly 'in-yer-face' theatre, perform an immanent critique. The culture of

Cruel Britannia is not oppositional in the sense of being outside 1990s commodity culture. It exists within that phenomenon, but through its invocation of cruelty and its exploration of an active nihilism, it is able to comment upon the historical moment. It works, to borrow Critchley's reading of Heidegger, as a *delineation* of the moment occurring within the moment itself. But that delineation is, by its very nature, anti-transcendental, and therefore cannot be considered truly 'transgressive'.

cruel britannia's legacy: debbie tucker green

Cool Britannia is now over. *Newsweek* rescinded its earlier proclamation that London was 'the world's coolest city' (4 November 1996) by giving an issue less than two years later the headline, 'Uncool Britannia' (6 July 1998). The weekly began to dismantle the mythology it had a hand in creating. Blair and his New Labour government slowly dissociated themselves from their early policies that placed 'creative industries' at the centre of their political vision. By the end of the decade, Blair would no longer be inviting heads of state to concerts by British girl-bands like All Saints. In this decade, Blair made a new friend in George W. Bush, and in the years following the World Trade Center disaster in New York City, the two had more pressing international matters to discuss.

Though it enjoyed a shelf life longer than most fads, the popular phenomenon that defined the 1990s was over before the new millennium had even begun. Concomitant with the death of Cool Britannia was the waning of 'in-yer-face'. Aleks Sierz, in a 2002 article, argues that the suicide of Sarah Kane in February 1999 and the West End success that same year of Conor McPherson's 1997 redemptive play *The Weir* marked the end of the aesthetic he provocatively named.³³ In a 2005 survey of British drama, Sierz laments the new timidity that has followed in the wake of writers such as Kane and Ravenhill. After the period of dramatic experimentation, British new writing, according to Sierz, was again dominated by 'social-realist plays' about 'me and my mates'.³⁴

It might be too early to define what characterizes new writing in this decade, but Sierz is right: the diverse and nihilistic energy of 1990s drama is noticeably absent, replaced by a renewed interest in documentary drama (David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, 2004 and the Tricycle Theatre's *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry*, 2003) and naturalistic plays set in council flats and working-class pubs (Jamie Linley's *Dirty Works*, 2005) and Roy Williams's *Sing Yer Hearts Out for the Lads*). But the state of new writing is not as grim as such an assessment may imply.

Many of the 1990s playwrights continue to explore provocative themes in their current work. Philip Ridley's 2005 play *Mercury Fur*, about a world of amnesiac teens addicted to butterflies and violence, was greeted by a press hysteria that echoed the reception of *Blasted* a decade ago. Mark Ravenhill's latest *The Cut* explores the mechanics of torture. It opened in London at the Donmar Warehouse in February 2006 in a production starring Sir Ian McKellen, better known to some as Gandalf. And in the space of a year, Martin McDonagh had two plays on Broadway: *The Pillowman*, about a writer in a totalitarian state, ran to rave reviews in the summer of 2005; and his bleak comedy about the IRA, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, opened on the Great White Way in May 2006. Perhaps unlike the Cool, Cruel Britannia is not dead, but instead has been absorbed into the fabric of British theatrical culture, now a popular export for other theatre centres.

More interesting is how the project of Cruel Britannia, with its comingling of coolness and cruelty, of nihilism and ethics, continues to affect new writing. debbie tucker green's *stoning mary*, which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in 2005, is a good example of Cruel Britannia's continuing influence. A language-driven play, *stoning mary* follows three interconnected narratives: a husband and wife fighting over which one of them can have the retroviral prescription that will slow the effects of AIDS; two parents terrified of their son who has become a child soldier in a militia; and a young woman awaiting her public stoning after confessing to the murder of a child soldier who had killed her parents. The play's storylines suggest contemporary Africa: the AIDS crisis of South Africa, the use of child soldiers in the Congo and the Sudan, and the stoning of women in Nigeria. Yet green specifies that 'the play is set in the country where it is performed in', and that 'all characters are white'.³⁵ In doing this, green's play transposes the crises of South Africa to England in a way similar to Kane's *Blasted*, which brought Bosnia to Leeds. The narratives of *stoning mary* conjure up Africa, while the voices of the characters locate the play specifically in urban Britain, and that combination creates a third space for the audience, a space of dislocation that is neither location and yet both. In a real sense, green's play envisions the consequences of Blair's widely reported statement made to the World Economic Forum in January 2005. There, Blair told his audience, 'If what was happening in Africa today was happening in any other part of the world, there would be such a scandal and clamour that governments would be falling over themselves to act in response.'³⁶

That sense of dislocation and alienation is acutely literalized in the

play's characters, who exist in a state of nihilistic despair, most dramatically, the title character who awaits execution for murdering a child soldier. Mary hopes that her sister has brought good news regarding a petition that might deliver a stay of execution. The sister stalls, teasing Mary about her thick glasses, and chides her for her decision to stop smoking. But the sister eventually reveals the grim truth: instead of the 6,000 signatures needed, Mary received twelve. Where Mary expected solidarity among women, she found instead that no one stood up for her. Her lengthy outburst describes how, in the end, it's not that 'the womanist bitches', 'the feminist bitches', and 'the burn the bra bitches' wouldn't support a 'bitch'; these 'professional bitches' won't support a 'bitch' like her: someone who can't read or count, someone who is deemed ugly, and someone who is considered expendable.³⁷ green's hypnotic repetition of 'bitch' becomes an accusation, a mantra that exposes female collectivity to be a myth, for women turn a blind eye when it comes to someone like Mary. Such a strategy clearly implicates a Western audience because in crucial ways, we have turned a blind eye to the problems of Africa, particularly the plight of African women. Instead of 'sistas' helping each other, there's only a bunch of bitches that can't be bothered to help out another bitch when she's down.

green's desire to bring the cruelty of the 'developing world' into the everyday setting of the 'first world' connects her writing to another young playwright whose shocking first play opened ten years earlier. That earlier play imagined what would happen if the horrors on the evening news were brought into Leeds hotel room. The Cruel Britannia imagined by Kane and Ravenhill in plays like *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love* and *Shopping and Fucking* seeks possibilities in an ethical nihilism. The plays' cruelty – like the cruelty theorized in the writings of Nietzsche, Artaud and Bataille – challenges the cynicism and opportunism of the historical moment. For Kane and Ravenhill, that moment was the reign of Cool Britannia, when London sought to become the global capital of cool. While that moment has passed, that ethical project continues in the work of writers of a new generation, writers like debbie tucker green.

18 January 1995: Press night for *Blasted*.

1 April 2005: *stoning mary* opens.

The Cool is dead. Long live the Cruel.

notes

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1. S. Kane, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 3.
2. *Observer*, Review of *Blasted*, 5 February 1995.
3. D. Edgar, 'Provocative Acts: British Playwriting in the Post-War Era and Beyond', in D. Edgar (ed.), *State of Play, Issue One: Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Faber, 1999), pp. 1–34 (p. 28).
4. T. Blair, 'Britain Can Remake It', *Guardian*, 22 July 1997.
5. See N. Klein's *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2000) for an insightful analysis of the new economy of brands as well as the growing resistance to it.
6. Cited in J. Lloyd, 'Cool Britannia Warms Up', *New Statesman*, 13 March 1998.
7. J. Gross, 'The Emperor of Ice Cream', *New Criterion*, June 1998.
8. M. Bracewell, *When Surface Was Depth: Death by Cappuccino and Other Reflections on Music and Culture in the 1990s* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo, 2002), p. 159.
9. In January 1993, the *Evening Standard* quoted Daldry as saying, 'Why is our audience so f***** middle-aged? We are not telling the right stories . . . We have to listen to the kids. A younger audience – that's vital.' It is unclear if Daldry ever said exactly that, but he carried such sentiments into his time at the Court. Cited in W. Lesser, *A Director Calls* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 90.
10. D. Pountain and D. Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion, 2000), p. 19.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
13. V. Gottlieb, 'Lukewarm Britannia', in V. Gottlieb and C. Chambers (eds), *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (Oxford: Amber Lane, 1999), p. 212, p. 209.
14. See A. Artaud, 'The Theatre and the Plague' and 'Letters on Cruelty', in *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. M. C. Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), pp. 15–32 and pp. 101–4; G. Bataille, 'The Practice of Joy Before Death', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. A. Stoekl, with C. R. Lovitt and D. M. Leslie, Jr (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 235–9.
15. F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale, eds (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 9.
16. Bataille, 'The Practice of Joy', p. 239.
17. This distinction between morals and ethics comes from philosopher Gilles Deleuze:

The difference is that morality presents us with a series of constraining rules of a special sort, ones that judge actions and intentions by considering them in relation to transcendent values (this is good, that's bad . . .);

ethics is a set of optional rules that assess what we do, what we say, in relation to the ways of existing involved. *Negotiations*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 100.

- See also Deleuze, 'On the Difference between the *Ethics* and a *Morality*', *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. R. Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1988), pp. 17–29.
18. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 17, p. 18, p. 69.
 19. F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 273. Translation modified.
 20. M. Ravenhill, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 25.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
 24. Kane, *Complete Plays*, p. 95.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
 26. See F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1954), pp. 103–439.
 27. F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 329.
 28. See E. Jünger, *Über die Linie* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1958).
 29. M. Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, trans. W. Kluback and J. T. Wilde (New York: Twayne, 1958), p. 93, p. 101, p. 87.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
 31. E.Y. Neaman, *A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature after Nazism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 180.
 32. S. Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 17.
 33. A. Sierz, 'Still "In-Yer-Face"? Towards a Critique and a Summation', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2002), 17–24.
 34. See A. Sierz, 'Beyond Timidity?: The State of British New Writing', *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2005), 55–61.
 35. d. t. green, *stoning mary* (London: Nick Hern, 2005), p. 2.
 36. Cited in L. Elliott, 'Blair urges "Quantum Leap" on Aid to Africa as Debate about Finance Rages', *Guardian*, 28 January 2005.
 37. green, *stoning mary*, pp. 61–3.