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Frames of violence and recent history in Simon Stephens' *Motortown*

Représentation de la violence et histoire récente dans Motortown de Simon Stephens

Marion Coste

- 1 Written in July 2005 by Simon Stephens and first staged at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs by Ramin Gray, *Motortown* tells the story of Danny, a young soldier returning to his hometown after a tour in Iraq. Traumatized by what he has witnessed and experienced in Iraq, Danny no longer recognizes the country for which he has fought¹. The play is divided into eight scenes, which work as relatively independent vignettes. We follow Danny's return from Iraq and his increasing sense of alienation from his own country. The former squaddie stays with his autistic younger brother, Lee, while aggressively trying to win back his former girlfriend Marley, who has moved on with her life. Danny buys a gun from a small-time arms dealer, Paul, whose underage girlfriend Jade Danny tortures, photographs and murders. He then stuffs her body in the boot of his car and stops at a hotel to spend the night: there, he meets Helen and Justin, a liberal couple who invites him for a threesome. Disgusted by their leftist stance and endorsement of the war in Iraq, Danny turns them down. The final scene of the play sees him returning home to his brother, to whom he confesses his crime.
- 2 There could be multiple interpretations as to what *Motortown* is about: the return of a traumatized soldier, the anti-war campaign, the crisis of masculinity, or the breakdown of the fabric of society. As Billy Smart puts it in his infamous article "Things That Always Tend to Happen in Simon Stephens' Plays", the play "was manifestly a play about something – Abu Ghraib – and was vitally important to the time it was written [...]" (Smart 2016, np). It could indeed be argued that *Motortown* deals with the notorious scandal of detainee abuse and torture at the American-run prison facility, which came to public attention with the release of photographic evidence in April

2004. The pictures showed Iraqi prisoners being subjected to dehumanising humiliation, abuse and acts of torture in direct violation of the Geneva Convention, and are now deeply embedded into the collective memory as one of the defining events of the war in Iraq and, more generally speaking, the war on terror. The play draws on In-Year Face aesthetics and techniques as the audience is spared nothing of the re-enactment of the Abu Ghraib photographs on stage. At its height in the 1990s, this movement of ostentatious theatricality, which aimed at shocking its audience, was a reaction to crises, wars and tragic murders. The plays confronted recent history in a bid to make sense of contemporary catastrophic events: in dealing with the Abu Ghraib scandal, merely a year after the revelation of the abuse, *Motortown* reflects on the ways this event has shaped British society.

- 3 Much has been written about the circulation of the Abu Ghraib photographs, most notably Susan Sontag's article "Regarding the Torture of Others", published in *The New York Times* in May 2003, and Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* (2009). While Sontag contends that the Abu Ghraib scandal, brought about by a few soldiers, reveals a form of systematic violence condoned by the United States, Butler sees it as an example of war categorising people between whose life is grievable or not. According to her, war photographs enforce that divide by determining which lives are recognised as human. However, because media frames and images "circulate in ways that are neither static nor predictable" (Butler 2016, xxx), this initial apprehension of lives, defined by the frame of the photograph, may be questioned. Arguing that images can no longer be controlled because of the ease with which it is now possible to reproduce and circulate them, Butler posits that once the photographs have been broadcast and distributed, they break away from their original frame of reference and open up to new interpretations depending on the context of their reception. Because frames enforce norms of recognisability of the human life, in this breaking away resides the possibility of new apprehensions of the human existence:

When the frames of war break up or break open, when the trace of lives is apprehended at the margin of what appears or as riddling its surface, then frames unwittingly establish a grievable population despite a prevalent interdiction, and there emerges the possibility of a critical outrage, war stands the chance of missing its mark. (Butler 2016, xxx)

- 4 In transposing the Abu Ghraib photographs to the stage, *Motortown* seems to give them new meaning. The act of torture no longer takes place in Iraq, but at home, in England, effectively creating a home front. The Iraqi prisoners are replaced by an underage Black girl, and the executioner acts alone. How does *Motortown* participate in the breaking up of the Abu Ghraib photographs' original frame? I would argue that the play thus reframes the Abu Ghraib scandal as a way to reflect on the rift provoked by the Iraq war in British society. I will first explore how the normative violence of the army underpins and structures Danny's photographs, before analysing another frame at play. As with the Abu Ghraib's photographs, the question of the audience's reception will also be considered.

1. Photographing torture, staging terror: normative violence

- 5 *Motortown* directly references the Abu Ghraib photographs at the climax of the play, in Scene 6, when Danny lures Jade to Foulness Island, a remote location where he had incidentally trained to become a soldier. The veteran psychologically and physically tortures the fourteen-year-old girl, and eventually shoots her at point blank. The scene epitomises Danny's trauma following his tour in Iraq: the veteran re-enacts on British soil what he has witnessed and performed while on duty, effectively bringing the war home. At the height of his paranoia and manic fit, Danny confuses Jade with a suicide bomber wearing a burqa, his trauma blurring the lines between present and memories, reality and hallucinations. In a scene reminiscent of the Abu Ghraib scandal, Danny takes pictures with his cell phone of Jade being tortured and forced into stress positions: he orders her to take off her jacket and then to put her hand on the ground; he asks her to pretend to be his sister; he puts out his cigarette on her hand, then pours liquid over her head. Six photographs in total are taken, the last one being of Jade's body, lying in a pool of blood. The parallel with Abu Ghraib is unambiguously underscored by the stage directions: "[Danny] imitates the famous Lynndie England 'Thumbs up!' sign right in her face" (*Motortown*, 51)².
- 6 As argued by Butler, the Abu Ghraib pictures enforce particular frames of recognition and generates specific ontologies of the subject: the images "produce the terms through which the subjects are recognized" (*ibid.* 3). Being enemies, the lives of the Iraqi prisoners are not recognized as human. Danny's camera lens defines the value of Jade's life, making her impossible to grieve, a life that "cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all" (Butler 2016, 38). Throughout the play, Jade actually barely has any agency. For instance, Danny objectifies her by likening her to a cute puppy (*Motortown*, 45) or a doll, "a cute little black thing" (*ibid.* 69). As for Paul, he uses Jade to assert his toxic version of masculinity, demanding of her that she confirms everything he boasts about. When Paul sends her to the kitchen to fetch Danny a glass of water, effectively relegating her to the edge of the stage, he gloats about having a fourteen-year-old girlfriend. Jade only interacts with Danny, and their conversations make clear that he is grooming her: on several occasions, Jade's lines are only made of a dash, underscoring her inability to respond to Danny's predatory questions. The frame of Danny's photographs, just as those of Abu Ghraib's, are structured by social and political norms: in the opening lines of her chapter dedicated to the Abu Ghraib photographs, Butler seeks to understand "[...] how the *frames* that allocate the recognizability of certain figures of the human are themselves linked with the broader norms that determine what will and will not be a grievable life" (Butler 2016, 63-64). In the context of armed conflict, those norms serve war-waging purpose and help cast enemy lives as precarious.
- 7 Just as Susan Sontag did in "Regarding the Torture of Others", the play seems to posit that these acts perpetrated by Danny are the result of violence sanctioned by the army. Throughout the play, Danny drops hints at the culture of abuse in the military, whether it is directed at prisoners, or at soldiers at the bottom of the chain of command. While torturing Jade, Danny reminisces about the abuse his fellow soldiers suffered at the hands of their sergeant major:

We had. There was. Our sergeant-major. He was a funny man. I quite liked him, as it goes. You hear all these stories, don't you? Attention! But no, he was all right. He'd get drunk. Do this to you.

He hits the sole of her feet with the butt of his gun. (Motortown, 50)

- 8 Danny's need to inflict on Jade the corporeal punishments he has witnessed in the army, meaning inflicting pain, abuse and humiliation on those who are considered as weaker, highlights what he has seen as a tolerated behaviour. For Judith Butler, norms governed the framing of the camera of Abu Ghraib: "The task [...] is to understand the operation of a norm circumscribing a reality that works through the action of the frame itself [...]" (Butler 2016, 83). The norm that dictates the frame of Danny's camera is undoubtedly that of the army, and its use of physical violence against squaddies and enemies alike. Danny's anecdote is immediately followed by an evocation of how the soldiers treated their prisoners: "Some of the things we did, down in Basra. It was a laugh. I'll tell yer that for nothing. Here, Ali Baba. Get that down yer throat, yer ragehead cunt" (*Motortown*, 51). Later that day, Danny tries to shock liberal swingers Helen and Justin by telling about the "game[s]" (*ibid.* 65) the soldiers played:

I saw, one time, a group of guys at Pirbright, get another lad, a younger lad – no listen to this, this is right up your street. They get him. Hold him down. Get a broom handle. Fucking push it, right up his rectum. Right up there. [...] And we all watched that. That was funny, to be fair. [...] (*ibid.* 65)

- 9 Considering sexual assault within the army as a funny game plays into this perverted idea of "fun" that Susan Sontag as denounced in "Regarding the Torture of Others" in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal, as "the true nature and heart of America" (Sontag 2004, np). It is difficult however to gage how willing a participant Danny was in these exactions. Although he tells Jade that he tortured prisoners, Danny tells another story entirely to his brother. At the end of the play, Danny comes back home to his brother, Jade's body still in the boot of his car. The brothers discuss Danny's wellbeing and the fact that his experience in the army seems to have changed him. Danny's last line sees him confess that he didn't want to participate in the abuse of prisoners:

In Basra, when it all kicked off with the prisoners, I didn't do any of it. I never touched nobody. I had the rules, pinned above my head. My idiot's guide to the Geneva Convention pinned to the head of my bed. They used to call me a pussy cunt. It never used to bother me. I wish I'd told somebody. I might, still. I wish I'd joined in. I would've liked that. (*Motortown*, 74)

- 10 Danny's moral dilemma between denouncing the abuse and joining in underlines his deep-rooted desire to be part a group, a theme that is recurrent in Stephens's work. Whether Danny has indeed tortured prisoners is neither here nor there, because the consequence of his experience of war culminates in Jade's murder. Philip Fischer has however provokingly suggested that "Jade is a substitute for the prisoners Danny didn't have the courage to torture" (Fisher 2006, np). This moment embeds the scene within the context of normative violence encouraged by the army towards the enemy during the war in Iraq, but more generally the war on terror. Indeed, the torture scene in *Motortown* does not only refer to Abu Ghraib, but also to Guantanamo Bay detention camp, in a bid to replicate a space on stage where extreme violence is permitted, and even legal. Danny encourages Jade to sing Britney Spears's "Baby One More Time":

[...] At his manic encouragement, she joins in.

He stops singing before the final line of the chorus. Waits for her to finish the line. Leans right in on her. Big grin on his face. She sings the final line of the chorus alone.

He nearly hits her. Hard. On the side of her head. Stops his fist just in time. Bursts out laughing. (Motortown, 47)

- 11 The choice of the song is significant, as much for its striking lyrics as for what it represents: it was, among other songs, used at Guantanamo to keep the prisoners from falling asleep. Danny's psychological torture of Jade is also reminiscent of the interrogation techniques used in the context of the war on terror. Although this is not an interrogation scene, as there is no truth to extract from Jade, Danny plays mind games for the fun of it, just to destabilise her. When he picks up the petrol canister and pours liquid over Jade's head, the squaddie asks the young girl whether she thinks it is petrol or water and taunts her: "Your imagination plays terrible fucking tricks on you in situations like this" (*ibid.* 52). He then offers her a cigarette, which could either be her last one before execution or the cause of her death, depending on the nature of the liquid he has poured over her. The physical and psychological torture Danny gleefully puts Jade through therefore reminds the audience of Guantanamo and the use of terror in order to get to the truth.
- 12 As Danny forces Jade into stress positions and mutilates her, he becomes a stage director of sorts: he organises the stage and sets up the scene to be immortalised by his camera. This scene, as did the Abu Ghraib pictures, reminds us of the theatrical nature of photographs: what we see is a staged version of reality, organised and constructed by the photographer or the soldiers torturing the prisoners. According to Butler, "[t]he camera angle, the frame, the posed subjects, all suggest that those who took the photographs were actively involved in the perspective of war, elaborating that perspective, crafting, commending, and validating a point of view" (Butler 2016, 65). The perspective Butler refers to is that of embedded reporting, a term which was first used to describe the news coverage of the war in Iraq. Embedded journalists and reporters were allowed to follow military units, on the condition that "their gaze remained restricted to the established parameters of designated action" (64). The Abu Ghraib photographs could therefore be construed as the validation of the military's perspective on the war in Iraq, and Danny's act of torture is set within these specific parameters, those of the violence tolerated, authorised or even encouraged within the British army. However, the frame of Danny's camera lens is not the only one structuring the apprehension of Jade's life.

2. "It's just that you come back to this": new context of reception

- 13 The circulation of photographs exposes the image to "new animating and shifting contexts of its reception" (Butler 2016, xiv). Having been broadcast, distributed and disseminated, the frame of war the image carries therefore breaks up and offers the possibility of reframing the lives they depict. This is, however, not the case in *Motortown*: Danny never shows the pictures he has taken of Jade to anyone, thus condemning her life to precariousness and ungrievability: there is no possibility for outrage at Jade's plight or calls for justice. Yet, I would argue that the breaking up of the frame happens in another, more distinctly (un)theatrical, way.
- 14 Director Ramin Gray aimed at questioning the frames at work. As indicated in the playtext, *Motortown* is to be "performed as far as possible without décor" (*Motortown*, 4): in Ramin Gray's production at the Royal Court, the stage is bare, except for a few plastic

chairs. Bright overhead lights confer a gritty feel to the production, further underscored by the imposing brick wall at the back of the stage. On the floor, stripes of white tape delimit what constitutes the “stage”. Actors move in and out of that space: when their scene is over, they step outside of the square and sit silently to watch the rest of the play unfold until their next scene. There are therefore two framing devices at work within the torture scene: that of Danny’s camera, and that of the white tape on the stage. The second frame creates a Brechtian distancing effect that allows the audience to question the social and political norms that govern it as well as the constructed nature of what is represented onstage.

- 15 Although Danny seems to get away with Jade’s murder, the alternating realistic and expressionist moments in the play confer a nightmarish quality to the torture scene, allowing Jade to reappear after her murder. In an interview with Aleks Sierz, Simon Stephens has commented on the scene change after Jade’s murder: the crew comes back on stage to mop up the blood with soapy water, while Jade climbs out of the body bag Danny has stuffed her into. Given that the actors exit the white frame on the stage, but remain visible to the audience, one can assume that Jade sits with the others outside of the frame. She therefore becomes a spectral presence, which does not haunt Danny but remains seen by the spectators as a reminder of Danny’s gruesome act. Although he never shows the pictures he has taken to anyone, thus condemning Jade to the original frame of his camera, I would contend that the interplay between the centre of the white frame and its edges provides the much needed breaking away that Butler argued offers the possibility of a new apprehension of human life. While the white frame enforces Danny’s version of reality, the discarded Jade becomes a “specte[r] that haunt[s] the ratified version of reality” (Butler 2016, xiii).

- 16 Danny’s reality is not merely governed by the norms enforced by the army: within the larger frame marked by the white tape, it is the whole fabric of British society that is questioned. Simon Stephens was prompted to write the play as a reaction against the anti-war campaign in Great Britain. Although Stephens was no supporter of a military intervention in Iraq, the arguments used by the anti-war movement troubled him:

There was something about the anti-war movement that built up around the declaration of war in Iraq that unnerved me. It was a movement that seemed to be based on a separation of the war from the international context that surrounded it. It managed, at times, to argue its way into defending the sovereignty of a mass murderer. I was not an unapologetic advocate of the war in any way and was sensitive to many arguments made against it. (Stephens 2009, 23)

- 17 This oversimplified approach to the war is exemplified in *Motortown* by Helen and Justin, whom Danny meets at a hotel. Danny’s traumatic experience is pitted against the couple’s liberal view of the war in Iraq. When Justin reveals they have been on the anti-war march in Hyde Park, Danny expresses his wish that he had been there: “I wish I’d been there. [...] With my SA80. Sprayed the lot of yer” (*Motortown*, 65). Danny’s violent tendencies are presented as the result of his increasing sense of alienation since returning from the war: “I come back home. It’s a completely foreign country” (*ibid.* 65). On more than one occasion, Danny laments the transformation of the country he has fought for. In his final rant after murdering Jade, and as he shoves her body in a body bag, Danny still complains to the young girl:

Yer see them, don’t yer?
Fucking leave university and get a fucking house together and spend all day in their
shitehawk little jobs hoping that one day they’re gonna make it as a fucking big

shot. But they're not. They never will. They're shrivelled up Home Counties kids and they march against the war and think they're being radical. They're lying. They're monkeys. They're French exchange students. They're Australians in London wrecked on cheap wine and shite beer. They're Hasidic Jews in swimming pools. They're lesbian cripples with bus passes. They're niggers, with their faces all full of their mama's jerk chicken, shooting each other in the back down Brixton high street until the lot of them have disappeared. They're little dickless Paki boys training to be doctors or to run corner shops and smuggling explosives in rucksacks onto the top decks of buses. It's not funny, Jade. I'm not joking. I fought a war for this lot. (*ibid.* 58)

- 18 Danny's intense rage at minorities, the middle class and the anti-war movement is strikingly condensed into this rhythmic rant, punctuated by the numerous harsh plosive consonants and the anaphora of "they're", the objects of his hatred. Wendy S. Hesford has argued that "the Abu Ghraib photographs are more about dominance established through the staging of trauma than the extraction of truth" (Hesford 2006, 30). Through the staging of terror and humiliation, Danny imprints on Jade's body his need for dominance over other minorities. The homophobic and misogynistic stance that pervades Danny's discourse throughout the play also points to a violence stemming from a toxic representation of masculinity. *The Independent's* Paul Taylor saw Danny's actions as a "twisted way [to] revenge himself for [his] girlfriend's rejection" (Taylor 2009, np). Earlier in the play, Danny was indeed rejected by his ex-girlfriend Marley: although she has moved on with her life, Danny believed that they would get back together when he returns from Iraq, and harasses her. Danny's obsession with an idealised version of ultra-masculinity, best embodied, according to him, by John Wayne, Sylvester Stallone and James Bond, reaches its climax during the torture scene. Not only does Danny want to dominate Jade, he also wants her to recognize him as her superior and, above all, a worthy man. Danny strives to show Jade how clever and strong he is: because his ex-girlfriend Marley rejected him, he longs for Jade's approval while simultaneously destroying her as an act of revenge on women.
- 19 However, the play offers another explanation to Danny's act. Much has been said about Lee's suggestion, in the last scene, that Danny's propensity to violence predates his time in the army: "People used to say I was a paedophile. Largely because of my glasses. [...] And if it weren't for you, I would have had a much more horrible time than I actually did. People were frightened you would have battered them. On account of you being a psychopath" (*Motortown*, 71). Lee's hinting at Danny psychopathic behaviour has been seen as undermining the connection the play established between personal violence and that displayed by the army³. It would however fit Stephens's argument about the war being symptomatic of the violence pervading society. Yet Sierz welcomes this revelation:

Stephens has deliberately not written Danny as a victim of army brutality – if he shows how war brutalises men, he also shows how brutal men discover themselves during war. Danny's deprived background, and his own family, are the cause of his problems. (Sierz 2011, 131)
- 20 While this does not quite feel like a "moral cop-out" (Sierz 2011, 131), it does evince a problematic sense of determinism, which condemns the working-class to a life of violence and struggle. The endemic violence represented here is, however, not confined to the limits of the stage: in the tradition of In-Yer-Face theatre, the audience is directly confronted with the brutality and cruelty the characters experience.

3. Torture and voyeurism: unsafe spectatorship

- 21 *Motortown* seems to relish in making the audience uncomfortable. *The Guardian's* theatre critic Lyn Gardner compared the experience of watching the play to "being run over by a 10-tonne truck that doesn't bother to stop to check that you are still breathing" (Gardner 2006, np). *Motortown* explicitly draws on the tradition of In-Yer-Face theatre, defined by Aleks Sierz as a form of theatre that "shocks audiences by the extremism of its language and images; unsettles them by its emotional frankness and disturbs them by its acute questioning of moral norms" (Sierz). It is also experiential: In-Yer-Face theatre seeks to invade the audience's personal space and force the spectators to experience what the characters go through on stage. In this instance, the scenography of Ramin Gray's production was purposefully designed to "torture" the public. Between each scene, the plastic chairs that make up the only elements of décor are rearranged to suggest a new location. Those transitional moments were choreographed by Hofesh Schechter: "What I wanted between each of the scenes was a spritzer that would wipe the audience's aesthetic palate. We used the image of a man plunging his head into a bucket of water, and between each scene he comes back up [gulping for air]. That's the choreography" (Rebellato 2013, 214). The theatregoers are therefore being forced to experience a form of waterboarding: the intensity of the scenes is meant to suffocate the spectators and the transitions to provide some much-needed respite. Angelaki has described the experience of seeing a Simon Stephens's play as "unsafe spectatorship": the playwright often writes mercurial characters who give the impression that anything can happen on stage and that the audience is sitting at an uncomfortable distance. *Motortown* has a nightmarish quality, offset by Danny's instability: he feels like a ticking bomb. *The Telegraph's* Charles Spencer reported that several members of the public were so unsettled that they had to leave the theatre (Spencer 2006).
- 22 The actors sitting outside of the white frame while the story unfolds can also be construed as a double of the spectators of the play. As such, this mise-en-abyme questions the reception of the audience and the importance of the gaze. As the actors silently watch Jade's murder, mirroring the theatregoers' position, the spectators become both witnesses and accomplices of the savage act. During the torture scene, most of the actors are sitting outside of the frame, watching the abuse and murder without stepping back into the frame to intervene. This dramaturgical device acts as a criticism of our silent acceptance of the crime and our complicity. The aim for the playwright was to question the arguments used by the demonstrators against the war in Iraq:
- I wanted *Motortown* to be a play that troubled its audience. It was important to me that a play that looked at such a brutal, ghastly war should take a position that maybe undermined the expectations of the Court's largely liberal regulars. (Sierz 2006, np)
- 23 The war in Iraq was still very much present in the audience's mind at the time of the performance: the play was first performed only three years after the infamous anti-war protest of February 2003, and less than a year after the 7/7 bombings in London⁴. Writing about such red-hot events that have shaped recent British history can only be political: Stephens hopes to spark a conversation around the UK's role in the war on terror and the consequences the war had on British society. Stephens seems to delight in forcing the public to acknowledge their contradictory positions: although they are

largely anti-war, they come to the theatre to watch a play about a soldier returning from Iraq, in what Stephens perceives to be a morbid fascination for the war. This characterisation is best exemplified by Helen and Justin, whose interaction with Danny highlights the representation of violence in the play as pornographic. Stephens suggested that the couple represent stereotypical left-wing voters whose fascination with Danny translates into sexual terms. The couple propositions him: Justin would watch while Danny and Helen have sex. For Stephens, “[...] fundamentally, they want to fuck [Danny’s story], don’t they? [...] They’re actually going to a hotel in Southend as a tourist to consume the soldier Danny” (Stephens and Sierz 2006). The objectifying fascination upheld by the upper-class for the lower-class therefore manifests itself a need to assimilate what is alien. The importance of the gaze is underlined several times and creates a parallel between pornography and torture. Danny enquires about the dynamics of the threesome:

Danny Do you like it? Watching?

Justin I do, yes. (*Motortown*, 63)

- 24 The association of the gaze with a sexual act is then perverted when Danny offers Justin to show him videos of the beheading of British civil engineer Ken Bigley and American radio-tower repairman Nick Berg:

Danny [...] You wanna see what I’ve got on my phone? You wanna see Ken Bigley?

I’ve got Ken Bigley on here. Nick Berg. All them! You wanna watch?

[...]

Danny You wanna watch, Justin?

Justin No, I don’t. (*ibid.* 65)

- 25 Danny is not the only character framing torture and murder as pornographic⁵: while working on the gun that will eventually be used to kill Jade, Paul shamelessly shares with Danny his predilection for hard-core, violent porn. The violence displayed in *Motortown* plays into Stephens’s view of the war in Iraq and the arguments made against it: “But it struck me as simplistic and somehow childlike not to see the war as symptomatic rather than causal” (Stephens 2009, 23). The reversal of the causal framework of the war makes for a monstrous world according to the playwright. And what a monstrous world *Motortown* represents: the characters’ racism, sexism and homophobia is laid bare for all to see, in an attempt to undermine the liberals’ simplistic arguments against the war. If war is the symptom of a perverted world, the play forces its audience to look at the class divide still at work in Britain. The characters of John and Paul, through their hatred towards the liberals, seem to force the audience of the Royal Court to realise that the world is not so simplistic outside of their bubble. Stephens argues that *Motortown* is a criticism of liberal culture, which fails to see that Danny is a product of society as a whole:

What I was hoping to do is dramatize the extent to which culpability for that story, that crisis, lies with everybody; that Danny is the product of all of us, actually. Liberal culture absolves itself of culpability, by organising anti-war marches or going to the theatre or writing plays (Sierz 2006, np).

- 26 Although Stephens demonstrates some measure of self-awareness, the play feels exploitative: as with many theatrical reactions to the war in Iraq, the focus is not Iraq, but the political and social consequences of Tony Blair’s decision to occupy the country. *Motortown* subverts the Abu Ghraib photographs, which are deeply embedded into our collective psyche as one of the defining moments of the Iraq war, in order to make a play about the breakdown of British society. *Motortown*, in a bid to shock the liberal

audience of the Royal Court into reviewing their arguments against the war, seems to pile on racist, misogynistic and homophobic characters rather gratuitously, in a bid to become more sensationalist. As Sierz has argued, “when the middle classes have nightmares, they feature characters like Danny” (Sierz 2011, 131).

- 27 Drawing on very recent events, *Motortown* attempts at reframing the Abu Ghraib scandal as an event symptomatic of the violence permeating British society and at reframing Jade's life, unlike those of the Iraqi prisoners, as grievable. The underlying **goal** of the play, however, seems to be a reflection on the class divide still at work in the UK: *Motortown* has been written with a specific, liberal audience in mind as a means to show the theatregoers the consequences of the war on the working-class and to provoke them into nuancing their pro-war arguments. As such, *Motortown* could well be construed as a state of the nation play, refracting national identity and the fragmentation of British society. Indeed, Stephens thinks the play is still relevant to this day and that one could retrospectively find in its themes an explanation for the 2016 Brexit vote⁶.
- 28 Here lies the potential problem with the play: because it aspires to portray the state of British society at the time of the invasion of Iraq, it covers too many themes and topics, which weakens its central argument. *Motortown* is certainly different to Stephens's plays in its depiction of the working-class, which lacks the usual tenderness and nuance one can find in his other plays. Moreover, the use of In-Yer-Face aesthetics of the play may, for some, be problematic in order to portray such sensitive issues. Understandably, the play divided the critics: some newspapers, like the *Daily Mail*, thought it was “depraved snuff-theatre” (Sierz 2011, 131) while others praised its provocative stance. Other critics have come as far as accusing Stephens of cultural tourism, inviting a privileged audience to tour a less fortunate area of England. The argument could also be made that In-Yer-Face theatre relies on sensationalism as the only way to jerk the audience awake. In an article about the relevance of the In-Yer-Face movement, Aleks Sierz has argued that this type of theatre can feel exploitative, especially in its depiction of the crisis of masculinity, and it is vulnerable to criticism (Sierz 2002, 21). Whatever the reception of In-Yer-Face theatre today, well after its days of glory in the 1990s, *Motortown* cements the crucial role of theatre in discussing recent history.

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NOTES

1. *Motortown* is heavily inspired by coming home from war narratives, and most notably by Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, a play about a soldier returning from war only to find himself alienated in his country and incapable of expressing himself other than through violence. Stephens's play also draws on Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

2. Lynndie England was one of the soldiers pictured with the Abu Ghraib prisoners. One of the photographs shows her doing a "thumbs up" sign, while pointing at a naked prisoner's genitalia.

3. *The Guardian*'s Lyn Gardner argued that "in suggesting that Danny was a psychopath long before he went to Iraq, or perhaps even joined the army, Stephens undercuts the connection between personal violence and violence perpetrated in the name of the state" (Gardner 2006, np).

4. Simon Stephens was actually writing the play at the time of the bombings (Stephens 2009, xvii).

5. Butler has argued against this description of war photographs and videos as pornographic, positing that it reduces that very notion to “the pleasure taken in seeing human degradation and in the eroticization of that degradation” (Butler 2009, 89). That comparison undermines the specificities of the violence portrayed in these photographs and videos.

6. “Simon Stephens in conversation with Dan Rebellato” at the “Crossing Borders: Contemporary Anglophone Theatre in Europe” RADAC conference.

ABSTRACTS

British theatre is renowned for tackling topical, red-hot events pertaining to immediate history: the war in Iraq, for instance, prompted swift and diverse responses from British playwrights. The representation of recent history will be analysed in this paper through the representation of torture, and more specifically the Abu Ghraib scandal, in Simon Stephens's *Motortown* (2006). Written during the 7/7 bombings in London, the play is permeated with the sense of horror associated with the war against terror and the war in Iraq: it blurs the line between the frontlines and the home front, as Danny, a former squaddie, re-enacts on British soil the acts of torture inflicted on prisoners in Abu Ghraib. This paper will show how, drawing on In-Yer-Face aesthetics, the playwright subverts the framing of torture and reflects on the anti-war movement.

Le théâtre britannique est réputé pour s'attaquer aux événements d'actualité, aux sujets brûlants relevant de l'histoire immédiate : la guerre en Irak, par exemple, a suscité des réponses rapides et protéiformes de la part des dramaturges britanniques. La représentation de l'histoire récente sera analysée dans cet article à travers la représentation de la torture, et plus particulièrement du scandale d'Abou Ghraib, dans la pièce *Motortown* (2006) de Simon Stephens. Écrite pendant les attentats du 7 juillet 2005 à Londres, la pièce est imprégnée du sentiment d'horreur associé à la guerre contre le terrorisme et à la guerre en Irak : elle brouille la ligne de démarcation entre les lignes de front et le front intérieur, alors que Danny, un ancien soldat, reproduit sur le sol britannique les actes de torture infligés aux prisonniers à Abou Ghraib. Cet article montrera comment, en s'inspirant de l'esthétique In-Yer-Face, le dramaturge subvertit le cadre de la torture et propose une réflexion sur le mouvement anti-guerre.

INDEX

Mots-clés: guerre, histoire immédiate, Stephens (Simon), théâtre britannique, théâtre in-ye-face, traumatisme, photographie de guerre

Keywords: war, immediate history, Stephens (Simon), British theatre, In-Yer-Face theatre, trauma, war photography

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