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“I Am the Abyss into Which People Dread to Fall”: Encountering Anxiety in Dystopian Drama

In the recent past, there has been no lack in potential sources of anxiety: global heating, Brexit, the war in Ukraine with its renewal of the threat of nuclear conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic and the insurrection at the Capitol have all shaken up certainties that most in the global north had taken for granted. Public reaction to these developments, in street protests and in the media, betrays a sense of anxiety that suffuses social and political discourse. This anxiety is also increasingly manifesting itself in contemporary drama. Indeed, it seems that the last years have seen the rise of what might be called a “theatre of anxiety,” which uses an overwhelming sense of anxiety as the backdrop against which topics of social, political, technological and ecological importance are staged and combines them with philosophical and aesthetic implications of anxiety.

Given this central role of anxiety in the current academic and political debate, my aim is to show how this sensation influences and is represented in dystopian drama on both a thematic and aesthetic level. As the following interpretation will show, a particular focus in analysing theatre and anxiety must fall on the staging of time and pain. Both time and pain are transgressive phenomena. The construction of pain as crossing various borders and time as connecting past, present and future can frequently be traced in dramatic representations of anxiety. I want to illustrate this by looking at two near-future dystopian plays,¹ namely Alistair McDowall’s *X* and Zinnie Harris’s *How to Hold Your Breath*. Each drama focuses on a specific aspect of anxiety: McDowall’s on the flowing nature of time and Harris’s on its painful, multi-layered and overloaded nature. Both plays also stage anxiety through the crossing of boundaries on a physical and mental level as well as aesthetically through the destruction of language and the ensuing semantic void. Thus, they illustrate that the key to portraying fear and anxiety in dystopian theatre, as a means of commenting on global crises and catastrophes, lies in the crossing of several borders in time and pain and in the destruction of language.

¹ For a thorough analysis why both dramas can be characterised as near-future dystopian plays see Trish Reid (79–82).

Pain and the Temporality of Anxiety

Fear and anxiety are two closely connected phenomena which can be characterised by similar underlying structures connecting time, pain and language and can function as commentary on global crises in drama and performance. According to Sara Ahmed, the connection between fear and anxiety takes place on a phenomenological level. Similar to Kierkegaard (41–42) and Heidegger (180–181), Ahmed defines fear and anxiety in relation to an object. As she argues, in fear, the object that is feared might pass by, which means that feelings of fear cannot be contained: “If fear had an object, then fear could be contained by the object. When the object of fear threatens to pass by, then fear can no longer be contained by an object” (65). The object of fear is thus “*not quite present*” (65). Therefore, Ahmed characterizes fear as the temporal “*passing by*” (65) of a fearful object over time. Even when the fearful object passes by, for instance when a fright-inducing snake vanishes, the fear lingers on, ready to emerge again whenever a snake is seen. Anxiety, on the other hand, can be described as a conglomeration of several of these objects or thoughts that induce fear (65). Thus, it is not a lack of objects but their overabundance which causes anxiety. This can be intensified when each object of fear is substituted by another object of fear over time, which leads to an even bigger conglomeration of fearful objects and ultimately to anxiety. In anxiety, the attachment to these countless objects of fear is so strong that one loses track of what exactly it is one is afraid of. As Ahmed writes, “we could consider how anxiety becomes attached to particular objects, which come to life not as the cause of anxiety, but as an effect of its travels” (66). In the theatre, this cluster of objects and anxiety finds its aesthetic counterpart in what may be termed the multimediality of presentation itself (Pfister 6), where lighting, costumes, props, actors, sounds and speech are all happening at once and acting upon the audience. On a thematic level, this conglomerate surfaces in the various topics and actions that happen simultaneously, and often cross the borders of what can be endured by the characters in a play.

When one follows Ahmed’s definition of anxiety as a gathering of several objects of fear, the staging of pain and time must be key to representations of anxiety on the stage. After all, for her, a fearful object that may also be the cause for anxiety is “an anticipated pain in the future” (65). While fear and all its side effects like paralysis or palpitations are felt in the present, the anticipated pain is felt in the future. Therefore, notions of pain and time are essential for analysing anxiety in dystopian plays.

Pain plays a central role in human experience. According to Ahmed, feelings of pain are important for the process of determining the boundaries of bodies;

[i]t is through sensual experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as bodily surface [...], as something that keeps us apart from others, and as something that “mediates” the relationship between internal or external, or inside and outside (24).

While here pain is seen as an indicator for the transgression of such bodily boundaries, Ahmed also establishes the connection between pain and feelings like fear, anxiety and uncertainty when she refers to fear as “an anticipated *pain* in the future” (65, emphasis added). This interconnection becomes particularly forceful, whenever pain is consciously reflected on: “The experience and indeed recognition of pain *as pain* involves complex forms of association between sensations and other kinds of ‘feeling states’” (23). Therefore, in pain the borders of body and mind are inadvertently and forcefully crossed on several levels, as the analysis of both dystopian plays further demonstrates.

One important aspect of pain is the inexpressibility of physical and mental pain and the subsequent political consequences this has, as described by Elaine Scarry. Pain, for her, combines the affirmation of our own physical nature with uncertainty about the physical nature of others: “To have pain is to have *certain-ty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt* (13). Furthermore, it is objectless and thus “has no referential content” (4). This becomes especially clear when looking at language or rather the inexpressibility of pain through language: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). This inexpressibility therefore not just influences the experience of pain within someone’s personal story: “the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be *verbally represented* also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be *politically represented*” (12). Painful experiences, or experiences that induce anxiety, thus frequently remain outside political discourse. The theatre, on the other hand, is a platform where feelings of pain and anxiety can be negotiated due to its status as an aestheticised art form. In the dramatic text, language can actively be destroyed to demonstrate the inexpressibility not just of pain but also of fear and anxiety on an aesthetic level and in wider discursive contexts. Dystopian drama is especially fruitful for this, not only because it is intrinsically related to aversive emotions like fear and anxiety, but also because “dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems” (Booker 3).

What is more, the near-future dystopian scenarios prevalent in plays connected to anxiety also underscore the temporal aspect of fear and anxiety, reflecting Ahmed's notion of a fearful object as "an anticipated pain in the *future*" (65, emphasis added). Bernhard Waldenfels extends this concept of anxiety and time. For him, anxiety combines past, present and future.² The object that is acting upon us is too early, for which we are not prepared. Thus, we do not have an answer (and hence no protective mechanism) for an event that suddenly comes upon us. We are afraid that an unforeseen future that changes our way of life might happen too early and become our past without us having an adequate solution for it, ideally to prevent it (Waldenfels 24, 83). While being in the present, we are then at the same time thrown into the future (an event is approaching too fast) and into the past (we are not ready for the unforeseen event that passes us by).

Similarly, in theatre, past, present and future are intermingled, and the linear time structure is broken. As Simon Critchley observes,

[i]n tragedy, time is out of joint and the linear conception of time as a teleological flow from the past to the future is thrown into reverse. The past is not past, the future folds back upon itself and the present is shot through with fluxions of past and future that destabilize it (32).

This likewise holds true for the near-future dystopian plays that will be discussed below. One way of expressing the dissolution of time in drama is, again, through the destruction of language. Thus, anxiety, as a commentary on global crises and as a conglomerate of fearful objects, can be conveyed in drama and performance through pain and the crossing of various boundaries which it induces, as well as through the connection of future, present and past. In both cases, the sensational and the temporal, this crossing is accompanied by the destruction of language and the depiction of the unsaid through aesthetic means. This is the case in both *X* and *How to Hold Your Breath*: both plays convey their political message through an atmosphere of anxiety, created by the demolition of temporal and linguistic orientation and a pervading sense of pain.

² A similar account can already be found in Edmund Husserl's *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, where he insinuates that perception itself is always in relation to retention and aspiration and thus combines past, present and future (385). Within anxiety, the linear structure of past, present and future is disrupted; as Waldenfels outlines, in anxiety the future has become the past (83).

X: Temporal Disorientation and the Breakdown of Communication

Alistair McDowall's two-act play *X* (2016) is set on a small research base on Pluto, and while crew members Clark, Cole, Ray and Gilda should have returned to earth weeks ago, all technical devices for time measurement and communication are dysfunctional. Cut off from human civilisation, the main characters are driven to conspiracies, anxieties and insanity. In McDowall's "sci-fi horror" (Sierz) both time and language are demolished and simultaneously connected on several thematic and aesthetic levels, thus breaking numerous boundaries and mirroring the multi-layered structure of anxiety. As the title suggests, the letter X plays a central role within this play. It is simultaneously used as a symbol for hugs and kisses, as a placeholder for names and the identity of the characters (McDowall 120), as a visual image smeared across a wall (10) or generally space (based on physical equations). Moreover, as Trish Reid outlines, "[i]t stands for the chromosomal inheritance a mother passes to her daughter [and] is a harbinger of doom in the vision of a little girl someone sees at the porthole" (82). In the following discussion, the focus will be on X as a placeholder for time and a symbol for the destruction of language.

The perception of time within the play is disrupted on several occasions. From the beginning onwards, time is perceived differently by each character and increasingly desynchronised from the time displayed by the large digital clock on the wall. The first scene not only sets the mood for the whole play but is an example of how, in anxiety, time and language are connected and destroyed simultaneously. It becomes clear that for unknown reasons the characters have no way of leaving the research base or getting into contact with earth. There is no solution for their technical problems. The characters' involuntary isolation in combination with their different perceptions of time makes them unable to work together. Their relationships are increasingly built on suspicion and resentment, social boundaries are not respected, and, due to the lack of trust, the crew members feel inhibited about showing any emotions (8). Their anxiety steadily increases as they are constantly waiting without any aim or hope:

Waiting for someone to pick up the phone. Or come get us. ... Or we're just waiting to die. [...] And there's nothing you can do about that. We've got more than enough food. Water won't run out. And the base is designed to last for *decades*, it'll still be breathing *way* after we've stopped. Its *job* is to live forever. (45)

The temporal contrast between the technical devices that last forever and the finite nature of humans can be seen as another source of anxiety in which not just nature but also technology might outlive humans, thus adding to the opaque conglomerate of fears and anxieties.

However, while the technological devices last forever, they may still be dysfunctional. When Cole is doing some math calculations with pen and paper, Clark looks at them and tells him that they are wrong. When Cole explains that he wants to calculate “time. X is time” (66), it becomes evident that all clocks on the base are dysfunctional: “Everything’s linked to Earth through the main clock. And the main clock’s wrong” (68). Their time neither fits earth time nor plutonian time, which is why Cole’s calculations can never be correct. Due to these irregularities, there are constant shifts between day and night, week and month and they do not seem to follow any pattern. Thus, the whole crew does not know what time or day it is, which further increases their uncertain and anxious mood. This uncertainty fits in well with Ahmed’s description of the object in fear as “*not quite present*” (65) and to anxiety as an accumulation of these fearful objects which build up “until [anxiety] overwhelms other possible affective relations to the world” (66). While the characters in the play are provided for by the base, they are surrounded by anxiety and fear a future that promises to be an infinite regress of boredom, despair and isolation. Their anxiety, elicited by their isolation and temporal displacement, leads to anti-social behaviour that further isolates them; the characters are not able to speak about their emotions, which still heightens their anxiety.

The only measurement of time in *X* is through dialogues and memory – something that is also increasingly disrupted. Although the drama is set in the future, the characters are constantly trying to hold on to a long gone past. They play games like *Guess Who* from the 90s and chess (28), tell each other stories of the last time they ate meat, of the last birds and trees and listen to the recording of bird songs to remember them and their Latin names (25). This nostalgia contrasts with the futuristic and sterile environment they are in. In an earlier scene, when Clark tells the story of the last tree on earth, he insists that “[h]istory is bullshit” and that one “[c]an’t see it. Touch it. There’s just this second, right now, as I’m saying it it’s dying, it’s gone. [...] Pimps like me live in the present” (15). Nevertheless, he is then fascinated with birds, their songs and names (25). This shows that he is torn between a longing for an irrevocable past, the construction of a quasi-pastoral history and an at least superficial rejection of the intangibility of history, an inner turmoil that explains his inability to talk about emotions and sentiments. When he is engaging with birds, language and sounds help to remember a long-gone time and give him some stability and hope. However, this hope is set in the past. Following Waldenfels, the catastrophe that happened prior to the

first act and that explains the depletion and destruction of nature on earth, came too soon for humanity to react and prevent it. The research base on Pluto is only the futile attempt to fix the mistakes made on earth centuries earlier. It becomes clear that the crew members have taken their own (and earth's) problems with them. Correspondingly, Michael Billington observes that "the human race, having wrecked its own planet, now transfers its problems to the colonised outer reaches of the solar system" ("X"). Therefore, in *X*, the shifting boundaries of past and future and the inability to live in the present comment on the current political inability to react to several global crises at once.

From act two onwards the division into acts and scenes breaks down. There are no more numbers for new scenes, which are now indicated by brackets [], mirroring the research base trapping its own crew members and the vacuum, isolation and nothingness inside the space station as well as the emotional emptiness inside the crew members' heads. The characters drift apart more and more, and so does their language. Communication in the play is increasingly disturbed as the crew members still cannot contact planet Earth nor communicate with each other, which impacts on their mental states. "In the hallucinatory second act," as Reid writes, "X represents the crossing out of neurons in a dying brain as it colonises language itself, erasing meaning as it goes" (82). Everything becomes very absurd, fast, circling around the same lines of conversation. Ray has tragically died, and Cole and Gilda are constantly in dispute, while Cole has advanced cancer which impairs his mental and physical abilities. Here a spiral begins of Cole forgetting about his illness, growing hostile towards Gilda and later Clark, with his ever-worsening physical and mental state eventually leading to his death. The words and actions crash into each other, breaking the boundaries of mental and physical states, of true and false, illness and health, conscious and unconscious, friendship and hostility. In these scenes the boundaries of time, language, individuality and humanity are breaking down (110). Fuelled by anxiety, the words get mixed up, blurred, and language and time stop making sense. Suddenly feelings are expressed instead of a message, as things are too horrendous to articulate. In the end the crew members cannot remember their old stories, their own names, or what X stands for. The blurring of sensory experiences becomes increasingly clear in the sequence of pages³ which consist of hundreds of X's, like a wall or a prison of letters that cannot be overcome, a system that cannot be used and experiences and emotions that cannot be described

³ This part of the play contains no stage directions or dialogue markers and thus feels as if it was lifted from an experimental novel, shifting between different genres and writing styles and leaving it open how this is to be staged.

(126–130). On these pages time, language, space, sensation and emotion are all intermingled and cannot be differentiated or expressed, leading to a conglomerate of fear and anxiety.

In the final scene of Act Two, scene X, Gilda is playing hide and seek with a little girl (142). The girl, who was earlier muted with an X across her mouth, is called Mattie. She is not just Gilda and Clark's child but also a hallucination that accompanies Gilda throughout the play. Mattie is thus the connection between Gilda's imagined fifth crew member and her daughter, whose age is shifting between a young girl and a grown woman. In this scene, which probably takes place long after the other crew members are gone, scientific calculations of time and space, age and height once again play a central role and, again, cannot be calculated. The entire conversation between Gilda and Mattie unfolds in temporal loops and circles around the ever-same topics and sentences that constantly shift in meaning. It seems Gilda is as confused by the different time scales as the audience. However, what remains is the love between child and mother. Mattie brings pillows and blankets to put in front of the window for her mother, and it seems as if Gilda mistakes her child for her mother and at the same time Mattie cares for her mother as for a child. The whole scene is riddled with opacity:

Mattie [...] How's that? Warm enough?

Gilda Are we still waiting?

Mattie No, we're not waiting for anything.

Gilda We're not?

Mattie No.

Gilda Oh.

...

Pause.

I don't know what time it is even.

...

And I can't see anything out this window. (148–149)

This scene, once again, shows how time connected with an anticipated painful future is closely linked to feelings of fear and anxiety. Even as an old woman, Gilda is still waiting for something bad to happen. This illustrates Ahmed's claim that the object in anxiety can never be contained because it passes by (65). Gilda is so obsessed with a future of isolation and separation that these feelings have long taken over her life. Therefore, she is not just unable to see anything out of the window, as everything is steeped in blackness; she is also surrounded by an uncertain and already past future that leads to a life of anxiety. As Marissia Fragkou observes, in *X* "the unimaginable or the dystopian serves as an index of what we are about to lose" (91). Alistair McDowall's *X* can thus be seen as an allegory for climate change, for gender relations, for fear of the future, for social

isolation and for fake news. In this play several (temporal) boundaries are crossed, which is accompanied by the dissolution of language; the boundary between emotion and reason, nature, culture and technology, old and young, mother and child, noise and silence, innocence and guilt, fear and anxiety vanishes.

How to Hold Your Breath: Social Collapse and Ubiquitous Pain

Zinnie Harris's dystopian alternative reality *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015) uses a similar crossing of boundaries, even though here my focus is on pain and language in combination with anxiety. The play describes the flight and ruin of Dana and her pregnant sister Jasmine from an economically, politically and ethically collapsing Europe: a conglomerate of dreadful events and tragedies happen at once, crash into each other and cross several thematic and aesthetic borders, while feelings of anxiety and pain are increased by and simultaneously cause the destruction of communication and language.

The first border that is crossed in the play is the one between pleasure and pain. At the beginning of the play Dana is in her bedroom with Jarron, who works for the United Nations. It becomes evident that the two of them had a one-night stand. However, Jarron was under the impression that Dana is a prostitute. When he wants to pay € 45 for the night, for her “unlocking services” (50) and Dana refuses, he gets angry. Infuriated that their encounter was not a commercial act but took place out of affection, he insists that he is “unloveable,” “a demon” and “a bridge that you don't cross” (23). Dana still rejects the money but is subsequently obsessed by Jarron and persuaded that he is involved in all misfortune that is about to happen to her. The first scene thus gives an impression of the physical and mental borders that are crossed throughout the play – through sex, manipulation and commercial interests. Dana's role as a protagonist is to resist corruption, which, together with an overarching feeling of anxiety, leads to her and her sister's mental and physical annihilation.

After the encounter with Jarron, Dana leaves for a job interview. During the interview she sits on a chair in the middle of the stage, while a bright light is blinding her so that she cannot see any of the interview panellists, who consist of dehumanised voices that surround her (35). This first interview situation establishes borders by playing with darkness and light. Throughout the play, these borders will be demolished as the anxiety-ridden situation of the interview is presented in intermittently recurring scenes. Dana is separated from any human interaction, and the blinding lights that seem to shine through her dis-

tract her from concentrating on her presentation. Nonetheless, she is invited to yet another interview to Alexandria.

When Dana and Jasmine, who accompanies her, are on the train to Alexandria, the ticket inspector tells them that the bank has refused their cards. In the meantime, Europe has experienced a major financial and economic crash, leading the surrounding countries to close their borders. Due to their lack of cash, Dana and Jasmine have to leave the train at a place aptly called Hartenharten. In their hotel room, Dana finds out that all the banks have shut. Their hotel room is freezing, the heating does not work, and neither does the kettle. They have no way of getting money or paying for the room. A succession of tragic events unfolds until in Scene Seventeen they have no money, no water or food, no clean clothes, no health insurance and no opportunity to travel to Alexandria. At the same time, they have lost their phones and thus cannot contact anyone, they lost their suitcase with personal belongings, and Jasmine lost the baby, which means that the fear and pain Dana and her sister have to endure occur on both a physical *and* a mental level. There are so many instances of fear and pain that Dana is not able to concentrate on any of them, feeling overwhelmed by what in Ahmed's terms may be described as the conglomerate of fear surrounding her and losing track of what she is afraid of. As Julia Boll claims, "[o]n a structural level, *How to Hold Your Breath* points at multiple causal entanglements that not only affect the characters' choices and their trajectories, but also make up the core structure of the society and indeed the universe in which they move and operate" (234). These "multiple causal entanglements" are, however, obscure. "[B]y far the most awesome and fearsome dangers," as Zygmunt Bauman observes, "are precisely those that are *impossible*, or excruciatingly *difficult*, to anticipate: the unpredicted, and in all likelihood *unpredictable* ones" (11). This further explains Dana's desperate situation and her fight for her own and her sister's life by adding a layer of insecurity, vulnerability as well as chance and unpredictability to her already anxiety-struck situation.

While Dana is surrounded by closing state borders that entrap her during her journey, her individual borders are further invaded. Desperate for her life, she sees prostitution as the only way out of her and her sister's predicament. In the end, her "customer" is not willing to pay the € 45 she demands and rapes her for € 10. While Dana is having rough intercourse with the punter, she is simultaneously asked to repeat her presentation for the interview panel. Being in the spotlight, surrounded by dehumanised voices that have no mercy on her while her body is being intruded is the ultimate crossing of borders in body and mind which induces long lasting pain as well as desperation and anxiety for the future. Pain and anxiety, which, following Ahmed, is a conglomerate of anticipated pains in the future, are transgressive phenomena because they

“involve the violation or transgression of the border between inside and outside” (65). In Harris’s play, these feelings are accompanied by the dysfunction and destruction of language and communication.

The annihilation of semantic meaning and language can already be traced in the prologue,⁴ in which Dana “speaks to the audience” (13), describing the journey she is about to begin. The entire prologue reads like a poem, and the density of the poetic language makes the anger but also the fear and anxiety become palpable. This is the first incidence in which language slips from Dana’s lips, and she claims she is “a scream. A howl” (13), comparing herself to wild animals and natural elements. In Harris’s play, the dysfunction and destruction of language is depicted in several instances on numerous levels, for instance by Martha and Clare, who can only communicate through violence and beat up an already hurt Dana after the encounter with the punter, or by Jasmine, who, after having lost her child, suffers from a form of amnesia and cannot follow any communication. However, in the following analysis, the focus will be on the interaction between a librarian and Dana. Scene Five is the first time Dana contacts the librarian, asking for a book on daemons after having had the encounter with Jarron. This first interaction takes excruciatingly long as the librarian does not seem to understand Dana’s simple request and, by asking unhelpful questions, complicates the matter without offering real help. While this seems to increase the comic relief in the play, the character’s role changes in the rest of the play.

In Hartenharten, at his weekend job, the very friendly but pedantic and at times importunate librarian exclaims that he has the books Dana ordered and added a few new ones – alluding to her financial situation without Dana realising what is happening around her. The librarian not just comments here but also foreshadows the events of the play. In a similarly helpless situation, he insinuates that Dana’s sister is in despair but does not give any further hints that she is having a miscarriage (105 – 106). This mixture of foreshadowing and commenting on events in the play comes close to the role of an omniscient narrator in a novel. He is part of the plot and at the same time not involved in what is happening. For Dana, the librarian is the element that crosses the boundary between reality and fiction, someone who is on her side but, although he is trying to help, is utterly useless and counterproductive, thus further adding to her pain. The librarian’s comments on the play reach a sad climax when Dana decides to prostitute herself and asks the librarian for advice, who immediately produces “how to” books: *“How to Stop Gagging with Someone’s Putrid Penis in Your Mouth [...] How to Make Sure You Don’t Get Strangled. How to Not Get a Disease that Will*

4 The Prologue was not included in the first production of *How to Hold Your Breath* (Boll 218).

Kill You. How to Stay Alive during Prostitution” (129). Thus, the horrendous events that happen to Dana are imagined, commented on, contextualised and made vivid by book titles. They not only “symbolise [...] a consumerist belief in easy solutions to every problem” (Billington, “How to Hold Your Breath”) but also add a visual dimension to Dana’s anxiety and pain, commenting on her suffering on a meta-level which further explains the horrible situation she is in and simultaneously prevents any real conversation about it.

Another example of the dysfunctional communication in the play occurs when Dana calls an ambulance for the bleeding Jasmine, who is having a miscarriage. The woman from the emergency hotline does not see the urgency of Dana’s call and goes through a slow and inefficient assessment with her, while the librarian is providing Dana with well-meaning but utterly useless advice. Finally, at the end of the assessment, the woman concludes:

Woman

twenty minutes now

Dana

twenty minutes, there must be a way to call a devil

Librarian

you can’t rush me

how to keep your cool when your sister is dying

Dana

she isn’t dying

can you get it any quicker than twenty minutes?

Librarian

she doesn’t get blood, she’ll die

Dana

They’ll give her blood then, won’t they? Someone give her some blood. Give me a book, how to make them give someone blood when they need blood

Librarian

how to listen when people are talking nonsense

Dana

what sort of nonsense?

Woman

I am sorry I have to ask, do you have insurance?

Dana

insurance?

this is an emergency –

Librarian

how to keep your cool when life is stressful

Dana

– I don’t need insurance

Woman

do you intend to pay for her treatment in cash?

Librarian

It's got a CD, this one with breathing exercises
meditation (112–113)

In this scene, language is reduced to absurdity, and while Dana becomes increasingly desperate, she does not seem to be able to communicate on a rational level with anyone. Her anxiety and pain thus become evident in the destruction of language in the play. At the same time the boundaries between the reality of the woman from the hotline and the librarian's fictionality are crossed, creating a multitude of unconnected sentences and several threads of communication happening at the same time. This chaos of topics and simultaneous events leads to what Ahmed describes as a conglomerate of different fearful thoughts that merge into anxiety.

At the end of the play, Dana is on a lifeboat with her sister and hundreds of other people, discussing their future perspectives:

Jasmine

we won't ever be going back home, will we?

Dana

I don't think there is anything left for us there.

Beat.

Jasmine

I don't like the idea of not existing.
of being a person but not a person. Like the baby

Dana

the baby –

Jasmine

is dead I know, whereas we –
we'll just be illegal. I understand.

Dana

when we get there, it will get better.
it will all feel better

There is a sudden jolt. (148)

When the boat capsizes, Dana is drowning, while simultaneously finding herself back in an interview scene. She is holding her breath and at the same time trying to answer the questions from the panellists. Talking will drown her and holding her breath will diminish her chances of a new life in Alexandria. This is the most dramatic way of destroying Dana's language. As Elaine Aston observes, “[t]he circularity of Dana's journey from ignorance, through the seeing and to non-seeing augers [sic] a cycle that needs to break, but is not broken.” (305) What Dana has to endure throughout the play, her pain and inability to ex-

press her needs and anxieties comes very close to what Bauman describes as the three kinds of dangers that induce fear and anxiety:

Some threaten the body and the possessions. Some others are of a more general nature, threatening the durability and reliability of the social order on which security of livelihood (income, employment), or survival in the case of invalidity or old age depend. Then there are dangers that threaten one's place in the world – a position in the social hierarchy, identity [...] and more generally an immunity to social degradation and exclusion. (3–4)

At the end of the play, Dana has encountered all three kinds of fears and anxieties, as she neither possesses any valuables nor her own body, which has been raped and beaten up, she has no employment or stable environment that will secure her future, and she has no position in society, being a refugee in a foreign country that does not welcome her.⁵ Thus, while the destruction of society is described on several thematic levels that crash into each other, thereby commenting on dysfunctional societies, Dana has to endure the crossing of mental and physical boundaries and the destruction of her language, subsequently leading to and being a sign of her pain, fear and anxiety. At this point she really represents “the abyss into which people dread to fall” (13).

Therefore, in Harris's dystopian alternative reality, the political, economic and ethical destruction of society is shown on a thematic level, while these events happen on several dimensions simultaneously and crash into each other, invading personal and social boundaries and inducing pain and anxiety. Similar mechanisms are at play in McDowall's *X*, where the technical devices for communication and time measurement are dysfunctional, leaving the main characters in isolation, desperation, insanity and anxiety. Aesthetically, this is depicted by the simultaneous dissolution of time and language, connecting past and future and breaking several boundaries in the process. Thus, both plays illustrate how fear and anxiety can be represented in dystopian plays through the crossing of several borders in pain and time as well as through the destruction of language and communication.

⁵ Among the manifold anxiety-inducing crises modern society is facing, the crisis of capitalism, whose power to shape our society is increasingly coming under scrutiny, is very prominent. It is also present in *How to Hold Your Breath*, where the banking system fails, and all consumerism becomes dysfunctional. Dan Rebellato has convincingly argued that British theatre adopted a new “anti-realist apocalyptic tone” (para. 4) as “counter-strategy to capitalist realism” (para. 58). For him, this trend is accompanied by a new, less realist representation of violence which is, however, bigger in scale, and as such verging on the apocalyptic.

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