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Abstract:

This paper explores the ways in which non-heteronormative sexual identities are represented and made to appear ‘other’ and potentially abject within north-American and British pedagogic cultures, and how this regime of representation affects the development and construction of sexualities in the young. Taking Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and bodily hexis as structural starting points, I draw on Butler’s theoretical work to examine how gender is represented and regulated through performative relations but how these also offer a site for resistance. I discuss Winnicott’s theory of the ‘transitional object’ and the ‘potential space’ of play that it affords, to discuss one such site, a space in which gender divisions are not yet understood (in infancy) and where they can be questioned (in child- and adult-hood). To help me navigate a complex terrain I refer to a large, photographic piece by Jeff Wall, ‘A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947’ (1990). Using this work as an interlocutor, I investigate a domestic situation in which normalcy is overturned by the ‘uncanniness’ of the performance, a phenomenon that undermines the pedagogic agenda to offer an equivocal space for fantasy.

Introduction

Within the context of developing an education for social justice in which all people are able to live a 'viable life' (Butler, 2004) the sphere of human sexuality continues to offer barriers to either common understandings or unified political interests and action (Saiz, 2007). Nonetheless, with the developing consensus on inclusive education within the UK, the government has advised:

It is up to schools to make sure that the needs of all pupils are met in their programmes. Young people, whatever, their developing sexuality, need to feel that sex and relationship education [SRE] is relevant to them and sensitive to their needs (DfEE, 2000, p. 12)

Despite this advice SRE programmes remain focused on sexual health and moral education avoiding the centrality of desire, the democratic embrace of diversity and, in consequence, the potential for developing sexual agency and well-being (Rogow and Haberland, 2005). The profile of SRE is still largely predicated on 'factual' and statistical information which, with its dispassionate, rationalist credentials, obscures what seems most imperative to young people (here 16-19-year-olds) who propose that 'sexuality education contain more detailed information about the logistics of sexual activity as well as sexual desire and pleasure (Allen, 2005, p. 390). The latter discourses are avoided both because of the discomfort and anxiety of teachers (Epstein et al., 2003, pp. 33-50), but also because the affective territory of sexual desire and pleasure, with its supposedly instinctual, urgent and unstable imperatives, is seen as an interruption within the rational discourses of knowledge transfer. Although the threat of sex happening in schools is constantly monitored and policed,

(Foucault, 1998; Levine, 2003) the spectre of the law and its proscriptions (all sexual activity before sixteen is illegal) inhibits schools from engaging with students as knowing and/or experienced (Allen, 2007). And yet in most instances children know a lot about sex before they are confronted with formal SRE (Renold, 2005, pp. 21-22). It appears that a number of questions commensurate with these understandings require urgent consideration: How are children introduced to thinking about sex and how do they construct, enact or mask their sexual identities within the social, domestic sphere? How do the sociological understandings of sexuality dominating the development of a critical SRE relate to psychoanalytical theory, particularly as they both propose unconscious processes as its basis? And, why are both these forms of knowledge so at odds with common understandings of children as non-sexual and/or innocent?

Given these questions I wish to explore how, in the domestic sphere, children are acculturated into heteronormativity through the reiteration of embodied heterosexual relations but also by the deployment of stereotypical signs of otherness, specifically in relation to gender and sexuality.

Methodology

In discussing the social and pedagogic relations that produce normalcy I have recourse to a series of potentially antithetical theoretical positions resulting in a dialectic at once problematising and productive. For example, Winnicott's essentialist idealisation of the mother-infant dyad (1974a) sits uncomfortably with Butler's view of the 'maternal body' as 'a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire' (1999, p. 116).

So too, Butler's belief in gender as an aesthetic and social resource which can be deployed to resist hegemonic structures would seem to contest the determinism of Bourdieu (in his early work). But as Bourdieu himself claims, when writing with Wacquant:

Ordinary sociology, which bypasses the radical questioning of its own operations and of its own instruments of thinking, ... is thoroughly suffused with the object it claims to know, and which it cannot really know, because it does not know itself... It reveals something of the object, but something that is not really objectified since it consists of the very principles of apprehension of the object... (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 236)

By drawing on specific insights from different positions I intend to demonstrate how the multiple registers of a permissive disunity may paradoxically construct an inter-reflexivity in which the premises of the one position question the assumptions of the others, and so on in turn. I am therefore going to look sideways and 'enlist' a photo piece 'A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947' (1990) by Jeff Wall, (see Plate 1 [on page ?](#)) to act as an 'interlocutor' drawing on a dialogic practice developed by Irit Rogoff (2000); she explains: 'Art is my interlocutor rather than my object of study, it is the entity that chases me around and forces me to think things differently, at a different register or through the permissions provided by another angle' (p. 10). Rather than subjecting Wall's 'ventriloquist' to a systematic analysis I engage with it in 'conversation', in the form of an interlude or interruption, and am thereby able to investigate an instance where a domestic space becomes the locus for the pedagogisation of gender.

Research Context

There has been significant research to demonstrate how the discourse of childhood innocence far from preserving and protecting children actually endangers them (Kitzinger, 1990; Kincaid, 1994; Giroux, 2000). The pervasive disavowal of childhood sexuality thereby produces a disjunction between the social order, as manifest in the laws of the father, and the felt experiences of children; this disjunction has very real affects on the developing subjectivity of each child. It is therefore important to look at the relationship between the rational and affective structures of human discourse and practice for it has long been argued that children are introduced to these domains as a duality in which thought and emotion are separated out and made oppositional (Damasio, 1994) and this happens in educational contexts from the earliest age. Such a binary opposition sets up a tension between the ways in which children understand, and are able to negotiate, the relationship between their feelings and the reasonable behaviours expected of them as emergent social beings capable of developing as active agents and citizens, particularly in relation to sexual agency and well-being.

The process of separation is achieved in the domestic setting by consciously speaking the law through injunctions and prohibitions while unconsciously presenting it within a 'feeling tone' (Getz and Lubart, 2000) with which it may be at odds. The degree of congruence between socially sanctioned, consciously performed enactments and the feelings they arouse within the performer/listeners is communicated through the body's social presence (bodily hexis): its look, movements, smells, sounds, surfaces and tactility, an 'aesthetic' that may throw the meaning of the speech into question.

The relationship between what is said and felt produces what Averill (2005) calls an ‘emotional syndrome’, a term that refers to ‘organized patterns of response that are symbolized in ordinary language by such terms as *anger, love, grief*’ (p. 228; author’s italics). Thus the fears, hopes, hypocrisies and tendernesses of adult carers take on a parallel if contrapuntal significance for the child. As Bollas (1993) asserts ‘I maintain that the internalisation of the mother’s form (her aesthetic) is prior to the internalization of her verbal messages. Indeed... where message is contradicted by mode of delivery or vice versa, is a conflict between the form as utterance and the speech as message’ (p. 42). The difference between what is said (with its didactic, moral framework) and how the speaking adult enacts her or his life (with all its vicissitudes and contingencies) sets up a disjunction between the law and the ability of children to sympathise and empathise with its implications and effects. This disjunction is significant both in relation to children’s developing subjectivities and to their understanding of what their adult carers mean; in other words there is a rupture between the symbolic and reality.

There is, however, one categorising principle within the discourses on sex, especially in relation to the education of the young, where the spoken and the enacted, the deliberate and the denied, converge and appear increasingly over-determined and belligerent, namely gender dimorphism (the either/or duality of female/male distinctions). The natural status that this opposition has acquired within patriarchal culture is enforced in the name of so-called ‘common-sense’, a strange mixture comprising pseudo-biology and proscriptive morality, which is maintained in spite of the good sense of feminist research and queer theory (Walkerdine, 1990; Butler,

1999; Renold, 2005) and the proliferating visibility of alternative, ‘chosen’ ‘life styles’ within the mega-visual apparatus of the capitalist media.

Gender Dimorphism

The rational/affective opposition foregrounded in this argument is a secondary division emerging out of the fundamental gender division which (amongst many other theorists) Bourdieu (1990) asserts is at the very core of patriarchal culture:

The division of sexual labour, transfigured in a particular form of sexual division of labour, is the basis of the *di-vision* of the world, the most solidly established of all collective – that is objective – illusions. Grounded first in biological differences, in particular those that concern the division of the work of procreation and reproduction, it is also grounded in economic differences, in particular those which derive from the opposition between labour time and production time and which are the basis of the division of labour between the sexes. More generally, every social order tends to perform a symbolic action oriented towards its own perpetuation by really endowing agents with the dispositions, and consequently the practices and properties, that the principles of division assign to them (p. 146).

Masculine and feminine dispositions are typically assigned within a spatial and temporal framework that produces and reinforces a discourse of difference structured as a sequence of binaries: public/domestic, intellectual/bodily, active/passive, cultural/natural, and these dispositions frequently correspond to rational and emotional modes of being and thinking. Despite equality laws, women are still the primary carers of young children both in the home and in the early years of schooling,

a division that establishes a regime of 'emotional labour' (Noon and Blyton, 1997) founded on the supposedly 'natural' disposition of women to want to mother. This regime of care is supplemented by the 'rationalist' discourse of patriarchal law which mothers are able to use as a regulatory tool by naming the absent father: 'wait 'til your father gets home', a process of displacement and deferral by which they are able to maintain their 'natural' disposition. Inevitably, this invocation is made difficult or impossible in those instances of single-mothers/carers or absent fathers, whether at a time post-war (as in Wall's photo-piece) or, more contemporaneously, the moral degeneracy of youth as recounted in conservative discourses on the family.

The way that the family, religious/local community and schools deploy discourses of the natural to inculcate symbolic values ensures that the law is inscribed upon, and performed by the body itself as a system of belief.

Enacted belief, instilled by the childhood learning that treats the body as a living memory pad, and automaton that 'leads the mind unconsciously along with it', and as a repository for the most precious values, is the form *par excellence* of the blind or symbolic thought. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 69)

In this way Bourdieu sees the law enacted through *bodily hexis*, a continuous performance determined and dominated by monolithic, cultural expectations around gender (but also inflected by class and race). This bodily practice is in effect a sedimentation and condensation of cultural mythologies that form a living history of itself, a *habitus*, '- embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history - is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product'

(Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56). Butler (1999) applies a similar conceptual framework in her examination of gender construction: ‘The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self’ (p. 179). However, she goes to some lengths to explain that this process is not an expression of internal instincts or drives but a socially produced, interactive performance:

If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not “do” one’s gender alone. One is always “doing” with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary... the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author... (Butler, 2004, p. 1)

However, unlike Bourdieu, Butler sees the potential to take control of this process because, despite its monolithic effects, gender normalcy is an illusion and therefore vulnerable to interrogation: ‘The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts [repeated and stylized bodily configurations], in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction’ (1999, p. 179).

Bourdieu's theory powerfully describes the unconscious processes that construct and constitute normalcy and how, as a symbolic structure, it is insinuated within social practice through the performative potential of the body. But the normal is also understood in relation to what lies outside its boundaries, by that which it is not. In this way the normalisation of heterosexual relations resulting from the process of dimorphic classification is coupled by a process of othering in which signs of gender ambivalence or misalignment are accumulated, condensed and then projected onto fictive and real characters who come to seem at once enticing and dangerous.

Alongside children's designated gender role such stereotypical others are introduced to children from an early age particularly by family members, but more widely through illustrations, film and toys (Kuhn et al., 1977) phenomena which are today intimately bound up in developing children as consumers, subject to desire (Schlosser, 2002; Ritzer, 2006). One of the objects through which this dimorphism is most assiduously policed is therefore the doll, an object that Melanie Klein (1955) had used diagnostically to reveal children's early infantile anxieties rather than reinforce them¹. For a moment this brings me to the psychic life of children rather than the cultural interventions and pedagogic agendas of adult discourse.

The 'potential space', the transitional object, projection and symbolisation

When what is said is consciously performed and ritualised in the form of a narrative or imaginary dialogue (as with Wall's ventriloquist) then an in-between space is opened up in which the distinctions between rational and affective modes are put into play. This space is closely related to the 'potential space' theorised by Winnicott (1974a, pp. 47- 48) where the infant, destabilised by its mother's necessary attempt

¹ It should be noted that Winnicott was a disciple and friend of Klein.

through weaning to break the ‘absolute’ bond between them, creates a ‘transitional object’ to act as a surrogate symbol of this bond and reassurance at times of lack. This object may take a variety of forms, for example a rag, a doll or some such familiar, suckable and pliable thing, or it can even be a word, an object that seems to the infant to be ingested orally. Here Winnicott asserts ‘I am staking a claim for an intermediate state between a baby’s inability and his [sic] growing ability to recognise and accept reality. I am therefore studying the substance of *illusion*, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion...’ (1974b, p. 3). In this process the infant creates their first ‘not-me’ object, which functions as a comfort willed and controlled by the child themselves. This object acts as a locus for the child’s projections and thus affords a symbolic space in which the illusion of the bond can allay anxiety. Winnicott argues that despite the sense of sustained omnipotence this process provides the child, it is the mother who allows for its creation by refusing to take away the increasingly used and unhealthy object. ‘The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living’ (1974c, p. 121).² The potential space therefore defines that place where fantasy can be projected onto the real and in so doing animate the inanimate. This is an imaginative process which becomes the prototype for all metaphoric, creative action especially those practices in which plastic and performative materials are manipulated to embody and communicate psychic and somatic experiences as in the arts.

² The potential space is an indeterminate one in which gender plays no part. It has something in common with Kristeva’s semiotic, a pre-Oedipal space of haptic reciprocity outside of language. But Kristeva’s ‘semiotic’ differs from the potential space in that the latter is triggered by separation rather than sustained by the bond, which is the basis of Kristeva’s theory.

These spaces of interaction between child and carers are given a more formalised and pedagogised role ‘as the mother’s aesthetic of care passes through her tongue, from cooing, mirror-uttering, singing, storytelling, and wording into the word’ (Bollas, 1993, p. 43). In those many instances where an adult reads to, or plays with a child, the real is suspended for a moment allowing the imagination of the child free, if symbolic, rein. Within familial, pedagogic situations, psychologists argue that it is the responsibility of the adult to return the child at some ‘appropriate moment’ back to the safety and security of normative social relations. As Spitz (1993) discusses in her analysis of the reading of Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* it ‘openly acknowledges (and in fact dramatizes) a child’s subjective state: responsively, it supports needs for aggressive fantasy, while unobtrusively it reassures that there will be a safe return to reality’ (p. 264). The key here is the trusting relationship which enables the child to create a symbolic space in which play enables them to come to terms with the tensions between inner and outer realities.

Teaching Gender

It is within (the relatively) safe environment of the home that children are taught about and observe gender from the earliest age and psychologists argue that they understand and differentiate between such categories as girls and boys once they can use gendered language from about the age of two, for example by applying the dimorphic pronouns ‘she’ and ‘he’ to their friends (in this way there is no acknowledgement of intersex people, who, until recently were nearly always given ‘corrective surgery’ corresponding to a morphology determined by their parents – see Butler, 2004, pp. 61-64).

The way this dual understanding of gender relates to and may be conflated with the normative sex categories, female and male, is evident in the way children ask questions in which designated gender behaviours, feminine and masculine actions/performances, do or do not conform to designated sex differences. Children soon realise that in relation to their own actions certain gendered behaviours are deemed appropriate and others less so just as they find that the sexual self-stimulation of infancy is deemed 'dirty' in the public sphere or, along with co-stimulation, may be strongly proscribed in any situation (Foucault, 1998; Gittens, 1998). Stereotypical characterisations of gender are reinforced throughout pedagogic interactions and acted out in play, children's self-regulated improvisations. In this way play offers up a symbolic resource for children with which they can position themselves in relation to social norms and through which misaligned gender behaviours and non-heteronormative bodily hexis can be relegated to a condition of otherness (Thorne, 1993). However, play also opens out into a potential space in which masquerade enables participants to position themselves differently, but as Renold's (2005) notes within the process of everyday interactions:

Children (each others' harshest critics) were more than ready to expose the gaps, cracks and transgressions of other children who constantly struggled to pull off convincing gender performances (i.e. those girls and boys who actively engaged and challenged existing gender norms). But they did so often in ways that consolidated and reinforced rather than undermined or thwarted gender norms. (p. 5)

Children come to realise that performing gendered behaviours outside their designated roles is increasingly frowned upon as they get older and frequently constitutes a punishable offence (Hilderbrand 2006). As Mary Douglas (1969) argues:

Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (p. 4)

As a result, when children come across other children who display non-designated behaviours, these others may be subject to taunts and bullying. This rejection is largely determined by children's developing and compelling need for recognition within the order of normative regulations (laws stated in the name of the 'father'; Kristeva, 1982) laws which are increasingly regulated through peer group identifications (Sherriff, 2007). In this way it can be seen that children are not passive recipients of the discourses on gender but actively achieve their identities through continuous, day-to-day performative relations.

When children come across adults embodying such differences their observations and potential interactions may result in confusion, ambivalence, disgust and/or identification. In the latter instance this may provide a model for the affirmative construction of difference, 'escaping the clutch of those norms' (Butler, 2004, p. 3) but is more likely within a heteronormative culture to lead to denial or self-loathing (Rivers and Carragher 2003). Of course, these differences are determined across a

spectrum of categories from age, class, disability, ethnicity, gender and race through to sexuality and such differences may intersect in highly pernicious ways (Addison, 2006). However, the discontinuity between desire and enactment can be hidden, or disavowed for, as Butler (1999) points out:

Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (p. 179)

In Wall's photo-piece such discontinuities are made visible.

Please insert Wall's image here, on as large a scale as possible, but please note that the artist does not permit any cropping of the image. Please include below the image the following attribution and copyright information

Plate 1. Jeff Wall 'A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947' (1990)
Transparency in lightbox 229 x 352.5 cms
Reproduced with kind permission of the artist – image courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

Ventriloquism: dolls and the uncanny

When I first encountered Wall's 'ventriloquist' in his retrospective at Tate Modern 2005, I was immediately attracted to yet troubled by its reconstructive nostalgia. Set in the late 1940s, Wall's childhood decade, it represents a pedagogic situation. At the centre of the image a seated woman performs with a ventriloquist doll to entertain a well-groomed, semi-circle of Canadian children from Asian and European diasporas.

While the gender of the human participants is insistently and normatively inscribed, the object of fascination, the doll, nominally male, registers as queer. This boy/man, at once affecting and uncanny, wears an Elizabethan ruff (a signifier of excessive display and/or licentiousness) an accessory that is somehow at odds with the masculine and heroic assertion of his bemedalled, military jacket. This disparity, in combination with the excessive folds of the patchwork cloth, which partly covers his trouser-less, raggedy legs, produces a deeply ambivalent aesthetic. The scale and physiognomy of the head suggests an adult although the smaller features, particularly the retroussé nose, contradict this, a juxtaposition that is quite unlike the typical dummy whose gross features need to be read by audiences from a distance. Likewise the doll's posture, upright, legs akimbo, together with its gestures, theatrical and 'limp-wristed', designate this boy/man as feminised, a con-figuration designed to produce a bodily hexis wholly queer. Although the children gaze fixedly at the performance, the semi-circle of their attention remains at a distance; no eager child breaks away from its arc, and some, particularly the standing boy at the far left, position themselves as far away as possible. Dolls may be familiar but this one is noticeably received by the children as 'uncanny', so much so that their usually animated engagement is stilled.

The uncanniness of the doll has a long pedigree in European folk-lore and literature and yet Freud (1919) argues that this uncanniness is not what the child feels, rather it is an adult perception:

Now, dolls are of course rather closely connected with childhood life. We remember that in their early games children do not distinguish at all sharply

between living and inanimate objects, and they are especially fond of treating their dolls like live people. In fact, I have occasionally heard a woman patient declare that even at the age of eight she had still been convinced that her dolls would be certain to come to life if she were to look at them in a particular, extremely concentrated, way... curiously enough, while the Sand-Man story [one of Hoffman's bogeymen] deals with the arousing of an early childhood fear, the idea of a 'living doll' excites no fear at all; children have no fear of their dolls coming to life, they may even desire it. The source of uncanny feelings would not, therefore, be an infantile fear in this case, but rather an infantile wish or even merely an infantile belief. (Freud, 1990, pp. 354-355)

What Wall's children find uncanny is therefore not so much the doll itself but the way in which the adult performer has the temerity to *use* (violate) the doll within an imaginary (potential) space appropriated from their own childhood practices, one originally based on trust as Winnicott is at pains to establish. With some ease the female performer manipulates one of the children's familiars to feign a dialogue, both curious and possibly didactic, in the guise of an entertainment. What is more, despite the ventriloquist's gender, it is conceivable that she might be choosing to ape the transgressive role of the public ventriloquist and make the doll speak things, possibly illicit things, that she would be most unlikely to say under any other circumstances and certainly not in a domestic, pedagogic environment.³ In different circumstances

³ During the year in which Wall's tableau is set the most successful North American ventriloquist was Edgar John Bergen and it was on radio (surprisingly) that his work was most widely disseminated from 1937 until 1956. His most popular dummy Charlie McCarthy was a wood carving based on 'a rascally Irish newspaperboy he knew' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Bergen 3.1.07). Apparently with this doll/boy dressed as an adult/toff, (its image known to listeners through cinema and later television) Bergen was able to use sexual innuendo that was unacceptable from an adult performer under the broadcast standards of the day (indeed Mae West had been prosecuted for using similar language in 1937).

adults do discreetly observe children playing with dolls, indeed without the witness of a benign adult a child finds it difficult to give in to what Winnicott's calls '*play*' that is, 'a child's state of relaxed absorption made possible by its mother's unobtrusive presence...' (Rudnytsky, 1993, p. xiii). It is nonetheless possible to conceive of situations where the witnessing adult might participate at some level, but s/he is unlikely to take centre stage as in the Wall. Here the female performer (archetypically mother/teacher) appropriates the possession of the child only to talk with it in such a way as to incite a counter-narrative, to render discussion as 'matter-out-of-place'. Here the usual, 'holding environment' for ventriloquist display, the stage, radio and television, is transposed to a different sphere and 'when these holding environments are unstable or transgressed, uneasiness and displeasure may ensue: life may invade art, therapeutic milieus collapse, and painted monsters emerge from the pages of books to terrorize young minds' (Spitz, 1993, p. 264). What could the doll be saying?

The ventriloquist doll and illegitimate discourse

In his extraordinary account of ventriloquism Steven Connor (2003) demonstrates how the disembodied voice has been received as uncanny since its first evidenced use in Europe by priestesses at the Delphic oracle from 700 BC to the third century AD. The history of ventriloquism 'shows us clearly that human beings in many different cultural settings find the experience of a sourceless sound uncomfortable, and the experience of a sourceless voice intolerable' (p. 35). Often magical and/or spiritual in its various manifestations, the disembodied voice impels hearers to overcome its impossibility by imagining its source as an excessive and frequently malign, corporeal presence, for 'it is we who assign voices to objects, phenomenologically, the fact that

an unassigned voice must always imply a body means that it will always partly supply it as well' (p. 36). It was not until the eighteenth century that the modern entertainment was envisaged and first staged and, within this tradition, Wall's performer conforms to a specifically twentieth century taste for conversational presentation, a dual partnership somewhat different to the nineteenth century preference for illusionistic spectacle and multiple voices. The tradition of adult ventriloquist and boy doll was also firmly fixed by the 1940s although this coupling had first surfaced in the music halls and vaudeville reviews of the previous century. This enabled the ventriloquist to contrast the restraint and reasonableness of their voice and demeanour with the grotesque and intemperate utterances and gesticulations of their wayward charge, a sure-fire formula for humour. But the result of the boy doll's profanities and other assorted transgressions is corporal punishment.

Little boys... are never innocent, or never wholly so. It is always open to the adult to suspect that the little boy is not a proper child at all, but is harbouring adult propensities towards violence and wrongdoing. This then legitimates the exercise of those actual adult propensities for violent punishment on the boy-dummy. One should not, perhaps ask, what the boy has done to deserve this violence, whenever there is a voice dissevered from the body, there will be violence, and it becomes necessary that there should be a boy to receive and contain it (Connor, 2003, p. 409).

Why does the doll have such a fascinated if troubled hold for Wall's young crowd?

Transitional Objects and their adult uses

What is played out in Wall's performance is pure transgression, nominally by the doll, but the stilled children understand that it is the woman who speaks what she cannot speak. It is she who transgresses the law and she is able to do so because she speaks from within a ritualised performance, the domain of the sacred and thus has license to do so (Bataille, 1957). Consider for one moment the timbre of her voice: perhaps it moves from tenderness to admonition, possibly mimicking the dominant singing voice of the age, the crooner, with all its intimacies and mannered affections; in contradistinction, the doll screeches and lisps, whooping and sighing in unmetred rapidity. What awaits the transgressor (the boy/doll) is violence and annihilation, the living death of the box that awaits him by the hearth with its straps and other constraining paraphernalia. The children thus identify the transgressive quality of the performance both with illicit, filthy speech and with a queer-look, and so the performance prefigures the punishment meted out to those who transgress within the wider social sphere (see Renold, 2005, pp. 166-167).

At first it is the mother/teacher, the trusting enabler, who is conjured, the storyteller who eases and placates the children into a sense of security. Suddenly she mutates, the wrathful enforcer, the absent father, appears and speaks the law. This law, the law of the father, is mediated by mothers/carers in order to separate the maternal bond and allow the child to enter the cultural domain. Gradually, as the child is enculturated to social norms the law becomes self-regulated taking the form of that disembodied part of the self, the super-ego, with its insistent voice, mercilessly and ventriloquilly speaking the law, a voice that functions to repress the irrepressibility of desire. But here in the ventriloquist act, it is the voice of the mother that is projected onto the

animated doll so that s/he speaks filth, incorporating all that the law would expel only to throw it back, smothering the law itself in excremental excess.

Conclusion

The ventriloquist act is presented within a matrix of transgression and inevitable punishment, identifications and projections, which mimics the process through which norms are established and policed.

...the subject's internal, or private, self is continually dissociated from his [sic] executant self. An aesthetic moment for such an individual may occur when he faces a formidable and confusing external object that establishes an internal confusion in the subject, providing him with an uncanny feeling of the awful and the familiar, an experience where this aesthetic object seems to demand resolution into clarity but threatens the self with annihilation if the subject seeks a word to speak it. (Bolas, 1993, p. 44-45)

Children's understandings are powerfully formed through the 'aesthetic' of others as manifest in bodily hexis, as well as by what they say. Any disjunction between these modes of semiosis provides children with a precedent for their own sense that what society allows them to do may be different from what they feel (they want to do).

Wall's tableau demonstrates what happens when the discontinuities between normalcy and feeling are embodied within one such formidable and confusing object, an object that holds such a potent aesthetic because it embodies and speaks what cannot be said. When children have ownership of dolls they are able to play with them to work through discontinuities, to give voice to that which they cannot admit.

But as in the Wall, children's symbolic territory is increasingly being confiscated. Take as an example the exponential rise of didactic dolls in the US where they are being corralled to assist in the education of all aspects of sociality: they can help your child to speak another language, familiarise them with religious figures or, in therapy, help to disclose abuse. The way in which the gender of dolls is so fervently and insistently demarcated, for example between warrior and supermodel, suggest that dolls are being used not only to reinforce stereotypical notions of heteronormative culture but also to invade and police the imaginative spaces that playing with dolls once afforded.

The transitional object and its potential space is produced at a time before the child is fully aware of the habits, behaviours and expectations that constitute gender, that is the cultural laws that compel the child to act out their designated sex. In this sense creative action first happens outside gender but within the bisexual matrix of the developing psyche. For Freud all humans have a predisposition towards bisexuality which is ultimately dismantled through the 'normal' progress of the Oedipal complex and for Butler this renunciation of bisexuality to an 'unresolved mourning for early homoerotic attachments and gender-inconsistent traits' (Hansell, 1998, p. 339). But there is the potential for reclamation and resolution; Elise (1998) drawing on Bassin argues:

for a post-oedipal recuperation of earlier overinclusive body-ego representations and cross-sex identifications that 'can mitigate [a] rigid polarized gender identity' (p. 158). Instead of a repression of bisexual conflict,

use of symbolic ability to play with rather than deny difference allows for reconciliation of masculinity and femininity' (p. 355).

Play appears to be the key here to the possibility of recuperation, and for Winnicott play is fundamental to human development: '*...it is play that is universal*, and that belongs to health: playing facilitates growth and therefore health; playing leads into group relationships; play can be a form of communication in psychotherapy... The natural thing is playing' (1974a, p. 48, author's italics).

An ability to override gender and sexual designation has been noted by Renold (2005) in school pupils' play and suggests that children need to be given the space to work through the tensions produced by heteronormative expectations in symbolic and creative form. By continually policing children's sexuality this space is denied and children are forced to perform to gender norms in ways that may conflict with their identifications and desires. In Wall's 'ventriloquist' the entrapped balloons are an index of the children's unspoken feelings, the fears engendered by the disjunction between normalcy and identification. When adults attempt to inculcate normalcy through processes of othering in the desire to control all aspects of children's developing subjectivity, they overlook and deny the workings of the imagination. Yet, pedagogic programmes always work in a dialectic relationship with the imaginations of children and who knows what hybrids and odd formations might be produced within the disjunction between adult intentionality and childhood fantasy; better to give children space so that in adulthood they will have some agency in relation to their gendered and sexual identities.

When discussing drag, Butler (1999) intimates the reflexive uncertainties that playing with gender can provoke:

...part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. (p. 175)

Here, Butler discusses the possibility of the parodic undoing of gender, a process through which the convention-bound myths of sexual difference are exposed and dismantled. Surely it is possible to imagine how an engagement with art and visual culture might contribute, if not to gender's undoing, at least to its unsettling.

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