Staging Grenfell: The Ethics of Representing Housing Crises in London

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> *No "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain.*
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> —Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

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In September 2021, the Working Class Artist Group (WCAG), a collective of thirty-three working-class artists and producers living and working in the UK, released a statement on Twitter criticising the announcement of a new theatrical production: *Value Engineering: Scenes from the Grenfell Inquiry*. The play offers a verbatim, documentary account of elements of the public inquiry into the Grenfell Tower tragedy— the horrific incident in which seventy-two people died following a domestic fire in a tower block on a social housing estate in West London in June 2017. "We do not believe," the WCAG wrote, that "it is the right decision to create this work whilst victims are still in temporary accommodation or displaced from their community. Whilst families are awaiting answers as to who will be held responsible" (@WCArtistGroup).

The fire at Grenfell Tower, which would ordinarily have been contained to a single dwelling due to the inherent, inbuilt fire-safety of the original concrete structure, spread uncontrollably because of combustible and poorly installed cladding, which had recently been affixed to the external walls of the tower block as part of a wider redevelopment project on the Lancaster West Estate. As I will outline in more detail below, Grenfell Tower has now become a cultural shorthand for discussions about the relationship between housing,

economic injustice and wider forms of class and race inequity in London and the UK more widely.

In this article, I want to consider the complex ethical terrain that *Value Engineering* navigates, as an artistic representation of the Grenfell Tower fire which purports "documentary" status, within a larger context of social and political inequality within and beyond the theatre industry. The fire, I propose, exemplifies structural violence in its most literal form, and demonstrates the ways in which the London housing crisis serves as a "canary in the coal mine" (an anachronistic idiom I use intentionally to draw attention to its class-based origins) for neoliberal policy and the dismantling of the welfare state. Following a discussion of this political context, I ask what might be at stake in cultural representations of this nationally significant event, what we risk in representing and "regarding" (Sontag 2003) the pain of other people, and how and whether notions of solidarity might be reconciled with notions of ownership via cultural forms. In this way, I give consideration to the concerns raised by the WCAG and offer a way into understanding the complexities of the controversy surrounding *Value Engineering*.

Grenfell Tower, Housing Injustice and Class Inequity in the UK

When images of Grenfell Tower ablaze in a raging inferno were transmitted across the news and social media throughout the night and into the day of the 14 June 2017, those of us who had been involved in studying and campaigning about the state of London's housing crisis were horrified, but largely unsurprised. It had long been clear that those living in Britain's council estates, or "social housing estates", were in grave danger as a result of the perilous advance of regeneration that has rapidly changed the face of London's built environment, particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century. The so-called 'regeneration' of the city's estates, carried out as part of wider urban redevelopment projects intended to increase

the value of real estate, has exposed fissures in the social contract. These projects have tended to reduce the number of dwellings available for low- and average-income earners, and displace those who cannot afford to buy or rent privately (Minton). As Paul Watt argues, "[h]ousing is the most palpable manifestation of London's inequality" (2), exposing inequities of wealth, health, safety and wellbeing that are, "disproportionately borne by London's multi-ethnic working-class population, who reside in the city's social housing estates, or in the insecure private rented sector" (Watt 2). The perilous state of housing insecurity experienced by working class people in London is evidence of wider systemic failure, exacerbated by neoliberal policies of austerity that have stripped back the welfare state since at least 2010 (Arie 2018).[1]

Because housing is a basic human need, and because rising real estate prices impact most everybody in both the private and rental markets, housing has become a "canary in the coal mine" for neoliberal policy. That is, the overheated housing market poses precarity and instability for social housing tenants (Minton), private renters (Owens and Green) and even homeowners, who face greater levels of indebtedness (Marsden 7) and concurrent insecurity. As the charity Shelter suggest in their report into what they call the "housing emergency" the results of housing precarity are not merely affective, in that they causes felt distress and what Watt calls "multiple discontents", but are part of an atmosphere of impending danger and failure which can result in disastrous consequences, including death.[2] In London, housing

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[1] In his 2019 report on a visit to the UK and Ireland United Nations Special Rapporteur Philip Alston highlighted how post-WW2 British society was held together by a raft of policy and welfare provisions, which have been systematically dismantled under a twenty-first century neoliberal ideology and replaced with a "harsh and uncaring ethos" (4). Urban development projects that displace and further stigmatize the poorest members of society (see: Tyler *Stigma*). are part of a wider neoliberal culture, in which "[u]rban space is systematically rearranged for the benefit of capitalist developers and their local state accomplices, while the result is displacement and the erosion of the working-class right to the city" (Watt 7).

[2] I use the analogy of 'canary in the coal mine' to describe the landscape of housing in London in order to draw on a working-class history; the phrase refers to the caged canaries which miners would carry down into the mine during shifts— the bird's greater susceptibility to noxious gases such as carbon monoxide meant they would die or fall unconscious providing a warning to miners that the atmosphere was no longer safe, and they should find means of escape.

conditions provide a warning that the atmosphere of "hyper commodification" (Madden and Marcuse 56) under neoliberalism is no longer safe, and that lives are at risk as a result of overarching political structures that govern the essential aspects of our lives, such as access to housing.

In the case of Grenfell Tower, the disaster was directly linked to neoliberal policy agendas governing urban development — policies characterized by a "near-universal contemporary model of regeneration dependent on opaque public–private partnerships and private capital and driven by commercial interests" (Boughton 2019). Grenfell was part of a larger redevelopment project, conceived in part to improve the aesthetic appeal of the building and its surrounds by cladding the concrete façade of the tower block in a more visually appealing exterior, better in keeping with the affluent district in which the estate was located. The redevelopment was beset with safety failures, pertaining mainly to the external cladding affixed to Grenfell (Symonds). These safety failures resulted in a catastrophic fire, which might have been prevented had the complaints of the tenants who lived in the building been heeded. Grenfell residents had long complained that their building was unsafe, and in a blog post published in November 2016 (no longer available online), a group of residents predicted that a "catastrophic event" resulting in "serious loss of life" was imminent (Grenfell Action Group). That these residents' concerns were ignored has featured in much of the coverage and commentary surrounding the fire and its aftermath. As Imogen Tyler has noted, neoliberalism relies on creating "wasted", expendable humans (Tyler *Revolting Subjects* 7) positioned as 'other' to a supposedly normative middle class; the devaluing of the poorest members of the UK's multi-ethnic working class, many of whom live in social housing, has been understood as a casual aspect of the fire (Preston 37-40). In other words, many people understood that residents of Grenfell Tower died in large part *because* they were working-

class and thus considered less than fully human—the fire a direct result of a system that devalued their lives to the point of expendability.

It is this context in which the WCAG released its statement criticising the decision to stage *Value Engineering*. The statement must be understood within a wider culture of class injustice in the UK, which extends beyond housing to the creative industries, including theatre. As recent research in cultural policy and performance studies has indicated, working-class people, and particularly working-class people of colour, are hugely underrepresented in the creative industries (Brook et al. 2018). This means that stories and artworks created *about* working class people are very often not created or controlled *by* or even *with* working class people. As a result, groups such as WCAG have campaigned for better and more equitable access to the arts, and have worked to 'call out' instances of class-based injustice. Given that *Value Engineering* was written and directed by well-known established middle-class theatre makers (Nicholas Kent and Richard Norton-Taylor, who had pioneered the "tribunal" documentary mode in the 1990s), with a mostly white (presumably middle-class) cast, the WCAG statement might be understood as a pushback against an elite culture which excludes and ignores working-class people, while at the same time taking ownership over stories with working-class people at their centre. When working-class people so infrequently have access to the means of producing their own narratives or accessing the institutions that produce such narratives ,the ethics of telling stories of working-class tragedies is rightfully called into question. "Taking the words of communities more marginalized than you, without making a long-term structural difference to the material conditions of that community, is unethical," wrote the WCAG when the makers of *Value Engineering* responded to their statement with the verbatim words of "the only black barrister in the enquiry" (@WCArtistGroup).

The ethical complexities of working-class representation within overarching violent structures of inequity here push up against the necessity of heeding the "canary in the coal

mine" epitomized by Grenfell. In other words, there is a case to made, surely, for consciousness-raising of the kind facilitated by *Value Engineering*, because the more that knowledge about injustices constituting a housing emergency spreads, the less likely we are (at least theoretically) to collectively tolerate current conditions. Still, as Sontag asks in her 2003 essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* ''What does it mean to protest suffering, as distinct from acknowledging it?' (Sontag 34). Is representation enough? What authority might middle-class people have to tell stories with working-class victims at their centre, and how can a lack of authority be balanced with a responsibility for culturally elite institutions to reflect the realities of the social world?

***Value Engineering* and the "pain of others"**

Value Engineering is the latest tribunal play, a mode of theatre developed by Nicholas Kent and Richard Norton Taylor at the Tricycle Theatre with a series of works produced between 1993 and 2011, which developed "documentary" theatre modes emerging in the 1960s and 70s (Billington). Tribunal plays, as Dan Rebellato outlines, "are plays whose source material generally comes from a public enquiry (from which most of the public has no direct access). At their best they correct the deficits that blight our democracy; they reveal the vulnerabilities of power; and, in their stately way, they can be massively rousing, shocking, and devastating." Examples of such plays include *Nuremberg* (1996), which staged elements of The Nuremberg Trials, a series of trials into war crimes following World War Two, under which many Nazi officials were prosecuted; and *The Colour of Justice* (1999), a dramatization of the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, which was adapted into a TV movie and offered a platform that showcased how the police mishandling of the case was underpinned by institutional racism.

Value Engineering similarly sought to present elements of a public inquiry that might distil major concerns for an audience unable to access the inquiry itself. Staged in formal courtroom style, with actors using the verbatim words of the inquiry participants edited from longer transcripts, the piece centrally works to draw attention to "value engineering," a mode of cost-cutting by corporate interests that is revealed through the performance as "blind to safety aspects despite numerous warnings" (Akbar).

The ethical terrain which *Value Engineering* traverses is complex, not only because of the corruption, ineptitude and corporate greed that it showcases as rife within the property redevelopment sector, but also because of the mode and context of the production. The Tabernacle Theatre, in which the play is staged, is located in Notting Hill, in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, a distance of less than a mile from the Lancaster West estate of which Grenfell Tower was part. As a review in the Guardian noted, "[t]his proximity carries a heavy symbolism" (Akbar), given the wealth and affluence of Notting Hill in relation to Lancaster West. It is not just the symbolism of the wealth inequity which is pertinent here—the class inequities that characterize UK theatre spaces also emerge in material ways through the production, as an apparently affluent, middle-class, almost entirely white audience (at least on the night I attended) sits in stark contrast to the profile of the victims of the tragedy. The ethical stickiness here is further compounded by the fact that *Value Engineering* is staged before the conclusion of the inquiry, and before anyone has been held accountable (let alone prosecuted) for the deaths of those who perished in the fire. The "otherness" of the victims in relation to the surroundings, audience, production team, is emphasized by their absence from the performance where the dead exist only as victims, and the presentation of the inquiry reduces their humanity to questions of the failures of neoliberal governance. This is not least because the victims and, indeed the reality of the fire

itself, exists as a subtext to the performance, and therefore relies on an empathetic response which is incidental to the business of the play.

The "documentary" status of tribunal theatre introduces further ethical questions around staging the pain of the "other". The inquiry testimony is presented in an ostensibly neutral staging, with minimal theatricality—Rebellato describes how, in the staging of *Value Engineering* the "formal business of the enquiry creates a patina of mostly rational, unemotional calm" (Rebellato). This works to reinforce the documentary nature of the play, coating the performance in a realism that disavows its distance from the actual inquiry. This is, after all, an interpretation of the thing, and not the thing itself. In Susan Sontag's writing on war photography she questions the role of the photographic document in allowing us the ability to regard the pain of others. Photographs, Sontag argues, present "both objective record and personal testimony, both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality" (Sontag 21). Tribunal theatre operates in a similar way, seeking, like the photographic document, to present "transparent reality" (Sontag 70), which nonetheless, in fact, (again like the photographic document) "represent[s] the view of *someone*" (Sontag 26 original emphasis).

The intervention of an interpretative hand in the dramaturgy of *Value Engineering* is concealed by the formal, bureaucratic nature of the production—but is nonetheless there in the devices used in editing the transcripts into a narrative sense. I was struck particularly by a section early on in the performance, in which a firefighter relays his attempts to save a thirteen-year-old-boy from an upper floor apartment as the fire raged. The selected elements and mode of staging this section created a narrative interpretation in which, had the firefighter attempted to knock on the doors of flats on lower floors as he ascended the building, lives may have been saved. That this patently is not the way first-response services operate (as the firefighter himself explains, in an emergency response a single task is carried

out to completion without diversion to ensure the safety of the officer and the organisation of the wider team), had little impact on the audience response to the staged testimony. During the interval, a conversation emerged around me in which the consensus was that, had the firefighter used “common sense”, lives would be saved.

The acknowledgement of interpretation in the staging of documentary theatre is important in parsing the ethical complexity of this performance because, as the WCAG suggests in their criticism of *Value Engineering*, *who* represents reality has a profound impact on the way we understand the world. The notion of a neutral, objective mediation of reality conceals the wider structures of inequity that silence voices of working-class people, making it harder for those such as the residents of Grenfell to be heard when they leverage complaints.

Nonetheless, as Sontag argues, though a mediated document cannot capture an embodied experience, and while there are ethical dangers in representing other people’s tragedy,

> Remembering *is* an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead. So that the belief that remembering is an ethical act is deep in our natures as humans, who know we are going to die, and who mourn those who in the normal course of things die before us. (Sontag 101)

The ability of a play such as *Value Engineering* to serve as a call to memory is thus perhaps where its ethics emerge, and where we might understand it as a call to empathy through a shared humanity, which resists the state’s rendering of the lives of working-class people as expendable. A list of the names of the victims at the close of the performance, displayed sombrely on a screen which earlier showed the burning building, does little to emphasize the individual human cost of the tragedy, but does provide a moment of collective reflection and public mourning, which might call attention to our ethical responsibilities and foster a solidarity across class divisions. I use “might” here as it is by no means guaranteed that collective mourning produces ethical responsibility—nonetheless, sitting still and

contemplating the names of the dead is an action that in and of itself recognises the humanity of the dead, and in so doing creates a kind of embodied solidarity that acknowledges a "shared humanity". This solidarity is likely fleeting and certainly fails to address in any practical way the real injustices of Grenfell and the wider conditions of housing for the poorest London residents. Nonetheless, though it can never deliver ethical retribution, the staging of the inquiry serves as a catalyst for remembrance; facilitating a sustainment of public awareness around Grenfell that might contribute to a growing consensus that current housing conditions, and the wider neoliberal political culture, are deadly and unsustainable, for us all.

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