

Staging Structural Violence in London: Housing crisis, class injustice and the ethics of representation in conditions of pervasive inequity

Katie Beswick.

‘No “we” should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain’

(Sontag 2003:4)

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In September 2021, the Working Class Artist Group, (WCAG) a collective of 33 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 — a 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’ (WCAG 2021).

As I will outline in more detail below, Grenfell Tower has become a cultural shorthand for discussions for the relationship between housing, economic injustice and wider forms of class and race inequity in London and the UK more widely. 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.

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 wider context of social and political inequity 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 given its class-based origins) for neoliberal policy and the dismantling of the welfare state. Using Susan Sontag’s essay ‘Regarding the Pain of Others’ as prompt for thinking about documentary representation and ethics, I ask what might be at stake in cultural representations of this nationally significant event, what we risk in representing and ‘regarding’ 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 burning in a raging inferno were transmitted across the news and social media throughout the night and into the day of the 14th of 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 because 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 ‘regeneration’ of the

city's estates, happening as part of wider urban redevelopment projects intended to 'improve' areas, primarily by increasing the economic value of real estate, has exposed fissures in the social contract — often reducing the number of dwellings available for low- and average-income earners, and frequently displacing from their homes those who cannot afford to buy or rent privately (Minton 2016). As Paul Watt argues, '[h]ousing is the most palpable manifestation of London's inequality', 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 2021: 2). The perilous state of housing borne by working class people in London is evidence of wider systemic failure, exacerbated by policies of austerity that have stripped back the welfare state since at least 2010 (Arie 2018).

In his 2019 report, 'Extreme Poverty and Human Rights', 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' (2019: 1). In this system, as numerous sociologists have shown, working-class people are stigmatised, deprived and devalued (Tyler 2020; McKenzie 2015; Skeggs 2011), to the point that their existence becomes expendable. Watt illustrates the way that such expendability is connected to housing provision. Indeed, urban development projects that displace and further stigmatise the poorest members of society 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 2021: 7). Because housing is a basic human right, 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 2016), private renters (Green and Owens 2019) and even homeowners, who face greater levels of indebtedness (Marsden 2015) and insecurity. As the charity Shelter describe in their report into what they call the ‘housing emergency’ (Shelter 2021), the results of housing precarity are not merely affective, in that they cause felt distress and create what Watt calls ‘multiple discontents’, but are part of an atmosphere of impending danger and failure which can result in disastrous consequences, including death. 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. In London, housing conditions provide a warning that the atmosphere of ‘hyper commodification’ (Marcuse and??) 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 characterised 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, mainly pertaining to the external cladding affixed to Grenfell (Symonds 2021). 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 (Apps 2021). Grenfell residents had long complained that their building was unsafe, and in a blog post published in November 2016, a group of residents predicted that a ‘catastrophic event’ resulting in ‘serious loss of life’ was imminent (Grenfell Action Group 2016).

That these residents’ concerns were ignored has featured in much of the coverage and commentary surrounding the fire and its aftermath. Imogen Tyler has drawn attention to how neoliberalism relies on creating ‘wasted’, expendable humans (Tyler 2013) 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 2019: 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. The phrase ‘structural violence’ (Galtung 1969), refers to the ways in which social structures and institutions disadvantage and cause harm to individuals and groups —in the case of Grenfell the systemic failure that led to the fire can be understood as a violent consequence of a housing market in which hyper-commodification and profit has made working-class lives, and basic safety for all those living in social housing blocks, expendable.

It is this context in which the WCAG released their statement criticising the decision to stage *Value Engineering*. The statement must be understood within a wider context of class injustice in the UK, which extends to the creative industries, including theatre. Recent research in cultural policy and performance studies has indicated that working-class people are hugely underrepresented in the creative industries, a state of affairs that is compounded for black and ethnic minority working-class people (Brook et al. 2018). This means that stories and artworks created *about* working class people are very often not created or

controlled *by* working class people (Beswick 2019 ??). 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 marginalised 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’ (WCAG 2021).

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’. In other words, there is a case to made, surely, for consciousness raising — the more knowledge about injustices constituting a housing emergency spreads, the less likely we are to collectively tolerate current conditions. Complicating the ethical terrain further are current debates surrounding so-called ‘cancel culture’, in which social media platforms have become a sphere in which extremely reductive debates about complex ethical matters circulate, often in the form of totalising statements, producing fractured, polarised binary positions that do little to substantively address injustice.

***Value Engineering* and the ‘pain of others’**

Beneath the WCAG statement lies a transparent morality: it is wrong to use the pain of others as material for an artwork, particularly when those others are part of a group marginalised by the wider culture from which you benefit. The ‘you’ here refers to the British theatre elite, of who Nicholas Kent (the director and co-writer of *Value Engineering*) and Richard Norton-

Taylor (the lead writer of the play) might rightly be considered to belong. Further muddying the ethical terrain is *Value Engineering*'s form as 'documentary theatre'

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'...estates are being destroyed by the onward predatory — indeed planetary — march of gentrification in the ideological guise of regeneration.' (Watt 2021: 8)

'The quickest, driest way to convey the inner commotion caused by these photographs is by noting that one can't always make out the subject, so thorough is the ruin of flesh and stone they depict' (Sontag 2003: 2)

'sheared off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the street' (Sontag 2003: 5)

'what matters is precisely who is killed and by whom.' (Sontag 2003: 7)

'there are many uses of the innumerable opportunities a modern life supplies for reharding — at a distance, through the medium of photography — other people's pain' Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen.' (Sontag 2003: 10)

‘This sleight of hand allows photographs to be both objective record and personal testimony, both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality – a feat literature has long aspired to, but could never attain in this literal sense’
‘people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity of mere contrivance’ (Sontag 2003: 21)

‘photographs represent the view of *someone*’ (Sontag 2003: 26)

The photographer’s intentions to not determine the meaning of the the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.’ (Sontag 2003: 33).

‘What does it mean to protest suffering, as distinct from acknowledging it?’ (Sontag 2003: 34)

‘photo editors make decisions every day which firm up the wavering consensus about the boundaries of public knowledge’ (Sontag 2003: 59)

‘Photographs objectify: they turn an event or person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality.’ (Sontag 2003: 70).

‘All memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not remembering but stipulating: that *this* is important, and *this* is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.’ (Sontag 2003: 75)

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 2003: 101)

‘What would they have to say to us? ‘We’ – this ‘we is everyone who has never experienced anything like what we went through – don’t understand. We don’t get it. We can’t truly imagine what it was like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine. That’s what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time and under fire and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby stubbornly feels. And they are right,’ (Sontag 2003: 111).

Tribunal plays 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.

The 'broken tradition' of documentary theatre and its continued powers of endurance

No way out: talking about tragedy