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The Fascination with Crisis and the Crisis of Perception in Contemporary British Drama

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Abstract: Based on considerations of the connection between fascination, crisis, and the “Medusa effect,” this paper argues that contemporary drama tends to challenge the audience’s sense of safe spectatorship by stimulating perceptual crises, returning the spectators’ gaze, and exposing their tendencies of (in)attentional blindness. Besides plays by Martin Crimp, Carol Ann Duffy, and Rufus Norris, the analysis focuses on James Graham’s *Quiz* (2017), which dramatizes one of the most popular scandals in the history of British game shows and challenges the audience’s capacity of moral attention. As I argue, *Quiz* engages the audience in multi-levelled crises (a crisis of knowledge, a crisis of perception, and a crisis of judgement), which stimulates conceptual blending, tests spectators’ responseability on an ethical, aesthetic, and political level, and eventually allows them to overcome the perceptual crisis created in the course of the play.

Keywords: perception, crisis, fascination, attention, blending, safe spectatorship, James Graham, *Quiz*

1 Fascination and Crisis

We are fascinated with crises, as long as they are not ours. The tension arising from crises, the sense of liminality and the unknown, the hovering betwixt and between hopefulness and despair can be strangely alluring. Crises have essentially paradoxical effects: they are threatening in that they upset established conventions and beliefs, but they are also productive insofar as they indicate a departure from established structures or at least prompt a rethinking of these structures, which might promise some change or renewal. This friction between something that is both dreaded and desired contributes to the fascination with crises. What is needed for this fascination to arise, however, is a safe distance between us and the crises presented – a distance that is created by a sense of safe

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spectatorship, which protects viewers from emotional demands or any kind of (emotional) suffering (Chouliaraki 111) due to the aesthetic distance provided by an artwork. The safer we imagine ourselves to be, the more intriguing the crises of others become. What contributes to the allure of the crises of others is the fact that these crises should not be openly displayed. In fact, “fascination” has often been connected with the desire to see what should remain obscure – either because it violates ethical boundaries or because it verges on the forbidden or a taboo –, which in turn elicits an irresistible attraction. Maurice Blanchot has described fascination as a state that does not refer to “the possibility of seeing,” “but [to] the impossibility of not seeing” (32). In the theatre, literally a “seeing place,” the “impossibility of not seeing” is a key principle, which enables a complex negotiation of our fascination with crisis – a negotiation that often also challenges our modes of perception, even leads to a crisis of perception, which is needed for us to confront our desire for crisis and its effects.

While one could argue that the fascination with crises has been one of the driving forces of theatrical performance and, more generally, drama, contemporary drama shows a particularly strong interest in jeopardizing the audience’s sense of safe spectatorship. It does so by challenging familiar schemata and by provoking mixed emotions and cognitive disorientation through radically opposed stimuli, thus creating conflicting responses and opening up liminal spaces between two different modes of perception, which push the audience into a perceptual crisis. What I am particularly interested in, however, are plays which provide an aesthetic refraction which challenges the illusion of safe spectatorship by inverting the audience’s gaze and turning it back onto the spectators. As I have argued elsewhere, theatre serves both as a mediator of fascination and as its antidote (Baumbach 93). In addition to eliciting fascination, many plays expose its mechanisms by unveiling the strategies used to elicit the cognitive crisis that fascination arises from. Paradoxically, these plays which not only *re-* but *deflect* fascination by conveying a misleading sense of security, ultimately contribute to the powerful allure of the theatre: the perceptual crisis creates a sense of fascination, which involves the audiences even more deeply in the theatrical experience, while confronting them with their fascination with crisis. In this context, crisis can be conceptualised as “a tear in the fabric of our epistemological web” (Butler 308), which exposes the incoherence of familiar categories and “the inadequacies and inapplicability of our own discourse” (Gilbert 16). In the following three sections, I will first further explore the connection between “fascination” and “safe spectatorship” in contemporary drama, before focusing on a case study, James Graham’s *Quiz* (2017), to illustrate my theses, followed by a short outlook on how to make sense of crisis in contemporary theatre.

2 The Medusa Effect and the Transgression of Safe Spectatorship

Though positively connoted in everyday speech, the concept of “fascination,” which derives from the Latin verb *fascinare* (‘to bewitch’ or ‘to becry’), is rooted in discourses on black magic, bewitchment, and the evil eye, and is closely connected to the visual sphere. As noted by Francis Bacon, “fascination is ever by the eye” (944). Today, however, fascination is not something to be avoided, but something we seek and strive for. As Steven Connor argued, in our fast-paced culture, which is oversaturated with stimuli by the media and entertainment industry, “the desire for fascination is a desire for arrest” (12). Ironically, this desire, in turn, fuels the entertainment and also the theatre industry, securing its ongoing appeal.

This desire for arrest, which is both protective (insofar as it shields the viewer from overstimulation) and threatening (insofar as it captivates, even freezes, the viewer’s senses) connects to what has been described as the “Medusa effect” (Albrecht). The Gorgon Medusa, whose gaze, according to classical mythology, petrified everyone who looked at her, is a key image of fascination and embodies both the threatening and protective function associated with “the desire for arrest.” While her sight was deadly, turning mortal men into stone, the image of her head was used as an apotropaic symbol, warding off evil from its wearer. The famous painting of Medusa’s head (1597) by Caravaggio illustrates this two-fold function of the Gorgon and also alludes to the paradox of presence and absence that Blanchot described with regard to fascination. What makes this painting particularly relevant in this context, is that it is also the product of an aesthetic crisis – how to paint the ineffable, how to behold the unbeholdable – and reflects upon the notion of “safe spectatorship.”

Caravaggio’s painting depicts the deadly Gorgon immediately after her decapitation by Perseus. However, her image is a representation: it is painted upon a leather shield, which might resemble the shield of Perseus, who could only kill Medusa because he did not look at her directly, but merely at her reflection in his shield (Ovid 782). While suggesting Medusa’s immediate presence, Caravaggio’s painting resembles a protective surface, which shields the viewer from the Gorgon’s petrifying gaze. This aspect of protection is emphasized by the fact that Medusa does not look straight at the viewer: instead, her gaze is deflected to the side. And yet, the round shape of the shield is reminiscent of an eye. The painting can be read as resembling the initial state of perception, indicating a potential threat of returning the gaze onto the viewer and thereby jeopardizing their sense of safe spectatorship, which contributes to the fascination with this image – a

fascination which arises from mixed emotions: from an intense attraction coupled with a feeling of repulsion, even fear, in the experience of an image that should have remained obscure, because it is too terrible to be endured.

The Medusa effect and the fascination arising from (the sense of) safe spectatorship, which Caravaggio captures in his painting, contributes to the success of many contemporary plays. Playwrights such as Martin Crimp exploit the eerie fascination with watching the crises of others (and regarding the pain of others). Crimp's "Face to the Wall," which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in September 2005, or *The Treatment*, first performed at the Royal Court in April 1993 and revived at the Almeida Theatre in April 2017, are cases in point. Set in New York, *The Treatment*, a sharp satire on the American film industry, foregrounds the fascination with a story of domestic abuse: it displays the relentless exploitation of a young woman's experience of abuse by two media executives, Andrew and Jennifer. Reminding the mistreated Anne that "no one's story is theirs alone" (298), they hire a playwright and a movie star to turn her story into a box-office hit. The play has been read as "a critique of fraudulent storytelling" (Cavendish) and a symptom of capitalist societies of spectacle (Escoda Agusti) where people are commodified. Whereas in the course of the action, *The Treatment* constructs an audience who is responsible for the exploitation of personal crises by the media, the theatregoers occupy a space of safe spectatorship. Replicated in the voyeuristic mass spectators, who feed on the pain of others and who are thus implicitly accused of co-creating spectacles based on victims' narratives, we – as the audience – are held "responsible," but not urged to respond. Crimp's *The Treatment* points to an ethical crisis prompted by an economy of fascination, fuelled by our desire for voyeurism and the media's (and also the theatre's) capacity to meet these desires. It does not, however, generate a crisis of perception.

Neither does "Face to the Wall," which is even more committed to the tradition of in-her-face theatre. Though only around eighteen minutes long, the play is extremely intense. It presents four nameless speakers who seem to recall a school shooting and try to come to terms with the event:

- 1: The children don't understand – they don't immediately grasp what's going on – what's happened to their teacher? – they don't understand [. . .]
- 3: [. . .] of course they understand – they've seen this on television – they know exactly what's going on and this is why they back away – instinctively back away. (25)

The account of the shooting is replete with graphic violence almost too unbearable to endure:

- 1: He moves on to child C. Child C – yes?
- 4: Tries to duck away.

1: What?

4: Child C tries / to duck away.

1: He shoots child B – in the head.

3: He moves on.

1: He moves on to child C. Child C tries to duck away. He shoots – no – yes – no – not shoots – yes?

4: But to no avail.

1: Tries to duck away. But to no avail. He shoots child A – in the head. (27)

The play turns out to offer the blueprint for a performance: we witness the rehearsal of an event that is too gruesome to be displayed on stage. The audience's unease is mirrored by the first speaker, who seems apprehensive "about the role he is being asked to perform" (Escoda Agusti 154): he holds his speech, pauses, stutters, but is urged on by the other speakers who provide him with cues that drive the horrific story forward. These cues testify to the fascination with this event, the account of which is turned into a play that due to its relentlessly blunt engagement with the taboo, with the abyss, will undoubtedly attract audiences' attention, and draws its success from the safe spectatorship it grants them.

Thrice removed – as spectators in the theatre, who watch the speakers retell a story that might have been passed on to them via the media or via other narratives, for example, a script for a performance that is still to come, the audience again might face an ethical crisis, especially as their role as audience to this rehearsal confronts them with their desire for sensationalism, but no crisis of perception. Instead, they can fully engage in the thrill of voyeurism and the trivialisation of evil, which is enacted by at least three of the four speakers on stage. And yet, the notion of perception is crucial in Crimp's drama. The opening of *Getting Attention* (1991), for instance, points to the question of seeing and not seeing, which is at the core of most of Crimp's plays:

MILLY: Did you see those boys?

BOB: What's that, love?

MILLY: Those boys. The monkey.

BOB: Didn't see anything, love. Sorry. (105)

As suggested by the stage directions, it is almost impossible that Bob has not seen the two masked boys who have barged into Milly while running past her, because he "*comes onto the balcony from the direction they've gone*" (105). As suggested by Aloysia Rousseau, "[a]s is the case with numerous characters in Crimp's theatre, Bob decides to shut his eyes when convenient" (348). Bob's decision to "unsee" this incident attunes the audience to a very sensitive and highly disturbing blind spot that becomes exposed in the course of this play. *Getting Attention* revolves around the abuse of a young girl, Sharon, by her parents, Carol and Nick, which is

overlooked by their neighbours, that is, Bob and Milly, even though they are acutely aware of everything else happening next door. The audience, however, is faced with “the impossibility of not seeing” (Blanchot 32), which causes both unease and fascination, while underlining their responsibility in recognising child abuse. Even though Crimp’s plays succeed in exhibiting our fascination with crises by holding up the mirror to our “desire for arrest” and challenging the sense of safe spectatorship, they do not elicit the kind of cognitive disorientation which can lead to a crisis of perception and expose the audience’s tendency towards (in)attentional blindness.

3 Returning the Gaze: The Crisis of Perception

In an age of “alternative facts” and “fake news,” what we see and read is often misleading. At the same time, the development of new (digital) devices continues to challenge our perceptual capacities and forces us to adapt our senses to new possibilities of “seeing.” Quite frequently, therefore, crises of perception arise not so much from what we see or what we perceive, but from what we miss. The “seeing place” of contemporary theatre offers an arena to exploit and expose these challenges to perception and unveil our tendencies of perceptual blindness – a potential that is used by Graham in one of his recent plays, *Quiz*, to engage the audience in a multi-levelled contest, which draws on the threats and thrills of gaming. As I will argue in the following, *Quiz* exploits our fascination with crisis, challenges our capacities of what Martha Nussbaum has referred to as “moral attention,” and arrests us in a crisis of perception by inducing cognitive disorientation – which also has political implications – and by keeping the audience in a state of perceptual liminality through the multiple shifting of perceptual frames. It is this combination of moral and perceptual crises which might have contributed to the great success of Graham’s plays in recent years.

Quiz, which premiered at the Minerva Theatre in Chichester in November 2017 and moved to London’s West End in March 2018, is based on a true event: a scandal that happened in September 2001, when one of the contestants on the popular television game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* was accused of cheating, after winning the jackpot of one million pounds. Charles Ingram, a British Army Major at the time, was the third member of his family to be on the show, following his wife Diana and his brother-in-law, who both won 32,000 pounds. According to the host of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, Chris Tarrant, Ingram, whom he described as “nice but dim,” was not very likely to succeed: “he didn’t have the brains to do it” (Andrews). At his first appearance on the show, Ingram floundered when facing the first set of questions, the easiest of the lot, and used all of

his three lifelines, only to excel on the second night, when he answered every multiple-choice question correctly, even though he admitted that he did not have a clue about some of the options offered to him in the course of the game.

Apparently, Charles Ingram was working with another contestant, who signalled the correct answers to him by strategic coughing. This is replicated in the play:

CHRIS TARRANT: “Who had a hit UK album with *Born to Do It*, released in 2000. A: Coldplay; B: Toploader; C: A1; D: Craig David.” [. . .]

CHARLES INGRAM: I think it’s A1. It could be Toploader. Which is also a barrel on a gun. I’ve never heard of Craig David. I might have to use my last lifeline, 50:50. [. . .]

On screen we are left with “Craig David” and “A1.”

CHARLES INGRAM: Hmm. OK. That hasn’t helped me at all, actually. I think I’ll go A1. [. . .]

CHRIS TARRANT: Final answer?

CHARLES INGRAM: No. (*Laughs. Thinks.*)

“Craig – David” . . .

And this time DIANA INGRAM coughs.

CHARLES INGRAM: . . . Or A1. (*Waits.*)

Do you know, when I guess, practising at home, I’m wrong 80 per cent of the time, so I think I’ll go for Craig David. (52–53)

Presenting an evidently clueless competitor who passes the quiz with flying colours, *Quiz* replicates the biggest scandal in the history of the game show, or, as Graham claimed, “the most British crime of all time,” “the story about whether or not a few middle-class people tried to steal a million pounds with questions and coughing” (qtd. in McIntosh). The public scandal also led to a severe personal crisis. Even though Ingram insisted he was innocent, he was put on trial and, together with his wife, convicted of fraud. He and his wife were given suspended sentences of eighteen months in jail; Charles Ingram had to resign his commission as Major; the Ingrams started to struggle with finances, and eventually went bankrupt.

What is striking about this play is not so much the question of whether Charles Ingram was guilty or innocent, but the way in which *Quiz* manages to gradually draw the audience into a multi-layered and enduring crisis – a crisis of knowledge, a crisis of perception, and a crisis of judgement, while confronting us with our own fascination with crises. As suggested in *Quiz*, the television show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* draws most of its success from human crisis. “The human drama of it” was the show’s major selling point: “[w]e’re watching people making – potentially making life-changing decisions in front of us. The show dangles the carrot as close to them as possible – and –” (30).

The show revolves around both the essence of “crisis” – provided that the latter is understood as “a call to take action” which includes “a possibility of fail-

ure or an injustice” (Gilbert 10) – and the fascination with watching someone at this turning point. The fascination with “the human drama” evolves in a transparent cage, which is replicated on stage by a blue neon cube and which has become iconic for reality television. It allows us to witness (and, as spectators, enjoy) the struggle of the contestant, when he has to choose between four possible answers.

When *Quiz* was first performed in Chichester, it received very mixed reviews. *The Telegraph* advised readers to “phone a friend and go,” while *The Stage* described it as “a fascinating, multi-textured and very entertaining play” (qtd. in McIntosh). One of the key points of critique was that the play was perceived as “frantic and unfocused” (qtd. in McIntosh). As a consequence, several changes were made for the London production: around 40 per cent of the play was rewritten, based on audiences’ reactions and the move from a studio theatre in Chichester to a West End proscenium theatre (McIntosh). One of the changes made was that the London production seated some audience members on the stage to replicate the studio conditions from *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The lack of focus that was criticised, however, remained, and, as I will argue, is part of the play’s dramatic design and the key to its success.

At the opening of the play (in the London production), we delve right into the quiz show, or rather: into the final preparations for the show. The prologue, happening off air, takes us into the centre of the warm-up session. Before we realise what is happening, we have signed a contract for participation – not only implicitly, but explicitly, by both actively engaging in warm-up activities and taking an oath:

[o]n the count of three, give us a cheer; the entire stalls; one, two, three – YEAH!

The stalls, presumably, cheer.

(Sighs.) Ah OK, one of those crowds. “Audience interaction?” “Me?” “Good heavens.” Clutching pearls. Monocle flopping out into the Prosecco.

What about in the royal circle, happy and well?! One, two, three –?!

The royal circle, presumably, cheer. (6)

As indicated by the several screens that face the audience, we are live in the studio. There is no fourth wall; there are not even three walls. Instead, the audience, partly seated on the stage, are turned into background actors, who are taught their cue when to cheer, to applaud, or to laugh, and who are drawn into the illusion of the game that is about to start – a game that they will watch from within.

Integrating the audience into a pre-show warm-up exercise might be a cheap trick to activate spectators, but it works in prompting “emotional contagion”: “[t]he more spectators join together in one emotion, the more empathy shapes the emotional response of the rest” (McConachie 97). In the (unlikely) event that the

opening exercise does not produce the desired emotional contagion, spreading from the royal to the grand circle and the balcony, the audience, whom the Warm-Up presenter reminds of their shared responsibilities as “a community” (6), is also sworn in by the barrister for the Crown, Hilliard QC:

[m]embers – of the *jury*. We’re going to need you to take an oath. Please raise your right hand and say after me...

The AUDIENCE rise and raise their right hand. The oath can be projected onto the screens.

“I solemnly, sincerely and truly declare and affirm that I will faithfully try the defendant and give a true verdict according to the evidence.” (8)

Emotionally and lawfully attuned to the show and already fully immersed in the performance, the audience in their role as jury members are reminded of their status as “[c]ommoners” devoted to “common law” (9). They are informed that, “[b]ased on the *values* that we all share,” they need to decide between two options which are displayed on the screens across the theatre: “[g]uilty. Or not guilty” (9). Only then does presenter Chris Tarrant announce the start of the game: “OK. Let’s play” (9).

Ironically, the first scene does not take us to the quiz show, but to “the case for the prosecution” (11) and their first evidence, a conversation between Charles Ingram and Major General Roberts. Their semi-professional exchange quickly moves from a short discussion of military plans of “prioritising vision systems this quarter” (10) to a joint performance of “The Major General’s Song” from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879), which upsets any trust in the military service and the capabilities of both men, especially, however, of Charles Ingram. These first doubts are the perfect cue for a shift to the courtroom, which the audience finds itself in next. *Quiz* begins with the gamification of the trial and with jeopardizing shared values, such as justice or duty, which will eventually lead to potential manipulation of “facts.”

With the fusion of the theatrical space, the television studio, and the courtroom, the audience are turned from spectators into agents, whose verdict, it seems, could shape the world of the play and impact potential outcomes of the event (Machon 34–48, 36). In *Quiz*, these different spaces converge, continuously, as the action moves from one into the other. These shifts often happen much too rapidly to keep track of the change of setting or the different roles we – as audience members – are placed in. As suggested by the opening, we are not only the audience to this game show, but also slip into the role of contestants (occasionally, the audience is involved in quizzing) and even jury members. At the same time, however, we are also silent witnesses both to the Ingrams’ meticulous preparation for the show (besides practising mock questions, they construe a fastest-fingers machine for training purposes to ensure that Charles gets into the hot seat) and to the “strategic coughing”:

CHRIS TARRANT: "Who was the second husband of Jacqueline Kennedy? [. . .]."

CHARLES INGRAM: Right, OK, I'm not certain. I'm not certain. I would have thought . . . that it was Aristotle Onassis.

TECWEN WHITTOCK *coughs from the seats.*

CHARLES INGRAM: One of my sub-strategies is to take my time actually. Adnan Kashoggi . . . Ronald Reagan . . . Aristotle Onassis . . .

TECWEN WHITTOCK *coughs again.*

CHARLES INGRAM: . . . and Rupert Murdoch. (*Waits.*) (51)

By drawing our attention, which is initially focused on the contestant, to the various coughs in the television studio, the emphasis in perception is shifted from sight to sound. Ironically, observing the millionaire panopticon on stage, the audience seems to suffer from inattentional deafness, which arises from the failure to attend to all stimuli in a given situation. As we tend to focus on the spectacle of the human drama that unfolds at the centre of the stage, we fail to recognize the coughing as a salient stimulus, not least because it is a stimulus that is easily missed, since it is a sound that we are quite used to in the theatre. The competing stimuli of sight and sound prompt a first crisis of perception, which further emphasizes the shift from our role as spectators, witnesses, and jury members to audience members and also potential accomplices of Charles Ingram. After all, coughing is an action attributed to the audience – an audience who might support Ingram in the attempt to deceive.

As suggested by these rapidly shifting settings and perceptual frames, we frequently have to adapt to perceptual changes, including the shifting emphasis on sight and sound, and mentally move quickly between the television studio, the private space of the Ingrams' home, the local pub where they participate in quizzes, and the courtroom. Wandering between different worlds, the audience has to quickly adjust to different realities, different codes of conduct, and different orders of perception.

What is created here is an instance of perceptual multistability. This phenomenon is illustrated by the well-known image of the duck-rabbit, used by Joseph Jastrow to illustrate that perception is not just a product of a stimulus, but also a mental activity. Perceptual multistability refers to the spontaneous perceptual switching between two or more likely interpretations of an image. Erika Fischer-Lichte has referred to this phenomenon to explain the audience's awareness of the actor's body, which competes with their awareness of the character embodied by the actor. In the case of *Quiz*, the perceptual switching does not concern the actor's body, but the audience's bodies, or, rather, their floating roles as spectators, contestants, silent witnesses, and jury members. The effect, however, is the same. As Fischer-Lichte argues, "[w]henver such a shift takes place, there is rupture, a discontinuity. The order of perception, which the spectators have initially

followed, is upset and even destroyed and another one has to be established” (87).

The continuous discontinuity of our various roles in *Quiz* destabilizes our perception and also our judgement. It leaves us in a liminal state, a betwixt and between, which, in the logic of the play, upsets the boundaries between the real and the fictional. These boundaries are blurred from the very beginning when the audience enters the stage to help set the scene for a quiz show they are part of and which they also partly create, either by digital voting or by subsidizing game shows such as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* As we learn in *Quiz*, these shows can only operate if the contestants do not win greater sums of money than the amount that the show received from phone call charges paid by spectators who call in to participate in an audience question during the show (13).

To remain part of the game and temporarily overcome the crisis of perception caused by these conflicting settings, the audience will inevitably try to blend these two settings into one in an act of conceptual integration (Fauconnier and Turner). They will create a third space, a mental space, which can contain the two different “input spaces” (142), that is, the television studio and the courtroom. These mental spaces refer to “the small, local representations [we] construct in [our] minds when [we] think and talk” (Blair and Cook 60). Within these spaces, different input information can be combined and compressed: “from many elements to few, from diffuse to compact, from between-space relations to within-space relations” (66). It is within this blend, which reinforces the gamification of the law, that the boundaries between show and “reality,” performance and essence, truth and lie become indistinguishable. This notion is reinforced at the centre of the play when the barrister for the Crown, Hilliard QC, remarks that

[n]one of this is real. This is a stage. I am wearing a costume. We are a “representation” of the truth.

PADDY SPOONER: In other words a lie.

HILLIARD QC: It’s art.

PADDY SPOONER: Alright, an expensive lie.

HILLIARD QC: In the words of Pablo Picasso: “We know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us *realise* truth.” (60–61)

This exchange immediately follows the scene when the audience is asked to vote:

[m]embers of the jury. It is up to you. Using the keypads in front of you, please vote now. Press A for guilty, or B for not guilty. The decision is really yours. Please vote now. It’s 50-50 remember – the *right* answer, and the one remaining *wrong* answer. (57–58)

In *Quiz*, art seems to be both “a lie that makes us *realise* truth” and the truth which makes us realise a lie, motivating a blend of opposing categories, such as “right” and “wrong,” which is at the heart of the cognitive and moral crises triggered by this play.

4 Making Sense of Crisis

Ironically, *Quiz* is a play that, through its reference to the quiz show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, is deeply invested in knowledge, in cognition, in the ability to think, in unequivocal choices – and *sense*-making. At the same time, however, it creates intense cognitive tension: first on the level of the quiz, where the contestant has to choose the correct answer out of four possible choices, which are designed to cause cognitive disorientation and trick the mind, and second, in the courtroom, where the choice is apparently easier, as only two options remain, leaving us a 50:50 chance to choose the “correct” answer. Once the votes are cast, the results are displayed on the screens across the theatre. In most performances, the audience voted “guilty.”

In Act Two, the show must go on. Or rather: it seems to repeat itself. Again, the Warm-Up presenter attunes us to the time “we’re back” (60) on the show, but this time, it is he who swears us in. When he announces the answers to a pub quiz that the audience has engaged in during the break (prompted by pieces of paper placed on spectators’ seats before the actual performance started), he asks us to become our own jury: “[h]ello! Welcome back! That’s it, get seated [. . .]. Now we’re going to let you mark your own answers, why, because we trust you. *Trust*. That you will not cheat. Not British is it. Honour, decency, fair play” (59). Having reached a verdict over the contestant, the tables are turned and our decency as well as our ability to admit failure, that is, not to have reached full points, is tested. With this return of the gaze, our crisis of cognition reaches the next round. We have turned from the observers to those who are observed by other observers whom we have been observing in this “seeing place.” As trusted contestants in this game, we are furthermore asked to take on shared responsibility for our actions and for our verdict, the effect of which we can witness hereafter, when we are turned into spectators of the aftermath of our decision and forced to respond, emotionally and cognitively, to the consequences of our vote and our fascination with the crisis we have been caught in – or coughed into.

Accused of fraud, Charles and Diana Ingram are humiliated everywhere they go. While standing on the platform waiting for the train to arrive, “[t]he Commuters nearby notice them, and together give some unsubtle coughs in their direction” (62). At a Starbucks, they are served their “cough-ie” (63).

During the trials, journalists from across the globe gather to follow what the Scottish Journalist describes as “one of the most entertaining trials in recent memory”: “[n]o wonder courtroom number 4 is currently trading as the hottest ticket in town” (62). The best seats, however, are occupied by us, the audience, to witness a spectacle that we are not only part of, but have partly brought about – by reaching a verdict and by engaging in the game of *Quiz*, which starts to occupy our mind, belittling much more severe crises happening around us. The misjudgement of the significance of the “coughing Major,” an extraordinarily trivial event, which engages all our cognitive energy and is given the same weight, if not more, than global crises, is exposed in the play:

ADRIAN WOOLFE: Look. That looks like . . . New York. Something happened. That’s one of the Twin Towers –

WOODLEY QC: The day after the show. 11 September 2001.

DIANA INGRAM: (*watched, shocked*) Oh my goodness.

ADRIAN WOOLFE: . . . This might – this might, bump you down the news a bit. (71)

The second part of *Quiz* confronts us with our own fascination with personal crises and our entrapment in a greater attention economy, an economy which is driven by the media industry, a show business that is paranoid with the idea of being robbed by a few middle-class people, and an economy which we are facilitating by entering the show (and the theatre) and which can manipulate our perception at will.

As the defendant reveals, the audio track of the show’s recording, which served as key evidence in the trial as it recorded the coughing incidents, was heavily edited, so that the strategic coughing was isolated and thus stuck out amongst more random coughs of the audience and other contestants. As a consequence, the production team of the show is accused of confirmation bias:

WOODLEY QC: Ever heard of a little thing called “confirmation bias”? Whereby once an assumption sinks into your brain, and you become fixated that a certain story, a certain answer *must* be valid, then all “evidence” and “facts” are suddenly organised and arranged to support that assumption? (94)

Though this question is directed at the production manager, it is also aimed at the audience, who is urged to reconsider their perception of the case. Throughout the second act, the blend of the television studio and the courtroom gradually dissolves, as the action concentrates on the courtroom and, in passing, also on events outside the television studio, that is, global crises that our fascination with the petty crisis concerning Charles Ingram has shielded us from.

At the end of the second part, the audience is asked to vote again, and the results will probably differ from the first voting. In addition to the result of the

current performance, the results of the previous ten performances are also displayed on the screens across the theatre. Nine out of ten audiences seem to vote “not guilty.”¹ *Quiz* ultimately exposes the manipulability of our perception. As one reviewer noted, it illustrates “the malleability of public opinion when presented with selective facts, on something that shouldn’t really be ours to vote in the first place. We vote how Graham manipulates us to vote” (Lukowski). The play first creates a huge think-tank, which exists in a liminal space between playful and lawful judgement, between emotional contagion and cognitive reasoning, between the television studio, the shared aim to win (for who does not want to become a millionaire?), the private space of the Ingrams’ home, and the courtroom.

The instances of perceptual multistability and the conflation of epistemological frames, which are evoked particularly in the first act, create temporary crises of perception. At the same time, however, they also emphasize that “[p]erception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. [. . .] The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement or interaction” (Noë 1). *Quiz* turns out to be a very effective vehicle for raising our discomfort with our own judgements as well as with our perception, or, rather, misperception of a scenario. It also caters to our “reality hunger” (Shields) and our fascination with the crises of others, which arises if safe spectatorship is granted. In *Quiz*, however, this fascination backfires onto the spectators.

In the end, all eyes are on us. It seems as if the play is fascinated with the crisis it has caused in the audience, the spectators who thought they were in control, but rapidly change their judgement of a scene that they thought to have perceived first-hand (and might have been familiar with before entering the theatre). Having caused a crisis that moves from a crisis of perception to a crisis of judgement, the play disintegrates:

[t]he results come in. DIANA and CHARLES stand looking at one another as they do, holding hands.

Beat . . . HILLIARD QC and WOODLEY QC smile at one another, shaking hands and taking their wigs off. A bell rings to signal filming over. We go “Off Air,” the lights snapping up, as STUDIO TECHNICIANS enter. “Show” over. People hand CHARLES and DIANA water, now just our actors. This all continues for a moment, until . . . Blackout. (102)

Though there is a blackout, the crisis of perception is not contained. Graham has been playing the audience. The multi-layered plot, which fuses the television stu-

1 Based on the results shown at the end of *Quiz* at the Noël Coward Theatre, London, on 14 June 2018.

dio with the courtroom and leads to the gamification of (legal) decision-making, capitalizes on two states of mind which occupy the British Isles: first, the widespread obsession with game shows and quizzes, which are, as Graham remarked in an interview, “a very British obsession” (qtd. in McIntosh), and second, the desire to be in control, a desire that the Leave campaign responded to during the EU Referendum in June 2016. These two mindsets are combined in the play. They are impossible to separate to the same extent as it is impossible to separate the courtroom from the studio – two spaces that are furthermore closely linked through the theatricality which governs the performances in both areas.

Although Graham has turned the background story of the Referendum campaign into drama – he wrote the screenplay for the television drama *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019) –, *Quiz* is not a Brexit play. At least it is not explicitly declared as such. However, at a time when we are facing a Brexit overdose, insofar as debates on Brexit dominate not only the media, but also start to shape literature and theatre, a *non-Brexit* play that tackles the key issues that led to Brexit and continue to fuel the fascination with the Brexit crisis is compelling. Even though the play has not yet been read in the context of Brexit, the connections are obvious. The promotion of the audience to jury members, who are asked to cast a decisive vote by choosing between two options, the misleading information spread in the first part of the play, which presents the case largely from the perspective of the accusers, the simple majority vote, a vote “on something that shouldn’t really be ours to vote in the first place” (Lukowski), and also the second vote, which in nine out of ten cases leads to a different result, are strongly reminiscent of the debates surrounding the Brexit Referendum. In *Quiz*, the audience gets the opportunity to vote again – a privilege which is not granted to the British people. Ironically, London West End audiences are not distinctly British: they are often predominantly international, representing those who have been observing the crisis on the isle and are gradually drawn into it. The second voting in *Quiz* connects to the people’s desire for the opportunity to vote again and vote differently, having emerged from the crisis of perception with a better view of the full picture and a deeper awareness of their potentially misleading perception of events.

Though not yet discussed in the context of *Brexitlit*, the return of the gaze, which the audience experiences towards the end of *Quiz*, is a key element in *Brexit* literature and especially in *Brexit* drama. Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris’s *My Country: A Work in Progress* (2017) illustrates this best. The play opens and ends with a speech by Britannia, who assembles East Midlands, Caledonia, South-West, Northern Ireland, North-East, and Cymru, to listen to the voices of both politicians and the common people. Together with these personifications of the regions of the British Isles, the audience is asked to listen to the angry voices that address issues of patriotism, immigration, the Referendum and its aftermath, and

the EU. The play closes with an appeal by Britannia: “[w]e cannot stand in judgement on each other’s lives. But we should seek and search and strive for good leadership. Are you listening? Do I hear you listening? *End*” (58).

Theatre does not only stage the impossibility of not seeing, but also the impossibility of not listening. Britannia’s question hints at a crisis of perception that might have affected the outcome of the referendum – and might continue to shape the debates regarding Brexit. Her question, however, is not so much directed to the characters onstage, but to the audience, returning their gaze. Furthermore, it is a rhetorical question. We are at the end of the play: the audience will stop listening, leave the theatre, and return to their role as “[c]ommoners,” practicing – as suggested by Graham – “common law” (9).

Similar to *Quiz*, what is emphasised here is the fact that perception is always an action: it is *enacted*. Both plays prompt a crisis of perception, which challenges our responsibility in times of crisis – our ability to overcome the “arrest” caused by fascination, and to respond cognitively, emotionally, and also morally to what we see and hear within the theatre, but also beyond it in the *theatrum mundi*.

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Bionote

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