



Societal Dysfunction and Dehumanization in Anthony Neilson's *Normal* (1998)

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Abstract - This article examines societal dysfunction and crime in Anthony Neilson's *Normal* (1998). It charts the interactions between socioeconomic inequalities and pressures, the breakdown of social institutions and the psychological disorders that drive individuals to commit crimes as a means of survival. As it closely scrutinises the moral and psychological portrait of a serial killer, his traumatic childhood experiences in a destitute, promiscuous and low working-class family, which itself is subjected to social economic injustice and legal repression, it establishes that personal development is largely determined by the psycho-social conditions in which the individual evolves. It shows that normality is an elusive concept and moving target.

This article draws on recent research on trauma, deviance and crime as well as on the works of contemporary drama critics to shed light on the play's perspectives on the collapse of sociocultural scaffoldings, and the development of criminal deviance.

Key words: *childhood, family, power, normality, repression, insanity, trauma, crime, justice*

Résumé - Cet article étudie les rapports entre les dysfonctionnements sociétaux et la criminalité dans *Normal* (1998) d'Anthony Neilson. Il analyse les inégalités et les pressions socio-économiques, l'effondrement des institutions sociales et les troubles psychologiques qui poussent les individus à commettre des crimes pour survivre. En examinant de près le portrait moral et psychologique d'un tueur en série, les expériences traumatisantes qu'il a vécues dans son enfance au sein d'une famille ouvrière, pauvre, aux mœurs légères, elle-même soumise à l'injustice sociale et économique et à la répression légale, notre étude établit, d'une part, que le développement personnel est largement déterminé par les conditions psychosociales dans lesquelles l'individu évolue et, de l'autre, que la normalité est un concept insaisissable et une cible mouvante.

Cet article s'appuie sur des recherches récentes sur le traumatisme, la déviance et le crime, ainsi que sur les travaux de critiques dramatiques contemporains, pour éclairer les perspectives de la pièce sur l'effondrement des échafaudages socioculturels et le développement de la déviance criminelle.

Mots clés : *enfance, famille, pouvoir, normalité, répression, folie, traumatisme, crime, justice*

INTRODUCTION

Fifty-six-year-old playwright and theatre director Anthony Neilson was born and raised in Edinburgh. The son of a couple of Scottish comedians, Beth Robens and Sandy Neilson, he grew up in a theatrical family and in rehearsal rooms. His passion for drama developed naturally. After difficult schooling and a year of theatre studies in his native city, he moved to Cardiff to attend the Royal Welsh



College of Music and Drama. He did not, however, complete his academic year as he was expelled from the arts institution for indiscipline. Having no particular occupation in the summer of 1987, he entered and won a BBC young writers' contest. His work experience in the drama series of the British media was instrumental in consolidating his writing talents but it was not appealing enough to him.

Anthony Neilson was one of the most influential playwrights to emerge and dominate the British stage in the 1990s. His innovative and also provocative theatrical production attempted to go beyond narrow cerebral experiences to touch and activate all senses of audiences and readers by lowering their defense systems while immersing them in shocking scenes of violence. His theatre takes, in fact, hold of readers and viewers through gripping incantatory images, sounds, music, smells and light, and propels them into the center of a dysfunctional universe, into a place where collective and individual lives become so distorted that they inevitably escalate into destructive dynamics. To open up the consciousness of his audiences and readers to the realities of his drama and of our world, Neilson employs a range of integrated strategies to activate and fully engage the imagination of his audiences in the events unfolding on his stage¹. Neilson's drama features galleries of emotionally damaged and isolated individuals, ontologically insecure figures who desperately search for a moral compass in an increasingly unintelligible and irrational world where, as Maté would word it, «*the abnormal has become the norm, the unnatural has become the inescapable*. (Maté 310). In their «*deranged, derailed, deformed*»² inner and external worlds, concepts of normality, welfare, social and criminal justice collapse and rise again into surrealistic forms and shapes.

Neilson's first major play, *Normal: The Dusseldorf Ripper*³, was premiered at the Edinburgh Theatre Festival in 1991. It relates the last days of a notorious German serial killer, Peter Kurten (1883-1931), also known as the Ripper or the Vampire of Dusseldorf. With his countless dreadful crimes, the psychopath created a state of extreme fear and distress in Germany in the 1920s. As his dramatic narrative follows the conversations between Wehner, the criminal's defense lawyer and

¹ Over years, Neilson has developed an innovative method of composing his plays. His writing technique relies on improvisation and collaboration with comedians and stage technicians. It typically starts with an idea and gets into shape during workshop-like rehearsals: actors and light, sound, costume designers contribute significantly to the content and form of his plays. He writes between rehearsals and his texts keep evolving until they reach a satisfactory consistency. His texts are often unfinished on the first public show. The intention of Neilson, behind this dynamic, inclusive and highly demanding writing process is to fill up the emotional gap between actors and the stages realities they embody and evolve in and also to suppress the distance between the audience and fictional world of his plays.

² KANE, Sarah 223.

³ The subtitle of the play was eventually abandoned



Kurten, it explores the sociocultural and economic circumstances that turn an innocent human being into a killing automaton. It gives a sharp analysis of the fantasies, fears and motivations of a serial killer.

This article discusses societal dysfunction and dehumanization in Neilson's *Normal* (1998). It is divided in three parts: the first studies how family institutions generate dysfunction and trauma. The second explores on the insanity of the justice system and the third and final part examines the thirst for power and revenge in the play.

1. Family dysfunction and trauma

Through a subtle weaving of historical, multigenerational and multiclass perspectives, Neilson's *Normal* draws up a poignant typology of trauma-generating family and social environments which continuously sustain themselves by the psychological, mental and moral damages they cause. The dehumanized figures inhabiting the play's universe all bear deep psychological wounds resulting from tragic childhood experiences and /or interactions with their social milieus.

The narrator of *Normal* Wehner is a young, conservative middle-class lawyer in charge of the defense of a low working-class criminal, Kurten. Wehner is led to confront his own family education, values and heritage as he examines his client's trajectory. Though the lawyer's parents remain faceless and off stage, their dramatic existence is given consistency through recurrent evocations in the exchanges with his client, in his childhood memories and also in the regular mail correspondences he writes to them and to which they never respond. The dominant reflexions and emotions arising from his multiple evocations of his emotionally distant parents become increasingly tainted with blame and rage as he realises his family's education deprived him of his childhood, closed him off inwardly, and restricted his imagination, thus seriously compromising his chances to self-fulfilment and happiness.

The narrow worldview of Wehner's highly principled parents seems to derive directly from the utilitarian doctrine of their ancestor, Thomas Gradgrind in Charles Dicken's novel *Hard Times* (1854). In the eminently materialistic and mechanical worlds of Dickens's hero, Gradgrind and of Wehner in *Normal*, which seek to root spirituality, creativity, and other aspirations of the soul out of human existence, imagination and passions are to be repressed, and ideally, deactivated. Emotions are meant to be contained and suppressed under all circumstances. Wehner, like Gradgrind's children, is trained to stoically keep the upper lip stiff in order to focus solely on their material success. To foster such values in him, he is, subjected, in his early childhood, to a rigorous and austere lifestyle. He is, for



instance, denied entertainment, the company of other children and the possibility to dream and to grow up with his age group. The psychological isolation and the crippling education he receives logically transform him into a unidimensional, highly immature and malleable character. His knowledge of tastes, fancies and aspirations remain appallingly embryonic until his encounter with Kurten, the Ripper of Dusseldorf, a violent nihilist who epitomizes serious threat to the established social rules, values and customs. Kurten fulfills the role of mentor and surrogate father to the immature and innocent young lawyer.

Wehner's confrontation with his client's tragic experiences and antisocial posture becomes, toward the end of the play, instrumental in unlocking his own restricted worldview and inner potential. The young lawyer realizes, like Gradgrind's eldest daughter Louise, that his home and school education only privileges intellectual achievements at the detriment of other essential aspects of life. He is pushed so hard by his family and school education that he has a strong sense of being dispossessed of emotional and social intelligence. As a result of his atrophied inner space, he feels unable to build meaningful and fulfilling relationships. His lack of emotional intelligence, which seriously hinders his ability to take part in complex human interactions, becomes a source of immense suffering: «*I know everything of the law, little of life and less of love*» (Neilson 5/6) he keeps lamenting and mourning over his dull and meaningless existence.

The nuclear, wealthy, rigidly ordered middle-class family atmosphere in which Wehner grows up is a complete contrast to the indigent and promiscuous family in which his client is brought up: Kurten is the third child of a large family of thirteen members who all live in one room, a mini-jungle in which physical violence, psychological harassment, sexual assaults and moral transgressions, are given free rein. The Kurten family's cage-like room offers far less comfort and safety than the country's prison cells they are so familiar with. Their dramatic live journeys are circular movements between the squalid box they call home and the grim prison cells of the country. The frustrations and humiliations they experience in the oppressive world outside are increasingly echoed and amplified in their room. This untenable situation generates, in young Peter Kurten, an uncontrollable desire to break free from the vicious circle, distance himself from his family heritage, and take revenge against the dark forces he believes are responsible for his fate.

In his closed and poverty-stricken family space, young Kurten experiences torments of physical and emotional deprivation. The persistent failure of his family to respond to his material, emotional and psychological expectations as well as their indifference to his own torments amplify his pain, lead him to run away from home and engage in crime. "*I was eight*, he confesses, *when I ran away*



from home for the first time. I thought myself quite the grown up. That was when I killed my first two.” (Neilson 12/13)

The lawyer’s and his client’s childhood environments look poles apart in many respects but they have a common denominator: both are isolating and trauma-generating spaces inside and outside which threads of communication and affection are broken. They systematically jeopardize the physical and emotional safety of its members and notably of its children. Kurten’s criminal behaviour, which is triggered by his early childhood frustrations, is inextricably linked with the socioeconomic and moral destitution of his family. As he is deprived of opportunities of growth and self-fulfilment, he seems to have no other option but to embrace the survival strategy of his lineage of outlaws, which consists of committing abominable crimes both inside and outside of the family circle.

His existential path is to a large extent, shaped and determined, by the grim circumstances of his childhood, by the violent indigence and physical brutality exerted on him, his family and his entire lineage. His family, a microcosm of his decadent country inexorably sinking into chaos under the rule of an old and senile national leader, is caught in a circle of poverty, ignorance and moral depravation. His grandfather, as he bitterly recalls, *«was a thief, a simpleton and a violent alcoholic as were his children»* (Neilson 8), his *«father was imprisoned for attempting to rape one of his daughters»* (Neilson 9). In his young age, he is, on a regular basis, subjected to physical violence by an amoral alcoholic father, who uses the meager family income to intoxicate himself. He is recurrently assaulted sexually by his sisters and mother, whose immorality is heavily underlined by their physical unattractiveness.

Kurten’s teenage initiation and addiction to social violence is taken to a higher level of viciousness, in his adolescence by a pervert neighbour, whose work consists of rounding up the wandering dogs in the neighbourhood and killing them. This sadistic dog-catcher acts as an attentive extended family to Kurten and fulfills the role of the attentive father while firmly instilling, in a methodical pavlovian-like process, hedonistic sadism into the highly receptive adolescent. The encounter between the dog-catcher and the vulnerable teenager fatally colours the ideas and feelings of the young man in search of identity, references and certainties, as he aspires to explore and live life to the fullest. Kurten’s morbid fascination for violence and blood is fostered by his tragic complicity with his mentor:

He taught me many things that man, many things. He took such pleasure in my happiness. We became great friends and I would visit him regularly after school. It was during this time that I made an astonishing discovery; that the spilling of blood, its coppery smell, its deep color, caused a pleasing sensation in my crotch. I became quite addicted to that sensation. (Neilson 14/15)



The dark existential trajectories of Neilson's central characters in *Normal* unambiguously indicates that human essence, far from being fixed reality, evolves constantly, according to circumstances and interaction with other humans. In a convergence of views with many artists and scholars including existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, playwright Edward Bond⁴, biologist François Jacob, and essayist Raphaël Gaillard, who convincingly argue that inner human architecture is formed and determined by social dynamics, Neilson demonstrates that human psyche is nurtured, shaped and coloured by the cultural milieu in which it is immersed. Employing an apt metaphor of industrial assembly line work, his main character Kurten asserts that deviance, madness, criminality or humanness are end products of socio-cultural processes. Deviants and malefactors, in the view of the hero of *Normal*, are embodiments of normalized dysfunction. They are manufactured, methodically and in large numbers, in various social circles. «*They are being created, assembled; in the homes, in the prisons. In the playgrounds. And they are, all of them, normal men* », he emphasizes. (Neilson 56)

In his book, *La statue intérieure*, scientist and academician François Jacob regards the development of human identity as a slow and life-long inner carving process which gradually integrates the chemistry generated by the continuous flow of interactions with the outside world; it is a complex joint adventure in time and space, not always smooth and straight, between the individual and their social environment. On this, Jacob notes:

I carry within me, sculpted since childhood, a sort of inner statue that gives continuity to my life, which is the most intimate part, the hardest core of my character. I have modelled this statue all my life. I've been constantly touching it up. I have refined it. I polished it. The gouge and the chisel, here, are encounters and combinations. Rhythms that jostle each other. (Gaillard 62, my translation) 5

⁴ The ontological conceptions of Bond and Sartres stress the fact that human nature and identity are the resultant state of various forces at work within and around the individual. In *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), Sartre conceives human nature as series of social influences: at birth, the subjective self is a virtual project that turns into a specific but undefinable reality through the interactions with a constantly changing sociopolitical and economic milieu. In the same vein, Bond states, in his essay 'Radical Innocence' that humans are born neither humans nor animals. The human mind is, in his view, a highly receptive and living platform that can be either nourished or ruined by life experiences: '*We are not born good or evil but with the potential to be either. What we become is largely the consequence of our society and our experience in it. H-bombs and death camps cannot be blamed on human nature. They are the consequence of social organisation*' (Bond 296 b).

⁵ Jacob writes: «*Je porte en moi, sculptée depuis l'enfance, une sorte de statue intérieure qui donne une continuité à ma vie, qui est la part la plus intime, le noyau le plus dur de mon caractère : cette statue, je l'ai modelée toute ma vie. Je lui ai sans cesse apporté des retouches. Je l'ai affinée. Je l'ai polie. La*



Normal demonstrates, through the grim existential trajectories of its central characters, that the exposure of children to emotional and physical abuse is detrimental to their psychological and ethical development, to their sense of normality and to their integration in social dynamics. Families, as the primary educational and socializing spaces, play an essential part in moulding human character, identities and worldview. The failure of family institution to provide a space of safety and organic growth has serious repercussions on other social institutions, including the justice system.

2. The Insanity of a Justice System

In *Normal*, Neilson achieves a tour a de force in transforming the play's stage into an immersive platform. Like in an interactive virtual video game, audiences witness crimes and explore the hidden and morally unacceptable realities behind the scenes of court yards and prison cells. The experiential journey gives them a thorough overview of a decadent justice system.

The entanglement of Kurten, the play's main figure, with the machinery of law does not only reveal the failures and brutalities of the system but also unveils the real motives of his defiant attitude vis-à-vis his country's institutions and authorities. Though he takes full responsibility for his own crimes and, by acting so, avoids obstructing the course of justice, he bitterly resents the systematic injustices, intimidations, disrespectful treatments exerted on him and other misfortune fellows in police stations, courts and in detention centers. In his view, which may also reflect Neilson's, institutional violence is not likely to foster offenders' moral amendment, to prevent crime or to contribute to social stability. Prison centers, as Kurten stresses, are lawless zones in which carceral populations are denied their basic human rights and forced into a tragic dialectics of humiliation and repression. They are subjected to a strict and absurd regime of unnecessary privations and isolations, to psychological and physical tortures which often end up wrecking their psychological balance and mental health. In prison, where Kurten has spent most of his teenage and adult life, he is, for instance, denied human company and access to newspapers and mirrors in order to completely disconnect him both from the outside world and from himself. The irrational ordeal he experiences in various penitentiaries exacerbates, in his view, fear, tensions and resentment, especially among convicts. With such devastating psychological pressures, carceral systems breed even more bitterness and turbulence inside and outside detention centers. For Kurten, who gradually

gouge et le ciseau, ici, ce sont les rencontres et des combinaisons. Des rythmes qui se bousculent.»
(Gaillard 62)



becomes the voice of the oppressed carceral populations, the judiciary system is not geared to the protection, education and redemption of convicts but seeks instead to annihilate their identity, hence his determination to resist to preserve his own humanity.

Wehner. You first went to prison when you were sixteen went for theft.

How did you feel about that?

Kurten Humiliated initially. Isn't that the purpose of prison? / But humiliation gave way to pride, and the more they attempted to erode my dignity, the more determined

I became that I would have my revenge

Wehner Is that why you murdered, for revenge?

Kurten My young friend. All told I have spent twenty-seven years of my life in prison.

I was unjustly persecuted. So, if I then went on to unjustly persecute others, it is the

State that is directly responsible (Neilson 15)

The moral blindness of the judiciary institution in *Normal* is exemplified in the jury members' shared persistence to regard Kurten's horrible criminal acts - including his coldly admitted over forty arsons and countless murders of defenseless children and women- not as the acts of a mentally deranged figure but as the deeds of a normal and sane human being, who fully «*deserves to be condemned to death by guillotine nine times over*» (Neilson 53). The jury's absurdly swift and severe verdict, which is additionally impossible to carry out, is indicative of a profound societal malaise and impass: it highlights the incapacity and or unwillingness of the court in particular and the society in general to calmly address human violence and evils that plague individual and collective existence. The public judgement passed by the court members (who are deliberately confused with the play's audience) is an indictment of the collective cowardice Kurten's society displays in the face of the moral issues and demands that serial crimes and mass destruction raise. His self-destructive society does not, as Kane would phrase it, «*believe in the light*» (206). It is "a society that locks away its failures with no counsel, no guidance, merely the reaffirmation of violence as the final solution." (Neilson 18)

The society of *Normal* jeopardizes its own foundations and growth by shutting its collective consciousness from the massacre of innocents and by allowing its children, the living symbols of hope and future, to be «*abused in the most horrific of ways, with no ear to hear their scream*» (Neilson 18). Such crimes are so recurrent and largely accepted that they seem rooted in some strange religious or civic sacrifices that Arthur in *Early Morning* (1977) calls 'duty in the blood' (Bond 186). Like Bond's cannibalistic figures, Kurten hates life itself and continuously poses serious threats to the well-being and evolution of his own society. He is the manifestation of the demonic social forces, which create and maintain the psychological, cultural and socioeconomic conditions that allow such offenses and massacres to happen. He embodies the evils and collective nightmare that



his society will not confront. “*For it is not just Peter Kurten that stands trial here But society itself*” (Neilson 18) emphasises his young defense lawyer.

The promptitude of the trial and execution of Dusseldorf Ripper, as his lawyer points out, materialises a desire to wrap the case up and let it go unnoticed and unaddressed. The judiciary masquerade seeks, in other words, to consign Kurten’s abominable crimes to oblivion in the collective consciousness. The whole situation feels like a missed opportunity for collective introspection, learning, and healing. Besides, the young defense lawyer believes that the execution of his mentally disturbed client is blatant revenge and class justice. In Wehner’s view, it perpetuates crime and bitterness in society. Death penalty and all the legal violence, as he labours in his address to the court and jury members, raises a fundamental ethical problem: the justice system he works for fails to distance itself from the immoral methods and postures that it is supposed to combat. The legal system has the ethical obligation to preserve human rights and dignity in all circumstances. Instead, like a criminal organisation, it recurrently resorts to illegal violence when exercising its power through intimidations, tortures and extra judiciary executions in its grim spaces. In doing so, it loses its moral preeminence. On these issues, Wehner challenges directly the consciousness of the court and jury members:

That Kurten should be taken from society is beyond debate

But do we punish murder with murder? Become what we condemn?

Or do we strive to understand? To prevent rather than cure?

Do we turn an evil mind to one of decency and good?

It’s a simple question (Neilson 18)

In the face of the spectators or jury members and the alienated magistrates, Wehner pleads strongly for an ethically coherent, human-centered and peace-oriented justice system. The hideous crimes of his client and the absurd violence of the judiciary system are evidence of collective consciousness crisis. It has taken him time to realise this. He gradually becomes convinced that the sine qua non condition to dissipate the cloud of fear and bitterness that intoxicate human existence, is the adoption of a radically nonviolent, benevolent and more humane approach in the application of the law. The evolution towards such higher standards, in his opinion, is a non-negotiable moral obligation. It is also detrimental to authentic human learning, growth and change. On this point, his view is in line with Laurent Perru when he writes:



by committing evil in turn, the victim who takes revenge allows evil to dominate him or her: there is then no hope of recovery. To turn the page, we must therefore begin by renouncing vengeance, which does not mean renouncing justice. (206)⁶

The insanity of the judiciary system in *Normal* is humourously highlighted by the irrational, grotesque and inefficient methods it uses to arrest the serial killer, who often manages in this tragic game to confuse police regiments, foil their plans and have the upper hand in the end. «*All manner of means were employed in the hunt for the killer, from graphology to clairvoyance. They even dressed a mannequin as of one his victims and had a man waltz with her in various dance halls*» (Neilson 5). The final capture and imprisonment of the serial killer in a high security jail has ultimately no healing effect on the psychology of the killer. On the contrary, it reinforces his pervert imagination by denying him access to regular newspapers but providing consistent documentation on Jack London. In detention, he is, in fact, given time and space to discover and immerse himself deeply in the story of the English serial killer he deifies in the end. His criminal inclination and idealisation of death are considerably reinforced in prison: «*There's nothing, he confides in his lawyer, I liked better than a spell in solitary confinement. (...) I would sit there in the blackness and dream of open wounds and carnage, of exploding bridges and poisoning reservoirs and feeding sharp sweets to children-*». (Neilson17)

The harmful effects of the dysfunctional justice system in *Normal* is underlined by the uncomfortable physical reactions Wehner develops after the meals and drinks he and his colleagues share on work days. The unsanitary food and beverages that the young lawyer ingests too quickly, in large quantities and on a regular basis, in what looks like an intergenerational rite of passage, upsets his body system: though the food and drinks give him gasses and cause him chronic hiccups, he seems to have no choice but to comply with the will of the wisdom keepers in the legal establishment, who regard him as «*their most prided and precocious son* » (Neilson 5) and entrust him with the defense of the Ripper's case. The choking affliction he suffers from, which results from unhealthy obligatory professional traditions, is indicative of an individual and collective inclination to self-destruction. It symbolically reveals the moral blindness of an entire corporation.

In *Normal*, Neilson alternates bright light and dark episodes on stage to generate meaning, and to provoke emotions and reflection. The stage is frequently bathed in red light. It metaphorically takes on a blood colour every time a crime or a major act of violence and an injustice is committed or is about to occur. The whole theatre turns red as Kurten's death sentence is pronounced, as Frau Kurten

⁶ My translation. Perru notes: «*en commettant le mal à son tour, la victime qui se venge laisse le mal la dominer: aucune guérison n'est alors à espérer. Pour tourner la page, il faut donc commencer par renoncer à la vengeance, ce qui n'implique pas de renoncer à la justice, mais de renoncer à faire justice soi-même*»



stands watching her husband calmly walk to the guillotine and to his death. The red light does not fade after Kurten's public execution. It lingers on as a persistent warning to the people on and outside the stage that crimes and threats are not removed from society after the brutal judiciary act like the one they have witnessed together. It is also important to observe that the penitentiary institutions which are intentionally designed to promote exemplary moral rectitude, are mostly plunged in darkness by recurring power failures. «*Happens all the time down here*», confirms Kurten (Neilson 17). The overwhelming absence of light in the hero's dull custody environment becomes a powerful expression of the lack of faith in the institutional capacity to transform inmates into morally sound citizens.

The irrationality of the judiciary institution in *Normal* lies both in its inability to detach itself from the ambient social violence, and in the systematic abuses it perpetrates or allows to happen in its rule of law. The crimes and postures of the Dusseldorf Ripper do not only uncover his own mental trauma but also mirror the responsibilities and failures of the institutions that are supposed to provide protection.

3. Thirst for power and revenge

In *Normal*, Neilson uses crime to reveal the state of mind of his play's characters. Peter Kurten, like many around him, is grappling trauma and existential emptiness, mainly resulting from socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation. His failure to find a place in his own society and feel acknowledged, appreciated and respected in develops within him the tragic version of the syndrome which Ralph Ellison describes in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952). Unlike Ellison's figure who chooses to hibernate while waiting for a miraculous social revolution, Neilson's hero opts for crime, terrorism and manipulation in order to break isolation, and to gain control and power in a totalitarian society

Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk states that trauma occurs when we are not seen and known. (Maté 23) His observation is a relevant diagnosis of the tragic condition that Peter Kurten confronts during his entire dramatic existence. When the curtain rises over his high security prison cell, audiences discover a self-centered, ontologically insecure, 'archetypal criminal psychopath', (Treid 49) who constantly and desperately, seeks to draw attention to himself, to be reassured about his public image. It is symbolically meaningful that the object he misses most in prison and asks for, on his first encounter with his lawyer, is a mirror. Their initial exchange does not start with the usual general topics like the weather, sports events or politics but focuses immediately on the physical appearance of Kurten. The positive feedback of the visiting lawyer, who



represents the outside world and performs the double function of a social mirror and censorship, provides instant relief and reassurance to the prisoner:

Kurten, I wonder- perhaps you could tell me- is my hair unkempt?

Wehner looks puzzled.

Kurten There are no mirrors here. Could you tell me?

Wehner Your hair seems fine.

Kurten Honestly?

Wehner (pause) Honestly.

Kurten (relieved) (Neilson 7)

Though uneducated, jobless and with no revenue, Kurten seeks a higher status and social respectability by making efforts to “cultivate the image of a gentle and pleasant man” (Neilson 36). To have an impactful presence, he sees to it that he stays in line with the prevailing dressing code: like a model, he always wears impeccable formal clothes, flashy leather shoes (which he polishes up incessantly to turn them into a mirror)⁷. He also understands that language is another important social mirror and he uses it with infinite care. He knows that he is on a territory where dialectics of control and domination operate, and where the image of the individual is continuously shaped and determined. With these defining parameters in mind, he mostly employs formal and distinguished language to polish and promote his public image in order to be regarded as a respectable intellectual or political authority. In order to further this image, he systematically avoids contracted forms, rude terms and colloquial language.

To control the course of discussions and the people he talks to, Kurten rarely answers questions directly, instead he asks other questions, interrupts or changes the subject matter. He also resorts to moments of silence to suspend, hold and draw the attention of his interlocutors, as the stage directions indicate (Neilson 8/9). Both his vestimentary and linguistic styles function like culturally accepted attributes or vessels of normality that he embraces to facilitate his social integration and ascension to power but they also work like psychological barriers that mask his criminal motives and activities.

Haunted by the social injustices and humiliations that ruined his childhood and distorted his adult life, Kurten is driven by an irrepressible desire for revenge

⁷ Neilson's dramatic portrait of his central character in *Normal* is a faithful representation of the German serial killer, Peter Kurten, who has inspired the play. The real Peter Kurten is, in fact, described as tidy, meticulous to the point of obsession. In the eyes of all and most of the surviving victims, he presents a mask of absolute normality. He is, all the time, impeccably dressed, his shoes are shined with infinite care. His dressing style gives him the appearance of a perfect gentleman. During the six years of her marriage, Mrs Kurten is unaware of any of her husband's crimes, even though she knows that he is constantly unfaithful to her. (Bourgoin 69)



and destruction against the institutions and forces that he holds responsible for his miserable existence. His apparent social conformism is motivated by the search for power to defeat such forces. «*There is no such thing as society*» (Neilson 25), he hammers, on his initial encounter with his court-appointed lawyer. It is morally incoherent, he resumes, to “*support the structures you distrust.*” (Neilson 24). His visceral distrust in his country’s sociopolitical institutions leads him to desert the military service. His refusal to participate in a war decided by corrupt elites looks like a laudable moral posture but his true motivation is to provoke political anarchy. His intention is to cause the collapse of the oppressive institutions that are the main cause of the prevailing socioeconomic chaos. His vision does not go beyond the confusion his actions may generate.

Feeling unfairly persecuted and humiliated all his life,⁸ the Dusseldorf Ripper discharges himself of the crimes, terrorists acts and the horrible sufferings he randomly inflicts on vulnerable and innocent people. He considers the ruling authorities of his country accountable for the violence resulting from the accumulated anger and frustrations of oppressed citizens. He considers the State directly accountable for his own arbitrary crimes. As he dissociates himself from the responsibility for the crimes he perpetrates, he turns off his humanity and can remorselessly indulge in higher levels of destructiveness and terrorism. In the process, he comes to understand that terror and fear are more efficient instruments for social domination and control. Through multiple and absurd arsons, murders and rapes, he manages to provoke and maintain palpable terror and trauma among the inhabitants of Dusseldorf. «*For 15 months, as Wehner describes, /A black fog of fear had been settled on Dusseldorf/And there was no escape from it/If you opened your window/It crept into your home*” (Neilson 5)

The heavy atmosphere Neilson depicts in his play is in fact a historic reality based on the psychosis and panic that took hold of Dusseldorf population and police authorities during the time when the serial crimes of Peter Kurten (1883-1931) were spreading terror in the German City. Stéphane Bourgoïn relates in his book *Le livre noir des Serial Killers* :

⁸ Peter Kurten (1883-1931) whose life inspires Neilson’s play confesses that the crimes he committed in adolescence were mainly motivated by a pressing need to survive. He stole to food to eat and resorted to false pretexts to have access to food. After serving his first sentence, he felt humiliated by a police officer who walked him handcuffed around and out of the town. This unnecessary additional humiliation, on top of the inhuman treatment he experienced in prison where he was regularly kept in chains and presented to curious visitors, was incomprehensible and deeply revolting to him. This post-prison incident with the police officer was a determining factor of his radicalisation. (Bourgoïn 48, my translation)



A Düsseldorf, la police reçoit plus d'une dizaine de milliers de lettres de dénonciation. Neuf mille personnes sont questionnées, pour la plupart des hommes soupçonnés d'être le tueur en série; l'opinion publique pense en effet qu'un seul homme est responsable de toutes les attaques, au contraire de nombreux enquêteurs qui estiment que deux, voire trois criminels différents sont peut-être à l'œuvre. A plusieurs reprises, certains échappent de peu au lynchage parce qu'ils sont vus en train de se promener avec un enfant. (28)

Neilson's hero in *Normal* is ultimately satisfied that he can be heard, felt and feared through the terror he inspires his society. It becomes clear to him that violence is the lingua franca that all social classes use and understand. He expects his interlocutors to lose control, surrender to his tyrannical presence or simply die of terror as does the wasp that tried to fly around his head. The first encounter with Wehner, his young and inexperienced defense lawyer highlights how Kurten handles his own emotions while he seeks to destabilize people he interacts with. As he regards himself as the embodiment of absolute evil and the biggest threat to society, he feels entitled to reverse social roles, mindsets and the feelings that typically belong to each camp. Putting himself on the top of his imaginary social pyramid, he refuses to display fear of his upcoming execution but expects everyone around him to be fearful in his presence:

Kurten (...) I'm impressed by your composure/ Considering that I am /Who I am/
(...)
Wehner *They'll execute you, Mr Kurten. Doesn't that frighten you?*
Kurten *Why should I be afraid? I am what they fear.* (Neilson 7/8)

Kurten's obsession for omnipotence and destruction is highlighted by his pathological fascination for huge burning fires. He sets barns alight to exterminate humans and animals and purify the land. As an unstoppable arsonist and murderer, he feels invested with a sort of a mystical mission and endowed with a supernatural power to clean, rebuild and pacify society, annihilate evil on earth. He gets almost in transe when his wild and fierce flames destroy life and triggers panic in his victims. Such apocalyptic scenes, and the human and animal sufferings he provokes get him sexually excited and make him "feel like a king" (Neilson 33), as untamable and potent as the roaring and penetrating blazes that he starts. Human and animal blood, arsons⁹ and people's tears are for him powerful psychological and sexual stimulants. "Their distress aroused me/ And the flames were very beautiful.", he admits. (Neilson 20)

⁹ In the distorted imagination and sexuality of Peter Kurten, the criminal who inspired Neilson's play, crime and sexual gratification are inextricably linked. The arsons he provoked, like all his other criminal acts, triggered intense sexual excitement in him. In *Le livre noir des sérial killers*, Bourguin reports Kurten's troubling confession on the subject: «In my imagination, fire played the same role as my other crimes. When people ran away screaming, I felt an incredible pleasure». (56) My translation.



Kurten's desperate search for social recognition and grandeur is heavily emphasized by his fanatic allegiance to Jack London, an absolute terror roaming Whitechapel, a destitute district in London, and committing gruesome murders and mutilations of female prostitutes. Kurten reads of him avidly in jail, and he interprets every celestial sign as a mystical acknowledgement or a blessing of his crimes by his spiritual guide, the London Ripper. Kurten's abominable crimes are destined to please his supreme gang leader and earn the right to sit by him in the "*Chamber of Horrors*" (Neilson 33), an imaginary temple where, he believes, the global criminal elite is supposed to meet and redefine its strategic plans and internal alliances.

Flattered by the nation's attention which comes in forms of countless hatred mails, marriage proposals and interest of the film industry in his story, Neilson's hero keeps, despite his imminent execution, nurturing megalomaniac dreams of power and glory. He is convinced that his partisans would sacrifice themselves in an ultimate combat against sociopolitical institutions to overthrow the ruling classes and celebrate him both as a visionary national and global hero: "*they would storm police headquarters and demand/the deposition of the commissioner /and appoint me /in his place/and the name of Peter Kurten! /Saviour of Dusseldorf! / would be lauded/throughout Germany /and the world!*" (Neilson 44/45)

Kurten's suicidal obstination in his delusions evidences that, once destructive ideas grip on an fragile consciousness, it may be highly challenging to uproot them. From early childhood to the end of his dramatic life, the mind of Neilson's hero is solely fixed on the dialectics of power and revenge for the humiliations and repressions he and his family have been subjected to for generations. In his violent, unclear and unstructured resistance to institutional oppression, he fails to understand that the epic battle in which he is engaged is part of a wider social class war. He is in fine, as Wehner explains to Frau Kurten, a scapegoat in this tragic class antagonism: "*These are uncertain days and people are angry. It's the blood of our leaders they want. It's the blood of your husband they may well get.*" (Neilson 27) Being a low-working class, middle-aged woman, in a turbulent male-dominated world, Frau Kurten finds herself caught in the epicenter of class and gender wars. She goes into the game as an underdog and an easy prey of all warring forces. Her body is metaphorically turned into a receptacle of all the ambient social violence and injustice. Against her will, she is forced into prostitution to survive and later to accommodate her husband's humiliating and unhidden infidelities with much younger partners. For years, she is used like a sexual object by both her husband and one of her regulars, a married gardner for whose murder she is sentenced to four years in prison. At the end of the play, in a sort of macabre, slow motion opera show, she is battered to death before her body is finally



distingrated on stage by a couple of men she trusts, her husband and his possessed disciple:

Wehner strikes her again. She lies still [...] Frau Kurten escapes, invading the audience space. Wehner bolts after her catches her, drags her, kicking her and screaming. He strikes her again. Kurten indicates that Wehner should strangle her. He does this and she falls limp. [...] She starts to crawl away. Wehner grabs her and Kurten directs him to break her legs, which he does. (Neilson 52)

In a vain attempt to regain control of her life, Frau Kurten initially resorts to physical violence but, out of despair, she resigns herself to her fate, and goes into an avoidance mode by keeping emotional and physical distance from her husband's world. At the beginning of the play, she is in the background, disconnected, feeling inadequate and drowning in her in shame, self-blame and emptiness. She hardly aware of what is going on around her. Only her voice can be heard, which connects her with the other characters and the audience. She feels stuck in a moral and sentimental impasse despite her good intentions and willingness to make hard concessions. As a result of her dramatic experiences, she gradually loses her essential human attributes: she loses her voice and her memory, which are the basic attributes of rationality. She finds it increasingly challenging remember the lyrics of her song, which seem in fact to be the lines of her own existence. '*Her voice is dead*' (Neilson 45) '*Her song fades to a hum*' (Neilson 51) indicate the stage directions.

Driven by a narrow and toxic cult of the self, the society of *Normal* is doomed to descend into anarchy and crisis. The tragic existence of the play's characters is indicative of a moral emptiness and a desperate need for meaning and purpose. Neilson's drama seeks to awaken its spectators and readers to the imperious urgency to redesign our ethical foundations and common sense of normality in order rewire our collective consciousness and build a world where there is, as Kurten articulates, '*No ugliness. No brutality. Love and only love.*' (Neilson 44)

CONCLUSION

Neilson's semi-fictional dramatic narrative of the life of the notorious German serial Killer, Peter Kurten seeks, beyond the shocking account of psychopathic murders, arsons and rapes, to establish a causal link between societal dysfunction and crime. His play convincingly demonstrates, in fact, that the exposure of children to toxic and harmful family environments predispose them to delinquency and social violence. The traumatic experiences that Neilson's hero is subjected to and he internalises in his childhood have determined his self-perception, his perception of the world around him and his interactions with his society. «*What fascinated me about the Dusseldorf Ripper, observes Neilson, was not much he was a killer but how his character was predetermined in childhood -.*» (Sierz 72)



In *Normal*, the lawyer of the serial killer, whose plea often reflects the dramatist's point of view, stresses the fact that his client's destructive behaviour is deeply rooted in the emotional and spiritual starvation that he experiences in his childhood as well as in the brutal and unjust treatment of the judiciary system, which he endures throughout his adolescence and adulthood. The absurd verdict of nine death penalties pronounced against the hero reinforces the overwhelming sense of irrationality prevailing in the world of *Normal*. Both family and judiciary environments are eventually, in his experience, spaces of torture, humiliation and dehumanisation and are therefore largely accountable for the endemic social violence and criminality.

Despite their undesirable traits, the magnitude of their crimes and their tragic destiny, Peter and Frau Kurten often stand out as touching figures, the real seekers of truth and enlightenment in the insane world of *Normal*. Their constant bottomline motivation in their long moments of confusion as well as during their ephemeral episodes of clarity, is to dissipate the ambient atmosphere of violence, the collective insanity that is turning into normality. They are uncompromising defenders of the values of love, authenticity and child protection. Kurten, whose guiding ethical principle is 'to never torture children' (Neilson 38), strives to preserve their physical, psychological and moral integrity under all circumstances. For the sake of love, he thus implores that his trial be held behind closed doors to avoid press coverage and the corruption of children, symbols of rebirth, hope and future.

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