

Obsession as Protection and Entrapment in Philip Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how memory and obsessive repetition function as both forms of psychological protection and sources of entrapment in Philip Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991). Situating the play within the confrontational aesthetics of In-Yer-Face theatre, it argues that Ridley's disturbing images and violent fantasies give theatrical form to unresolved loss, vulnerability, and the fear of change. Through close textual analysis informed by trauma theory, the discussion traces how Presley and Haley Stray organise their adult lives around the uncertainty surrounding their parents' disappearance and a continuing attachment to childhood. Chocolate, medication, storytelling, and sibling dependence establish a predictable domestic world, but their repetition also sustains isolation and obstructs engagement with the present. The arrival of Cosmo and Pitchfork exposes the fragility of this enclosure, bringing desire, coercion, and bodily vulnerability into its supposedly protective space. The analysis distinguishes sexual desire from coercion without treating queer desire as a consequence of trauma. It also examines how apocalyptic narratives and bodily horror involve spectators in the play's fears, linking shock to psychological conflict and an uneasy fascination with spectacle. The paper concludes that the twins' renewed expressions of fear resist a narrative of recovery: the practices through which they endure unresolved experience also perpetuate their confinement. Ridley thus presents obsession as a contradictory response to insecurity that preserves a fragile sense of safety while restricting the possibility of change.

Keywords: Philip Ridley, *The Pitchfork Disney*, traumatic memory, obsessive repetition, psychological entrapment.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Ridley is one of the most unique figures in the confrontational British theatre which came into being in the early 1990s. Violence, desire, fantasy, fear, memory and vulnerability, all of this is at the centre of his dramatic worlds, but not always alone. Violence often emerges from an already dysfunctional relationship that is characterised by dependency, coercion, sexual tension, unresolved experience or obsessive efforts to exert control. Likewise, memory does not function merely as recollection of a completed past. It exists in the here and now and continues to influence how characters define themselves, how they make sense of intimacy, how they manage loss, and how they react to what they can't or won't face.

Presley and Haley Stray live in a closed domestic universe, one that is governed by chocolate, drugs, narratives, rest, imagination, and sibling interdependence in *The Pitchfork Disney*. Their continuing attachment to childhood following parental disappearance produces a form of emotional stasis in which familiar rituals protect them from an external world experienced as dangerous. Fear and fantasy merge, and Presley's experiences with Cosmo reflect the frailty of a subject who craves contact but lives his adult life in a state of withdrawal. Abandonment, arrested development, obsessive repetition, sexuality, bodily vulnerability and violent imagination are thus woven into the play.

The onset of Philip Ridley's career as a dramatist in the early 1990s marks a time of change in British playwriting that was later dubbed In-Yer-Face theatre. There are shared characteristics of this theatrical sensibility in his work: explicit sexuality, sudden violence, provocative images of the body, unstable interpersonal relationships, and a commitment to making the audience uncomfortable in the presence of experiences which would ordinarily be unseen and unsaid in conventional realist theatre. Baş notes that British In-Yer-Face plays were frequently characterised as "sexually explicit, and often violent," while their performance practices also brought spectators physically closer to provocative dramatic material (116). This is significant for Ridley, whose emphasis on intensity can rarely be limited to the realm of the fictional world. It is developed in a way that the viewer/player is forced to come face-to-face with actions, narratives, images and desires that defy easy emotional disengagement.

Ridley's significance in this theatrical moment, however, is the specific way in which confrontation is manifested in his art. In instances of violence, the language becomes intense, the narrative line is often depicted in fairy-tale fashion, grotesque images are used, the sexual content is ambiguous, humour is used, and there are emotional moments. Therefore, shocking is not an end in itself. The theatrical impression may lead to a more complex psychological state. Partly because they reveal subjects whose relations to themselves and others have already become unstable, eating living creatures, fantasies of mutilation, bodily violence, predatory sexuality, obsessive

rituals, and narratives of abuse become powerful. Oldham therefore describes Ridley's theatre as continuing the In-Yer-Face tradition through its combination of sex, violence, and shock, while nevertheless locating a more complex human concern beneath its extremity (177–81). His description of Ridley's recurring narratives as "mini-rituals of storytelling" is particularly suggestive because spectacle and narration repeatedly function together as ways of approaching fear, memory, and psychological dislocation (Oldham 181).

In-Yer-Face theatre is also, of course, an emotional confrontation and therefore cannot be seen as a list of explicit acts. Sosnowska's discussion of its continuing theatrical repertoire emphasises the importance of affect and "structures of feeling," showing how the legacy of this theatre persists through embodied and emotional responses as much as through identifiable stylistic devices (86–87). The unease, attraction, disgust, pity, fear and fascination are also the instruments Ridley's theatre uses. His characters and images can repulse and attract at the same time, creating an unstable response in the audience's emotions. The provocative image becomes thus linked to psychological meaning: the fears, memories, desires, and obsessions behind the image keep it significant.

Ridley's appearance must be contextualised against the social and cultural context he inherited when he appeared in British theatre at the start of the 1990s. Baş places In-Yer-Face theatre within a post-Thatcher generation shaped by the neoliberal policies and conservative transformations of the 1980s, arguing that the theatrical confrontations of the following decade provided a means of responding to that inheritance (119–20). Ridley's initial plays are not political allegories, but the insecure domestic settings, unsettled relationships, anxieties about sexuality and the body, threatened identities and pervasive fear that can be traced within this larger context of social uncertainty. His theatre thus reflects the pressures of its historical moment indirectly, transposing the larger sense of insecurity into the smaller sense of belonging, desire, memory, and control.

MEMORY, TRAUMA AND OBSESSION IN RIDLEY'S DRAMATIC WORLD

The psychological force of Ridley's theatre becomes particularly clear in his treatment of memory. Often his characters live in closed or threatening environments and build new ways of creating safety by sharing stories, rituals, possessions, relationships and repetitions of behavior. The dramatic present is consequently never entirely self-contained. What has happened so far, continues to influence what characters fear, desire, avoid, remember and compulsively repeat. Memory in this sense is not passive recollection. It is an activity that continually reshapes the present lives of subjects.

In Birke's writing on modern British drama, the significance of threatened domestic security is also clearly apparent in Ridley's dramaturgy. When looked at alongside other dramatists, Birke identifies the 'disruptive power of threats to home' as a significant source of theatrical anxiety (89–90), which can be represented through highly stylised and dystopian dramatic scenarios. This is relevant to Ridley's previous work in theatre too. The rooms and flats, the possessions and familiar objects and private rituals at first offer sanctuary but are not necessarily safe. Memory and obsessions can flourish in the protected interior just because characters have rejected some ways of external change. Obsession develops within these spaces as a repetitive attempt to impose control. A character may return compulsively to a story, an object, a bodily ideal, an age, a remembered event, or an imagined past because repetition offers temporary stability. The requirement for constant reconstruction implies that what is achieved by repetition is only temporary. Ridley's dramatic universe, then, is one that is applicable to trauma theory, as it helps to give a language to thinking about the repetition, delay, and involuntary nature of unresolved experience. This pattern is especially pertinent to Caruth's account of trauma, which partially identifies traumatic experience with the time lag in which it is not fully integrated at the moment of its occurrence, but later re-appears through repeated images or narratives, dreams or action (4). This kind of formulation highlights the repetition in Ridley's images without necessarily purporting to identify each obsessive act as a trauma. The most important thing is the persistence of experience that cannot be completely captured in consciousness by means of recollection. The past does not just precede the present, it remains in the behaviour and relationships of the present.

Fear and fantasy perform an equally ambiguous function. They can hide characters from the awfulness of reality, but they can also block reality from being faced. Ridley has created a number of settings that dramatise this paradox. Storytelling can communicate pain while concealing it; memory can preserve identity while trapping the subject within an earlier self; and obsession can create order while exposing profound instability. Violence is repeatedly staged within this network of unresolved fear, frustrated desire, threatened control, and recurring memory. Ridley's theatre then transcends the provocation to an investigation into the ways in which vulnerable subjects are creating, defending and sometimes destroying themselves by means of memory, fantasy, desire and repetition.

THE PITCHFORK DISNEY: CHILDHOOD, OBSESSION, FEAR AND VIOLENCE ABANDONMENT, ARRESTED CHILDHOOD AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ISOLATION

The *Pitchfork Disney* is about Presley and Haley Stray, the 28-year-old twins whose chronological maturity is juxtaposed with emotional substructures in which they still operate. They live by chocolate, prescription medication, storytelling, sleep, and the objects they are used to, while being too dependent on each other. The flat is thus more than a physical place. It becomes a defensive interior where the twins do their best to keep things together when their parents are gone, and to reduce the amount of contact they have with the outside world they consider to be

threatening.

Ridley wilfully keeps the absence of parents uncertain. Presley tells Cosmo that his parents are dead, but when Cosmo asks him when the twins started living this way, Presley says “After Mum and Dad lost us,” as if to correct himself: “No, left us” (Ridley 55-56). The slip is important as it indicates an accident, whereas left introduces the possibility of abandonment. Presley then reverts to a more plausible explanation, claiming that his parents went on one day and “never came back” (55–56) and the twins “waited a very long time” (56). The precarious nature of the account implies that the past has never been properly incorporated into the overall story.

In both his discussion of Ridley’s dramatic worlds, however, and his examination of the “fear, abuse, and neglect” of psychologically vulnerable subjects, Ala’a Muwafaq Mustafa emphasizes the role of these elements in creating psychologically vulnerable individuals. In *The Pitchfork Disney*, parental absence remains active not simply because it is remembered but because the twins continue to organise adult existence around the structures associated with childhood. They are isolated, are tightly enclosed in their homes, rely on one another, and are antagonistic toward different relationships, which all suggest that the lack of parental protection still continues to organise the present.

This is more of an arrest of development than a mere childishness. There are many ways that Presley and Haley regulate fear that are still related to an older emotional world. At the end of the play, Ridley further emphasises the unsettled nature of parental loss when Haley recalls that her parents were good people, and asks, “Who would want to hurt them like that? For no reason. No reason.” (Ridley 96). The past is thus left emotionally unfinished. Childhood is neither mournfully reclaimed as a safe, historic era but is instead a flawed entity, often tried and retried by the twins.

CHOCOLATE, CONSUMPTION AND OBSESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Chocolate is one of the most conspicuous elements of this repetitive domestic existence. Its recurrence with medicine, sleep, familiar stories and other childhood objects relates to the twins’ need for predictability and tie-in to consumption. Food offers them an instant and a consistent source of comfort in a life that is otherwise not under their control. Chocolate consequently operates not simply as an eccentric preference but as one part of a wider system of psychological regulation.

This is more visible when medicine is used in a ritualistic fashion. Haley asks Presley, “Shall we take our tablets together tonight? Like we used to?” The two then kneel before one another, place tablets in each other’s mouths, swallow them, and embrace (Ridley 24–25). The phrase ‘Like we used to’ brings the present into clear connection with the past. Medication becomes both anaesthetic and ceremony: it reduces immediate anxiety while recreating an established pattern of mutual dependence.

Ingerslev’s account of traumatic repetition helps clarify this paradox. She characterises repetitive activity as an “ongoing struggle to survive with the trauma” and asks how the subject may “compose a future for what has been lost” (207). This formulation does not come as a clinical diagnosis to be imposed on the twins but is useful for comprehending the protection and limitation of repetition. The familiar actions create a temporary sense of stability, but they do not resolve the anxiety to be regulated either, as they are repeated over and over again.

Chocolate, medication, sleep, storytelling, and sibling dependence therefore belong to the same larger economy of repetition. These practices reduce uncertainty by making experience predictable. Meanwhile, the twins are stuck using them and can’t cope with change. Obsession protects because it narrows the world to manageable rituals; it entraps because anything outside those rituals becomes increasingly difficult to tolerate.

FEAR, FANTASY AND TRAUMATIC MEMORY

The twins’ fear permeates their imagination, as well as their behaviour. Their narratives are constantly morphing mundane moments into scenes of catastrophe, dangerous animals, threat to the body, disappearance and apocalypse. Fantasy therefore functions as more than entertainment. It brings the anxiety to a narrative form; otherwise, it may be diffuse or unarticulated. Presley openly acknowledges this imaginative strategy when he tells Cosmo, “Only we invent a new world,” explaining that he and Haley imagine a nuclear holocaust after which they are “the only two left alive” (Ridley 70). The fantasy converts extreme isolation into a condition of survival rather than social withdrawal. When everyone else has left, there is no more need to be involved in the outside world. The apocalyptic narrative makes this psychological logic especially visible: “The whole world is a wasteland. Black sky. Black earth. Black nothing,” while the twins’ house remains standing alone within the devastation (Ridley 22). The landscape externalises their emotional condition. But what they really have is living in a closed environment and, as it turns out, it’s as if it’s a place where solitude is an unavoidable and acceptable fate. It is here that Badham’s discussion of Ridley’s storytelling becomes relevant, as she argues that stories shared between his characters can produce ‘a rupture in identities and relationships’ rather than simply restoring psychological coherence (185). Through storytelling, Presley and Haley can share their fear, but the recurring presentation of fearsome images can also help maintain the forms that allow fear to permeate.

This contradiction becomes explicit when Presley acknowledges the limits of control: “There’s nothing we can do to save ourselves. That’s what scares me” (Ridley 30). Helplessness is the source of fear. The fantasy provides a temporary solution because the twins are, at least, able to control the stories in which danger is embodied, but the

fantasy world is filled with dangers which are the very ones that the twins are trying to avoid. Zhao's caution that literary trauma criticism should retain specifically literary perspectives rather than translating texts too quickly into psychological diagnosis is particularly relevant here (201). Ridley's dream stories are not just symptoms of psychic damage, but also a means of dramatisation. Through narration, internal fear becomes sensory and theatrical. The audience will need to envision the ruined world, the menacing body, or the recollected disaster in addition to the characters.

SEXUAL THREAT, BODILY VULNERABILITY AND VIOLENCE

Cosmo and Pitchfork break the protective enclosure by bringing in the unrecognized, the sexual, the curious, and the threatening body. Much of the experience occurs when Haley is drugged or asleep, making her extremely vulnerable. Because of her diminished capacity to respond, consent and autonomy are of central importance to the dramatic situation. Furthermore, Cosmo's interaction with her body is sexualised and cannot therefore be interpreted as just 'provocative' humour because her body is made available to another precisely when her agency is reduced.

The situation with Presley and Cosmo is more complex. Attraction, fascination, jealousy, protectiveness, and fear operate simultaneously. Wyllie describes *The Pitchfork Disney* as staging a confrontation between "private security and public danger" and between "repressed sexuality and the object of sexual desire" (67). Presley's meeting with Cosmo is unstable, as his formulation reflects. The stranger symbolises the potential for intimacy besides that between siblings, but also the risk when an outsider is introduced into the tightly controlled domestic sphere.

Wyllie further argues that Presley seeks refuge in remembered dreams and fantasies when confronted by present "sexual temptation and threat" (67). What it's about is not so much the solidification of a sexual identity as the revelation of how much desire undermines Presley's defensive ties with the outside world. Desire requires proximity, uncertainty and vulnerability—the very conditions that the twins' routines have been designed to avoid.

Sierz makes an important related point in his introduction to *The Pitchfork Disney*: he notes that Ridley resists fixing his characters within stable categories such as gay, straight or bisexual, because the dramatic emphasis lies in what characters do rather than in assigning them reductive labels. Presley's attraction to Cosmo and Cosmo's sexual interest in Haley consequently need to be interpreted through behaviour, agency, and power rather than through predetermined sexual categories (Sierz 16–17).

This is crucial to a queer interpretation of the play. Presley's abandonment issues could shed light on his aversion to closeness and the vulnerability of emotion, but not his sexual orientation. Queer subjectivity and traumatic experience may intersect without becoming causally equivalent. Similarly, the moral question involved in Cosmo's relationship with the sleeping Haley isn't about sex, but about a lack of informed consent. Ridley thus isolates desire from coercion while at the same time situating them in the same tenuous theatrical space.

BODILY HORROR, VIOLENT IMAGERY AND APOCALYPTIC ANXIETY

Through the extreme images of the body and the dread of what might happen, Ridley heightens the atmosphere of fear in the play. Bodies are imagined as consumed, transformed, penetrated, mutilated, aged, or exposed as spectacle. The images are of special importance not only for shock value but because they render psychological fears sensorially present for the spectator. The most obvious example is Cosmo's entertainment. He consumes "Caterpillars. Maggots. Worms. Beetles. Moths. Goldfish. Slugs [and] Spiders" as part of performances designed to provoke disgust (Ridley 32, 62). He explicitly identifies a public appetite for such extremity through "man's need for the shivers" (Ridley 67) and a "daily dose of disgust" (Ridley 62), explaining that audiences pay more as they become increasingly queasy. Ridley thus places a miniature model of In-Yer-Face spectatorship within the play itself. Disgust becomes simultaneously sensation, commodity, and entertainment. The scene also alludes to its theatrical mode of production: Cosmo's paying audience echoes the disquieting fascination with troubling spectacle the play creates. Shock, then, is not just given to the audience; it asks the question: why do you want to see shocks? The same kind of dynamic is achieved in Pitchfork's hidden face, through anticipation rather than action. Cosmo asks Presley to imagine his nightmare and magnify it almost beyond comprehension before claiming that Pitchfork's unmasking has made "women faint and grown men vomit" (Ridley 82). Before it can be seen in full, it's terrifying. What is left out compels the viewer to engage imaginatively in building up the dreaded image.

Sierz is exactly right when he sees in the play this mixture of fantasy, explicit sexuality, violence, and sensory intensity as central to the play's significance in the evolution of experiential British theatre. He describes *The Pitchfork Disney* as a work that transformed the auditorium into a site of sensation rather than allowing violence to remain safely at the level of abstract contemplation (Sierz 6–8). Presley's face-transplant fantasy adds a distinctly subjective level to a transformation of the body. After losing his own face, he discovers that doctors have given him the face of *Pitchfork Disney* (Ridley 75–76). Physical mutilation is not enough to cause the horrors. It is in the breakdown of separation of other and self, the feared other. Bodily transformation becomes a crisis of identity. These wildly imagined and apocalyptic scenes are thus part of a broader psychological framework of the play. Sexuality and change, violence, death, and uncertainty are recurring features of adulthood. The twins' love of childhood makes sense in an imagination that provides few safe images of adult growth and development.

OBSESSION AS PROTECTION AND ENTRAPMENT

The *Pitchfork Disney*'s central trends all come together in the self-contradictory nature of obsession. Chocolate, tablets, stories, locked doors, remembered routines, apocalyptic fantasies, and sibling dependence provide temporary security. Each provides the twins with some predictability to repeat when external experience is threatening. But the security that comes with repeating is based on an opposition to change. A few moments with Cosmo reveal this time stoppage. When Cosmo observes that "a lot can happen in years," Presley replies, "It can. But sometimes ... it don't" (Ridley 41). Ten years have passed since the disappearance of the parents, yet the twins' emotional world remains organised around the same loss and the continuation of childhood structures.

Wyllie directly identifies this problem, arguing that *The Pitchfork Disney* critiques commitment to remembered experience when it develops into a "destructive denial of the present" and of "the possibility of living in the present" (66). Memory in the play is not in and of itself therapeutic, then. History can be a place of comfort, yet at the same time limit the subject's ability to live in the adult world.

This is especially significant because the outside world, for a fleeting moment, opens the door to change. Presley opens the door and finds desire, jealousy, violence, fear and new kinds of intimacy. But this experience doesn't lead to secure transformation. Wyllie concludes that Presley and Haley's dependence upon remembered dreams and nostalgia prevents them from confronting adulthood and ultimately locks them into a "cycle of fantasy" (67).

With Ridley's conclusion, that is the feeling of entrapment that becomes audible. Presley and Haley embrace while their dialogue collapses into repeated declarations of fear: "I'm scared," "Me too," followed again by "I'm scared" (Ridley 96). Language no longer develops an argument or story. It rotates around the emotional state in which the twins started.

From the trauma perspective, the ending is particularly important as it means that confrontation is not always a catalyst for recovery. The change from the outside has come, violence has occurred, the world of the two twins has been broken, but experience is not enough to break down the walls that have been built up over the years. The sibling embrace once more provides instant safety and enclosure.

The *Pitchfork Disney* does not offer the idea of obsession as comic eccentricity, or as a symptom with a single psychological root. It develops through the interaction of parental absence, uncertain memory, fear, repetitive consumption, bodily vulnerability, desire, fantasy, and the need for control. Chocolate reassures without resolving loss; medication numbs without removing anxiety; storytelling articulates fear while facilitating its repetition; and domestic enclosure provides safety while preventing sustained intimacy. Ridley's central paradox is that the mechanisms through which Presley and Haley preserve themselves are also the mechanisms through which they remain psychologically trapped. Their rituals allow them to survive, but repetition makes it impossible to live as children and impossible to live as adults without any of the hazards.

In conclusion, it could be argued that the obsession of the Stray twins with the past has not only protected them from the dangerous outside world, but has also stultified their growth, relegating their existence to a perpetual childhood.

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