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## **Pantomime Terror : Diasporic Music in a Time of War**

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## Pantomime Terror: Diasporic Music in a Time of War

JOHN HUTNYK

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*I find it increasingly problematic to write analytically about 'diaspora and music' at a time of war. It seems inconsequential; the culture industry is not much more than a distraction; a fairytale diversion to make us forget a more sinister amnesia behind the stories we tell. This article nonetheless takes up debates about cultural expression in the field of diasporic musics in Britain. It examines instances of creative engagement with, and destabilization of, music genres by Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental and Asian Dub Foundation, and it takes a broadly culture critique perspective on diasporic creativity as a guide to thinking about the politics of hip-hop in a time of war. Examples from music industry and media reportage of the work of these two bands pose both political provocation and a challenge to the seemingly unruffled facade of British civil society, particularly insofar as musical work might still be relevant to struggles around race and war. Here, at a time of what conservative critics call a 'clash of civilizations', I examine how music and authenticity become the core parameters for a limited and largely one-sided argument that seems to side-step political context in favour of sensationalized—entrenched—identities and a mythic, perhaps unworkable, ideal of cultural harmony that praises the most asinine versions of multiculturalism while demonizing those most able to bring it about. Here the idea that musical cultures are variously authentic, possessive or coherent must be questioned when issues of death and destruction are central, but ignored.*

### PREAMBLE: PANTOMIME

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If you don't buy this record I'll jump out of these speakers und rip yer bloody arms off.  
(Aunty Jack)

The stage persona of Aunty Jack, a forgotten 1970s Australian television comedian and recording artist, was a cartoon version of feminist era cross-dressing, making a parody of commercially threatening violence. There is nothing but harmless humour in his/her performance, a pantomime figure in a scene where everyone knows the musician cannot jump out of the speaker and force you to buy a record, or make you do anything much at all. Sure, this played on parental fears of the susceptibility of youth to get caught up in the latest crazed anti-establishment stunt (Aunty rode a Harley Davidson motorcycle, was a sort of renegade pirate type, swore on prime-time TV, etc.). This has, I would argue, much to do with the fears that are presented to us in the mainstream media of today, deflecting any alternative discussion

of music and politics, meanings and issues in the world of world music as such. I want to examine this and take the figure of ‘panto’ seriously. Is it merely a conceit to think that, for mine, it is a good thing that music crosses borders and tests limits, that it takes and makes possibilities that challenge, that sometimes it has a life of its own, irrespective of the boundaries some might prefer to erect so as to confine or control? Sometimes the counter-establishment charge of renegade panto makes a lot more sense than the antics of those in power.

In the present era, Auntie Jack is no longer remembered. A new figure of fun has a more ominous underside, and yet I think this does much more politically than the mischief of the rebel Aunt. As Aki Nawaz is portrayed in the UK as a cartoon ‘suicide rapper’ by newspapers like the *Sun* and *Guardian*, he also gets across a previously unheard and unwelcome message about the hypocrisy of the so-called ‘war on terror’. Soon he is invited (and invited back) on to BBC news round table discussions. There is no danger of him being arrested any time soon, however much he courts ‘outrage’ with his agitational views. This process has been a long time coming: the ways in which world music sensibilities coincide with proper entertainment values to exclude political comment deserves close attention. Several scenes are worth examining in this process.

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### ‘THE RAPPER WHO LIKENS BIN LADEN TO CHE GUEVARA’

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In June of 2006 the *Guardian* newspaper found a stupid headline to put above the press release Nation Records put out to promote the new Fun^da^mental album. Accusing Aki Nawaz of terrorism, support for Osama bin Laden, un-British sentiments and punk sensibilities, the article seems more like the *News of the World* than a left-leaning intellectual broadsheet.

Aki Nawaz of course is a past master of provocation (his earlier outings as aka Proper-Gandhi gives it away). Yet this strategy, straight out of the Andrew Loog Oldham school of promotional work where ‘no publicity is bad publicity’, is still a risky move. Not least because the *Guardian* can turn itself into some sort of sensational tabloid for a day (the headline itself—‘G-had and Suicide Bombers: The Rapper Who Likens Bin Laden to Che Guevara’—is particularly inane, but references all the storm-in-a-teacup fears that surround us today, and manages to tap Che on the shoulder as well). Nawaz as a rapper rather underplays his diverse activities as impresario of the global jukebox over the past 20 years. As co-founder of Nation Records, Nawaz has been instrumental (pun intended) in bringing a diverse and impressive array of talent to attention: ranging from the diasporic beats of Transglobal Underground, the drum and bass of Asian Dub Foundation (discussed further later), the hip-hop/

quaito stylings of Prophets of the City, and *qawaali* artists such as Aziz Mian and more. A kind of alternative and left-oriented version of populist world music, Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental itself has been Nawaz's vehicle, with co-conspirator Dave Watts, for a series of provocations against mainstream hypocrisy and racism. Often misunderstood by the music press—who were enamoured at first with their radical stance, but soon simplified this to sloganeering such as calling them 'the Asian Public Enemy' (see Hutnyk 2000; Sharma et al. 1996) and versioning the band, and label, as a quixotic exotica. No doubt at times Nawaz has played up to this—his persona as rapper 'Propa-Gandhi' did play on, and yet destabilize, conventions of British Asian identity.

In the *Guardian* piece that broke the story of the 'suicide rapper', Nawaz is pictured in a post Propa-Gandhi, but still somewhat pantomime pose. I would call this disgruntled chic/sheik if this were not also an awful play on words. The photo the *Guardian* chose is particularly revealing of the current iconography of terror and fear in present-day Britain. In the print version of this Ladbroke Grove ensemble (the *Guardian Unlimited* Web image is slightly cropped) there is an English flag to the right of the picture. The bus in the background on the left is behind a young lad with a backpack—this refers with significance to the 7 July 2005 London bomb anniversary about a week away when this story was printed (early July 2006). All the buttons of contemporary Islamophobia, nationalism and transport system vulnerability are referenced here, though its unclear if the photographer and Nawaz contrived to create this scene together. Certainly Nawaz himself is clearly trying to look angry—panto—but we can tell inside he is smirking at the absurdity of it all.

Thinking about pantomime terrors deserves a little historical play. The popular christmas and summer holiday entertainment form has roots in vaudville and melodrama, and might also be traced back through French mime, Italian *commedia dell'arte*, or even to Roman mythology and the flutes of the god Pan (Miller 1978). A more detailed history of course would have to contend with the relation of the Pied Piper of Hammelin to J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan, with issues of role reversal, double entendre, drag, slapstick, superstitions (left side of the stage for demons, right side for fairy princesses) and theatre ghosts, if not more. The trajectory within the pantomime archive that I find most relevant here would start with Sheherezade and the stories of *A Thousand and One Nights*, the first 'proper book' I owned as a child—illustrated with lavish pictures of Sinbad the Sailor, various alluring princesses on flying horses or magic carpets, Alladin and his lamp, and of course Ali Baba and the 40 thieves. That Sheherezade had to tell devious stories to evade death at the hands of the despotic King Shahrya is only the first of the points at which Edward Said-style critiques of Orientalism would need to be deployed. Wicked and conniving traders outfoxed by fantastically beautiful maidens told as fairy tales to children but barely disguising the violence at the heart of the stories

themselves did certain ideological duty. My problem with Said, however, has always been that these effects are not just literary and historical, even as a wealth of historical research was released in the wake of Said's texts. Today, however, pantomime seems to play an even more sinister role.

The villain that is 'BEHIND YOU' in today's panto is the sleeper cell living and working amongst us, travelling on the Tube, preparing to wreak havoc and destruction unannounced. Ali Baba is the despot holding the West ransom to the price of a barrel of oil; Sinbad is Osama, with a secret cave to which only he knows the secret code words: 'open sesame'. The fears that are promulgated here are of course childish terrors and stereotype, but the problem with stereotype is their maddening ability to transcend reason and keep on popping back up to scare us. This is not a place for thinking, its theatre. We might consider the repetition of the historical as seen in Marx's study of Louis Bonaparte in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: the second time history repeats it returns as high farce.<sup>1</sup> The need for someone to write the *brumaire* of Blair is pressing. It suggests to me a speculative dream version of Sheherazade, who has been detained, rendered and interned in Guantanamo. Kept on her own in a cell except for a daily interrogation when she is brought before her captors who demand a story. She obliges them with the production of a narrative that provokes ever more draconian civil liberties crack-downs, and higher and higher terror alert ratings in the metropolis, but the production of this narrative can never set her free and she will never become queen (Blair and Bush are already hitched to each other, and perhaps to history in the same way Nixon was to Watergate and defeat in Vietnam). Although my dreaming of Sheherazade is only a conceit, a thousand and one terrors assail us all.

Thus, the promotional provocation that Aki Nawaz offers in 'All is War' is a dangerous strategy as well, simply because the authorities that have the power to do such things just may well get the wrong end of the night stick and actually think this father of four is some sort of threat to the Nation. There have been times when his friends did think he was destined for Belmarsh prison on charge of promotong 'terror', especially with regard to the album 'Erotic Terrorism', and more recently the track 'DIY Cookbook', discussed later. Fun^da^mental have always pushed hard at the complacencies and hypocrisies of our political servility, and this is a good thing too—there are those who argue that we *all* need to threaten a rethink of the dubious policies of Blair and the clones, of the terror war they are waging worldwide, of the domestic demonization of Muslims, of the crushing of civil society (what civil society—that it is too civil is the problem), and of the stifling numbing dumb, dumb, dumb of the press. And let us take a lesson from Nepal, which in the same week that Nawaz was identified by the *Sun* as the pantomime caricature of the 'suicide rapper', the Nepalese government, amidst its own Maoist insurgency, still repealed some of its 'anti-terror laws' in the interests

of civic freedoms.<sup>2</sup> The war on terror has contracted rather than opened up civic space, and any exposure of such strictures is to be supported.

Where is the discussion of the repeal of the terror laws and other fear-mongering that is making life in Britain untenable, and offers ‘a win’ to the terrorists? That the terrorists were ‘laughing at us’—according to RyanAir chief Michael O’Leary<sup>3</sup>—is only one end of the massive disillusionment of the British public with Bush and Blair’s terror war. This laughter readily makes the usual anti-Islamic political editorializing in the media a pro-government panto in itself. Is this just part of a *music show*—the new replacement for *Top of the Pops* perhaps—as we can all see of course that the ‘banning’ of a music track is only a minor power play in an obscure corner of the culture industry? No, Aki Nawaz is just the sort of threat we need much more of, in the sense that we have to debate, discuss, challenge and change—and absolutely none of this requires any heavy-handed police interventions, or worse. The laughter that ensues is not easily hushed, it reveals much.

## ON SAMPLING: PAUL SIMON

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But silence is golden—this could be a mantra of the conservatives, that would deign please not hear from troublemakers and rebels.

There are double standards. Some can speak and produce, some are spoken for. This is an old formula, well known since the work of Spivak (1988, 1999), but with both economic and political consequences that must be addressed. In a context where there is an ongoing demonization of Islam—which could be argued was a postcolonial necessity, creating a convenient enemy bogey that simply had to be established in the wake of Soviet Communism’s collapse—the question of creative expression has become a resonant, if not always acknowledged, part of the discussion of music and politics in the UK.

The early moves that manufactured a new enemy have now been replaced by the crusading ‘war on terror’, which targets Asians of all stripes within and beyond national borders and the rule of law, and irrespective of any consideration of allegiance to peace, civic life, evidence, coherence. With this context in mind, we might consider earlier skirmishes of the music market as little more than incidental. But politicized motivation was never more explicit than in the response of Paul Simon to Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental’s ‘crossover’ efforts in the album *Erotic Terrorism* (Nation 1999). The reconstructed populist world music impresario’s follow-up album after *Graceland* (Warner Brothers 1987) was called *The Rhythm of the Saints* (Warner Brothers 1990). It used recordings of a town square performance by the Brazilian percussion ensemble Olodum, which were taken back to New York where Simon ‘improvised music and words



over them and added other layers of music' (interview with Bob Edwards, quoted in Taylor 1997: 64). Timothy Taylor adds that it is Simon who profits—his position in a powerful economic centre—the United States, a major corporation—means that he cannot escape its centrality, despite his assertion that he works 'outside the mainstream' (ibid.: 203). It is then curious to compare the moment of appropriation—another key misleading term—with a parallel incident. When Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental recorded a version of Simon's song 'The Sounds of Silence' for inclusion in *Erotic Terrorism*, their request to clear copyright for the sample was refused. Asked for permission a second time, Simon was offered the publishing rights for the new version, with an additional backing vocal, but the self-appointed high priest of world music again said 'no', citing legal precepts and refusing further discussion (author interview with Aki Nawaz 1999). Noting the power of some musician-entrepreneurs to own and control, and the cap-in-hand reliance on name stars and gatekeepers for those who might want to breach the conventions of music industry protocol, the track was renamed 'Deathening Silence', sample removed.

The retelling of these conjoined tales about Simon is not meant only to make an equation between the selfish, or rather self-interested, conceits of copyright legalese and the more serious debacles of racism, anti-Islamic profiling and the anti-people pogroms of the state machine. But who would be surprised if someone did equate such 'cultural' power with the way the war on terror legislates special rules that permit detention without charge or trial in the USA, the UK, Australia, Malaysia, etc.? Even as such a connection was anticipated in Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental's ironic album title reference: *Erotic Terrorism*. Thinking of the detention camps in Afghanistan and Iraq, certainly there is some credence to Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental's pre-9/11 prophecy that 'America Will Go to Hell', in their anti-war anthem EP release from the same period as 'Deathening Silence' (*America Will Go To Hell*, Nation 1999). The use of hip-hop to express a critique of American (and United Nations, NATO or British military) imperialist activities makes Paul Simon's legal enforcement of silence something less than neutral, and this conjunction surely indicates also a more nuanced relationship between politics and content than the unidirectionalist historians of hip-hop might warrant. The 'deathening silence' here is not only a comment on record industry ownership of lyric and melody, but also references the ways commercial imperatives sanction quietude about the politics of so-called anti-terrorism, and the inadequacy of romantic and liberal anti-racism. No mere hybrid multi-culti cross-ethnic particularity, Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental's call is to fight against the seductive terrorisms of complicity and conformity, the manipulation of market and law, the destruction of culture and civilization in pursuit of oil.

What kind of change in the apparatus of the culture industry would be required to orient attention away from the industrial military entertainment complex? What would displace

the ways people in the music press and mainstream academic community consistently deploy categories that are far removed from the actualities articulated in the Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental discussion? The critics appear deaf to ideas. In panto, it is tradition for the audience to have to yell loudly: ‘HE’S BEHIND YOU.’ This is the classic staged scenario, and so I think what is needed is a more incisive and aggressive denunciation of the performance of well-intended hypocrites such as the singer of sounds of silence. Surely it is clear that many misconceptions come from well-intentioned deployment of arguments around terms like ‘authenticity’, ‘identity’, ‘appropriation’ and ‘commerce’. That it is no surprise that intentions and their effects are readily undone is almost a platitude. The solution is not to insist on the correctness of an alternate interpretation (see Kalra and Hutnyk 1998; Sharma and Hutnyk 2000) and it is equally not the case that insistence on fidelity to the source material will redeem all (but a listen to the albums and a check of the websites is worthwhile—combating sanctioned ignorance advanced through media bias is an obligation we must all take up).<sup>4</sup> These are probably the predictable moves that others have already made, but if raising questions about complacency in commentary adds impetus to the work of showing where a critique of unexamined complicity and marketing zeal restrict possibilities, then the opening is important. Paul Simon: shame.

## ON DUB AT THE MOVIES

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Music is a weapon of mass destruction. (Asian Dub Foundation)

Cinema and sound sync/mix technology seems to come and go in leaps and loops. Where once the screen image required accompaniment by a live performer at a piano, today such a ‘throwback’ to the old black-and-white days of immediately present live sound is rare, even nostalgic. A calculated and curious staging renews our appreciation of the artifice of sync sound, although the piano is electric and the ‘live’ now requires mixing desks, digital precision, planned sequencing and programmed synthesizers. It requires all this, at least, in the case of performances over film by the drum-and-bass outfit Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) (ADF are a long-standing political drum-and-bass outfit; their line-up includes John Pandit, a speaker at the RampArts discussion in the following section). Always innovative, of late ADF have been filling cinema halls with new audiences for old films. I am impressed by this revival of a past format, and thinking about how this technology is used perhaps helps our understanding of the pursuit of innovative modes of political activism.

ADF screen movies with intent. For several years they had used the 1995 Kassowitz film *La Haine* as a vehicle for a cinema music experiment, where the story of three youths caught

up in suburban unrest (which is itself largely off screen) in the suburbs of Paris is presented in performance with a new *live* drum and bass soundtrack. This film has particular relevance given events in the Paris suburbs in November 2005,<sup>5</sup> but I do not want to focus upon representation and the repetition ‘in the real’ of the events ‘in the film’. Rather, I am more interested here in the scene of the screening of a French film replayed in Britain, a film which itself is very much alert to the politics of representation, to the reverberation of screens, such that when shown in the UK it is meant to evoke parallels and differences in terms of race, suburban alienation, and the politics of the imagination, especially with regard to thinking about performance and terror.

*La Haine* begins with a Molotov cocktail, set across the background of a shot of the planet as seen from space. The incendiary device is falling, and spinning as it falls, towards the earth as pictured from afar. A voice recounts a story of someone who fell from a tall building, and as he passed each floor on the way down, he said aloud: ‘So far, so good, so far, so good.’ Ash and Sanjay Sharma (2000: 105) wrote perceptively on this film, suggesting that this ‘anxious repetition of assurance’ might be dubbed ‘the inner voice of liberal democracy’. The Sharma brothers link this reassurance to the critical scene of the journalists visiting the suburbs only to be confronted as intruders by the youth, chased with their television cameras back to the safer boulevards. When the three youth themselves are stranded in the centre of the city, caught without tickets to the Metro, they see reports from the ‘riots’ on a public multi-screen, and learn of the death of one of their comrades.

ADF want the film to provoke discussion about the ways politics is shown. They screen it for new audiences and it is discussed in detail on the interactive activist/fan website that is part of the ADF Education Foundation (ADFED), itself an activist-oriented youth politics forum. Workshops organized by ADFED included one by Sonia Mehta in 2003 involving Ash Sharma on the development of ADFED as a music technology training provider working with visual media and exploring the politics of sound.<sup>6</sup> Discussion within ADFED and on the ADF chat site is not uncritical. For example, the politics of screening action cinema as entertainment is measured against questions about the best ways to organize, and politicize, the music industry, organizations like Rich Mix (an arts centre and venue for music, cinema, performance, and training with which ADFED is associated)<sup>7</sup> and anti-racist campaigns. Concerns about street and police violence are aired and the testosterone-fuelled adventurism of the Paris uprisings are compared with events in the UK that echo those shown in *La Haine*. The film, as ADF intend, also articulates these concerns. The absence of women in the film is striking, but as the Sharmas argue, the pathologizing of the suburbs is an old sociological, anthropological and Hollywood standard, where inner urban tradition demands alienation and decay, disaffection and lawlessness, reinforcing the racism, even as *La Haine* challenges these easy moves (ibid.: 103).

In 2002, ADF initiated similar concert screenings of another film, this time the revolutionary cinematic extravaganza of *The Battle of Algiers*, directed in 1964 by Gillo Pontecorvo (scenario Franco Solinas, music by Ennio Morricone; won the Golden Lion Venice 1966). This film tells the story of the clandestine resistance movement against the French occupation of Algeria, and works well when screened for new audiences with a live ADF soundtrack. Bringing a new audience to an old film, a part of the third cinema movement, quite often overlooked by drum-and-bass fans, carries a powerful allegorical charge at a time when issues of colonial occupation—Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine—are prominent in the media.

I am particularly interested in what a British Asian music activist outfit, with a record of anti-racist, anti-imperialist organizing, can achieve with the technology of sound and film as propaganda device. What does this tell us about activism, media and the intended audience for ADF's experiments at the movies? Some will of course say that the ADF update track for *Battle of Algiers* is no improvement upon Morricone's score; some will quibble about the sanctity of creative work in the age of digital reproduction; some might suggest that ADF cash in with a radical pose, presenting themselves as advocates of any and every left cause going. It is of course possible to discuss these matters, but I think these are the wrong questions.

It might be interestingly provocative to ask instead after the plausibility of ADF's attempts to get the youth to question; to 'meditate' (not at all in the yogic sense) upon problems of politics, violence, resistance, and on alternate ways of viewing the world. *The Battle of Algiers*, in Pontecorvo's third cinema way, was already a moment of consciousness raising, which ADF now update according to their want. ADF are not sentimental, and they are never in denial about the culture industry as a sapping vortex of commercialization, but their engagement with the media cannot be described simply as an issue of chains or noise. ADF would want to promote a revolutionary consciousness. I wonder if we can grant them the luxury of thinking so differently.

Perhaps what ADF have thought is not just any kind of politics, nor any greater or lesser disguised evangelical mission, but a purpose and push towards a more fundamental form of thinking; the realization that a limit to thinking, a narrowing, is a baleful consequence of an unexamined attachment to the silver screen. The jangling soundtrack ADF provides for *La Haine* or *The Battle of Algiers* is intended in the face of so much dross on TV. ADF member John Pandit is often contemptuous of idle talk as a substitute for the necessities of organizing an alternative to capitalism, imperialism, racism, and in many ways I hear this resonating over and over in ADF's politically motivated use of film.

Perhaps we can better understand something about what *The Battle of Algiers*, as a film, achieves by listening to the ADF soundtrack. The event is never simply the cause of bringing about a critical anti-colonialist consciousness in the youth that are attracted to ADF performances. Ostensibly, this would be one of the simple planned, even calculated, ends, but no one

would be so stupid as to think there is a one-to-one equivalence between planned intention and effect. Indeed, there is no simple or singular intention possible when an audience, by definition, comes from a wide range of possible contexts. There are plenty of debates about ethics and motivation, even inspiration, in the literature on propaganda, promotion and politics. ADFED itself is a broad ‘church’ (to invoke an out-of-place metaphor), open to many, and ADF have long pointed out their wide ‘consciousness raising’ orientation.

Unfortunately, this does not mean that film itself, with added live music, is by and by an automatic consciousness raising tool. One particular story drives this point home. In 2002, it was reported that Pontecorvo’s film was to be screened (with the original score) at the Pentagon as an instructional text for the generals of the low-intensity warfare operations unit, with the intention of aiding them in their thinking about how to win the war in Iraq, and how to deal with a militant insurgency without losing the ‘battle for hearts and minds’, as the French so clearly did in Algeria. It seems the generals watched less than carefully. The point is not to suggest only that any text—film, event—can be turned to any politics whatsoever (though I am sometimes convinced that all things can be recuperated and co-opted to do service for capital), but that what is required to achieve a radical thinking is something more than the conventions of calculative thought that usually belong to reason, especially reason in the hands of the generals bombing Afghanistan, Lebanon and Iraq.

ADF use film and music to make us think, not simply consume. In this they are, I feel, an advance insofar as they do more than simply offer a critical note against colonialism, revealing some of the truths about colonial history; rather, revealing plus an activism that militates *for* critical thinking. It is no accident that ADF called an earlier EP *Militant Science*. They explain:

Whatever anyone says about ADF’s so called ‘political’ lyrics, no one would have taken any notice if it wasn’t for ADF’s sound and its inherent energy: ragga-jungle propulsion, indodub basslines, distorted sitar-like guitars and samples of more ‘traditional’ Asian sounds.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the critiques of the way ADF activism works in the field of representation address this. The technological (and infrastructural) support for this kind of cinematic event presents the world as a picture of resource extraction, a matter of calculation (of capacities, of yield, of export dollars and arms sales). It may be that our drive to calculate the world has a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy built in so that the world comes to be (and only be) calculable, and only in the most brutal ways.

That ADF use sound to provoke us towards the possibility of thinking in a way not merely caught in repletion of our received and ordered way is all important. Maybe then we *should* feel uncomfortable, since film can be watched merely (usually) as entertainment (the culture industry), and ideology does its work unobserved and unremarked.

## RAMPART AND SLY: THE SECRET OMNIPRESENCE OF RESISTANCE

I insist I'm a legitimate scientist  
paid by the government with your finances. ('Cookbook DIY')

Appalled at the carnage on my television screen, I ventured out. I caught the train to Shadwell and walked to the corner of Rampart and Sly Streets (hmm, significant street names—*Ramparts* was a 1960s magazine of some importance, Sly, well, that's clear enough—at the end of the street there's a great sweet shop). So, I arrived at the corner to find Aki Nawaz from Fun^da^mental slumped in a broken office chair beside a dumpster and a pile of crushed cardboard boxes. 'Welcome to my office,' he greets me. We sit and chat about the mad media responses to his new album *All is War*; we run through recent events in the horror that is Lebanon; approve the resistance of Hezbollah; and consider the possibility that bruiser John Reid is going gung-ho in his new home secretary job because, like an earlier blind incumbent, he is jockeying for position as a possible future leader of the Labour Party, so acting tough is what he thinks will get him noticed in the press. We talk about how the tabloids make public opinion nowadays and how Reid's posturing is mainly a way of scaring people into silence, apathy and into nothing but the joys of shopping. Then a Green Party representative comes over and asks Nawaz what instrument he plays in the band (I only wish he had replied, 'Hi, my name's Pink').

Home Secretary Reid, believe it or not, is a former CPGBer (Communist Party of Great Britain, old version) and perhaps best noticed for calling Jeremy Paxman a West London Wanker (henceforth W-L-W). Well, Reid has his chances I guess, so why not be gung-ho at a time when the deputy PM John Presscaught is invisible and war criminal Bliar is off hiding out in some Caribbean terror training camp after paving the way for the Israeli defence force to make pavement out of southern Beirut. A airport carry-on luggage scare and the arrest of a bunch of teenagers is a great service to the no-hoper piggy polities that need the cover (but *gung-ho* is a funny expression; a mix of Bruce Lee and Ho Chi Minh springs to mind, so I best stop using it, because Reid has long ago left the left behind, and I am told anyway, that gung-ho was taken up by the US Marines, but was originally the abbreviation for a Chinese Communist organization, so using it to refer to the Labour Party is far too uncanny... I digress, see <http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=19980126> and also contrast the film <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091159/> and laugh out loud).

Anyway, politics by tabloid. Nawaz has himself been noticed in the tabloids quite a bit of late—the *Sun* called him a 'suicide rapper' and the *Guardian* had a go, as I have mentioned already. The event at RampArts—an anarchist-inspired social centre in Shadwell—is to discuss the controversy, and to host the premiere screening of the video for 'Cookbook DIY'.<sup>9</sup> The

Downloaded from [crc.sagepub.com](http://crc.sagepub.com) by John Hutnyk on September 16, 2010

evening kicks off in somewhat desultory manner with a half hour video on the history of Fun^da^mental that presses various key buttons—Tribal Revolution, Dog Tribe, GoDevil clips, and plenty of send-up footage of a lame Australian TV interviewer who pretty much can't cope with Nawaz asking if Australian Aboriginals had rights and land back yet: 'What are you doing about it?' 'Nothing.' The point is didactic and heavy handed (it is a music talk back show), but correct.

Slowly the RampArts social centre fills up, and people take their seats to find a gift FDM CD—it is not about the sales—and Ken Fero, co-director of Injustice, kicks off proceedings by introducing Aki Nawaz, John Pandit and the guy from the Green Party, noting that two other guest speakers were still on their way. Nawaz starts speaking about how democracy is a weapon that kills, that there is a silencing that is much to blame, that the leader in Downing Street needs to be put on a donkey and paraded through the city, and that he cannot understand why nobody is doing anything. He is really angry. The youth in Britain are angry. There are people being killed in thousands and everyone seems to be going on and on as if there was nothing they could do. They tried to protest against the Gulf War, but were ignored and since then, nothing. Why, he says, aren't people out there burning down town halls and the like? (This last comment almost an aside, but it will become more and more the hot topic of the night). The Green Party representative speaks next, about free speech—frankly, the usual routines—thank-you Shahrar Ali, invited by the organizers *Red Pepper*. Then Natasha Atlas arrives. Her music is also released under Nawaz's Nation Records imprint, and she talks of her Syrian partner, the troubles musicians have getting visas in Europe, her anger and frustration at the war, and she apologizes for being emotional. In fact, it is the most passionate thing I have heard her say ever, and not at all prima donne-esque. Great. Then the final late speaker walks in, Louise Christian, human rights lawyer (and she reminds us the event is organized by 'Rod Popper'). She speaks in favour of free speech and against the new additions to the terror laws that will criminalize anyone who speaks in favour of—glorifies, encourages—acts of terror. These laws apply even if the alleged glorifier of terror did not inspire anyone to act, even if they were vague about whether they really intended people to go out, and—Louise looks over to Aki—even if they say people should go out and blow up buildings. She supposes these laws will not ever be tested, that they are like clause 28—crime of encouraging homosexuality, or the incitement to racial hatred law—they are a kind of public relations gesture. We should not get paranoid, that at least in this country we can have debates like this. There has been no debate as yet, but restlessness in the audience suggests one might start soon, and debate is something we have to cherish, because—here is the clincher—they don't have it in Turkey, Burma or North Korea.

John Pandit from ADF speaks next. Quietly pointing out the need to organize and to do so in new creative ways, to make a new set of alliances. To do the work required to build a movement that is not just protest marches that go from A to B (this will also become a refrain, the issue of how the Stop the War (STW) coalition does all it can to minimize confrontations and have us all hide in Hyde Park provokes considerable agitation). And its important, he emphasizes, not to fall for the self-censorship that means that so many musicians who do have media visibility say nothing.

The first question is from the reporter from the *Daily Star*, Neil Chandler—he told me his column appears in the Sunday edition. I think to myself that I might even buy it as his question was okay and in a short exchange with the reporter from the *Morning Star* (and representative of the STW coalition) Neil seemed by far the more credible. But it is the *Daily Star*, so no high hopes, eh? (And the subsequent article turns out to be the usual tabloid clichés.) In any case, in response to questions, the point was made forcefully by Nawaz that the issue was British foreign policy. A fairly simple persuasive argument he offers runs: we put up with years and years of racism and it did not mean any young people strapped on jackets and bombed the trains; we endured unemployment and it did not mean anyone went out to bomb buildings [well, Angry Brigade and Baader Meinhof excluded, but ...]; but the nightly news footage of innocents killed one after the other in their hundreds and no-one wants to discuss it, no-one listens, no debate, no significant movement to defend Muslims; no defence of mosques from attack; no way the STW coalition was going to deliver on its promise that ‘if Blair goes to war we will stop the whole country’, despite 2 million marching in February 2002—the problem is foreign policy. Change that and its over.

Some audience members were keen to point out that there were ongoing efforts to defeat Blair. Protests against airports and weapons manufacture, dealers, delivery, sabotage, various campaigns. There was some discussion of how music is important as a way of airing issues, that musicians are more than the soundtrack of a movement, that since the 1960s Vietnam protests music could be something more than entertainment. But so often it is not. I am of course reminded of Adorno saying that the debate was not yet over about art, and perhaps art still carried the ‘secret omnipresence of resistance’ in its hidden core. But this is not enough in a world of shopping. All this is admirable, but it does not get to the question of just what kind of organization is needed to defeat the imperialist foreign policy. The questions I ask have to do with this: the need for debate and action on all these points; on what sort of organization is needed; on what sort of action is needed (someone heckles ‘but not blowing up buildings’); and on what sort of analysis is needed to support both organization adequate to succeed and the actions necessary. This does not get taken up; instead, the chair notes there is always resistance, there will always be resistance. Another speaker asks a question



about violence, naming Gandhi and the struggle against British colonialism. Nawaz makes the point that Gandhi was not alone, there was always a range of others involved, from Udham Singh and Subhash Chandra Bose. Gandhi, it is insisted, wanted peace, not blowing up buildings—this is becoming the defining phrase, spiralling into architectural defence. Nawaz, exasperated, says, ‘You lot care more about buildings than people’—hands thrown up in the air. Everyone wants a say, a filmmaker is shouting from the back, the guy with the roving mike has gone outside to answer a phone call, with the mike still turned on. Chaos. So the movement shall be organized like this...

Dave Watts from Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental stands up. The discussion has dragged on and his frustration is as clear as that of anyone. He starts by saying he understands why people want to be suicide bombers, he understands the frustration that would make someone want to go out and do it. You can imagine how this rubs up against the Gandhians. Watts says there has to be some understanding of where those who have tried to discuss have now ended up—ready to do violence and blow up buildings [code words]. But then he says he is a man of peace, a lover of peace, but he is angry and we have to fight for peace. The video clip we are about to see is called ‘Cookbook DIY’ and Watts explains its in three parts, that the person who in frustration, because there is no other avenue for discussion, expression or action, has made a home bomb for 50 quid, is a small version of the guy who makes a dirty bomb, with materials bought on the black market, but neither are as obscene as the scientist who kisses his wife in the morning—Watts mimes a smooch, playing to the audience—panto—who then goes off to work in a Pentagon lab or some such to make a neutron bomb that kills all the people but leaves the buildings intact. At which point, the screening starts.

And that is exactly what ‘Cookbook DIY’ does. Just as it says on the tin. This ‘suicide rap’ exposes the suicide scientist making the neutron bomb, the daisy cutter, the cluster bombs and all those other armaments that the Lords of War—Blair, Reid, etc.,—threaten us with, under their terror laws, their terror regimes, the bombing runs and their surveillance systems. Their free speech that is no speech, their diplomacy and their democracy. Under the veneer of democracy, the bloodied hands of the piggy polities; under the musical refrains, the resistance; under the cover of the *Daily* and the *Morning Star*, another secret possibility. The global resistance, *zindabad!*

‘Cookbook DIY’ lyrics:

I’m packed up ingredients stacked up my laptop  
Downloaded the military cookbook PDF  
Elements everyday chemicals at my reach  
Household bleach to extract the potassium

Chlorate boiling on a hotplate with hate  
 recipe for disaster plastic bomb blaster  
 I mix up 5 parts wax to Vaseline  
 slowly ... dissolve in gasoline  
 add to potassium in a large metal bowl  
 knead like dough so they bleed real slow  
 Gasoline evaporates... cool dry place  
 I'm strapped up cross my chest bomb belt attached  
 deeply satisfied with the plan I hatched  
 electrodes connected to a gas cooker lighter  
 switch in my hand the situation demands  
 self sacrifice hitting back at vice with a £50 price

I'm 31... numb... but the hurt is gone  
 Gonna build a dirty bomb  
 us this privilege and education  
 My PhD will free me  
 Paid off the Ruskie for weapons grade uranium  
 Taught myself skills from Pakistan Iran  
 upgraded its stage two of the plan  
 Rage... a thermo nuclear density gauge  
 stolen by the Chechens from a base in Georgia  
 I get some cobalt 60 from a food irradiator  
 so easy to send the infidels to their creator  
 its takes a dirty mind to build a dirty bomb  
 The simplicity is numbing genius is dumbing  
 down the situation to a manageable level  
 to make the world impossible to live for these devils  
 a suitcase of Semtex a mobile phone trigger  
 Blow them all to hell for a million dollar figure

I insist I'm a legitimate scientist  
 paid by the government with your finances  
 I got a private room in the White House suite  
 So I can develop according to presidential brief  
 The megaton don Gulf War veteran

The foremost proponent of the neutron bomb  
at the centre atomic surrounded on all sides  
wrapped in layers of lithium deuteride  
the bomb detonates causing lithium to fission into helium  
tritium neutrons into fission  
The blast causes shockwaves that melt body fat  
uniquely though it leaves the buildings intact  
I made the 25 megaton daisy cutter  
a great blast radius with very little clutter  
There's less radiation so you get a cleaner bomb  
its your money people it cost a billion. (Nawaz/Watts, *All is War*, Nation, 2006)

## CODA

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To return to the heady days of Aunty Jack is not possible. In the present era, s/he is no longer remembered. Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, however, keep alive incisive critical expression through their oblique angles on world music in a time of war—it is this versus the clash of civilizations rhetoric that animates press interest today. So, we can cite the closing song: 'Farewell Aunty Jack, we know you'll be back. Though you're ten feet tall, you don't scare us at all. Your big bold and rough, but your not so tough, there's a scream as you plummet away.' And recall that pantomime, like comedy, sometimes can still speak truth to power, and thereby reveal its hypocritical coordinates.

Though I am still not so sure. I used to think the counter-establishment charge of renegade panto made a lot more sense than the antics of those in power, but now I have to recognize that it is just as much the case that panto has changed, that it has become the news, and the stakes are much higher, and that entertainment must provoke thought and talk, or we die.

In some ways Aki Nawaz has taken pantomime a step further, and managed to raise issues where others have not. This does not mean that other pantomime events have been displaced. The spectacle (lower case) of Mr and Mrs Bush placing a wreath in a wading pool at the base of former World Trade Centre on the evening before the fifth anniversary of 11 September 2001 was somewhat bizarre. This was not cross-dressing, but crocodile tears—the bombing of the Towers was of course reprehensible whoever did it (conspiracy theorists here, there and everywhere), but rather than offer more images of Bush looking edgy, I think its more important to listen to Gore Vidal and his concern with the 'the destruction of the [US] Republic' as

inaugurated after 2001 in the guise of Homeland Security; Guantanamo; Rendition; endorsement of torture, etc. (Vidal quips re ‘Homeland Security’ that the term is reminiscent of the Third Reich—‘Der Homeland’ was not a phrasing he had heard from an American before ‘it was forced on us’ by the government). This was on BBC radio (11 September 2006). Vidal, self-styled as ‘spokesman for Carthage on Roman radio’, defender of ‘the Constitution’ against the oil and gas tyranny, and against the collusive ‘dreadful media’. We have not just lost some buildings, far worse is that we lost the Republic.

This would not be the argument made by Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental or ADF, but the echoes of concerns with buildings, silencing, freedom and rights recur. I am amazed that the most critical voices that break through the tabloid haze of justifications for war are those of novelists and musicians. Representative politics seems to have avoided such forthright discussion. In the video for ‘Cookbook DIY’ pantomime characters make the argument. There are three verses. The first entails a cross-of-St-George-wearing youth constructing a strap-on bomb from a recipe downloaded from the Internet. He is dressed as a rabbit and as a lizard in parts of the verse, playing on childlike toys and fears; the second verse references the Muslim scholar and the figure of the armed guerrilla as the character relates a more cynical employment as a mercenary making a ‘dirty bomb’ with fission materials bought on the black market in Chechnya or some such; the third pantomime figure is the respectable scientist discussed in *Ramparts* by Watts. Here the scientist in a lab coat morphs into a member of the Klu Klux Klan and then a suited business man, building a neutron bomb that destroys people ‘but leaves the buildings intact’. Pantomime allows Nawaz to point out the hypocrisy of an empire with no clothes. The terrors we are offered every night on the news are pantomime terrors as well, a performance melodrama, operatically grandiose. The scale they require—weapons of mass destruction; Saddam’s show trial—is exaggerated in a way that welcomes oblique internalization. These figures are patently absurd, yet all the more effective as incitements.

Perhaps Vidal’s Republic was also always a panto scene in the US anyway. But we might also understand the discombobulation of the presidential bloopers (Bush’s varied faux pas; Dick Cheney’s wayward shootings) as deflection of an otherwise unbearable present; if it were not so serious you would have to laugh; you have to laugh because it is so serious.

The pantomime performance of president and prime minister makes me think also of Alain Badiou, in *Infinite Thought* (2005), pointing out the non-equivalence of terror directed at a couple of buildings by a non-state entity (‘the terrorists’), and the retribution that is visited on all of our lives by the state terror directed by US forces; directed first at peasants, villagers and the dispossessed everywhere, but also directed at those in the ‘we’ through security legislation and so on. (Badiou’s essay on terror in that book is one of the few good critical academic discussions we have.) That the terror extends to covert activity by secret service agencies,

includes surveillance operations, a plethora of dark underworld gadgetry, etc, removes all vestige of civil liberties, and prepares us for perpetual war is only the logical consequence of—face it—our anti-war demonstrations, even when 2 million, being also only a kind of panto. We marched to hide in Hyde Park ('HE'S BEHIND YOU') and sat down tired to rest, when we should have sat on Blair and not moved till he resigned. The some people are still there, clinging on in a rerun of Punch and Judy forever.

This does not mean I want to bring back the days when pantomime was just a cute summer seaside entertainment and music was just an excuse for dancing. I wish it were possible, but it is not. We need to rethink and disrupt the usual categories. As provoked by Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental and ADF, music and politics can, I believe, destabilize otherwise dangerous certainties; and that can only be better than the unthinking with which we are often now forced to abide. I have started to listen once again.

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## NOTES

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1. Marx's Eighteenth *Brumaire* is by far the most eloquent articulation of class and ideological politics available—the classic phrases are well known 'they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented', 'potatoes in a sack', 'let the dead bury the dead' and so on (Cowling and Martin 2002).
2. The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance (TADO) was introduced by King Gyanendra in 2002 in the wake of the killing of King Birendra and 10 members of the ruling royal family.
3. See <http://kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/08/22/5362.shtml>, accessed 23 September 2006.
4. The term 'sanctioned ignorance' is from the always-insightful Gayatri Spivak (1999).
5. 'On October 27th, Bouna and Zied died of electrical burns when they fled from the police. Riots broke out in Clichy-sous-Bois and other housing estates across France. This is the first time since May 1968 that there has been urban violence of this magnitude; it is also the first time that young people from the neighbourhoods have risen up together, realizing that they share a common fate. This fate can be summed up as having no future but unemployment, low-income housing, daily humiliation and police racism, a ghetto culture that makes us outcasts, but which on a certain level is also a source of pride, because it's ours' (<http://atouteslesvictimes.samizdat.net/>, accessed 2 November 2006).
6. <http://www.adfed.co.uk/htmlversion/futureprojects.html>, accessed 7 May 2007.
7. <http://www.richmix.org.uk/>, accessed 7 May 2007.
8. [http://www.asiandubfoundation.com/adf\\_home\\_fs.htm](http://www.asiandubfoundation.com/adf_home_fs.htm), accessed 7 May 2007.
9. Lyrics can be found at [http://www.dicklaurentisdead.com/fun-da-mental/aiw\\_lyrics/Cookbook\\_diy.doc](http://www.dicklaurentisdead.com/fun-da-mental/aiw_lyrics/Cookbook_diy.doc). Download track at <http://www.fun-da-mental.co.uk/>.

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