

CEPaLS 19: Saturday night spectacles

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In the dark evenings of October through to December, UK TV channels vie for Saturday night viewers, not least the pre-watershed head-to-head competition between *Strictly Come Dancing* (*SCD*) and *X Factor* (which *SCD* wins!). After the watershed of 9pm when certain types of scenes and language can be broadcast there has been a new competition between the European and Nordic Noir detective and thriller 'box sets' on BBC4 and the three-part *Gunpowder* drama in the run up to November 5th on BBC1.

As a *SCD* addict I watch the live Saturday night show (replete with chocolate), and then the results on the Sunday (the results show is recorded on the Saturday, and the outcome is available on the Spoiler thread for those who cannot wait!). On one Saturday evening in October I continued watching BBC 1 after *SCD* in order to embrace the new *Gunpowder* drama. In a flash back to childhood, I spent most the drama hidden behind a cushion. Normally when faced with public state murder on TV or at the cinema I experience such 'hiding' over a few minutes, but with *Gunpowder* this seemed to go on and on and on. And I also had to try not to listen. I gave up and did not watch the other two episodes. Odd really. I know the story of Guy Fawkes and the 'conspirators', and I know what happens, and I in fact I used to teach it!

Both *SCD* and *Gunpowder* are about the same thing: Spectacle.

SCD is about the glitz and glamour and sequins of dance, music, and singing. Yes I do vote. And it is about teaching and learning – it is about how the professional experts teach their celebrity partner to dance, and how the viewer witnesses learning by the celebrity over three months, and how the professional expert also learns how to teach even better. In the results show two celebrity couples are identified as being in the 'dance off' – a situation caused by a combination of the Judges' and viewers' votes. Two couples re-dance their dance from that week again, and then the Judges decide who goes and who stays.

The process of who goes and who stays is a spectacle – the celebrity loses their place in the competition, and the professional has had their choreography subjected to scrutiny. Much is made of this with the use of knife-edge music and camera shots, the red light that shines on the two couples who have been found not to be good enough. Much horror and sighing from the audience and on Twitter. When there is 'a shock elimination' then there is much anger and even 'I'm not watching this anymore' responses.

Gunpowder is also about display but there is not much colour - except for the blood. The execution scenes take place in with a drab bluish/greyish stage. In this setting people as humans are humiliated, and have to feel excruciating pain before their life is taken through a ritual of prescribed punishment.

Those who do the work and those who watch are part of this ritual that is also about teaching and learning. Each human who has been found guilty loses their life, hoping that the professional does their job speedily. In the end each human has to surrender to being taught lesson, where their belief system takes them beyond the lesson. Importantly the crowd has to be taught what will happen if they hold and practice beliefs that are regarded as seditious.

Much might be discussed about this, not least the role of the audience at home watching *SCD* and then the *Gunpowder* drama. Why did I find it okay to watch *SCD* and comment on the 'guilt' of dancing mistakes or judges scores on a Saturday, then watch the results show and witness

the 'death' of a dancer on a Sunday? But why did I find the scenes in *Gunpowder* unwatchable? After all, this drama showed what we know from history about how the justice system worked (and we know how it continues to work), but we also know that public executions in the UK were stopped because too many people who went to watch actually died as a result of being in an unruly crowd. We know that capital punishment is not a deterrent, and so the idea of a lesson to be learned by those who are punished and those who are witnesses to the punishment is a fabrication. I was left asking myself: how many people watching *Gunpowder* would not accept the *SCD* spectacle but would actually enjoy the scenes of execution? And would want this type of punishment to return to the UK justice system?

The exercise of power through spectacle is not new. But where does the borderline lie between what is and is not acceptable? It seems to me that the use of display, the big reveal, the public humiliation is an integral part of our modern world, and it is being used in education – where there are life and death issues are in play.

Let me give an example from education, and example that I thought about while watching *SCD* and *Gunpowder*...

Lotteries for school places are being used in the contemporary admissions system in England. They are also used in the USA, where Ravitch (2012) provides a review of David Guggenheim's documentary *Waiting for Superman*, where she identifies that the film:

“...tells the story of five children who enter a lottery to win a coveted place in a charter school. Four of them seek to escape the public schools; one was asked to leave a Catholic school because her mother couldn't afford the tuition. Four of the children are Black or Hispanic and live in gritty neighbourhoods, while the one White child likes in a leafy suburb. We come to know each of these children and their families; we learn about their dreams for the future; we see that they are loveable; and we identify with them. By the end of the film, we are rooting for them as the day of the lottery approaches (p21).

She then goes on to describe and consider the denouement:

“In the final moments of *Waiting for 'Superman,'* the children and their parents assemble in auditoriums in New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Silicon Valley, waiting nervously to see if they will win the lottery. As the camera pans the room, you see tears rolling down the cheeks of children and adults alike, all their hopes focused on a listing of numbers or names. Many people react to the scene with their own tears, sad for the children who lose. I had a different reaction. First, I thought to myself that the charter operators were cynically using children as political pawns in their own campaign to promote their cause. (Gail Collins in *The New York Times* had a similar reaction and wondered why they couldn't just send the families a letter in the mail instead of subjecting them to public rejection.) Second, I felt an immense sense of gratitude to the much-maligned American public education system, where no one has to win a lottery to gain admission” (p30).

This spectacle of 'school choice', where children win a reprieve from a failing school, or lose a place in a better school through a public lottery is not acceptable. That is all there is to say. But we have to be mindful that lotteries are in play in the admissions arrangements in England.

I wonder if we are being softened up to accept ways of rationing public services (such as lotteries) by engaging with the cultural norms of 'light entertainment' such as *SCD* and *X Factor*? We might only see the dangers involved when we compare and juxtapose 'light' entertainment with very 'serious' drama that displays the realities of watching personal humiliation in public. But it is more than this. What happens in *Gunpowder* as a historical account is actually happening now, and it is not a drama but a power process for disposing of human beings...

If you wish to reference this paper:

Gunter, H.M. (2017) *CEPaLS 19: Saturday night spectacles*. Manchester: University of Manchester.

References

Ravitch, D. (2012) The myth of charter schools. In: Swail, W.S. (ed) *Finding Superman. Debating the Future of Public Education in America*. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University. 19-30.