

CULTURE WARS

Thursday 14 January 2010

📖 Their fault

Scapegoat Society, Sunbury House, London

📖 Mark Carrigan

At a time of rising social tensions, when the far right are on the move and economic uncertainty reigns, the figure of the scapegoat becomes uniquely pertinent. So *Scapegoat Society*, curated by [norn](#) at Sunbury House, holds out promise of being the sort of politically engaged art which can help illuminate and reimagine our increasingly troubled times. It aims to explore the process through which scapegoats are produced and the inevitability of such figures in any society (it is, argue the curators, a 'fundamental part of the human condition'). The exhibition itself is a multidisciplinary collection of work by nine international artists, arranged within one large room and one small side-room at the gallery.

As might be hoped for given the subject matter, some of the work on display is extremely powerful. 'The Dissident' by Jacek Niegoda is a short film of the escalators at a foreign subway station. This initially slow piece comes to life after a minute and a half when an odd figure begins an earnest yet futile upwards ascent of the downwards escalator. Within a couple of minutes dirty looks have transformed into boots and fists, as two youths confront him and block his path up the escalator. The slow motion of the escalator (or perhaps the grinding force of social norms?) along with a few well placed kicks leaves him struggling off at the bottom of the escalator where the youths continue their assault. The visual metaphor is a little crude and the message somewhat confused; after all walking the wrong way up the escalator is an intrinsically pointless endeavour whereas surely dissent is not? Even so the cinematography is admirable and the overall effect is a powerful one. It's difficult to see this and not be moved by sympathy for the eponymous dissident or anger at the commuters who ignore the assault. The audience is also left uncertain as to whether this was a staged scene or art as social experiment (and if the latter then the ending of the film becomes all the more powerful). The ambiguity almost leaves one feeling complicit in the dissident's fate.

The most striking work in the exhibition is undoubtedly Rod Dickinson's recreation of the infamous Milgram experiments. These were originally conducted in 1961, starting as Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem entered its third month. The Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram hoped to understand how so many Germans had come to participate in the holocaust. The experiment took the form of a 'teacher' and a 'learner' situated in separate rooms. The former would ask the latter to perform memory tasks through an intercom, punishing mistakes with electric shocks of ever increasing severity. Or so the teacher believed. In actuality there were no shocks and the experiment was intended to test the willingness of the teacher to continue to administer shocks, as guided by the white-coated psychologist, once s/he had reason to believe that the learner was at risk of injury. This effect was achieved through pre-recorded tapes of groans and screams, as well as references to a heart condition and the learner banging on the wall separating them from the teacher. If the teacher expressed a desire to stop the experiment this was met with a series of scripted responses from the psychologist, ranging from a polite 'Please continue' to bluntly telling the teacher that 'You have no other choice, you *must* go on'. If they continued to protest after each of these four scripted responses then the experiment would end. Otherwise it would only end when the maximum 450 volt shock had been administered three times in succession, by which point it could have proved genuinely fatal if actually administered.

65% of the original participants reached this point and similar results emerged in later repetitions of the experiment throughout the world. Dickinson painstakingly reenacts the experiment on the basis of the transcripts from the original experiment and the resulting film is immensely moving. It produces a voyeuristic discomfort which grows throughout as we watch a succession of teachers struggling to confront the pain they believe themselves to be inflicting on the learners in the adjoining room. We see the furtive glances towards the white-coated psychologist become outright pleas to stop and, most disturbingly, we see the relief that reassurance from an authority is able to bring as the teachers acquiesce to the psychologist's requests to continue.

In an odd way however this work detracts from the rest of *Scapegoat Society*. The slow-burning force with which it unnerves the viewer unfortunately serves to foreground the relative weakness of much of the other art on display. For instance Artur Zmijewski's film 'Two Monuments' charts groups of unemployed Irish and Polish workers in Dublin collaborating to build two monuments. The artist attempts to highlight the tendency to 'place blame on others' rather than recognising 'the malign forces of global capitalism on local labour markets'. Yet too insubstantial to be a standalone documentary and too ponderous to work as an installation, it is simply disappointing,

as a potentially engaging concept amounts to little more than a tired articulation of overly-familiar multicultural motifs. This is true of some of the other work on display, for instance Rainer Ganahl's 'Homeland Security I-V' and Silke Wagner's '18.08.70'. The former involves the artist repeating phrases such as 'I am not a terrorist' into a camera in 11 different languages while the latter is an aesthetically attractive but politically rather vacuous homage to the civil rights activist Angela Davis.

While some of the work featured in *Scapegoat Society* may be disappointing, however, the overall intentions of the exhibition are admirable, and it collects an invigorating range of work within a small gallery space. Although the message is at times trite, it is also sensitising to the pervasiveness of the scapegoat and the processes through which such figures are produced. Anyone expecting a sophisticated social psychological thesis will inevitably be disappointed but on balance the exhibition is undoubtedly worthy of attention.

Till 21 February 2010

• [Visual Arts](#)
