

## Chapter 4

# Pantomime Paranoia in London, or, “Lookout, He’s behind You!”

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### Visiting the Kumars

At the end of the last and at the very start of the present century, there emerged a new figure of fun in the British media who has been revealed also to have an ominous underside. Court jesters of culture, the flavor of the month for a short while anyway, South Asian comics and comedians became popular and almost ever-present on our screens. For a while, many of us laughed, and many celebrated a coming of age; daft like everyone else meant visibility at last. The televised hilarity of “Goodness Gracious Me” and the madcap efforts of Sanjeev Bhaskar on his BBC pseudo chat show “The Kumars at No. 42” were welcome insofar as they promoted manifestations of “multicultural comedy” as part of a tolerant and inclusive tradition. But this is not—never—the whole story, and I think the popularity of such shows now reveals in retrospect some disturbing emergent anxieties where the visibility of comic figures does more politically than ever the mischief of the usual court jester as courtier to power achieved.

The question of who comes to visit the Kumars at Number 42 was a matter of mirth on television, and various celebrities from all walks of life sat with an “average”—actually quite wacky—South Asian family to talk about their latest cultural product: promoting a film, a play, their new book, and so on. As a light entertainment early evening format it was a great success. But such questioning of the neighbors and the to-ings and fro-ings of their associates can be a much sharper confrontation elsewhere in Britain, especially in the years after the advent of the War of Terror, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, and the London bombs of 2005. It could be argued that the figure of the terrorist in Asian garb is a new manifestation of the scapegoat; the Asian next door becomes a stereotype and scare-mongering figure, made all the more suspect by religious incomprehension, language barriers, and ingrained institutionalized xenophobia. A raft of recent studies have pointed out (Wilson, 2006; Kundnani, 2007) that alongside the visit to the Kumars we now also witness special squad investigations, high-profile security raids, and closures of streets; the police cordoning off areas of middle English suburbia; the nightly news interviewing people living on the same streets as suspects, insisting that “he kept to himself” or “they seemed like normal people”; and scenes of the accused being driven off to interrogation and

detention under the anti-terror legislation. Or we see average citizens subjected to unprovoked and violent mayhem at the hands of the state, as in Forest Gate (where Mohammed Abdul Kahar was shot in the chest and his brother Abul Koyair kicked and beaten as 250 police stormed their house on June 2, 2006) or the Stockwell tube (where Operation Kratos officers shot-to-kill Jean Charles de Menezes on July 22, 2005), and as planned and prepared for in various terror legislations, police and army procedure manuals, and as called for by right-wing newspapers and talk-back radio shock jocks.

I see the Kumars as the bright side of a sinister kind of theatre that has emerged in Britain today, and I think it can be linked to other seemingly innocent comic aspects of British performance culture, with relevance to similar scenarios throughout the world. This chapter attempts to unpack the scripts.

## A Suicide Rapper

In its June 28, 2006 issue, *The Guardian* newspaper found a fairly absurd headline to put above a slightly modified press release Nation Records put out to promote the new Fun-da-Mental album.<sup>1</sup> In effect the headline accused frontman Aki Nawaz of terrorist sympathies, support for Osama bin Laden, un-British sentiments, and punk sensibilities. Despite *The Guardian*'s carefully distanced reporting ("Nawaz says he is prepared to face the consequences"), this story seemed more likely to belong to the *News of the World* than a left-leaning intellectual broadsheet. *The Sun* duly took up the tale the next day with an inflammatory headline which proclaimed the band's "Suicide Bomb Rap" had provoked "fury" and led to calls from MPs for police to arrest Nawaz for "encouraging terrorism."

Some might say Aki Nawaz is a past master of provocation as a sales gimmick (his earlier outings as drummer for the Southern Death Cult give it away). Yet this strategy, out of the Andrew Loog Oldham school of promotional work where "any publicity is good 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 tea cup fears that surround us today, and manages to tap Che Guevara on the shoulder as well). Long ago it became standard for critics to question the commitment with which a pop culture personality might profess political sentiments, and there are endless reams of discussion in the annals of the Left concerning the complicity, compromises, and commercialism of avowedly leftist "cultural" interventions. It is also often pointed out that attempts to simultaneously sell progressive politics and culture industry products without getting some sort of molten plastic rancidity all through your clothes are futile. Turning into that which you despise is a common media refrain (fans call this "selling out"). Yet to limit acknowledgement of Nawaz to his role

<sup>1</sup> <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,1807542,00.html>, accessed March 24, 2008.

as a rapper rather underplays his diverse activities as impresario of the global juke box 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 below), the hip-hop/quaito stylings of Prophets of the City, and Qawwali artists such as Aziz Mian and more. With co-conspirator Dave Watts, Fun-da-Mental advances alternative and left-oriented versions of populist world music, as a vehicle for a series of targeted provocations against mainstream hypocrisy and racism. Often misunderstood by the music press, there were many who were enamored at first with their radical stance, but this attitude was soon simplified and resolved itself into sloganeering with various versions of the suggestion they were “the Asian Public Enemy” (reported in Sharma et al., 1996; Hutnyk, 2000) and versioning the band, and the Nation label, as a quixotic exotica. No doubt at times Nawaz has played up to this—his persona as rapper “Propa-Gandhi” clearly marks a knowing ambiguity and many of his comments play on, and yet destabilize, conventions of British South 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. This could be called a disgruntled chic/sheik stance if this were not also an awful play on words. The photo *The Guardian* chose to print is particularly revealing of the current iconography of terror and fear in present day Britain. In the print version of this Ladbrooke Grove ensemble (the *Guardian Unlimited* web image is slightly cropped) there is an English flag to the right of the picture, alongside a likely looking resident. The bus in the background on the left is behind a young lad with a backpack—this surely refers with pointed significance to the July 7, 2005 London bomb anniversary about a week away when this story was printed. I want to read the bus in this ensemble as of crucial significance. All the buttons of contemporary Islamophobia, nationalism and transport system vulnerability, and conspiracy theorizing are referenced in this image here—though it’s unclear if the photographer Martin Godwin and Nawaz himself contrived to create this scene together, certainly Nawaz in the photograph is trying to look angry—pantomime villain—and we can tell that inside he is smirking at the absurdity of it all.

And the absurdity of it all is certainly present in the iconic bus photograph that is recalled by means of citation. If the backpack behind Nawaz necessarily evokes the Tavistock Square bus bombing, it does so, intentionally or not, ironically or not, in a way at least deserving of attention. That this has been ignored seems a failure of analysis. Instead of any critical indication of the potency of this scene, either by the news reporters Mark Brown and Luc Torres, or by respected commentators, this remains a silent device within the ensemble, associating by visual proximity, Nawaz with the London bombers—connectivity confirmed and mocked in simultaneity and in the anniversary repetition of the media scare.

Yet, it must be said that while Nawaz is portrayed as a cartoonish suicide rapper in *The Guardian* and *The Sun*, he also uses this notoriety to convey a previously unheard and unwelcome message about the hypocrisy of the so-called “war on terror.” The iconography works to open forums previously unavailable for him to raise issues, provoke discussion. Soon he is invited (and invited back) onto BBC news roundtable talk-back, his voice heard because he courts “outrage” with his agitational views. To some degree his provocation does force issues into the open. He is not invited to the Kumars’ show to promote the album, but instead appears on BBC2’s *Newsnight* in August, 2006 and on *Newsnight Review* in October the same year (and subsequently). Bad publicity enables important interventions on a serious late evening current affairs program. Possibly via a circuitous route, it is in the casting role of pantomime villain that establishment doors were opened to some different ideas—any publicity at all pays off in the end. Several other scenes are worth examining in this process where a former punk drummer with reformed global world music sensibilities coincides with entertainment values and programming requisites to enable political comment with a sharp edge.

### Pantomime

My view is that we need to work through the moves as they travel from comic outrage to serious debate. This means a detour through the theatrical, and for the purposes of this discussion, the comic theatre of British pantomime. Thinking about pantomime terrors deserves a little historical play. The popular Christmas and summer holiday entertainment form has roots in vaudeville 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 Hamelin 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 Scheherazade and the stories of *A Thousand and One Nights*, the first “proper book” I owned as a child (novelist Hanif Kureishi calls it “the greatest book of all” in *My Son the Fanatic* [1998, p. xii])—illustrated with lavish pictures of Sinbad the Sailor, various alluring princesses on flying horses or magic carpets, Aladdin and his lamp, and of course Ali Baba and the 40 thieves. That Scheherazade had to tell devious stories to evade death at the hands of the despotic King Shahyar 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 effective ideological duty (get ’em while they’re young). Jacques Lacan also weighs in on this tale, quoting Edgar Allen Poe in “The Purloined Letter,” he reminds us that Scheherazade lives from morning to

morning, the repetition of her storytelling the gamble of her survival from day to day ([1966] 2006, p. 29). Her gamble risks telling the wrong story, and in Poe on night 1,002 she blunders and must face consequences that are too terrible to tell to kids. My problems with Said and Lacan, however, have 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, and Lacan's comments on the gambler's paranoia should indeed make us wary. Today, however, pantomime seems to play an even more sinister role.

The most memorable scenes in panto are the ones of tension. The viewers, children and their parents, watch as the innocent hero is stalked by the dastardly and demonic villain—Captain Hook perhaps, or a demon. The children are encouraged to shout out and expose the impending danger, to call out the threat. This theatrical structure lays out a pattern that repeats. The villain that is “BEHIND YOU” in today's real life panto is the sleeper cell living and working among us, travelling on the tube, plotting next door, preparing to wreak havoc and destruction unannounced (except for the high rotation security announcements at train stations advising us never to leave our belongings untended). Similarly spooky allegories might be evoked from the panto stories, 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 opening code words: “open sesame.” The fears that are promulgated here are of course childish terrors and cliché, but the problem with such stereotyping is their maddening ability to transcend reason and keep on popping back up to scare us. This is not a place for thinking; it is just children's theatre. But perhaps 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. 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” as Bonaparte usurps democracy, the peasants treated as “potatoes in a sack,” and Marx wanting to move on and “let the dead bury the dead,” and so on. The trouble for Marx, perhaps also for Lacan, was the repetition compulsion built into the story. So much so that this suggests to me a Poe-faced speculative dream version of the story of Scheherazade herself, whom I imagine has this time been detained, rendered, and interned in Guantanamo. Our heroine is kept in isolation in a dank 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 crackdowns and higher and higher terror alert ratings in the metropolises, but the production of this narrative can never set her free and she will never become queen (the despotic kings are otherwise engaged: Tony Blair and G.W. Bush are already hitched to each other and a legacy in Iraq, and perhaps hitched to history in the same way Nixon was to Watergate and defeat in Vietnam). Of course it's the case that my dreaming of Scheherazade is only a conceit—even as I cannot imagine what so many years in detention can do to anyone. A thousand and one terrors assail us all.

## All is War

Thus, the promotional provocation that Nawaz offers on the Fun-da-Mental album *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 promoting “terror,” especially with regard to the album *Erotic Terrorism*, and more recently the track “Cookbook DIY,” discussed in a section below. 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 Bush-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’s too civil is the problem), and of the stifling numbing dumb dumb dumb of the press. And let’s take a lesson from Nepal, which in the same week in which Nawaz was identified by *The Sun* as the pantomime caricature of the “suicide rapper,” the Nepalese Government, amid its own Maoist insurgency, still repealed some of its “anti-terror” in the interests of civic freedoms. The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance (TADO) was earlier introduced by King Gyanendra in the wake of the 2002 killing of his brother Birendra and ten members of the ruling Rana Royal family. The King was forced to repeal the terror laws by popular pressure from the insurgent Maoist movement, heading (April, 2008) toward democratic electoral victory at pace. Yet beyond Nepal, the war on terror has contracted rather than opened up civic space. It is my view that 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? There are those in the tourist and airline industry who think this offers “a win” to the terrorists. That the terrorists were “laughing at us”—according to Ryan Air chief Michael O’Leary<sup>2</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 show business, the new replacement for *Top of the Pops* perhaps? Of course we can all see that the “banning” of a music track is only a minor power play in an obscure corner of the culture industry. There are a great many other modes of video violence that might much rather take up the time of the self-appointed guardians of propriety in Britain. Certainly there are examples of video images that might give more cause for concern—racist materials proliferate no doubt, and there will be reason to consider training, recruitment, surveillance, suicide, and celebration videos in (forensic) detail. But Nawaz and his “Cookbook DIY” video is just the sort

<sup>2</sup> See <http://kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/08/22/5362.shtml>, accessed September 23, 2006.



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. No wonder there are concerns about humor; the laughter that ensues is not easily hushed: it reveals much.

### The Villains Are Behind You

We must acknowledge that a newspaper publicity event for a culture industry music promo is not really “news,” especially while there are more serious debacles to attend to, such as the rise of racism, anti-Islamic profiling, and the anti-people pogroms of the state machine, saturation bombing, occupations of entire nations, war crimes. The gap between music product and international significance surely means it would be a surprise 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 United States, the UK, Australia, Malaysia, and so on. In his excellent book *The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st Century Britain*, Arun Kundnani makes an unanswerable case against the erosion of civil rights and for recognition of the way this impacts particularly on minorities, and by extension on us all:

Never before has such a vast and rapidly expanding accumulation of state power confronted young Asians, Africans and African-Caribbeans, Muslim and non-Muslim, immigrant and British-born. Under anti-terrorist powers, they face mass stop and search without reasonable grounds of suspicion ... They face new powers of arrest that dramatically extend time held in police custody prior to any charges being brought. They face the threat of raids in the early hours ... They face virtual house arrest without the right to defend themselves in court. They face mass surveillance at places of worship, at train stations and airports. They face the risk of armed police deploying shoot-to-kill tactics. They face prosecution for expressing unacceptable opinions, for protesting, for supporting foreign charities, for being members of political organizations deemed unacceptable to the government. Finally, they face the ultimate sanction of having their citizenship itself stripped away! (2007, pp. 167-8)

The news stories referenced obliquely in the above citation would only extend the list if detailed: over-policing and incompetence that leads to the death of civilians like Charles de Menezes on the Stockwell tube, with no police punished; the Forest Gate shooting of innocent brothers, with ongoing harassment; the persecution of the “lyrical terrorist” Samina Malik, with a drawn out court case to examine her “crime” of writing rhymes on a scrap of paper while at work at Heathrow; a range of other high-profile “cases” and prosecutions, detentions, deportations .... All contribute to a climate of generalized suspicion, such that fellow passengers on the tube are wary, the airport check-in queue is an anxious one, citizens are

confronted on the streets, taxi-drivers are beaten, Mosques are attacked, right through to a disproportionate attention to “community cohesion,” and the farce of government insistence on British values. This escalation can only be described as a polymorphously perverse new mode of racism manifest in bizarre diverse and ubiquitous forms. To oppose all this is an obligation.

The worldwide erosion of civil liberties under the sign of a perverted new anxiety was already anticipated in Fun-da-Mental’s ironic album title reference: *Erotic Terrorism* (1998). Thinking of the detention camps in Afghanistan and Iraq, certainly there is some credence to Fun-da-Mental’s pre-September 11, 2001 prophecy that “America Will Go to Hell”—in their antiwar anthem EP release (*America Will Go to Hell*, 1999). The use of the rap form to express a critique of American (and United Nations, NATO, or British military) imperialist activities surely indicates also a more nuanced relationship between politics and content than the unidirectionalist historians of hip-hop might warrant. This not only is a comment on record industry promotional opportunism, but also references the ways commercial imperatives at the same time sanction a certain quietude about the politics of so-called anti-terrorism and the inadequacy of romantic and liberal antiracism. No mere hybrid multiculti cross-ethnic particularity, Fun-da-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-da-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>3</sup>). These are probably the predictable moves that others have already made, but if raising questions about complacency in

<sup>3</sup> The term “sanctioned ignorance” is from the always insightful Gayatri Spivak (1999). The reference to Kalra and Hutnyk (1998) is a special issue on “music and politics” of the journal *Postcolonial Studies*. Sharma and Hutnyk (2000) is to a special issue on “music and politics” of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*.



commentary adds impetus to the work of showing where a critique of unexamined complicity and marketing zeal restrict possibilities, then the opening is important.

### The RampArts Interlude (Notes from a Screening)

Appalled at the carnage on my television screen, I ventured out. I caught the train to Shadwell in East London and walked to the corner of Rampart and Sly Streets (hmmm, significant street names—*Ramparts* was a 1960's 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 his 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 Aki what instrument he plays in the band (I only wish Aki had replied, "Hi, my name's Pink").

The then-Home Secretary Reid, believe it or not, was a former CPGBer (Communist Party of Great Britain, old version) and perhaps best noticed for calling current affairs presenter Jeremy Paxman a West London Wanker (aka W-L-W)—Deputy PM John Prescott was at the time trying to remain invisible (with two Jaguar cars) and Tony Blair was off hiding out in some celebrity Bee Jee holiday resort (aka a Florida terror training camp) after paving the way for the Israeli Defense Force to make pavement out of Southern Beirut. An 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. Aki has himself been noticed in the tabloids quite a bit of late; *The Sun* branded him a "suicide rapper" and *The Guardian* had a go as I have mentioned already. The event at RampArts, an anarchist inspired social centre, is to discuss the controversy, and to host the premiere screening of the

video for “Cookbook DIY.”<sup>4</sup> The 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 Aki 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’s a music talk-back show) but correct.

Slowly the RampArts social center fills up, and people take their seats to find a gift Fun-da-Mental CD—it’s not about the sales—and Ken Fero, co-director of Injustice, kicks off proceedings by introducing Aki, John Pandit, and the guy from the Green Party, noting that two other guest speakers were still on their way. Aki 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 can’t understand why nobody is doing anything. He is really angry. The youth in Britain are angry. There are people being killed in their 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, 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 Aki’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’s the most passionate thing I’ve 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 *Red Pepper* ... twice ...). She speaks in favor of free speech and against the new additions to the terror laws that will criminalize anyone who speaks in favor 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 never be tested, that they are like Clause 28, the crime of encouraging homosexuality, or the incitement to racial hatred law, they are a kind of public relations gesture. We should not get paranoid; 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’s the clincher—they don’t have it in Turkey, Burma, or North Korea.

<sup>4</sup> Lyrics here: [http://www.dicklaurentisdead.com/fun-da-mental/aiv\\_lyrics/Cookbook\\_diy.doc](http://www.dicklaurentisdead.com/fun-da-mental/aiv_lyrics/Cookbook_diy.doc); download track at <http://www.fun-da-mental.co.uk/>.

John Pandit, from the band Asian Dub Foundation (ADF), speaks next. He quietly points out the need to organize and to do so in new creative ways, to make a new set of alliances. He stresses the need 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 in the discussion, with speakers raising the issue of how the Stop the War coalition does all it can to minimize confrontations and have us all hide in Hyde Park, of course provoking considerable agitation). And it's 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, who told me his column appears in the Sunday edition. I think to myself that I might even buy it as his question was OK and in a short exchange with the reporter from the *Morning Star* (and representative of the Stop the War 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 Aki 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, 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 defense 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 two million marching in February, 2002 ... the problem is foreign policy. Change that and it's 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's 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. Aki makes the point that Gandhi was not alone, there was always a range of others involved, from Uddam Singh to

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Gandhi, it is insisted, wanted peace, not blowing up buildings—this is becoming the defining phrase, spiraling into architectural defense. Aki, 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-da-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. Dave says there has to be some understanding of how those who have tried to discuss such things in the past have now ended up . . . [pause] . . . 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 Dave explains it’s in three parts, that the person, who in frustration because there is no other avenue for discussion and expression or action has made a home-made bomb for fifty 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—Dave 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. Have a look at the video people . . . at which point, the screening.

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 Stars*, another secret possibility. The global resistance, Zindabad!

### Pantomime Video

The video itself is pantomime on film.<sup>5</sup> The first verse, about the homemade bomb, is performed, as is the entire clip, by a dress-up figure before the camera. At the very first appearance this figure appears wearing a white rabbit head. This is strange and already disturbing, but I think references in some oblique way a kind of cute or innocent image that belongs to the Britain of pet bunnies, or of the world of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. That this innocent quickly transforms into a lizard

<sup>5</sup> The video promo was directed by Kashan W. Butt for Nation Films, 2006.

figure is commensurate with the fear that works to suggest a constant vigilance: the otherwise unassuming neighbor becomes a threat. The lizard figure becomes a Zebra, again invoking a kind of infant menagerie, before becoming again the rabbit. But looking more closely, the figure here is wearing a St George T-shirt, thereby clearly signifying nationalism at one level, but also citing the popular World Cup publicity picture of English soccer star Wayne Rooney as dragon-slaying hero, savior to English football fans. This complicates any easy ascription of innocence to the rabbit/zebra/lizard, and, without implicating the English striker, suggests perhaps the home-made bomb is very much home grown. In between the verses, disturbing flashes of dolls tied up, ransom images that tamper with our comforts. Children's toys blasted into the political scene. The graffitiist in the Guantanamo jumpsuit works on a banner alongside.

In the second verse, the bomb-maker is now a 31-year-old Ph.D. disaffected with conventional or domestic means of protest, now gone over to the side of organized resistance. Speaking as if to camera at a press conference, or perhaps as if in a video prepared for Al Jazeera broadcast, this figure is insistent, aggressive. Dressed at first as a twisted student in graduation robes, kaffiyeh and graduation hat, half way through the verse this figure changes into someone in a balaclava and the ammunition belt of a mythic revolutionary figure, possibly reminiscent of Pancho Villa or Rambo. This character, the bandit-terrorist, turns the volume of threat up considerably and at the end when the character spins a revolver on his finger and turns to someone in a plain dirty-white hooded sweatshirt: "it takes a dirty mind to build a dirty bomb." But this grubby image surely suggests we are mistaken to locate this threat outside of Europe—in the murky theatres of violence, in the lawless badlands. The point here is to underline the hypocrisy of our geo-political conventions, this image indicative of a failure to appreciate the co-constitution of such badlands with the dubious foreign policy decisions of the imperial powers. In between verses, images of toy cars, computer games, football paraphernalia, and other trinkets from our early adolescent pastimes. The graffiti still not readable.

The final verse clinches the argument about militarism. It depicts the "legitimate scientist" working at his bench in his white lab coat, sponsored by the research funding of the Pentagon, UN flag behind him, developing the most destructive weapons of mass destruction ever known. Half way through the verse this figure transforms into the sinister figure of a Ku Klux Klan member in white hood and smock, then into a suited "Lord of War" wearing a gas mask; presumably only the bureaucrats will survive total war. All this is perhaps heavy-handed, but nevertheless the critical points are not misplaced, the metaphoric substitutions work. The projected indications are sound, the neutron bomb is the violence of racism, of class/bureaucratic inhumanity, the cold clinical cynicism of the (mad) scientist in the employ of even more mad (mutually assured destruction) masters.

By this stage the point is made, finally the full quote is visible from the graffitiist. It is a citation from an American president, possibly via the King himself, necessary only to provide a space for reflection while the tune fades. "If we make peaceful revolution impossible, we make violent revolution inevitable"—JFK.

### Back to the Kumars

In pantomime one actor can play many roles, often telling their story through rhyme, song, dance, and humor, not necessarily with particularly high literary or artistic pretensions, men in drag, bawdy women, double entendre, burlesque, knowing morals, and audience involvement: “From the very beginning the pantomime was acutely aware of the world around it ... no other form of entertainment has ever devoted itself so wholeheartedly to holding up to the public, for its approbation, censure, or mere amusement, the events, manners, whims and fancies, fads, crazes and absurdities of the time” (Frow, 1985, p. 136).

This could describe Sanjeev Bhaskar’s comedy but a return to the heady innocent days of visiting “The Kumars at No. 42” is not possible. In the present era, such comedy is no longer so easy. Fun-da-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. Recall that pantomime, like comedy, sometimes can still speak truth to power, and thereby reveal its hypocritical co-ordinates, but quite often it is only a holiday period entertainment. 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 managed. This does not mean that other pantomime events have been displaced. The spectacle (lower case) of Mr and Mrs G.W. Bush placing a wreath in a wading pool at the base of the former World Trade Center on the evening before the fifth anniversary of September 11, 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 it’s 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 (September 11, 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-da-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 in each of the three verses. The first entails a cross-of-St-George-wearing youth constructing a strap-on bomb from a recipe downloaded from the internet. That he is dressed as a rabbit and as a lizard in parts of the verse is Fun-da-Mental playing on childlike toys and fears; the second verse references the radical 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. Here, the scientist in a lab coat morphs improbably-critically into a member of the Ku Klux Klan and then a suited business man, building a neutron bomb that destroys people “but leaves the buildings intact.” This outrageous 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*) 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* (2005b), pointing out the non-equivalence of terror directed at a couple of buildings by a nonstate 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, and so on, removes all vestige of civil liberties, and prepares us for perpetual war is only the logical consequence of our antiwar demonstrations, even when two 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. 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 to laugh this away, but it is not. We need to rethink and disrupt the usual categories. As provoked by Fun-da-Mental, 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. With a wry smile, I have started to listen once again.

