

Dealing with Metaphysical Evil: The Banker as Evil Genius in the British Game Show *Deal or No Deal*

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It would appear that evil is becoming more, not less, conspicuous in contemporary social discourses as a conceptual resource for explaining the derivation of social harms emanating from human (in)action and exculpating the failures of institutional or regulatory agencies to prevent them. Metaphysical evil is increasingly cited in a range of popular and official explanations of social harms resulting from moral failures at the individual and collective level. By 'metaphysical evil' I mean evil of a transcendent, demonic nature reflecting the seductive, cruel and wicked aspects of pure malice directed at 'innocent', unsuspecting or hapless humans that has been traditionally personified in a monstrous or Satanic figure of myth and/or the presence of a seducer implied by the Gnostic traditions and the theodicy, as well as within rationalist Cartesian epistemology. This type of evil is to be distinguished from the physical evil unleashed by, for instance, disease or natural disasters, or the humanist designation of moral evil delimited to the observation of socio-ethical-legal codes of behaviour as represented in the deontological ethics of Kant, specifically his concept of 'radical evil' ([1793] 1960). Kant's reconceptualisation of evil as 'radical', that is as 'rooted' in the human character and the result of the failure of *all* human beings to live up to their duties according to the norms of moral law, was intended among other things to do away with what he considered the failure of theodicy in general and its notional acceptance of evil as a metaphysical reality in particular. In his view, evil as a metaphysical entity encouraged a sense of moral passivity among individual actors, in essence allowing or even encouraging moral agents to let themselves off the hook for the evil and suffering. What is more, theodicy occluded the power of reason and cognition, and the potential for individual and collective freedom to think and to act in morally defensible ways. In short, Kant's seminal yet (even by his own admission) ultimately incomplete exhumation of metaphysical (or 'diabolical') evil from the lexicon of modern moral philosophy represented a historical frontier marking the final inauguration of rationalism and the establishment of a secular moral ethics fit to explain, and more to the point deal decisively with, evil in the modern scientific age. Kant thus resituated evil in the distinctively humanist realm of what he called 'practical' (as opposed to 'pure') reason, placing it alongside other intuitive areas such as aesthetics, and reaffirming the centrality of human action, agency and decision-making as subject to moral culpability and possible reform over divine or indeed demonic intervention as the source of original sin or eternal lament.

As an explanatory term for social harm resulting from human frailty, impurity, wickedness or perversity, evil is very much in evidence in current 'ordinary' explanations of social harm, not least in contemporary cultural discourses relating to crime and criminality. This is the case not only in the tabloid press, but also in the panoply of popular cultural genres devoted to crime stories as modern morality narratives, as represented in cultural forms as diverse as reality television shows to the summations of high court judges. This is in many ways surprising and even counter-intuitive given the long-established and progressive forces of rationalisation and (perhaps slightly more ambivalently) secularisation within British society. In this context, understanding evil and how it is expressed and explored within popular culture and the media is important as it represents a key source for making sense of how we perceive society and our capacity to deal with the puzzling, recurring and seemingly insurmountable forms of suffering, wrongdoing and chaos with which we are, or feel we are, continually faced. In this essay, I examine one particular version of the fabular encounter

with evil in the form of the Evil Genius as represented in a contemporary popular UK television game show *Deal or No Deal* (hereafter *DoND*, as referred to by its many fans), broadcast by Channel 4 since 2005. Taking Descartes' fable of the Evil Genius as the starting point, I argue that the depiction of The Banker as a contemporary version of the Evil Genius reveals a number of insights into the recurrence of metaphysical evil in contemporary British culture. This in turn affects evil's functional qualities and meanings as a way of explaining and 'dealing with' the multiple and complex problems of suffering, harm and wrongdoing in today's society, as for instance in the shifting cultural constructions of identity, sexuality and subjectivity and the difficulties and riskiness of maintaining these everyday positions and situated knowledge. In particular, I am interested in exploring how the encounter with metaphysical evil personified by The Banker as Evil Genius in *DoND* relates to the development of contemporary understandings and narratives of crime, criminal subjectivities, fragile relationships and unstable socio-economic realities as sources of 'ordinary' sense-making in the wake of increasing disillusionment with the corrective powers of science and technology and institutional cultures of expertise. I argue that The Banker as Evil Genius builds upon the original Cartesian anxiety over error and uncertainty to reinvigorate the fear of risk, humiliation and venality as the basis of popular or 'ordinary' collective explanations about what (or who) is responsible for the social evils of crime and deviance, and what can realistically be done about them in a globalised political economy.

The game show (along with its predecessor the quiz show) has been a mainstay genre of radio and television since the very beginnings of these media. It has retained its ubiquity and popularity despite a recurrent susceptibility to scandal and corruption, being a genre that is both cheap to produce and amenable to advertising through a combination of opportunities for gambling, product placement and other emergent forms of leisure and consumption activities (Hoerschelmann 2006; Holmes 2008). And yet in spite of this, comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the game show as a rich cultural resource for analysing codes of morality in comparison with other television genres such as the soap opera, the police procedural or the crime drama. Hence I will concentrate mainly in this essay on two of the few examples of critical scholarship devoted to the game show: Olaf Hoerschelmann's *Rules of the Game: Quiz Shows and American Culture* (2006) and Su Holmes' *The Quiz Show* (2008). And while there is clearly scope to carry out a comparative analysis of *DoND* with its other national versions, the central point of analysis here is on the characterisation of and encounter with The Banker as Evil Genius within the British version of the show and UK cultural context in order to examine in detail the rendering of evil in this particular character and its functional role as a contemporary concept of moral philosophy.

The Banker as Evil Genius: a Cartesian allegory?

Many scholars, among them the distinguished French philosophers Jacques Maritain (1944), Michel Foucault (2006) and Jacques Derrida (2001), have noted the uncharacteristic and seemingly bizarre framing of Descartes' magisterial *Meditations on First Philosophy* ([1641] 1985) – that iconic text of modern rationalism, epistemology and Enlightenment thinking – on the 'fable' (as Descartes calls it) of the Evil Genius. According to one recent commentator, this rather bewildering philosophical trope confirms the need (1) to continually reconsider such foundational philosophical texts and their inheritors and read them in a new way against their contemporary socio-cultural backgrounds, and (2) to regularly reaffirm the foundation of modern rationalism and the law on evil, whether understood as madness, irrationality or insanity (de Ville 2010). This analysis of The Banker as Evil Genius aims to explore both.

Let us first start with the characterisation of The Banker in *DoND* through the lens of the Cartesian Evil Genius. Like Descartes' Evil Genius, The Banker is a fictional and invisible yet crucial presence, a form of metaphysical evil summoned up by Descartes – and by the host of *DoND*, Noel Edmonds – and subsequently 'dealt with' more or less via the rules of the game, though these rules are themselves demonstrably in a state of flux and not infrequently violated or revised on an ad hoc basis by the Evil Genius himself as he sees fit. Even so, the exception to this flux is represented by Descartes' and Edmonds' role as mediator and officiator in the fabular drama. As in Descartes' original evocation and battle with the Evil Genius, the encounter with metaphysical evil in *DoND* is in many respects not so distinctively modern as it would at first appear to be insofar as it draws on sources other than the pure power of human rationality rooted in the modern subject modelled on the thinking, disembodied, rational subject of the *cogito*. Rather, the encounter with The Banker as Evil Genius relies on a disjointed amalgam of modern and pre-modern epistemologies and subjectivities drawn from the wisdom and ontotheological traditions as well as – in many respects, even more than – from the principles of modern rationalism and the praxis of human cogitation. In a departure from the Enlightenment derogation of knowledges and sense-making practices linked to pre-modern resources such as religion, embodiment, venality, emotion, superstition and local traditions, in *DoND* these are reinvigorated as the sources of knowledge and power fit to defeat this derivative form of mythic-transcendent evil.

As in the *Meditations*, the visual and physical absence of The Banker as Evil Genius from the televised set and the communication messages to the home and studio audience via an amanuensis adds to his transcendent or metaphysical character and heightens the sense of mystery and ritual surrounding both him and his relationship with the host. And indeed much of the language of the programme lends itself to the re-enchantment of the dramaturgical space of the television studio, with the set continually referred to by Edmonds as 'the dream factory' and the collective studio audience as 'the Pilgrims', alongside the many other neologisms given to ordinary everyday objects comprising the main elements of the set such as the floor (aka 'walk of wealth'), table ('pound coin table') and chair ('crazy chair'). Interestingly, other bespoke objects on the set which are distinctive to the game, such as the screen upon which the numbers are displayed or the boxes in which numbers are contained, do not have such special names or neologisms, and neither are they invested with the same rhetorical or allegorical significance as their everyday counterparts. This heavy investment of meaning and significance in 'ordinary' objects commonly found in the domestic and/or work sphere and comparative lack of attention to the bespoke furniture of the set is suggestive of the importance of the ordinary and everyday in the framing and audience reception of the show. This screening of the object within the genre of reality TV supplants the subject as a central conveyor of identity and meaning, and does so in a way which is evocative of Baudrillard's (1996) thesis on the murder of the real (aka 'the perfect crime') and the consequent resurgence of metaphysical evil and irony as the spiritual touchstones of late modernity.

As Holmes (2008) remarks, the game show is a key cultural forum in the continual work of reconceiving what being 'ordinary' is within a society as wedded to a hierarchical class-based social order as it is obsessed with the comparatively vertiginous and unstable categories of celebrity and 'reality' as formative to a fast-evolving television genre and popular culture more generally. Unlike many contemporary game shows, *DoND* does not have celebrity contestants or versions but sticks stridently to the appearance of 'ordinary' members of the public as players of the game whose very 'ordinariness' (the constructedness of which is denoted by the use of quotes around it is ironically the reason why they are on television.

While this blurring of the conventional boundaries between the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary' with respect to the binaries of 'reality' and the 'television space' helps convey a sense of the inclusiveness of the viewer with the players by breaking down this barrier between host, player and television audience, nevertheless the distinctive unseen presence of The Banker reasserts the uniqueness of the space he inhabits as a realm apart not just from the 'ordinary' but in a more multifaceted way the 'social' if not also the 'real' or the 'human'.

But who is The Banker? As in the case of the Cartesian Evil Genius (and other mythic characters of evil from Western culture such as Job's Satan), we know little about The Banker as personification of evil in *DoND*. In the first instance, as related in the early episodes of the programme, we don't even know if he is in fact 'real', notwithstanding his avowedly fictional characterisation. This is a situation referred to at one point early in the show's broadcast history by the host Noel Edmonds when he mentions on air the widespread speculation that he (Edmonds) was simply miming a telephone conversation and that there was in fact no one on the other end of the line. This speculation is well founded as, firstly, The Banker is clearly a fictional character and, as in other popular fictional genres of television, film and theatre, it is common practice for actors to pretend they are engaged in a telephone conversation when in actuality there is no one on the other end of the line and the telephone is merely a prop. In the show's closing credits, The Banker is identified as being played by 'Himself'. There has been and continues to be considerable Internet-based speculation about who is 'playing' The Banker at any given time, indicating that it is widely accepted that this is an actor and that the man (as appears to be the assumed expectation) who plays him will change. He has his own Wikipedia entry¹ which describes him as 'quasi-fictional'. Secondly, we never actually hear the voice of The Banker – with two exceptions: when Edmonds places the receiver close to the microphone on his chest (close to his heart) we hear The Banker's demonic, evil laughter usually in response to the ill fortune of a player, or more commonly his words as mimicked by Edmonds himself.

Edmonds' mimicry of The Banker is a significant element of the show in terms of its reinforcement of the hegemonic ideological norms of capitalist patriarchy and British identity. Through these acts of mimicry, we learn that The Banker speaks in a low and markedly posh upper-class English accent (described variously as 'dirty', 'sexy' and 'Churchillian' on his Wikipedia site), the voice of a wealthy, white middle-aged, reportedly corpulent and by all indications extremely privileged man. At the same time, such mimicry has a deeply transgressive element, eroding the barriers conventionally separating the material from the metaphysical world through Edmonds' role as amanuensis or go-between and also master of ceremonies and proposer of 'the Question' in the ritual that lends its name to the show. This highlights another important dimension of the host's role with respect to his representation of the evil of The Banker and the reality of the show qua mimesis. According to Taussig (1993), this tendency towards mimesis as mimicry in the face of alterity and the presence of evil reveals a fundamental strategy that people have employed throughout history to protect themselves from the predations of evil spirits in their midst: simply to portray or represent them, and more specifically to copy and then parody them, thereby divesting them of at least some of their enigmatic and frightening powers through the act of (re)production or imitation. According to this interpretation mimicry represents an act of human defiance, possibly even of resistance, to the forces of evil which are beyond the bounds of normal human defences. This tendency towards mimicry and mimesis similarly foregrounds the simulated doubling of reality in the media and the parody and irony that have supplanted the real in modern culture (Baudrillard 1996). But while the use of mimicry by the host in relation to The Banker might be construed as a form of resistance, Edmonds' other use of

mimicry with respect to contestants lacks symbolic or simulacral richness and is more conservative in relation to the existing social order.

Edmonds' mimicry of the contestants can be construed as a reinforcement if not an extension of the cultural norms and stereotypes constitutive of postcolonial capitalism noted by Hoerschelmann (2006). This is exemplified in the case of the contestant Francis (whose participation in the show was broadcast over about a week of episodes in late August/early September 2009), a black male player who emigrated as a child to Britain from Ghana. Upon his arrival in 'the dream factory', Edmonds addressed Francis in a mock Caribbean accent and referred jokingly to Francis' presumed sexual prowess among the women contestants. Francis' cool response to this teasing based on cultural stereotypes of Afro-Caribbean men, coupled with his emergence over the course of his appearances on the show as a charismatic leader among the other players whose advice was often sought, results in a change of attitude by Edmonds, whereby Francis was no longer subject to such stereotypical mockery but instead is duly accorded the 'respect'² of The Banker and a rather extravagant performance of awe on behalf of Edmonds as host. In this case, this earning of 'respect' by eliding the mimicry performed by the host marks Francis' ability to use the game show format to actively resist and reverse such cultural stereotypes, if only at the individual level. Notwithstanding Francis' example, it is commonplace for Edmonds to mimic the regional or ethnic accents of many of the contestants in a teasing manner, ostensibly as a way of galvanising a sense of informality and solidarity among the players and the audience through the host, while simultaneously invoking and reinforcing a narrow range of stereotypes relating to the subjectivities of 'ordinary' or 'average' individuals as citizens, readily identifiable if not caricatured by their regional accents and derivative identities, and often portraying lower-class, disabled, minority ethnic or women contestants in a negative, condescending or otherwise disempowering way (Holmes 2008).

According to Hoerschelmann (2006), this is consistent with the preoccupation of game shows with the modern scientific notion of 'the average' in the face of increasing diversity which, despite its concentration on the individual contestant, makes heavy use of references to numerically generated quantitative data generated via polls or surveys which the contestant must reiterate in the form of the 'right' answer (as in 'our survey says ...'). This is consistent with the strict normalisation of knowledge and behaviour required of 'ordinary' people in order to be allowed to participate in game shows as identified by Holmes (2008). But in the absence of such scientific numerical data on *DoND*, despite being a game that involves numbers, its relationship to empirical data represented numerically is decidedly random and hence is impossible to decipher, discipline or control in the way quantitative or controlled random sampling is. Thus such evidential knowledge of 'the average' and associated mechanisms of social norms and control are invoked through other means, such as by repeated references to broader cultural norms in the form of social stereotypes (Hoerschelmann, 2006) or the reduction or narrowing of possible questions, answers or choices. In *DoND*, this is clearly represented by the single question (normally) asked a maximum of seven times with only two possible responses, either 'deal' or 'no deal', though players have on occasion engaged in a form of de facto bargaining with The Banker as a way of trying to increase the amount of money offered, or more often, The Banker makes offers as a way to try to encourage the player to make an early deal. But the salient point is that all players must deal with The Banker and on his terms – in the end there is no other option.

Between two worlds

Chief among the other main themes of the show is the blurring of the boundaries between certain predetermined metaphysical and material realities with the individual player situated between these 'two worlds'. The simple and random constitution of the game whereby the 22 boxes containing an unknown amount of money ranging from one pence to £250,000 are opened in a strict pattern is imbued with meaning through two central and twin strands: firstly, the narrative provided by the player at the start of the game (setting out the fabular terms of the individual's unique encounter with The Banker as Evil Genius), and secondly, the offer provided by The Banker at regular intervals (providing the essential element of gambling to the show as an emblematic expression of risk-taking fundamental to global capitalism as a popular spectacle and enjoyable leisure activity). As is the case with many players, the story told by Francis (cited previously) centres on the resilience of his continuing relationship with, in his case, absent loved ones, notably his partner who cannot be there as she is at home recuperating from a back injury and his deceased daughter whose spiritual presences powerfully invoke enduring emotional bonds. For the purposes of the game, a most significant spiritual dimension is represented by the additional presence of the daughter, whose connotations of love, purity and goodness serve as a moral and metaphysical counterpoint to the evil, corruption and wickedness of The Banker. She exists now as an immaterial or spiritual entity whose presumed ability to know the amounts of money contained in the boxes and the resilience of the bond of love with the player should theoretically guide the course of his choices throughout the course of the game. This represents a presumption about the transgressive and risky nature of the quasi-metaphysical space of the studio and is a vital factor of this and many other games in which deceased friends and relatives feature prominently (typically represented at the start of the game by the production by the player of photographs and other symbolically significant objects linked to this absent person). This incorporation into the game of other subjects from alternate realities is enhanced by the fabular encounter with evil personified by The Banker, who is similarly represented as a disembodied presence and participant in the game, staged for example by the analogue telephone displayed on its own podium on the set. While the incorporation of the absent loved one serves to maximise the risk taken by the player and the vertiginous qualities of intimate personal relationships in late modernity, the pairing of these spiritual presences with the quasi-spiritual presence of The Banker enhances the mystique of his transcendent stage presence while at the same time rendering the other aspects of his character more significant. Moreover, The Banker's reliance upon and use of technology (particularly the telephone) helps to establish and conflate the link between the intimate/spiritual and the material/capitalist.

The visual memory of those old elitist quiz shows pitting viewer against contestant is strongly evoked by the presence of the old-style analogue telephone and its repeated close-ups, as noted by Hoerschelmann (2006). Although the elitism of knowledge gained through education is jettisoned, the utopianism of new interactive media technologies is challenged by the presence of an old-style telephone as a prop on the set of *DoND*. While it is a nostalgic and comforting reference to a bygone age and the current commodification of interaction and communication through a profusion of wireless and runaway technologies linked to new digital media, the chunky black analogue telephone still retains its link to the postwar past of the British nation and their pluckiness in the face of the devastation of war, as well as the inexorable corruption scandal of game-fixing that brought the original quiz shows to an ignominious end. The telephone allows for the reconfiguration of the collapsed time-space boundaries and the transmission of the contemporary game show as collective cultural event directly into the new domestic space of the private residence or family home as collective national space under construction. While the mobile telephone of *The Matrix* franchise (1999,

2003, 2003) facilitates the transference into and out of a terrifyingly proliferating series of realities, each more dystopian than the next, the telephone of *DoND* allows the more direct yet non-threatening engagement with a more diabolical (in the Kantian sense of being an unknown and disinterested manifestation of the purely malevolent and demonic) form of evil with metaphysical overtones in the comfort of the domestic family home, much like the recourse to the internal dream space of the subject as *cogito* fabricated in the *Meditations* by Descartes himself. The telephone symbolises the commodification of the text–audience relationship while also proffering the utopian possibility of participation and connection, which along with the random character of the game itself, cushions the evil of chaos and chance with the more risk-laden possibilities of corruption attenuated by the potential opportunity for winning the big ‘life-changing’ money prize.

What all of these symbolic representations of the telephone have in common is their role in collapsing the normative boundaries between space and time, allowing audience, participants and others, whether deceased loved ones or monstrous or guardian angels (such as the implied role of sponsors), be they at home, in the studio, in the marketplace or in the nether realm, to occupy the same distinctive and re-enchanted place fit not just for gambling but also advertising. In recent series of *DoND*, the product placement has been the activity of gambling itself, with the main sponsor being the online betting firm King.com, the ad link for which contains the only visual representation of The Banker (pictured from behind, sitting at his computer playing King.com). The analogue telephone along with other older telecommunications technologies such as the letter and the postcard evoke powerful themes of love, desire and the impossibility of communication and interpretation, as explored by Jacques Derrida in his book *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987). These themes of love and the impossibility of translation between the absent loved one disrupts the notion of a stable, unified and controllable rationality, identity and reality, as suggested by this statement by Derrida which could also be applied to *DoND*: ‘Dreamed again of the Englishman staggering around the telephone: he was rubbing a new pencil against a box of matches and I was trying to stop him. He was in danger of burning his beard. Then he screamed your name with a peculiar accent ...’ (1987: 11–12). It is argued that Derrida's exploration of the metaphor of the postcard highlights the predominance of the televisual to culture which is ‘cast as an immense number of postal transmissions, each stamped by authorities and tradition’ (Derrida, in Manning 1998). Derrida's thesis refers here to the general economy of texts in a culture characterised by a continual profusion of visual images and liminal spaces: ‘Both postcards remind us of the prices we pay (to culture, to the state, to capitalism) for our images and messages’ (Dienst, in Manning 1998).

Ultimately, the resurgence of evil leads to the necessity for individuals as well as collectives to engage in a sort of compromise or ‘wager’ in the face of imminent danger or risk, whether in terms of constantly reconfiguring cultural notions of security through the progress of scientific and investigative technologies based on the continual redistribution of harms, or as Derrida (Bennington and Derrida 1999) proposes, negotiating the constantly shifting and profuse indeterminism of identity, communication and relationships through popular reality genres such as autobiography and associated communication technologies, particularly the telephone and the post (Derrida 1987). The Cartesian paradox of striving for certainty in a postmodern world disillusioned with the optimism of science, rationality and truth is dominated by indeterminism, instability and risk in which the subject is more expansive, fragmented and fluid than ever before. This is at the heart of the recent panics concerning risk and the destabilising of the present by an indeterminate and unpredictable future in which the only real certainty is the determination of death attenuated in the meantime by the evils of

grievance and suffering (ibid.). Increasingly, explorations of evil in a proliferation of popular cultural forms are gaining ground over elite and expert criminological discourses as a prime source of sense-making about the suffering, dangers, harms and crises we continually face, particularly in response to crime. Among the most prominent and ubiquitous of these cultural tropes is the re-encounter with the villainous figure of the Evil Genius.

As in the case of other newly created virtual spaces in the modern digital and global age, the imaginary topography of *DoND* is populated by angels and demons as well as rather hapless humans whose task it is to continually negotiate the risks not just to do with gambling for money, but also manage the contingent hazards pertaining to the maintenance of identity and interpersonal relationships also placed at risk as part of the wager with The Banker as Evil Genius, and to make sense of it all on an incremental basis as the game (show) unfolds. To this end, this game of random numbers is endowed with meaning through its link with other transcendent or imaginary spaces created by the public articulation of certain deeply personal relationships and alternate subjectivities, omens or coincidences as articulated by the player at the start and on an ongoing basis throughout the game as a way of making sense of the subsequent random, if carefully controlled and ritually transcribed, series of events.

In this fabular context, the dramaturgical staging of the game and usage of space are significant. As Hoerschelmann (2006) states, the staging of the game show with respect to the positioning of the audience and other participants also conveys powerful symbolic meaning, particularly with respect to the shaping of norms of participative democracy through such popular cultural forms. Loosely based on the proscenium model in which the audience faces the stage, in game shows it is virtually impossible to maintain the illusion of the 'fourth wall', an aspect of classical Greek theatre which is particularly eroded by the frequent audience responses to the messages of The Banker, usually in the form of (rather polite) boos and hisses. This theatrical effect of illusion is also disrupted by the presence of the other players whose staging in the form of a broken arch (east and west wings) resembles the Greek chorus who, like their ancient predecessors, interrupt the proceedings to offer observations or advice to the player as a way of helping the audience (at home and in the studio) to better understand the unfolding drama. Though each of these interventions break the illusion of suspended belief crucial to the enjoyment of conventional theatre, at the same time these same disruptions serve to reinforce the equally critical 'reality' element which, according to Hoerschelmann (2006), has been a fundamental dimension of quiz and games shows as 'reality television' genres since their beginnings in the radio quiz shows of the 1930s and the inauguration of the television age.

The repeated appearances of the other players and frequent references to their social bonding with each other over the course of the series highlights their function as like that of Job's comforters, 'friends' who ostensibly offer advice and consolation to the poor contestant in times of crisis. Though the consolation is presented as genuine and well meant, at the same time it subtly underscores the protagonist's implied guilt as the source (usually) of their suffering/bad fortune or alternatively the fragility of their good luck, thus re-establishing the link between suffering and guilt as framed in the traditional ontotheological version of the theodicy as noted by Ricœur (1984). This 'comforting' advice is often (though not always) unsolicited and usually proffered when things are going badly for the player, implicitly bringing into question the integrity of his or her claimed otherworldly connection to a dead/absent loved one or the credibility of their integrity as worthy recipients who are genuinely deserving of 'life-changing' money, despite (like Job) the life story of honesty and virtue the player continually strives to tell and reframe on an incremental basis over the

course of the game. This form of sociality enshrined in the game between the player and the other contestants as ‘friends/comforters’ thus reinforces new forms of intimacy as ‘pure relationship’ described by Giddens (1992) wherein mutual disclosure of private thoughts, histories, hopes and dreams is key; or as friendship networks replace traditional marriage as the primary model for intimacy, sexuality is portrayed as plastic and adjustable, and bonding ties are loose, impermanent and easily re-established (Bauman 2003). Crucially, the consequences for these new forms of ‘liquid’ or ‘pure’ relationships and the rise of therapeutic discourse, as Jamieson (1999) argues, are that they serve to individualise personal problems or tragedies and downplay sociological explanations of suffering, disappointment and harm that place the blame for personal woes on the individual him or herself rather than assigning causation to external forces such as structural marginalisation or institutionalised social inequalities.

This decidedly ironic dynamic of comfort and support also offers the opportunity for *Schadenfreude* on the part of the other players and (more importantly) the at-home and studio audience, further supporting the suspension of disbelief in the fabular encounter with the metaphysical realm of evil and of the dead via The Banker. Here emotions such as desire and greed can be publicly indulged in a pleasurable monetary game of chance, if at the risk of testing the credibility of traditionally sacred or stable forms of intimacy based primarily on conjugal or family relationships. The seemingly random and chaotic nature of modern reality can thus be made sense of and ultimately resolved or ‘dealt with’ in this ‘extraordinary’ (a word frequently uttered by Edmonds to describe each contestant's game) encounter with The Banker as Evil Genius. In this context, the value of the individual and his or her connection to the ‘other’ metaphysical world and deservingness of emotional and material wealth in this world are symbolically rendered in the final amount of money eventually won. This phenomenal representation of spiritual and personal value in the form of a final cash sum in a popular game show can be interpreted as an intensification and narrowing of Weber's famous Protestant ethic thesis, whereby the contemporary ‘spirit of capitalism’ in global capitalism no longer pivots on the acquisition of material wealth achieved stoically through a lifetime of saving and hard work retrospectively interpreted as divine favour and passed on via the generations, but instead teeters vertiginously on the momentary possibility of winning a big money prize as the outcome of a random and single game of chance tenuously linked to a spiritual and/or love connection offered in sacrifice to the transcendent realm of evil over the course of less than an hour's broadcast. This story of ‘risk, reward and timing’ (listed on the *DoND* website as number 10 of 56 ‘Noel's Phrases’) is emblematic of the social order of modern global capitalism and its impact on relationships and identity in the age of risk, where the stakes are high and being a winner or loser is completely open to chance and not an outcome of knowledge, merit, effort or indeed material or spiritual desert. Rather such outcomes pivot on the need to take recourse to The Banker as folk devil widely blamed for being among the architects and ultimate beneficiaries of the evils of global capitalism, at whose altar these primary relationships and identity images are ruthlessly and irresistibly put to the test.

Hence for the modern subject, the phenomenology exposed by the ongoing encounter with metaphysical evil is neither one legitimated by the confidence of relentless scientific-technological progress nor of faith in spiritual-metaphysical eschatology, but a volatile and precipitous economy of exchange between the two, a repetitive, random and dangerous path, where either way death is the final destination (Derrida 1987). The abiding ethos of the game of *DoND*, as of contemporary modernity, is to accept and – as much as possible – enjoy the experience of the gamble and the frisson of the encounter with the evil Banker or the guilty

pleasure of witnessing someone else's success or bad luck, while at the same time being obliged to submit to having one's legitimacy and deservedness decided on the basis of the a single brief final (financial) outcome, risky though this chance and very public encounter is.

In a random and chaotic world dominated by the twin forces of risk and evil, the redemptive pleasures afforded by *Schadenfreude* and gambling fuelled by greed and the socially determined legitimacy of desert by others are not to be understated, particularly in a modern world where the evils of crime and other catastrophes have proven so resistant to the various mechanisms of state regulation and social control, a situation that seems to be deteriorating in a globalised world. The potential for a player's, all too public, humiliation at leaving with only a penny is very real, even if the performances of disappointment at this prospect by Edmonds, the other players and the 'pilgrims' is often in the event somewhat less than convincing. While there has never yet been an open expression of delight at this type of eventuality by the participants, such feelings have at times been strongly intimated, and on at least one occasion Edmonds has acknowledged that the at-home audience tunes in for just such bad outcomes. For on-screen participants, a certain level of decorum and restraint is expected if not demanded by an implied social code, with outright expressions of levity at the player's expense reserved for The Banker alone.

The evil laugh

The Banker's laughter is a sign of his presence and emblematic of the type of evil he manifests. As Pfister (2002) argues in his historical analysis of laughter, like sex, laughter is bound to social and cultural conventions relating to attempts to civilise, limit and control; whereas it was once acceptable to laugh at disabled people or inmates (people once visited Bedlam in order to have a good laugh at those with mental illness) or at the impoverished, or to indulge in racist or sexist humour, since the eighteenth century laughter has become ever more closely associated with sentiment and sensibility, denoting benign merriment and a sense of shared sympathy founded for instance on the appreciation of wit, ideally between social equals, often friends. Other types of sneering, bitter or malevolent laughter at or at the expense of those who are socially inferior or less powerful or fortunate (such as practised by The Banker) continues to be associated with the baser and less sociable or socialisable aspects of human nature that (again like sex, deviance or indeed criminality) have also been subject to social denigration through religious ritual and other normalising forms of civility or etiquette (qua Elias). The constant resurgence into public social interaction of these types of deep-seated urges or drives represented by inappropriate or even demonic laughter serve as reminders of our more depraved, anti-social natures, threatening the stability of the civilised status quo and reintroducing the notion of the darker aspects of human nature and the lure of obscenity, transgression, misanthropy and taboo.

Laughter is thus primal but also inherently social, inextricably tied to hierarchies of conventional and institutional power relations that are framed and bound by the rules pertaining to particular social situations. This is true even of the pathological laughter of the alienated, isolated individual (such as the villain or Evil Genius) whose laugh is often portrayed in film or television as disembodied, filling aural space from somewhere unknown or emanating from 'the beyond', as in the case of the fabular encounter with the Evil Genius via the Cartesian *cogito* and The Banker in *DoND* – making it all the more alien and menacing. This laugh is not shared or reciprocated, but the public performance of inappropriate laughter can be construed as a demonstration of social superiority or alternatively a desperate cry for recognition and empathetic solidarity (Fisher 2009). Either

way, this type of evil laughter from the margins can pose the prospect of the transgression or even subversion of the very same social hierarchies and orthodoxies from which it emanates through the transgressive incursion of the carnivalesque (Pfister 2002: vi). While it is generally considered unacceptable for those who are taking part in *DoND* (like Job's comforters) to openly laugh along with and thus identify with The Banker by enjoying someone else's very public and (so they claim) undeserved misfortune, such prohibitions do not extend to the viewing audience at home. The Banker's true evil is verified by the seductive qualities of his transgressive invitation for the viewing audience to join and identify with him in enjoying the public spectacle of failure, humiliation and the despair of the player. This invitation to identify with The Banker undercuts the multiple tropes of the television game show incorporated in *DoND* that encourage the audience to identify with the player, as noted by Hoershelmann (2006), through close-ups of the telephone, direct appeals to the at-home and studio audience, and the inclusion of phone-in contests. This contradiction echoes the aporetic qualities of evil as represented in the theodicy and elicits an 'alternation between a sympathetic-masochistic identification with the victim and the sadistic pleasure that such an identification might cover' consistent with the trauma-voyeurism dialectic of 'wound culture' (Seltzer 1998: 272). Unlike other forms of 'factual' television such as the documentary and broadcast news, the seemingly relentless parade of images of humiliation, disaster, suffering and despair are assuaged by this opportunity to find pleasure in and even laugh at the minor catastrophe of (another's) bad luck from a (socially) safe distance.

The link of laughter to Britishness, or more properly Englishness, as a marker of identity and shibboleth of social inclusion is also highly significant here (Pfister 2002: vii). As Pfister argues, this suturing of laughter to tragedy and horror in English culture historically has been established since the emergence of the English nation in the Tudor times, rooted in their distinctive sense of humour which pervades its literary and cultural tradition (ibid.: viii). But of course the most obvious cultural referent of The Banker as villain is with bankers as currently popular villains or folk devils who have through their unbridled greed and selfishness brought about a cataclysmic crisis in the global financial system, largely as a result of the over-extension of debt to those who are unable to resist or to pay. And indeed, as is usually the case with villains in popular culture, The Banker in *DoND* often laughs while he works, drawing attention to the classically Marxist contrasting fortunes of the spoiled capitalist fat cat and his counterpart the immiserated worker, an idealisation invigorated by the 'factory' trope in which the show is initially framed in its opening credits and the repeated designation of the studio as 'dream factory' by Edmonds.

Unlike Descartes' version of the Evil Genius or Satan in Job, the characterisation of The Banker as Evil Genius is significantly shaped by his implied gender, class, ethnic and above all national identity and physical embodiment. With respect to the latter, unlike the Cartesian Evil Genius, The Banker's evil is a characteristically venal form, a causal motivation for other notable contemporary manifestations of criminality such as terrorism and treason as currently denoted by members of the British security services (for example, Rimington 2002) and other experts in national and/or corporate security (such as Sarbin et al. 1994). The Englishman as villain, and his (as it usually is) possession of an elite identity codified in the classic upper-class accent, is a well rehearsed trope in many popular cultural forms, including television, popular fiction and film. According to Gillis, this fascination on the part of British audiences with the upper-class Englishman as villain reflects current cultural anxieties about threats to public and private security contained in popular cultural forms as being both globally omnipresent and at the same time intimately proximate, and that 'the most dangerous threat to individual, familial or national security comes from within' (2002: 7). Particularly for

British audiences, the upper-class English gentleman villain incorporates a number of aporia in terms of conveying popular cultural knowledge not only about the new world order but also the underlying status of British culture and identity in it in a postcolonial age. While the very British Banker represents a particularly potent example of a folk devil in contemporary popular culture whose excesses carried out in a newly deregulated environment in the City of London have been at least partially responsible for untold misery on a global scale, these same qualities of power, ruthlessness and greed are nevertheless valorised as they reconfirm the consequential potency and superiority of the elite British white male in a postcolonial context. In a new world order where Britain as a nation state has been accorded a secondary or even tertiary status within the global international community of nations and where the white coloniser has ostensibly lost his ability to explore, pillage and rule, The Banker as international villain reaffirms the resilience of British masculinity – albeit under continuing threat from ideologies such as feminism and homosexuality – and the greatness of the British nation state despite the loss of empire (Tosh 1997).

Against this historical-cultural context, the dyad comprised by Edmonds and The Banker echoes the relationship noted by Banner (2002) between James Bond as 007 and a succession of elite white male villains in the Bond stories. According to this thesis, the existence, motivation and modus operandi of Bond and his villainous counterparts is legitimated by the ineptitude of the existing legal institutions and other regulatory systems designed to detect, investigate and ‘deal’ with evil effectively as criminal corruption and malfeasance through the institutionalised legal-judicial system. This point is particularly well exemplified by the telephone scandals when *DoND*, along with a number of other high-profile television shows broadcast at the time, was allowed to continue to operate even weeks after unfair and exploitative practices had been detected and broadcasters warned by the regulatory body Ofcom. Hence part of the attraction of engaging in combat with The Banker in *DoND* is as a direct result of the public disaffection with state-run legal and regulatory institutions to ‘deal’ effectively with crime and achieve justice through legal-rational, impersonal and objective means.

But as noted in the growing scholarly literature on evil, while repulsive and destructive, it is also compelling and seductive, and in popular cultural forms (for example the proliferation of vampire stories), evil is linked to emergent knowledges of sexuality (as in Alford 1997; Icoz 2006). The intrinsic and transgressive sexiness of evil contained in the homoerotic undertones of the Bond stories in terms of the relationship between Bond and his many villainous adversaries by whom 007 is repeatedly ‘captivated’ but somehow never ends up getting killed is instructive, as is their adoption of the persona of the upper-class, wealthy Englishman (Banner 2002). Through his envoy Edmonds, The Banker has shown himself to have a penchant for sexual innuendo and has indulged in leering at contestants and audience members – men as well as women. It has also become a regular feature of the game for female contestants to express their latent sexual desire for The Banker, and to display coquettish or openly flirtatious behaviours in dealings with him. Coincidentally, it has become the practice for the player to kiss on the lips the contestant who has the box containing one pence, with much hilarity ensuing when the players in question are both male, or when there is a notable discrepancy in identity markers represented by age, class, sexuality or disability in evidence – reinforcing social hegemonies relating to taboos around male homosexuality and other anomalous couplings. The penultimate outcome of the game, second only to winning the big money prize, is to ‘spank’ The Banker by dealing at the highest possible offer. With all its innuendo of sexual transgression, spanking The Banker offers the promise for the player to turn the tables on the evil Banker by deriving pleasure from

subjecting him to the pain and public humiliation of this most taboo sexual practice that in many ways codifies the subversion of virtually every principle of Enlightenment rationalism through the undeniable venal pleasures of sexual aggression (Anthony 1995: 274).

Conclusion

In a culture struggling with the pre-eminence and legitimacy of institutions founded upon the values of rationalism, secularism, science, expertise, elitism, regulation and the hegemony of the state in crisis, popular cultural forms like *DoND* facilitate the redux of pre- and postmodern ethos such as represented by the ancient virtues of courage, the comfort of ritual, as well as the taboo pleasures of sexual and aggressive drives, *Schadenfreude* and malign levity as ways of making sense of, and also making the best of, modernity as a more or less bad lot. But this comes at a cost, putting already strained intimate interpersonal relationships to the test for the purposes of public entertainment and monetary gain, and thereby reinforcing an individualistic ethos of evil and social suffering over more structural or sociological accounts. In many ways, the fabular re-encounter with metaphysical evil via The Banker in *DoND* enables viewers and contestants to explore the seductive qualities of transgression, resistance, risk and taboo through emergent ideologies of participative democracy shaped by advances in communicative and media technologies. At the same time, the reliance of the game upon repetition, stereotype and the nostalgia of British imperialism, capitalist patriarchy and the (symbolic) humiliation of sexual violence lends itself to the reassertion of a constellation of cultural modes of social control that exceed the boundaries and mock the failures of legal-judicial-regulatory systems to deal effectively with these same social-metaphysical evils and the cause of multiple social harms.

Notes

1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Banker_\(Deal_or_No_Deal_UK\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Banker_(Deal_or_No_Deal_UK)) (accessed 23 August 2010).

2. 'Respect' is a word frequently if episodically invoked by Edmonds, usually with reference to The Banker's attitude toward the player in recognition of his or her 'courage' as a gambler unafraid of risk and/or guile as a reader of the game or their high status as someone who has emerged as a leader among the other contestants and someone whose advice is actively sought and often acted upon. This invocation of respect disrupts the 'democratic' levelling of the game by, for example, the exhuming of specialist knowledge or the use of 'ordinary' contestants; in this way, 'respect' represents a way of reintroducing the hierarchies of class and social status by the all-powerful Banker. As Holmes (2008) argues, class is an under-recognised but vital part of the game show, particularly in relation to the behaviour of 'ordinary' contestants who as 'real' people from less privileged social classes can sometimes prove to be unmanageable and problematic by behaving in what is deemed by programme makers to be an inappropriate or difficult-to-control way. Hence the granting of 'the respect' of The Banker by the host rewards 'good behaviour' on the part of the contestant and facilitates the reintroduction and reinforcement of strict and authoritative hierarchies of elite social power.

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