

Thesis Abstract

The present thesis offers to read six plays by three contemporary British playwrights – Sarah Kane’s *Crave* (1997) and *4.48 Psychosis* (1999), Caryl Churchill’s *The Skriker* (1994) and *Far Away* (2000), and Tim Crouch’s *ENGLAND* (2007) and *The Author* (2009) through the lens of Julia Kristeva’s essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror* (1982). Kristeva theorizes abjection as that which retains some resemblance to the subject or object, but is neither – or no longer belongs to the subject. Being confronted with the abject is unpleasant because it is threatening for the subject. It contains all that is habitually removed from life and does not belong in the symbolic order – corpses and excrements. Likewise, the maternal body needs to become abject for the infant to realize its own borders and bodily integrity. Kristeva proposes that the abject finds its way back into the symbolic order through literature, and reads a number of writers as being concerned with the abject. In the theatre, as well as in the visual arts, abjection has been a useful theoretical starting point, despite the fact that it is seen by a number of critics as something which cannot truly be grasped, and as resisting description and verbal imposition. Each playwright and each play includes a different aspect of the abject. Central to the readings are the ways in which the abject disrupts the language and order maintained by the characters, who are closer to indeterminate textual identities than to traditional, naturalistic, gendered people. The abject functions both as a positive and negative force. From subjects who find their identities incompatible with the requirements of the symbolic world, and seek freedom in poetry and death, to characters who gradually lose sight of what is right and wrong, and collapse into abject evil, all six plays explore contemporary crises of subjectivity and the ways in which theatre can (or cannot) resolve them.