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Abjection in Selected Plays by Sarah Kane, Caryl Churchill, and Tim Crouch

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Table of Contents

Declaration	ii
Permission	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
1.1. Abjection in Theory	4
1.2. Abject Art	7
1.3. Criticism	9
Chapter 2 Abject Infections: Sarah Kane	16
2.1. Overview of work, criticism, and reception	16
2.2. Abject Poetry: <i>Crave</i> (1998)	23
2.3. Cathartic Ritual: <i>4.48 Psychosis</i> (1999)	30
Chapter 3 The Female Abject: Caryl Churchill	36
3.1. Overview of work, criticism, and reception	36
3.2. The semiotic, “ancient and damaged”: <i>The Skriker</i> (1994)	39
3.3. The Abject as Spectacle: <i>Far Away</i> (2000)	44
Chapter 4 Dematerialized Theatre: Tim Crouch	51
4.1. Overview of work, criticism, and reception	51
4.2. “to understand what’s inside me”: The Abject Bodies of <i>ENGLAND</i> (2007)	54
4.3. Confessions of an Abject Writer: <i>The Author</i> (2009)	60
Chapter 5 Conclusion	64
Works Cited	67
Thesis Abstract	75
Abstrakt práce	76
Key Words / Klíčová slova	77

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Abjection in Theory

The present thesis aims to trace the use of abjection, as developed chiefly by Julia Kristeva within a post-structuralist theoretical framework, in selected plays by British playwrights Sarah Kane, Caryl Churchill, and Tim Crouch. In the space of three author-specific chapters, beginning with Kane's *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), continuing with Churchill's *The Skriker* (1994) and *Far Away* (2000), and closing with Crouch's *ENGLAND* (2007) and *The Author* (2009), the intention is to analyse their very distinct approaches to writing, staging, and performing abjection. At the same time, the trajectory is chronological, for its chief purpose is to highlight a shared genealogy of what Crouch has dubbed "dematerialized theatre."¹ While Crouch's experiments with radical conceptual techniques have become a staple feature of his work as playwright, Sarah Kane's early work is, by today's standards, conventional in terms of both staging and characters, which is why the focus is on her last two plays. Finally, the two Churchill plays chosen for analysis here are not signature representatives of her work, which spans several decades and is relentlessly experimental and diverse in terms of form and content. Nevertheless, the six plays share a tendency to forego traditional theatrical strategies of representation, even the most non-naturalistic ones, for the sake of purely verbal, if not anti-theatrical expression which, in the case of Kane and Churchill, has been described as "poetic drama" by Christopher Innes in his survey of 20th century British drama. Naturally, the use of abjection is

¹ Tim Crouch, "Interview with Tim Crouch Writer and Director of Royal Court's Adler & Gibb," *Aesthetica*, 5 May 2014, 23 June 2015 <http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/interview-with-tim-crouch-writer-and-director-of-royal-courts-adler-and-gibb/>

of special interest here, as by Kristeva's definition it constantly disrupts and threatens language,² and yet permeates all literature. Can abjection be staged without props and images, without "[t]hese body fluids, this defilement, this shit,"³ so infamously associated with Kane's work, dismissed by its first reviewers as "these familiar faeces"⁴ and "this disgusting feast of filth"⁵? And consequently, does the term allow for a broader understanding than canonically endorsed – specifically in connection with the theatre?

1.1. Abjection in theory

The term itself, despite being rooted firmly in psychoanalytic theory, has branched into different understandings and uses especially in the performative and visual arts, which are discussed in the following section. For Kristeva, abjection is a state first experienced in early childhood as the infant becomes conscious of their own bodily autonomy, and learns to distinguish their body from that of the mother: abjection fills the liminal space separating the subject from the object, the threshold one crosses to abandon the semiotic and enter the Symbolic. Crucially, abjection is sinister and violent because it is necessary: one cannot dwell in its destructive liminality and avoid, or even postpone initiation into the symbolic order – which is precisely what happens in the plays in question, as will be shown later.

Once the subject has defined itself – separated from the mother – abjection still looms large as a reminder of the semiotic s/he has left behind. Being overcome by uncontrollable disgust is how the body protects itself against a "threat [...] beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable"⁶ – i.e., the abject. The subject is able to deal with the object: the object purports a "desire for meaning" which the subject pursues; the abject, however, "has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I," and if the subject gives in and

² For Kristeva, language is composed of the symbolic (meaning) and the semiotic (rhythm and drives). In this she appears to differ from Lacan, who argues that the semiotic is fully suppressed in early childhood. In Kelly Oliver Ed., *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) xiv-xv.

³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 3.

⁴ Michael Billington, "The Good Fairies Desert the Court's Theatre of the Absurd," *Guardian*, 20 January 1995.

⁵ Jack Tinker, "This disgusting feast of filth", *Daily Mail*, 27 January 1995.

⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.

pursues the desire for the abject, s/he is “draw[n] [...] toward the place where meaning collapses.”⁷

Abjection is therefore instrumental in defining human civilization or culture as it always lures one beyond the borders of a given system – what Kristeva terms the symbolic. She illustrates this rather conveniently (nearly committing, one could argue, an act of ‘orientalism’) with the example of “primitive societies” who “have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.”⁸ She suggests that throughout our lives we retain the fear of falling back into the semiotic from which we have had to break away so violently. The abject is impossible to ignore, but also impossible to react to, as it constitutes “a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.”⁹ Naturally, the subject’s reaction to anything that is not part of the symbolic order has to be violent enough to protect it from it.

Kristeva is purposefully read here as a post-structuralist mainly because her work on abjection is largely influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan argues that language gives us sets of binary oppositions which can only exist and make sense in relation to one another. It is through learning about binary opposition that we construct the world around us to the point where we are unable to think or express ourselves without it, because it becomes the language we speak. In this way, the symbolic order uses language to regulate all meaning. The Oedipal stage, first theorized by Freud, becomes a much more complex formative process in Lacan’s work, and psychoanalysis no longer operates as a dual relationship between the analyst and the analysed, but as a triad where language functions as the third, crucial variable¹⁰. The “traditional binary opposition between what is real and what is imaginary” is replaced by “a

⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 13.

⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

¹⁰ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 49.

tripartite model of real, imaginary and symbolic,” and in psychiatry, this works to outline “the three clinical structures of neurosis, psychosis and perversion.”¹¹ Ultimately, post-structuralist writing is iconoclastic, as it takes to task the structuralist belief in the indispensability and unavoidability of binary opposition, and also theorizes that which comes before it in the psychosexual development of the human subject; this has been crucial for feminist post-structuralist theorists such as Hélène Cixous, who draws on Derrida’s concept of *différance* and, in *Sorties* (1975), dismisses the male-female sexual binary as “a fantasy of unity. Two within one, and not even two wholes.”¹²

Even though the abject is a cognate of *subject* and *object*, it is not a Lacanian addition to the subject-object binary and is not part of a tripartite structure as is the case with the examples above. Kristeva indeed arrives at the term “abjection” through a linguistic – structuralist – analysis of the French root word “jet” (jeter – to throw) and its etymological affinity with “jest”. As a system, it excludes (jests) – abject – abjects – casts off – what challenges it, all things “improper” and “unclean”: the corpse, the excrement, any thing that has become waste, and the maternal body¹³. But the abject does not stand alone: it has been, in a way, part of the subject prior to separation, but once parted with, it is unintelligible and therefore threatening.

Kristeva views abjection as dangerous and violent but ultimately truthful and subversive – it is an act of unmasking, a counterforce against the artifice of living in the symbolic. In terms of art history, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood have contextualized Kristeva’s ideas alongside theorists of the postmodern: “Like [Daniel] Bell and [Jean-François] Lyotard, Kristeva addresses a condition of loss of faith in unified rational or religious systems, though unlike them she sees the individual subject’s sense of abjection as the basic condition which these

¹¹ Evans, *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 50.

¹² Hélène Cixous, “Sorties,” in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), *Sorties*, 84.

¹³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

systems serve to mask.”¹⁴ Likewise, Kelly Oliver maintains that “[o]ne of Kristeva’s most important contributions to contemporary theory is her attempt to bring the speaking body back into the discourses of human sciences.”¹⁵ Abjection as a concept seems to circumvent established approaches to theories of subjectivity and connects much more closely with artistic expression. As a challenge to the symbolic order, as a reminder – and remainder – of all that “I cast aside in order to live,”¹⁶ abjection has translated into literature and literary theory. Body art and radical feminist art, too, either cite Kristeva’s book as a source of inspiration or perceive it in very negative, anti-feminist terms, creating artistic pieces which oppose it.

1.2. **Abject Art?**

From the 1980s onwards, feminist art has been particularly prolific, producing explicit content usually involving abject female bodies to raise questions about sexual politics and objectification. Rina Arya sees “abject art” as the heir of the radical experiments with body art of the 1960s and 70s, which sought to defy or escape the condition of embodiment – the “phenomenological state of the lived body that is defined by the situation of both being and having a body”¹⁷. These performances focused on extreme body mutilation. Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* (1974) let viewers violate or venerate the artist’s body using 72 objects; Charles Burden took a bullet in his arm in *Shoot* (1971). Artists were ostensibly trying to experience and showcase abjection to address “cultural ‘traumas’ and consumerist society,”¹⁸ as a form of returning to unmediated, primal experience, or possibly as an attempt to reconstruct their own identity. While they certainly succeeded in reasserting the freedom and independence of art and the artist, the nature of certain pieces was, in Helen Freshwater’s

¹⁴Charles Harrison and Paul Wood Eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 1999) 1137.

¹⁵Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva*, xvi.

¹⁶Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

¹⁷Rina Arya, “Taking Apart the Body: Abjection and Body Art,” *Performance Research* 19.1 (2014) 5.

¹⁸Rina Arya, “Taking Apart the Body,” 6.

words, “darkly disturbing, [they] were realised through manipulation or coercion.”¹⁹ The effect of such performances is, Arya contends,

a blurring between art and life [,] less hierarchical than theatre viewing [...] we are undone by the violent actions that we witness and cannot dispassionately view the process of abjection that the artist undergoes because it affects our sense of self, and ultimately we become abject through contamination by what we have seen and experienced and need to go through a process of catharsis or collapse of meaning before meaning and identity can be reconfigured.²⁰

Arya’s use of the collective “we” shows abjection at work in performance, whereas in the theatre, real shooting or defilement do not take place and nor does ‘real’ abjection: it always has to work within a mimetic framework. These extremities can in fact be helpful in distinguishing what is theatre and what is performance.

This is precisely the approach taken by Dan Rebellato in his discussion of the reasons that led so many British theatre-makers in the 1990s to write and stage extremely graphic violence in their plays: “acts of spectacular violence and dismemberment characteristic of in-yer-face theatre are, if not impossible, certainly illegal to perform on stage.”²¹ In-yer-face theatre, a term famously coined by Aleks Sierz in his book-length study of the same name, was mostly put on at the Royal Court Theatre in London and became such an established part of its repertoire that Tim Crouch was able to appropriate the discourse of the in-yer-face generation in *The Author*, which was commissioned by the Royal Court. Violence more than any other part of performance tends to be under the suspicion, on the part of audience members, reviewers, and academics, of being sensationalist and gratuitous with no deeper meaning or justification. Kane, in her first three plays, saw it as a way of vaccinating the audience against real-life violence; Crouch is sceptical of this approach, yet his work has also been criticised for being exploitative and since there is no visual representation of violence in

¹⁹Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*, 62.

²⁰Rina Arya, “Taking Apart the Body,” 11.

²¹Dan Rebellato, “‘because it feels fucking amazing’: Recent British Drama and Bodily Mutilation,” *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, eds. Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 205.

The Author, this opens up the question of whether violence is tolerated differently when it is told rather than shown, as the confessional narrative mode of the play is set against its voyeuristic elements. This is certainly not easily resolved. Rebellato compares filming violence and staging violence: “[Kane’s] *Cleansed* would be, in some ways, easier to do on screen, where the simplest digital effects could conjure Carl’s mutilation,” whereas the theatre is much more dependent on straightforward make-believe and tricks if it is to stage violence: “The more real it is, the less convincing it is, since the audience will always be aware that no real mutilation can be taking place.”²² It seems that the ability of the theatre to seek out updated strategies of representation is at stake – strategies that would not render it secondary to film and that would not leave it to bad reproductions of the newer medium – in a way similar to painting, which had to define itself anew and independently of photography which instantly took over faithful reproduction at the turn of the 20th century.

The possible connections between abjection and violence are not explored by Rebellato, who instead draws upon the postmodernist preoccupation with “the body in crisis,” and the efforts to show the human body as it has always been: never really “whole and healthily autonomous” but posthuman: “Posthumanists like [Donna] Haraway argue that [...] divisions of humans from animals have been cosy ways for patriarchy to universalize its own idealized self-image and to marginalize the messy and animalistic female body. Permeation by technology may indeed be a path to liberation.”²³ This positivist attitude towards technology is balanced by anxieties surrounding commodification – as can be seen in the plays of Martin Crimp, Mark Ravenhill or, as will be shown later, in Crouch’s *ENGLAND*.

Abjection is often used to discuss the artists and art mentioned by Arya and Rebellato – from Marina Abramović to the YBAs – even though there may be very few artists that would describe their work as “abject” or exclusively so. Still, Kristeva’s book resonated particularly strongly with the 1990s US art scene. In 1993, a group of students from the

²² Rebellato, “‘because it feels fucking amazing’: Recent British Drama and Bodily Mutilation,” 205.

²³ Rebellato, “‘because it feels fucking amazing’: Recent British Drama and Bodily Mutilation,” 194-195.

Whitney's Independent Study Program curated *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, featuring artwork which dealt with disgust and the body such as Andres Serrano's *The Morgue* (1992). The exhibition was inspired by the Kristevan abject and the artwork was brought together within this somewhat artificially imposed scope to interrogate and protest a climate of what Joseph Henry summarizes as

the concomitant Culture Wars and the identity-based oppressions inflicted by a conservative populace and its conservative elected officials. The AIDS crisis, the Watts Riots, the Anita Hill trial, anti-feminism, and the general collapse of the American welfare state all pointed to a historical scene replete with crisis.²⁴

The term "abject art" was used here for the first time simply as a "curatorial neologism meant to describe an art that either utilized or commented on abjection."²⁵ Henry writes that "[the] more astute critics" noticed "the curators worked with an overly stable definition of abjection's materials, as if shit or blood were irrevocably abject in its artistic evocation [...]. The looseness with which the curators applied 'abject' almost mimicked the condemnatory register they were trying to critique,"²⁶ which in turn was simplifying and reductionist for the diverse work exhibited. Theorists thus quickly recognized the potential of the concept of abjection to be used as a synonym for disgust or filth," and many have suggested that it would merit a broader debate and implementation. The fact that abjection was tailored to and adapted for the American context – in that it can be used politically – means that it has the potential of transgressing Kristeva's original definition.

1.3. Criticism

Critics and theorists have pointed out both the limits of Kristeva's enquiry and the alleged simplification of abjection by art practitioners. Imogen Tyler argues that the Kristevan notion

²⁴Joseph Henry, "The Suffering Body of 1993: Whatever Happened to the Abject" *Momus*, 27 Apr 2015. 22 June 2015. <http://momus.ca/the-suffering-body-of-1993-whatever-happened-to-the-abject/>

²⁵Henry, "Whatever Happened to the Abject"

²⁶Henry, "Whatever Happened to the Abject"

of the abject negates any possibility of representation as “the abject is resolutely prior to and in excess of language and meaning.”²⁷ To represent abjection – as the proponents of the so-called ‘abject art’ have done – is to bring it back into the symbolic order which it allegedly subverts. The concept of abjection merits an interdisciplinary approach and a metaphorical understanding, but there has never been a consensus as to what art is abject, and what is just its derivative or simplification.

Kristeva herself has read Georges Bataille as an example of an abject writer of abject literature. In his book on Bataille, Benjamin Noys confirms the notion of abject art as “the art of the remainder, especially the bodily remainder: blood, urine, tears, sperm, excrement, etc. It has often justified itself by reference to Bataille [and] [i]n doing so it assimilates Bataille as part of the new counterculture art market.”²⁸ Consequently, he argues that *Powers of Horror* effectively simplifies Bataille’s work by “provid[ing] a matrix for art criticism and practice which allows it to understand the abject as bodily waste,” and a discourse of the abject which has permeated the art scene, and used abjection for marketing purposes, whereby “the abject surrenders to meaning.”²⁹ For Noys, therefore, the simplification of the abject goes hand in hand with its commodification by artists who are exploited by the art market.

Before theorizing abjection, namely the necessary mechanism of the mother becoming abject so that the child can become subject, Kristeva developed in her 1977 essay *Desire in Language* Lacan’s “drives” to include the maternal drive. Judith Butler has warned that in trying to counterbalance Lacan’s symbolic by disclosing the subversive potential of the semiotic, Kristeva reaffirms the superiority of the former: “[Kristeva’s] naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability [...] Kristeva offers us a strategy of subversion that can

²⁷Imogen Tyler, “Against Abjection,” *Feminist Theory* 10.1 (2009) 5.

²⁸Benjamin Noys, *George Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 2000) 40.

²⁹Noys, *George Bataille*, 40.

never become a sustained political practice.”³⁰ Similarly, Tyler argues that however useful the concept of abjection has been for (American) feminist theory, Kristeva belongs firmly to the patriarchal theoretical canon. She sees Kristeva’s work as being divorced not only from the real manifestations of abjection but mainly from women, as it is written from the traditional, male, artist’s, vantage point. Tyler opposes Kristeva’s understanding of abjection as a historical given, especially the concept of matricide, or “the structural requirement that the maternal functions as the primary abject.”³¹ While certainly influential, *Powers of Horror* is still a rather hermetic text, and the ambiguity and elusiveness of the concept of abjection invite both endorsement and criticism which are not necessarily exclusive.

Clearly abjection cannot be taken at face value as an umbrella term for all that is controversial, uncomfortable, or liminal in the six plays, where it overlaps with examples of the sublime, the grotesque, the subaltern – and most importantly, the Other. It is a contested concept which is further complicated by translation and Kristeva’s arcane references. There are also connections to be made between abjection, spectacle, and ethics. Conversely, the form and language of the plays in question is deceptively simple. It is in the discrepancies and unreliability of characters, the blank spaces and glaring contradictions, and in the dramatic irony, that abjection may be found as the unassimilated remainder of complex theatrical ‘transplantations’. It works here as an exposure of the limits of language as the body infiltrates the discourse in moments where the pre-verbal, semiotic, abject amplifies the encounter between the performer and spectator. The theatre is able to bring down certain barriers through its unique, albeit limited, simulated conditions of make-believe. Encountering the abject can be an instance of uncomfortable and even unwilling act of witnessing, of transgression, and ideally brings about the ensuing experiential struggle not to become part of it, however fascinating it may seem.

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³⁰Judith Butler, “The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva,” *Hyapatia* 3.3 (1989) 106.

³¹Tyler, “Against Abjection,” 2.

Chapter 2 Abject Infections: Sarah Kane's *Crave* and 4.48 *Psychosis*

Sarah Kane's work, once deemed scandalous and criticised for allegedly lacking in moral or political justification for its gory violence, has received steady critical attention, especially since her death in 1999. She has been associated by critics with several movements or simply grouped with other dramatists of the same generation, labelled 'New Brutalists,' and, the one label that has become a widely used, albeit contested term, 'in-yer-face' theatre. Before exploring the reasons for these categorizations, it is worth mentioning that Kane herself opposed them. Graham Saunders documents these tensions in introductory chapter of his book *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, which came out in 2002 as the first critical study of her work. Saunders chronicles the various responses to her plays but does not endorse the need for "a particular 'reading' or theoretical approach,"¹ instead providing a rich repository of interviews and other primary points of contact with Sarah Kane, and with several theatre practitioners and critics who knew her personally.

Saunders devotes a separate chapter of his book to each of her plays, but the introduction inevitably discusses the premiere of *Blasted* (1995) as a crucial date in the history of British theatre. It pinpoints the shift in interest of the Royal Court away from politics and naturalism towards the work of younger playwrights who were, allegedly and infamously, interested in neither. The reputation of *Blasted*, which has been described in retrospect as "perhaps the least seen and most talked about play in recent memory,"² stemmed from the tabloid press which took pains to list every possible act of violence found in the play; while this has been well-documented and criticised as an entirely pointless approach to Kane's work, *Blasted* was quite unique in that it made the tabloid headlines at all. This led

¹ Graham Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) x.

²James MacDonald, "They Never Got Her," *Observer Review*, 28 February 1999. Quoted in Graham Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* 4.

many critics to wonder whether theatre could still be seen as a relevant public cultural platform. Saunders contends that the responses to Kane's writing debut were as galvanizing as those to John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* had been in the 1950s; once again it was not about the ideas or artistic merit of the play so much as about the uproar it had caused and attention it had received from circles far removed from the theatre. Saunders writes: "*Blasted* brought theatre, temporarily at least, out of hibernation to dominate the cultural arena, and perhaps more importantly, its fortuitous scheduling at the beginning of the year focused critics' attention keenly, not only on the rest of the Royal Court's season, but on new writing in general."³

Nearly twenty years later, *Blasted* is no longer shocking on a sensationalist level on account of its language or actions, nor can it be assumed that any audience member would find themselves in the auditorium by accident, not knowing what the play is about. It has become part of the British theatre canon and unsurprisingly, when Sheffield's Crucible Theatre had a whole season dedicated to Kane's work, *Blasted* was seen by an audience comprised largely of a group of elderly subscribers to the theatre who were coming to see a classic British play of the 1990s.

The reasons *Blasted* is not analysed separately here are twofold. It has received by far the most critical attention and literary canonization of any of Kane's plays, including in-depth analyses of abjection in the play. Meanwhile, the inscrutability of Kane's more formally experimental work – *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* – resulted in much milder critical response and has not generated the same level of attention. At the same time, they are much more radical in the writing of character and have their own poetic value which merits closer analysis in relation to abjection. This, in itself, is not a rare view. Saunders likewise sees Kane's writing as evolving further away from naturalism ever since *Blasted*:

³Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, ' 5.

Kane's eschewal of realism in language, which had begun in *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love*, became even starker in *Cleansed*, together with the depiction and function of character. [...] *Cleansed* began a process, which would continue in *Crave* (1998) and *4:48 Psychosis* (written 1999, performed 2000), in which character became more an expression of emotion than the outward manifestation of psychology and social interaction.⁴

It is not that character is absent, it is just conceived very differently to what it usually embodies. Meanwhile, the following pages provide an outline of selected critical approaches to Kane's work which connect with the close readings.

Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre* (2000) is cited in virtually any reading of Sarah Kane's work – even if its central arguments are often contested and not endorsed. Some of his ideas are worth revisiting here as well because what the kind of theatre he describes as in-yer-face inevitably touches on certain aspects of abjection as employed in Kane's plays. For Sierz, in-yer-face theatre is chiefly about shock: shocking content, shocking format, the intention being to “wak[e] up the audience” because the writer has “something urgent to say.”⁵ It is also a “search for deeper meaning, part of a rediscovery of theatrical possibility”⁶ and the alleged shock comes as a reaction to the unfamiliarity or boldness of form and content. Sierz claims that

[q]uestioning moral norms, [in-yer-face theatre] affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are [and] takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative.⁷

Naturally, if judged only on the basis of shock value, this type of theatre has its momentum, and has an expiration date; it can be safely assumed that audiences are no longer in for a shock when they see Sarah Kane's work, as has been illustrated with the Sarah Kane season at

⁴ Saunders, 'Love Me or Kill Me,' 88.

⁵ Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) 5.

⁶ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 5.

⁷ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 4.

Sheffield above. Indeed, one wonders whether a play like this fails if it fails to shock, or whether it has in fact succeeded in pushing the boundaries of what can be shown. The other indispensable quality, mentioned also by Sierz, is that the immediate, physical, in-*yer-face* shock corresponds to the materiality of live theatre and as such lies in the performance, not the written text. As such,

this kind of theatre should always have an unusual power to trouble the audience emotionally, to contain material that questions our ideas about who we are. [...] [T]he vocabulary of disgust nearly always involves ideas about what is dirty, what is natural, what is human, what is right and proper. Most in-*yer-face* theatre challenges the distinction we use to define who we are: human/animal; clean/dirty; healthy/unhealthy; normal/abnormal; good/evil; true/untrue; real/unreal; right/wrong; just/unjust; art/life. These binary oppositions are central to our world-view; questioning them can be unsettling. [...] ⁸

This chimes in with Kristeva's understanding of abjection as a force which has the potential to collapse binary oppositions and the systems that generate them. Both Sierz and Kristeva seem to imply that the effect of in-*yer-face* theatre and experiencing abjection, respectively, is edifying and life-affirming. Kristeva believes that "as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live."⁹ What complicates Sierz's argument, however, is that it works on two assumptions which are nearly impossible to test – authorial intention and audience response. Kristeva describes the gut reactions to being confronted with the abject; in in-*yer-face* theatre, abjection is part of the test the audience is allegedly put through, where shock seems to be at once a hopeful confirmation that they have not become completely immune to images of pain and violence, and that they still possess certain unwelcome assumptions about what is appropriate and (re)presentable:

⁸ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 6

⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

In-yer-face theatre always forces us to look at ideas and feelings we would normally avoid because they are too painful, too frightening, too unpleasant or too acute. [...] They summon up ancient fears about the power of the irrational and the fragility of our sense of the world [...] Experiential theatre is potent precisely when it threatens to violate that sense of safety.¹⁰

The reactions Sierz lists – fear and disgust – are the typical reactions to being confronted with abject material. In in-yer-face theatre, the basic labour of the audience – looking at make-believe action – is amplified; what is also suggested, implicitly, is that they are lured into the position of being voyeurs, lookers-on, and the process of looking draws them into the action on stage to the point where they are too intrigued to look away. This is not an attempt to generalize about audiences – it is rather a question of aesthetics and a general move towards staging abjection in Britain in the 1990s. Otherwise there is nothing much to distinguish between Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* and Kane’s *Blasted* in terms of disturbing content.

Elzbieta Baraniecka takes issue with Sierz’s label, which in her view “puts too much focus on the particular attempt to shock through aggressive and explicit images rather than the targeted response that these images are supposed to elicit from the audience, which is a powerful experience of indeterminacy.”¹¹ She is also sceptical about labels such as ‘New Brutalism’ because they “[stop] at the sensationalist surface.”¹² She argues that many other plays of the 1990s, including Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away*, seem to be artificially separated from their ‘in-yer-face’ siblings through Sierz’s category, although they have “the comparative power to intensely disturb and also affect audiences at a very deep emotional and/or visceral rather than cerebral level.”¹³ Baraniecka herself proposes a reading through the lens of the sublime aesthetic. Theoretically she draws from Lyotard who believes the sublime can subvert metanarratives. The experience of the sublime, Baraniecka argues, reveals “the

¹⁰ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 6.

¹¹ Elzbieta Baraniecka, *Sublime Drama*, 2.

¹² Elzbieta Baraniecka, *Sublime Drama*, 3.

¹³ Elzbieta Baraniecka, *Sublime Drama*, 3.

incommensurability of subject and object and therefore the impossibility of objective knowledge.”¹⁴

What is valuable in Baraniecka’s study is that she connects the sublime with theatre practice using Artaud’s theatre of cruelty – the “inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue.”¹⁵ In performance, the sublime “actualises” both this experience of cruelty, and the “exhilarating moment of the actual experience of the life force,” combining two seemingly irreconcilable sensations into “painful delight.”¹⁶ The resulting indeterminacy, which is the result and effect of this process, is another link between Kane, Churchill, and Crouch in their work and will be discussed later.

When Kristeva writes that “the abject is edged with the sublime,”¹⁷ she suggests a connection between the abject and sublime experience. Both are rooted in a loss of definable object, which is there but cannot be linguistically apprehended. As will be seen, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* are both, formally speaking, exquisitely poetic pieces, but thematically stage the loss of the subject’s ability to express “hermself”¹⁸ and the frustration of not getting their message through.

Abjection is part of Kane’s artistic expression, present across her work, and it is hoped that discussing it will be useful for a deeper insight into the plays, not an imposed theoretical framework. Writing about abjection in *Blasted*, Sarah Ablett’s argument is that Kane employs it on both a linguistic and thematic level to subvert certain expectations associated with the “domestic play.” Starting off with “the taboo subject of defecation,” Ablett argues, Kane lets “other abject actions and elements appear” and slowly but surely “[r]ealism gives way to dream logic.” In other words, “Kane’s carefully crafted movement from the social conventions of a domestic play to surreal imagery constitutes a regression from a symbolic to

¹⁴ Elzbieta Baraniecka, *Sublime Drama*, 2.

¹⁵ Elzbieta Baraniecka, *Sublime Drama*, 4.

¹⁶ Elzbieta Baraniecka, *Sublime Drama*, 5.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12.

¹⁸ Sarah Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen) 205. All subsequent citations from Sarah Kane’s plays are from this edition.

a semiotic order.”¹⁹ Ablett traces abjection in Ian’s vocabulary, then in his actions, and notes how after he rapes Cate, his body begins to fail and his illness suddenly manifests itself violently, as if “to punish him and remind him of the fact that there is something poisonous inside him that wants to be expelled.”²⁰ Conversely, Ian “regards Cate as polluted and infected with the abject,” and Cate herself “confirms her defilement and her wish for purification.” The dream (nightmare) logic of the play moves from verbal to physical violence which spreads like an infection, “the word becoming flesh.”²¹ Ablett proves that there is a structure in *Blasted* – not one that would conform to established dramatic conventions and naturalism but one of the abject, pre-verbal, surreal. It becomes increasingly clear in the course of the play that it is governed by an alien, unreal, abject logic: “Almost every abject phenomenon (defecation, rape, death) in the play is hinted at in statements before it finds its manifestation in real actions”. In this way, the play “excavat[es] the seeds of violence and the existential conflicts underlying every human relationship.”²²

It is the idea of infection, infectious language that turns into actions, that is mentioned a number of times by both Sierz in his book and Ablett in her article. Sarah Kane herself, in one of her most cited interviews, asserts that she would rather “risk an overdose in the theatre than in life.”²³ Elsewhere she describes her experience of attending a production of Jeremy Weller’s *Mad* – which reportedly influenced her like no other performance – as inoculation: “It was a bit like being given a vaccine. I was mildly ill for a few days afterwards but that jab of sickness protected me from a far more serious illness.”²⁴ This medical vocabulary echoes Plato’s ambivalence about the *pharmakon*, and indeed in Kane’s case her work is both revealing of the deepest ruptures and pain of the body and the mind, and hopeful that theatre

¹⁹ Sarah Ablett, “Approaching Abjection in Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*,” *Performance Research* 19.1 (2014): 63.

²⁰ Ablett, “Approaching Abjection,” 66.

²¹ Ablett, “Approaching Abjection,” 65.

²² Ablett, “Approaching Abjection,” 70.

²³ Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1997)133.

²⁴ Quoted in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 92.

has the potential to alleviate them through showing them as they really are. Using abjection, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* are confrontational and inviting, menacing and hopeful. *4.48 Psychosis* furthers the idea of collapse of the subject who “finds that the impossible constitutes [her] very being.”²⁵

Crave and *4.48 Psychosis* are often seen as Kane’s shift from exteriority to interiority, or what Clare Wallace describes as a “move away from the physicality of earlier plays towards explicitly interior, psychological spaces.”²⁶ The formal shift lies in the fact that these two plays do not include many stage directions in the traditional sense, and the way the actors deliver their lines is entirely at the discretion of the director. The content follows a similar trajectory. It is still, in Wallace’s words, an instance of “staging trauma,”²⁷ but it is reliving and remembering trauma rather than experiencing it live on the stage. In *Crave*, characters become voices and do not suffer body mutilation, rape, violent death on the stage, so the in-ner-face aesthetic is partially subdued; it is as if the characters of Kane’s earlier plays have come together and apart, gathered on the stage again, almost as ghosts, with their confessions and memories of past traumas which they have both experienced and caused. In a sense, it can be a much more intense and disturbing theatrical experience to witness the inner life of a traumatised subjectivity: ‘C’ could well be the ‘Cate’ of *Blasted*, finally free of Ian, now struggling to remember and to understand.

2.1. Abject Poetry: *Crave* (1998)

There are four characters in *Crave*, but their lines suggest an even greater number of voices.

Thanks to its complex rhythmic structure *Crave* can be read as a poem or as a song. The

²⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

²⁶ Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 222-223.

²⁷ Wallace, *Suspect Cultures*, 185.

poetic rhythm of the play, which many have commented on, is created not only by the distribution of lines between actors, so that there is usually only one sentence per line, but it is also in the content. The statements, ideas and feelings that are communicated sometimes come together and at other times directly contradict each other; formally the lines are often variations, differing by only one word. All this invites the reader or viewer to follow different threads in the play. Some connect with others, and some disappear, only to be picked up and interwoven again. Some are very minimalist, others run through the whole play and occur as repetitions or themes, such as the complexity of M's character. She is desperate to have a baby but refuses to connect with the two younger characters who see her as a motherly figure:

B: You could be my mother.

M: I am not your mother.

The line is repeated verbatim a shortly afterwards by C who is given the same response:

C: You could be my mother.

M: I am not your mother.

By the time M chooses to embrace her motherhood, however, everyone has turned away:

M: I could be your mother.

B: You're not my mother.²⁸

The figure of the Mother plays a significant role in both plays. In *Blasted*, *Cate* asserts that she cannot leave her mother, but it is unclear whether it is Cate who needs her mother, or the other way around, or both; the young woman 'C' in *Crave*, on the other hand, asserts:

²⁸ Kane, *Crave*, 168-182.

“Somewhere outside the city, I told my mother, You’re dead to me” (155) which M remembers or echoes: “You’re dead to me” (196) and C reacts defensively, “You’re not my mother.” At the same time, M is obsessed with her need to have a child, so the possible mother-daughter relationship of M and C remains contradictory and unreal. It would go against the logic of the play, which is structured through rhythm and fragments of text, if any connections were permanent between the four voices; their ability to hear one another and to react is deliberately contested and in this sense, there are four monologues and interaction only happens sometimes and is never really certain that it is there.

The thread I seek to unravel in more detail is a rather specific one: the characters A and C and their damaged relationship. This is not to suggest that they interact throughout the play. Their lines are as fragmentary and disconnected as those of the rest, and can and should be read as monologues too; the choice to see them in dialogue comes partly from fragments in their speech suggesting a connection between them and the Cate and Ian characters of *Blasted*.

Continuing with the proposed idea of infection in Kane’s plays, mentioned by Sierz, Ablett, and indeed Kane herself, it can be argued that the uneasy ending of *Blasted* does not provide closure. After all, Ian is not a good character, and his belief that Cate has forgiven him – in the last line of the play, he seems to thank her for it – might be a very mistaken one. Both Cate and Ian have survived, but what has been survived is a horror which returns again and again already in *Blasted* – with Ian dying and then waking up again. By the end, Cate has not received the purification she seeks: she is irreversibly contaminated by Ian, eating sausage

despite being a pure, vegetarian character, and drinking gin, Ian's drink of choice even when he is sick. She also compulsively sucks her thumb, just like she does at the beginning, suggesting that she has not overcome the trauma she brings with her to the hotel room.

In other words, there are echoes of *Blasted* in *Crave* which spin a damaged relationship between a younger woman and an older man which is based on sexual abuse, and it is once again abject abuse. The boundaries of what is proper are completely dismissed; rape is mentioned and remembered, but so is love. The central idea is that of A as the "shameless rapist," a term Kristeva uses to elaborate on the distinction between actions which are abject, and those which are not:

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a Savio[u]r.²⁹

There are many textual clues in *Crave* that C (or certain parts of her subjectivity, or voices) has lived through the trauma of sexual abuse; what makes it irreconcilable and unintelligible is her ambivalence about it. She is able to describe what has happened as 'rape' but she also experiences feelings of guilt because she sustains a connection to her abuser. At the beginning of the play, she confesses this to A:

C: If I could be free of you without having to lose you.

A: Sometimes that is not possible.³⁰

²⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

³⁰ Kane, *Crave*, 155.

Later on, halfway through the play, she struggles to remember what has happened: “Listen. I am here to remember [...] I have this grief and I don’t know why” and a variation on this last sentence connects grief and guilt, and is repeated: “I have this guilt and I don’t know why,”³¹ and this textual connection enables her to remember and list the places where she was abused: “A field. A basement. A bed. A car.”³²

In this sense, C leads a paradoxical and irreconcilable existence because she finds pleasure in being abused, yet feels just as victimized. In Kristeva’s understanding, abjection is “at the peak of its strength when [the subject] [...] finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it *is* none other than the abject.”³³ She also suggests that religion, being “unfailingly oppressive,”³⁴ has turned abjection of self into a tool of control and dependence: it is the “ultimate proof of humility before God.”³⁵ This mechanism transfers to human relationships, if we maintain the connection between religion and morality as control mechanisms of behaviour, and guards of the order abjection always seeks to undermine. As A finishes his powerful declaration of love, C seems to react directly to it:

C (*Under her breath until A stops speaking.*) this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop (Then at normal volume.) this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop

³¹ Kane, *Crave*, 171.

³² Kane, *Crave*, 174.

³³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

³⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 16.

³⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

This echoes Cate's attempts to protect herself as well as others from Ian's verbal and physical abuse. For his abuse is in fact a perverse need to secure the attention of Cate. Her stutter and faints and asking Ian to stop ("Ian, d- don't. [...] I t- t- t- t- t- t- told you. I really like you but I c- c- c- c- can't do this."³⁶) are triggered by his unwanted sexual advances but there is also a hint that her father might have abused her in some way. Cate says her fits have returned "since Dad came back"³⁷ and again in *Crave*, when A mentions a little girl being sexually abused by her father and grandfather, which seems to trigger a traumatic memory in C.

There is a feeling that some time has passed and that *Blasted*, a play which is "not behaving itself,"³⁸ as David Greig observed, is reopened and revisited, or at least the violence it contained. Another case that points out to Ian attempting to understand his own actions from his own limited and essentially evil point of view is that when A says, "I am not a rapist" and "I am a paedophile" this is a semi-honest confession of someone who has possibly had sexual relations with a minor but does not consider statutory rape to be rape in the real sense of the word if the young woman has voiced consent. Cate is 21 in *Blasted*; Ian is twice her age and they have been together in the past, suggesting that she could have been under eighteen. Even if she is not deranged, let alone mentally challenged as Ian likes to suggest, she is certainly deeply damaged and never in control of the situation – until Ian is rendered fully helpless at the end of the play and can no longer hurt her.

³⁶ Kane, *Blasted*, 14.

³⁷ Kane, *Blasted*, 10.

³⁸ David Greig, "Introduction," *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, xv.

Sierz considers *Crave* to be Kane's "most difficult work" as it is "about aching need and suggests that what we most crave may be the same thing that cripples us emotionally."³⁹ He suggests four main approaches could be used to read and make sense of the play. There are strands of narrative – storylines that can be excavated from the fragments; citations to be connected to their sources; the text enjoyed first and foremost as a performance – suggesting an attention to the poetic quality of the work and to its rhythm and overall feeling; and also as a very personal work which already includes fragments from Kane's personal life, so keenly analysed by readers of *4.48 Psychosis* – in *Crave*, Kane cites her own previous work.⁴⁰

Kane herself felt that *Crave* was different and demanded a new approach.⁴¹ Rebecca D'Monté begins her analysis of *Crave* by voicing praise for "the level to which Kane explodes characterisation and dramatic structure through her experimentation with language" which she compares to the tirelessly innovative work of Caryl Churchill.⁴² In this respect, D'Monté argues that *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* are in fact Kane's best work where "Kane's true artistic voice was understood and appreciated."⁴³ D'Monté even suggests that Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) present a similar "dissection of the character"⁴⁴ which on the one hand feeds into reading Kane's work as heavily influenced by high literary modernism, but on the other also points out the difficulty a reader encounters with texts, unless performed, where it is easy to get lost in the stream of consciousness and fragmentation and the voices collapse

³⁹ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 118.

⁴⁰ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 18-19.

⁴¹ Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, 17.

⁴² Rebecca D'Monté, "Voicing Abuse/Voicing Gender," in Clare Wallace ed., *Monologues* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 223.

⁴³ D'Monté, "Voicing Abuse/Voicing Gender," 224.

⁴⁴ D'Monté, "Voicing Abuse/Voicing Gender," 224.

together: it is difficult to find consistency of character or thought, which forces one to turn to different makers of meaning.

While the ending of *Blasted* has been read as Ian receiving forgiveness and appreciating Cate by thanking her, it could also be seen as a confirmation of his incurable sense of entitlement and arrogance whereby he believes she has forgiven him, and dies believing his actions are redeemed. In this sense, the emotional intensity of *Crave* disturbs the notion of a reconciliation. Reading *Blasted* and *Crave* against each other suggests that violence not only generates more violence, but also traumas do not go away.

2.2. Cathartic Ritual: 4.48 Psychosis (1999)

Kane's last play, *4.48 Psychosis*, has become as burdened by its subsequent criticism as her first one. She completed it shortly before her death, meaning that any academic readings of it have had to take this into account. It is a further reduction of dramatic means: there are possibly three voices or textual identities, unstable and contradictory. With early reviews considering *4.48 Psychosis* a dramatised suicide note, and later, balanced reviews looking to avoid biographical criticism, what emerges is a profound anxiety about reading textual material that deals with psychosis and the breakdown of the subject.

Writing about abjection in *4.48 Psychosis*, Carolina Sanchez-Palencia Carazo warns of the so-called Sylvia Plath syndrome, whereby an author's final work is read biographically and as interconnected with their suicide. Such simplifications eradicate the complexity of the language used by Kane to write and stage suffering. Carazo argues "one of the [play's] most

noticing [sic] aspects is the confluence of different languages trying to convey irreconcilable realities.”⁴⁵

Meanwhile, Baraniecka focuses on the rupture, or ‘rift’ between materiality and immateriality and argues that “the voice embarks on a desperate search for a true self that would feel complete and undivided” and, having failed, sees death as the only solution: “[t]he voice, after all, consists of language itself. It is therefore language that attempts suicide in the play.”⁴⁶ This approach resembles Ablett’s choice to distinguish between symbolic and semiotic parts in *Blasted*.

Others have looked at the emotional depth of the play and its effects. Alicia Tycer in her essay “‘Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander’: Melancholic Witnessing of Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis*” argues that “melancholic witnessing leads to the reader’s/audience members’ ability to appreciate the play’s broader political ramifications.”⁴⁷ Tycer believes that the play is written to incorporate individual human experiences through gaps and silences. She terms this strategy “experiential minimalism” and argues that it “requires that audiences and readers interpret *4.48 Psychosis*’s meaning for themselves.”⁴⁸ Tycer’s reading is important in balancing the one-sided critical interpretations of the play. On the other hand, it does little more than claim that *4.48 Psychosis* can be read as an open text, and performed as such. The idea of the open text, formulated by Umberto Eco, is applicable to all of Kane’s work but in

⁴⁵ Carolina Sanchez-Palencia Carazo, “4.48 Psychosis: Sarah Kane’s ‘bewildered fragments,’” *BELLS* 18 (2006) 4.

⁴⁶ Elzbieta Baraniecka, “Words that ‘Matter’: Between Materiality and Immateriality of Language in Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis*” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 1 (2013): 164.

⁴⁷ Alice Tycer, “‘Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander’: Melancholic Witnessing of Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis*,” *Theatre Journal* 60.1 (2008): 24.

⁴⁸ Tycer, “‘Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander,’” 26.

4.48 Psychosis this openness is greater because there are fewer certainties. The number of speakers, the delivery of lines, the stage directions are all missing.

Psychosis, as a condition, is commonly understood as a loss of touch with reality, and as such constitutes the central paradox of the play because the speaker regards it as the opposite: “At 4.48 / when sanity visits / for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind” and dreads the daily life, which is chiefly about medication and experiments with her brain: “When it has passed I shall be gone again, a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool.”⁴⁹ Only at night, without doctors and medication, she is in touch with her bare self, and is able to reflect on her situation. Suicide, in the logic of the play, is a sensible decision.

The unending tensions and mutual destruction between adverse forces are present throughout Kane’s work, including rationality and emotion, sanity and insanity, body and mind, and in *4.48 Psychosis* the mind, though considered ill, conquers the body: speaking consciousness prevails over character, so much that the play relinquishes its control of the actorial body. Interestingly, the speaker sees her mind, not her body, as a dark, old, Gothic-like building and her consciousness fills one of the rooms, but it is in the very ceiling that the “truth” represented by the abject cockroaches is hidden, and in a moment of clarity (light) these are let out.

⁴⁹ Sarah Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 229.

A consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floor shifts as ten thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellent as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one ever utters⁵⁰

The speaker is anxious that she will not remember this revelation, which to her is a way out of an irreconcilable existence and hopeless situation. She reminds herself throughout the text to “remember the light” and “believe the light.”⁵¹ The play thus stages a failure to communicate the “truth” which cannot be expressed through language except through metaphors and fragmented images:

I don't imagine / (clearly) /that a single soul could / would /should or will / and if they did / I don't think / (clearly) that another soul could / would / should or will⁵²

It is the Beckettian “obligation to express” and the paradox of having something to say knowing it will not be understood, but still believing it should be said.

Kristeva sees certain kinds of art and literature, and the tortures of the artist, as a repository of the abject in our culture, a role it has taken over from religion: “[T]he artistic experience which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity.”⁵³ Kristeva postulates that art takes over from religion the duty to contain and purify and ritualize the abject. This applies to pagan as well as monotheistic religions, all of which have their own rituals to achieve catharsis. As will be seen, in *4.48 Psychosis*, the speaker is torn between the church of her doctors and the church that is her own art. Ultimately, she has to choose between death and sanity, which she

⁵⁰ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 205.

⁵¹ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 206.

⁵² Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 222.

⁵³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.

recognizes as a “beautiful lie – the chronic insanity of the sane,”⁵⁴ and chooses death, even though she has “no desire”⁵⁵ for it.

In *4.48 Psychosis*, abjection permeates the speaker’s being. She no longer distinguishes between the semiotic and symbolic, and collapses. The speaking voice in the play collides with a suffering body it inhabits. The speaker is a patient, in dialogue with her doctors, but also an artist who feels compelled to draw from the very experience that is killing her: “They will love me for that which destroys me.”⁵⁶

The two roles are irreconcilable because as a patient, she has to undergo treatment passively, and relinquish control; as a writer, she is in control but only to the extent that the collapsing body in which patient and writer are united, will let her. As a patient, the speaker equates the mental institution with a church to whose ideology she must convert in order to be cured:

I came to you hoping to be healed.

You are my doctor, my saviour, my omnipotent judge, my priest, my god, the surgeon
of my soul.

And I am your proselyte to sanity. (233)

As an artist, she sees herself as the “[l]ast in a long line of literary kleptomaniacs (a time honoured tradition,”⁵⁷ and as such she equates writing with religious ritual with writers

⁵⁴ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 228.

⁵⁵ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 244.

⁵⁶ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 213.

⁵⁷ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 213.

stealing from one another (“Theft is the holy act / on a twisted path to expression”⁵⁸). The text also incorporates biblical language and quotes and writers are united in their pagan, or perhaps blasphemous, celebrations of the triumph of language. The “light” the speaker sees, and the “cockroaches” which represent the “truth,” are all part of a vision which is outlined again in ritualistic, pagan, ecstatic words:

Christ is dead / and the monks are in ecstasy

We are the abjects / who depose our leaders / and burn incense unto Baal⁵⁹

Control over the language enables the speaker to undermine the holiness of the doctors. It is in writing that she is able to describe what she sees, and so maintain connection to reality, including the iconoclastic revelation that the doctors will not help her, especially since some “you’d think were fucking patients if you weren’t shown proof otherwise.”⁶⁰ The speaker revels in her writing, and writes herself completely out of the appropriation and parody of medical discourse, where the subject is omitted, such as the line: “believes consultant is the antichrist.”⁶¹ Conversely, breakdown occurs when the speaker loses this sense of freedom and control over her own body and soul. She realizes that “when I am charmed by vile delusions of happiness, the foul magic of this engine of sorcery, I cannot touch my essential self.”⁶²

⁵⁸Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 213.

⁵⁹ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 229

⁶⁰ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 209.

⁶¹ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 224.

⁶² Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 229.

Interestingly, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* both end with the idea of the face as a shapeless mould of matter. C asks: “Patch and paint and paste a look onto my face.”⁶³ and the speaker of *4.48 Psychosis* closes with the words, “It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind.”⁶⁴ It is an escapist and extremely depressing vision of a subjectivity which never had a recognizable shape and existed completely outside of the symbolic order, visible to others but invisible to herself. The last line of *4.48 Psychosis*, “please open the curtains,” unites the spaces the speaker has had to inhabit: hospital curtains and theatre curtains, and signify death as the only way out.

⁶³ Kane, *Crave*, 199.

⁶⁴ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 245.

Chapter 3 Caryl Churchill

3.1. Overview of work, criticism, and reception

On the one hand, Caryl Churchill's plays can be described as the most overtly political, socialist, and concerned with various mechanisms of sexual, ethnic and socioeconomic oppression, of the three playwrights. She has frequently addressed current issues, debates, and conflicts. In particular, she writes into her work a complex debate about the role of women in capitalism, and about human rights in general. At the same time, most of her work especially of the last fifteen years is also hermetic, arcane, difficult to describe or characterize in bulk and rather similarly to Crouch, Churchill succeeds in producing a haunting atmosphere of fear and uncanniness, a complexity of characters and their unclear motivations through a combination of experimental language and non-naturalistic stage designs.

There is little space here to launch a comprehensive overview of Churchill's work, and it is also a task which has already been undertaken: from Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond's *Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill* (2009), to R. Darren Gobert's *Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (2014), and several heterogeneously oriented anthologies of British drama, Churchill is a staple focus of academic interest and despite being well-known and established (and possibly the best-known living) British playwright, she rarely comments on her own work, which continues to surprise and draw audiences. Instead, Churchill often uses her position to commend and support younger and emerging theatre-makers who are innovative and do something new: she has defended Sarah Kane when the need arose after *Blasted* came out, and she has also chosen Crouch's *An Oak Tree* (2005) as her favourite play of the decade.¹

Churchill has, broadly and chronologically speaking, worked in all possible branches of theatre, from her first radio plays in the 1970s, through ongoing work with collectives and workshops such as the Joint Stock, to some of the most powerful explorations of gender,

¹ Dan Rebellato, "Tim Crouch," in *Modern British Playwriting: 2001-2009* (London: Methuen, 2013) 126.

which she is still known for the best and which usually represents her writing in anthologies – *Cloud 9* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982), to plays such as *The Skriker*, which interlink the struggles of feminism and environmentalism against global capitalism.

In many of Churchill's plays, abjection could be discussed in most orthodox Kristevan fashion as pertaining to motherhood, or, to use Elaine Aston's more eloquent phrase, "resistant representations of the maternal."² Children are a staple feature of Churchill's work, too, and she often uses their lives as litmus tests for the conditions or systems she writes about or critiques. They are lonely, abused, abandoned, murdered, compromised to the point of losing their traditionally ascribed innocence, and even complicit in the suffering of others. Precarious connections between mother and child in plays such as *The Skriker*, *Top Girls*, *Far Away*, *The Owners* are broken and lost, or damaged beyond repair. Churchill often presents these relationships obliquely, only for them to later emerge as central to the story. It is not the mother that becomes 'abject' but the child and the risks it entails. Josie regrets murdering her child in *The Skriker*, but her reasons are never given. Extreme violence is not provoked by a single event or rupture but by a set of bad conditions; it is implied that Josie murders her child in some kind of psychotic state or other, which makes it possible for her to be institutionalized rather than imprisoned.

What emerges in the two plays chosen here is also an understanding of the abject which predates Kristeva – the politically abject figure in the simpler understanding of one who is "cast off," and the ways in which the abject, however passive, always provokes aggression because it resists assimilation and does not comply with the aggressor's forced rules. Conversely, the aggressor himself is abject because of his corrupt actions, and "kills in the name of life."³

In this sense it is a risky approach, as it does precisely what advocates of Bataille see as unforgivable – that is, extending the understanding of abjection to the level of politics, and

² Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 15.

seeing it as a potential influence in conflicts; the process of defining a part of the population as undersirables is much easier when they are part of us but in fact are not - and as such have to be exterminated.

In his seminal *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (2002), Christopher Innes approaches the work of Churchill as well as Sarah Kane's in a chapter called "Poetic drama." In Churchill's case, he argues that she is "a political writer" who "centres on psychology rather than society."⁴ This is not to say that Churchill does not contextualize, but that she favours subjective experience of certain collectively felt realities – or, "politics from a subjective perspective."⁵ Similarly, Elin Diamond in her essay "On Churchill and Terror" identifies an interest in "the indirect atmospherics of terror, the way it leaches into the psyches of ordinary citizens and ordinary lives."⁶ Given that Hannah Arendt is listed among Churchill's chief life influences,⁷ she often traces the 'banality of evil' from its first manifestations and little first steps towards desensitizing people and turning them against one another without anyone taking any responsibility or realizing what is being done. In contrast to these small-scale, individual tragedies and experiences, the conflicts Churchill depicts are often so enormous and global that they transcend the space of the stage to suggest apocalyptic consequences. This is present in *The Skriker* as well as in *Far Away*, but can be also said of Churchill's plays about globalization and world economies, such as *Serious Money*. To emphasize the hopelessness of her vision Churchill often writes into such plays an "obsessive dreaming of the powerless,"⁸ who are usually silent and completely passive, inhabiting a world in which evil always triumphs.

⁴ Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 512.

⁵ Innes, *Modern British Drama*, 512.

⁶ Elin Diamond, "On Churchill and Terror," in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, ed. Elaine Aston, (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 126.

⁷ Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views*, 19

⁸ Innes, *Modern British Drama*, 524.

3.2. The semiotic, “ancient and damaged”: *The Skriker* (1994)

Churchill wrote *The Skriker* in 1994. It can be characterised as a play where an indefinite past confronts an unclear and empty present and where the future is non-existent or referred to in very bleak terms. The past is represented by various characters, spirits, ghosts and creatures from chiefly English and Scottish folklore who interact with present-day humans through movement and silent actions. The only speaking mythological figure is the Skriker, and it is significantly a shapeshifter, usually female, who has lived through history and is, according to its own words, incompatible with the present: “You people are killing me, do you know that?”⁹ and belongs to the past where “people knew we mattered.”¹⁰ At the same time, as a character, it is as unburdened by history as the two women it stalks throughout the play -- Lily and Josie. It represents a group of familiar folk creatures but is itself a modern (or postmodern) element in the play, transforming into any form it needs to lure either Josie or Lily into the underworld.

The Skriker is capable of blending in with its surroundings but only for a short time, as it is always discovered, usually by Josie; what cannot be adapted to the present at all, however, is its speech. Poetic and rhythmical, nonsensical yet keeping certain structures and meanings so that something gets through, the Skriker’s babblings and incantations resemble Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* puns, rhymes and alliterations, where meaning is inseparable from sound yet both are somehow arbitrary. The Skriker connects words through associations with similar ones and disrupts established collocations:

Haven’t I wrapped myself up rapt rapture ruptured myself in your dreams, scoffed your chocolate screams, your Jung men and Freud eggs, your flying and fleeing? It was golden olden robes you could rip tide me up in but now it’s a tatty bitty scarf scoff scuffle round my nickneck. Give a dog a bone.¹¹

⁹ Caryl Churchill, *The Skriker*, in *Plays Three* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2003) 256. All subsequent citations from the play are from this edition.

¹⁰ Churchill, *The Skriker*, 257.

¹¹ Churchill, *The Skriker*, 272.

While the above example is one of the many attempts of the Skriker to hold a conversation, it also presents itself as a storyteller, which is in itself a redundant function in a play: the Skriker is obsessed with being loved, with getting attention, and with having control over events and history, but realizes its language is broken and not appreciated. It tries to tell its own story in the modern world: “So the Skriker sought fame and fortune telling, celebrity knockout drops, TV stardomination, chat showdown and market farces, see if I carefree, and completely forgetmenot Lily and Josie”¹² but the phrases it employs are misremembered, as if it does not quite understand what it’s saying, or as if it is forced to speak a language that is no longer its own (“see if I carefree”). While the result is a masterstroke of Churchill’s poetic writing, it is not what the Skriker itself wants; it does not want to be “ruptured” and instead seems frustrated that contemporary people recognize it so easily, unable to believe myths and ancient stories.

The idiosyncratic speech of the Skriker has been read through Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic, briefly, in Mladen Ovadija’s *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-garde and Postdramatic Theatre*: “[The Skriker’s] subliminal language retaliates against logocentrism, consumerism, and the belief in scientific progress.”¹³ This can be seen, for example, in the bar scene where the Skriker, has taken the shape of an American woman. She repeatedly inquires of Lily how the TV in the bar works, and finds out that Lily does not quite know. Still, the Skriker is determined to find out – perhaps in order to understand the world better:

Lily. “I don’t know how the TV works.”

The Skriker. “Would you like a ring that when you look at the stone you can tell if your loved one is faithful?”

Lily. “I don’t have a loved one.”

The Skriker. “I can fix that, no problem. Just tell me how / the TV – ”

Lily. I don’t know how the TV works.

¹² Churchill, *The Skriker*, 275.

¹³ Mladen Ovadija, *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-garde and Postdramatic Theatre* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013). Google Books. Not paginated.

Lily goes.¹⁴

The Skriker offers Lily the currency of fairy tales which no longer has any value, in exchange for something that cannot be given. The language (shape)shifts to adapt, even in between sentences, from the contemporary “I can fix that, no problem” to “if your loved one is faithful.”¹⁵ The Skriker’s magic is not wanted, having been replaced by magic technology. All it has left is a connection to another world, the Underworld, where both Josie and Lily end up going on their own, with very different outcomes. The Skriker lures them there one by one: Josie goes almost in spite of herself, realizing she is being tricked, saying: “But when you’ve lost her you want her back.”¹⁶

As one would expect, time in the Underworld passes much quicker, but feels like eternity to those trapped there, so that when Josie gets back she cannot believe Lily is still alive and at the same spot in the park. Kristeva describes the realm of the abject as such a “*land of oblivion*” where “[t]he clean and proper [...] becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame.”¹⁷ When Josie eats at her underworld initiation feast, she is incapable of distinguishing between “cake and figs.”¹⁸ In a purely non-verbal set of exchanges, Josie by eating underworld food becomes part of it, reenacting a well-known fairy-tale as well as biblical and mythological Greek trope. Again, this corresponds to being confronted with the abject, whereby one loses a sense of time and place. Kristeva writes: “time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.”¹⁹ Next, Josie is seen scrubbing the floor – having been imprisoned by the Skriker in its true kingdom and being told that what she has eaten was, in fact, “Poison in the food chain saw massacre.”²⁰

¹⁴ Churchill, *The Skriker*, 259.

¹⁵ Churchill, *The Skriker*, 259.

¹⁶ Churchill, *The Skriker*, 268.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8.

¹⁸ Churchill, *The Skriker*, 270.

¹⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

²⁰ Churchill, *The Skriker*, 271.

If the Skriker's speech reflects the Kristevan semiotic, then the character itself can be described as a mythical personification of the abject. It does not belong anywhere in the present world, the real world of the symbolic. The symbolic, conversely, encroaches upon the Skriker's realm, the underworld: the spirits and ghosts are all mute and can only act silently, secretly. The Skriker is too "ancient and damaged" to be embraced as a single subjectivity, instead constituting a plurality of opposing characteristics. This is why Josie says, "She's horrible. There's something wrong with her,"²¹ even before finding out that the Skriker is not quite human.

Ovadija reads *The Skriker* as an instance of the Kristevan *chora*: "Churchill's use of excessive, libidinal vocality to characterize her damaged fairy deprived of the ability to bear children echoes Kristeva's idea of revolution in poetic language that originates from the instinctive sonority of the semiotic, maternal chora."²² Ovadija goes on to point out how different productions of the play have used these qualities of the language and have focused on physical movement or the sound of it. What emerges from the quote, however, is a readiness to identify the Skriker as a female, whereas its gender is not mentioned anywhere in the stage directions. It does usually take a female form, and is mostly played by female actors, but identifying it as a female means losing a crucial indeterminacy which contributes to the complexity of the figure. As Aston writes: "As an androgynous, archaic spirit, the Skriker offers the possibility of a point of origin outside of the gender binary, but one that s/he is not allowed to take up; is not allowed to 'be.'"²³

In a chapter devoted to Churchill in *Feminist Views on the English Stage*, Elaine Aston likewise connects the linguistic idiosyncracies of the play to the Kristevan semiotic. The Skriker is under strain because it represents a "damaged semiotic [which] is taking

²¹ Churchill, *The Skriker*, 264.

²² Ovadija, *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-garde and Postdramatic Theatre*, not paginated.

²³ Aston, *Feminist Views*, 30.

revenge on a world that has created yet denied its existence.”²⁴ As such it can be no other than a “nemesis figure [...] unleashed on a world that continues to neglect its mothers, its children, its future.”²⁵ At the same time, the Skriker does not haunt Josie and Lily in order to help them, or to avenge them, or to harm them. It transcends any ethical or consequential framework. It has its own needs and acts to satisfy them. It is autonomous and does not act on anyone’s behalf but its own. Despite Josie and Lily never discussing their situation, it is clear that they are among the most disadvantaged, and as such also in danger of agreeing to the Skriker’s demands because they seem as lost in their world as the shapeshifter itself, and have nothing to lose.

When read against Churchill’s other work, it is an implicit critique of the consequences of privileging, in Aston’s words, “production over reproduction.”²⁶ Indeed, precarious motherhood seems to be at the core of much of Churchill’s work around the beginning of the 1990s, and *Top Girls* in particular is widely read as a raging critique of Thatcherite Britain, pointing out especially to power-seeking women in aggressive professions (brokers, or, earlier, ‘owners’) who by becoming part of the system of capitalist oppression hurt other women as well as their own children. Aston links this concern to Churchill’s later work, most notably *Far Away*, where she identifies the same impulses of women to betray one another, thus perpetuating their enslavement within a system which uses them to its own advantage:

Far Away is a cautionary tale, not least for feminism. The cross-generational betrayal of women, of Harper and Joan, who choose complicity in the (male-authored) crimes against humanity committed in their ‘home,’ contributes to catastrophe. Education and labour systems that teach and train young women (and men) to make beautiful objects, but fail to instruct in the politics of their learning or their labour are dangerous.²⁷

²⁴ Elaine Aston, “Telling Feminist Tales: Caryl Churchill,” *Feminist Views on the English Stage* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 31.

²⁵ Aston, “Telling Feminist Tales,” 31.

²⁶ Aston, “Telling Feminist Tales,” 20.

²⁷ Aston, “Telling Feminist Tales,” 36.

One of Churchill's greatest formal strengths as a playwright is, therefore, her ability to convey very precise hints at current social themes or events while remaining extremely hermetic in writing the worlds of her plays, which are full of non-naturalistic, fantastical, or minimalist settings and characters and move towards abstraction and universality.

3.3. The Object as Spectacle: *Far Away* (2000)

The title of the play articulates a position imposed on the young character of Joan: she has to believe that no matter what is happening, or how far away it is happening, she is safe and on the right side of the barricade. Unlike *The Skriker*, which is comprised of short liquid-like shape-shifting scenes, *Far Away* is a triptych with actions in each part having consequences in the next. A young girl named Joan, who has no history or place of belonging, is staying with her aunt and uncle, and finds out that her uncle beats and tortures an unidentified group of people in the backyard. At first, she presents a possibility of confrontation: she is not satisfied with the answers her aunt gives her, and pushes and probes until she is given the truth. This strategy, however, does not constitute a moral decision; upon learning the truth, she does not choose to care for 'the Other' and help or at least stay out of the system. Instead, she chooses complicity. By scene two, where she makes grotesquely colourful hats for death-row prisoners, who have to wear them at their execution, she has become entirely numb and incapable of sympathy or even acknowledging what is really happening. Churchill once again unleashes an apocalyptic punishment for human evil: there are too many sides in the last scene to still keep track, and everyone is fighting for no particular cause except to remain separate from the others. This is why the belligerents are very numerous, impossible and absurdly specific, to the point where they verge on the humorous: "It was when the elephants went over to the Dutch, I'd always trusted elephants."²⁸

²⁸ Churchill, *Far Away*, 157.

This, of course, is also Churchill's very sinister vision of a world where slowly but surely violence and mass murder become the norm, and she shows how this becomes more and more probable with each young person – in this case, Joan – taught and conditioned not to care. R. Darren Gobert praises the play for the “eerie precision” with which Churchill captures “a world in which unambiguous ethical dicta – ‘crocodiles are always in the wrong,’ for instance – sit in an ambiguous ethical landscape whose ‘enemies’ elude precise identification.”²⁹

The strong ethical enquiry which the play solicits has been at the core of most critical readings. Mireia Aragay has focused on the ethical ramifications of globalization and its illusion of distance which she argues Churchill critiques in *Far Away* by making the play “mediate between the circumscribed space of the stage and the expansive spatial experience of globality, thus soliciting an intensified perception of global interrelatedness.”³⁰ This is achieved through a demarcation of so-called ‘life-zones’ and ‘death-zones,’ terms Aragay borrows from Étienne Balibar to describe the “cancelling out from consciousness of both the bio-political division of humanity and the violence that sustains it.”³¹ Like all major catastrophes and genocides, this can only be achieved by eradicating all dissent and replacing it with complicity, and the line between active and passive resistance does not matter, as is seen in the character of Joan. If she is to see the lives of the prisoners as abject, then she must not identify them as Other or objects: they become abject, a category “not radica[l] enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clea[r] enough for a defensive position to be established – one that implies a refusal.”³²

In Act One the two sides of the conflict are clearly given, in the second act they are amplified, and in the third they are part of a war of all against all which the original conflict

²⁹ R. Darren Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) 35.

³⁰ Mireia Aragay, “Globalization, Space and the Ethics of Witnessing: Party Time (1991), *Far Away* (2000), and *Fewer Emergencies* (2002),” in *Ethical Debates in Contemporary Theatre and Drama* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2012) 106.

³¹ Aragay, “Globalization, Space and the Ethics of Witnessing,” 113.

³² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 7.

seems to have caused and perpetuated. The parade in act 2, scene 5, is undoubtedly the most visually powerful element of the play. Churchill's stage directions make it clear that she wants to separate the minimalist, non-naturalistic space Joan occupies from the very naturalistic, deadly space where the death procession marches. Churchill envisions the following numbers: "*five is too few and twenty better than ten. A hundred?*"³³ As in *The Skriker*, the people here – reduced to ragged, abject creatures – are silent and wearing the hats Joan and Todd have been making:

*Next day. A procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners, each wearing a hat, on their way to execution. The finished hats are even more enormous and preposterous than in the previous scene.*³⁴

The hats are of course all Joan and Todd think about when they watch the spectacle and wonder which hat will go to the museum, and lament that it is a shame to "burn them with the bodies" (150). The fact that the hats get bigger and bigger and more and more preposterous with each passing day is in fact part of the "metaphor for something or other" Todd fails to recognize, as they clearly cannot get bigger infinitely – they would soon fall off the prisoners' heads. Churchill seems to suggest that the spectacle of suffering is addictive and as the spectators become insatiable, new ways of getting their attention need to be found. When the hats cannot get any bigger, and the executions more spectacular, what naturally follows is that "It's all going to be downhill from now on" (149), as Joan says shortly after the procession has walked off the stage in one of the many dramatic ironies Churchill inserts into the play, foreshadowing the upcoming collapse of all categories and boundaries, and completing the moral degradation of Joan, for whom mass executions are not 'downhill' enough.

The executions take the form of voyeuristic spectacle, which is no longer about the human bodies, which have been reduced to nothing more walking hat sticks: everyone wants to see the hats they are wearing, and hat-making has become a leading industry complete with

³³ Churchill, *Far Away*, 132.

³⁴ Churchill, *Far Away*, 149.

unions and business negotiations, and there is a suggestion that it is only one of the many industries created around executions: when Joan worries that “[w]e might not get jobs in hats again,” Todd says, “[t]here’s other parades.”³⁵ Churchill shows a dystopian textbook version of the worst realization of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), a world where all real experience has been replaced by “universal separation,”³⁶ and the spectacle has become “the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep.”³⁷

Joan is able to make hats for executions because she has learned to enjoy the spectacle through which a mass extermination is being legitimized: her natural instinct to denounce violence and her sympathy for the beaten children in her uncle’s backyard have been sedated by the addictive lure of witnessing the death of a designated group of undesirable objects – for the spectacle she enjoys functions as a permanent “opium war” in which “consumable survival must constantly expand.”³⁸ And this death happens not as a form of punishment, such as the execution Joan of Arc, but purely as a celebration of excess in a regime which can afford to march human beings to display “preposterous” hats, and this is why their march is called a “parade.” For the spectacle is, in Debord’s words,

[n]ot a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society’s unreality. [...] The spectacle [...] is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have *already been made* in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system.³⁹

This is why the design of the hats in *Far Away* is so highly valued and is part of fashion. They are discussed as objects of art which are somehow not part of mass production: despite being made on a large scale, craftsmanship is valued and every hat seems to be an original,

³⁵ Churchill, *Far Away*, 151.

³⁶ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2005) 7.

³⁷ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 12.

³⁸ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 22.

³⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 6.

handmade by a person who can then hope to have it displayed in a museum. In other words, the hat becomes highly valued, whereas humans become “bodies” the burning of which brings about the tragedy of burning the hats alongside them: “You make beauty and it disappears. I like that.”⁴⁰

This connects with the focus of contemporary society on the visual, or, what Kristeva terms “the culture of the image” which replaces “the culture of words.”⁴¹ Tina Charter in her study of abjection in film summarizes Kristeva’s readings of Debord, namely in *Intimate Revolt* (*La Révolte Intime*, 1997) as “Kristeva’s suspicion of the image as spectacle, and her proposed solution of a rehabilitation of the imaginary.”⁴² Kristeva distinguishes between images which perpetuate the society of the spectacle, and those which have a potential to “reconnect drives and signs.”⁴³

In other words, even if contemporary society is plagued by images which are nothing more than simulacra, there are still works of art which retain the *jouissance* of artistic creation – such as *Far Away*, a fantastical and imaginative play which stages a spectacle, and its consequences, created through the complicity of artists – or workers, as the case may be – with a regime or society which has commodified their work and where the object has become the “narcissistic [...] artist who practices his art as a ‘business.’”⁴⁴ If one sustains a belief in what Nicholas Ridout terms the ‘ethical encounter,’⁴⁵ this play is indeed an example of theatre which is political through its appeal to spectators to resist a process of capitalist globalization and people coming apart that is so widespread that it is as unrecognizable as the spectacle that nurtures it; the spectators are invited, to use Aragay’s words, to become “witnesses, asking

⁴⁰ Churchill, *Far Away*, 150.

⁴¹ From Kristeva’s *Intimate Revolt*, as quoted in Tina Charter, *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish, and the Nature of Difference* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008) 116.

⁴² Charter, *The Picture of Abjection*, 116.

⁴³ As quoted in Charter, *The Picture of Abjection*, 117.

⁴⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 16.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre & Ethics* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 54.

them to *see* that the death-zone is not truly far away, but actually, in its banality, sustains life in the life-zone.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Aragay, “Globalization, Space and the Ethics of Witnessing,” 115.

Chapter 4 Tim Crouch

4.1. Overview of work, criticism, and reception

Tim Crouch describes his theatre as “dematerialized,” that is, “a theatre that is closer to being a conceptual artwork than a figurative or representational form.”¹ The visual arts, along with the aesthetic response that they elicit from viewers, are an enthusiastically acknowledged source of inspiration, interaction, and interrogation, but they are not simply appropriated: above all, Crouch seeks to explore the “potential of theatre.”² Consequently, one of the main trajectories in the critical reception of his work has been to map these sources.

Stephen Bottoms, in particular, has successfully described the ways in which Crouch’s work bridges performance art, conceptual art, and theatre. According to Bottoms, Crouch’s interest in forging “compelling dramatic narratives” indicates “a powerful reinvigoration of dramatic traditions rather than a step beyond them.”³ Performances of Crouch’s plays retain and reify the theatrical truth of their own individuality and ephemerality while their numerous blank spaces – or, perhaps, well-directed cracks – help “authorize”⁴ the audience to put forward its responses. At the same time, however, the audience has a limited set of possibilities in this regard compared to contemporary immersive theatre, for example, as the plays remain scripted and rely on predictable responses.

In *The Author*, the audience is asked questions including, “Do you want me to stop?”⁵, but the actors have to carry on regardless of the answers, some of which turned out to be interesting in themselves.⁶ This is not a failure but, rather, a deliberate (and risky)

¹ “Interview with Tim Crouch Writer and Director of Royal Court’s Adler & Gibb,” *Aesthetica* 5 May 2014. 1 Dec. 2015. <http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/interview-with-tim-crouch-writer-and-director-of-royal-courts-adler-and-gibb/>

² “Interview with Tim Crouch Writer and Director of Royal Court’s Adler & Gibb,” *Aesthetica* 5 May 2014. 1 Dec. 2015.

³ Stephen Bottoms, “Authorizing the Audience: The Conceptual Drama of Tim Crouch,” *Performance Research* 14.1 (2009): 67.

⁴ Stephen Bottoms, “Authorizing the Audience: The Conceptual Drama of Tim Crouch,” 67.

⁵ *The Author*, in Tim Crouch, *Plays One* (London: Oberon Books, 2011) 170. All subsequent citations from *The Author* and *ENGLAND* are from this edition.

⁶ See Helen Iball, “A Mouth to Feed Me: Reflections Inspired by the Poster for Tim Crouch’s *The Author*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 21.4 (2011): 437.

interrogation of authority and authorship. In *The Author*, it is a risk carried by the author-performer-character of Tim Crouch as he becomes a detestable, abject figure and deliberately leads the audience into confusion as to the boundary between theatre and reality, performer and character, and storyteller whose reliability fluctuates throughout the play. In an interview with Siobhan Davies, dance choreographer, Crouch says that these strategies are aiming to subvert the traditional hierarchies of story-telling in the theatre:

[T]oday I'm authorised to tell you the story and tomorrow you might be the one who tells me the story and it's absolutely fine. [...] There is no training to what I do, there is just an existence as a human being in the space and the gnoseological space has given me a sort of significance maybe in this space.⁷

The signature “randomness” in Crouch’s work is something he believes is only possible (and, consequently, worth pursuing) if the structure of the play is strong enough to sustain it.⁸ It is also one of the most interesting features of his plays, partly because it establishes a web of interdependence between everyone involved in the performance. Usually, the narrative is more diegetic than mimetic, with the events taking place in the past tense, relying on the audience to construct and re-construct them. Likewise, the stage design is minimalist and entirely non-naturalistic to the extent that arbitrary objects sometimes stand for other objects, although this is used to highlight the fact that it is again a traditional theatre technique. As Dan Rebellato points out, “[t]here is no particular reason to assume that the relationship between the stage and the fictional world should be one of resemblance [...] All theatre involves a kind of imaginative transformation of the visual material before us into something else”.⁹

⁷ Siobhan Davies, “Siobhan Davies in Conversation with Tim Crouch,” 2 August 2008. 19 November 2015. <http://www.siobhandavies.com/conversations/crouch/transcript.php>

⁸ Siobhan Davies, “Siobhan Davies in Conversation with Tim Crouch,” 2 August 2008. 19 November 2015.

⁹ Dan Rebellato, “Tim Crouch,” in Dan Rebellato Ed., *Modern British Playwriting: 2000–2009* (London: Methuen, 2013) 132.

At the same time, this use of bricolage and the delivery of lines “vividly but without very strong characterization, emotional colour or physical embodiment”¹⁰ are now one of Crouch’s best-known strategies of “dissonance,” to use Rebellato’s term. These dissonances are also palpable in terms of movement. In an essay titled “Gentle Acts of Removal, Replacement and Reduction: Considering the Audience in Co-directing the Work of Tim Crouch,” Andy Smith explains the need for two co-directors in these plays which have very little or no physical action, and where the meaning of the lines is often deliberately in contrast to their delivery, stressing that the main reason for the pre-rehearsal directorial discussion is to find

an essence, taking away an excess, reducing down to some fact of theatre, of story, of us all together here. [T]he plays help us. They themselves are often looking to place something somewhere else, something that at first glance looks as if it perhaps shouldn’t be there, but that through this interrogation might begin to resonate and we realise that it absolutely can: no stage, or an audience upon it (*The Author*), a performer who is standing in front of us but doesn’t know the words or the story (*An Oak Tree*), a play that has been transplanted into a gallery (*ENGLAND*).¹¹

The plays therefore take shape as a form of intellectual exercise, while the questions the theatre-makers ask each other about theatre and the necessity of each element in the given play enable the implementation of different writing constraints to see what can be removed or replaced for the piece to still be theatre.

While plays such as *ENGLAND* or *The Author* break the stage/auditorium convention, one of the hypotheses they also seek to affirm is that a seated and silent audience does not imply passivity, and that a non-naturalistic and dematerialized play can in turn be more demanding and far more disturbing than staged violence precisely because there is no definite image. It is for this reason that Crouch’s published *Plays: One* are prefaced by a quote from

¹⁰ Rebellato, 129.

¹¹ Andy Smith, “Gentle Acts of Removal, Replacement and Reduction: Considering the Audience in co-Directing the Work of Tim Crouch,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 21.4 (2011): 413.

Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*, a seminal work in theatre studies – by a philosopher, not a theatre scholar – which postulates a democratic and egalitarian relationship between performer and spectator without assuming that the latter is passive and ignorant.

Because of the complex structure of Crouch's plays, they are never simply 'about' one single story or idea, and the fact that visceral subject matter such as abuse or death does not quite suffice is another update of the in-her-face experientiality. Crouch tests the notion that "nothing really happens"¹² in the theatre, and there is a great effort to blur the boundaries between tragedy, comedy, theatricality, and reality. In *ENGLAND*, *The Author*, and the recent *Adler & Gibb*, the theme of death permeates the interrogation of the play as a conceptual artwork and the meta-theatrical focus on the roles of the author, actor, artist, and audience. The direct textual references to Barthes's death of the author or Kristeva's abject help navigate the investigation, but at the same time they are playful, pre-emptive strategies, making Crouch's theatre at once "art [...] for all"¹³ and a fringe affair.

3.2. "to understand what's inside me": The Abject Bodies of *ENGLAND*

Crouch's published plays include a number of introductory quotes by artists and art theorists. In the case of *ENGLAND*, the reference point is Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube* (1976), a study of the relation between the artwork and the gallery space. Like *The Author*, *ENGLAND* was written as a site-specific play, but instead of a disclaimer connecting it to a specific gallery, the text adapts depending on where it is performed. Crouch is interested in allowing the "randomness"¹⁴ of the gallery space to resonate with individual audience members within the play's structure. Unlike site-specific theatre-makers, Crouch's intention is not to create

¹² Crouch, *The Author*, 192.

¹³ Crouch, *ENGLAND*, 116.

¹⁴ Siobhan Davies, "Siobhan Davies in Conversation with Tim Crouch," 2 August 2008. 19 November 2015.

theatre in non-theatrical spaces. With *England*, that's a play for galleries, it's not because I am on a search away from the architecture of theatre. [...] I want people to see more of the art and to be aware more of the hereness of here and the nowness of now rather than some tangential association with space and seeing. So we did it in an art gallery because it has to be an art gallery, it wasn't because it was a non-theatre space.¹⁵

Commissioned by the Traverse Theatre, *ENGLAND* premiered at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh in 2007 and has since toured many different galleries around the world. It has also been translated and adapted with other actors than Crouch and Hannah Ringham.

It is a two-act play, each act takes place in a separate room in the gallery. In the first act, the audience are both visiting a gallery and looking at an unidentified character as he or she is searching for heart transplant. The play is for two actors, usually male and female, both portraying this one character; at the beginning they also guide the audience through the exhibition. In the second act, which takes place around 12 months later, the same character, now called ENGLISH, visits an unspecified country to thank the nameless widow of Hasam, the man whose heart he or she has received. One of the actors plays ENGLISH, the other is the interpreter. Halfway through the act they switch their roles. The wife is portrayed by the seated audience. The audience become the wife as they enter the room where the second act takes place.

ENGLAND is Crouch's third play for adult audiences, and as such it echoes some of the concerns outlined in his earlier work, including the interrogation of the role of the so-called "authorial actor."¹⁶ Rebellato writes that during his long-standing career as an actor, Crouch accumulated a number of frustrations with "modes of theatrical production [which] disempowered and disenfranchised the actors by systematically excluding them from creative responsibility for the whole production."¹⁷ In this respect, *ENGLAND* is among Crouch's most challenging pieces: in the first act, it invites the audience to behave as viewers and,

¹⁵ Siobhan Davies, "Siobhan Davies in Conversation with Tim Crouch."

¹⁶ Rebellato, "Tim Crouch," 126.

¹⁷ Rebellato, "Tim Crouch," 127.

ideally, roam the gallery and explore the artwork at leisure while the actor is, in Emilie Morin's words, "recycled as both a gallery guide, charged with directing visitors to the gift shop, and a translator."¹⁸ In the first act, the terminally ill character (played by two actors) elicits sympathy – a moral imperative in the cultural framework of the play – only to force-cast the audience into the exact opposite ethical dilemma, that of the heart donor's grieving wife, facing its recipient. The second act showcases a typically, or stereotypically, parochial Western attitude towards an Eastern culture, which cannot be dismantled by emotion, access to art, or even facts as it has been carefully nurtured. The political potential of *ENGLAND* and Crouch's work in general has been stressed in an article by Christina Delgado-Garcia, who suggests that reading Crouch's plays through the lens of the visual arts does much more than just bringing the two forms together, as there is also a "thematic critique of conceptual art's potential banality, exploitative voyeurism, or self-involved obliviousness."¹⁹ Inevitably, these mechanisms prey on identities that can be said to be constructed as abject – politically as well as culturally – due to the inability of the main character to perceive his or her heart transplant as more than a commodity exchanged in a successfully concluded transaction. Even the symbolic association of the heart with feeling and emotion is broken up.

The mechanisms of site-specifics in *ENGLAND* make the audience participate in the theatre-making process, for example when the actors point at different works of art and say things such as, "Here you can see me in the early morning," or "Look how the reflections of buildings around us convey a sense of depth."²⁰ Stephen Bottoms has borrowed the term 'site generic' to point out that *ENGLAND* is made for galleries: but all galleries are alike, and

¹⁸ Emilie Morin, "'Look Again': Indeterminacy and Contemporary British Drama," *New Theatre Quarterly* 27 (2011): 73.

¹⁹ Cristina Delgado-Garcia, "Dematerialised Political and Theatrical Legacies: Rethinking the Roots and Influences of Tim Crouch's Work," *Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts* 8.1 (2014): 71.

²⁰ Crouch, *ENGLAND*, 114.

consequently, “[*ENGLAND* and *The Author*] are in large part about the standardisation of such art spaces.”²¹

In the white space of the gallery, the body is not welcome, especially when it begins to disintegrate and short, but intensifying, confessions of extreme pain begin to hack the aesthetic discourse:

I feel like I’m sliding around. / I feel swollen up. I feel beached.

These are the works of an artist on the wall and in the cathedral.

This is art.²²

The body of the speaker/narrator begins to fail him/her, and the text highlights its split between the gallery and the hospital. The two institutions are described in similar terms, using similar vocabulary, and shown to operate in the same ways through monetary transactions.

There are also multiple clues which suggest that the relationship with the boyfriend, who provides the money, is not idyllic and might in fact be abusive and co-dependent:

He hates / it when I’m ill. [...]

My skin is sore. [...]

Please don’t get the wrong idea about my boyfriend, though.²³

The guilt of the character-patient makes them distance themselves from their failing body, which they have come to perceive as an inner, unpredictable and unpleasant threat – abject. At the beginning, it is still perceived as “I”: “Something’s wrong with me. [...] Where’s my strength gone?”²⁴ As the illness progresses, the body is expressed through synecdoches and is scattered across the lines: the corner of the eye, the grey skin, fingernails, and then the arteries and increasingly abject bodily processes – breathing and perspiration. This is also part of Crouch’s examination of the role of the body in the gallery: as Bottoms points out, “[t]he

²¹ Stephen Bottoms, “Materialising the Audience: Tim Crouch’s Sight Specifics in *ENGLAND* and *The Author*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 21.4 (2011): 447.

²² Crouch, *ENGLAND*, 126-7.

²³ Crouch, *ENGLAND*, 119-120.

²⁴ Crouch, *ENGLAND*, 115, 119.

human body is an awkward inconvenience for the art gallery.”²⁵ This is therefore the intermedial exchange that occurs between art and theatre in *ENGLAND*, but it transcends the artistic level and becomes much more radical and political in the second act.

The body is eventually fixed with money: “It helps to have a rich boyfriend.”²⁶ As Jane Prophet turns the human heart into art,²⁷ Crouch turns art into heart: the art collector is able to secure a speedy heart transplant, possibly having negotiated with a Mormon hospital to move the prospective donor to another clinic. The transaction is completed during the transition of the audience into another room in the gallery, where they are seated. The heart recipient acquires an individual body and a name and the audience lose theirs as they become the silent character of the wife, and lines are delivered to them individually by ‘English’ and his or her ‘Interpreter.’

To quote the play’s official description on Tim Crouch’s website, *ENGLAND* is a play about “one thing placed inside another: a heart inside another person’s body, a culture inside another country’s culture, theatre inside a gallery, a character inside an actor, a play inside its audience.”²⁸ These transplantations correspond structurally to the heart transplantation which is at the core of the story. The meeting with the widow is a disappointment for ‘English’ whose politeness is not returned – she does not care for English’s life any more than English cares for that of Hassam, the donor. Crouch lays bare the widow’s feelings of resentment towards ‘English’ which are never part of similar encounters as shown by reality TV.

Conversely, ‘English’ is offended when their extravagant gift is not appreciated: the heart has been accepted, but the artwork does not ‘transplant’ well. There are particular cultural anxieties undercutting the exchange, and this can be seen in adaptations of the play in translation. In a 2012 Iranian adaptation of *ENGLAND* called *The Fourth Wall* by Amir Reza Koohestani, for example, the protagonist is a female character who has both an Iranian and an

²⁵ Bottoms, “Materialising the Audience,” 445.

²⁶ Crouch, *ENGLAND*, 142.

²⁷ Julia Crouch used a photo of Jane Prophet’s *Silver Heart* (2004) for the cover art of *ENGLAND*.

²⁸ Tim Crouch, “England,” 15 November 2015, <http://www.timcrouchtheatre.co.uk/shows-2/england>.

American passport, which enables her to apply for a heart in both countries; unwittingly, she ends up receiving her husband's heart after he dies in a car accident, which makes her confront her own identity.²⁹ Meanwhile, a 2012 Czech production of *ENGLAND* directed by Katarina Schmitt also opted for a female gender for the protagonist, and made the widow distinctly Eastern European-looking.³⁰ The more radical devices of the play, such as sitting the audience down as the wife and delivering lines individually to persons, are therefore not always observed in productions where Crouch is not performing. The silence of the widow/audience can be explored – and exploited – in many ways and contrasted with the anxieties around confronting the dominant culture's Other depending on the production.

When the text clashes with the original *mise-en-scène*, the wife becomes abject: she inhabits a grey area which is neither subject nor object, and her identity is inconceivable: she is from Manchester but does not speak English, and her family is scattered across the globe; also, when 'English' says "Hard to see how they're feeling with just the eyes,"³¹ the plural constitutes a breach of the fourth wall, as there are indeed many faces, and simultaneously belies the dormant prejudices which make 'English' unable to comprehend the woman's unique identity, and so extrapolates the appropriate "she" onto the collective "they." Apart from her face, other usual identity markers are also missing, such as her name, the country she lives in, and her voice.

ENGLAND is replete with parasitic phrases: overheard, overused expressions which can accommodate any meaning, or none at all. Like the gallery space and the hotel room, the text of *ENGLAND* has the same properties anywhere in the world. It is made of the most ordinary phrases from "look", "here", "Happy New Year!" to "You saved my life!" and "It is tragic to have a life taken away so suddenly." The locution is that of immediacy and direct contact, but the effect is that of interchangeability and distance. This distance is consolidated

²⁹ "The Fourth Wall," 20 December 2015, <http://www.mehrtheatregroup.com/the-fourth-wall#>.

³⁰ "Tim Crouch – England," 20 December 2015, <http://www.meetfactory.cz/cs/program/detail/tim-crouch-england>.

³¹ Crouch, *ENGLAND*, 149.

by the choice of ‘English’ to meet the widow in a hotel room – “somewhere neutral” – rather than interacting with her home country. It is an effort to chase away the strange dreams of animals he/she has been having ever since he/she received the transplant. It is an anxiety of being contaminated by the abject. As Kristeva writes,

In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task [...] amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless ‘primacy’ [...] Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, ‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject.³²

The actual experience of receiving somebody else’s heart seems to be subsumed under anxieties about the foreignness of the donor and under the pressure to not disclose any details surrounding his death to his wife, who has not yet seen the body.

ENGLAND’s two acts are titled ‘Dabbing’ and ‘Wringing,’ that is, two physical actions which are connected, if not causally then at least by association. Whatever is merely “dabbed at” in the first act is soaked and ready to be “wrung” in the second. In this sense, the ending of *ENGLAND* remains open to interpretation and directorial choices: on a textual level, the final “What did she say? What did she say?”³³ could be an act of communication, sympathy, or arrogance.

3.3. Confessions of an Abject Writer: *The Author* (2009)

Of the two plays discussed in this chapter, *The Author* is undoubtedly the more controversial one, also based on the fact that there were many walkouts and other negative responses in the first weeks of its run – perhaps not surprisingly, given the repertoire of the Royal Court Theatre, which commissioned the play. Unlike *ENGLAND*, it is unambiguously site-specific: the names of the theatre and of the Author character do not change, regardless of where the

³² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 18.

³³ Crouch, *ENGLAND*, 159.

play is performed. There is no stage: the actors are diffused and mix with the audience, who are greeted by the character of Adrian, a devout theatre-goer labelled by reviewer Philip Fisher as a “smiling archetype of Crouch Prozac-niceness,”³⁴ only for them to be lured into a sinister story of cross-exploitation. In Clare Wallace’s words, this strategy “promotes self-consciousness about being a member of the audience” through “performers’ disarming sensitivity to spectators.”³⁵ In short, politeness in *The Author* does not equal goodness, it is but a device which deconstructs familiar phrases and what they can really mean – a strategy also used in *ENGLAND* – thus commenting on the difficulty of true dialogue in art and life, and restating the need for a structure of a performance. A collapse, while certainly worth pursuing, does not seem to generate the liberating political outcomes sought by performers of ‘abject art.’

Pausing at the ornithological metaphor provided by the artwork for the play’s poster, Helen Iball argues that the main reason why the play polarised its first audiences is its complicated ethical dimension, including the fact that it showcases “archetypal modes of exploitation” in order to subvert them, thus “tread[ing] the very fine line between complicity and critique.”³⁶ *The Author* pulverizes its eponym: ‘Tim Crouch’s’ consummation of child pornography is only one of the many instances of exploitation the character has perpetuated. Beginning with the fairly conventional idea of staging “[w]hat had become possible in the world we live in [...] recently possible,”³⁷ ‘the Author’ becomes “more and more absorbed” in “following all the links on [his] computer”³⁸ – an obsession which eventually desensitizes him completely, to the point where he is only unable to make the right choice, and “decide[s] to

³⁴ Philip Fisher, “The Author,” *British Theatre Guide*, 28 December 2015, <http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/author-rev>.

³⁵ Clare Wallace, “Playing with Proximity: Precarious Ethics on Stage in the New Millennium,” in Mireia Aragay and Eric Monforte Eds., *Ethical Speculations in Contemporary British Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 129.

³⁶ Helen Iball, “A Mouth to Feed Me,” 441.

³⁷ Crouch, *The Author*, 177.

³⁸ Crouch, *The Author*, 177.

continue.”³⁹ The play also follows the individually told stories of the cast of his play who begin to be affected in their everyday lives by the extreme violence of the piece. Esther breaks down, Vic becomes aggressive, and their exploitation of the survivor of extreme sexual abuse, Karen, mirrors ‘Tim’s’ exploitation of them as actors. The stages a full loss of distinction between victim and perpetrator.

The Author does not offer any form of physical or verbal interactivity as the most straightforward way out of engaging the audience. Instead, the play remains scripted, which left some members of the audience, even the cast, slightly at a loss as to how to deal with the questions. One audience member wrote online that answering “yes” to the question “Do you want me to stop” did not, in fact, stop the play from going on.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, actor Chris Goode, who replaced the late Adrian Howell when *The Author* went on tour, reflected on his blog on the difficulties he encountered trying to tune the audiences to the play so that the work could be done, and on the unnerving reality of the walkouts, particularly at the very beginning of the play.⁴¹ *The Author* is a play acutely aware of its audience, and its creators also seem aware of the pressure to address it in a new and meaningful way while still keeping the overall structure of (a) play. In *Theatre & Audience*, Helen Freshwater contends that “for performers, the need to negotiate the reality of encountering a group of spectators, gathered together with the intent of watching their show, remains a pressing issue, regardless of the fragility, contingency, or transience of that audience’s collective identity (or indeed the internal debates which individual audience members may entertain.”⁴² It is no coincidence that the play includes as characters all the most important human factors for a play to take place: the author, the cast, the characters, and audience members, but never staying within one

³⁹ Crouch, *The Author*, 202.

⁴⁰ User Harry Giles, comment section. Charlotte Higgins, “The Author: Edinburgh’s most talked about play,” *Guardian*, 12 August 2010, 28 December 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2010/aug/12/edinburghfestival-theatre>.

⁴¹ Chris Goode, “Edinburgh Diary 2010: No. 3,” *Thompson’s Bank of Communicable Desire*, 9 August 2010, 28 December 2015 <http://beescope.blogspot.cz/2010/08/edinburgh-diary-2010-3.html>.

⁴² Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2009) 6.

layer, instead making Tim intersect with “Tim” and Adrian (Howells) with “Adrian” which is particularly “unsettling,” as Iball argues, for its “uncertainty over whether the actors are speaking about themselves.”⁴³

The play also scripts a number of possible responses, including the review and the walkout. While the review is parodied quite conventionally when Adrian reads from a real review and says, “Doesn’t really say much, does it,” the walkout is done so that it is not clear whether it is staged or not. As Charlotte Higgins says in her review of the play, “[t]he performers are protected by the script.”⁴⁴ However, they are also constrained by it in ways that the audience is not; it is the responsibility of the cast to handle the responses so that the play can progress.

Before ‘Tim’ calmly recounts the events that eventually lead him to watch child pornography, the central concern of the play is repeated: “I have the choice to continue. I have the choice to stop.” It is an in-yer-face moment in this otherwise “dematerialised” play, as it uses an extremely disturbing mental image to make a point about the complicity of the viewer with the perpetrator of violence or exploitation, which begins and ends with his or her conscious choice. ‘Tim’ does not decide to take his life out of remorse or disgust with himself, but because he has likely been discovered and is afraid of the repercussions. After all, he has also made Esther complicit in his voyeuristic exploitation as she will “of course” see the incriminating thumbnail in the morning. ‘Tim’ is then driven to become the Kristevan *deject* who

places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays [...]. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter—since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. [...] [H]e divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his

⁴³ Iball, “A Mouth to Feed Me,” 440.

⁴⁴ Charlotte Higgins, “The Author: Edinburgh’s most talked about play,” *Guardian*, 12 August 2010, 28 December 2015.

abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.⁴⁵

In a psychoanalytical sense, the *deject* does not have boundaries (does not operate within the symbolic order) but is constantly seeking them. In a more literary sense, this is not to suggest that ‘Tim’s’ behaviour can be explained as schizophrenic, but rather that the exposure to the extreme content to which he subjects himself eventually turns from noble, artistic, mimetic intentions (“if we do not represent [the images] then we are in danger of denying their existence”⁴⁶) to complicity. The culmination of the play is the “death of the author” in the floatation tank, as it is deemed “better [,] less classical”⁴⁷ than the original thought of gauging out his eyes. The decision to use a voucher and take his life in the tank is again one that has to be made: “Do I continue?” The responsibility of the audience is taken away; the authorial “I” has to make the final decision before it dies.

Kristeva seldom addresses theatre in her work directly, however in 1977 she published a short article titled “Modern Theater Does Not Take (A) Place”, where she asserts that “as its only locus of interplay is the space of language, modern theatre no longer exists outside of the text.”⁴⁸ Kristeva is suspicious of the theatre form as a whole, arguing that since modernity forces us to seek “the limits of the presentable,”⁴⁹ cinema may one day eradicate theatre altogether. Kristeva sees Artaud’s theatre of cruelty and Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco’s “discourse of verisimilitude”⁵⁰ as the two possible paths of interrogation theatre can take. The Artaudian model is understood as a theatre of silence, one that relies on “colo[u]rs, sounds and gestures” instead of language, thus exploring the realm of the semiotic – the pre-symbolic, primal, unconscious “thresholds” of existence. The Beckettian model interrogates the symbolic, and as such deals with either death or madness (for example, Robert Wilson’s

⁴⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8.

⁴⁶ Crouch, *The Author*, 177.

⁴⁷ Crouch, *The Author*, 203.

⁴⁸ Julia Kristeva, “Modern Theater Does Not Take (A) Place”, trans. Alice Jardine and Thomas Gora, *SubStance* 6-7.18-19 (1977-1978): 131.

⁴⁹ Kristeva, “Modern Theater Does Not Take (A) Place,” 132.

⁵⁰ Kristeva, “Modern Theater Does Not Take (A) Place,” 132.

Einstein on the Beach). Despite its datedness, the article offers an understanding of theatre which is not entirely at odds with Crouch's practice. An appreciation of the role of the "madman" as the one, who chooses to risk personal identification with his character to interrogate some of the darkest contemporary issues, cannot be expected at the end of the performance, which seeks to make him as abject as possible. As Iball writes,

The 'question' for spectators is: do I have the capacity to filter the information, to recognise as a spectator that the Company – and, particularly, Crouch – put themselves at risk of judgement, disdain, fury, abuse in order that spectators might recognise the abusiveness of their own conventionalised [and thus invisible] expectation of being served art at others' expense? Will I reconsider my responsibilities as a consumer, rather than leaving that to the producer?⁵¹

The interrogation of responsibility is not undertaken in a moralising, preaching tone: it lingers on after the 'death of the author' but it condemns 'Tim,' not the audience, leaving the play open for them to make the association with 'the birth of the reader' – or, in a theatre context, activating their own agency and interpretation, and even confronting hidden real-life complicities.

⁵¹ Iball, "A Mouth to Feed Me," 441.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

All six plays, in their respective ways, launch a critique of hegemonic institutions and privileged groups, be it mental hospitals, art galleries, governments, theatres, nations and churches, and point out to the fragility, ineffectiveness and ultimate failure of such distinctions. Kristeva's abject disrupts all these categories, and haunts the symbolic order they are expected to protect. Pre-verbal expression, the semiotic, the abject body, the psychotic patient, the abuser and the abused, the ethnic Other all undermine the rigid order imposed on the characters. The resulting collapse is never joyful, but it certainly works as an unmasking of the illusions created to repress primal drives.

Sarah Kane, who in Mark Ravenhill's words possessed a rare "classical sensibility"¹ as a writer, was concerned with extreme experiences and emotions, and her work thematically often occupies the liminal space, however thin, between life and death, sanity and insanity, and obsessive love which manifests itself as hate. At her best, Kane stages this liminality not as a clear demarcation line but as the site of abject pollution and mutual infection. In *Crave*, opposite voices collapse into one in a "falling towards light" which is "both a liberating shedding of the self and also the self-destruction of death."² Death comes as the only possible reconciliation of the voices, which are suddenly described as having been written solely for the joy of words: "don't forget that poetry is language for its own sake."³ Inevitably, discussing *Crave* in relation to Kristeva's essay on abjection has been the single most difficult task of this thesis. As a medium, the text resists simplifying statements. The voices of *Crave* express conscious, maddening desire for one another, which is paralleled with an equally intense sense of loss – of love, mother, or innocence. The choice to focus on the connections between A and C and their mirroring characters, Ian and Cate, in *Blasted*, sought to provide a reading of just one of the many directions one can take to approach the text and the various

¹ Mark Ravenhill, "Obituary: Sarah Kane," *Independent*, 23 February 1999. Web.

² David Greig, "Introduction," *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2001) xv.

³ Kane, *Crave*, 199.

themes which are recurrent in all of Kane's work and can often be traced in very specific textual fragments, lines, and phrases.

4.48 *Psychosis* was read through the Kristevan notion of the abject as the core of cleansing and cathartic religious ritual, which has been replaced by art – the “catharsis par excellence.”⁴ There are many instances in the play of Kane's ironic use of religious language to parody the superior position of the church and doctors over believers and patients. The artistic subjectivity of the writer emerges as the one true humble and abject existence, the “child of negation,”⁵ who is not proud or defiant about the choice to kill herself but sees it as inevitable, and asks for love and respect (“don't cut me up [...] I'll tell you how I died” 241) as she is aware that she can never be understood. As Kristeva writes, “It is only after his death, eventually, that the writer of abjection will escape his condition of waste, reject, abject.”⁶ Such seems to be the marker of truly abject literature.

Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* is situated other side of the ambiguity of the abject. The central figure stands for many things, but it is above all the reminder of all that has been silenced and repressed in the symbolic, and in the present world: poetic, semiotic language sounds threatening but has no power or significance. Its warnings are not taken seriously. By embracing the abject, that is, by following the Skriker into the Underworld, Josie and Lily choose to explore the forbidden aspect of their culture, the “most *fragile*, [...] the most *archaic*, sublimation of an ‘object’ still inseparable from drives.”⁷ While Josie manages to return with a feeling of having experienced something profoundly uncanny, Lily finds herself in a horror future, where she is faced with her own abject deformed “child's child's child's”⁸ who blames her for her current state, and Lily accepts food from her, securing her soul to the Skriker forever. In the landscape of *The Skriker*, the semiotic and the maternal/feminine have

⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.

⁵ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 239.

⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 16.

⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12.

⁸ Churchill, *The Skriker*, 290.

been repressed and abused for such a long time that the retaliation of the abjects turns against themselves and the Skriker can only offer protection through spiritual annihilation.

Far Away starts off with minimalist dialogue but Churchill's scope of interest is just as broad. The ethical dimension and the question of responsibility for the future is paramount as the play follows a woman's moral and ethical disintegration in the name of a dystopian world order. The abject existences of the prisoners become part of a spectacle which serves as entertainment, and failing to protect their lives results in a war of all against all, animate and inanimate objects. Individual complicity and a revoking of the mantra "I wanted to see"⁹ results in the complete repression of all that is different or intrinsically human, only to be replaced excessive, fascist delight in watching mass executions and the gradual end of the world.

Tim Crouch's *ENGLAND* positions the real, suffering body inside a gallery. The commodification of art is paralleled to the commodification of life. A painting is supposed to repay the widow's grief. In her rejection of the painting and her complete lack of gratitude lies also a critique of western patronization and attitude towards the East. Sympathies shift between Act One and Act Two: from the formless, abject body of the main character, which has been unnerving his/her boyfriend, and collapsing in pain in the middle of the white cube, to his or her indifference to the grief of the widow of the man whose heart he or she has received in order to acquire an individual body and face, and with them a new force to condemn the indeterminate, foreign woman as abject.

Finally, the format of *The Author*, a play taking place in the auditorium, is mostly confessional. 'Tim Crouch' ominously says, "harder almost not to"¹⁰: he has learned to watch everything and fatally collapses art and life. As such he becomes abject, because he has become part of what society pushes aside. The defencelessness of the abused child at the end and also of the formerly abused Karen is partly projected onto the audience, who is trapped

⁹ Churchill, *Far Away*, 113.

¹⁰ Crouch, *The Author*, 177.

and never asked for consent. ‘Tim’ seems to be confessing only part of the story: child pornography can possibly be found “by a couple of clicks”¹¹ but certainly not by someone who claims to have never done it before, and the lack of remorse also points towards possible hints that it is not his first time. What remains clear, however, is that there is a connection between the play he has written and his insensitivity to what really should not be watched. It is the passivity of the spectator: choosing not to stop and apparently the more one is exposed to this material the harder it is to abide by any ethical considerations. For ‘Tim Crouch,’ any ethical concerns he might have initially invested into the making of his play are cancelled out by the end.

¹¹ Crouch, *The Author*, 201.

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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.

Abstrakt Práce

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá šesti divadelními hrami tří současných britských dramatiků: *Crave* (1997) a *4.48 Psychosis* (1999) Sarah Kane, *The Skriker* (1994) a *Far Away* (2000) Caryl Churchill, a *ENGLAND* (2007) a *The Author* (2009) od Tima Crouche, a to skrze esej o abjekci Julie Kristevy zvané v anglickém překladu *Powers of Horror* (1982). Kristeva vnímá abjekci jako to, co nějakým způsobem připomíná subject či objekt, ale není ani to, ani ono, či již není součástí subjektu. Konfrontace s abjektem je nepříjemná, protože subject je jím ohrožen. Obsahuje totiž vše, co ze života běžně vyjímáme, a co nepatří do symbolického řádu – mrtvoly a exkrementy. Tělo matky se taktéž musí zapudit jako abject, aby si dítě uvědomilo své vlastní hranice a tělesnou integritu. Kristeva píše, že abjekt si nachází cestu zpět do symbolického řádu skrze literaturu a analyzuje některé spisovatele jako autory literatury abjektu. V divadle, stejně jako v umění, se abjekce často používá jako teoretický rámec, ačkoliv ji mnoho kritiků vnímá jako něco, co nemůže být uchopeno, protože se brání popisu a slovnímu uchopení. Základem této analýzy jsou způsoby, jakým abjekt narušuje jazyk a řád, který se postavy snaží udržet, ačkoli jsou samy spíše neurčitými textovými identitami nežli tradičními, naturalistickými lidmi konkrétního genderu. Abjekt funguje jako pozitivní i negativní síla. Ať už jde o subjekty, kteří své identity nedokáží přizpůsobit požadavkům symbolického řádu, a hledají své vysvobození v poezii a smrti, po postavy, které postupem času ztrácí přehled o tom, co je správné a co ne, a propadají se do čirého zla abjekce, všech šest her se zabývá současnými krizemi subjektivity a způsoby, jakými je divadlo dokáže (či nedokáže) pomoci řešit.

Key Words / Klíčová slova

Abject / Abjekt

Abjection / Abjekce

British Drama / britské drama

British theatre / britské divadlo

Caryl Churchill

Ethics / Etika

Julia Kristeva

Sarah Kane

Spectacle / Spektákl

Tim Crouch