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When is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts

In this article David Barnett investigates the ways in which plays can be considered 'postdramatic'. Opening with an exploration of this new paradigm, he then seeks to examine two plays, *Attempts on her Life* by Martin Crimp and *4:48 Psychosis* by Sarah Kane, in a bid to understand how their texts frustrate representation and the structuring of time, and concludes by considering how the restrictions imposed upon the postdramatic performance differ from the interpretive freedom of text in representational, dramatic theatre. David Barnett is senior lecturer and Head of Drama at the University of Sussex. He has published monographs on Heiner Müller (1998) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder (2005), the latter as Research Fellow of the Humboldt Foundation, Germany. He has also published articles on contemporary German, English-language, political, and postdramatic theatre.

The Postdramatic as a Category

THE LONG OVERDUE translation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater* into English finally gives a new readership an insight into a sophisticated and sensitive disquisition on forty or so years of innovative theatre and its aesthetics. The study looks at many aspects of theatre and primarily concentrates on directors and performers. This essay considers how Lehmann's ideas can be applied to plays themselves by approaching two recent British plays dramaturgically.

In the past couple of decades, texts written for the theatre have been displaying qualities that have made their association with 'drama' increasingly difficult to sustain. Before approaching the exemplary texts I have chosen to discuss, I shall take a little time to introduce the postdramatic as a category for theatre writing. As the name suggests, the term sees drama as a moment, however enduring, in the history of theatre and proposes a different kind of instance which critically interrogates some of drama's fundamental aspects. As Karen Jürs-Munby points out:

> 'Post' here is to be understood neither as an epochal category, nor simply as a chronological 'after' drama, a 'forgetting' of the dramatic 'past', but rather as a rupture and a beyond that continue to entertain relationships with drama and are in many ways an analysis and 'anamnesis' of drama.[1]

The term, then, can imply a reflection on the dramatic without necessarily presenting a complete break, yet, as we shall see, the postdramatic does not simply suggest an extra metadramatic layer either.

In crude terms, drama is defined by two key processes: it represents and it structures time. To take these in turn: representation corresponds to Aristotle's definition of mimesis, the imitation of an action. Actors represent characters, props represent objects, sets represent locations and so forth. The problems of representation in the theatre are many and varied, and I shall merely gloss some of the most prominent ones. Representation is never neutral: it is both selective and subjective, and both qualifiers reduce whatever is being represented in some shape or form because the referend will always be more complex than that which is distilled into a representation.

Various dramatists have, of course, attempted to expose the limitations of representation. Luigi Pirandello asks the theatre how it will represent an unhappy family story in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and concludes that the characters continu-

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ally feel short-changed by the representational strategies the theatre has at its disposal – their 'reality' cannot be compassed by the methods of the dramatic theatre. Bertolt Brecht, on the other hand, tries to expose the means through which the theatre engages with representation to reveal ideological structures that inform the process. In many of his epic plays, the individual is shown to be in continuous dialogue with conditions and circumstances, and a range of responses are articulated which, for example, resist a uniform understanding of the representation of character. Both playwrights use the dramatic theatre's own means to call representation itself into question, and generate a representational hall of mirrors: while they both continue to use representation, they point to its weaknesses and so implicate their own plays in the limitations of representation at the same time.

Yet representation is not only formally problematic on its own terms. Technological advances have radically compressed both time and space, and raise the question as to how one represents a world that is constantly shrinking. Recently, transatlantic and low-cost flights, the internet, and mobile phones have all radically affected the way we view distance and the time required to cover it. Information technology and the mass media have connected the world in ways that engender profoundly different ways of experiencing it. As Lehmann puts it:

> simultaneous and multi-perspectival modes of perception replace linear and successive ones. A more superficial and, at the same time, more encompassing sensibility takes the place of the more centralized and deeper one.[2]

Capitalism, too, in the form of globalization, has become the almost universal economic system and has exploited the new technologies to make categories such as distinctiveness and particularity all the more difficult to apprehend. With this in mind, the individuality of a character, for example, may well confer a representation with a sense of singularity where no such quality may be said to exist.

In addition, technology's and the media's ability to create simulacra, simulations of the real, further compounds the problems of representation: if a dramatist represents a simulation as a material reality without due dramaturgical scepticism, then the theatre is merely restating conditions it might be better minded to question. The postdramatic proposes a theatre beyond representation, in which the limitations of representation are held in check by dramaturgies and performance practices that seek to *present* material rather than to posit a direct, representational relationship between the stage and the outside world.

The Suspension of Linearity

Lehmann also views the treatment of time in dramatic theatre as a defining quality when he writes: 'Drama is the flow of time that is controlled and made manageable.'[3] The linearity imposed upon the drama is clearly at odds with the modes of perception discussed above where a particular and singular representation of events may contradict a plenitude of experiences. Dramatic action is the representation of moments, and when these are ordered, tensions, developments, and climaxes arise. The postdramatic, on the other hand, looks to the paradigm of the dream as a formal means of suspending the thematic flow of time. Dreams are episodic and non-linear: meaning is dispersed throughout their structures, so that, for example, knowledge of a dream's conclusion may not shed any undue revelatory light on the dream's possible significance.

The lack of sequential logic led Freud to wonder whether individual elements should be interpreted literally, ironically, historically, or symbolically.[4] The epistemological uncertainty of the dream seeks to infect the theatrical event in postdramatic theatre and so rob the stage of its ability to make material meaningful in itself. Instead, language and images are presented and passed over to the audience to experience and only perhaps to interpret itself.

The postdramatic theatre seeks to emulate the temporally unstructured literature that is

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sketched in the novel *Slaughterhouse 5*. Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction introduces the reader to the Tralfamadorians, a race that exists outside of time. This is the response of one of their number to the question of how they read:

> We Tralfamadorians read them all [the pages] at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when all seen at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvellous moments seen all at one time.[5]

The alien treats a confrontation with art as an all-encompassing experience of a particular chosen subject. Clearly *we* do not experience theatre outside of time, but the postdramatic aims to suspend linearity or at least to make it highly problematic in performance so as to mediate a rich and unprivileged flow of material that is concerned not with action but with a circumstance or a condition.[6]

The textual basis of postdramatic theatre is only a small part of the phenomenon. The words themselves, one of the dominant elements of the dramatic theatre, become just another element in a theatrical mode that militates against hierarchies in performance. With this in mind, there are many dramatic texts that have been submitted to postdramatic production, and the results, especially in the theatres of continental Europe, have led to a reconsideration of canonical and less canonical works in the light of their radical repositioning in the theatre. Plays such as Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (as directed by Christoph Marthaler, Berlin, 1997) or Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* (as directed by Michael Thalheimer, Berlin, 2001) have been viewed away from the strictures of their plots in recent productions and allowed to function in ways clearly unintended by their authors.

The (potentially) postdramatic text suggests itself as a relativized element for performance from the outset and points to its own indeterminacy and status as uninterpreted material. In the following discussion, I shall be concentrating on Martin Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* (premiered at the Royal Court Upstairs, London, 7 March 1997) and Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis* (premiered at the same theatre, 23 June 2000) to examine how texts may manifest connections with the postdramatic, following which I shall raise questions about the relative freedoms of postdramatic performance.

Attempts on Her Life

The most striking formal feature of Crimp's play is that it refuses to attribute character name to the spoken text. While this is not something new in itself – Peter Handke and Heiner Müller had been doing this a couple of decades earlier – the type of frustration Crimp engenders is. Other writers have indeed charted 'landscapes of consciousness' where unattributed speeches have gone into more collective realms of memory and experience; Crimp is, however, mainly writing recognizable dialogues, which are relatively unstylized and conversational. While early drafts of *Attempts* did have character names, Crimp has sought to problematize the status of the speaking subject in the published versions by replacing nomination with dashes.[7] In *Attempts* the number of speakers is theoretically limited only by the number of dashes in any one scenario.

The idea of text as scenario is to be found in Crimp's introductory note to the play: 'Let each scenario in words – the dialogue – unfold against a distinct world – a design – which best exposes its irony.'[8] The deliberate deployment of the term clearly opposes it to the more fixed 'scene'. 'Irony' is also central in that it implies uncertainty: the ironic, rather than signalling the opposite of literal meaning, points to an unfixed locus of meanings along a spectrum. The text would then appear to be offering itself as something undetermined and unfinished, despite its apparently naturalistic detail. And while one may wonder whether Crimp's 'distinct world' were an invitation to make the scenario concrete, the distinctness of the world may well be one that is globalized, pervaded by

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the mass media and inhabited by commodified notions of all that is encountered.

The world that is presented is a site of uncertainty and a lack of fixity. The question of geography and location, for example, is made problematic in *Attempts* by the frequent confusion reported by speakers as to where they actually are or where they might be. The very opening line of the play starts:

> — Anne. (*pause*) It's me. (*pause*) I'm calling from Vienna. (*pause*) No, sorry, I'm calling from . . . Prague. (*pause*) It's Prague. (*pause*) I'm pretty sure it's Prague. Anyway, look . . . [9]

The world of the play is highly compressed with temporal and spatial confusion impinging upon several of the scenarios, giving a sense of dislocation and of how unreal the experience of place can be in the contemporary world. Crimp's 'distinct world' is one that is no longer able to be apprehended.

The Presence of an Absence

There are seventeen scenarios in total and each one is concerned with the absent figure of Anne. She is referred to in all seventeen but never appears on stage at all. As Martine Dennewald notes, Anne is *only* constituted by language, yet this recognition then bleeds into our understanding of all the other speakers.[10] While they appear to articulate themselves in everyday language, we are asked to consider precisely whence their idiom and their attitudes emanate. Language itself is the focal point in *Attempts* because of its explicit lack of context. However, that it is eminently recognizable generates something akin to Brecht's idea of *Verfremdung*, of making the familiar strange. When representation is being eschewed in performance, common phrases are presented to the audience away from more habitual inflections as a way of calling the very bases of everyday communication into question.

The seventeen scenarios, which are discrete and self-contained, feature repeated motifs, discursive structures, phraseologies, and, on occasion, repeated lines. The particularity of the language is thus actively called into question and the spectator is directed away from the speaker to the systems that construct the lexicons and syntax of the spoken. Repetition in this play asks us to question the originality of an utterance or a discourse that seemingly emanated from an individual, and to relocate the instance of language in a more networked context.

Several of the scenarios feature the imagining, rather than the reporting, of Anne's exploits and her supposed characteristics. The act of imagining, however, follows such staid and predictable lines that one is forced to ask where the trite ideas are coming from and what is informing them. The fourth scenario, 'The Occupier', for example, seems to present voices discussing Anne as if she were a naive consumer who accepts everything she is exposed to in the marketplace. It opens:

> — She's the kind of person who believes the message on the till receipt.
>
> — 'Thank you for your custom.'[11]

The divorce of the speaker from the spoken in this short section alone asks the obvious question: who is speaking? The responses to this are unfettered in postdramatic theatre and beg answers that go beyond the notion of the apparently sovereign individual. The audience is asked to consider relationships between text and possible contexts that enable a re-examination of each.

The position that emerges in this scenario, just from these two lines, is that the first speaker is trying to distance him or herself from gullible consumerism while trying to construct an individualized scepticism that is wise to the ruses of the system. However, the generalizing 'She's the kind of person' places the speaker in the canalized language of the stereotype. The recognition of the stereotype by the second speaker then confirms his or her implication in the discourse. The demarcation between the speakers and the elusive Anne is thus false in that their language anchors them in the very systems they seek to criticize. A politics emerges that highlights the vast reach of socio-economic systems into identity, communication structures, and knowledge. An understanding of

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language as spontaneous utterance is revealed as a naturalizing fiction.

Language itself is rendered profoundly suspect in the scenarios, something that relates to the postdramatic category of 'language as protagonist'.[12] A set of insults, for example, are attributed to Anne and imagined by what seem to be film or television producers in the third scenario, 'Faith in Ourselves'. The same insults are then repeated verbatim in the twelfth scenario, 'STRANGELY!', and are again reported to be Anne's speech. Seemingly authentic text is exposed as pre-formed and unoriginal, despite the apparent naturalism of the lines themselves. When language is viewed as an active agent, the status of the human beings delivering the lines has to be modified – human agency in the text is fundamentally interrogated, and this is something of a regular feature in postdramatic theatre.

Divorcing the Speaker from the Spoken

The scenarios themselves are unrelated. The various Annes that emerge are not just contradictory but seemingly entirely different people. The order of the scenes is thus similar to the dream structure discussed earlier: there is no illumination for the spectator who pays sustained attention to the different Annes. If anything, she becomes ever more obscure as the play continues, as these new versions further complicate their referend. The texture of the scenes is also mainly 'undramatic' in that there is little sign of conflict: that is, the text pursues a certain line, however crooked, and is never interrupted by dissent or contrary positions.[13]

Dennewald only detects a divergence from this texture in the eleventh scenario, 'Untitled (100 Words)', which seems to present an argument between two or more art critics discussing the merits of an installation produced by Anne. The lack of conflict in the rest of the play is another index of the oneiric state: Freud talks of the reconciliation of contradiction as a unity in dreams.[14] Heiner Zimmermann does, however, divine a form lurking under the apparent chaos, centred on the art critics' scenario, around which a roughly symmetrical structure emerges in the play as a whole. He surmises that the devices 'contradict the play's fragmented surface structure and express a desire for order and meaning which challenges the postmodern rejection of hierarchies and moral indifference'.[15]

I am not entirely convinced that his thesis necessarily holds, primarily because for the most part he views the scenarios as scenes. He talks of *two* art critics in 'Untitled' and reduces other scenarios to what they are *apparently* representing. Through this lens, one may well find coherence after a fashion, but if we are to take Crimp's dramaturgy seriously, the category of representation may not be one we choose to accept.

However, one can certainly see where Zimmermann is coming from. As mentioned earlier, the dialogues *appear* to represent conversations, and this is probably why he views the scenarios as veiled scenes. The apparent naturalism of the language and the clear *allusion* to representation can make the unattributed dashes appear gratuitous or pretentious – why turn normal dialogue into a pointless guessing game? Lehmann remarks that 'postdramatic theatre does not exclude the presence, the taking up, or the continued effectiveness of older aesthetics' – that is, it can critically engage with the dramatic tradition without necessarily using dramatic means.[16] So, if we do accept the dashes as deliberate frustrations, as a persistent questioning, we are asked to consider fundamental issues pertaining to human interaction and communication.

Performance thus demands the divorce of the speaker from the spoken, and postdramatic theatre proposes the 'text bearer' as a replacement for the dramatic 'character'.[17] The text bearer has no other responsibility than to deliver text: that is, not to interpret. The theatre becomes a place in which speech is not processed on the stage but in the auditorium. In many ways this is a radicalization of Brecht's diegetic practices. While Brecht's actors pointed to their own representations as socially influenced, here postdramatic text bearers open up the site of text construction to unrestricted speculation without the filter

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of Brecht's ideological indices: the words are pointing, but in no particular direction.

When one views Crimp's play in this way, the structure that rehabilitates a narrative is undermined, as figures on stage are no longer attached to recognizable scenes or situations. Indeed, the very title *Attempts on Her Life* warns us against fixing meaning. While the title's pun has been acknowledged as both a series of experiments to apprehend Anne and to kill her, the second meaning has further implications for the practice of biography. If biography is the act of representing a life, then what it leaves behind is a lifeless corpse, secured in and by language. Representation has the function of fixing information and turning it into knowledge.[18] By resisting representation, the biographer does not try to pin Anne down but to allow her a plenitude of meanings which are equally valid throughout the play.

The dangers of representation in the performance of *Attempts* are made clear by Mary Luckhurst:

> A wholly male cast . . . inflects the play with an overpowering patriarchal politics and straightforwardly renders men the Enemy; a wholly female cast imbues the compulsive fantasies constructed around 'Anne' with another political and sexual agenda and gives the impression that women dominate capitalist systems, which they do not.[19]

Luckhurst pinpoints a major problem for representation in dramatic theatre in her suggestion that the representative function of actors is always channelled through value systems that exist beyond them. By this I mean that if there is inequality in a value system, such as patriarchy, then the oppressed party is not empowered by simply swapping the terms. In Luckhurst's example, an all-male cast provides an unsophisticated critique of men and their commodification of women in their constructions of Anne. Yet an all-female cast does not liberate women from such signifying processes because they are still predicated on a male self and a female other – the all-female cast acts to ape the male system in representational performance. As Luckhurst points out, it would merely show that women had become an integrated part of the system, it would not demonstrate their deliverance from it.

Representation, then, in the performance of this play may collude with the systems the play is trying to examine by offering no alternative to their dominance. The refusal to represent confronts the system with its own language and enacts a critique that is not tied to those who are insinuated in it. The post-dramatic reading of *Attempts* suspends meaning in such a way that the system itself may be considered critically with denotative meaning suspended by connotative text bearers.

4:48 Psychosis

Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis* is a play that deals with issues of profound depression, unmitigated pain, and the possibility of relief. The '4:48' of the title is referred to four times in the text as a moment at which the speaker finds clarity for a brief moment before dawn. Like *Attempts*, the play has no character attribution. There are Crimp-style dashes to signify a change in speaker in six of its twenty-four scenes, the rest present text in a variety of forms. There are series of meditations using a variety of layouts on the page, scenes consisting of lists, and there are two scenes in which all one finds is numbers on the page. The play offers a wide variety of textures whilst never attaching text directly to a speaker. There are, however, several instances of an 'I' in the play which clearly beg questions that concern the representation of identity.

Reading the play, one could be forgiven for seeing a single speaker emerge from the text. As Ken Urban notes: 'The play's multiplicity also creates the uncanny sensation that the text is deeply monologic, the product of a singular, albeit divided, self.'[20] While the 'I' is highly contradictory – wishing to live, wishing to die; longing for suicide and fearing death – such oppositions are indeed not that unusual when representing a figure who is severely depressed and/or psychotic. The highly disunified self does not necessarily challenge the flexible actor.

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There also seems to be a clear demarcation between the 'I' and either a singular doctor or therapist in the dialogue sections, despite the dashes which merely suggest a new speaker. Mel Kenyon, Kane's agent, recalls a conversation in which Kane actually talked about 'the role of the doctor and lovers . . . and whether the play was for three voices'.[21] Annabelle Singer agrees: 'At times a conversation between patient and therapist becomes clear.'[22] However, elsewhere in the text there are scenes which ask us to modify the view that we are dealing with discrete speakers.

The fourteenth scene appears to represent a doctor's notes on a depressed patient. Medications, dosages, and observations give the scene a sense of distance from the patient if not necessarily a sense of objectivity. The eleventh paragraph starts to hint that we may have to revise our opinion of the texts when we read: 'Lofepramine and Citalopram discontinued after patient got pissed off with side effects and lack of obvious improvement.' This is followed two paragraphs later by the appraisal: 'Mood: Fucking angry. / Affect: Very angry'.[23] The apparent distance collapses as it is possible that we are being offered the patient's perspective, using the idiom of the medical profession.

The dialogues that seemingly constructed a patient and a doctor become destabilized and the question again arises as to who is speaking. While the dialogues may well represent a patient and a doctor, there is no reason to believe that this is not the patient or a group of patients aping the discourse they have encountered on many occasions. Alternatively, the texts could amount to a collage on the discourse of mental illness without *any* clear speaking subject. The anonymous dashes are not, then, mere affectation, hiding what is 'obviously' a two-person dialogue; they are genuine markers of uncertainty.

The two scenes that contain lists are also of interest in the manufacture of textual grey areas. The third scene of the play is for the most part a list of self-rebukes and negative self-evaluations. The twenty-second is taken from Edwin S. Shneidman's book, *The Suicidal Mind*, and lists a series of aspirations as a barrage of infinitives.[24] Both scenes could be performed by an individual character, emoting his or her lacks and ambitions. Yet the second of the two scenes does not belong to the speaker and signals an impulse identified by Urban when he notes that 'there is a citational quality to the language'.[25] Actors are clearly able to 'quote' text in performance, and again we return to the Brechtian mode.

The Shneidman intertext, however, was only revealed by the disclosure of an actor in an interview, and there may be many more interlopers lurking in the play that are yet to be outed. One is not therefore sure what is quoted and what is not. The originality of the language is again at stake. The 'citational quality' does not, however, only refer to direct intertexts but to discourses and their formulations, as discussed above with respect to Crimp. In postdramatic theatre all that is ever delivered is a quotation; it is never suggested that the speaker is the originator.

The Refusal of Representation

There is also a metatheatrical streak that runs through *4:48* which acknowledges its employment of quotation, something which is signalled particularly in the seventh scene where we find the lines: 'Last in a long line of literary kleptomaniacs', 'A glut of exclamation marks spells impending nervous breakdown. Just a word on the page and there is the drama', and 'I sing without hope on the boundary'.[26] The lines mark a knowingness within the text of its own theatricality that make unproblematic, character-based performance difficult and questionable.

Gerda Poschmann divides postdramatic texts into two categories: 'text to be spoken' and 'additional text'.[27] The latter term extends beyond stage directions and is not subordinate to the former, nor a mere appendage. This is text that, according to Poschmann, 'is to be considered as having an exchange value for scenic poetry which can and should be created by the director'.[28] Kane's two scenes in which only numbers appear and the cryptic eighth scene that only

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bears the letters 'RSVP ASAP' fall into the category of 'additional text'. Precisely what is to be done with these texts is not in any way vouchsafed by the play, and they present a provocation to the director and performers.

Elsewhere, there are poetic meditations on depression that organize themselves on the page in ways that simply cannot be represented in an unambiguous fashion on stage. The placement of the texts suggests shapes, pauses, lacunae, and probably a host of other modulations. Again, the page is generating the unknowable, but this ignorance can nonetheless be reduced into spurious knowledge by interpretation on the dramatic stage.

Postdramatic theatre becomes a theatre of language in which the word is liberated from representational or interpretive limitation in a bid to deliver it as an associative piece of communicative material. The postdramatic theatre-text can refuse to represent and leave all possible readings open. The crucial corollary of this is that if the performers are delivering text without characterization, then the production itself can offer a similar refusal. The interpretation takes place in the auditorium, if at all.

The shift from a limiting interpretation to a deliberate suspension of meaning points to a very different kind of theatre. *4:48* is not about the sufferings of an individual but the experience of suffering in a variety of forms that transcend the singular or the narrow. The poetic excurses of many of the scenes aim far beyond the individual and track a variety of perspectives when viewed as a whole. If the texts are presented and not represented in performance, there is no pretence that the deliverer is the speaker, and more conventional actor/audience relations of empathy, sympathy, or antipathy are circumvented. The language itself, and not its speaker, becomes the focus.

Kane, in a different mode from her conversation with Mel Kenyon quoted above, wrote that:

> Increasingly, I'm finding performance much more interesting than acting; theatre more compelling than plays. . . . Performance is more visceral. It puts you in direct physical contact with thought and feeling.[29]

The postdramatic theatre is not, then, a cold institution, from which emotion has been banished. It does, however, generate a different kind of emotional experience. If one considers the horror conveyed by neutral reports of atrocities or suffering on news broadcasts, one can appreciate the latent power of uncoloured language. While performers will not be representing pain or even representing its repression through a more neutral form of delivery, the possibilities for Kane of a visceral theatre may not necessarily be attenuated by non-representational and a-signifying practices on stage.

A Theatre of Language

4:48, like *Attempts*, does not offer a linear time structure. While its first scene is repeated verbatim in a longer twenty-third scene, and the *faux* medical report of the fourteenth scene seems to refer back to details in the fifth and the tenth scenes, the lists, the numbers, and the other scenes suggest few referential connections. The final scene may well conclude with the line 'Please open the curtains', that signals an ending of sorts, especially with the metatheatrical reference to stage curtains, but one could hardly say that the speaker's state had changed or reached a resolution.[30]

Kane has certainly arranged and ordered her scenes – there are repetitions, echoes, and changes in cadence – but there is neither cause, nor effect, nor development. The condition is not explained, no answers are proffered. The architecture of the play is deliberate but the sequence is not predicated upon the demands of a plot; no story emerges from the chaos. The play takes place in an unnamed place and presents unqualified material.

So, although one *could* interpret the speeches, humanize them, and represent characters and conversations, the text itself offers a very different potential in performance: the chance to turn a human theatre into a theatre of language, where the performers are responsible for the imaginative presentation of linguistic material which is then experienced and processed by the audi-

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ence away from the restrictions of interpretation. Kane shows how a play can break free of dramatic constraint and create a very different mode of reception, and indeed perception, within an audience. *4:48* seeks a redefinition of performance and spectatorship within the theatrical event.

Conditions for Postdramatic Performance

Both plays under discussion take fairly similar formal approaches to their subject matter in that they fail to attribute character and present episodes which do not structure time into anything approaching a progression of ideas or themes. The similar formal strategies, however, aim at quite different effects in performance. Crimp is opening up his language to scrutiny by presenting apparently naturalistic dialogue within the context of an increasingly compressed and globalized environment. Questions of identity construction, the politics of language and agency, are formulated through a radical shift of the audience's perception – the familiar is made strange (*Verfremdung*), provoking astonishment and, hopefully, a reappraisal of the material presented.

Yet Brecht turned his spectators into co-producers of meaning: his framing of dialectical contradiction articulated its terms clearly, inviting decision-making to take place within a delimited realm of signification. Postdramatic *Verfremdung* does not articulate the contradiction but rather leaves lines to jar, in conversation with themselves and the contexts of their spectators. Clichés, repeated motifs, or less formulaic phrases are all exposed to a form of presentation which makes them strange and disjunctive. The undoubtedly contemporary settings and formulations historicize the material and turn what at times can seem little more than idle banter into political exchanges by virtue of the fundamental interrogation that the language is exposed to.

4:48 on the other hand elicits a different kind of response. The removal of the individual from the performance generalizes the circumstance of profound depression away from more personal manifestations. While one may detect a political element here that links depression to a variety of discourses that exist beyond the individual, the thrust of the play seems far more to allow an audience an *experience* which is not tied down to the vagaries of biography. The result of this engagement is, naturally, unknowable, but will tap into the individual memories of each spectator and contrast them with a corpus of material on stage that may be accepted, rejected, challenged, or met with indifference.

The freedom of interpretation or experience upon which such productions of *Attempts* and *4:48* are predicated does not, however, come cheap. When Zimmermann asserts 'the Postdramatic Theatre abolishes the dramatic text's conventional dominance over its performance', he is only partly right.[31] While the postdramatic certainly reduces the prominence of the text on stage, as is clear from the anti-hierarchical model of the dream (in which text and image are of equal significance), the text has to be treated very carefully to manoeuvre it into this position. The freedom of interpretation in the auditorium is balanced by a raft of performative rigours involved in resisting representation. While the dramatic theatre has increasingly treated text as a flexible source for a variety of interpretations which go far beyond the imaginings of their writers – modernized Shakespeare is the obvious example but the wealth of possibilities is endless – the postdramatic theatre has to abjure the very methods that have enlivened dramatic theatre over many years.

The reintroduction of character into *Attempts* and *4:48*, which cannot be prevented by the texts themselves, has the effect of collapsing the potentially supra-individual reach of the plays. *Attempts* examines the nature of individuality and identity by directing its lens at the linguistic construction of subjects in the period of late capitalism. From Marx's claim that the individual was 'the ensemble of social relations' to Althusser's doctrine of the interpellation of the subject as an individual, theorists have sought to expose the functions and uses of individualism for capitalism. Crimp's political strategy becomes obscured if the iden-

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tity of the speakers is not made problematic; a concept of agency becomes reinscribed into the figures on stage that effectively plays the system's naturalizing game.

Similarly, Kane's dramaturgy aims at the communication of a broad set of experiences that go beyond those of an individual sufferer. The reduction of the texture of the speeches to the utterances of plagued individuals refocuses the event into a play of empathy. A postdramatic production of either Crimp or Kane turns the texts into objects in their own right, as constellations of language, devoid of individuated perspective. Text can then offer itself as an active agent in performance and become an object in itself for performers to work with. Characterization no longer becomes the focal point but defers to the articulation of this object in a series of ways that posit language as existing in its own space, external to the individuals believed to have been its masters.

Postdramatic theatre asks us to rethink the ways in which we read and perform plays. Character and plot, the mainstays of dramatic theatre, are no longer categories that need enter the stage in an age in which the act of representation has become increasingly untenable. *Attempts* and *4:48* demand fundamental changes in the modes of perception engendered by both reading and spectating. Such radical shifts open up new and engaging ways of experiencing performance, beyond the twin dogmas of individualism and psychology.

Postdramatic theatre texts configure themselves in such a way that they openly invite creative approaches to the business of acting and making theatre. The invitation, however, is not and cannot be binding, and it is ultimately the task of the theatre's practitioners to decide whether they accept the challenge.

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