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## Postdramatism, Ethics, and the Role of Light in Martin Crimp's *Fewer Emergencies* (2005)

In this article Mireia Aragay and Clara Escoda examine James Macdonald's Royal Court Theatre production of Martin Crimp's triptych *Fewer Emergencies* (2005) in the wake of recent critical assessments of Crimp's work in relation to Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic paradigm. By focusing on light design, the authors suggest that Macdonald's staging of the play productively enhanced the tension inherent in Crimp's text between dramatic and postdramatic elements. Light was conceived in postdramatic terms as a major component of the *mise-en-scène*, synaesthetically interacting with the linguistic material in a way that necessitated the spectators' active processing of all onstage signs and, ultimately, their critical examination of their own ethical and political positioning with respect to the late-capitalist social and cultural order. Mireia Aragay is a Senior Lecturer in English drama and theatre at the University of Barcelona. She is co-editor of *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics, and Academics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Clara Escoda has recently completed a PhD thesis on Martin Crimp's theatre at the University of Barcelona, where she lectures in English literature.

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THE PUBLICATION in 2006 of the English translation of Hans Thies-Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999) has led in recent years to a renewed discussion of theatre practices of the last forty years or so, including those in the work of Martin Crimp. As is well known, Lehmann identifies 'a new paradigm of postdramatic theatre' emerging since the 1970s in the wake of the 'caesura of the media society'.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, he argues that postdramatic theatre involves a new mode of audience address that seeks to prompt the spectators' self-awareness, self-exploration, and self-interrogation by startling them into being fully present in the theatrical situation.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, however, Lehmann is cautious not to set up a binary opposition between dramatic and postdramatic theatre. He states, for instance, that 'In the emergence of a new paradigm, the "future" structures and stylistic traits almost unavoidably appear mixed in with the conventional', and speaks of 'postdramatic stylistic moments' being embedded within dramatic texts.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly for this article, this leads him to claim that 'text theatre' can be a 'genuine and authentic variant of postdramatic theatre'.<sup>4</sup>

While Lehmann makes no reference to Crimp in *Postdramatic Theatre*, he does argue that the work of some contemporary 'in-yer-face' playwrights, besides the German-speaking Peter Handke, Elfriede Jelinek, or Heiner Müller,<sup>5</sup> shows a 'profoundly changed mode of theatrical sign usage' which suggests that 'it makes sense to describe a significant sector of the new theatre as "post-dramatic"'.<sup>6</sup> In his preface to the English edition he notices in particular Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis* (2000), further suggesting that 'the attack on the spectator' in British 'in-yer-face' plays 'would have to be theorized as a tension between dramatic and postdramatic theatre'.<sup>7</sup>

In the wake of recent critical assessments of Crimp's work in relation to postdramatism, this article argues that such a tension is also productively deployed in both Crimp's triptych *Fewer Emergencies* (2005) –

not a particularly 'in-yer-face' piece – and notably in James Macdonald's Royal Court production of the play.<sup>8</sup>

In the introduction to her English translation of Lehmann's book, Karen Jürs-Munby labels two of the playlets in the triptych, *Fewer Emergencies* and *Face to the Wall*, postdramatic on the grounds that they are "'open" or "writerly" texts' that require spectators to become 'active co-writers of the (performance) text . . . active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making'.<sup>9</sup> From Jürs-Munby's perspective, the two short plays exemplify the postdramatic turn to performance in new writing for the theatre, a claim that can be extended to the third piece in the triptych, *Whole Blue Sky*.

### Between Engagement and Detachment

In a similar vein, Aleks Sierz recognizes a productive clash between dramatic and postdramatic elements as characterizing Crimp's triptych, with the latter encompassing the use of anonymous speakers and absent protagonists (rather than naturalistic *dramatis personae*), unspecified settings, and the narration rather than enactment of plot events.<sup>10</sup> However, Sierz ultimately questions the description of the playlets *Fewer Emergencies* and *Face to the Wall* as postdramatic on the grounds that '[they] depend principally on an individually authored [dramatic] text and not a *mise-en-scène* to achieve [their] effects', and that

the *Sprachflächen* [juxtaposed linguistic surfaces] so characteristic of postdramatic theatre – 'which make no distinction between narration, dialogue, description, expository text, and stage direction' (Zimmermann) – have little in common with Crimp's text, which is all dialogue, and recognizably conversational dialogue at that.<sup>11</sup>

Adam Ledger has recently suggested that Sierz's is an essentially dramatic – textual – analysis of the triptych,<sup>12</sup> to the detriment of what Lehmann calls the theatre situation or joint text resulting from the interaction between the linguistic text, the *mise-en-scène*, and 'the mode of relationship of the performance to the spectators'.<sup>13</sup> Ledger goes on to argue that, not unlike Sierz's reading,

Macdonald's staging of the triptych was also based on giving the actors a coherent, stable grounding, which Macdonald, seemingly prompted by Crimp, found in the notion that 'we're all inside Martin's head'.<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting, however, that in a later interview Crimp qualified this by pointing out that in the triptych he was interested in making visible the thought processes and discourses that inform contemporary individuals 'by reflecting the reality – in a Beckettian manner – of the "skull"', and going on to add, 'Even if you can write plays that "happen" inside your head, you also have to *recreate the world*. . . . There is a limit to the "skull" metaphor'.<sup>15</sup>

One way in which the triptych prompts spectators to recreate (critically) the world is precisely through exploiting the tension between dramatic and postdramatic elements by placing its language use in a hazy halfway zone between recognizable conversation and *Sprachflächen* or language surfaces, delivered by (postdramatic) 'text bearers' or 'speakers' rather than (dramatic) 'characters'.<sup>16</sup> In Macdonald's production of *Fewer Emergencies* the oscillation of the four nameless speakers between engagement (conversation) and detachment (*Sprachflächen*) was enhanced by the absence of eye contact between them.

Additionally, in performance, as David Barnett notes in relation to Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) and Kane's *4:48 Psychosis*, the 'divorce of the speaker from the spoken' required by such language use impels spectators to wonder in which direction the speech uttered on stage is pointing, what kind of context it is conjuring up.<sup>17</sup> And indeed, rather than enact a (postmodern) 'constant resistance to meaning',<sup>18</sup> *Fewer Emergencies* (satirically) addresses a very specific kind of context – it dramatizes the core conflict of late capitalism, the ever-widening gulf between rich and poor, as it unfolds in an increasingly globalized, mediatized, commodified world.

The three plays, *Whole Blue Sky*, *Face to the Wall*, and *Fewer Emergencies*, explore the fault lines inherent in a construction of identity where subjects are defined, as phrased in *Whole Blue Sky*, by money, property, and family,<sup>19</sup> showing that this breeds contem-

porary conflicts and, crucially, impels spectators to negotiate their own (ethical and political) response by wondering under what conditions it might become more encompassing.<sup>20</sup>

### The Role of Lighting at the Royal Court

But what Lehmann calls the joint text emerges out of the combined interaction of the spectator not only with the linguistic material of the performance, but also necessarily and simultaneously with the *mise-en-scène*.<sup>21</sup> In Macdonald's 2005 production, light was conceived in postdramatic terms as a major operative element of the *mise-en-scène*. Light interacted with the workings of the linguistic material of the play in a way that necessitated the spectators' active involvement in the decoding of all the onstage signs and, ultimately, their critical examination of their own (ethical and political) positioning with respect to the middle-class, late-capitalist values explored in the triptych.

A close examination of the role played by light in Macdonald's production of *Fewer Emergencies* reveals a *mise-en-scène* based on a postdramatic type of sign usage whereby the play 'becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, and thus requires a changed mode of perception and reception from spectators'.<sup>22</sup>

In Macdonald's production, the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs was turned into a white box containing both the stage and, placed opposite in close proximity, the audience. The walls, as Macdonald and designer Tom Pye disposed them, did not fit together in the manner of a closed structure. This contributed to creating a fluid, interconnected space where light had an incidence on the audience's receptivity not as a tangential element, but as a central factor that circulated freely, postdramatically doing away with the fourth wall and placing spectators in the unified space of the theatrical situation. Lights were not even dimmed for the start of the performance.

Within this open space, each play was lit in a different colour, with the light enveloping actors and audience in a single atmosphere 'that act[ed] as a germ or mood for each story'.<sup>23</sup> In *Whole Blue Sky* it was an ultraviolet, dazzling white light; in *Face to the Wall*, an intense red light; while in *Fewer Emergencies* a green light projected undefined shapes and shadows. Macdonald's account of the decision to turn the Theatre Upstairs into an open space reveals an acute sensitivity to the postdramatic nature of the writing and a desire to find equivalents for it in the *mise-en-scène*, specifically as regards the light design:

As Martin had jettisoned all conventional theatrical procedure in his text, it felt important to do the same thing with the production. We wanted to throw up in the air what an audience might expect from a production – just as the writing challenges what one might expect from a play. . . . So we started by turning the Theatre Upstairs black box into a white box, including the seating, and brought the lights up when the play started instead of dimming them. There was no set, no situation: just three or four voices discussing a possible situation, chewing away at it.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, the actors kept 'relatively still so that the audience could *listen* carefully and not be distracted by any action', while a few white chairs and tables made up the minimal set.<sup>25</sup>

Miguel Morey and Carmen Pardo characterize the role of light in Robert Wilson's theatre in terms that both link up with Macdonald's emphasis on listening and highlight the synaesthetic mode of reception that is required, as much for Wilson's work as in connection with Crimp's/Macdonald's *Fewer Emergencies*. Light, they argue, works almost like an actor – 'the visualization of . . . textures and intensities effectively makes the light an actor, helping us not only to see but to *listen*. . . . Light helps us to see and *listen* to the scene it paints . . . that internalizing of the gaze that is, in some way, *listening*.'

By devising a radically pared-down yet extremely potent stage image where light was kept constantly and palpably present – either through subtle variations in intensity or texture, as was the case in *Whole Blue Sky*

and *Fewer Emergencies*,<sup>27</sup> or through maintaining the same all-pervasive red light throughout, as in the middle play, *Face to the Wall* – Macdonald’s production of the triptych solicited the spectators’ active participation in the synaesthetic processing of the minimal onstage signs.

According to Lehmann, synaesthesia is fundamental to postdramatic theatre, where it sets into play a process of communication that intensifies the ‘synthesizing, corporeal activity of sensory experience precisely by means of a purposeful impediment’. It calls attention to it ‘as a quest, disappointment, retreat, and rediscovery’.<sup>28</sup> Through synaesthetic effects, Macdonald’s production of Crimp’s triptych kept spectators active on this path of discovery and self-interrogation, making them ‘listen’ to the (symbolic) violence of late capitalism and eventually become aware of the urgent need to acknowledge the claims of the Other – the precondition for the ‘face-to-face’ encounter that is the basis for a truly ethical life according to Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>29</sup> It is precisely, Lehmann claims, at the level of sign usage and perception that theatre can activate an ‘aesthetic of response-ability’ so as to respond to the disconnectedness between address and answer, self and Other, that characterizes the current, highly mediatized, late-capitalist cultural and social order.<sup>31</sup> It is in this way that in Macdonald’s staging of Crimp’s triptych the aesthetic became a route towards the ethical – in Levinasian terms, a ‘summons to responsibility’.<sup>31</sup>

### *Whole Blue Sky* Ultraviolet ‘Pictures of Happiness’

In *Whole Blue Sky*, three speakers – 1 is designated as female by Crimp, while the genders of 2 and 3 are left unspecified – gradually but relentlessly expose the misery and violence behind the smooth façade of a well-to-do middle-class family. The wife seems to have once had cultural aspirations which she feels compelled to continue sacrificing for the sake of ‘[the] things that make life worth living’, that is, ‘Money? Property? Family?’<sup>32</sup> – the interrogative mood ironically

working to destabilize a narrow understanding of happiness in terms of a late-capitalist dream. And the speakers insist that the family’s child – whose name, Bobby or Jimmy, remains uncertain – *must* be a happy child, since people have always ‘bought him pets, built him snowmen, assembled his jigsaws late at night so that in the morning he’d come down the spiral stairs to find . . . the whole blue sky completed, cut the crusts off his sandwiches and taken / the cheese out’.<sup>33</sup>

In Macdonald’s production, the dazzling ultraviolet light bathing the stage and the auditorium foregrounded the emptiness of the middle-class dream of material comfort, which equates any possible notion of happiness – any ‘blue sky’ – with prosperity and status. The aseptic atmosphere created by the light metonymically conjured up the shine of glossy magazines, computer screens, iPods, or shopping malls, so that while the text evoked images of luxury and ‘perfection’, the ultraviolet light ironically foregrounded their artificiality, the fact that they are mere ‘picture[s] of happiness’.<sup>34</sup>

2 Maybe [Bobby]’d like some fruit.

1 Maybe he’d like, yes, one of these plums. Or maybe he’d like just the tiniest sip of wine? No? What’s that he’s saying? . . . Everybody likes him. Everybody has always liked him. Mummy – Daddy – people in shops – people in the street – people on market stalls have always offered Jimmy, for example a banana – bent down, hooked cherries / over his ears.<sup>35</sup>

At moments such as this the ultraviolet light synaesthetically intertwined with the text in order to suggest that both the speakers and the family members were dazzled by the shiny surfaces of a culture of simulacra. At the same time, however, the light seemed to vary in intensity and to exist in movement, creating an unstable, fluctuating atmosphere.

Such gradations of light seemed designed synaesthetically to enhance the spectators’ perception of the half-suppressed, dark strand of unease, even of violence, that lurks just beneath the glossy surface of late capitalism, as when Speaker 1 uncovers the hidden cost

of the family's and their guests' high living standard – 'Haven't they worked? Haven't they struggled to extend this table? Haven't they screamed at each other in private? Punched each other? Haven't they broken each other's skin to open this, for example, bottle of wine?'<sup>36</sup> – or when Bobby asks his parents to sing him a song so as to stop the nagging voice in his head that does not let him sleep at night, the voice of dissent and distrust of the system.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, the effect produced by the combination of the ultraviolet light and the text was to expose the mechanical senselessness of lives devoid of any awareness of their own deadening limitations.

### The Dissolving of Identity

In addition, the text suggests that the over-riding desire on the part of the family to adjust to consensual notions of happiness turns them also into mere simulacra. The ultraviolet light in Macdonald's staging of *Whole Blue Sky* also merged with the text in that respect, since it homogenized spectators into an indistinct whiteness that had the uncanny effect of preventing them from seeing each other's true colour and difference – each other's Otherness. Here, again, light and text combined to suggest that individuality and authenticity – and hence the chance of the Levinasian 'face-to-face' encounter with the Other – are part of the price to be paid in order to uphold the late-capitalist consumerist dream.

Thus, gradually, the child's identity seems to dissolve as, first, a series of confusions between the family's pet and the child are introduced whereby both are objectified and inserted in an Arcadian tableau, a stylized, timeless family picture. Both, the speakers say, 'cement the marriage':<sup>38</sup>

- 1 (*inward*) That pet – that pet's so funny – the way it knows the difference between right and wrong – the way it burrows when it's done right and when it's done wrong comes to the surface . . . smiles at everyone – shows us its yellow teeth. And the name's so funny. What a funny thing for a pet to call its own child. What kind of name is that?

- 2 You mean for a child to call its own pet.  
1 I said for a child to call its own pet.  
2 You said for a pet to call its own child.  
1 You think I don't know what I said?<sup>39</sup>

Until eventually 'Bobby' slips into 'Jimmy' – and yet, for the description of an 'ideal' family and society to remain undisturbed, Speaker 1's slip of the tongue must immediately be suppressed:

- 2 [People on market stalls] have always offered Bobby, for example a banana – bent down, hooked cherries / over his ears.  
1 I said Bobby.  
3 You said Jimmy.  
1 Well whatever I said AND I KNOW FOR A FACT I SAID BOBBY people have always liked him.<sup>40</sup>

The persistent absurdity of the confusions suggests that individuals who live by late-capitalist 'pictures of happiness' might as well be interchangeable.<sup>41</sup> The interrelation between text and light in Macdonald's staging of *Whole Blue Sky* laid bare the supposedly axiomatic link that is made in today's late-capitalist culture between consumerism and happiness. Hollow images of happiness distributed and reinforced by the media produce simulacra which multiply endlessly, pointing to no other referent but themselves. It is revealing, in that connection, that when Speaker 1 attempts to define what happiness means, she is caught in tautological reasoning – 'Pictures, pictures of happiness, that's what a picture of happiness looks like.'<sup>42</sup>

Through synaesthetically absorbing both the text and the light work, spectators were encouraged to penetrate the glossy façade of the late-capitalist dream in order to 'listen' to its darker underside. Only by doing this, it was implied, might they perhaps be able truly to *see* one another 'face to face' across the dazzling white light enveloping them within the theatrical space – and beyond.

### Face to the Wall Towards the 'Face-to-Face' Encounter

The world adults are bequeathing to future generations is understood, as the title of *Face*

to the Wall implies, in terms of punishment rather than patrimony. The play focuses on male violence as simultaneously a symptom and a cause of such a situation. A mass murder has taken place at a school, a ferocious act of violence apparently performed by a postman and thus arising from within the community. Speakers 1 (explicitly identified as male), 2, 3, and 4 (genders unmarked) are trying to come to terms with the massacre. As Speaker 1 begins to recount the postman's story, 2 and 3 increasingly impel him to impersonate a masculinity anchored in aggression and violence until he finally collapses and vents his anger on the audience. In the wake of 1's collapse, Speaker 4 took over in Macdonald's staging of the piece and went on to provide an interpretation of events that deviated from the values of media-saturated late capitalism.

In Macdonald's production of *Face to the Wall*, light maintained a red intensity that emphasized the underlying theme of anxiety running through the triptych as the underside of the late-capitalist consumerist dream. At the same time, the unity between stage and auditorium created by the red light strongly suggested that the four speakers in the play represented the different discourses that interpellate individuals within late capitalism, here shown as if struggling for prominence within the anxious red 'skull' of the collective unconscious created by the light. Through this all-pervasive light, Macdonald turned the stage into a post-dramatic space of simultaneity where the discourses that interpellate spectators in contemporary society were objectified, so that they might eventually empower those leading to, in Levinas's terms, the 'face-to-face' encounter with the Other.

When Speakers 2 and 3 begin to prompt 1 to reproduce attitudes and beliefs that glamorize male violence, 1 experiences a conflict between his (Levinasian) pre-societal impulse to empathize with the children and the social injunction to enact a distancing from them, as is made clear when he highlights the instinctive trust children place in others as opposed to adults – 'it's interesting to see the way that some of [the children]

hold hands – they instinctively hold hands – the way children do – the way a child does – if you reach for its hand as it walks next to you it will grasp your own – not like an adult who will flinch away.'<sup>43</sup> Under the pressure exerted by 2 and 3, Speaker 1 fully 'becomes' the violent postman, simultaneously threatening the children with further violence and telling the other speakers to stop feeding him his lines – 'YOU SAW WHAT HAPPENED TO CHILD D, SO SHUT THE FUCK UP. CUNT. CUNT. LITTLE CUNT. I SAID DON'T HELP ME. Long pause.'<sup>44</sup>

### Finding a Space for Autonomy

In Macdonald's production, 1's collapse, followed by the long pause, left a void on stage, an indeterminacy that made it possible for another voice to take over, that of Speaker 4, who had remained utterly still up to this point, with his head in his arms, listening despondently to how 2 and 3 idealized the postman's suburban life as a consumerist utopia and coerced Speaker 1 into glamorizing violence. He now broke into a song, the 'Twelve-Bar Delivery Blues', which, contrary to 1's violent outburst, is a peaceful, creative, connecting tune.<sup>45</sup> Within the anxious red 'skull' created by Macdonald, 4's song represented a small space of autonomy and resilience, a voice which spectators could choose to privilege without being coerced to do so through discourse or edification.

Through song, 4 sought to reach out to the Other – the postman – rather than demonize him, to reactivate the spontaneous, pre-societal inclination towards empathy and care for the Other that Levinas speaks of. At the same time, it was strongly suggested that Speaker 4 was a poet figure and, consequently, that artistic creation emerges out of a potent feeling of unease about the loneliness, individualism, and lack of proximity to the Other that characterizes late-capitalist culture and a desire for change. Revealingly, Crimp has described the artist as a 'canary in a cage': that is, as a 'listener' – the role Speaker 4 plays through most of *Face to the Wall* – who 'sings' out of a sense of impotence and entrapment.<sup>46</sup>

By choosing to sing – not a rational, discursive process, but a creative response – Speaker 4 broke through the signifying circularity that had taken hold of the speakers' conversation so far by (in Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's words) introducing on the stage 'the pluri-linear, multidimensional semiotic of forms of corporeality, gesturality, and rhythm',<sup>47</sup> a moment of creative fertility to counterpoint Speakers 2 and 3's suppression of spontaneous feeling in their effort to align themselves with dominant discourses. The 'Twelve-Bar Delivery Blues' suggests an alternative ground for the interpretation of the violent mass murder, one that links it precisely to the inhibition of individual thought and emotion:

Son, I told him,  
Your poor daddy's dead  
There's another person  
Come to live in his head.  
Son son, your daddy's not well  
Son son, your DADDY'S A SHELL.

There's another person  
Speaking these lies  
There's another person  
Looking out through my eyes.  
Son son, he's filing reports  
Son, son, he's PROMPTING MY THOUGHTS.

. . . Son son, I ain't got no choice  
Son son, I JUST HEAR THIS VOICE  
(Saying . . . )  
Doo ba ba-doo ba ba –  
Doo ba ba-doo ba ba –<sup>48</sup>

*Face to the Wall*, the middle play, is the most daring piece in the triptych in terms of its formal experimentation, powerfully revealing how, in postdramatic theatre, the 'simultaneous and multi-perspectival modes of perception' have replaced the traditionally linear structures of drama.<sup>49</sup> *Face to the Wall* displays a dream-like, non-linear, postdramatic structure which is, perhaps, the formal expression of the non-hierarchical, utopian 'face-to-face' encounter that Speaker 4 sang about at the end of Macdonald's production. As Lehmann points out,

an essential quality of the dream is the non-hierarchy of images, movements, and words. 'Dream thoughts' form a texture that resembles

collage, montage, and fragments rather than a logically structured course of events. The dream constitutes the model par excellence of a non-hierarchical theatre aesthetic.

In this way it enacts a suspension of the laws of time and narration that 'heralds a more liberal sphere of sharing and communicating'.<sup>50</sup>

Through Speaker 4's song and the intense red light, Macdonald's *Face to the Wall* sought to 'produce presence',<sup>51</sup> to return to the 'corpo-reality' of the Other, as opposed to the bodilessness, a-historicism, and inequality generated by mass-media culture. Crimp and Macdonald presented the (red) collective unconscious of late capitalism as a potential site of resistance, the ground where socially mediated discourses compete with pre-societal impulses not subsumed within the reification of an exchange society.

In *Whole Blue Sky* the speakers are at most distressed by the (symbolic) violence of late capitalism but, blinded by the promise of material abundance, they silence the voices that prompt them towards personal change through identification with the Other; but *Face to the Wall* makes a strong statement of a conviction pervading Crimp's dramaturgy – that personal subjective transformation, a reconnection with the pre-societal impulse towards ethical behaviour, is the necessary precondition for wider social change. Through the use of light, Macdonald contributed to creating the theatrical conditions to trigger the spectators' subjective transformation.

### *Fewer Emergencies* A Green Space of Metamorphosis

Light in Macdonald's production of the playlet *Fewer Emergencies* comprised different shades of green, varying in texture and intensity, as though representing matter at a shaping stage, in the process of becoming something other, something else. In its metamorphosing character, the green light synaesthetically highlighted the position of the three speakers in the play – all unmarked for gender – the child whose story they narrate, and, crucially, spectators, who at the end of

the piece stand on the verge of subjective change, as if about to sail off to 'the rim of the world' and start to rethink late-capitalist economic and cultural values from that liminal position.<sup>52</sup>

There are obvious connections between *Whole Blue Sky* and *Fewer Emergencies*, respectively the first and last playlet in the triptych. *Fewer Emergencies* also features a family whose house in this case is threatened from without by a rebellious crowd of dispossessed migrants. The child, Bobby, bears the same name as the child in *Whole Blue Sky*, and Speaker 1 also (confusingly) calls him Jimmy at one point. When Bobby is caught in the hip by a gunshot, a link is established between the domestic, mainly symbolic violence on which the first playlet focuses and global forms of violence – both, it is suggested, being underpinned by the same late-capitalist logic.

In *Fewer Emergencies*, Crimp creates a highly satirical parable of world inequality through imagining Bobby's house as the place where the treasures of the late-capitalist western world are kept. The contents of Bobby's room, which he has so far kept to himself, range from 'a shelf full of oak trees, and another where pine forests border a mountain lake' to pornography.<sup>53</sup> He keeps the island of Manhattan in a secret drawer, 'the city of Paris' and 'a Japanese golf course' in another cupboard, a 'wardrobe full of uranium and another full of cobalt [. . .] and a row of universities – good ones' on a little shelf.<sup>54</sup> And the key, of course, 'hanging from the shelf, like the Beethoven quartets and fertility clinics [. . .] the key to use in emergencies, the key to get out of the house', in which he is locked 'for his own protection'.<sup>55</sup>

Increasingly, Macdonald's production focused the spectators' attention on the key for use in emergencies by synaesthetically fusing together the play's linguistic material and the light work. As the rioting crowd threatens to bring down Bobby's house, Speaker 2 exclaims that Bobby 'wants to reach the key', and 1 adds he is going to use it in order to 'open the door'; 2 and 3 concur he 'must be / completely mad'.<sup>56</sup> Under the pressure of violence, however, the speakers

were reluctantly forced to imagine the possibility that Bobby might share his privileges and possessions. Their complacent insistence that 'Things are definitely looking up [. . .] Brighter light – more frequent boating – more confident smile – fewer / emergencies'<sup>57</sup> was troubled, in Macdonald's production, both by their disturbing account of how a bleeding Bobby attempts to reach the key – 'What he's losing in blood he's gaining in confidence' – and by the gradual darkening of the stage until a complete blackout was reached and all the spectators could hear was:

- 1 . . . He's closer to the key . . . see how / it swings.
- 2 See how the key swings.
- 3 That's right, Bobby-boy. Watch the key. Watch the key swinging.<sup>58</sup>

By becoming invisible to Bobby, the speakers, and the audience alike, the key – like the light design across Macdonald's staging of Crimp's triptych – discounted the fourth wall. Simultaneously, the key was foregrounded in the speakers' narrative. It thus became the locus for the ethical dilemma confronting spectators as much as Bobby at the end of the play: acknowledging the demands of the Other and refusing or failing to do so are two options that 'swing' over their heads, just as the key (invisibly) swung before their eyes.<sup>59</sup> Crucially, the green, malleable light of the playlet *Fewer Emergencies* worked together with the open theatrical space to articulate the thrust both of Crimp's triptych and Macdonald's production – to mobilize the spectators' ethical potential to transform themselves and perhaps begin, indeed, to re-create the world.<sup>60</sup>

## Notes and References

1. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 24 (emphasis original), at p. 22.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 105, 143.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24. As is well known, Aleks Sierz adopted and popularized the term 'in-yer-face' in his seminal study *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London:



Faber, 2001) to refer to new writing of the 1990s that displays extreme representations of violence, sex, and language in combination with an intensely confrontational mode of audience address. Kane's *Blasted* (1995) is the classic example.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

7. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

8. *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies* were jointly published in 2002. In 2005, prompted by French stage director Hubert Colas (see Aleks Sierz, "'Form Follows Function': Meaning and Politics in Martin Crimp's *Fewer Emergencies*", *Modern Drama*, L, No. 3 (2007), p. 378), Crimp wrote *Whole Blue Sky*, and the three plays were published as a triptych, *Fewer Emergencies* (London: Faber, 2005), with *Whole Blue Sky* as the first, *Face to the Wall* as the middle, and *Fewer Emergencies* as the last play. Macdonald's production of *Fewer Emergencies* ran at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs from 8 to 30 September 2005, with the actors Rachel Blake, Neil Dudgeon, Paul Hickey, and Tanya Moodie. It was the first time the three plays were staged together as one single theatrical event. In March 2002 Katie Mitchell had directed *Face to the Wall* at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. The short play *Fewer Emergencies*, as distinct from the triptych, 'received its first production in 2004 at the Théâtre National du Chailot, Paris, and the Schaubühne in Berlin', directed by Marc Paquien and Falk Richter respectively. See Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp* (London: Methuen, 2006), p. 68).

9. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 6.

10. 'Form Follows Function', p. 377–8.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 380. As Sierz notes, *Sprachflächen* is Elfriede Jelinek's term. Sierz's quote is from Heiner Zimmermann, 'Images of Woman in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*', *European Journal of English Studies*, VII, No. 1 (2003), p. 74.

12. Adam Ledger, "'Does What?': Acting, Directing, and Rehearsing Martin Crimp's *Fewer Emergencies*", *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXVI, No. 2 (2010), p. 124–5.

13. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 85.

14. Macdonald, interviewed by Sierz, in *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, p. 218.

15. Clara Escoda, 'Interview with Martin Crimp', 2005, unpublished (emphasis added).

16. David Barnett, 'When is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXIV, No. 1 (2008), p. 18 and 23, borrows 'text bearers' from Gerda Poschmann's *Der nicht mehr dramatische Theatertext* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997). This article uses the term 'speaker' instead, which is not meant to ignore the physical dimension, but is certainly more fitting than 'character' for plays that are so imbued with a postdramatic sensibility.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

18. Ledger, 'Does What?', p. 131 (emphasis original). Crimp is wary of postmodernism 'because it appears to have no moral position', and sees himself as a sceptical satirist. See Mireia Aragay et al., ed., *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics, and Academics* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 59–60.

19. Crimp, *Fewer Emergencies*, p. 14.

20. In Crimp's own words, the three plays share the common theme of 'the culture of contentment, [and they explore] different kinds of anxiety about the fault line between the *haves* and the *have-nots*. There are more and more *haves*, but the people who have-not have less than

they used to. . . . The gap between the poor and the comfortable is getting bigger'. Quoted in Aleks Sierz, 'Crimp's Political Theatre', *Plays International*, Autumn (2005), p. 18.

21. Vicky Angelaki, writing from a phenomenological perspective, carefully traces how the triptych necessitates 'the spectators' conscious involvement and a process of decoding rather than one of facile consumption of ideas'. See Angelaki, 'Subtractive Forms and Composite Contents: Martin Crimp's *Fewer Emergencies*', in Ellen Redling and Peter Paul Schnierer, ed., *Non-Standard Forms of Contemporary Drama and Theatre* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008), p. 31–46, at p. 32. However, while the light design in Macdonald's *mise-en-scène* is mentioned, it is not fully embedded in the overall discussion, based on the claim that 'language is elevated to the position of the most crucial element' (p. 36). The same approach informs Angelaki's 'Performing Phenomenology: The Theatre of Martin Crimp', in Daniel Watt and Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräffe, ed., *Theatres of Thought: Theatre, Performance, and Philosophy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p. 6–12, particularly p. 11.

22. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 85.

23. Macdonald, interviewed by Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, p. 219.

24. *Ibid.* Because the light work was self-consciously an artistic project in and of itself, a light artist, Martin Richman, was entrusted with its design. See R. Darren Gobert, 'Finding a Physical Language: Directing for the Nineties Generation; James Macdonald in Conversation with R. Darren Gobert', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXIV, No. 2, p. 145.

25. Macdonald interviewed by Sierz, *ibid.* (emphasis added).

26. Miguel Morey and Carmen Pardo, *Robert Wilson*, trans. Graham Thompson (Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2003), p. 57 (emphasis added).

27. As Macdonald explains, the white box was made out of 'gauze, or screen, or fabric'; the theatre lights were thus 'diffused through fabric' and pointed at 'strange things, which reflect light as well – bits of metal fabric and sequins. So they're bounced off unusual materials; that's the way [Martin Richman] achieved those effects'. See Gobert, 'Finding a Physical Language', p. 145.

28. *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 85.

29. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Ethics as First Philosophy', in Seán Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 83.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 84. According to Macdonald, Crimp's triptych is 'a clever sleight of hand which turns the tables on a liberal audience. . . . There are more emergencies in the world because we have the goods and other people don't. And that's all you need to know – so what are you going to do about it?' See interview with Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, p. 220. Interestingly, Macdonald has also stated that he wanted 'everybody . . . to have responsibility for the whole text', which meant that 'you had to see three or four faces and the audience had to be able to hold them within the same eyeline'. See Gobert, 'Finding a Physical Language', p. 142.

32. Crimp, *Fewer Emergencies*, p. 14.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 16–18.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 16–17.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 9. As Sierz notes, 'the word "cement" suggests both a union and weighing down'. See 'Form Follows Function', p. 387.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 12–13.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

45. The song 'Twelve-Bar Delivery Blues' is printed at the end of *Face to the Wall* (Crimp, *Fewer Emergencies*, p. 34–6). It is not assigned to any speaker in particular. It was Macdonald's decision to allocate it to Speaker 4. In this connection, it is interesting to note that 4 was played by 'one extra person [Paul Hickey] who came in just for that story, as the sort of rogue presence. His little nugget was the song, which is the most offbeat piece of the evening anyway.' See Gobert, p. 144.

46. Crimp, quoted in Sierz, 'Crimp's Political Theatre', p. 18.

47. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Brian Massumi, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 116.

48. Crimp, *Fewer Emergencies*, p. 35–6. This is echoed in *Fewer Emergencies*, the third play in the triptych, where the speakers seek to suppress the situation of violence in their neighbourhood from their thoughts and emotions by softly singing, 'Doo doo-ba-dee doo doo doo ba-doo . . . Ba doo-ba-dee doo, ba doo-ba dee doo . . .' (p. 48–9).

49. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 15.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 83–4. Barnett ('When is a Play not a Drama?', p. 15), also highlights postdramatic theatre's use of the 'paradigm of the dream'.

51. Ledger, 'Does What?', p. 126.

52. Crimp, *Fewer Emergencies*, p. 43–4.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

59. Uncannily, as stated on the last page of the 2002 Faber edition of *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies*, the latter was written on 10 September 2001. 'I was renting a room', Crimp remembers, 'and in the distance I had a glimpse between the buildings opposite of the river; where boats were gliding by. . . . The following day the twin towers in New York were destroyed' (quoted in Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, p. 68). The attack against the (symbolic) heart of late capitalism brought the system to a head – either it was radically rethought or it went on unchanged regardless of its own fragility and (perhaps, in the long run, lethal) contradictions. The key had been set swinging.

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