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Abstract: The British playwright Sarah Kane (1971–1999) became one of the most celebrated and derided authors in the 1990s theatrical scene in Great Britain, to a large extent due to the vitriolic response offered by many tabloid journalists and theater critics to her first play, *Blasted* (1995). This paper explores the reaction by the British press to her plays, at the same time that it studies the portrayal of mass media in Sarah Kane's oeuvre by examining how Kane criticized the distorting effects of the media on the depiction of truth, offering a theatrical approach based on honesty and violence as an alternative to the affect-stripping tactics of journalism. Sarah Kane's works are analyzed in the context of the rejection of naturalism that is present in all her plays, a naturalism which is seen as a byproduct of the mimetic depiction of reality championed by journalism. Truth is seen by Sarah Kane's characters, including Hippolytus in *Phaedra's Love* (1996), as a radical ideal worth pursuing despite the devastating effects it has on its advocates, who, most noticeably in her latest plays, *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), are destroyed in the process of trying to reach honesty and communicate an inner feeling about themselves. The choice of a surreal and minimalistic approach both in the language used by the characters and the staging of the plays is seen as a response to a culture saturated by mediated content, in which the failure of words to convey sense adds to the inadequacy of mimetic representations to express affection.

Keywords: Sarah Kane, Truth, Media, Theater, Journalism, Honesty.

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Beyond Journalism, Beyond Naturalism: Sarah Kane's Attempts on Truth

> This is the strangest kind of 'objectivity' there can be: an absolute certainty about what I am was projected onto a chance reality—the truth about myself spoke from a terrifying depth.
>
> FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Ecce Homo*

1. Introduction: Tabloid Journalism Against Sarah Kane

When Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) premiered at the Royal Court in January 1995, the response of the press was so radical and outrageous, that the accounts provided of the first representation have become almost mythical, given the fact that the production was underfunded (Sierz 48) and the attendance to it was limited to "fewer than a thousand people" (Macdonald). As Graham Saunders suggests, it could have been assumed "that the Royal Court had cynically promoted Kane as an *enfant terrible* through which to regain the glory days of Edward Bond's *Saved*" (38).

However, Sarah Kane herself would claim in an interview with Dan Rebellato that the intention of the Royal Court had never been to shock as many people as possible, let alone to provoke a bitter reaction in the press. In fact, the Royal Court "had programmed the play into a dead spot (...). They were a bit embarrassed about it, so they put it into a spot just after Christmas when no one was going to the theatre anyway and hopefully no one would notice" (1). Therefore, the supposedly infuriated response to *Blasted* does not coincide with the actual reaction of the audience to the premiere, which was overplayed by journalists and critics, making it "the least seen and most talked-about play in recent memory" (Macdonald). Sarah Kane would highlight this incongruence between the response of the press and that of the public, claiming that "it's important not to confuse press with audience. There was media outrage, but it was never a public outcry" (qtd. in Stephenson & Langridge 131).

It was Jack Tinker, the theater critic after whom Sarah Kane reportedly named the cruel doctor and torturer of *Cleansed* (1998), who wrote the review that triggered most of the negative comments which followed the play (Saunders 96), and which had an unprecedented snowball effect in theater criticism in Britain. The famous description of *Blasted* as a "disgusting feast of filth" (qtd. in Stephenson & Langridge xvi) for a *Daily Mail* piece has eventually been used as a catchphrase by vindicators of Sarah Kane's work, who highlight the importance of dramatic disgust as a means of connecting with and eliciting a direct response in the public. Sarah J. Ablett draws on Jack Tinker's words to explore the notion of the *disgusting* in Sarah Kane's work. She discusses several other reviews by contemporary journalists who had the chance to watch the play —including one by Morley Sheridan for the *Spectator* which described Sarah Kane's debut as "a sordid little travesty of a play" (qtd. in Ablett 128), or a review by Charles Spencer for the *Daily Telegraph* in which *Blasted* is said to be a "nauseating dog's breakfast of a play" (128).

It was not just with *Blasted* that Kane faced a negative reception by British theater critics. Reviewing *Phaedra's Love* (1996), Charles Spencer famously contended that "It's not a theatre critic that's required here, it's a psychiatrist" (qtd. in Armstrong 100). Sarah Kane would usually mock reactions which focused on the mental health of the playwright instead of discussing the contents of the pieces themselves (Rebellato 2), and saw these comments as a result of the

failure of critics to understand what she was doing and hence of their inability to locate it within an existing theatrical tradition. Scathing reviews would also follow *Skin* (1995), described by the *Daily Mail* as "one of the most violent and racially offensive programmes ever to be made for television [in the UK]" (qtd. in Ablett 139), as well as *Cleansed*, which critic John Gross considered "miserable stuff" (qtd. in Armstrong 31). This tendency of critics to misunderstand Sarah Kane's works as meaningless displays of gratuitous violence—which according to David Greig was ultimately "difficult and depressing" for her (x)—did not change until *Crave* (1998), whose highly lyrical style was positively received by many critics as a breakaway from the goriness of her previous works (Saunders 120), even if some of the main themes of *Crave*—boredom, solipsism, the failure of words to convey sense—had already been dealt with in *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love*. Be that as it may, Kane remained wary of critics until her death, especially British ones, and was particularly annoyed when journalists interviewing her confessed they had not read her work (Rebellato 4).

2. Staging Truth, Staging Cruelty: Sarah Kane and the Depiction of Violence

Sarah Kane chooses to show torture, rape, fellatio or suicide on stage as a way of making the audience confront the cruelty of contemporary world in a more direct and engaging way than the daily news. Kane always understood her own theater as a means of communicating truth, and in a 1997 interview she responded to critics who complained that in her plays there was an excess of despair and brutality by embracing despair as a part of life which she felt the responsibility to address, since "[M]ost people experience a lot more despair and brutality than John Peter would like to believe. There's only the same danger of overdose in the theatre as there is in life. The choice is either to represent it, or not to represent it" (Stephenson & Langridge 132–133). In the same interview Sarah Kane asserted that her only responsibility was toward truth (134–135), however terrible it may be—an idea that echoes Hippolytus' insistent rejection of God when approached by the Priest in *Phaedra's Love*, turning down his offer of a last-minute conversion, since "[I]f there is a God, I'd like to look him in the face knowing I'd died as I'd lived. In conscious sin" (Kane 94).

The connection between cruelty and truth which Sarah Kane establishes in that interview is one of the main motifs of her work, and it lies at the heart of her understanding of theatrical representation. In *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), arguably her bleakest work—where she more overtly addresses isolation, dysphoria and suicide—one of the voices[1] refers to "a truth which no one ever utters" (205), insisting on equating truth to a horrible revelation, to "an instant of clarity before eternal night" (206) —a moment of lucidity which precedes death by suicide. At the moment she was writing this play, Sarah Kane had started to read the work of Antonin Artaud, which—surprisingly given the resemblance in both their work and their way of understanding theater—she had not done before because, as she put it, the French essayist and dramatist had been recommended to her by a college professor she scorned (Tabert 19). Kane dealt with

[1]Partially inspired by Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*, Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* is a play with no specific characters. The words uttered in it may correspond to the voices heard by a psychotic character suffering from dissociation, but they may also be a dialogue between a patient and their psychiatrist. A cast of three characters was chosen for the first performance (Waddington 146), aiming to reflect the "Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander" (Kane 231) triad that appears in this and other of Kane's works.

Artaud's ideas on theater in her last play, but the notion of cruelty as a ubiquitous element in modern culture had been present in her plays since *Blasted*, where the familiar setting of a hotel room is transformed into a civil war scenario.

In *The Theater and Its Double* Artaud equated life with cruelty, claiming that "I said 'cruelty' just as I might have said 'life' or 'necessity' (...), I associate it with a true act, therefore alive, therefore magic" (103–104). The second part of *Blasted*, after the explosion of the Leeds hotel, was inspired by the war in Bosnia (Rebellato 6), and *Phaedra's Love* was eventually interpreted as an allegory of the corruption of the British Royal Family (Stephenson 131–132), on account of the 1990s scandals around Princess Diana. Given the circumstances, it is difficult not to read the lines "they've rid themselves of the corrupting element. But the monarchy remains intact" (Kane 99) as a reference to the sociopolitical context in which Kane was writing.

However, none of these issues is explicitly referred to in the plays, and the allusions to contemporary events in all her work are scarce. In *Blasted*, Cate says the last time she went to a football match was "Saturday. United beat Liverpool 2-0" (Kane 19), which in all likelihood alludes to the 19th February 1994 match in Elland Road between Leeds United and Liverpool FC; in *Phaedra's Love*, Hippolytus watches Hollywood films (65) and wants to give the present he has received to Oxfam (75); in *Cleansed* there is a direct allusion to the Beatles' song "Things We Said Today" (136); and in *Crave*, more indirectly, to popular culture elements such as *Star Wars* (171). However, all these references are vague and almost irrelevant to the overall message of the plays, as Kane decides to get rid of virtually every indexical which would make the play dependent on a particular context. As it has been highlighted, she decontextualizes the plot of her plays, while introducing the necessary ambiguity so that they can be interpreted as allusions to the contemporary reality of Great Britain:

> What should be assimilated and understood is displaced and decontextualized so that the source of the trauma's presence is incongruous, and therefore inassimilable. While the play's inspiration and immediate commentary contains an artistic, referential metaphor to central Europe, it persists also as an urgent and specific comment upon, and reference to, Britain. (Armstrong 52)

Skin, which was written to be broadcasted on Channel 4, explores the skinhead movement through its manifestations in Great Britain during the 1990s, so that the young racist protagonist Billy appears with a Union Jack flag on his right arm (Kane 249). However, and even if this is the play which most heavily relies on the immediate context, it still examines power relations and the universal issue of love, Sarah Kane's most recurrently explored theme, which in the case of *Blasted* is shaped as an abusive relationship where Cata loses herself to the brutal Ian, telling him "I stink of you" (33)The stage direction which opens Scene One of *Blasted* remarkably describes the setting as a "*very expensive hotel room in Leeds—the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world*" (Kane 3). The scenario of *Phaedra's Love* is quite economically described as a "*royal palace*" (65); the action of *Cleansed* takes place "*inside the perimeter fence of a university*" (107), which may well stand as an indefinite symbol of Foucauldian power—as an educational institution, but also as a hospital, a prison, or a concentration camp. In *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* there are no deictic markers whatsoever, as conveyed by the absence of stage

directions, which mirrors the disintegration of the subject and the move towards isolation and solipsism which Kane depicts more intensely in her last two works, but which she had been working upon since *Blasted*. This is testified by the fact that Kane removed the direct references to the Yugoslavian wars which were included in the 1993 version of the play (Sierz 51), or by her assertion that "I think there's the problem that when so specific something actually stops having resonance beyond that specific… Whereas I hope that *Cleansed* and *Blasted* have resonance beyond what happened in Bosnia or Germany specifically" (qtd. in Saunders 94).

Still, Sarah Kane claimed that all the violence depicted in her work was just the result of showing on stage what appeared in the media, as she said in her interview with Dan Rebellato, where she reflects on the ideas of theater as journalism and the relationship between theater and realism. Replying to critics who complained about the excess of violence in her plays, she said: "I hate the idea of drama as journalism and I would never say I'm a journalist, but when it comes to the acts of violence in my plays, my imagination isn't that fucking sick (...). I just read the newspapers" (Rebellato 14). Then, provided that the scenes Sarah Kane wrote were merely a reflection of the violence that was present in the media at the time she wrote, why did she provoke such a bitter reaction among that same press on which she relied for writing her plays? What she was arguably doing was to get rid of every redundant or pointless section, getting "all the boring bits cut out" (14), and leaving just the "moments of extremely high drama" (12) —as it happens in Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, a play which Kane had directed in 1997 and which she acknowledged as a major source of influence. The physical intensity of this high drama arguably reaches its peak in *Cleansed*, as exemplified in this stage direction showing the vehemence of the love relationship between Grace and Graham:

> *He sucks her right breast.*
> *She undoes his trousers and touches his penis.*
> *They take off the rest of their clothes, watching each other.*
> *They stand naked and look at each other's bodies.*
> *They slowly embrace.*
> *They begin to make love, slowly at first, then hard, fast, urgent, finding each other's rhythm is the same as their own.*
> *They come together.*
> *They hold each other, him inside her, not moving.*
> *A sunflower bursts through the floor and grows above their heads.*
> *When it is fully grown, Graham pulls it towards him and smells it.* (Kane 120)

Echoing the fragmentary nature of Büchner's work, this series of short, simple sentences serves the purpose of reflecting the intensity of Grace and Graham's love, getting rid of connecting elements and leaving in the text just the moments of blatant activity; by using just one stage direction to depict this, Sarah Kane is contributing to the intensification of the action and the reduction of theatrical times.

In Sarah Kane's plays, violence is ubiquitous; transition elements are removed and the escalation toward brutality takes place in such a short period of time that it does not let the audience remain at a comfortable distance (Iball 3). *Blasted* might be seen as the play where the

transition toward blatant brutality is most abrupt, but the atmosphere of violence, suffering and cruelty of that play had been established since the very beginning through the mental breakdowns experienced by Cate, and the racist, misogynist, and coarse language used by Ian. His offensive language is the first step to physical violence, which takes place first in the form of rape and then as war and destruction. However, it is probably in *Cleansed* where the omnipresence of violence the eeriest in all of Kane's work, for it appears in close connection to love, "what was to become her main theme" (Greig xi). Grace recalls an ex-boyfriend who "bought me a box of chocolates then tried to strangle me" (Kane 124), and the love which the characters express to each other is tested by the torturer Tinker in the context of extreme violence, as when Graham protects Grace from the gunfire shooting by shielding "Grace's body with his own, and holds her head between his hands" (132). As in *Blasted*, the escalation toward brutality in *Cleansed* is also fast and abrupt; there is no pause or transition toward madness, and love becomes so intense that its physical manifestations are as sudden as they can get, as when Carl makes a dance of love to Rod—a dance that, abruptly, "becomes frenzied, frantic" (136), to turn into "a spasmodic dance of desperate regret" (136). The identification between love and physical destruction is a constant motif in Kane's work, who was influenced by Roland Barthes' claim that the situation of a love-sick subject be like that of an inmate of Dachau (qtd. in Saunders 93).

Kane was especially critical of the way violence is depicted in the media, as she believed that even when tragic events are shown in the news, the distance which the television establishes between the spectators and the events shown ensures that the emotional commitment of the audience with the suffering of people in the context of oppression or war is limited, and ultimately causes detachment. It was the realization that no one was going to help the Bosnian woman crying for help in the news that prompted her to turn *Blasted* into a play about full-scale war (Rebellato 6), in an attempt to engage the audience by making them participants of a familiar scenario "where its opening scenes accord with realist strategy" (Iball 4), but which soon turns into an uncomfortable setting where cruelty and coarseness take hold, and pleasure and pain merge, as when "*On the word 'killer' [Ian] comes*" (Kane 32). Thus, the play moves into a civil war situation where the ruthless Soldier takes control, with the purpose of conveying that "the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilisation" (Rebellato 7).

Blasted is the play where Sarah Kane most directly addresses the specific role of the media in the portrayal of violence in Great Britain. Cate, a 21-year-old woman plagued by trauma, suffering continuous panic attacks, has become traumatized by the 45-year-old journalist Ian, who mistreats and eventually rapes her. The idea of journalistic reporting as a way of avoiding emotional involvement is embodied by the character of Ian, who refuses to help Cate when she experiences mental fits, turning a blind eye or blaming her. By telling her "[D]on't do it again, fucking scared me" (Kane 10), he is victimizing himself and trying to make Cate feel guilty. "Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander" (231) are the three participants of a crime as identified by Kane in *4.48 Psychosis*. These have been analyzed as the three key subjects in Kane's ontology (Chute 161), and in *Blasted* they all merge in the character of Ian, through whom Kane discusses the position taken by the media in situations of conflict.

Ian's job as a journalist makes him a professional bystander, but his attitude against Cate turns him into a perpetrator, who is nonetheless transformed into a victim when the Soldier

arrives and bites Ian's eyes off (Kane 50). Ian's bad conscience about the horrible things he has done, and his realization that he is not one of those fully functional people with kids who are eligible for a transplant (11), being excluded from the Foucauldian structures of power like the hospital, make him aware of his own guilt, and therefore a victim and a perpetrator at the same time.[2] When Ian tells Cate "[P]unish me or rescue me makes no difference" (51), Kane is making him both a victim and perpetrator, therefore questioning Ian's position as a professional bystander. As a journalist, he should have been aware that a war was coming, but instead it is Cate, seen by Ian as a stupid woman who will never get a job (8), the one who observes that "[L]ooks like there's a war on" (33). As Jolene Armstrong has remarked, Kane's decision to make Cate announce the imminent war instead of Ian is a way of reflecting how Ian's inherently violent personality precludes him from seeing that anything is changing at all; his worldview cannot tell the difference between the brutality he inflicts day to day and the horrors of a full-scale armed conflict (72).

Kane shows how the violence-seeking attitude of journalistic reporting hampers awareness of the events happening within national borders, a similar thing to what she does in *Skin* when highlighting the exaggerated, self-imposed Englishness of the neo-Nazi group members (Kane 251), who are themselves creating the violence they claim to be caused by immigrants. In *Blasted*, Ian's reaction to the impending war consists in a racist comment; unable to apprehend the atmosphere of violence that permeates Britain, he says the country is turning "into Wogland" (34). The metaphor of blinding accounts for plenty of the symbolism of the text in regard to journalistic reporting; when the Soldier eats Ian's eyes (50), Sarah Kane visually represents what was already apparent in Ian's negligence and inability to grasp what is happening around him. Ian's parochialism is manifest through his blatant racism, but also through the abhorrence he feels when the Soldier tells him about the horrific experience of the violence inflicted on his girlfriend Col. Ian refuses to write about the way Col was buggered and had her throat cut on the grounds that, as he is a home journalist, he is not meant to write about foreign affairs (48), refusing to acknowledge the personal as political in a form of self-defense that eludes his professional responsibilities. Moreover, he feels "[T]his isn't a story anyone wants to hear" (48). Claiming that no one would be interested in such a story, as it is not a personal matter, Kane is also placing the public in the position of accomplice of the "affect-stripping tactics of news reporting" (Aston 13) that prioritize information which can be sensationalized, and which escapes emotional involvement. Toward the end of the play, the stage direction showing Ian trying to clean up his shit with newspaper (Kane 59) may be the best description to depict the failure of that affect-stripping, sensational journalism in situations of war and devastation.

3. When Media Fail, When Language Fails: Minimalist Approaches to Miscommunication

Rather than a personal abhorrence of journalists or critics, Sarah Kane's contempt for mass media should be studied in conjunction with her ideas about representation in theater and the role of the media in the rendering of information in Great Britain, which stood in close connection with

[2]The notion of guilt as a torturing mechanism which makes the sufferer collapse is repeatedly explored by Kane. In *Crave*, A bemoans how "Guilt lingers like the smell of death and nothing can free me from this cloud of blood" (184).

naturalism. As David Greig claims when discussing the difficulty to represent the most surreal scenes onstage, "[H]er stage imagery poses no problem for theatre per se, only for a theatre tied to journalistic naturalism" (xiii). The naturalist movement, which had been the most successful trend in British drama since 1945, aimed to reconcile thorough examinations of human behavior and the working-class British citizen with the broader scenario of sociopolitical change, on the assumption that society ought to be extensively observed but also changed (Middeke et al. xx). The so-called postdramatic theater reacts against the alliance between naturalism and overexposure to the media, which had bolstered the belief that the most accurate representation of reality is achieved through mimesis (Lehmann 89).

Sarah Kane responded to naturalism by pushing the borders of feasible representation to include scenes of extreme violence, as well as surreal stage directions such as "*A sunflower bursts through the floor and grows above their heads*" (Kane 120) in *Cleansed*, which forces the directors to take radical decisions and move beyond the conventions of naturalistic theater. According to James Macdonald, who directed Kane's *Blasted*, *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis*, it was the press' reaction to *Blasted* that led her to write something which could not be taken for realism (qtd. in Saunders 121), moving towards abstraction and surrealism.

The departure from realistic codes runs parallel to the disintegration of personality Sarah Kane explores in her later works. Even if in *Blasted* she had already shown the dissolution of personality in the process of love, as when Ian tells Cate "[W]e're one" (Kane 26), it is in *Cleansed* that the loss of self as a consequence of love becomes a main theme, a point visually expressed when she has Graham simultaneously bleed in the same places as Grace does (Kane 132). In *Crave*, Sarah Kane goes a step further by removing almost every stage direction whatsoever and naming the characters through the letters A, B, C, and M, who are constantly echoing and rebutting what each other is saying through an array of rhetorical devices—anaphora, parallelism, epistrophe or stichomythia. These convey the loss of identity taking place when, as M puts it, "[Y]ou stop thinking of yourself as I, you think of we" (161).

The dissolution of personality comes to a head in *4.48 Psychosis*, where the absence of characters and stage directions poses a direct threat to the assumptions of social realism, so that directors face the need to make decisions about the amount of actors and actresses to include in the play, as well as their gender and age; the words in the page may belong to one same female character, to one same male character, to a male psychiatrist and a female patient, or, as it was decided in the premiere by James MacDonald (Waddington 141), to three different characters representing the split of the personality of one same person. This decision accords with the disintegration of character expressed by the voice in the play in lines such as "I'm seeing things / I'm hearing things / I don't know who I am" (Kane 225), but the lack of clear-cut guidelines about the way the play should be represented gives way to different representations, which are also interpretations on behalf of the directors and the readers of the plays.

Sarah Kane's repudiation of naturalism is closely related to her rejection of other media to represent her plays. Even though she did write the script for a short film, *Skin*, transmitted on Channel 4, her career as a writer relied heavily on the connection with the public, convinced that, in theater, unlike in cinema or in television, the implication of the audience is essential for the outcome of the work of art, since even a cough by a member of the audience can alter the result of the performance (Saunders 17). Kane liked to think of theater as a live art, and enjoyed the

fact that "I can't possibly expect to ever see the same production twice" (Rebellato 16). She aimed to engage the public in the production of the play so that they could become an active part of the performance, stopping them from staying at a comfortable distance. This relates to the views on theater held by Artaud, who believed that the spectacle should be extended "by elimination of the stage, to the entire hall of the theater" (116), so that it "will scale the walls up on light catwalks, will physically envelop the spectator and immerse him in a constant bath of light, images, movements and noises" (116). In the production of *Phaedra's Love*, the only time Kane herself directed a premiere of her work, barriers between the audience and the actors were removed, placing the spectators close to the playing space, which was dispersed throughout the theater, and making them participate in the murder of Hippolytus (Campbell 175).

It was not only in the productions that Kane rebelled against the tenets of social realism and the passivity of the audience favored by television but, most important in an author who regarded herself as a writer and not as a director (Rebellato 8), her texts are imbued with criticism to that indifference favored by journalistic reporting. In *Phaedra's Love*, Hippolytus is depicted as a bored, depressed man who spends his days watching Hollywood films on television (Kane 65). These do not prove a meaningful source of entertainment and exacerbate his boredom and nihilism,[3] as his "gaze flits between the car and the television apparently getting pleasure from neither" (74). Hippolytus is the victim of a world based on overstimulation and a meaningless quest for pleasure which is never fulfilled as, following the Priest's words, self-satisfaction is impossible—a contradiction in terms (93). Hippolytus suffers what Mark Fisher dubbed "depressive hedonia," a condition characterized "not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it is by an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure" (21–22). Hippolytus indulges in activities which cannot satisfy him, he does not enjoy sex and watches TV all night just to fill time (79). In *Attempts on Her Life*, whose influence on Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* has been repeatedly highlighted (Iball 30, Saunders 109), Martin Crimp describes a world where even the most radical gesture "is simply one more form of entertainment i.e. one more product … to be consumed" (256). Postdramatic theater, although not a solution to the overstimulated world of ubiquitous entertainment, is seen as a departure from realism and traditional plot constructions, providing the directors with freedom to choose the number of characters to say the different lines of the play, as, through an exercise of minimalism, Martin Crimp does not name any of the characters who speak in *Attempts on Her Life*, and their number is also left unspecified.

The way out of that overstimulation offered by Kane, especially in her last plays, is also a minimalistic approach, a minimalism of short plays in which the theatrical scenery is austere or non-existent and where spoken language is scarce.[4] It has been argued that Kane's later work presents a shift from a theater of violence towards more linguistic plays (Voigts-Virchow 200), but the language used by characters in *Crave* or *4.48 Psychosis* is minimal and the access to meaning is highly surreal and symbolic, sometimes conveyed through associations to other texts,

[3] Hippolytus' nihilism is indeed connected to his rejection of God and religion as an absurd way to provide sense to existence. In his conversation with the Priest, who is trying to make him repent and confess his sins, Hippolytus points to the senselessness of this cycle, claiming that "I know what I am. And always will be. But you. You sin knowing you'll confess. Then you're forgiven. And then you start all over again" (96).

[4] In this respect, it is worth mentioning the influence of Samuel Beckett on Sarah Kane. Kane mentions Beckett in an interview as an author she admired for his elusion of simplistic interpretation (Stephenson & Langridge 131), and her plays are imbued with a nihilism and minimalism that has been analyzed as essentially Beckettian (Voigts-Virchow 204).

as to *The Waste Land* in *Crave*, which, amongst other allusions to Eliot's poem,[5] includes a translation into German of *The Waste Land*'s line: "In the mountains, there you feel free" (Eliot 5), through which she would mock Eliot's tendency to include lines in different languages, turning the poem into a cryptic edifice in need to be deciphered. Kane was also deliberately cryptic in *Crave,* and decided not to include explanatory notes as Eliot had done for his poem, so that every production was different, and every reader or viewer made their own interpretation about the play (Rebellato 16). The exact significance of the number 199714424 in *Crave* (Kane 188) remains unknown, as do the lists of numbers that appear in *4.48 Psychosis*, which contributes to the effect of disorientation and confusion Kane sought to achieve.

Along the difficulty to comprehend the cryptic allusions to other works which Sarah Kane included in *Crave*, the audience is confronted with the additional challenge of understanding the sentences in German, Spanish and Serbo-Croatian, which couples well with the idea Kane had that everything that had been imagined and conceived had to be represented (Greig xiii). As Jole Armstrong has stressed (160), through those lines she deliberately attempts to block communication with audience members who are monolingual. This is not an arbitrary decision, but a coherent approach which connects with Sarah Kane's view on the futility of words and the solipsism of the modern world, where individuals are so enclosed within themselves that they cannot reach any meaningful human contact. The characters of all texts by Sarah Kane, but especially those of her final works, are tormented by the impossibility to communicate and the failure of language to connect with others. Words are not enough; they are ineffective as a remedy, as suggested by the following exchange between C and B in *Crave*:

> C.- I hate these words that keep me alive
> I hate these words that won't let me die
> B.- Expressing my pain without easing it. (Kane 184)

Even when language fails, the characters of *Crave* never stop trying to express their feelings and achieve redemption through language. Arguably the best example of this is found in A's intimate monologue about the love he has for the person he is addressing, which runs for almost two pages with no punctuation marks at all.[6] In this fragment, A yearns for the presence of the person he loves, and desperately wants to "somehow somehow somehow communicate some of the/overwhelming undying overpowering unconditional all-encompassing heart-enriching mind-expanding on-going never-ending love I have for you" (Kane 170).

The shortcomings of language when it comes to representing the world or expressing genuine feelings had been already explored in Sarah Kane's earlier work. In *Phaedra's Love*, Hippolytus complains about the meaninglessness of conversations after sex, saying "Can't stand post-coital chats. There's never anything to say" (Kane 82). In *Cleansed*, when Grace is trying to teach Robin to read and write, the latter observes that there are letters which do not look like they sound, so Grace tries to teach him to write her name, "so you think it looks like it sounds"

[5] In *Crave*, C and M allude to Eliot's line about April "mixing memory and desire" (4); C expresses her desire to be "free of memory" (198), to which M replies: "Free of desire" (198), alluding further to Eliot's line.

[6] A relevant aspect considering the importance punctuation had for Sarah Kane, who would get irritated by actors who disregarded the punctuation of her texts (Chute 172).

(123). Grace also wants Robin to say her name (133), which she would interpret as a token of love. In *Crave*, language appears as a system through which characters try to express their frustrations and reach honesty, but their feelings are so strong and overwhelming that language falls short for that purpose; as A puts it: "I don't have music, Christ I wish I had music but all I have is words" (Kane 172).

Honesty had been championed in *Phaedra's Love* by Hippolytus, who, against the hypocrisy of the Priest who sins knowing he will be saved through confession, wants to create "[a] kingdom of honest men, honestly sinning" (96). His honesty is inbred, it is his way to approach life, whereas the characters in *Crave* strive to reach that honesty in order to connect with each other and communicate their most intimate desires and disappointments. In Sarah Kane's plays, honesty is the last resort of identity: the capacity to be honest regardless of its devastating effects on other people is what makes Hippolytus a larger-than-life character; in *Crave*, characters struggle to keep that honesty as their self-consciousness vanishes. In his long monologue, A sees in honesty an act of sacrifice and affection undertaken for the beloved person, as shown by his words: "tell you the truth when I really don't want to and try to be honest to you because I know you prefer it" (170). His self-destruction is completed when honesty fades: "I've lost faith in honesty" (188) are the words which express his falling apart, as he is unable to be true to himself.

In *Crave*, honesty is hindered by the fact that characters are trying to communicate painful situations, including family trauma, which contributes to the disintegration of personality the text addresses. As Jolene Armstrong defends, "Trauma is the catalyst for *Crave* and the resulting pain is what each character desires to express, and presumably purge ... Kane's language depiction is cryptic and fragmented, betraying a basic feature of pain—its essential inexpressibility" (168). The shape this phenomenon takes in *Crave* is that of four bereaved characters, each of them struggling to express a sorrow which is not understood by the other three. When *A* voices his desire to stop existing, "Death is my lover and he wants to move in" (Kane 180), the answer provided by B is sheer incomprehension; his anguished "What does that mean, what does that mean, what does that mean what you're saying?" (180) adds to the despair which pervades the play.

Much of the pain the characters in *Crave* suffer is caused by unrequited love, by the inconsistency between an overwhelming feeling of love and the lack of response by the object of that love; as A puts it, "You've fallen in love with someone that doesn't exist" (190), an issue which will be expanded in *4.48 Psychosis* through the frustration felt in view of the gap that exists between the speaker's desire and the indifference of the desired person: "Sometimes I turn around and catch the smell of you and I cannot go on I cannot fucking go on without expressing this terrible so fucking awful physical aching fucking longing I have for you. And I cannot believe that I can feel this for you and you feel nothing. Do you feel nothing?" (214). In her essay about illness, Virginia Woolf claims that "illness often takes on the disguise of love, and plays the same odd tricks" (6), which is an idea Kane constantly dwells on in her work, especially in *Crave*. In this play, illness and love are intertwined through trauma, which ultimately causes pain by association, insanity, anorexia and bulimia (Kane 172–173).

The characters cannot comprehend themselves, and therefore cannot be comprehended by others either; as C so wittily puts it, "[Y]ou get mixed messages because I have mixed feelings"

(165). The essential theme of communication failure could make *Crave* prone to be represented in the media and not onstage, as the characters are together and at the same time they are not; they are speaking to each other but not reaching understanding—a crucial feature of mediated communication which makes scholar Graham Saunders and Kane's literary agent Mel Kenyon agree that it would be perfect for the radio (Saunders 150). Nevertheless, even if a German film version of the play—*Gier*, directed by Thomas Reisinger—can be found on YouTube, Sarah Kane's approach was essentially theatrical, and she refrained from getting her plays produced for the radio or television. As Ken Urban comments, "Kane's canon brims with a uniquely theatrical vision" (40), vindicating the uniqueness of the theatrical representations. It is, to quote Martin Crimp in *Attempts on Her Life*, "theatre ... for a world in which theatre itself has died" (254).

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes also analyzes the deficiencies of mediated communication in the communication of romantic feelings. He regrets that, in a love relationship, "I try to deny separation by the telephone ... but the telephone wire is not a good transitional object, it is not an inert string; it is charged with a meaning, which is not that of junction but that of distance: the loved, exhausted voice heard over the telephone is the fade-out in all its anxiety" (115). For Barthes, mediated communication falls short in the expression of romantic feelings, and only physical contact might fulfill the romantic yearning.

It may be interesting at this point to draw attention to the fragment in *Crave* where C bewails that "My entire life is waiting to see the person with whom I am currently obsessed, starving the weeks away until our next fifteen minute appointment" (Kane 184). Although by 1998 communication between people was already possible through a wide range of media, C seems to long for an in-person meeting, and any other type of communication outside those in-person appointments is simply not enough. Kane's insistence on the importance of the characters' physical presence in *Crave*, her desire that "none of the plays must be produced in any other media whatsoever" (Saunders 150) is to be seen as a radical vindication of theater as an art; the miscommunication of the characters in *Crave* is more appalling because it happens onsite, inside a physical space shared by the four characters. The failure to connect is so shattering insofar as the personal contact that the characters were craving is not satisfied by the physical proximity. When B says "If you were here—" (Kane 193) and M instantly replies "I am here" (193), the effect of alienation and disorientation—the feeling that "you're in the wrong place" (187)—that is achieved when performed in a theater could not be matched by a film or a radio production, where the members of the audience do not share the space with the actors and cannot feel the dissociation with the here and now of the space shared by the protagonists, nor the awareness that they are not communicating, that they are inhabiting different mental worlds.

4. Conclusion: Sarah Kane Against Tabloid Journalism

Sarah Kane's work constitutes a vigorous response to the affect-stripping methods of mass media journalism. The controversies between Sarah Kane and the media establishment surrounding *Blasted* also permeate the rest of her work, which brims with criticism against the lack of emotional involvement in traditional depictions of violence on the mass media. Her plays suggest an alternative way of representing violence onstage which relies on honesty and an intense involvement of the audience in the productions. The ubiquity of cruelty in Sarah Kane's work, in

line with Artaud's ideas about theater, is understood as a reaction against the detachment favored by the media, as well as a way of challenging the conventional classification of participants into victim, perpetrator and bystander.

The overstimulation prompted by the different media has been identified as one of Kane's major concerns, and the shift toward more surreal, minimalistic plays has been contextualized as a coherent evolution in her theatrical production, which casts doubt on the scope of naturalism when it comes to representing truth in an increasingly fragmented world. In line with her questioning of naturalistic modes of representation, Sarah Kane became increasingly preoccupied with the failure of language to convey reality. The fragmentary style of *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* reflects the frustration over the inability to communicate in a context of trauma. To a considerable extent, our analysis has relied on Sarah Kane's interviews and secondary sources about her work to study Sarah Kane's criticism of mediated discourse and naturalism. Our main purpose, however, has been to explore how Kane's ideas on the flaws of journalism or the impossibility of language to access reality are expressed within her plays themselves. Kane's work, in sum, offers a unique perspective on how theater can provide an engaging alternative to the mimetic representations of reality usually found in the mass media.

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