

DE GRUYTER

Clara Escoda Agustí

MARTIN CRIMP'S THEATRE

COLLAPSE AS RESISTANCE TO
LATE CAPITALIST SOCIETY

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Collapse as Resistance to Late Capitalist Society



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To my family

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I Preliminaries I: Introduction and Rationale

This book finds its origins in a series of lectures I attended in 2005 at the University of Barcelona, which were part of the MA programme “Construction and Representation of Identities”. It was during one of these lectures that a play happened to fall into my hands – it was entitled *Attempts on her Life*. In this beautifully crafted, insightful play, a young girl tells her parents she feels “like a TV screen” (Crimp 1997: 24). And she adds, “like a TV screen [...] ‘where everything from the front looks real and alive, but round the back there’s just dust and a few wires’” (Crimp 1997: 24). The play was undoubtedly tackling the issue of collapse or breakdown in the context of late capitalism. There it was, in front of me, a sensibility which I judged akin to mine.

In Crimp, the contemporary emphasis on technology and economic growth is seen to uproot individuals from themselves and one another. Collapse points to, in part, the underside of science and technology, and to the values late capitalism, with its emphasis on productivity, growth and efficiency, refuses to acknowledge and keeps repressed. Ever since I was an undergraduate student, I have been interested in how irrationality, or non-normalized behaviour, is dramatized as a form of dissent and protest. Allured and intrigued, I decided to write my doctoral thesis on Crimp’s plays, the result of which is this present book, focusing specifically on how the motif of collapse or breakdown of the self might emerge in response and opposition to the suppressed violence of the current world order.

The aim of this book is to read Martin Crimp’s *The Treatment* (1993), *Attempts on her Life* (1997), *The Country* (2000), *Face to the Wall* (2002), *Cruel and Tender* (2004) and his adaptation of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* (2006) in the context of contemporary, late capitalist societies, and to explore how female collapse in particular works as a form of denunciation of the violence of contemporary relationships.¹ In these plays, relationships are seen to be shaped by the re-

¹ Crimp’s *The Treatment*, directed by Lindsay Posner, was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, where it ran from 15 April to 30 June 1993. The play won the John Whiting Award and established Crimp as a central figure on the new writing scene (Aragay et al. 56). *Attempts on her Life* was first directed by Tim Albery, and it was presented at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs (then housed at the Ambassador’s Theatre), on 7 March 1997. The production ran until 5 April 1997. This study also makes occasional references to Juan Carlos Martel Bayod’s production of the play, which ran at Sala Beckett, Barcelona, from 1–7 April 2005, coinciding with Crimp’s visit to the theatre, where he offered a series of lectures on playwriting. It also makes repeated references to Katie Mitchell’s revival of the play for the National Theatre on the occasion of its tenth anniversary. Mitchell’s production was staged at the Lyttelton auditorium of the National Theatre from 8 March to 10 May 2007. *The Country* was first directed by Katie Mitchell and it opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 11 April 2000. The production ran until 24 June 2000. This study makes occasional references to

quirements of a society which is increasingly governed by the rules of the globalized free-market economy, where an overriding lack of scruples as to personal ambition often leads institutions, corporations and individuals themselves, in their daily relationships, to perpetuate supposedly archaic forms of patriarchy. Ultimately, emerging out of the analysis and discussion of the individual plays, this book aims to offer a critical discourse in which the type of subjectivity and of relationships produced by globalized, technological neo-liberalism can be interrogated.

My use of the term ‘collapse’ does not refer to socio-economic breakdown, as has been analyzed by the theories of economic collapse, and by authors such as Jennifer Milliken, Keith Krause, Dmitri Orlov, or Jared Diamond, amongst others, but to the type of subjective, individual breakdown some of Crimp’s characters undergo.² It is used as an ‘umbrella’ term that covers many forms of breakdown of the self, such as violence, hysteria or even masochism. The book analyses the instances of breakdown Crimp’s characters undergo and explores how they seek to point to the larger malfunctioning aspects of late capitalism. Finally, and most importantly, it focuses on how collapse can both signal a given situation of power inequality and also allow for different alternatives or possibilities of disruption to become manifest.

Chronologically, this book takes *The Treatment* (1993) as its point of departure and Crimp’s adaptation of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* (2006) as its closing play. The book singles out *The Treatment* as the play that first introduces the motif of female collapse and violence within late capitalist societies of control. The structure of the present book is organized around five main blocks, in addition to the

the production of *The Country* directed by Toni Casares at Sala Beckett, Barcelona, from 16 February to 27 March 2005. *Face to the Wall* was first directed by Katie Mitchell and it ran from 14 to 23 March 2002 at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. This study makes reference to James Macdonald’s production of Crimp’s triptych *Fewer Emergencies*, which included *Face to the Wall* together with *Whole Blue Sky* (2005) and *Fewer Emergencies* (2002), and which was staged at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs from 8 September to 1 October 2005. The premiere of *Cruel and Tender* was directed by Luc Bondy and it was first presented, in a co-production with the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord and Ruhrfestspiele Recklingshausen, at the Young Vic on 5 May 2004. It ran for two weeks in May, and then from 17 June to 10 July 2004, after touring in Europe. Finally, the first production of Crimp’s *The Seagull*, directed by Katie Mitchell, was staged at the Lyttleton auditorium of the National Theatre, where it ran from 17 June to 23 September 2006.

² See Milliken and Krause’s “State Failure, State Collapse and State Reconstruction: Concepts, Lessons and Strategies”, Orlov’s *Reinventing Collapse: The Soviet Experience and American Prospects* (2011), or Diamond’s *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or to Survive* (2006) as examples of socio-economic approaches to collapse.

present introductory one. The second block, “Preliminaries II: Martin Crimp’s Theatre, a Pedagogy of Resistance”, carries a theoretical introduction, and considers Crimp’s theatrical production as aiming to construct, through the dramatization of collapse, a strategy of resistance to what he deems to be the profoundly totalitarian tendencies of late capitalist society. The theoretical introduction is, in its turn, divided into two sections. The first section, “Martin Crimp’s Context”, includes two chapters which offer the contextual background to Crimp’s plays. In the first one, “Late Capitalism and Societies of Control”, the type of contemporary society in which Crimp’s plays are set is outlined, and the transition from traditionally disciplinary societies to societies of control is discussed.

In societies of control discipline does not come so much from an external source of authority or institution as it does from surveillance mechanisms such as ‘cameras’ and the codes of behaviour extolled through television and other media.³ This chapter also introduces the notion of bio-power as developed by Michel Foucault – namely, the power upon bodies and the control of life that began to be characteristic of modern societies as a substitute for the old right of the sovereign to take the life of his – less frequently, her – subjects and impact directly on their bodies. The transition from societies centred around the power of the sovereign over life to societies based on bio-power, in which control is exerted through ideology, runs parallel to the change from disciplinary societies to late twentieth-century societies of control. One of the most important consequences of this double transition, Foucault claims, is that it has been increasingly left to the individual to internalize codes of behaviour and to self-regulate accordingly, a mechanism which ultimately renders individuals ‘docile’ to the late capitalist economic system.

The second chapter under “Martin Crimp’s Context”, “A Post-Holocaust Writer: Capitalism and Barbarism”, delves into the interface between late capitalist forms of repression and surveillance and the modes of operation of fascism or ‘barbarism’. As Elisabeth Angel-Perez has pointed out in *Voyages au bout du possible: Les théâtres du traumatisme de Samuel Beckett à Sarah Kane*, Crimp, like many other contemporary British dramatists, does not dramatize the Holocaust directly (Angel-Perez 2006a: 12), yet contemporary British theatre, and Martin Crimp’s dramaturgy in particular, “compulsively dramatizes the problematic

³ This book refers to the technological devices that characterize societies of control as the ‘camera’. The concept of the ‘camera’ is an umbrella term that is meant to include the array of technological means – the strategic and generalized use of TV sets, CCTV, the cinema, advertisements and the internet, amongst others – whereby ideology is propagated and the current world order maintained in late capitalist societies of control.

[...] of a post-Holocaust world” (Angel-Perez 2006a: 12), and it does so by actively searching for a post-Holocaust aesthetics.⁴

In Crimp, fascism or totalitarianism is understood as a radical manifestation of bio-power’s inherent tendency to erode the individual’s political potential and render him or her mere ‘docile’, biological matter. As Giorgio Agamben puts it in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1999/2005), “Bio-power’s supreme ambition is to produce, in a human body, the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, *zoè* [the animal being] and *bíos* [the cultural being], the inhuman and the human” (Agamben 156), so that docile identities may be inscribed upon subjects. It is Crimp’s concern with detecting the seeds of totalitarianism in bio-power’s most repressive instances that leads him to develop a post-Holocaust type of dramaturgy, based on collapse and testimony, and which aims to invite spectators to resist bio-power’s totalitarian tendencies as they may detect them in their context, as well as to warn them of the dangers of slipping back into barbarism.

The second section under “Preliminaries II” bears the title “The Semiotic Potential of Collapse on Stage” and is divided into two chapters. The first one, “Collapse on Stage: What it is and How it Works”, defines the term and tries to describe how collapse functions, specifically, on stage. It focuses on the particular semiotic potential of a scene of collapse in the theatre, as opposed to how it works in other genres. Its main point is that collapse always seeks to make social contradictions visible for an audience by revealing how they impact on the subject. Crimp’s decision to introduce collapse in his plays functions as a means to break through the fourth wall, the conventional stage-audience separation, by calling attention to itself and interpellating spectators politically in the here and now.

Collapse, in Crimp’s plays, takes three main different forms. One of them is the sudden onset of a character’s silence, which causes indeterminacy and places the theatrical event in suspension, as in *Attempts on her Life* and *Face to the Wall*. The second form collapse takes is the irruption of a metaphorical, irrational language which spectators are meant to attempt to give concrete representation to by evoking specific images of their own – perhaps similar – experiences, as is the case in *The Treatment*, *The Country* and *Cruel and Tender*. Finally, Crimp may

4 For want of an English translation of Angel-Perez’s *Voyages au bout du possible: Les théâtres du traumatisme de Samuel Beckett à Sarah Kane*, the translation is mine. From now on, my translations of non-English texts will be indicated by providing the quotation in the source language in a footnote. In French, Angel-Perez’s quote reads, “[...] peut-être plus qu’aucun autre, le théâtre anglais contemporain rebrasse compulsivement les problématiques [...] de l’après-Auschwitz”.

introduce a violent act on stage which, in a metaphorical manner, aims to make contradictions visible and invites the audience to make connections – this third form of collapse is also present in *The Treatment*, *The Country* and *Cruel and Tender*.

The chapter argues that directors can enhance the textual moments of collapse by further contributing to rendering the stage-audience separation unstable and ambiguous. In so doing, they prompt spectators to pay heightened attention to the political meanings a particular scene may be seeking to convey. Theodor W. Adorno describes such moments in art as instances in which the spectator may “lose footing [...] discovering that the truth embodied in the aesthetic image has real tangible possibilities [...] experience congeals in an instant, and [...] it signals the breaking-through of objectivity [i.e. social conditions] into subjective consciousness” (Adorno 258). This accurately describes the semiotic potential of collapse on stage; namely, the fact that it may be used in order to push the limits of theatre, making spectators aware of the social contradictions of the present time.

The second chapter in the section “The Semiotic Potential of Collapse on Stage”, is entitled “I have Witnessed: Testimony and Audience Responsibility”, and is divided into two sub-chapters. The sub-chapter “Auschwitz and Testimony” argues that Crimp’s dramaturgy, as a post-Holocaust type of dramaturgy, is imbued by the contemporary reflections on ethics and the figure of the testimony. The sub-chapter defines the concept of testimony, and argues that, after Auschwitz, testimony offers the possibility to redefine ethics, since it leads to a notion of ethics which is not totalizing, and which takes into account the value of each particular body/individual.

The sub-chapter also argues that, in Crimp’s dramaturgy, when both male and female characters collapse they seek to tap into a primeval, empathic dimension of the self which finds itself distorted or annulled by late capitalist interests. Crimp’s theatre thus strongly conveys the notion that individuals are inherently characterized by a sense of responsibility towards the Other. As a post-Holocaust writer, Crimp is imbued by the contemporary reflections on ethics carried out by thinkers such as Emmanuel Lévinas or Zygmunt Bauman. As shall be seen in more detail, for Lévinas, as for Bauman, empathy is the primary structure of subjectivity, and it develops spontaneously through proximity. As Bauman explains in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, for Lévinas, “Responsibility, this building block of all moral behaviour, arises out of the proximity of the other. Proximity means responsibility and responsibility is proximity” (Bauman 2005: 184; emphasis original). It is thus the mechanisms of distanciation characteristic of late capitalist society which cancel or truncate the development of empathy.

The second sub-chapter, “Audience, Resistance and Testimony”, picks up from here and goes on to discuss the relationship that testimony establishes with the audience. Its main argument is that collapse and testimony are the cornerstones of Crimp’s dramaturgy – of his ‘pedagogy of resistance’, based on interpellating spectators so that they may contribute to detecting the seeds of totalitarianism as they may detect them in their context. The sub-chapter claims that the defamiliarized, lyrical language of testimony is meant to spur resistance in the audience/witnesses, and to elicit their collaboration in decoding late capitalist society’s contradictions and in resisting complacency or what Adorno termed “reconciliation” (Adorno 252).⁵ In Adorno’s words, paradoxically, “this perceived social deviance of art becomes its political justification” (Adorno 252). The audience is encouraged to decode the lyrical, indeterminate, urgent language of the irrational, which expresses itself through metaphors. In order to do so, they must bring to bear their own traumatic memories or experiences of oppression, thus becoming double witnesses – that is, both to themselves and to the character delivering the testimony. Thus, spectators will ideally assist in the testimony’s full delivery while trying to ‘read’ the play.

In the light of the preceding reflections, the third and last section under “Preliminaries II”, “Redefining Ethics: A Collapsing Body”, argues that collapse is a strategy aimed at situating the body – and thus, the needs of the person – centre stage in a late capitalist context that considers individuals primarily as rational, closed-off, individualistic bodies of property and possession. When female characters collapse in Crimp’s plays, their bodies are often shown to become fluid, as they are often stained with blood, such as Rebecca’s body in *The Country*. Their bodies, indeed, bring to mind the “carnival[esque]” (Burkitt 49) body envisioned by Mikhail Bakhtin. The ‘carnavalesque’ is a notion of the body as an open surface that can integrate the Other, thus defying the closed-off, individualistic subject of capitalism, a subject defined by its possessions and existing in opposition to other bodies.

Finally, the chapter also argues that collapse redefines ethics not as a compendium of epistemological norms or a series of agreements that must be reached before being able to act ethically, and therefore as an ability of the rational subject, as they have traditionally been considered, but as an experience of the dignity of human beings that emerges out of the individual’s own contact with suffering, out of a process of learning, in life, about the equal value of each

5 Vicky Angelaki’s “Subtractive Forms and Composite Contents: Martin Crimp’s *Fewer Emergencies*” (2008) offers a detailed analysis of the techniques of defamiliarization Crimp employs in the triptych *Fewer Emergencies*, drawing in this case on Viktor Shklovsky’s, Bertolt Brecht’s and Terry Eagleton’s reflections on the political significance of alienation in performance.