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Nina Kane, University of Huddersfield, *Gender, Fracture and the Architecture of Sarah Kane's 'Blasted'*, 2011.

Nina Kane, University of Huddersfield - paper first given in June 2011 on two occasions.

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Gender, Fracture and the Architecture of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*¹

In the opening of this paper, I reflect on Kane's writing processes and on the importance of recognising the spaces and fractures in her texts. I then turn to an analysis of formal structure in her work, before focusing on the significance of architecture in *Blasted*, and its relationship to embodiment, language and gender politics.

It has often been asserted that Kane's characters have no history, no social placing or context to refer to, unlike those in social realist drama.² I disagree on the whole with this premise, and would argue that in the case of both *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, the characters are locatable in a mediated geography and time through scenography, through language and through relationship onstage (dynamic). The challenge to the audience is not that the characters lack context or 'linear narrative', rather that they are characters situated in a state of flux; flux is arguably both within and beyond context, eternally here and forever already gone (*déjà vu*). Kane's plays are noted for their intensity, and the mediation of geography and time shifts with energy and complexity, challenging and enervating the reader, audience, actor and director in a dynamic quest for meaning.

¹ The bulk of this paper has been disseminated in the public domain, firstly as part of the Drama Research Seminar programme at the Drama Department, University of Huddersfield and secondly as a paper at the Postgraduate Research Conference, English Department, University of Huddersfield, 8-9 June 2011.

² Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, op. cit. pp. 8-12.

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Kane's scripts are not empty of meaning. Nor are they the result of an ascetic application of select words to the empty space of the page. They are in fact the opposite. As Kane herself notes in her discussion of writing *Blasted*, the sparse, succinct, immediacy of her dialogues results from a long process of careful crafting, and a pattern of immersion and selection:

The first draft was about three times as long as what's there now and I don't think there's a single word in the first draft that is in the final draft, because I suppose what I was writing was sub-text – great reams of it. Everyone having these huge monologues.³

In the 1998 interview with Dan Rebellato at Royal Holloway College, she said:

I don't like writing things you don't really need, and my favourite exercise is cutting – cut, cut, cut!⁴

Kane's plays are therefore the precisely-honed fragments of a much wider set of stories which sit underneath – invisible, deleted, out-of-reach but existing in the spaces and still, in their erasure, carrying import, meaning and 'sub-text'. The page, far from being empty or cool, is a space that has had energy, stories, dialogue and actions thrown at it; it is fat with dynamic. Only after Kane removed and cut what she did not need, to shape the selection of words she chose, did the definitive text emerge. Arguably, her technical processes are filmic – what we read is 'the final edit'. The space of the page through such engagement is, thus, charged. It is this that gives Kane's theatre a disconcerting – sometimes uncanny (*unheimlich*) – quality.⁵

³ Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, op. cit., p. 44.

⁴ 'Interview with Sarah Kane', [audio-recording], 1998.

⁵ S. Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Uncanny*, London, New York, Victoria, Ontario, New Delhi, Auckland, Rosebank, Penguin, 2003, pp. 121-162. First published as *Das Unheimliche* in *Imago* 5 (5-6) in 1919. 'among the various shades of meaning that are recorded for the word *heimlich* there is one in which it merges with its formal antonym, *unheimlich*, so that what is *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*. As witness the passage from Gutzkow: 'We call that *unheimlich*: you call it *heimlich*.' This reminds us that this word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other – the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept

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When we engage with Kane's text as actors or directors, the uncanny is made manifest, and meaning unfolds and opens unexpectedly in rehearsal. This is true, to a lesser or greater extent, with most production processes. In my experience of working on *Cleansed* with young people, however, I would assert that Kane's writing brings unanticipated and sometimes disruptive elements into play that are not easy to foresee. In engaging with the dynamics and the relationships 'between' characters, readings and inferences not immediately visible to the silent, literary reader, become apparent.

This makes Kane's work challenging, interesting and inherently disruptive to a British theatre that is still largely preoccupied with language and action. As James MacDonald notes in an interview for the *The Independent* during the first run of *Cleansed*:

Words are only a third of the play. The bulk of the meaning is carried through the imagery. That's incredibly rare for a British playwright.⁶

If words constitute 'a third of the play', and 'imagery' carries the '*bulk* of the meaning' (a second third, *italics mine*), is there arguably a third site of 'meaning' located in Kane's construction of the text? I argue that there is, and that it is to be found in the spaces left by Kane's edit. I propose that an honouring of, an instinctive 'listening' to or sensing of *that* which exists *in absentia*, is important when approaching Kane's work. I would go further and argue that for actors and directors, it is essential to find meaning from the gaps in the text. For it is in attempting to realise the script with its fractures and deletions, that the unexpected and sometimes uncontrollable occurs in rehearsal –

hidden... the term 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open. P. 132.

⁶ J. Christopher, 'Rat with hand exits stage left', *The Independent*, 4 May 1998, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/rat-with-hand-exits-stage-left-1161442.html>, (accessed 12 May 2013).

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because space can be vast and unfathomable, and history conceals more than we perhaps realise. It is here that actors and directors find what the production means for them, and will, possibly mean for an audience.

I would like to consider architecture at this point in relation to Irigarayan scholarship. When we 'build' or 'construct' a set, particularly one that conveys a Naturalist interior (as the set design for *Blasted* frequently does), we are working with architectures that mirror the spaces, frames, fixtures and fittings of the world beyond the stage. Yet architecture, as Irigaray notes in her November 2000 address to the International Architectural Association, is not neutral. It encodes gender in its arrangements, and conventionally, in the construction of dwelling places, prioritises survival over relational needs in its organisation of space.⁷ This emphasis on survival results in family or partnership dwelling-places being built around conventional features of communality (shared dining room, shared adult bedroom, shared kitchen): the traditional 'hearth'. This, she argues, effects a sublimation of the individual to the group through an enforced being-ness with another or others. In gender terms, Irigaray argues that this arrangement forces individuals into a conflictual and destructive 'oneness' that is essentially masculine (self-same), reinforcing patriarchal control. It does not allow either partner (or other family members) to develop their own subjectivity or desires through use of space and it does not allow for 'difference' nor for 'differentiated relationships' between people:

Intimacy, familiarity and proximity do not exist only through living alongside one another and sharing the same space. On the contrary, that often leads to their

⁷ L. Irigaray, 'How can we live together in a lasting way? Address to the International Architectural Association, November 2000.' in *Key Writings*, 2009, pp. 123-133.

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destruction. The intimate and familiar are first confused with being in the mother, being with the mother, and dwelling in the family home [...] (resulting) in an infantile need for undifferentiation.⁸

In her address, Irigaray advocates a new model of architectural development for shared living, which moves away from the 'traditional hearth' and prioritises relational concerns through separate but connected dwellings:

Then each can keep their own economy, and thus coexistence is possible in difference(s).⁹

Such dwellings would be constructed with consideration of:

all perceptions: visual, but also tactile, auditory, olfactory, gustatory [...] (with concern for) [...] a culture of breathing [...] a place for nature [...] a place of intimacy with oneself.¹⁰

She advocates new models of construction that allowed for sexuate difference, and the development of intimacy through having the space to develop ones' own 'self-affection', leading to ones' 'being-in-relation' to the other: a 'being-two' rather than 'being one':

The point is important to save and lay out the space for living together: the space for each one and the space between the two.¹¹

Irigaray's analysis of conventional dwelling spaces within patriarchy extend usefully to a consideration of the gender politics of *Blasted*. In the script, Kane constructs a hotel room centrally occupied by a double-bed, shared bathroom and drinks cabinet providing sustenance. The hotel room marks (and appears to maintain) a unity of place, dominated initially by an older man, Ian, whose language and physicality mark the territory of the

⁸ In discussion with Andrea Wheeler reproduced in *Conversations*, Irigaray usefully defines 'Undifferentiated' thus: 'Undifferentiated can be endowed with at least a double signification: without difference and indifferent, that is to say, both unimportant and awakening no feeling, perhaps not even any specific mood.' Irigaray, *Conversations*, op. cit., p.56.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.67.

¹¹ *ibid.*

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room as being one of white, patriarchal, economically-comfortable dominance. The initial ordering of the room as self-same with Ian is offset by the female figure of Cate whose language and action initially centre around him at a loss to herself. The alignment of Ian with the space also receives colonial inflection through the unseen presence of the room-service waiter who is abused (racially) for his black ethnicity, and (given his role in 'serving' Ian) also for his class position. The space of the stage, with its unity of place, represents a communal world, self-same with Ian. In this space, Cate and the room service waiter can only exist in alterity or sublimation; in an enforced relationship *with*, not a loving, 'reciprocal' or mutually respectful *relation-to* Ian. It appears impossible for Ian to consider the space or the people around him as anything other than his; as objects to possess, dominate and control. Thus Act 1 presents us with a set of relations within a frame embodied by Ian that:

does not concern itself with a quantitative difference, which somehow remains in sameness and maintains relations in a parental or hierarchical dimension, and even in a sadomasochistic bond.¹²

With a deft structuring, cogniscent of the agency of the oppressed at resisting sadism, and with an active desire to 'save' and not destroy her characters, nor keep them trapped forever in a Sartrean hell without exit, Kane articulates a space for both Cate and the room-service waiter in the offstage.¹³ In enabling each to retreat to or exist in this offstage space at points, she indicates the possibility of 'leaving a monosexual culture.'¹⁴

¹² Ibid., p. 68.

¹³ J-P Sartre, 'No Exit', *No Exit and three other plays*, New York, Vintage International Edition, 1989. First published in Paris as *Huis Clos* in 1945.

¹⁴ Irigaray, *Conversations*, loc. cit., p.56.

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It also offers an opportunity for the audience/reader to consider a change in the theatrical picture presented to them (and by extension, arguably, to reflect on the potentials of such changes in relation to their own lives):

In order to meet with the other as such, we have to reverse the situation: to leave our usual quotidian in order to open ourselves to the strange, the still unknown, the unusual and unfamiliar. We have to give precedence to the other and not to our usual world.¹⁵

In this, Kane seeks a space within the rigid naturalism of her original stage setting, and indicates a possibility for an alternative model of becoming for both the man (Ian) and the woman (Cate) on her stage. To do so involves bringing the hitherto ignored and invisible world of the offstage, backstage, wings, fly towers and fly floors into play coupled with a destruction of the onstage architecture to allow 'breath' and 'nature' through. It also becomes necessary for the perception of the audience to be shifted from a primary 'visual', to encompass sound, smell, touch and taste. Whether it be evoked through Ian's 'stinking rotten lung', through the abject imagined horror of eating human flesh, through the sound of rain and running water, through the nurturing touch of being fed (feeding another) or devastating touch of being raped (raping another), this opening of the senses to a wider perception of the spaces possible beyond the dominant space of the hotel room (stage) is essential to a dismantling of the patriarchal dwelling-place and its destructive 'sameness'.

Arguably a temporal, abject and feminist challenge to the unity of place is necessary for an eventual 'being-two' and a 'being-in-relation' to be reached, and Kane sets this in motion from the start of the play. It is important to note how the unity of place operates

¹⁵ *ibid.*

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as a liminal space in both *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, and to recognise the fracturing effect of the movement between interior spaces and exterior spaces at significant points in the action. Kane uses architecture within the scenography to contain, anchor, hold and support the reader and audience's encounter with its elements. She uses fracturing to challenge the audience and to open up the space of the stage to new possibilities. Central to this is a clear and intentional use of form, and I will look in more depth at this, now.

Recalling Kane's comment in conversation with Stephenson and Langridge, that more important than content is form, it must be noted that formal construction and its relationship to content and stage-image is rarely, if ever, discussed in Kane scholarship.¹⁶ It is a glaring omission, and one that inhibits understanding of her work. Her discussion in this instance was centred on the media response to *Blasted*, and she usefully analyses her theatrical structuring of the play thus:

In terms of Aristotle's Unities, the time and action are disrupted, while unity of place is retained. Which caused great offence.¹⁷

Retaining the Aristotelian unity of place is clearly a theatrical choice for Kane here (it is not incidental) and the geography of her works frequently retain this classical feature. It is important to consider Kane's investment in maintaining a unity of place in *Blasted* and the dramaturgical implications when the other unities are set non-classically in combination. What Kane does with unities in *Blasted* is this. She presents a unity of place, which represents a classical security for the audience. She then disrupts the unities of time and action to fluid, chaotic and jarring effect as the play unfolds. As such

¹⁶ Stephenson and Langridge, loc. cit., p. 130.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 131.

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Kane undermines, fragments or threatens the continuity (or exclusivity) of location and the 'security' such unity of place supposedly represents. It is an incendiary combination of forms, and underlines the content of the play effectively. The effect on an audience member investing in a security of location is, however, potentially explosive.

Kane typically signposts the inevitable destabilisation of location early on through scenographic description. For this she uses naturalism both as an aesthetic and as a tactic. Stage directions introduce the reader to location by employing naturalist techniques, but they are not a reinscription of convention. Rather Kane quickly challenges our investment in the theatrical certainties of place and naturalism, presenting the reader with 'a very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive, it could be anywhere in the world.'¹⁸

Thus through oxymoronic juxtaposition and a precise use of language she reveals the theatrical trope of naturalism in the script to be one of artifice. It is something that the reader of the text knows, also the actor and director, but that the audience, however, does not 'read' clearly in their viewing until later on. Notably architecture features strongly in this process of deconstruction from the outset.

Having destabilised the location geographically, she quickly moors the reader back to an immediate position with a highly-visual, materially-seductive structuring of the room that is precise and micro-cosmic in detail:

There is a large double-bed.

¹⁸ Kane, *Blasted*, op. cit., p. 3.

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A mini-bar and champagne on ice.

A telephone.

A large bouquet of flowers.

Two doors – one is the entrance from the corridor, the other leads off to the bathroom.¹⁹

In scene 2, she subsequently dismantles the cool pictorial and materialist security of the setting with 'body blows'. Hence the opening description suggests a sudden, impending, heat and the stage directions note that 'the bouquet of flowers is now ripped apart and scattered around the room'.²⁰ Whilst the action remains rooted in unity of place, the action happening off-stage brings uncertainty, and Kane evokes an uncanny atmosphere through a conjuring of invisible others, and through moments of disappearance and apparent erasure. The room-service waiter, though gendered and described physically in racist terms by Ian, is never actually seen.²¹ Cate goes into the bathroom for a bath, locks the door, and apparently disappears²² until re-entering from the bathroom in scene 4 'soaking wet and carrying a baby'.²³ At the end of scene 2, the onstage architecture is blasted by a mortar bomb leaving 'a large hole in one of the walls, and everything [...] covered in dust which is still falling'.²⁴

A pattern of physical deterioration in the structural unity of the room continues to the end of the play. By scene 5, the floors of the room become symbolic of earth, whilst (hyper-spatially) retaining floor-boards that can be broken and made into a graveyard cross ('Cate is burying the baby under the floor').²⁵ The 'grave' widens in inference

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 35.

²² *ibid.* p. 38.

²³ *ibid.*, p.51.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 57.

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towards the end of the play, becoming big enough for the figure of Ian to crawl into. Finally the roof appears to give way, allowing rain that has been heard since the end of scene 1 in through and onto Ian who is now, largely 'under' the ground-level of the room.

The destabilising significance of the 'very expensive hotel room in Leeds' that could be 'anywhere in the world', finds full expression in the unfolding of time and action by the end of the play. Though the unity of place is maintained, it is left violently transformed and (literally) leaking by acts of humanity and nature committed inside and out. Suggestions of 'disappearance' through the onstage body's relationship to the architecture of the space heighten a supernatural quality pervasive in the play, and as with Harold Pinter's *Dumb Waiter*, we can find ourselves asking questions about invisibility, and whether 'somebody' is 'really there'?²⁶ Does the room-service man actually exist? Where does Cate disappear to from the bathroom? How does she get back in? The textual image of Cate emerging soaking wet from the bathroom evokes the fairy-tale idea that she somehow disappears down the plughole in scene 2, finding the baby in some strange 'otherworld' down in the pipes.

The mystery of disappearance and reappearance nevertheless persists, and is further emphasised by the sudden presence of physical characters not previously seen, and with no obvious immediate link to the narrative of the preceding scenes.²⁷ What do we make of the knocking ritual enacted between Ian and the 'invisible' soldier? Where does the

²⁶ H. Pinter, 'The Dumb Waiter' in *The Caretaker and The Dumb Waiter*, New York, Grove Publishing, 1988. First published by Eyre Methuen in 1960.

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

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soldier come from? Where has the baby come from? How much time has passed and what is happening to the room? The soldier's entrance in scene signifies a violent intensification of physicality, marked in words by his possession of geographical location and by his centrality on the stage: 'Our town now!'²⁸ But who are the 'we' or 'they' possessing the town, and which town is it? Words fail to reassure on the stability of place; rather they mark the hotel room and the stage as a site of liminality, also of violence and destruction.

Hence increasingly, questions of disappearance become emmeshed in the architectural framework of the room itself, and prompt imaginative speculation. Imaginative speculation is necessary for the processes of staging a production, but in this case is also, notably, an inevitable consequence of the naturalism through which the reader has architecturally constructed the scene in her/his mind. Staging *Blasted* obliges the reading scenographer or director to engage with the construction of architecture and its subsequent dismantling. To not do so would involve a strong break from Kane's text, and the erasure of many parts of action and dialogue, which would then need to be 'fixed'. Like the deletions of Kane's scripting processes, the holes in the hotel wall of *Blasted* support the remaining frame and need to be understood and constructed for the production to convey meaning.

The text prompts the production cast therefore to consider – which wall does the bomb blow a hole in, and what can we see through it? Is it another hotel room, like a *mise-en-abyme*, a mirror of the one we're 'in', its opulence shattered by the rupture in its

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 39.

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surface? Does it blast through to the outside, indicated by the window Ian looks through in scene 2, in which case, is wind blowing through? Is there noise from outside? And how unnerving could the reality of this be (given the room is on an upper floor)? Moreover, when Ian crawls beneath the floorboards – with his head poking out – where does the rest of his body disappear to? Is he curled foetally between the joists, or is he dangling down into the room below, about to fall at any minute?

Arguably, similar questions or visual promptings will arise or present themselves to the minds of any reader of the script, but it is those who stage the play who may consider this with more precision perhaps, and such are the questions that arise. When the human body is imagined within the architectural frame constructed by Kane, disconcerting images and associations reveal themselves, reinforcing the atmosphere of horror contained within the dialogue and actions between characters. What is clear is that the uses of architecture serve to effect a continuity and politics in the delivery of the play's content. The use of naturalist stage direction throughout serves to reinforce a precarious physicality and uneasy location of focus onstage. Unable to rest easy with a secure unity of place, and buffeted by a disrupted unfolding of time and action full of violent exchange, questions, ambivalence and hope about the invisibility of the off-stage intensifies for the audience.

It is perhaps this presence of naturalism with its certainties removed that so 'spooked' the reviewers. That, and the inscription of the structure of the play being located clearly in the feminine:

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The form and the content attempt to be one – the form is the meaning. The tension of the first half of the play, this appalling social, psychological and sexual tension, is almost a premonition of the disaster to come. And when it does come the structure fractures to allow its entry. The play collapses into one of Cate's fits.²⁹

Cate's fits, and the fracturing of the structure that they represent, are highly significant to *Blasted*. Her 'collapses' at key moments serve to 'fracture' and interrupt the action, in ways that stall or divert the dialogue in process. Her stutter affects a similar disruption. It creates a fracture in the rhythm and flow of dialogue between her and Ian throughout acts 1 and 2. Whilst Ian appears to be at an advantage through this, and seizes the opportunity to talk over and denigrate Cate further, a deeper investigation of the importance of fracturing shows how it locates itself as a source of agency for Cate.

Before examining the nature of Cate's fits, I would like to explore a moment of fracture that allows 'entry' to 'the disaster to come', but which also, effects a site of agency for Kane and for her female protagonist. Kane locates hope within Cate, and signifies this in a transitional, magical, moment in act 2. Notably, the moment has clearly been created through an edit in Kane's writing, and we are left with a space that invites a question over disappearance.

It starts with an exit from the stage by Cate into the bathroom. The naturalism of the exit is supported by dialogue: '**Cate.** I'm having a bath and going home.'³⁰ It is also supported by stage direction, which recognises a continuity of action, Ian having previously turned one of the bath taps on:

²⁹ Stephenson and Langridge, loc. cit., p. 130.

³⁰ Kane, *Blasted*, op. cit., p. 35.

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*She goes into the bathroom, closing the door. We hear the sound of the other bath tap being turned on.*³¹

The soldier enters shortly afterwards and performs a predatory action. Attempting to smell Cate through her knickers, he enters the bathroom and, given the violent scenarios with Ian earlier, the fear is raised that the soldier may have the intention of raping her.³² The audience/reader perhaps prepare themselves for what appears to be an inevitability, compounding the rape of Cate by Ian earlier within a social realist frame. In an act of writing beauty, Kane effects an interruption to this narrative, and Cate disappears:

*The **Soldier** puts **Cate's** knickers in his pocket and goes to the bathroom.
He knocks on the door. No answer.
He tries the door. It is locked.
He forces it and goes in.
Ian waits, in a panic.
We hear the bath taps being turned off.
Ian looks out of the window.*

Ian. Jesus Lord
*The **Soldier** returns.*

Soldier: Gone. Taking a risk. Lots of bastard soldiers out there.

***Ian** looks in the bathroom. **Cate** isn't there.*³³

The conventional reading and rendering of this section is to interpret it as if Cate has climbed out of the bathroom window. But the script, precise in all other details of naturalist progression at this point, does not state this to be the case. It is perhaps inferred that Ian sees Cate's escape through the window, and this is a possible reading of this. Equally possible however is a reading that Ian has looked out of the window and only just noticed what the soldier tells him – that 'there are lots of bastard soldiers out

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Kane discussed the rape of Cate in *Blasted* and testified to misgivings about the dramatisation of rape onstage 'Sarah Kane Interview', [audio recording], 1998; and Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, op. cit. p. 26. She also queried the idea that rape is an inevitability of war. See Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, op. cit., p. 48

³³ Kane, *Blasted*, op. cit. p. 38.

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there'.³⁴ Cate had pointed his attention to the window in the bedroom earlier 'looks like there's a war on' and he had not bothered to look.³⁵ And what of the sound from the bathroom? The sound of the taps is audible. Would we not hear a window opening, or Cate climbing out? And can we assume there is actually a window in the bathroom? Most 'very expensive hotel rooms' by design do not install them there. The naturalist analysis of this moment falls down under scrutiny in its lack of written detail – a notable absence in an otherwise precise dramaturgy.

I would argue that Kane has created a moment of magical realism by leaving space and therefore ambiguity around this moment. In creating an uncanny atmosphere through sound, knocking and disappearance, she enables us to conceive of an 'other-worldly' possibility, and one that offers hope to the female protagonist, but also to the spectator. Cate's disappearance into another place through the fracture allowed by Kane's editing choices has a relationship to Cate's fits, and it is to this point that I now return.

Cate's fits represent a disappearance into a private, unconscious state, which is at some level hysterical, at another empowering. Whereas feminist theory has traditionally placed 'hysteria' as a conservative form of resistance, Cate's alignment of her *petit-mals* with masturbation posits her fits as a place of *jouissance*.³⁶ In stating that the play 'collapses into one of Cate's fits' Kane subtly indicates to the reader to look beyond an image of female 'hysteria', and to read back into the text to find its more pleasurable connections.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23. H. Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, vol. 1, issue 4, Summer 1976, pp. 875-893.

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Thus Kane places her writing in an intentional, bodily-centred (arguably, cunt-centred) site of female exploration and joy. The destabilising of Aristotelian unities by this method is deliberate and she connects the power of such formal working to the critics' outrage. Whilst maintaining the spectacle of a structural unity of place on the conventional stage, Kane's play actually takes the reader/audience to 'another place' where (in Cate's words): 'the world don't exist, not like this. Looks the same but – Time slows down.'

In ways reminiscent of Francesca Woodman's photography, also Lucy Gunning's performance art / video work, the 'feminine' in Kane's construction does not occupy the centre of the room. Rather she forms an affinity with the architectural frames, seeking its edges, corners, hard to reach, private and 'invisible' spaces, disappearing into its structures playfully, mysteriously, or with trepidation and at other times 'becoming it' in ways that subvert conventional perception of boundaries and the limits of physical possibility.³⁷

In seeking the edges or 'background' to the limits of 'place', Kane's tactics, as expressed through Cate's 'gynocentric' shifting of time and space to 'another place', evoke resonance with the theories of radical feminists such as Mary Daly. In *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly argues that women, and feminism, should recognise and develop 'a gynocentric context'

³⁷ P. Phelan, 'Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time', *Signs*, vol. 27, no. 4, Summer 2002, pp. 979-1004. E. Gumpert, 'The Long Exposure of Francesca Woodman', *The New York Review of Books*, 24 January 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/jan/24/long-exposure-francesca-woodman/>, (accessed 12 May 2013). Fortnum, R. (ed.), 'Lucy Gunning' in *Contemporary British Women Artists in Their Own Words*, London and New York, I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2008, pp. 65-72. Of particular relevance to this discussion is Lucy Gunning's work 'Climbing Around My Room', 1993.

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for their lives that 'unlearn' patriarchal teachings, associations and language, reclaiming the etymology of language and reference for ourselves:

The strength which Self-centring women find, in finding our Background, is our own strength that we give back to our Selves. The word *strength-giving* is only materially the same, only apparently the same, when used by women who name the sacred on our own authority....There is a sense of power not of the 'wholly other' but of the Self's be-ing. This participation is strength-giving, not in the sense of 'supernatural elevation', through 'grace' or of magic mutation through miracle drugs, but in the sense of creative unfolding of the Self.³⁸

In considering these associations, it is clear that the reviewers were not reacting directly to the subject matter of *Blasted*, but to its formal tactics.³⁹ The reader/audience witnesses an 'unfolding of Self' in Cate's character-progression through the play, but also (remembering that form and content are one) in the 'unfolding of Self' within Kane's theatre – a re-shaping of conventional unities that shifts place through 'spinning' and gynocentric playing with time and action. Furthermore Kane uses the 'falling apart of Cate's fits' to comment pertinently on the nature of violence, locating it firmly in the masculine, and (noting Cate's complete disappearance to 'another place' in scene 3) as being between men, and 'closer to home' than one might think.

Kane does not locate this violence (or its male gendering) unproblematically. Nor does she represent Cate's fits, and the collapse of 'self' and language' accompanying them as being representative of a pain-free utopia or an essentialist place of uncomplicated *jouissance*. Cate frequently 'loses' the battle with Ian, and her triumph at the end of the play is that she has learned to eat for herself first before feeding him, and to sit apart in her own space. This is important for it dramatically represents what Irigaray frequently

³⁸ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, op. cit., p. 49.

³⁹ See Aston's discussion of Kane as a 'feminist witch' in 'Reviewing the fabric of *Blasted*', op. cit. pp. 22-26.

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refers to as the 'reserve' or 'dynamic reserve'.⁴⁰ In finding a place of 'reserve', Cate's speech and agency strengthen, Ian slips through the cracks, the world as they once knew it has been blown apart, and Ian acknowledges his dependence on her with gratitude. She is a survivor, not a victor, and Ian remains broken, but alive to learn the new laws of exchange between them. The space of the stage is no longer the 'self-same' that it was – Ian has been physically pushed to its margins, and Cate has found a way of being in the centre of it in her own way. In effect they have reached a 'being-two', and a way of 'being in relation' to one another where difference is clear. The war outside, however, is still raging.

Kane has effected this 'being in relation' through a process of fracturing and destruction. Cate's disappearances (bodily and mentally) and her stuttering, babbling, challenge to the thrust and 'coherency' of Ian's speech, represent a fracturing of patriarchal power and language in the text – an interruption enacted through dialogue, and through shifting movement of the female protagonist into and out of view/presence. By extension, Cate's fits (and Kane's play) 'blast' a space in the theatrical landscape to hear, form and perform something 'other' in response to violence. This process is not without loss or contradiction for the female subject, nor the female writer. It is one that involves painful recognition of the self as implicated in the process of violent display, particularly where 'writing' (and 'good writing') is concerned:

My main source in thinking about how violence happens is myself, and in some ways all of my characters are me. I write about human beings and as I am one, the ways in which all human beings operate is feasibly within my understanding. I don't think of the world as being divided up into men and women, victims and

⁴⁰ Irigaray, 'The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas *Totality and Infinity*, "Phenomenology of Eros"' *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, op. cit., pp. 185-217.

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perpetrators. I don't think those are constructive divisions to make, and they make for very poor writing.⁴¹

That the trappings of language position men frequently in a violent and unquestioned disregard for the female figure, is dramatised most fully in *Blasted* through the character of Ian, a male journalist whose language from the outset frames him as vile (**Ian**: I've shat in better places than this).⁴² Kane parodies the detachment of Ian's journalism when narrated down a telephone line. This reveals the structural coldness inherent in constructing violent, sensationalist narratives, and underlines the uses of language as a weapon against women:

Ian: A serial killer slaughtered British tourist Samantha Scrace, S-C-R-A-C-E, in a sick murder ritual comma, police revealed yesterday point new par. The bubbly nineteen year old from Leeds was among seven victims found buried in identical triangular tombs in an isolated New Zealand forest point new par. Each had been stabbed more than twenty times and placed face down comma, hands bound behind their backs point new par. Caps up, ashes at the site showed the maniac had stayed to cook a meal, caps down point new par. Samantha, comma, a beautiful redhead with dreams of becoming a model comma, was on the trip of a lifetime after finishing her A-levels last year point [...].⁴³

The tightly drawn nature of Ian's violent text construction – a text devoid of space, its narratives forced together – personifies a patriarchal rigidity of language. In presenting us with a fractured female text/body, and a naturalist theatre scene gradually dissolving and fragmenting to allow spaces, cracks and falling, Kane arguably undermines the violence of such construction, meeting violence with violence in the body of the text, but a violence of intervention, unravelling and dismantling, ultimately leading back to a female (arguably feminist) *jouissance*/joy:

I [...] picked a moment in the play, I thought I'll plant a bomb and blow the whole fucking thing up. I loved the idea of it as well, that you have a nice little box set in

⁴¹ Stephenson and Langridge, loc. cit., p. 133.

⁴² Kane, *Blasted*, loc. cit., p. 3.

⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

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a studio theatre somewhere and you blow it up. You know you go to the Bush Theatre and you go in and you see the set...and there's always this longing for it to blow up, so it was such a joy for me to be able to do that.⁴⁴

That the violence of such rendering/rending is not without loss is underscored further in her analysis of the need to sometimes go to places that are painful – not for some abstract masochistic purpose, but in order to face the ‘horror’ of the world clearly:

The choice is either to represent it, or not represent it. I've chosen to represent it because sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality. If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future, because experience engraves lessons on our heart through suffering...I'd rather risk overdose in theatre than in life. And I'd rather risk defensive screams than passively become part of a civilisation that has committed suicide.⁴⁵

If Kane was more nuanced in her analysis of gender relations, and the necessity of theatre to explore violence through ‘descend(ing) into hell imaginatively’, it is clear her critics were less open to the risks of this. I would argue that the gendered nature of her technical approach, and the challenge in combining cunt-centred content and critique with form was a key factor in the juvenile and aggressive reaction to *Blasted*. Kane was clear on how her playing with unities caused ‘offence’:

it implied a direct link between domestic violence in Britain and civil war in the former Yugoslavia. *Blasted* raised the question, ‘what does a common rape in Leeds have to do with mass rape as a war weapon in Bosnia?’ And the answer appeared to be ‘Quite a lot’ The unity of place suggests a paper-thin wall between the safety and civilisation of peacetime Britain and the chaotic violence of civil war. A wall that can be torn down at any time, without warning.⁴⁶

Kane's ‘paper-thin wall’ is an architectural imaginary that effectively collapses a binary. It represents a fold, and the fold marks a desire to close the conventional distance between peacetime Britain and violence ‘elsewhere’, to represent a ‘truth’. The

⁴⁴ ‘Interview with Sarah Kane, [audio-recording], 1998.

⁴⁵ Stephenson and Langridge, loc. cit. pp. 132-133.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 131.

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conjuring of a 'paper-thin wall' to represent the philosophical closeness encoded in Kane's exploration of violence, and its metonymic presence on her stage denoting a consistent 'unity of place' is interesting in its structural imagining, also in its architectural resonance. The metaphor holds echoes of the song 'Paper Moon' and through this association, we are returned to the visual world of the stage, and by extension, to the artifice of naturalism suggested by Kane's opening. The 'paper-moon and cardboard sea' type of scene-setting, so attractive to the average critic, and representative of the box-set of the Bush are being knowingly played with then pulled down in Kane's text. She warns us of this in the oxymoron of her opening stage direction, but provokes us to invest in it anyway.⁴⁷ The silent, subversive 'told you so' whispering through each 'blow' to the architecture (and naturalism) of the scene is punctuated by Ian's final 'thank you, and it is this that is arguably the most challenging feature of Kane's formal method.

The 'thank you' is interesting and relates to time. A few moments before expressing it, Ian 'dies with relief'. Cocooned safely in his grave in the floorboards, having exhausted the limits of his rage, despair and venom, he momentarily becomes the conventional tragic hero, entombed comfortably in a solitary end. At this point, Kane's text metaphorically 'plays God' with naturalism and denies Ian this heroic end – the roof apparently 'fractures', allowing the rain through, bringing him back to life. The moment of fracture is surreal and biblical – the roof does not crack, give way, fall-in – it literally and silently 'parts like the Heavens', resurrecting him. It is another example of Kane's deft and subtle uses of magical realism to effect conditions for a 'horizontal-

⁴⁷ 'A very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world.' Kane, *Blasted*, op. cit., p. 3.

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transcendence' in relations between the characters onstage. Kane swiftly restores the scene and its architecture to naturalism, and in doing so underscores the necessity of recognising reality in the final analysis, and (through language) in bringing the redemptive power of feminine intervention down to earth:

He dies with relief.

It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.

Eventually.

Ian. Shit.

Cate. *enters carrying some bread, a large sausage and a bottle of gin. There is blood seeping from between her legs.*

Cate. You're sitting under a hole.

Ian. I know.

Cate. Get wet.

Ian. Aye.

Cate. Stupid bastard.

She pulls a sheet off the bed and wraps it around her.

She sits next to Ian's head.

She eats her fill of the sausage and bread and washes it down with gin.

Ian listens.

She feeds Ian with the remaining food.

She pours gin in Ian's mouth.

She finishes feeding Ian and sits apart from him, huddled for warmth.

She drinks the gin.

She sucks her thumb.

Silence.

It rains.

Ian. Thank you.

*Blackout.*⁴⁸

The final image of rain breaking through concludes an increasingly expressive set of stage directions that play with time. 'The sound of spring rain' (sc. 1), "the sound of summer rain' (sc. 2), 'the sound of autumn rain' (sc. 4) 'the sound of heavy winter rain' (sc. 5), takes the reader through a chronology that extends the theatrical unity beyond

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

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its conventional 'day' to a seasonal year.⁴⁹ In her extension of time beyond convention, Kane successfully reinscribes her working method in the feminine, and in the time-defying, 'spinning' and masturbatory space of Cate's fits.⁵⁰ Ultimately, in the ending of *Blasted*, the rain (time) and the war (action) completes the erosion of the solid structure of place, yet with this destruction comes a change in relationship between its two (gendered) protagonists, and ultimately a space for hope and redemption – a space, (Kane's method proposes), not located in naturalism, watertight language or the rigid maintenance of Aristotelian unities. Rather she proposes a negotiation, and a playing of different elements that allow a leaking, implosion, bombardment and fracturing of the dominant structures.

⁴⁹ Kane, *Blasted*, op. cit., see pages, 24, 39, 50 and 57.

⁵⁰ Daly, op. cit., p. 389.

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