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MARTIN CRIMP'S *THE CITY*: INSECURITIES OF MODERN SPEECH

Abstract: Stage language was reinvented by Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter in England, in the second half of the 20th century. It is no longer based on the Aristotelian mimesis. Beckett and Pinter's works have had direct influence on the 21st century tradition of new playwrights, one of whom is Martin Crimp. While Crimp explores a symbolic and absurdist landscape of cruel relationships, he also depicts current problems such as materialism, unemployment, marital aggression, mental illness, and loneliness in the British urban society. Crimp considers theatre an appropriate means to express this urban depression by employing fluid speech in which there are frequent interruptions and repetitions and where the lines overlap and the thoughts pile up in hesitations. He illustrates anxiety and fear of contact. This paper analyses the power of the stage language in Crimp's 2008 play *The City*, which represents the chaos of postmodern reality within a space-time collage. The play problematises and challenges Britain's text-based theatre culture and English naturalism.

Key words: Contemporary British Theatre, Martin Crimp, *The City*, Theatrical Speech.

Introduction

The *City* is a compelling play written by the innovative British playwright Martin Crimp who has already established his exceptional place in the tradition of British new writing for the theatre with his world-renowned works such as *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) and *The Country* (2000). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and Thatcher's dismissal from power, a group of young writers, including Crimp, believed that change in both society and art is possible. They then started a progressive movement, which included theatrical works in the post-Thatcherite years, in order to create a recognised cultural renaissance celebrated as Cool Britannia. Aleks Sierz labeled this new group of young playwrights as “*in-yer-face*”, due to their avant-garde theatre sensibilities. According to Sierz, Crimp belongs to this “*new writing*” movement. Although Crimp identifies himself as too old to be categorised in “*new writing*”, which flourished in the 1990s, his plays share a similar sensibility with “*in-*

yer-face” dramatists, reflecting a mixture of emotions, ideas, feelings and ideologies. This new generation of playwrights creates forward-thinking, futuristic plays in contrast to naturalistic, social-realist works. In this sense, Crimp's theatre is challenging because it questions the British tradition of naturalism and social realism. (Sierz, 2006. p.2). As a follower of Beckett and Pinter, whose speech and repetitions have reinvented stage language, Crimp experiments with language and form.

As part of the “*in-yer-face*” sensibility, the new writing in Britain has invented new forms of performance no longer based on the mimesis of reality, but rather, positioning itself somewhere between theatre and collage in order to distort the distinction amid reality and its imitation. These innovative forms of representation include collage, performance and installation art. Indeed, Crimp's dialogues depict a distinct world where communication on stage is avoided and rejected, thus creating a sense of postmodern reality and the feeling of

disorder produced by it. As we shall see, Martin Crimp's characters use language as a mask and evasion in order to depict a postmodern sense of complexity, ambiguity and distortion. The playwright explores a symbolic and absurdist landscape of cruel personal relationships where words are used to hide his characters' real intentions. With his innovative attitude to theatrical forms, Crimp continues to become an enigma for contemporary critics and audiences. His plays are complex, experimental in form and unsettling in content, and he uses language as a mask and evasion in order to portray his characters' struggles between liberation and security.

Crimp, among other things, is the dramatist of *The City* where there are images of domestic violence, betrayals, territorial struggles, business tensions and depressions all of which are portrayed through a series of speech inconsistencies, where words are in conflict with the intended meaning of the interlocutor. His fascination with the conception of city as text can be interpreted by Benjamin's idea of the city as text. As David Frisby argues, the city possesses features of textuality "a decipherable constellation of signs and symbols". (Frisby, 2002, p.15). In his previous play, *The Country*, too, Crimp explores the city as a text, emphasising its overtones as a place of mystery, alienation and discontent. Indeed Corinne in *The Country* clarifies that they have moved to the country to start again, to escape the city, to change their lives "to be happier...to get away from the city". Again in *The Country*, Rebecca articulates her experiences with Richard, how he gave her drugs and was intimate with her by utilising the city as a metaphor: "The treatment was wild...her body became the city...she was leaving for the country" (Crimp, 2000, 27).

The City, which was written as a sequel to *The Country* also has five scenes like the traditional form. The play has four characters: Clair and Christopher 40, Jen-

ny 30, Girl 9 or 10. Time and place are blank. Similar to *The Country*, *The City* underlines the psychological terrors of the domestic. Clair reminds her husband of his previous aggressive manners:

"You've been impossible. You've stormed round this house shouting and slamming doors ever since Christmas. I close all the windows, but even then the neighbours turn up here complaining they can't sleep-and I can see them looking at the children, wondering if there are bruises under their dressing-up clothes" (38).

It is not only domestic hostility that the play implies but also there are references to political atrocities of the wide world with offstage narrations. As we shall see, eventually, both the domestic and the global terror work towards emphasising the private terror of a writer's imagination in a rather creative and ingenious way.

In *The City*, three adult characters struggle to make sense of a bizarre and disintegrated world in a structure full of complicated narration. The characters' accounts explore urban living, worldwide insecurity and the nature of fiction. The play features three major characters: Chris is an office worker, his wife Clair is a language translator and their neighbour Jenny. The characters use spare language, however, their cool manners bear undertones of unease and atrocity. The setting is reminiscent of a familiar Pinter-esque environment, where a middle-class couple meets across the kitchen table and chats about their day. Their exchanges depict an apocalyptic world full of anxiety. Clair describes a chance meeting with a famous writer named Mohamed, who gives her a diary. Mohamed intends to give the diary to his daughter from whom he has been separated. Chris, meanwhile, has had a terrible day as he has learned about his redundancy, because the firm he works for is to be restructured. The couple's dialogues reflect a sense of a decayed marriage. Billington states that Crimp works through half

hints and verbal links rather than linear narrative through which he establishes certain motifs such as insecurity, fear, fractured parent-child bonds, global persecution. (Billington 2008). Onto this mixture, the troubled neighbour Jenny's account of a foreign war is enriching:

"My husband's gone to war. Not to kill. Of course not. He's a doctor...It's a secret war...they're attacking a city – pulverising it, - turning this city – the squares, the shops, the parks, the leisure centres and the schools – turning the whole thing into fine grey dust, because everybody in that city has to be killed. Not by him...so that our boys can safely go and kill the people who are left – the people, I mean, still clinging onto life. Because it's amazing how people can cling onto life – I'm a nurse – I see it everyday – according to my husband – in this city: people in all sorts of unexpected places, clinging onto life...the people clinging onto life are the most dangerous people of all". (23).

Jenny is a nurse whose husband is away assigned as a doctor at an unspecified and secret war. She has come to complain about Chris and Clair's loud children who have disturbed her daytime sleep. Then she draws a picture of a woman breastfeeding her baby down in the drains, but can't kill them: "Angry and unscrupulous perpetrators of terror who will stop at nothing to stay alive. A brick splits the soldiers skull" (24). With all these horrible images Jenny asks insistently "Do you see? How difficult it is – yes – for me to sleep in the daytime with all this on my mind when your children are running up and down, shouting and screaming" (24). All the accounts highlight a sense of despair, which is inevitable in modern urban living. These narrations also imply the playwright's own ideas related to the West's (American and British) attempts at peacekeeping processes in the third world and especially in the Middle East. Crimp depicts fragmented pictures of the failure of the peacekeeping practices where communities are devas-

tated and exposed to violence, physical and psychological pain and atrocities.

As the play progresses, it turns out that the banal domestic space has become a place for a middle-class nightmare. The play turns into a kind of self-interrogation, until by the end its characters are questioning each others' reality. It finishes with a description of a war-devastated city, bombed flat like in Chechnya, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Clair's confession of her creative sterility, of her inability to create living realities may also reflect the author's concerns.

Crimp's innovation in stage language comes from his being trained as a musician and translator of the French language. His stage language is both tense and musical, especially when his characters use words in order to create disorder rather than connection between each other. Each character utters nervous accounts alluding to torture, war and cruelty: For example, in Clair's narrative, Mohamed's daughter is taken away from him; in Chris's story his swipe card does not work, which is a sign of his dismissal from work; in Jenny's account there are references to a hostile war – all these exchanges are juxtaposed in order to create a threatening, anxious subtext around daily worries. Characters experience bizarre encounters, which result in modern day alienation. As Laura Ennor states, "cruel accounts are juxtaposed together with humorous stories in order to create a sense of 'absurdity'". (Ennor, 2010). For example, while Jenny gives an account of major, global issues, Chris talks about not being able to find the right meat in the frozen section. The images of an inhumane society are suggested in the interactions amongst characters as implied in Jenny's speech about an unnamed devastated city and Chris's redundancy in the heartless capitalist system. The fragments of non-linear narratives are rather challenging and intricate towards a coherent story on the audience's part, but as Mark Fisher explains there is a dream vision and Crimp's

“theatrical blurring of fact and fiction (which) only reinforces the sense of psychological damage caused by a dysfunctional society” (Fisher, 2010). Similarly, Hayley Horton finds *The City* to be an engaging, contemporary piece of theatre that demonstrates the art of storytelling from a point of view that isn't always comfortable. (Horton, 2012). For example, when Chris meets his school-friend Sam in a pub, his past is revealed like a nightmare. Somehow Chris has been left apologetic before Sam as his past memories are awakened and his old friends function as a means of threat to his existence in the pub. Next moment Sam's friend Phil joins them in the pub which creates another moment of nightmare and humiliation as Sam tells Phil how Chris has been a loser in life: “This, says Sam, is my old friend Christopher from school, done very well for himself, lost his job”. (35). Another moment Chris is alone in the pub, and he has to tell Phil's girlfriend who comes from Abu Dhabi, that Phil could not wait for her and starts telling her about the previous chat: Sam, meat, his hat, etc. Here, offstage characters become importantly functional as Crimp utilises other diegetic characters as the subconscious of his major character in order to create a dialogic sense - as if the character is in dialogue with the offstage character but in reality he may be conversing with his subconscious. That way the character reveals all his fears, anxieties, and doubts in which he is trapped.

The play's form and structure is designed to blur the line between fact and fiction. The audience is continuously drawn between lies and truths while trying to rationalise the character shifts in this mysterious play; throughout the play, Chris becomes businessman, home husband, and butcher respectively. In this mazelike play, each character adds a different level to the puzzle. Indeed, Crimp quotes Fernando Pessoa before the playscript: “Everything we do, in art and life, is the imperfect copy of what we intended” (Pessoa,

The Book of Disquite). This allusion prefigures Crimp's complicated opinions on life and art, the idea of the Aristotelian mimesis in art, the fluid boundary where life turns into art, where truth transforms into damaged imitation. Like the playwright himself, his dislocated characters struggle to grasp the point where reality ends and fiction begins. Indeed, in the penultimate scene, Chris is listening to a girl of 9 or 10 reciting poems. The girl wears a coat over a nurse's uniform exactly like Jenny in Scene II. When Chris asks her to take her coat off because it is hot, she then pretends to be the nurse. The dialogue between Chris and the little girl, where now she acts as the nurse, is a blur between mimesis and fiction. It is as if father and daughter are playing a game:

Chris: How's Charlie?

Girl: Charlie's lost a lot of blood.

Chris: I hope it's not all over the playroom carpet (43).

However, when Chris holds his daughter's coat and reaches the coat's pocket to feel Charlie's blood, the fiction turns into reality. Now the girl wants Chris to punish and hit Charlie, because Charlie has found “mummy's writing”, which is her secret diary. Indeed there is a reference to Clair's unexpected arrival from Lisbon “maybe she was afraid that someone would find her secret diary” (44). Clair tells Chris that Mohamed's daughter has died in a car accident. But then Mohamed has a confession to make which has a shocking effect on Clair. Mohamed confesses that he experienced “exaltation” after hearing about her daughter's death from his sister-in-law: “I realised that what had happened could only enhance my work. My child, you see, is like a log thrown into the fire, making the fire burn, he said, more brightly” (52). Clair is disgusted by what he has called his exhilarator, telling him that she does not care how many people he has killed in his never-ending fight for freedom and democracy, or how many days he had been

tortured or how many prizes he had won for describing it. (53).

In the last scene the family celebrates Christmas and Clair gives Chris the diary from Scene I as a present. Clair asks Chris to read the diary:

“There was a city inside of me – a huge and varied city full of green squares, shops and churches...there would be industrial zones...and in that city I’d find an inexhaustible source of characters and stories for my writing. I was convinced that in order to be a writer I’d simply have to travel to this city – the one inside of me – and write down what I discovered there...I know it would be difficult to reach this city – And I did reach my city. But when I reached it, I found it had been destroyed. The houses, the shops...minarets lay on the ground next to church steeples...I looked for inhabitants to write about, but there were no inhabitants, just dust. I looked for the people still clinging on to life – what stories they could tell! – but even there – in the drains, the basements, in the underground railway system – there was nothing – nobody – just dust. And this gray dust, like the ash from a cigarette, was so fine it got into my pen and stopped the ink reaching the page. Could this really be all inside of me? I cried at first but then I pulled myself together and tried for a while then to invent. I invented characters” (62).

Clair writes in her diary that she invented characters such as Mohamed, Jenny, a child, and put them in her city. She confesses that the process of writing and creating characters and stories is hard work, and so she has to give up on her city, believing she was no writer. She discovers her own emptiness and feels relief. At the end of the play, Clair decides that most of the characters, perhaps including Chris and herself, are her own inventions. Here, Crimp’s process of creating as a writer is reminiscent of David Greig’s method, where he likens the process of writing to the city in *Damascus*. Greig’s character is

also fascinated with relationships between illusion and truth, fiction and fact. Greig’s Paul lectures Wasim on ‘truth’ and ‘morality’ by using the old city as a metaphor. Like in Crimp’s play, Paul likens ‘writing’ to ‘an old city’, and finds relationship between ‘literature’ and ‘truth’, emphasising that writing is like an old city and in its centre there is the desire to tell the truth (Greig, 2007, 65). Indeed Greig, like Crimp, attempts to explain that in today’s world people are unsettled, inhabiting an insecure and dangerous world. In both writers, the process of writing resembles an invented city where all is nothing but fantasy. However, while Crimp is disillusioned by the devastated city, Greig is delighted to find new resources in the city in order to create fiction.

Conclusion

All in all, the common underlying theme in Crimp’s play is the isolation and loneliness of man in modern mass society. The characters have multiple selves; they reinvent the present, re-imagine the past, and embody virtual spaces to achieve a conversational gain in their verbal battle. They often inhabit places in time: in their past or their imagined future. Crimp’s characters blur the line between actual and play. Although there is a danger of developing a distaste for modern life in Crimp’s play, because he portrays vividly that life can be a stranger substance than clichéd life, the play provides for a refinement of our unreliable minds, where truth and lies, fact and fiction, interact.

By means of his verbal inventions, Crimp has challenged critics and spectators alike with his unusual techniques and ground-breaking approach to theatrical forms. The Crimpian puzzle includes a complex and experimental play structure with complicated, multiple character roles, together with disconcerting plots in order to distort the text-based, neat naturalistic, social-realist playwright. His characters em-

ploy language as a camouflage in order to hide behind the unsayable facts of their lives. However, it is not only the characters' private fears or discontents but also present-day political/ ethical tribulations within globalised urban societies being depicted in Crimp's *The City*. Indeed, for the playwright, theatre is the proper medium by which to articulate his visions on urban despair. While portraying the city-dwellers' incomprehension of this disorienting existence, he makes use of a flowing speech characterised by repeated disruptions, fragmentations and indecisions – a characteristic which promises to make Crimp's theatre as revolutionary as Beckett's.

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ГРАД МАРИНА КРИМПА: НЕСИГУРНОСТИ САВРЕМЕНОГ ГОВОРА

Резиме

Сценски језик су поново изумили Семјуел Бекет и Харолд Пинтер у другој половини двадесетог вијека у Енглеској. Он више није утемељен на аристотеловском опонашању. Бекетова и Пинтерова дјела имају огроман утицај на драмске писце двадесет првог вијека, међу којима је и Мартин Кримп. Док истражује симболички и апсурдни предии окрутних веза, Кримп истовремено осликава текуће проблеме, као што су материјализам, незапосленост, насиље у браку, ментални поремећаји и усамљеност у урбаним подручјима британског друштва. Кримп сматра позориште одговарајућим средством да изрази ову тугу урбаног простора тако што користи динамичан језик пун прекида и понављања, у којем се реченице преклапају а мисли гомилају у тренуцима оклијевања. На тај начин он показује забринутост и страх од контакта с људима. Рад се бави снагом сценског језика у Кримповој драми из 2008. године под називом *Град*, која представља утисак о хаосу постмодерне стварности у колажу простор – вријеме. Драма проблематизује и преиспитује британско позориште ослоњено на текст и енглески натурализам.