

The Private and the Public Wars: A Play by Martin Crimp

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This paper will focus on Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender*, first performed at the Young Vic in the spring of 2004. The play is representative of Crimp's tendency to explore the fields of the private and the public in equal degrees, navigating both territories in the same text. It is, perhaps, features such as this that have triggered comparisons between Crimp and Pinter and it is true that, like Pinter, Crimp is a master of language and subterranean action. In this paper, I will argue that Crimp is equally effective in depicting private and public conflicts and I will demonstrate this by exploring the techniques which he employs in order to communicate the characters' tension and aggression, concluding that his subtle methods are highly effective. In terms of theory I will focus on Stanton Garner's *Bodied Spaces*, a phenomenological approach to performance. In doing so my purpose is mainly to indicate the value of phenomenology as a theoretical approach to Crimp's theatre for which *Cruel and Tender* will serve as an example.

However, as the extensive justification of such an approach would necessarily entail a detailed application of phenomenological premises to the play which the given space here does not allow me, I will only pursue this on an essential level. That is, my aim is not to provide a complete phenomenological analysis, but to present the fundamentals of a case for the use of phenomenology for the understanding of specific traits in Crimp's theatre. In this case, these will be the embodied nature of language and spatial behaviour. The reason for this is that such considerations are central in

Crimp's theatre and, in order to fully account for their signifying depth, a phenomenological approach that lifts the text from the page, where pure literary criticism would focus, is beneficial. Moreover, phenomenology, although complementary to speech-act theory, in fact manages to extend beyond it, as it takes a step further by providing an account of the parallel corporeal experience and effect of speech on the individual and his/her interlocutor, entirely appropriate for performance analysis. The emphasis which phenomenology places on lived experience would operate so as to bring the audience into the equation, accounting for its experience of the characters' verbal and corporeal behaviour. In a play such as *Cruel and Tender* the value of this rests with a more complete understanding of the devices set to use.

One of the essential characteristics of *Cruel and Tender* is the formulation of power relations through language. The basic storyline of the play involves Amelia, a woman in her forties, situated at a "temporary home close to an international airport" (n. pag), where she awaits her husband's return from war. The man, simply named 'the General,' never appears onstage with Amelia, as he only returns in the third and final part of the play, after she has committed suicide offstage. The play is an adaptation of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, so certain elements of the story are part of the updating process of the tragedy. Briefly, the events that transpire until the General's appearance are as follows: A sub-Saharan African woman, called Laela, is brought to Amelia's house joined by a young boy. As Amelia learns later, the woman is the General's lover and the boy is their son. Resisting the undermining of her position and the misleading to which she is subjected by Government authorities regarding the true nature of her husband's war impetus, Amelia decides to send him a pillow containing a liquid which she believes causes soldiers to yearn for home. However, the liquid is

proven to be an aggressive chemical which causes horrific injuries for the General. When he returns he is a broken man, physically and mentally.

In *Cruel and Tender* dialogues are sharp and never safe. However, it would be an oversight not to acknowledge that the strongest weapon for the characters are their monologues. The play begins with a powerful soliloquy where Amelia recounts the events that led to her present situation, giving the first samples of her unwillingness to be patronized and manipulated:

AMELIA. There are women who believe  
all men are rapists.  
I don't believe that  
because if I did believe that  
how—as a woman—could I go on living  
with the label 'victim'?  
Because I am not a victim—oh no—  
that's not a part I'm willing to play—believe me. (1)

Crimp writes more striking, lengthy monologues for Amelia as she makes her way through revelations that shutter her belief system in her husband and her marriage, torn between the reality of the infidelity and the crimes of war which the General has committed. One of the most memorable moments in the play is Amelia's last monologue, where the fact that she is at war with everyone, from her only son to her husband, is more obvious than at any other time in the play. In her final moments Amelia determines the outcome of this war and prefaces her exit by repeating that she is not prepared to play the role of the victim (46). Her ensuing suicide, therefore, is not an act of cowardice, but one of dignity. She does not forfeit, she *chooses* to end the war.

Since the two sides of this domestic conflict are represented by Amelia and the General, when one side has finished presenting its case, it is anticipated that the spectators hear of the other side. This is how the General articulates his viewpoint:

GENERAL. Because I have purified the world or you.  
 I have burnt terror out of the world for people like you.  
 I have followed it through the shopping malls  
 and the school playgrounds  
 tracked it by starlight across the desert  
 smashed down the door of its luxury apartment  
 learned its language  
 intercepted its phone calls  
 smoked it out of its cave  
 thrown acid into its eyes and burned it to carbon. [. . .]  
 because for every head I have ever severed  
 two have grown in their place  
 and I have had to cut and to cut and to cut  
 to burn and to cut to purify the world— (57-58)

In performance it is made very clear that Amelia and the General are each other's adversary: Amelia's onstage composure and grace is directly contrastable with the General's aggression and brutality and the audience is offered two diametrically different stage images. As opposed to Amelia's several monologues, the General only delivers two on stage and, on both occasions, his gruesome speech fails to compete with Amelia's verbal eloquence.

Garner discusses monologues in *Bodied Spaces*, contributing illuminating observations for the examination of plays such as *Cruel and Tender*, where much of the information regarding crucial events is carried through speech rather than onstage action. Language is treated by Garner as *mise-en-scène*, suggesting that it achieves a physical onstage presence as concrete as that of any physical object. That is, the worlds that language succeeds in generating on stage are equally visible as those that are presented by means of set design (141-43). The only difference between the two is

that the former are realized within the spectators' imagination and consciousness. In *Cruel and Tender*, monologues serve to bring two different worlds on stage: Amelia's and the General's. The first world rests within the private, domestic domain and unveils the tensions of this environment with eloquence. The second world inhabits the public, military domain of the battlefield and records its brutality with crudeness. These two worlds, presented by the speakers of the respective monologues, clash on stage in a battle whose outcome is interpreted by the audience. Moreover, focusing on the plays of Pinter, Garner observes the possibility of "predatory interactions," during which "[. . .] the terms of presence (and nonpresence) are continually at stake" (144). As Garner maintains here, "From the interrogation [. . .] to the institutionalized language-politics, speech constitutes a field of domination and resistance, disclosure and erasure" (145). These suggestions are directly applicable to Crimp's theatre and in this case to *Cruel and Tender*, where the protagonists' two different realities are being contested on stage and two different subjectivities compete before the audience.

Another common concern of the two plays is the issue of territoriality, which leads to a spatial conflict. This is perhaps another factor why Crimp's writing has been compared to Pinter's: The concept of the intrusion of someone's private space by an enigmatic outsider is recurrent in both writers' work. In *Cruel and Tender* this materializes in the antagonistic relationship between Amelia and Laela, the driving force behind which is not primarily the claim for the General's affections, but the claim on the same domestic territory. It is not long after Laela is accepted by Amelia as a guest in her home that the latter finds the young woman properly settled in the house, accustomed to her new environment and enjoying a lifestyle of leisure and luxury. It even becomes clear by the fact that Amelia's staff is eager to serve Laela's

every need that this uninvited guest has began to receive the same if not more attention in the household as herself. This is undeniably a crucial factor as regards Laela's growing establishment within Amelia's home and one which functions to prove that the animosity between the two women is essentially constituted on territorial rather than emotional grounds. Moreover, this is a war that Amelia seems to be fighting single-handedly and on unequal terms as she strives to assert her territory with no external support, while Laela has gained allies in the women of the household staff, who encourage her spatial domination of Amelia's home. Winning this war is, for Amelia, a matter of dignity: By holding the fort or fighting her corner, she preserves her pride intact and proves that she has not sustained a blow by Laela's unwelcome presence in her house.

In order to grasp the importance of this spatial war from a phenomenological perspective it is necessary to take into account the actualities of its depiction on stage. The crucial parameter in Luc Bondy's original 2004 production of the play was that the audience encountered a sparingly decorated stage, where no single object seemed to be placed for the purposes of mere decoration. For a phenomenological account of performance, where the characters' embodied stage presence and corporeal motility are brought to the foreground as primary concerns, such choices in terms of staging style are far from insignificant. Therefore, it is not surprising that questions of this type are extensively addressed in Garner's text. As he observes in an analysis of theatrical space which is directly applicable to the first production of *Cruel and Tender*, an environment such as the one created in Bondy's staging serves one highly important effect. This is none other than to enhance the sensation of an empty space in which a body encounters its *other* and strives to cancel its attempted establishment

inside a given territory. For Garner, such battles are both verbal and physical (145). The dialogues and the characters' movement are indeed Crimp's basic tools in demonstrating such a conflict and the examination of the specifics of Amelia and Laela's hostile cohabitation serves to illustrate this point. Critics were not only quick to notice Amelia's defensive territorial behaviour, but they also phrased it in a very interesting mode, perceiving Amelia "as a figure of wonderfully fierce and frustrated intelligence, stalking her territory like a panther" (Kingston 634).

However, the invasion of domestic space and the conflict it results in is not the only type of war that Crimp is interested in exploring, as *Cruel and Tender* also navigates the territory of military conflict in an enthralling manner. The General's lifelong task has been to 'eradicate' terror and his latest mission has instigated his downfall, as after an expedition to Africa he finds himself accused of war crimes, burdened by the brutal death of a boy, who had allegedly developed terrorist activity. As in many plays by Crimp, there are different versions of the truth here, too. In the case of *Cruel and Tender*, these regard the real motives behind the General's war and the extent to which these were personal or political. In any case, Crimp's text seems to suggest, it is the aftermath that matters. In order to convey this aftermath to the spectators, Crimp does not employ gruesome stage representations, either in the form of enactment or image projection, but a brief cynical description by the Government Minister, which is as follows:

JONATHAN. [. . .] if you want to root out terror—and I believe we all of us want to root out terror—there is only one rule: kill. We wanted that city pulverised—and I mean literally pulverised—the shops, the schools, the hospitals, the libraries, the bakeries, networks of fountains, avenues of trees, museums—we wanted that so-called city turned—as it now has been—irreversibly to dust. (13)

For the audience of *Cruel and Tender*, which was one of different nationality and cultural background as the first production of the play was a collaboration between the Young Vic and several major European festivals, the imagery generated by such a description was far from irrelevant. Staged in 2004, the play came one year after the beginning of the war in Iraq, an event of immense political significance, surrounded by great controversy. It also came almost three years after the 9/11 incidents in New York. Considering the fact that in a short piece called *Advice to Iraqi Women* read at the Royal Court Theatre in 2003 Crimp had exposed the absurdity of the consequences of war on defenseless social groups, *Cruel and Tender* could easily be interpreted as a full-length follow up to the same theme. Critics certainly thought so, with Charles Spencer commenting: “Nothing I have seen in the theatre to date so resonantly and provocatively captures our bewildering post-9/11 world, with its alarmingly amorphous war against terrorism and the ghastly aftershocks coming out of Iraq” (633). This is a readily available interpretation, but the fact that the war in the play takes place in Africa suggests that *Cruel and Tender* perhaps bears more affinities to the tragedy of Rwanda, as Luc Bondy has also suggested from his directorial perspective (20-21). And though it must be said that to deny the play a reference to the Iraq war might mean to close our eyes to the most likely interpretation taking the sociopolitical context into account, to maintain that *Cruel and Tender* is only about the Iraq war would also be like proposing that Pinter’s *Ashes to Ashes* is solely about the Holocaust. *Cruel and Tender* is about terrorism, yes, but a terrorism that is as much domestic as it is universal, and about the need to identify private and public repression alike. The play is as effective as it is, for the exact reason that it moves between both worlds, achieving a most impressive balance.



I have focused here only on what I consider to be the basics in *Cruel and Tender* as regards Crimp's way of bringing to the stage private and public wars. Considering the possibilities for an appropriate title for this text the highly accurate suggestion of a German critic came to mind: His comment was that until *Cruel and Tender* Crimp was known for his shrewd depictions of the private conflicts that take place within four walls (Wengierek n. pag). This is an entirely valid statement for a number of plays by Crimp and it even holds true for *Cruel and Tender* as well. However, the significance of this text rests with the fact that it also features another, much more public war. In this paper I have tried to explore the fundamentals of how Crimp conveys conflict to the spectators and it strikes me that language, with its endless expressive possibilities is, for the playwright, the locus where everything takes place. As far as the selection of themes and their negotiation on stage in terms of form and scenic images is concerned, Crimp might be regarded as belonging to a theatrical tradition which extends from Harold Pinter to Roland Schimmelpfennig. This is particularly evident when we examine his treatment of language, demonstrating a profound awareness of the wounds it can result to. Language is the main vehicle for self-assertion and even self-sustenance and its importance could hardly be overestimated in any play by Crimp. As Amelia says to one of her opponents in *Cruel and Tender*, "I'm starting to find the way you speak an atrocity which makes cutting a man's heart out seem almost humane" (21). In *Cruel and Tender* and in Crimp's theatre in general this may well be precisely the case.

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