

'The Stage, a Skull': Scenic Poetry and the Role of Light in Martin Crimp's *Fewer Emergencies* (2005)

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of light in James Macdonald's production of Martin Crimp's triptych *Fewer Emergencies*. For his 2005 staged production at the Royal Court Theatre, London, Macdonald turned light into one of the play's major operative elements, and had each play enacted in front of a screen of light. Light and text thus created a space of synesthesia, or of interrelation between different perceptible fields, which sought to render the conventional separation between stage and audience, or 'fourth wall', fuzzy and ambiguous. Such strategy came to its full political potential in the triptych's middle play, *Face to the Wall*, where it was used in order to interpellate the audience as responsible subjects with respect to a situation of violence that was portrayed on stage, thus inviting it to *experience* some of the most totalitarian aspects of contemporary society, so that they might resist them outside the theatre.

Martin Crimp's triptych *Fewer Emergencies* (2005) is made up of three very brief, very minimalist plays –*Whole Blue Sky*, *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies*. In these plays, action does not take place on stage but it is narrated and improvised by four nameless characters that are called 1, 2, 3 and 4, and who sit in a row and invent stories. They, in fact, make up the plays themselves. British director James Macdonald, who took the triptych to the Royal Court theatre in London in 2005, turned light into one of the play's major operative elements of the *mise-en-scène*.¹ Taking advantage of the plays' indeterminate character, in

¹ James Macdonald's staged production of *Fewer Emergencies* took place at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, and it ran from 8 to 31 September 2005. The actors were Rachel Blake, Neil Dudgeon, Paul Hickey and Tanya Moodie. Stage director Katie

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which the stage directions specify no particular setting, Macdonald decided to place light at the same level as the other artistic media composing the theatrical event. Macdonald in fact relied on a minimalist light artist, Martin Richman, who works within the minimalist tradition initiated by light artists like Dan Flavin, for him to be in charge of the light work. Richman's lights thus covered the three walls of the room, including the ceiling, in one single colour, creating a background that was reminiscent of abstract expressionist paintings, such as Mark Rothko's.

During the course of the performance, conditioned by impulses they received from the text, the audience inevitably began to read minimal changes in intensity, shape and colour into the screens, moved by the need to interpret and bring closure to the play. Light and text thus created a space of synesthesia; that is, of interrelation between different perceptive fields, with the aim to render the conventional separation between stage and audience, or 'fourth wall', fuzzy and ambiguous, and to make the audience feel they found themselves at an open space. This, indeed, was made with a political goal in mind, which was taken to its full expression in *Face to the Wall*, the triptych's middle play, and the most experimental one of the triptych. In this play, the disruption of the safe boundary between stage and audience, or the so-called 'fourth wall', works in order to interpellate the audience as responsible subjects with respect to a situation of violence that is portrayed on stage. Light, which sought to challenge the 'safe' boundary dividing stage and audience, was therefore integrated within a pedagogical strategy, aimed at making the audience *experience* some of the most totalitarian or violent aspects of contemporary society, so that it may resist them outside the theatre. Light thus invited the audience to feel physically engaged with the situation portrayed on stage, thus re-embodiment its members as resistant subjects, instead of as potential voyeurs of the spectacle.

Mitchell directed *Face to the Wall*, the triptych's middle play, at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs in 2002. *Face to the Wall* (2002) and *Fever Emergencies* (2002) were initially published together, and in 2005 Crimp added the third play, *Whole Blue Sky*, in order to turn the work into a piece of theatrical length. It was James Macdonald who first brought the three plays to the stage.

Figure 1. Dan Flavin's installation at Richmond's Hall (2000)



1. The non-hierarchical theatrical experience

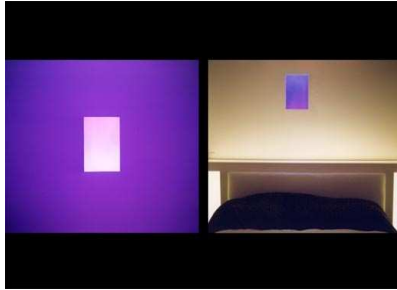
Whole Blue Sky portrays a high-middle class family, made up of an absent father, a mother who misses her former, independent life, and a tormented, scared child called Bobby. In this play, the mother knows that her husband's eyes often 'slide away', "even in the toy shop selecting a toy –his eyes slide away, under the hat" (Crimp, 2005: 11). Indeed, the wife reveals that she would often just pack her books and leave if she only could, but "money" (Crimp, 2005: 14) "property" (Crimp, 2005: 14) and "family" (Crimp, 2005: 14) keep her from it. The female, who appears as slightly more detached from power, is more able to see its contradictions. As she put it, referring to her husband and herself, "Haven't they worked? Haven't they struggled to extend this table? Haven't they screamed at each other in private? Punched each other? Haven't they broken each other's skin to open this, for example, bottle of wine?" (Crimp, 2005: 15). Thus, the family, in this first play, is seen to disintegrate from within. *Whole Blue Sky* can be considered a footnote to *The Country* (2000), written five years before, which also shows the 'gulf' between genders that is present within the liberal family. Material conditions create a gulf of misunderstanding between husband and wife and stratify the family's gender behaviours.

In this context, *Whole Blue Sky* submitted the audience to the penetrating gaze of a white, fluorescent light. The play, as Martin Crimp himself announced, "already begins in light, even before it starts, and it never dims to darkness" (Escoda, 2005). The ultraviolet light had the

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uncanny effect of preventing the audience from seeing each others' true colour and difference, filtering all faces through a homogenising colour that highlighted and intensified the whiteness of their clothes or of their teeth. Indeed, it evoked the dazzling light of shiny, smooth surfaces and glossy magazines, which creates, as the audience could then experience, a society of surfaces where one can read but the most external signs. The stark whiteness of, for instance, the American mall, or of computer screens, or even of iPods, in short, the images of luxury that the media teach its viewers to desire were represented metonymically through the dazzling light. Happiness, in the play, is understood in terms of a capitalist dream. In this context, the constant, dazzling white light reminded the audience of middle-class luxury, and of the fact that any possible desires or understanding of happiness –any 'blue sky'– are being equated with material possessions and status.

The light work thus intertwined with the textual emotions and ideas, bringing about the effect of synesthesia. Thus, light itself was like an actor that helped the audience through seeing and listening to the play's political messages; it created a space for 'listening' in the audience's minds. In *Robert Wilson* Miguel Morey characterises the light in Robert Wilson's theatre, in terms that might be applied to Crimp as well. He argues that the light works almost like an "actor that helps the audience through seeing and listening" (2003: 57). And he adds: "Light creates a space for listening ... it must help listening ... and its colour should only deepen the intensity of the act of listening" (2003: 167). In this play, the effect produced by the ultraviolet light and the text was one of absurdity. The cost that families must pay for 'happiness', as described in these terms of consumption and narcissism, is revealed as absurd. The political message, however, is not mediated by the play itself through a discursive and argumentative use of language, but it is negotiated by the audience in the process of the theatrical event, and through a synesthetic and aural process in which visual and auditory stimuli merge.

Fig.2. Martin Richman's *Way To Open Window* (1999)

Fewer Emergencies, the third play, brings the audience back to the first play, *Whole Blue Sky* –Bobby, the family's child, bears the same name as the child of the first play. If the family in the first play showed signs of disintegration from within, it is now threatened from without, as it is attacked by a rebellious crowd of dispossessed immigrants. As Bobby, the child that also appears in *Whole Blue Sky*, is caught by gunshot, a link is established between the microcosm of the family, and larger world relations. In this play, Crimp creates a parable of world inequality through imagining Bobby's house as a place where the treasures of the Western world are kept. He does so in a miniaturesque, highly satirical, Swiftian manner, relishing in the tiniest detail. Bobby's room, which he wants to keep away from the rioting crowd and for his selfish pleasure, contains, like Western society, "a shelf full of oak trees, and another where pine forests border a mountain lake" (Crimp, 2005: 45) and even pornography. He also has the island of Manhattan within a secret drawer, and a "wardrobe full of uranium and another full of cobalt ... and a row of universities" (Crimp, 2005: 45). And the key, of course, to withdraw in emergencies from the weight and responsibility of so many unshared privileges. Bobby's home which, in the play, represents the West's economic and cultural structures, and which already demand emotional sacrifices to Western individuals themselves, is thus symbolically brought down, made to collapse, by those who are excluded from it.

As the characters in *Fewer Emergencies* are brought face to face with the impending violence in Bobby's neighbourhood, they finally ask themselves if it might be possible for Bobby to share some of his

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privileges and let the crowd in –a question which had so far been veiled, like a taboo. And the playwright remains impassive: there will be no glorification in return, the West will not be held as hero. Those who will have a share will, as Crimp states it sarcastically, simply love it. As the characters put it, “3 Love him/ 2 They will love him./1 Then they’ll always love him” (Crimp, 2005: 47). The truth is put forth in all its bluntness and yet it is also oddly liberating. Bobby, who had previously kept all his privileges in his room for himself, considers, when under threat, whether he might be able to extend some of his privileges in an act of selflessness. At this point, just as Bobby’s house threatens to be brought down by the crowd in a sudden ‘emergency’, the playwright foregrounds the ‘key’ Bobby wants to reach in order to lock himself inside for the audience to watch, thus bringing home to the audience that sharing –or extending privileges– and refusing to do so are two options that also swing over their heads like a pendulum, just as the key swings over Bobby’s head as he “watch[es] [it] swinging” (Crimp, 2005: 49).

Light, in *Fever Emergencies*, expressed the play’s underlying aim to bring about a subjective change in the audience towards sharing and empathy, as well as the playwright’s desire to make it emerge. It projected different shades of green on the auditorium’s walls and ceiling; indefinite shapes which varied in texture and intensity, and which seemed to represent matter at a shaping stage, in the process of becoming something other, something else. Furthermore, the walls of the theatre, as Macdonald devised it, did not fit together in the manner of a closed structure, but they were asymmetrically disposed, so that they did not delimit a closed space. This produced a perception of emptiness and placelessness. In this open space, light had an incidence on the audience’s receptivity not as a tangential element, as in traditional drama, but as a central factor that circulated freely, uniting stage and audience. Without the filter of this ‘fourth wall’ which discriminates what the audience is supposed to receive as the play’s meaning and what it is not, the semiotic hierarchy of traditional theatre is substituted by a transversal disposition. The audience was thus also encouraged to relate in these transversal movements.

Figure3. Neil Dudgeon in James Macdonald's production of *Fewer Emergencies* (2005)



2. 'The warm metal –thank you– of the gun': interpretation and violation

This willingness to shake the distance between stage and audience was used, in *Face to the Wall*, or the middle play, in order to directly and politically interpellate the audience, turning its members into responsible subjects with regard to the symbolic violence that was portrayed on stage. *Face to the Wall*, the triptych's middle play, presents a series of characters who are trying to come to terms with a mass murder that has taken place at a school, involving the killing of children and of a school principal. The event, which they may have seen on TV, or which may have taken place within their neighbourhood –we don't know– has deeply impacted them, and they are now trying to fathom its causes. A Postman who had thus far been living with his family in the suburbs, in material ease, has decided to finish with the system overnight, and has bumped into a school, killing its children and a school principal. As it is sung and improvised in despair by character 4 at a later stage of the play, the Postman –or the terrorist– is said to have a voice within, a fanaticism, which prompts his thoughts and annuls all other voices and purposes, and with which he himself doesn't even know how to cope.

In James Macdonald's production, *Face to the Wall* (2002) was pierced through by an intense background of red light, as the actors sat

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around a white, bright table that lighted their faces. The red light which enveloped stage and audience turned the characters' faces into icons of contemporary anxiety, and also gave the play its thematic unity. The middle play, indeed, represents the underside of the consumerist dream which the *mise-en-scène* of *Whole Blue Sky* transmitted through the ultraviolet whiteness. Indeed, the red light represents the anxiety caused by such a sudden outburst of violence in the midst of an affluent neighbourhood. In this context, Character 1 holds the floor and begins to speak, seeking to explain the murder to himself. Uncannily, however, characters 2 and 3 increasingly begin to prompt his speech and to make it more resonant of media and cinematic discourses, leading him to glamorise the violence of the event.

Crimp imitates the movement of a camera as 1 describes what the murderer sees and does, thus suggesting 1 has slipped into the murderer's 'role'. At this point, however, Character 1 begins to stutter, revealing he has a conflict with the performance he is being asked to enact. His continuous use of 'thank you' and 'good', even if they are self-encouraging comments, dramatically clash with the horrors described. As he puts it, for instance, "He shoots child C –good– in the head (Crimp, 2005: 27). Or, at another point, "Just as the child –child A– now flinches away from what? –yes?" (Crimp, 2005: 26). To which 4 answers straight away "From the warm metal" (Crimp, 2005: 26), and 1 continues, "1 From the warm metal –thank you– of the gun" (Crimp, 2005: 26). Indeed, there is a strain in 1 between the social mores he must follow and the performance that is being asked from him. It is as though the voice that glamorises violence and which demands of 1 a 'true' masculine performance must 'colonise' the more felt and intuited voice that leads him, almost in a bodily, primeval pull, to empathise and connect with the bodies of the small children.

As 1 puts it, as though reading from a Hollywood script and referring to the murderer's actions: "He moves on to child C. Child C tries to duck away. He shoots –no– yes–no– no shoots–yes?" (Crimp, 2005: 24). At this point, Character 4 just nudges him to continue: "But to no avail" (Crimp, 2005: 24). By portraying 1's increasingly clashing discourses Crimp dramatises exactly just how individuals self-regulate according to the models that come down to them through TV sets, Hollywood movies, and also through everyday relations, as individuals ingrain these models. Although Crimp portrays this conflict of voices as

an objective, theatrical and material situation of group coercion, the play goes as far as to suggest that such a battle might as well be taking place within 1's mind alone, whilst the other characters might just personify discourses coming from different technological media that affect and shape the contemporary mind. In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that this state of self-regulation is characteristic of the mode of operation of power in contemporary societies of control. As they put it:

We should understand the society of control ... as that society ... in which mechanisms of command become ever more 'democratic,' ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of the citizens ... The society of control might thus be characterized by an intensification and generalization of the normalizing apparatuses of disciplinarity that internally animate our common daily practices. (2000: 23)

Thus, in *Face to the Wall* Crimp dramatises the diffuse, decentralised form normalisation takes in contemporary society. As Hardt and Negri put it, "Bio-power is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it" (2000: 23-24). Bio-power reaches down to all spheres of social, economic, cultural and political life, and at the same time it produces them. Indeed, the characters are 'producing' what, in *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity and Modernity*, Ian Burkitt terms the "closed [off]" (1999: 49), individualistic or bodies of modernity, which are constructed as opposed to other bodies so that they may become more compliant to required, late capitalist identities, based on property and possession. The other characters, and certainly 1 himself, through self-regulation, are effecting an incorporeal transformation of his own body and identity, of the previously non-subjectified body of character 1. If he was an 'embodied' person, in whom words and intention were one – a 'felt' and lived body– he is made to become a discourse-ridden body, which may fully regulate himself according to norm. He becomes a ventriloquist. At first, indeed, 1 spontaneously relates to the children, focusing on them rather than on the Postman's supposedly violent

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drives, and describing scenes of great empathy. As 3 offers him a part of the speech for him to build on, and argues that “it’s interesting to see the way some of [the children] hold hands” (26), 1 immediately takes advantage of it and directs the narrative towards children’s capacity for emotional rapport:

- 1 And it’s interesting to see the way that some of them hold hands –they instinctively hold hands– the way children do – the way a child does– if you reach for its hand as it walk next to you it will grasp your own–. (26)

Yet, through repeated acts of interpretation, 1 is being made docile to a series of economic interests which demand that the male be subjectified as an aggressive, competitive, unempathic body, cutting himself apart from, rather than bonding with, others. He is made to impersonate not just the prototype of the soldier, on which the hegemonic masculinity of action movies is based, but also another social myth that is perhaps even more alive in contemporary society: that of the entrepreneurial man who, taking initiative on his own shoulders, must display an individualistic and unempathic emotional structure in order to succeed. This process of coercion and symbolic violence, indeed, takes place, throughout, in front of the eyes of a passive audience. In this context, the play highlights how such contemporary processes of identity construction and normalisation actually violate the individual’s primeval, more intuited body and identity to the point of bringing her/him to collapse. Indeed, in an act of resistance, 1 suddenly tears his own speech asunder in anger and hysteria, repeating that he wants to tell the story all by himself, and that he does not need any “help” (Crimp, 2005: 31) from others in making it ‘appealing’ for the imagined ‘audience’. Uncontrollably, he begins to shout in such a manner that Character 1’s discourse –previously limited to the self-enclosed circuit of on-stage communication– begins to encompass the audience, whom he is facing, in the form of outright insults:

1 You saw what happened to child C—you saw what happened to child C no— yes—no— don't help me—
Pause. Don't help me

4 You saw what happened to child D.

1 Don't help me —you saw what happened to child A, you saw what happened to child B, you saw what happened to child C, you saw what happened to child D, so-so-you saw what happened to child D, so

4 So shut the /fuck up.

1 YOU SAW WHAT HAPPENED TO CHILD D,
SO SHUT THE FUCK UP. CUNT.CUNT.
LITTLE CUNT. I SAID
DON'T HELP ME.

Long pause. (Crimp, 2005: 31)

Crimp introduces the figure of collapse at the point in which individuals are considered mere screens for the projection of docile identities. At this point, Crimp inserts a long pause after 1 collapses in anger. The silence, which makes the audience self-conscious, aims to make it feel and *experience* the extent of the distortion that has been enacted on the character. Character 1's collapse, together with the political use of the pause and of light, are integrated within a pedagogical strategy that seeks to make the most totalitarian tendencies of late capitalist, mediatised societies, visible, as well as the potential of language and ideology —as they are distributed through technology— to violate the integrity of individuals.

In this context, collapse is the automatic response to what a character deems as an exercise of interpretation of his identity being enforced on him from without. Thus, Crimp places the 'empty' bodies of actors on an equally 'empty' stage, to signal the incorporeal or invisible transformation 1 is being made to undergo. Through his breakdown, Crimp signals the point at which the political being disappears. The anger expressed by 1 is supposed to impregnate the audience, and it indeed does so, because the audience cannot but passively absorb it and retain it. Indeed, both the "*long pause*" (Crimp, 2005: 31) and the violent collapse act in the manner of a direct call on the audience, and are meant for it to 'experience' the violent nature of the identities that the neo-liberal elite in control of technology and

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communication require for the maintenance of the system, and to elicit their distance from them.

Figure 5. Rachel Blake and Paul Hickey in James Macdonald's production of *Fever Emergencies* (2005)



3. 'Voyeurs in bedlam?': re-materialising the audience

The anger or hysteria of Character 1 mirrors the violence which has been projected on him, as he throws it back or vents it upon the audience, and is followed by a very long pause so that its impact can be fully felt. In this context, light is used as a theatrical strategy, that is, in order to spur the audience into thinking and to achieve a certain theatrical effect and communication with it. Thus, through the use of breakdown as an explosion of anger and therefore, as a form of 'hysteria', Crimp makes the audience *experience* and measure directly on their bodies, the extent of the violence which has been projected onto that character, and which the audience had, so far, passively witnessed. Yet because of the red, enveloping light, the illusion of a closed circle of communication on the stage is shunned. Through light and through the pause, Crimp seeks to make the audience self-conscious of its own presence and interpellate it as subjects who, having been voyeurs of a spectacle, should now step in as responsible bodies who are aware of the totalitarian underside of ideological control. As Crimp himself has put it in an interview, regarding his use of the theatrical pause:

What is unique to theatre is that the performance is about the relationship of the play to the audience. It's a relationship that involves a group of people, so there's a sort of tension there, which I think you are conscious of in writing ... And you don't write silence unless you are aware of the audience, because otherwise the silence doesn't mean anything. The silence in a play is about the relationship between the actors on stage and the audience, and this is a very special and particular thing – the acknowledgement of that silence. (Devine, 2006: 90)

Through the use of light and the pause, the audience's subjects were, so to say, suddenly re-embodied as responsible, committed subjects, instead of promoting a feeling of 'absence' in terms of political engagement. It is as though, through that long, uncomfortable silence, both character 1 and the audience were suddenly made aware of their material, committed bodies, after having had them taken away by the fiction of power. The perhaps voyeuristic, previously closed-off bodies of the audience, who had at first passively been watching a character's process of victimisation, were thus rendered potentially engaged bodies of empathy and connection.

Figure4. Tanya Moodie in James Macdonald's production of *Fewer Emergencies* (2005)



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In conclusion, in Macdonald's production of *Fewer Emergencies* light is used with a whole pedagogy of resistance in mind. It is used in order to undo the boundary between stage and audience and to elicit the audience's responsibility. *Face to the Wall*, or the triptych's most experimental play, uses synesthesia with the aim not just to undo the 'fourth wall' but primarily in order to interpellate the audience as responsible subjects, making it commit to the symbolic violence portrayed on stage. The strategies of light, collapse and the pause also aim to re-subjectify its members as resistant bodies, in whom intention and voice, discourse and feeling, may not be, as they were in Character 1, divorced, thus leading to a situation of ventriloquism. Through the use of light, silence and the character's breakdown, Crimp makes the audience *experience*, by projecting the violence of coercion upon their own bodies, some of the most violent tendencies of contemporary society, while it seeks to re-embody them as necessarily empathic, open, and absorbing surfaces/bodies, which may be traversed by, instead of refracting, the other.

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