Approaching Abjection in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

Sarah Ablett

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Sarah Kane’s debut play *Blasted* (1995) starts with the male protagonist Ian stating that he has ‘shat in better places’ (2001: 3). The place to which he is referring is a ‘very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world’ (3) where he has booked in with his former lover Cate. While the setting (a hotel room in a familiar city) – and the cast of *Blasted* (a middle-aged man and a young woman) – point to the realist style of a domestic play, a genre that an audience of the 1990s would have been used to (Greig 2001: ix), Ian’s first line already signals a break from this form. Linguistically, this colloquial and derogative statement deviates from the register expected of a middle-class character like Ian (a journalist), but its thematic content, the taboo subject of defecation, is even more discomforting. Excrement is one of several phenomena and elements of human existence that Julia Kristeva conceptualizes using the term ‘abject’. In the course of Kane’s *Blasted*, other abject actions and elements appear, and with them the expected narrative order of a domestic play is increasingly upset. Realism gives way to dream logic. This becomes most apparent after the mise-en-scène turns into one of open warfare.

In this article instances of abjection in *Blasted* are investigated on the basis of Kristeva’s psychoanalytical framework developed in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984 [1974]) – where she laid down the modalities of the symbolic and the semiotic as they exist within the Symbolic Order – and its extension through the exploration of the abject in *Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection* (1982). In the simplest terms, the symbolic refers to the structured use of language, whereas the semiotic is related to a pre-verbal state.¹ My argument is that Kane’s carefully crafted movement from the social conventions of a domestic play to surreal imagery constitutes a regression from a symbolic to a semiotic order. This process can also be summarized, using the heading of the first chapter in *Powers of Horror*, as ‘approaching abjection’ (1). While the abject represents that which the infant rejects when it becomes separate from its mother and eventually enters the symbolic order via language acquisition, *Blasted* sees a reversal of this development. By facing abjection, the subject (Ian as a character, but also the audience of the performance) comes in touch with the semiotic stage of being, a pre-linguistic state and, according to Kristeva’s theory, ‘a state of crisis’ (in Morgan and Morris 1995: 21).

The postulated movement from a symbolic to a semiotic state in *Blasted* will be illustrated through an analysis of the changing manifestation of defilement and rape in the play. The realization of abjection through art and its implications for content and form will also be examined in order to show how *Blasted* can be regarded as a theatrical instantiation of abjection. The aim of this article is to emphasize the potential of contemporary drama for approaching and mediating the abject and providing potential catharsis to its audience.

¹ A distinction needs to be made between the symbolic, which is an aspect of language, and the Symbolic, which is one of Lacan’s three registers of psychic reality. For a concise summary of Kristeva’s conceptions of the semiotic, the symbolic and the abject, see Kelly Oliver (2003).
what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection. Faecal matter signifies ... what never ceases to separate from a body in a state of permanent loss in order to become autonomous, distinct from the mixtures, alterations and decay that run through it. That is the price the body must pay if it is to become clean and proper. (1982: 108)

The reference to excrement unsettles what we understand as a symbolic order (i.e., rules of social life, behavioural conduct etc.). Defecation is considered defilement and needs to be ‘jettisoned from the “symbolic system.”’ It is what escapes the social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based’ (65). What makes Ian’s statement so offensive is that instead of expressing discontent in an abstract, trite manner, as for example ‘This is a shit place’ would, it evokes a concrete image of Ian defecating, establishing a direct connection to his body’s boundaries. Faecal matter is a taboo subject because it reminds us of the ‘objective frailty of subject order’ (70). Our social system has taught us to regard it as a polluting object. ‘Excrement and its equivalents ... stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death’ (71). ‘[I]n order to gain a stable self in society, the “subject must disavow” that which is abject and thereby “part of itself”, and, as Elizabeth Grosz further explains, “[t]he ability to take up a symbolic position as a social and speaking subject entails the disavowal of its modes of corporeality, especially those representing what is considered unacceptable, unclean or anti-social’ (1990: 86).

In Blasted Ian not only talks about defection, he also appears almost obsessed with his own corporeality, which he experiences as defiled. Numerous times throughout the play he refers to himself as being unclean – ‘I stink’ (3, 6, 8, 11). He assumes that this is the reason why Cate does not want to perform oral sex on him (8). Ian also confers the idea of pollution, the abject, to foreigners symbolizing otherness and thereby endangering social identity: ‘Hate this city. Stinks. Wogs and Pakis taking over’ (4). Ian’s illness, presumably lung cancer, is also related to the idea of being polluted and can be understood as a bodily manifestation of abjection, as a kind of metaphor. Through the illness, his body mirrors his emotional interior. Kristeva explains how psychosomatic symptoms take over when the symbolic order fails to structure the subject’s world in a meaningful way: ‘We cannot express our anxieties in signs – they seem too insubstantial – the whole burden of aggressivity is borne by the body and our bodies become ill to signify that there is a conflict somewhere’ (in Morgan and Morris 1995: 26). In Powers of Horror Kristeva describes the symptom as:

[A] language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire.... In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. (1982: 11)

The confrontation with the body and its decay is vividly illustrated by Ian’s description of an operation he underwent: ‘surgeon brought in this lump of rotting pork, stank. My lung’ (11). The inside of the body appears outside of it, part of the subject becomes object. Ian’s statement concerning his illness can be construed as what Kristeva calls a ‘state of abjection, [where] the borders between object and subject cannot be maintained.... [T]he autonomy or substance of the subject is called into question’ (in Morgan and Morris 1995: 22).

What we can observe from Kane’s realization of the corporeal dimensions of abjection is a ‘joining of body and signs’, which Kristeva regards as being the ‘base of our culture’ and the root of Christianity, ‘a religion of the word, but [more importantly of] the word made flesh’ (in Morgan and Morris 1995: 26). In this regard Kane could be added to the list of avant-garde artists Kristeva mentions who ‘considered that the purpose of art should be to take up the concern of the Mass, transubstantiation, whereby what is symbolic becomes corporeal and what is corporeal becomes symbolic’ (26). One of the authors she discusses in relation to abjection is Louis-Ferdinand Céline. In his
writing she sees 'body and language being mingled, those intermediate states, those non-states, neither subject nor object, where you is alone, singular, untouchable, unsociable, discredited, at the end of the night' (Kristeva 1982: 135).

According to Kristeva, Céline achieves this effect not primarily by dealing with abject topics but by a style of writing that mirrors abjection, resulting in a 'drowning of narrative in style' (137). The same holds true for Kane's work: what Céline accomplishes by means of 'tamper[ing] with vocabulary and syntax' (137) is realized in Blasted by a 'tampering' with conventional plot structures and the use of dramatic imagery. The play offers its audience various encounters with 'the word becoming flesh': by breaking with the expected on the level of the plot structure and thereby mirroring the content that is being depicted (which defies a logical set up because it is abject) and by the realization of abject motives – first through speech, then through dramatic imagery. In the following, these mechanisms are retraced in regard to (sexual) violation.

The first time brutality is mentioned in Blasted is when Ian dictates an article about the murder of a young woman called Samantha Scrace to a fellow tabloid journalist over the phone. Here we can observe the violent and distancing effect of language, our prime mode of establishing meaning. The paper's sensationalist agenda combines violence (murder) with the sexually appealing attributes of the victim – 'beautiful redhead with ambitions of becoming a model' (Kane 2001: 12). Not only does media culture fail to combat violence, it acts violently itself. The identity and humanness of the victim seem to collapse through the spelling out of orthographical signs (which disfigures the content) and, in relation to the play's plot structure, a foreshadowing of 'sick murder rituals' and other atrocities such as rape, which are poetically designed in a way that leaves the audience much less possibility to distance themselves from its effects and implications.

This becomes evident in Scene 2 of Blasted, which opens with the morning after an actual rape indicated by a 'bouquet of flowers … now ripped apart and scattered around the room' (24). The rape took place offstage, but its dire consequences can be perceived through the protagonists' behaviour. In contrast to the case of Samantha Scrace, the audience comes closer to feeling empathy with rape victim Cate by witnessing the effects the violation has had upon her. Ian very much impersonates the 'shameless rapist' Kristeva mentions in her analysis of more abstract states of abjection. According to Kristeva, states that appear irreconcilable are experienced as repulsive: 'what disturbs identity, system order.…. The in-between, the ambiguous …, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior' (1982: 4). And Ian is not only shameless; the ambiguity of his action results, above all, from his violation of the one he claims to love. This ambivalence is also already foreshadowed in a discussion between the couple in scene one:

IAN: Cate, love. I'm trying to look after you. Stop you getting hurt.
CATE: You hurt me.
IAN: No, I love you. (Kane 2001: 17)
What stands out here is that while Ian does not show any palpable remorse through speech or behaviour, his body seems to communicate his moral ambiguity. The outbreaks of Ian’s illness, his coughing fits, exteriorize his struggle. His symptoms are strongest after the rape. ‘He begins to cough and experiences intense pain in his chest, each cough tearing at his lung…. It looks very much as if he is dying’ (24). The body seems to punish him and remind him of the fact that there is something poisonous inside him that wants to be expelled – ‘The … vomiting that protect[s] me …, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement’ (Kristeva 1982: 2).

Ian seeks to cleanse himself (and her): ‘I’m having a shower…. Want one?’ (Kane 2001: 25). By the rape Cate is defiled in Ian’s logic and thereby loses her value as a suitable girlfriend for her new partner: ‘Soiled goods. Don’t want it, not when you can have someone clean’ (52). Now, according to this reasoning, his question ‘You want a bath?’ (33) makes sense. Ian regards Cate as polluted and infected with the abject. She sees herself in a similar manner when she announces: ‘I ache…. Everywhere. I stink of you’ (33). We can also understand his utterance ‘We’re one, yes?’ (26) along these lines. This is furthermore confirmed by Cate’s change of character. After the abuse, she too takes part in abject practice by seducing and then violating Ian (31). Her transformation becomes linguistically apparent in the first line she utters after the rape, when she addresses Ian and his state of extreme pain with the word: ‘[c]unt’, thereby entering a (gender) power struggle by the use of derogatory language – a realm that had been Ian’s before (25). As a consequence she ‘begins to cough and retch’ (33) just as Ian does because of his illness. In her case, the coughing is caused by a pubic hair swallowed in the process of violation. For the first time, Cate does not decline the offer of cleansing: ‘I’m having a bath and going home…. [We hear the other bath tap being turned on]’ (35), whereby she confirms her defilement and her wish for purification.

BREAKDOWN OF THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

After Cate has become a perpetrator and part of the abject practice, the scenery of domestic crime and infection expands, like a disease that spreads from one house to a town, to a country. Now that the war has broken out between the couple, Cate looks out of the window and sees this reflected outside as well: ‘Looks like there’s a war on’ (Kane 2001: 33). Despite sporadic dealings with abjection up to this point, the main plot still adheres to the conventions of
a domestic play: man and woman in a hotel room; the conflict is that the man wants sexual intercourse and the woman does not, so the man takes her by force. What happens in the following scenes is a breaking up of these conventions. What Kristeva describes in relation to Céline’s novel *Journey to the End of the Night* (1934) can be aptly applied to the plot structure of Kane’s play:

[When narrated identity is unbearable ..., when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first. If it continues nevertheless, its make-up changes; its linearity is shattered, it proceeds in flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompletion, tangles and cuts (1982: 14).

With the entrance of the soldier and the explosion of the bomb, the symbolic order (i.e., expectations of a domestic play) is literally ‘blasted’. The effect becomes plain in the critics’ evident helplessness turning into anger and outrage at the break with conventions. Thus, one asks: ‘What war is being waged and why ... are we really in Leeds?’ (Edwards 1995), and another claims that the play knows ‘no bounds of decency, yet has no message to convey by way of excuse’ (Tinker 1995).

The apparent collapse of meaning can be explained by a movement from a privileging of the symbolic aspect of language to that of the semiotic. Because the semiotic is pre-verbal it cannot be grasped logically and cannot be adequately described in words. Here signification works differently: ‘Semiotic functioning is the nondiscursive aspect of meaning and subjectivity...’ (Beardsworth 2004: 25). The depiction of the semiotic can therefore only be approached, and art, according to Kristeva, is one of its few modes of representation (1982: 17). Abjection is what connects semiotic functioning to the symbolic order and is, at the same time, the symbolic order’s pre-condition. Kristeva relates the breakdown of the symbolic function and its manifestation in art to states of psychosis. She regards pieces of avant-garde art dealing with abjection as ‘masterful

sublimations of those crises of subjectivity’ (in Meisel 1984: 131). In Kristeva’s view the interest of artists in these topics and the presence of this kind of art ‘shows the extent of the malaise [psychosis]’ in contemporary society. She believes ‘the crisis we are living through [to be] deeper than anything since the beginning of our era, the beginning of Christianity’, because of a loss of set values and beliefs (in Morgan and Morris 1995: 27). Kane reflects this crisis most distinctly in her last play *4.48 Psychosis*, which sees an intensification of all the stylistic implications of abject writing being discussed here. *Blasted* can be seen as a precursor in this regard, in which abjection is ‘approached’ in two ways, stylistically and on the level of content, whereby the audience becomes witness to the shattering of the symbolic order and the implications for the subject.

In Scene 3 of *Blasted*, the fact that the symbolic order has been shattered becomes manifest in Ian’s first words after the bomb detonation. Through the explosion his linguistic means of structuring and controlling his surroundings by the use of derogatory language starts to collapse. He now regressively asks for his ‘Mum’ (39) and is very much at a loss without his usual frames of reference: ‘He trails off confused, and looks at the SOLDIER. “Think I might be drunk” (40). Kane justifies this break with theatrical conventions by referring to the abject logic of war: ‘War is confused and

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For an exploration of abjection in Kane’s final work, see Carolina Sánchez-Palencia Carazo (2006).
illogical, therefore it is wrong to use a form that is predictable. Acts of violence simply happen in life, they don’t have a dramatic build-up‘ (in Singer 2004: 141). In Blasted, the ambivalence, which began with Cate becoming a perpetrator, is intensified in Ian’s encounter with the soldier. When they talk about their partners, the soldier mentions that his girlfriend was violated and killed: ‘Col, they buggered her. Cut her throat. Hacked her ears and nose off, nailed them to the front door’ (47). He appeals to Ian as a journalist to end the vicious circle of abjection by bringing it back into the symbolic order: witnessing, writing it down, informing and warning people.

Some journalist, that’s your job…. Proving it happened. I’m here, got no choice. But you. You should be telling people…. Doing to them what they done to us, what good is that? At home I’m clean. Like it never happened. Tell them you saw me. Tell them … you saw me. (47–8)

Only when Ian refuses does the soldier enact upon him what his girlfriend had suffered before, cherishing her memory while he tries to avenge her by raping someone else: ‘I made love with Col. Bastards killed her, now I’m here … He kisses Ian very tenderly on the lips…. You smell like her’ (48–9). After the rape, the soldier sucks Ian’s eyes out and eats them, again, re-enacting: ‘He ate her eyes. Poor bastard. Poor love. Poor fucking bastard’ (50). Feeling pity for the man who raped his girlfriend is extremely ambivalent, an abject state that the soldier cannot bear – he commits suicide (offstage, we learn about it when Cate returns).

The soldier’s moral ambivalence is irritating to the audience. The perpetrator is clearly also a victim; he ‘is crying his heart out’ as he rapes Ian (49). This action has a twofold function within the play: it is not only a re-enactment of the way the soldier’s girlfriend was violated by others; the dramatic imagery also establishes a link to Ian’s violation of Cate.

According to Rina Kim, critics who missed the logical link between the instances of the rapes, failed to ‘recognize Kane’s theatrical imagery’ because of ‘their attempt to comprehend Blasted in the logic of reason familiar to the naturalistic form’. She claims that the second half of the play requires a ‘logic of fantasy’ (2013: 16). The play’s structure and content should therefore be analysed with focus on motives and symbols found in the dramatic imagery. Accordingly, the soldier’s entrance can be interpreted as a gruesome materialization of Cate’s earlier description of Ian’s personality: ‘You are a nightmare’ (33). At the same time the plot structure of the play progressively turns into a nightmare. Dramatic images, which cannot be connected through normative logic anymore, are forced onto the audience. ‘[T]he play collapses into one of Cate’s [fainting] fits’ as Kane herself expresses it (in Stephenson and Langridge 1997: 130), a state in-between life and death – abjection at its core.

For the audience the impossibility of determining who is victim, perpetrator or bystander becomes almost unbearable, as does simultaneously, on the level of content, Ian’s state of existence, which is again mirrored in the final collapse of form. Once more we can see how well content and form are married in Kane’s play and that her dramatic work is far from displaying a random assortment of horrific actions.

In Scenes 1 to 3, we have seen the crumbling and blasting of orders of the symbolic system through the arrival of war and the depiction of a spiral of violence in which all perpetrators are also victims. In Scene 4, Cate returns to the hotel room reporting from the war happening outside. The war scene described by the soldier previously (women handing their babies to strangers hoping that someone will take care of them) becomes present on stage as Cate carries a baby someone gave to her. In desperate attempts to hold on to manifestations of a symbolic order, Ian and Cate discuss religion and science, which represent alternative options for the subject to establish meaning and deal with contingencies. Cate tries to argue Ian out of committing suicide by appealing to religion: ‘God wouldn’t like it.’ Ian’s response is nihilistic: ‘No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing....
Everything has got a scientific explanation’ (55–6). When Cate later buries the starved baby and prays for it, Ian’s position is more ambivalent. On the one hand, he asks Cate if she would also pray for him and even indirectly asks for forgiveness, which signifies a less nihilistic attitude than he displayed earlier. On the other hand, he quickly returns to his previous stance when Cate ignores his demand, denouncing the possibility of life after death: ‘She’s [the baby is] dead…. She won’t [meet anyone who’ll do bad things], Cate, she’s dead’ (58).

In the final scene, the questioning of a symbolic order is negotiated within the character of Ian himself. While Cate goes to look for food, Ian experiences a painful form of existence where a ‘complete breakdown in language’ takes place (Kane, in Saunders 2002: 63) and the action is solely presented through dramatic images. Ian experiences a psychological crisis exemplified through bodily horror. He frantically masturbates, defecates, tries to strangle himself, cries ‘huge bloody tears’, laughs hystERICally, eats the baby and finally dies (59–60). Ian’s state appears to be a complete regression into the semiotic. It matches Kristeva’s description of the artistic manifestations of abjection in Céline as the ‘crying-out theme … of suffering horror’, which brings with it a recasting of syntax and vocabulary – the violence of poetry, and silence’ (1982: 141). In these tableaux of abject actions we find a theatrical realization of this kind of ‘silence’, as no words are spoken after the reiteration of the word ‘cunt’ (59) until Ian realizes that he is not dead and Cate returns.

This part of the final scene deserves a more detailed examination because it presents a complex interplay of the modalities of the semiotic and the symbolic. The two-sidedness of abjection and its relation to the sacred becomes explicit, as does the subject’s inherent struggle with these two orders. The motif of defecation reappears. Ian, who affirmed at the beginning of the play that he has ‘shat in better places’, now actually realizes his statement: raped, blind and alone, he defecates in the worst place imaginable, among corpses in a room destroyed by war. Defecation suggests a child-like state into which Ian has regressed. Again this is a realization of an earlier derogative comment: ‘They [babies] shit and cry. Hopeless.’ (52). At the same time we can see his desperate attempt to hold on to the symbolic order by ‘trying to clean it up with newspaper’ (59). In his most desolate state, he rips out the cross that Cate had built for the child’s burial – an aggressive act of rebellion against the religious order – and eats the baby. In addition to incest and murder, cannibalism can be regarded as the most abject action imaginable, because not only does it result in the ultimate loss of borders between subject and object, it also mars the boundary between what we consider to be human (‘civilized’) and non-human (animalistic) (Biber 2005: 3). Figuratively, however, Ian’s act can be regarded as a realization of the Last Supper as described in the Gospel of St John:

I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. (John 6: 53–6, Authorized [King James] Version)

Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier suggests that the swallowing of the baby can be read as ‘an element of hope, since the baby becomes the “holy child” who is symbolically transformed into the Host’ (84). If a psychoanalytical interpretation is applied to this scene, it becomes even more revealing. Kristeva regards transubstantiation as a cultural mechanism to overcome cannibalism:

The tie between the multiplication of loaves and the Eucharist is well known; it is established by another of Christ’s statements, this time bringing together body and bread, ‘This is my body.’ By surreptitiously mingling the theme of ‘devouring’ with that of ‘satiating,’ that narrative is a way of taming cannibalism. (1982: 118)

If we adopt this view, and, at the same time, regard Ian’s eating of the baby as incorporating the Host, we find ourselves using a circular
logic. The two-sidedness of abjection becomes fully explicit in this event, as does the subject’s inherent position between the semiotic and the symbolic. Ian dies in the child’s Christian grave and thereby, once again, participates in the symbolic order.

However, Ian’s death, and especially his sudden ‘rebirth’, constitute a significant break with this order. In *Blasted*, the inherent human struggle to come to terms with death finds its formal resonance in a climax of impossibility in regard to the theatrical realization of the dramatic text. The stage direction reads: ‘IAN dies with relief. It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.’ He comments on his situation with the word: ‘[s]hit’ (60). Because of the enigmatic and elliptic style, no dramatic build-up can save the actor from having to perform the impracticable, or the audience from being confronted with the borders of comprehension (Did Ian sleep and not die? Did he die and now experiences life after death? Were all the actions since the entrance of the soldier the content of an hallucination or dream?). In Kristeva’s view, this effect is not a sign of ‘bad form’ (1982: 37) but a reflection of the contemporary crisis of the subject, which art can only address and not resolve. When artists address this crisis, ‘[t]hey maintain a duality – on one side the most violent fragmentation and abjection, on the other, in the background, an inquiry into the state of the world.’ Thus, the spectator is asked to ‘make the connection for himself or herself’ (in Morgan and Morris 1995: 25). Kane’s understanding of the artist’s role reads almost identically: ‘what can I do other than say, well, there’s this problem and look at some of the aspects of the problem and let people make up their own minds’ (in Saunders 2002: 99).

CONCLUSION

This analysis has retraced the plot structure and content of *Blasted* in regard to abjection, and it has shown how the symbolic order, through an accumulation of abject references and practices, increasingly gives way to the pre-linguistic state of the semiotic. Drawing from Kristeva’s interpretation of Céline’s writing has proven fruitful in regard to Kane’s realization of abjection in a dramatic text. The theatre proves to be a highly suitable medium for addressing the abject because of its ability to fuse body and sign in a double sense, as has been shown in this analysis.

In conclusion it can be argued that in view of the play’s gradual and highly complex movement from the mentioning of a murder case in the tabloid press to the outbreak of all-encompassing violence, early criticism of *Blasted* that regarded the play as a ‘gratuitous welter of carnage, cannibalism … and other atrocities’ (Cross 1995) or a ‘lazy tawdry piece … without an idea in its head beyond a … desire to shock’ (Spencer 1995) seems much more absurd than the undermining of the narrative order and norms of decency, at which these articles take offence. Almost every abject phenomenon (defecation, rape, death) in the play is hinted at in statements before it finds its manifestation in real actions. Here, actors’ lines, stage directions and dramatic imagery work together to challenge the audience by excavating the seeds of violence and the existential conflicts underlying every human relationship. The play confronts the audience with realities of violence and war that are usually absorbed through the media and therefore not really felt. Through the means of theatre, one is forced to bear the unbearable and watch the unthinkable, not in order to overcome it but to embrace it as a possibility for change. ‘Therein lie the ethics of Kane’s work. She claims that ‘[i]f we experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future’, and that it is ‘crucial to … commit to memory events never experienced – in order to avoid them from happening’ (in Stephenson and Langridge 3).
1997: 133). With this statement Kane is very much in accord with the classical Aristotelian idea of catharsis, as is Kristeva, who believes in the possibility of catharsis through art, for the artist but also for the audience. The reactions of the public she describes in regard to artworks dealing with abjection account well for the negative criticism Kane received; but Kristeva also offers hope for those who are willing to confront the abject:

As for the public, they can react in two ways. There are those who repress this state of crisis, who refuse to acknowledge it, in which case they either don’t come or find the works disgusting, stupid, insipid, insignificant…. Others may be looking for a form of catharsis. When they look at these objects, their ugliness and their strangeness, they see their own regression, their own abjection, and at that moment what occurs is a veritable state of communion. (in Penwarden 1995: 23)

Kristeva’s and Kane’s shared belief in a possible catharsis through art is not the only reason why Kristeva’s psychoanalytical theory proves to be effective for the analysis of Kane’s work. It furthermore provides a theoretical approach to literature and performance that allows us to look at instances and expressions that escape the logic of (everyday) reasoning and thereby shows us not only a side of the human condition that may be uncomfortable or even unbearable but also that forces us to consider the constructedness and fragility of social order and language and our debt to the symbolic system that provides us with meaning.

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