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# ***Blasted* 1999. Sarah Kane's Body Against the Archive**

Dorota Sosnowska

## **Abstract**

The body-archive category in Polish Theatre and Performance Studies is articulated as an emancipatory tool with the potential to reclaim the history of marginalised, oppressed, and silenced groups not represented in the archive, but as I claim, it still subsumes the body under the power of identity and meaning it gains through history. Looking at one of the most important 'dead bodies' in the archive of Polish contemporary theatre – Sarah Kane's body – and the way it was present and presented to the Polish viewers, I ask if the other model of the relation between body and history is possible. I find it through the notion of trauma and plasticity inscribed in Kane's text and realised on the Polish stage in the 1999 production of *Blasted*. Reading the remains of the performance I ask how it can be read in the context of Polish political transition and how it reflects the meaning of Kane's 'new brutalism' in Polish 1990s.

## **Key words**

Sara Kane, Polish political transition, trauma, plasticity, body-archive

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The understanding that the body, especially if it is viewed as a source and a medium of different performances, holds not only specific memory but also archival power, drawn from modern Performance Studies, mainly Rebecca Schneider's (2011) and Diana Taylor's (2003) thought, became in a Polish context strictly connected to the emancipatory project of reclaiming history from nationalistic and chauvinistic discourses. Rethinking the status of the historical source, introducing the body and theories of performance into the field of history, and blurring the border between theory and practice serves to establish history as a living experience possible to be actualised in repetition and reenactment and shared via 'body-to-body transmission' (SCHNEIDER 2011: 99). The body becomes a research tool as well as a source of knowledge about past events, affects, practices, and needs.

As important as it became in theory as well as artistic practice in Poland, the concept of body-archive seems to frame a specific logic of emancipation that is not obviously but inextricably connected to the identity and its politics. This model of emancipation can be perceived as problematic, as in 1993, in one of the fundamental books for the whole field of the Performance Studies, Peggy Phelan expressed a deep distrust towards the concept of identity politics, which she understood as connected to the strategy of visibility and the false hopes for emancipation it framed. Her theory of performance was written, as she stated, '[...] against the perpetual fracturing of disciplines, specialisations, and identities progressive political and critical theory has wrought' (PHELAN 1993: 27). Searching for the theory allowing in oxymoronic gesture to grasp what is unidentified, unnamed, unmarked, she turned towards ephemerality and non-recurring character of performance. Performance theory putting forward reenactment and body-archive, undoing the singularity of the embodied gesture, is not only emancipating performance from ephemerality but, as I will show, establishing a new necessity of identity discourse and its politics. From that point of view, it seems interesting that in the Polish theatre of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the emancipatory project has been firstly formulated, the new aesthetics and theatrical language was formed with so-called brutalist dramas of Sarah Kane, in which the concept of identity, as I will also show, is questioned or abandoned. Crucial to my argument, is the knowledge that Kane's dramaturgical extreme radicalism requires such a level of presence that it makes the relation of the body and the archive impossible and obsolete although history is central for the way the embodiment is used and understood in Kane's work. That is why I find it exceptionally interesting to analyse how Kane's concepts were translated into the context of post-communist transition and what consequences it could have for the emancipatory project inscribed in Polish theatre as well as for the understanding of the relation between body and archive formulated in Poland, mainly by Dorota Sajewska, as deeply rooted in the context of theatre history and practice.

## Body-archive

Dorota Sajewska places the notion of body-archive in dialectic tension with body-memory conceptualised by Jerzy Grotowski in the 1970s. This concept based on the theatrical practice of Grotowski and rooted in the acting theories of Konstantin Stanislavski was at the same time leaning toward cultural anthropology establishing not only the power of embodied experience but also its universality. Grotowski stated:

Body-memory. It is believed that the memory is something independent from all the rest [...] It is not that the body has memory. It *is* memory. It is what needs to be done to unblock the body-memory [...] Or, perhaps, body-life? Because it surpasses memory. The body-life or body-memory dictated what needs to be done with life experiences or cycles of life experience. Or with possibilities?<sup>1</sup> (Grotowski quoted in SAJEWSKA 2019: 70)

Sajewska (2019) stresses that this idea of the relation between body and memory was based on the conviction that the corporeality is self-sufficient, does not need and does not establish any relation with documentation, traces or remains of the past and at the same time rests radically un-individualistic, establishing rather a collective body than one's own body, the collective being composed of a whole chain of ancestors and with past embodiments possible to retrieve through song and movement. That way the past becomes a linear and continuous rooting of all bodies and their memories in their relationship with the source which is a strongly metaphysical concept. What is striking for Sajewska is that Grotowski ignores the category of the archive that, as she reminds us, was popularised at that very time by Michel Foucault (1972) and his *L'archéologie du savoir* [The Archeology of Knowledge]. With Foucault the archive is understood as a system that structures all discourse and all possibilities to formulate a statement. By the same token the archive describes an oppressive rather than emancipatory character of the system it represents. But following Foucault's thought Sajewska finds the notion of document or rather anti-document that, as she reminds us, is closer to a monument 'meaning a sensual foundation, living tissue, which ought to be studied in the same manner as an archeologist studies his sources' (SAJEWSKA 2019: 72). As the author explains: 'The document therefore ought not be treated as a sign of something else, of what is represented by it. Instead, we should accept its discontinuity and study the relationships inside the document itself, thus investigating the "formal analogies" and "translations of meaning"' (SAJEWSKA 2019: 72). This is where the difference between Grotowski's and Sajewska's (after Foucault) idea of the meaning of the 'living tissue' in the relation with past appears – if for the first one the body is always pointing to something else allowing metaphysical relation with ancestors, for the former it is its shared materiality with discontinuities, entangled in a fragmentation that establishes the body's ability to actualise the past. That is why Sajewska proposes *body-archive* as a different notion to

1 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of the sources are mine.

*body-memory* drawing from Rebecca Schneider's (2011) idea of remains and a performance's ability to remain through bodies, fragmentary gestures, traces, documents, and evidence gaining the status of 'living tissue' through the performative archival practice of the researcher or artist. Echoing Schneider, Sajewska is thus interested in the reenactment and reconstruction as what enables the body-archive to act. The goal of reconceptualising the status of the body in the historical studies from what is lost, ephemeral and marked by death to what remains in the never-ending repetitions and actualisation is political. It enables us to redefine not only the valid sources of knowledge but knowledge itself and revalue practices of the marginalised, forgotten, or oppressed groups and beings as possible to recall and retrieve from the past. She states, 'The inclusion of such acts in the study of cultures and arts seems particularly important in the emancipatory perspective. It allows us to look at performance as an action in which identity, memory, and the demands of marginalised social and ethnic groups are manifested' (SAJEWSKA 2020: 167).

This political goal was interestingly formulated by Dorota Sajewska and Karol Radziszewski in the context of their work on the video-performance *Prince*. It was realised in 2013 as a part of the RE//MIX cycle organised by the well-known off-theatre Komuna Warszawa, located in Warsaw. The cycle was supposed to establish a new canon and new history of performance and visual arts in Poland. Artists were working with different media, using different tools to build a common tradition from what had inspired them and influenced their work. Working on the remix of Jerzy Grotowski's *Constant Prince* the authors encountered a serious obstacle: all the archival materials documenting the work of Grotowski and his actors are not available without special consent of the heirs holding the copyrights. The only sources to work with this past theatre were 'uncanonical' sources (like the book *Rozmowy z Teresą Nawrot. Ćwiczenia według techniki Jerzego Grotowskiego* [Conversations with Teresa Nawrot. Exercises with Grotowski's Technique] by Elżbieta Baniewicz (2012) where Teresa Nawrot – one of the Laboratory Theatre actors – discusses intimate details of Laboratory Theatre practice which is considered by the Grotowski's scholars as defamation) and the ability to repeat gestures, words, and situations. That is how the video-performance took the shape of a fake documentary in which actors replay well-known scenes and renowned people. The original materials being impossible to use, the copy and the ability to repeat became a new historical source which at the same time disclosed the discontinuities and hidden places in the official narration. Sajewska and Radziszewski named their practice a 'queering of the archive' and pointed to the transformative and non-normative character of the embodied practice. The body-archive becomes not only about a new understanding of the relation to the past but also about one's own identity. Radziszewski states:

There is also a passage to the body as an archive. I was preparing for the casting with a book by Zbigniew Cynkutis and a book by Teresa Nawrot. In both of them the 'Grotowski method' exercises are shown; [...] And suddenly this boy, Amin, appears live in front of me, completely unexpectedly, and does the figure of a cat. It works, he knows he's doing it right, energy emanates from it. It's a camera action, because I was mainly looking through the camera at

this strange contact: that he is someone's son, that he is showing something that comes alive in me. (SAJEWSKA and RADZISZEWSKI 2014)

This 'aliveness' has an erotic character as Radziszewski explains, showing that body-archive as a critical notion can be directed against the metaphysical power of ancestors as well as the oppressive character of the historical discourse which is anchored in the understanding of the body as a site of identity, drawing its emancipatory potential from that very fact. Body-archive is then a body performing an identity of the subject based on the discontinued, fragmentary, and incomplete, affective and material remains of the past which enter into complicated relations with social and political norms. The history is placed in the body-archive through the concept of identity which must be possible to conceptualise by the one who is working with that kind of archive. Without this, the body becomes a universalised idea far from the materiality and historicity that it is supposed to engender. That is why it remains strictly connected to the political emancipatory project. The body seen as a site of identity is almost necessarily anchored in the history of struggles for rights defining politically agent identities. History told from the perspective of the body-archive is a history of otherness: of women, LGBTQ, Jews, and other ethnic minorities and workers and common people, a history that is so desperately needed in today's Poland.

Sajewska underlines the goal of the body-archive: to reclaim theatre and performance as theory and body itself as a medium working outside of representation which gained its most advanced formulation in the notion of *necros* which she proposed. The author defines a 'necros' as a particular category of bodies 'located beyond the dichotomy of object and subject, living and dead, experience and mediation, action and documentation' (SAJEWSKA 2019: 427). Taken from the field of dead body studies, this concept 'gained meaning as a category that encompasses the differentiated semantic and interpretational levels of the relationship between life and death and [...] biologically and technologically reproducible matter' (SAJEWSKA 2019: 427). It is used to describe the particular agency of remains and their ability to act as a form of subjectivity influencing culture and social life. She states that the word 'necros' not only indicates the passive remains of a past event but actively leads to the new performative process. Sajewska argues:

Archived remains are treated solely as traces, as incomplete representations of the past that must be ascribed with an identity in the form of documentation to be acknowledged as a part of a given culture's social life. Fundamental to this transformation is the act of removing all doubt as to the remains' ontological status. (SAJEWSKA 2019: 432)

This process reveals itself as violence against those who are rejected from society, against those cultures that suffer oppression and, in the words of Cameroonian scholar and philosopher Achille Mbembe (2003), are denied even death as an event worth mourning. Notably, according to Mbembe, the goal of the archive is to surpass the matter of the gathered remains and to produce history as a montage of fragments,

a 'product of composition' (Mbembe quoted in SAJEWSKA 2018: 63). To counter the power of the archive over remains, Sajewska then proposes the notion of 'necroperformance', which makes it possible to study remains and documents 'outside the rule of representation through a situational, subjective, and sensual experience of matter' (SAJEWSKA 2019: 434). Necroperformance thus enables resistance against the violence of the archive by focusing on the action, situation, and networks of relationships and interactions between subjects of various ontological status. From the perspective of *necros*, history could be understood as a necroperformance happening between different bodies and different remains. But although it is directed against the power of the archive, it cannot be thought of without remains, traces, fragments, and corpses that even if emancipated from representation and status of documents, still require identification.

Entering the archive of Polish contemporary theatre and searching for the remains, traces, and fragments of the emancipatory project it was offering, especially with the concept of necroperformance in mind, one quickly finds a dead body: the dead body of British dramaturge Sarah Kane who hanged herself in a psychiatric hospital in 1999.

## Sarah Kane's body

The turning point (or rather one of the turning points) in Polish contemporary theatre history is often attributed to the premiere of Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* by Krzysztof Warlikowski in 2001 in Wrocław, Poznań, and Warsaw.<sup>2</sup> As Joanna Krakowska stated, *Cleansed* was a spectacle introducing non-normative bodies and sexualities into the public sphere offering an important point of reference for emancipation in Poland (KRAKOWSKA 2019: 133). Grzegorz Niziołek summarising the heated debate around this spectacle, writes that it was read as anti-bourgeois provocation directed against social hypocrisy. The author states:

It was hard not to get the impression that the performance allowed for the articulation of emotions, prejudices and attitudes relating not only to the sphere of sexuality. It was read (not always consciously) as a call for the creation of a new social identity and a readiness to confront postmodern Western culture, as well as the sources of its suffering – in a sphere completely free from the pressure of traditional patterns of Polish culture. It is this last motif, affirming the experience of being uprooted, that gave the reception of the performance (and the dispute around it) a powerful source of energy. (NIZIOŁEK 2008: 89)

Niziołek links that reaction to Warlikowski's performance and Kane's text to the processes of political, social, and cultural transition in Poland which began in 1989 with the fall of communism. 'The argument about the *Cleansed* touched on this very

<sup>2</sup> It was a co-production of the Wrocław Contemporary Theatre (prem. 15. 12. 2001), Polish Theatre in Poznań (prem. 9. 1. 2002), Variety Theatre in Warsaw (prem. 18. 1. 2002), Hebbel Theatre in Berlin, and Theorem-European Commission for Culture.

issue: it was a question about the depth and irreversibility of the transformations experienced for more than a decade now,' Niziołek states (NIZIOŁEK 2008: 89). In 2002 Grzegorz Jarzyna, at that time the artistic director of Teatr Rozmaitości [Variety Theatre] in Warsaw, where Warlikowski staged his spectacles including *Cleansed*, directed *4.48 Psychosis* – the last of Kane's plays, published after her death. Critics saw it as a continuation of Warlikowski's work a second act of the transition drama marked by new brutalism.

The fundamental difference lies in the way the actors' physicality is treated and used. Warlikowski took the performance to the limits of intimacy, forcing everyone to overcome their embarrassment and thus opening new gates of perception. In Jarzyna's case, the carnality gives way to the poetry of the text. The theatrical effect is weaker, less shocking. For me, *4.48 Psychosis* is the completion of *Cleansed*, the second act of the play, in which we fall into the abyss of sadness, losing the remnants of the rays extracted from *Cleansed*. (GRUSZCZYŃSKI 2002)

The place of Sarah Kane's dramaturgy in the history of Polish theatre was sealed after the premiere of Jarzyna's spectacle. In that vein Roman Pawłowski – famous theatre critic and propagator of the young theatre in Poland – presented her in 2002 to the readers of the *Wysokie obcasy* [High Heels], a weekly supplement of the biggest daily journal *Gazeta Wyborcza*, addressed mainly to women:

She recorded the evils that are so plentiful in the world that people have stopped noticing them at all. She saw them in the bright spotlight. She suffered from mental illness and was treated for depression. After her suicide, *The Times* placed her in the pantheon of tragically dead artists alongside Dean, Monroe, Joplin, and Cobain. (PAWŁOWSKI 2002)

Born in 1971, she was 28 when she died. Her career lasted four years. She wrote five plays: *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, *Cleansed*, *Crave*, and *4.48 Psychosis* arousing outrage and horror when staged around the world and qualified as in-her-face or (more commonly in Poland) new brutalist drama.<sup>3</sup> Pawłowski continues:

In them she described scenes of rape and violence that no one before her dared to show in the theatre. Compared to her dramas, the tabloid press, and live television coverage of crime scenes seem like an innocent pastime. One play contains scenes of homosexual rape and cannibalism. In another, a mob lynches the main character by cutting off his genitals and frying them on a grill. In yet another, a psychopathic murderer amputates a young homosexual's tongue, arms, and legs, and slits his partner's throat. Stigmatised as a scandalist with scenes of barbaric atrocities, Sarah Kane only received recognition after her death. (PAWŁOWSKI 2002)

3 Other important writers from this generation include Mark Ravenhill and Antony Neilson; see Aleks Sierz (2001).



Only then was she listed among best 20<sup>th</sup> century authors like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Edward Bond. Yet, the most important scene for Pawłowski, with which he opens his text and seals the Polish reception of Sarah Kane's work, is placed in the psychiatric hospital of London's Kings College, where Sarah Kane was admitted on 18 February 1999 and found dead two days later. 'She hung herself from a hook on the toilet door, on a shoelace pulled from her own athletic shoes. She had an hour and a half to do it, which is how long she was left unattended,' he writes (PAWŁOWSKI 2002). This violent scene opening the whole story, becoming in Pawłowski's narration the primal scene of Kane's theatre<sup>4</sup> is establishing her dead body as *necros* triggering a new performative process in the shape of the turn of centuries in-her-face theatre. This dead body is impossible to distinguish from the violent imagery in her texts. As such it becomes an active remain, an agent that exists outside of binary categories of life and death or subject and object.

What is striking though, is that in the case of Sarah Kane and her theatre this operation of framing the impact of her suicide and her corpse as triggering a necro-performance flies in the face of her resistance to biographical readings of her plays. As Joelen Armstrong in the book *Cruel Britannia* reminds her readers:

When Kane stated in her last wishes that there be no 'biographies', her reasoning may have been motivated by what Grieg assesses as her resistance to identificatory labels: 'she hated labels, especially those that defined her by gender or sexuality' (Hattenstone 29). As woman, and lesbian, in a predominantly male professional environment, Kane's fear of being reduced to a specific label is a valid concern, despite being contrary to contemporary concerns of identity politics that often seeks to foreground difference such as sex and gender. (ARMSTRONG 2015: 232)

Nevertheless, I agree with Pawłowski that the dead body is crucial in Sarah Kane's theatre, but I argue that it is a different kind of death that enables the body to reveal itself as a site of history. What is more, in my opinion, it is not the archive that frames this model of embodiment. The key to Kane's understanding of the theatrical body seems to be strictly connected to violence. Asked by Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge if there is a level at which a violence in theatre can be overdosed by a viewer Kane responded that it can be overdosed in real life and a real choice is whether to represent it or not. She added:

If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future, because experience engraves lessons on our hearts through suffering, whereas speculation leaves us untouched. And anyone – politician, journalist, artist – who attempts to give people that imaginative experience, faces defensive screams that it is too much from all sectors of the artistic and political spectrum. It is crucial to chronicle and commit to memory events

4 I use the term 'Kane's theatre' and not dramaturgy consciously to mark that I refer to her concept of new brutalist theatre and not only plays.

never experienced – in order to avoid them happening. I would rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life. And I would rather risk defensive screams than passively become part of a civilization that has committed suicide. (STEPHENSON and LANGRIDGE 1997: 134)

Kane's theatre is not anchored in the past and triggered by the remains of what has come before. It is not an operation on the archive although its aim is connected to embodied memory. It is rather open to what is not there and what never should happen. What is especially interesting is that the theatrical mechanism of 'engraving lessons on hearts through suffering' (STEPHENSON and LANGRIDGE 1997: 134) that Kane describes, can be understood as inducing a traumatic experience that changes body and memory of the one who goes through it forever, introducing the radical break which reformulates the meaning of recognisable and fixed identity. As Catherine Malabou (2012) in her essay on destructive plasticity states, sometimes the flow of life, from the beginning to its end, understood as a process of becoming who one is, 'gradual existential and biological incline, which can only ever transform the subject into itself' (MALABOU 2012: 1) can be disturbed.

As a result of serious trauma, or sometimes for no reason at all, the path splits and a new, unprecedented persona comes to live with the former person, and eventually takes up all the room. An unrecognisable persona whose present comes from no past, whose future harbours nothing to come, an absolute existential improvisation. (MALABOU 2012: 1–2)

If the relation between body and history in Kane's theatre is traumatic (see ARMSTRONG 2015) than it can be read through the category of destructive plasticity which allows us to see the body and embodiment outside of the rule of identity, in a paradoxical, violent, and cruel act of emancipation.

Polish reception of Sarah Kane's dramaturgy, oscillating around her dead body and establishing an emancipatory discourse of identity using her plays, seems to go against the potential of destructive plasticity. The necroperformance of Kane's remains on Polish stage seems to cover rather than uncover the trauma inscribed in her texts although, as Niziolek was pointing out, this is exactly the great suffering that was so moving for the public experiencing the condition of being 'uprooted' by the political transition of the times. This relation between new brutalism and Kane particularly and Polish post-communist experience was in my opinion established earlier, in 1999 with a first production of Kane's text in Poland. It was *Blasted* by Towarzystwo Teatralne [Theatrical Society], an off-theatre funded by Paweł Wodziński and Paweł Łysak in 1998.<sup>5</sup> In 1999 they staged Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* in Teatr Rozmaitości – a spectacle that provoked heated debate and protests from the right-wing local politicians, a reaction that led to it being withheld from the repertoire for some time. Nevertheless, that same year Towarzystwo Teatralne staged Sara Kane's *Blasted*. This time they did

5 Łysak and Wodziński in 2000 took over the position of two directors at Teatr Polski in Poznań and enabled, as co-producer, the production of Warlikowki's *Cleansed* and Jarzyna's *4.48 Psychosis*.

not work with any institutional theatre and chose a space in the ruined Norblin factory situated in Warsaw's city centre. Wodziński explained in the interview:

We chose this old hall not by chance. It was destroyed, almost like after an explosion, after an air raid. The second reason is prosaic – we had no room. But Norblin's halls, although very beautiful, have one disadvantage. They are not heated and therefore we will play here only in October. [...]

Our proposal is not: we made *Shopping and Fucking*, we made some noise and we disappeared. The process of familiarising the audience with difficult subjects will not be easy, we are aware of that, we try. Our proposals are meant to open the theatre to social issues, sometimes painful ones. (WYŻYŃSKA 1999)

Despite the fact that this spectacle was a breakthrough event introducing new theatricality to Poland it is rather modestly represented in the archives. But in a couple of photos, reviews, and interviews with artists, in the crude and radical character of the production registered by those documents, in the strong affective reactions it triggered, I find the possibility to grasp a model of embodied history that is crucially important to understand the experience of new brutalist theatre and Polish political transition.

## **Blasted**

Beata Bandurska in her talk with Krystyna Duniec (JANUSZANIEC 2014) held in frames of the Hypatia scientific project conceived as an effort to create sources for researching the herstory of Polish theatre, describes her work on the role of Cate in *Blasted* from 1999. She says that Kane's text was like nothing she had ever read or seen in theatre, and she knew it would require a very different strategy. 'This was a documentation, in real time, of [...] a total destruction,' says Bandurska of Cate (quoted in JANUSZANIEC 2014). She thought she would not be able to reach for such experiences although she really wanted to do so. 'I was afraid that I will play it, that I will show off with this role, I will try to impress' (Bandurska quoted in JANUSZANIEC 2014). She makes clear that she was aware that attempting to play Cate attractively in that ruined factory building with a hole in the ceiling would be a disaster. She starts to describe the process from the act of cutting her hair:

I went to a hairdresser. I had long blond hair 'til that moment. She told me it will look ugly. If you have had long hair for such a long time, short hair won't style well. I said I don't have to look pretty. I remember that I walked on the street and looked at myself in car windows and I really looked bad. It's fantastic that I did it, I thought. (Bandurska quoted in JANUSZANIEC 2014)

This small, rebellious act against socially accepted femininity is one of the little impulses, scraps, physical acts, fragments, and trinkets that allowed her to construct Cate

not as a theatrical role but rather as a performative presence on the stage. Pawłowski describes her acting in his review:

Dramatic in her is the ordinary and mundane, the gesture with which she fixes her blouse, hugs her face on the hotel bed, hunts for a yellow cheese sandwich. But every now and then a shiver runs through this innocent figure, a girl stutters, laughs nervously, has an epileptic attack. Then hell enters everyday life. (PAWŁOWSKI 1999)

'Hell' is how the author describes her body, constructed, or revealed with the help of the performative tactics, becoming a site of war.

The story of how Kane wrote this play was recalled many times, pointing to the abrupt intervention of the Balkan war into the script of the realistic, Ibsen-like drama. It is worth recalling it once more:

At some point during the first couple of weeks of writing [in March 1993] I switched on the television. Srebrenica was under siege. An old woman was looking into the camera, crying. She said, 'please, please, somebody help us. Somebody, do something.' I knew nobody was going to do a thing. Suddenly, I was completely uninterested in the play I was writing. What I wanted to write about was what I'd just seen on television. So, my dilemma was: do I abandon my play (even though I'd written one scene I thought was really good) in order to move onto a subject I thought was more pressing? Slowly, it occurred to me that the play I was writing was about this. It was about violence, about rape, and it was about these things happening between people who know each other and ostensibly love each other. (Kane quoted in SIERZ 2001: 100–101)

The play starts in a luxurious hotel room in Leeds – in the 1999 Warsaw production only signalled by a simple bed and a little table in IKEA style placed on the stage, where Ian (Krzysztof Bauman) – a middle aged white man and journalist involved in the shady business of paid killing – has invited Cate, a young woman from the lower class with whom he was once romantically involved (Fig. 1).

He wants her company because he has learned that he is terminally ill with cancer. She comes but does not want to have sex with him, her refusal ending with a violent rape. But this realistic scenery is destroyed with the second part of the production which starts with a bomb hitting the hotel room. Suddenly Ian and Cate find themselves in the middle of a war. The soldier (Robert Więckiewicz) who appears in the room repeats violent acts of rape and torture he saw performed on his fiancée, on Ian. The soldier sucks Ian's eyes out and commits suicide. Further atrocities involve Cate bringing a baby to care for, who dies and gets buried by her, Ian digging up the grave and eating the baby and then putting himself in the grave instead, which was one of the most shocking scenes for the viewers. The play ends with Cate, blood dripping between her legs, returning to half buried Ian with food. He offers her a thank you – the last words of *Blasted*.



**Fig. 1:** Towarzystwo Teatralne, *Blasted*. Beata Bandurska, Krzysztof Bauman.  
© Jacek Barcz, 1999. Courtesy of the author.

Polish critics, echoing British ones from the 1995 premiere in The Royal Court Theatre (dir. James Macdonald), wrote:

The heroine's epileptic seizures at the slightest suggestion of a love act, the eating out of eyes [...] the stories of murdering previously raped victims, the violence, aggression, and finally the eating of a recently buried infant – all this at a certain point becomes simply irresistibly funny. [...] *Blasted* is not a drama, but a record of the stream of a sick consciousness. A thing to be described in the sick note, but not worth staging. The performance of *Blasted* evokes yet another feeling – and that is embarrassment at having participated in such an event. (MOŚCICKI 1999)

This laughter, shame, embarrassment, disgust present in most of the reviews point to the affective work of object. The spasm, characteristic scratching at the back of the throat and then the contraction in the stomach, abdomen, and all the intestines, increased perspiration and heartbeat that is described as abjection and that we can try to push back with laughter signals something, as Julia Kristeva says, 'that I do not recognise as a thing' (KRISTEVA 1982: 126).

When I am invaded by abjection, this torsade made of effects and thoughts to which I give this name, does not have, strictly speaking, any definable object. The object is not an object in front of me that I name or imagine. [...] The object shares only one quality with the object – that of being opposed to I. But if, in being opposed the object offers me equilibrium within the fragile web of a desire for meaning which in fact makes me indefinitely and infinitely homologous to it, the object, on the contrary, as fallen object, is what is radically excluded, drawing me towards the point where meaning collapses. (KRISTEVA 1982: 125)

The corpse is one of the most powerful examples of the concept of abject. It 'throws the identity of the one who is confronted by it into still greater turmoil, like some fragile and fallacious event' (KRISTEVA 1982: 127). The odour of death, its presence in a corpse is radically different to the work of death's signifiers. It is impossible to understand. The corpse 'indicate[s] to me what I keep permanently at a distance in order to live' (KRISTEVA 1982: 127) – limits of my condition as a living being. This seems especially important in Kristeva's thought: only in relation to this limit as she states, 'my body detaches itself as a living being' (KRISTEVA 1982: 127). The body reveals itself in abjection devoid of meaning, signification, discourse, and identity. In this moment of spasm and disgust the existence of the body is suddenly confirmed. When on the stage of *Blasted* all of the atrocities are shown (e.g., Fig. 2), what is staged is in fact the abjection: 'immoral, murky, devious, and suspect: a terror which is dissimulated, a smiling hatred, a passion which abandons the body instead of inflaming it, a man in debt who sells you, a friend who stabs you in the back' (KRISTEVA 1982: 128) or as Jacqueline Rose could add, the war – troubling the very concept of reality and putting the abrupt end to possibility of truth that could be the source of knowledge and meaning (see ROSE 1993).

From this perspective the embodiment installed in *Blasted* as subjected to the work of abject, revealing the limits of meaning and aiming at establishing a radical presence, is at the same time historical through its ability to actualise the war. But historicity is not what makes the past present once again in the reenactment of violence. Through the mechanism of abjection, the war is not signified or represented, replayed, or acknowledged – it is experienced. The bomb hitting the hotel room is exactly what it is – not a metaphor nor an archival remain. It shreds the language, theatre, and discourse to infect with abject and put an end to the meaning. In violence it makes bodies emancipate from language and, as limits of the human condition, embody war. The important thing is that at the same time it is not the war as general notion but the historically specific event invading present reality through media. The war is not something in the past, it is not something one can anchor one's identity in or recall from the body-archive. It is real, it is present, and it is something inscribed in the very embodiment.

In 1999 Warsaw, the staging of *Blasted* in the ruined space of a closed factory, translated that paradigmatic scene of capitalism into the war zone. Given the fact that the war in the Balkans was triggered by the same global political impulses as that which caused the transition in Poland, one could say that with that spectacle the dark, violent, abject side of transition was, even if unconsciously for its viewers, revealed.



**Fig. 2:** Towarzystwo Teatralne, *Blasted*. Beata Bandurska, Krzysztof Bauman.  
© Jacek Barcz, 1999. Courtesy of the author.

The bomb was not hitting a luxurious hotel room, the destruction and chaos were present in that spectacle from the very beginning making the first part as (un)real as the second one.

Cate performed by Bandurska with short, blond hair, in light-colored straight pants, too large and hanging on the belt and short button-down sweater, wearing flat, black leather shoes with laces looks like she was taken from some post-apocalyptic world (Fig. 3). Her eyes pierce through the observer as they take in photos from the spectacle. In one scene, that of her rape, she lies on the floor, on her side, unconscious but tight with visibly tense muscles, while Ian is violently undressing her. Her small, naked body perfectly captures the trauma. In the above-mentioned interview with Duniec she says:

I invited a couple of my friends to see the spectacle in Norblin factory. And then I heard that one of my friends said to the other that after this role I won't be able to recover for a long time because it seemed that it was not me... that someone else did such a work. [...] People could think that it was a kind of hysterical or unconscious dive into the material. But it was really hard work. (Bandurska quoted in JANUSZANIEC 2014)



**Fig. 3:** Towarzystwo Teatralne, *Blasted*. Krzysztof Bauman, Beata Bandurska, Robert Więckiewicz. © Jacek Barcz, 1999. Courtesy of the author.

Bandurska, cutting her hair, working as a volunteer in the community care centre, and gathering things, gestures, and clothes that seemed like Cate's, was herself going through a change. She states that it was a liminal experience for her as an actor. In the end she is not playing a role, but she appears on the stage as a different person, as someone else – even if it is, like she underlines, carefully constructed. This feeling of strangeness registered by her friend points to the way the abject framing of Cate's and others presence on stage in the form of epileptic attacks, rape, war, and all other atrocities is triggering a traumatic experience leading to a radical change, metamorphosis, or to return to Malabou's term – 'work of destructive plasticity' (MALABOU 2012).

Pointing to the fact that plasticity is radically different than elasticity, and its work is creating new forms also through irreversible destruction, Malabou aims at the phenomenology of existence created through trauma, pain, neurological damage, illness, depression, and nearness of death that remains

avoided, glimpsed often enough in fantasy literature but never connected to reality, neglected by psychoanalysis, ignored by philosophy, nameless in neurology, the phenomenon of pathological plasticity, a plasticity that does not repair, a plasticity without recompense or



scar, one that cuts the thread of life in two or more segments that no longer meet. (MALABOU 2012: 6)

The metamorphosis it offers is absolute. Not only the mask, the costume, the appearance, the form of existence changes, but a new existence appears that has nothing to do with the old one.

Identity abandoned, dissociated again, identity that does not reflect itself, does not live its own transformation, does not subjectivize its change. Destructive plasticity enables the appearance or formation of alterity where the other is absolutely lacking. Plasticity is the form of alterity when no transcendence, flight or escape is left. The only other that exists in this circumstance is being other to the self. (MALABOU 2012: 11)

What is crucial for Malabou is that this possibility of suddenly becoming someone else, of losing the contact with one's own past and identity is always present in every existence. It is not exceptional, even if it is rare. The phenomenon of plasticity is present in everyday life making the perspective of radical metamorphosis part of living experience. And although theatre, just like literature, can only offer a glimpse of such a radical change and existential form alien to subjectivity, this thought has crucial consequences for understanding the embodiment and relation between body and history that I aim at formulating here. In this perspective the way the body records experience and particularly traumatic experience is through an irreversible change that makes it different and transformed. The only way the continuity between past and present is maintained is through the identity and its uniform and fixed character. If then the body becomes a site of history, a focal point, like it happens when abject appears, then it materialises as a work of destructive plasticity that breaks with the past instead of replaying it or actualising it. I argue that history was not past in *Blasted* but rather a constant possibility of reaching the end of present and actively transform the future without any way to return, that is embedded in the existential condition of the body. That is why even such an intimate and small gesture like cutting long, blond hair, that became so important for Bandurska, can trigger plastic destruction, and become historical in Kane's theatre happening outside of the rule of identity in the space of body detached from meaning and appearing through abject as a living being. Therefore, the actress remembers liminality and freedom of this gesture. This is the path of emancipation that remains overlooked, obscured by the identity struggles and logic of archive ontologically grounding the body as (anti)document in constant connection to its past.

## Impossible archive

Two famous Polish productions of Sarah Kane's texts strongly exploited the emancipatory potential of nakedness, sexuality, and closeness but also of the physiology, meatiness, and horror inscribed in her work. They paved the path for a new kind of Polish theatre – politically and socially engaged, undertaking difficult subjects, and practicing identity emancipation. The way Warlikowski's and Jarzyna's spectacles were received and remembered establishes a strong relation between the body as a site of identity that makes it politically agent. As I was trying to show, the concept of body-archive, anchored in anthropology of culture and in artistic practice, is also framed by the recognition of emancipatory potential of the body read through identity and its historical struggles. But looking at Kane's texts and her archive as well as first production of her play prepared in the time of political transition in Poland, I wanted to show a different model of embodiment, showing possibly different meanings and dynamics, breaking with the discourse of identity and in consequence showing the body not as a remain anchored in the past but as a constant possibility of the end of the present time. I also read it as an emancipatory project although one of a radically different nature: it is an emancipation of the body from the meaning, an emancipation from the past, an emancipation from progress, an emancipation to a destruction, and a transformation that one does not recover from. This project inscribed in Kane's dramas could be seen as interestingly valid for the times of post-communist political transition: time of a radical and violent change.

As Croatian scholar Boris Buden (2012) shows, there is a confusion around transition as a notion that stems from the fact that, as a term it comes from Western Political Studies and was coined to describe changes of political systems in the South American countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Buden writes, 'Political studies were always looking at the cases of regime changes from retrospective. They were trying to draw their conclusions from the historical experience *ex post*' (BUDEN 2012: 34). But in the case of Eastern Europe, the notion of transition coined by liberal transition studies scholars and politicians was no longer used to describe political changes but rather project them. Buden further states, 'The political process of transition is predetermined this time. Its purpose is clear. It is to adopt a global capitalist system along the lines of Western liberal democracy' (BUDEN 2012: 35). The logic is clear: the communist system with its past, politics, and ideology is bad; the only possible direction is capitalism, free market, and liberal politics. The path is also very well known, and it should repeat the path of western countries. To 'be like in the West' is the definition of, by the same token impossible, transition.

Reflection on the failed post-communist project and constructed, teleological and oppressive rather than an experiential and emancipatory notion of transition leads Buden to the attempt of building another narration about lived through changes. He asks, what has actually happened with post-communist societies? Referring to the post-foundational social theory, he states that no society has real fundamentals but historically changing imageries that coalesce to form them. So called 'void signifiers', in the form

of Nation, freedom, revolution, or simple order play a crucial part in society building and its politics. As Buden states,

There will still be attempts to build a society on something, which are doomed to failure in advance. It is precisely these attempts that form the foundation of society; however, they always elude us and will never be finally established – society cannot be justified completely and once and for all. [...] Which of these [political, cultural, ideological] figures are hypostasised as the basis of society in a particular historical situation depends solely on the effect of real political clashes, and thus the hegemony established as a result of those clashes. (BUDEN 2012: 69)

After the fall of communism, new fundamentals must be established and in most cases they are not, contrary to the hopes of western observers, liberal and capitalist values, but nationalism and religion. The author comments that 'it did not raise any questions about the historical mission and ideological supremacy of liberal democratic capitalism. On the contrary, it only reinforced its claim to power' (BUDEN 2012: 70). It has resulted in the constant need for correction in the democratic order of the 'new' Europe.

However, before the new fundamentals appeared in the social and political consciousness of the East, the end of communism opened a crack and society was 'hanging on the edge' (BUDEN 2012: 71). This moment is for Buden defined not by politics (a set of rules, institutions, political parties) but by 'the political' – the experience of having one's own society fundamentals questioned. The 1989–1990 breakthrough opened an abyss resulting in the 'historical crisis of the social fundamentals' (BUDEN 2012: 72) allowing 'the political' to pour into the sphere of politics marking this historical turn as a beginning of the epoch of 'post-foundationalist condition' in which the search for the common social basis is at the same time necessary and futile. This is the real meaning of transition which describes the moment between the rebuttal of the old fundament and the construction of the new one. This is also the moment of 'the political', which is experienced as a loss of society. Buden proceeds to show how this situation, how this specific historical moment creates a subject, called after Paolo Virno, the one 'not-feeling-at-home-anywhere' (Virno quoted in BUDEN 2012: 74), who lost the support of society being also far away from the 'substantial community' which consisted of repeatable habits and customs. As a result, the uncanny state of 'not-feeling-at-home-anywhere', builds into an experience of existential dread because

the community itself is a response to a feeling in which the fear of a concrete danger is manifested, such as unemployment, impoverishment in old age, illness or simply the uncertain future of children. It is a fear that is experienced within a community, that is, within established, stable, and familiar forms of life and social relations [...]. But outside, outside the community, this fear loses its concrete and well-defined causes and becomes omnipresent, unpredictable, and permanent. In short: outside the community, fear becomes dread. (BUDEN 2012: 76)

New brutalist drama in Poland might be seen as addressing this feeling of dread and framing 'the political' as an existential experience. In *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis* 'the political' that Buden refers to, can be seen as translated to politics – especially in the form of identity politics. In *Blasted* from 1999, the great abyss opened up by the fall of communism and the lack of social fundaments seemed to be directly staged as crude abject, as embodied horror, as destructive war causing the spasms of disgust. From this perspective the reading of the model of embodiment in its connection to history and through the concept of destructive plasticity offers another meaning to the transition experience. As radical and traumatic change it introduces new 'existential improvisation' (MALABOU 2012: 1) that for a moment remains outside of politics, in the zone of the dreadful but free of oppressive politics. In this abyss a faint emancipatory path appears that in the acts of radical, plastic metamorphosis seeks for radical freedom. It is possible to follow by the recognition of the body and its existence as a detached living being that is enabled by the abject. This is the history inscribed in bodies, transforming them, and creating not the archive but rather its impossibility, as their present comes from no past and their future harbors nothing to come.

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