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Affective Orientation in Sarah Kane's **4.48 Psychosis**

Álvar Menéndez Cámara

Abstract

This article explores the affective resonance of Sara Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* and its socio-political implications. Through the works of Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant it proposes a theoretical framework that focuses on affective objects and how they shape the affective orientation of the text. It also studies the figure of the *affect alien* and the notion of *impasse* to analyse how they define the affective environment of the play. Finally, the corporeality of affect is taken into account to better understand how Kane's text connects with the reader, affectively orienting them alongside its protagonist in order to reinforce the critique guided by the narrative voice.

Key words

Sarah Kane, Affect Theory, trauma, affective objects, *impasse*

Sarah Kane's masterful use of violence and visceral imagery gives her work a powerful emotional layer that allows the plays to directly connect to the audience. It is a connection that relied more directly on rather raw violence in her early texts and that eventually moved the focus to the introspective aspect of emotions like pain or anger in the last works. Thus, the exploration established in *4.48 Psychosis* allowed Kane to delve into the emotional impact of mental disorders, giving the text a profound affective layer that revolves around alienation, anhedonia, and pain. The play consists of a series of fragments that appear to be thoughts on the mind of a depressed person through pain, loneliness, and medical appointments, slowly guiding the audience to the final decision: the character's suicide.

This analysis employs a theoretical framework established around Affect Theory and, particularly, the works of Sara Ahmed (2010) and Lauren Berlant (2011), whose conception of the idea of affect and notions like 'promise of happiness' and 'cruel optimism' can help understand how affect is articulated through the body and guided by affective objects. Within this context, the configuration of figures like friends or doctors as those affective objects can help elucidate how the play orients its affective presentation to gain the empathy of the audience and strengthen the sociopolitical weight. This article claims that the focus on the relationship among negative affects, alienation, and the bodily disposition of affect can help develop a framework for the analysis of Kane's text and characterise her work.

The case of *4.48 Psychosis* is particularly relevant for the analysis since the work is known for the strong connection of emotion and pain, and the representation of the mind could provide a link with the affective experience of trauma. The play has already been studied for how it connects its 'rupture' form with the breakings of the mind (see e.g., MATAMALA 2014: 827; OVASKA 2016: 4–6) and where its language can be traced to corporeality and a sensory engagement (CAMPBELL 2005: 90). Thus, there is a strong presence of an affective reading of Kane's play in the critical work around it that can be extended further. On the other hand, the affective study of theatre opened up a wide research field to investigate deeper into audience and text, and this field has already yielded interesting analysis (see CAMPBELL 2005: 94) on Kane's linguistic devices and how they affect the audience and invoke the spectator's sensory engagement. Similarly, the works of Ahmed and Berlant have also been applied in the study of theatre (see e.g., FISHER 2018; REID 2018). For instance, Fragkou (2021: 128) follows their approach about affective imprints and atmospheres to analyse the affective implications of theatre and performance as well as how the embodiment of affect and the staging of *affect aliens* (*sensu* AHMED 2010: 49) reveals important political implications in the texts. Thus, it is within this context that this article aims at providing a new perspective on the affective disposition of *4.48 Psychosis*, placing a particular emphasis on affective objects, the bodily orientation and the connection between affect and happiness or its absence in order to understand how the play guides the affective orientation of the reader influencing the sociopolitical critique of the text.

Reading affect in theatre

Affect Theory has undergone a wide expansion throughout the 20th century, branching out and generating a rich critical framework with which to study the emotional response, the affective state of narration, and a whole array of embodied experiences of emotion. These theories (e.g., AHMED 2010; BERLANT 2011; MASSUMI 2002) can also be applied to theatrical and performance studies, where they can help provide new insights into the connections between performers and the audience, and the affective resonance of text, body, and stage. Tait (2021: 13) synthesises the current approach to theatre studies from the Affect Theory perspective stating that '[a]ffect has become a central concept in the analysis of what is being sensorily and bodily felt and thought in theatre and performance'. This idea is essential to understand a double analysis that affect offers regarding theatre: 'feeling and thought' can be linked to both the text being represented, and to the effect it has on the audience. This emphasis on the spectator has political as well as aesthetic implications. As Pais (2015: 147) observes, through her use of Teresa Brennan's theories on the transmission of affect, '[it] allows us to think of spectator's participation both as a social and an aesthetic process, as an intensification of the circulation of affect that impacts on performers on stage'. The role of the audience is in a constant focus when reading theatre from an affective perspective, which which, in turn, has political consequences. Fenshman (2016: 55) proposes the concept of 'affective spectatorship' to reflect on the aesthetic and political implications of the affective relationship and reinforces the idea that 'affects [...] play their part in the concatenation of theatre images producing qualitative changes in an individual emotional state'. An implication between the individual and the public shows how the effect of affect extends to a broader and more political side.

Taking into consideration these affective possibilities, such a reading can be relevant for works such as Sarah Kane's, which have been identified for their vivid violence and their ability to provoke and to generate discomfort in the audience. Her plays manifest a continuous search for the heightened effect on the audience that brings the relevance of affect and emotion to the foreground. It is important to note here that the distinction between emotion and affect is a complex question within Affect Theory and this discussion will follow Ahmed's view on the connection between affect and emotion:

[...] thinking through affect as 'sticky'. Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects. My argument that affect is a form of stickiness contrasts with Brian Massumi's¹ work, which suggests that affects are autonomous and distinct from emotions. [...] I think that the distinction between affect/emotion can under-describe the work of emotions, which involve forms of intensity, bodily orientation,

1 Ahmed proposes this connection as a response to Brian Massumi (2002), whose work establishes a difference between affect and emotion, with emotion being a 'qualified intensity' with a sociolinguistic fixing, while affect is an 'intensity' and is embodied in autonomic reactions (MASSUMI 2002: 24–25, 28).

and direction that are not simply about 'subjective content' or qualification of intensity (AHMED 2010: 230).

Ahmed thus reassesses the connection between affect and emotion, considering that they are cohesive and adhesive and opposing the idea of affect as autonomous. Even before being affected, before affect is embodied, there is a predisposition to affect that implies places and objects already have an affective value (AHMED 2010: 230). With this connection in mind, it is noticeable how most of the emotions that appear through Kane's plays converge towards the idea of pain and the attempt to overcome a painful experience, which has also pushed forward the approach of trauma studies to her work (see MATAMALA 2014: 201) with an aim to reflect on how painful events can exceed one's expectations. Kane's texts show how the excesses of emotions affect the characters and, consequently, how that can and cannot be represented by language and how affection reaches the audience. Thus, approaching Kane's plays from the affective framework becomes a powerful tool with which to analyse both her reception and the emotional link her work establishes with the spectators.²

It is not only important to focus on these objects and how they generate and guide affect, but also to pay attention to the idea of orientation and how it is shaped by the surrounding affect. This idea allows us to structure the analysis around the affective objects and how they guide the text. At the same time, sharing an affective orientation becomes essential to Ahmed's concept of affective experience, and it is an intrinsic part of her definition of happiness (AHMED 2010: 24). Thus, the affective experience becomes even more relevant in theatre performance when when the characters and the audience begin to share the same orientations. Following this framework, Ahmed (2010: 21) also reflects on the idea of happiness, considering that it involves the dimensions of affect, intentionality, and evaluation. These dimensions of happiness imply that being happy is to be affected by something and being in contact with a certain object. Therefore, not only happiness but also its absence can be read as an affective experience that will be mediated by objects. And through this read on the negative aspects of happiness Ahmed questions the idea of happiness as a good thing, or a goal for humans, as she considers that this 'promise of happiness' must be considered from all perspectives and with particular emphasis on unhappiness, *bad* things, and *killjoys* (AHMED 2010: 13, 19). By looking into the etymology of the words *hap*, *happening*, and *happiness*, she also connects the search for happiness with reliance on a mixture of luck and fortune, as well as the need for preparation, as the person should be predisposed to let themselves be affected by it. Through these concepts, Ahmed points towards a suspension on the idea of happiness as a good thing and encourages us to question the effect happiness can have on reading anything as a good thing. She considers this reading to be directly connected to the distribution of happiness and unhappiness through time and space which allow to better understand those objects

² See Campbell (2005: 94), for example, who questioned the sensory impact and the corporeal responses elicited by Kane's plays.

that oppose happiness and what she names killjoys (AHMED 2010: 13, 19–20). Therefore, the lack of happiness, pain or suffering can be read as negative affects which will guide the individual in their search for a change, for the promise of happiness, and it is within these negative affections that the powerful potentiality of affect for political and social action becomes stronger.

Going further in the analysis of unhappiness, Ahmed introduces the matter of alienation, seen as a misalignment with the affective community that induces the inability to achieve pleasure: 'We become alienated – out of line with an affective community – when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good' (AHMED 2010: 41). Thus, Ahmed (2010: 49, 157) links the lack of happiness with the opposition to normativity and proposes the notion of *affect alien* to better understand those individuals that shape the negative form of affect, who are out of line with the general mood, not feeling the way others do in response to an event. This alienation and distance from normativity also entails a revolutionary consciousness, which arises from the ability to recognise suffering, to identify the root cause of being made an alien, as 'revolutionary consciousness means feeling at odds with the world' (AHMED 2010: 168). And it is through this connection of alienation, misalignment with the norm, and revolutionary consciousness that Ahmed enlightens the political implications of affect: how the lack of happiness exposes the coercive force of social norms, how negative emotions can ground collective resistance or how the refusal to align with society's expectations enables new forms of critique.

This affective experience can be further extended through the work of Berlant (2011), whose view of affect as a link between intuition and the visceral allows for a better understanding of the bodily disposition of affect (BERLANT 2011: 53). The notions of body and corporeality prove particularly interesting for performance studies and provide a new layer to the study of affect. Similarly to Ahmed's remarks on bodily orientation and predisposition, when discussing the connections of affect and emotion, Berlant's view on affect is closely linked to relationships and the affective atmospheres that are shared and where bodies will find themselves in a constant reaction and response (BERLANT 2011: 13, 15). Furthermore, Berlant establishes a link between affect and intuition, seeing the latter as a mechanism for subjectivity that is essential to understand the relevance of the body in affect, to comprehend its viscosity and affect orientation through the body (BERLANT 2011: 53).

On the other hand, Berlant's affective approach to the negative side of affect can be found in her arguments around cruel optimism, how it can impact one's life, and the link she establishes to the experience of shock or trauma. Her definition of 'cruel optimism' as the relation that takes place when something one desires becomes an obstacle to their flourishing (BERLANT 2011: 1) aligns with Ahmed's questioning of happiness in a common political understanding of affect. Moreover, Berlant establishes a historical reading of affect where the present gains a particular role: 'the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else' (BERLANT 2011: 4). Berlant sees the present as a mediated affect, which allows her to define the notion of *impasse* as 'a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that

the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things' (BERLANT 2011: 4). It is, thus, a suspension of time that involves a higher affective capacity and that becomes particularly relevant to understand trauma through its affective orientation (BERLANT 2011: 199–200). Taking these notions into account, the works of Ahmed and Berlant shape the basis for inquiry into the affective structure that underlies *4.48 Psychosis*.

Affective orientation in *4.48 Psychosis*

4.48 Psychosis, Sarah Kane's last play, became the final step of her exploration into the theatrical form and her own poetic language, and also a look into the intimate, the mind, and the inner world. At the same time, the play is the most fragmented of her works. By making the mind the centre of the stage, the play focuses on pain and trauma and forces a particular affective predisposition that can easily grasp its audience. As Greig observes in his introduction to Kane's anthology: 'The mind that is the subject of the play's fragments is the psychotic mind. A mind which is the author, and which is also more than the author. It's a mind that the play's open form allows the audience to enter and recognise themselves within' (GREIG 2021: xvii). It is this connection to the audience that strengthens the affective power of the play.

Several of the critical texts (see e.g., FAÍSCO 2020; MATAMALA 2014) about the play have placed an emphasis on its fragmented structure, a collection of 'bewildered fragments'³ that showed the evolution of Kane's writing as she explored and innovated the theatrical form. She disintegrated the dramatic structure, transforming its rhythm into a tempo of madness and a rupture of form that showed the fractures in the mind of its main character (MATAMALA 2014: 767–771). However, this rupture is not only interesting for its innovation in theatrical form, but it can also set the basis for an affective reading of the play. By dividing the text into these small fragments, Kane shows the audience how that main voice in the play is currently dealing with her⁴ own trauma and pain. The chaotic and disordered fragments reflect on a formal level, how her mind tears apart and the self is diluted (MATAMALA 2014: 772) while her own body is inevitably affected by all the pain.

Berlant's reflection on the response to trauma can be useful in this analysis to point out the political implications of Kane's text and how affect plays a relevant role in it: 'such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or "crisis ordinariness" and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated' (BERLANT 2011: 10). This mediation of affect is what will guide the play's path through pain and

3 Following the play's own words (KANE 2001: 210).

4 *4.48 Psychosis* does not include any markers to infer the gender of the main character. However, this analysis will employ the feminine third person in order to facilitate the article's discourse.

suffering, and it can allow us to better understand Berlant's notion of *impasse* (BERLANT 2011: 4) by which not only the spatial setting of the play will be diluted, but also its time. If the present is a mediated affect, the time after trauma can also be affected and become a stretch of time that involves a greater affective capacity, an *impasse*. In the case of *4.48 Psychosis* this suspended time comprises the whole play: the exact time 4.48 becomes more and more relevant as the time at which the mind finds ease from her pain. 'At 4.48 | when sanity visits | for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind' (KANE 2021: 229). Right at this time, she finds calmness, she feels as herself and not lost, and these moments – in which the audience gets a glimpse of her real orientation despite drugs and the opposed environment – become the time of affective predisposition. This *impasse* and this predisposition also imply a stronger connection to the reader, a better affective link through which they can bond closer to the main character and understand her affective orientation.

In addition, during this moment she also realises that when she is away from this *impasse*, she falls into the false hope of happiness: 'when I am charmed by vile delusions of happiness [...] I cannot touch my essential self' (KANE 2021: 229). The protagonist sees the faults in the 'promise of happiness' and directly presents them to the audience, further affecting the predisposition for a reorientation towards the sociopolitical critique of the idealisation of happiness and the expectations on how to deal with mental issues. She also establishes a connection around her own pain and the negative affect that emphasises the questioning of happiness.

Throughout that time, the body will become the actor through which affect is shaped in the play as it is what guides the interaction with the surrounding and what will predispose the character to face the affective objects. The third fragment of the text already shows an instance of the character's relationship with her own body: 'I am fat [...] My hips are too big | I dislike my genitals' (KANE 2021: 207). Although these instances are not particularly powerful on their own, and they can lose strength in the long list of statements she makes in that fragment, they show a problem with the body and her emotions towards it, as well. Furthermore, this particular fragment shows the evolution of the character's internal voice. It foregrounds how she follows a path from sadness and slowly gives more relevance to the body, always linked to this negative affectivity. As the play moves forward, the body gains more relevance and becomes a mediator of love and affection. Thus, the words of the play 'something touches me in that still place and a wound from two years ago opens like a cadaver and a long buried shame roars its foul decaying grief' (KANE 2021: 209) already point to the way the character is directly interacting with her environment – and with the medical world, as will be seen later on in this analysis – and predisposes her to a negatively charged affectivity. This bodily interaction is recalled once again when she mourns 'No one touches me' (KANE 2021: 215), which becomes a lament for a lack of affection at a point in her life and one of the examples of how, throughout the text, touch and love seem to converge in their meaning.

Taking these examples of how affect is mediated through its corporeality, it is also important to note how the role of the body intersects with the spatial dimension of

the *impasse*. One of the main consequences of the response to trauma is the dilution of the space. The main character finds herself in an indefinite space, and most of the play takes place inside her mind, which will become the main spatial setting showing the isolation from the world she is feeling. The main character somatises her response to shock by diving into herself and showing how relevant the body is to affective experience. It is the bodily disposition that achieves its greatest reflection of the rupture between her body and her mind when she claims that 'body and soul can never be married' (KANE 2021: 212). A rupture that is further emphasised by the fragmented form of the text.

However, the corporeality of affect in the play shows its double side, as the body is also the main mediator of pain, both caused by trauma and also as a quick answer to shock. That way, when she asserts that she cut her arm because it 'feels fucking great. Because it feels fucking amazing' (KANE 2021: 217) pain is resignified; its affective connotation seems to change as she looks to oppose the voice that questions her actions. On a similar note, even when she finds some relief, when 4.48 comes, the calmness in her pain has a somatic component: 'Sanity is found at the centre of convulsion' (KANE 2021: 233). It seems that it is only through bodily pain – in this case in the form of a convulsion – that her suffering has a temporary stop. Thus, at the end of the play, the protagonist has made up her mind about death, and the role of the body becomes apparent: 'Fattened up | Shored up | Shoved out | my body decompensates | my body flies apart' (KANE 2021: 238). In these sentences, that mark the beginning of the last fragment of the play, she shows how her body is being lost as much as her mind.

Therefore, it is through her body that the character will interact with the affective objects and redirect its orientation. In *4.48 Psychosis* there are two affective objects that stand out and define the more social part of affect: doctors and friends, even though they appear as remnants in the mind of the character.⁵ Both these objects share an ideal of happiness that would be aligned with the general society's view, and the opposition established by the main voice throughout the text will guide the affective analysis of the play. Thus, it is necessary to consider more closely the main character's disposition, in contrast with what could be seen as the normative orientation, and how that allows her to be read as an *affect alien*. For instance, the character opposes the medical view and what doctors expect of her or think will make her better, as well as her relationship with her family or friends, the glimpses of which the reader gets throughout the play. These different layers in which she actively orients her body against her surroundings shape the affective impression that the audience gets of her, and progressively move the reader to face the same direction as her. They are affectively implicated with her views of the world, thus reinforcing the political stances that the play makes.

The markers that begin shaping the affective dimension of the play can be found early on, as the main character describes herself through short statements about her

5 Although the affective role of these objects can change depending on the specific theatrical production – as this play has been performed with one or several actors and sometimes the doctor can appear as a separate character – they are always a main antagonist to the main voice's affective orientation.

current life: 'I am sad [...] I am a complete failure as a person [...] I would like to kill myself' (KANE 2021: 206). This succinct fragment works with a double affective aim, as it not only shows the traumatic state in which the character is in, but also starts searching for an empathetic response from the audience. At the same time, she also states that she is terrified of medication, which is followed by the scene where doctors are described as 'a room of expressionless faces staring blankly at my pain' (KANE 2021: 207, 209). This part of the play starts turning the orientation of the text towards her and away from the medical point of view. For a brief moment, she seems to share the orientation of one of the doctors, as they are 'the only doctor who ever touched me voluntarily' (KANE 2021: 209). However, this little share of affect just works to reinforce the opposition of the main character after the trust is quickly shattered, which brings a deeper emotional layer to her affective reorientation. '[You] said it was nice to see me. I trusted you, I loved you, and it's not losing you that hurts me, but your bare-faced fucking falsehoods that masquerade as medical notes' (KANE 2021: 209–210). The hint of an affective connection with the doctor quickly turns into a highly negatively charged response: the love has turned into hate and mistrust, and the main character is further configured as the *affect alien* that will not align with social expectations. Every attempt she made at establishing an affective link with the people around her unavoidably works erroneously and deepens the emotional rupture of the character from the environment. Progressively, the doctors become an oppressive force that does not aim to help her and only sees her as a list of symptoms and failed medications, as is reinforced in the fragment filled with an exhaustive list of antidepressants and anxiolytics with their doses, side effects, and diagnoses. Thus, the play pushes the audience to question the assumption of this perspective and to consider that the character's view does not align with it. The character fears the psychiatric institution, and her search for happiness, if there is any left, cannot be found in the medical treatment. It is at this point that Ahmed's connection of alienation and revolutionary consciousness is manifested through the text, as the misalignment of the affective orientation of the character is what is guiding her political opposition. By recognising that the character has been '*made an alien*' – using Ahmed's terms (2010: 168) – the character becomes estranged from the world, and her revolutionary consciousness is shaped. And by aesthetically configuring this alienation, the text aims at reorienting the reader, affectively predisposing them to connect with the narrative voice and empathise with its sociopolitical resistance.

Friends of the main character, on the other hand, function as an affective object with a distinct approach, as it is not simply defined by their opposite orientation, and the main character is in many ways predisposed to share a common affective place with them. After all, the beginning of the play poses a question on friendship and its disinterested position: 'What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive?' (KANE 2021: 205). However, the question is left unanswered as the character is not able to make up her mind whether or not she should share the affective orientation of friends. The character just seeks 'to belong/to be accepted' (KANE 2021: 234); she needs others to accept her pain and her trauma. She expects the others to com-

prehend her affective orientation, her role as an *affect alien*, and not to confront her. However, as the play progresses, her relationship with the idea of friendship tumbles, and when the question of friends and support returns, she circles back to the need to be with her friends, to share a common emotion with them' and find her place. 'I need to go home to my lover and relax. I need to be with my friends and relax. I need my friends to be really together' (KANE 2021: 237). At this point, she still sees her friends as a safe place where a common orientation is shared, where her emotions can be understood. However, this section of the play continues the structure of the previous fragments where her own doubts on her predisposition to friendship had been established: 'But you have friends. | (*A long silence.*) [...] | What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive? (*A long silence.*)' (KANE 2021: 205). Throughout the play, there is continuous use of silence when the main character is questioning the idea of friendship, constantly doubting her own ability to share an orientation with friends, to be able to affectively connect with them. Thus, when these silences reappear at this point, when she seemed to have understood the relevance of friends, they do so to show how the breakup with these affective objects becomes more relevant. As she fails to orient alongside friendship, to connect with friends as an affective object, her affective alienation grows stronger and eventually detaches her from any goals that could have prevented her suffering and search for death.

Through these objects and affective figures the play guides the audience to be oriented in the same direction of the narrative voice and against all cultural and social expectations. Even though the main character can be interpreted as an *affect alien*, it is precisely that opposition to the norm that sets the basis for a political protest against the medical treatment of mental disorders and the psychiatric institution, but also how society has come to deal with these issues. As the play advances, the character shapes the corporeality of her affect which guides the audience to an affective predisposition alongside the character's orientation in her perspective of opposition.

Conclusion

The affective frameworks developed by Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant allow for new critical insights into Sarah Kane's work that could show how the alienation of her characters, as well as the affective atmospheres they inhabit, shape the sociopolitical readings of her plays. As this article has shown above, in *4.48 Psychosis*, violence and shock take a step into the inner world, transforming visceral experience into an affective predisposition of the body that directly connects with its audience. The corporeality of Kane's language and the fragmentation of the play's form foreground the affective objects – particularly the doctors and friends – and emphasises how they inhabit the character's mind. She, thus, shapes her orientation towards resistance to normative structures and, in its turn, directly affects the audience, guiding the spectator to adopt this disoriented position. Such reorientation constitutes a sociopolitical challenge

to prevailing medical and social expectations in the contemporary capitalist society. Moreover, Kane's text shows how the fragmentation of the narration on a formal level can be reinforced by the aesthetic layer of affect, which articulates the rupture of both mind and body, thereby heightening the emotional and political resonance of the play. Particularly, the notion of *impasse* is relevant to comprehend how the play works with the character's response to trauma: both time and space become diluted, creating a stretch of time that reinforces the affective capacity of the play and strengthens the connection with the audience.

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