Staging the Extreme:
Forms of Cruelty in Contemporary British Drama

MASTERARBEIT

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
Master of Arts (MA)

an der Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz

vorgelegt von
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am Institut für Anglistik
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Graz, 2016
Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude
  To my parents J and C for your unconditional love and support.
  To my friends C and B for always being there for me.
  To my supervisor Professor Maria Löschnigg for your guidance and infinite encouragement.

I thank you with all my heart.

-- EK
... was ist, zeigt sich nur, wenn es außer sich ist.
Georges Bataille
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Cruelty is ubiquitous. If one takes a look at the world, cruelty can be found in the smallest everyday situations as well as in most horrifying atrocities happening on a global-scale. It finds its form in gestures, dialogues, calamities and doubt; it takes shape in murder, rape, violence, degradation, mutilation, dehumanisation, mercilessness. Cruelty is ubiquitous and the choice is to either confront oneself with it or to remain ignorant to it. Either way, these cruelties are present and active, yet not to face up to them means to tolerate what is intolerable, to leave unquestioned what should be questioned, to turn a blind eye on what should be changed. In order to understand, one must look and see. British playwright Sarah Kane, who is quoted above, once said, “we need to see the things we already know happen, but to see them presented in a different way and so will understand them better” (qtd. in Saunders 2009: 103). Theatre is a place that can present these acts of cruelty in a way that facilitates an understanding of them. Moreover, theatre has the obligation to look and to tell the stories of cruelty, of all and any forms of cruelties that exist simply because they exist everywhere in our world.

The representation of cruelties has always been an integral part of theatre. It has been used to warn, to shock, to redeem, to entertain, to raise awareness and arouse compassion – without the risk of real danger. Art has the power to incite our imagination, to evoke our worst fears which would normally be buried in our unconscious and thus to alter our very sense of self, our relationships and our understanding of the world. It is this notion of confrontation, of exposing oneself to that which is frightening, terrifying and painful in oneself and in our world in order to trigger a transformation that stands at the centre of the Aristotelian concept of catharsis and has since then been taken up by numerous other thinkers and writers, such as Antonin Artaud or Howard Barker. Of all arts, theatre is so well suited to excite and confront its audience because of its physical immediacy and proximity. As Tom Sellar aptly formulates, “[n]o other art form can suggest connections between small, everyday
behaviour and larger forces as palpably. The physical proximity of spectators and stage counters the distance felt in every other aspect of our highly mediated lives” (2005: 8).

The term cruelty differs from violence in that it refers to a realm which is heightened, more extreme and reaches more deeply. In this thesis I investigate the diverse forms of cruelty in contemporary British drama and look at three plays by Sarah Kane, Harold Pinter and Martin McDonagh. Since cruelty in theatre has a long tradition I will first provide an overview of the history of cruelty on stage, outlining the definitions of Aristotle’s concept of catharsis, Antonin Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ as well as subsequent presentations of cruelties on the British stage and possible interconnections with film theory. In the analysis of Sarah Kane’s Cleansed (1998), I will discuss cruelty directed towards others, as expressed in the implementation of utterances into physical reality, cruelty directed against one’s self and the aspect of love and beauty in the face of cruelty. Next I will examine Harold Pinter’s The Hothouse (1980) in regard to the abuse of language in the form of cruel bureaucracy, malicious officialese and interrogation as a means of establishing power. In the discussion of Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman (2003) I will explore cruelty employed in narrations, visualised on stage and evoked in the imagination. All these plays feature extreme acts of cruelty and implement them in different ways and for different purposes. With this thesis I attempt to discern the manifestations of cruelties with regard to their underlying significances, their origins and their relations to the world at large.
1. Origins and Definitions: Aristotle’s Tragedy and the Concepts of Catharsis

[...] So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning, and for no cause,
And, in this upshot, purpose mistook
Fall’n on th’inventors’ heads.
(Hamlet 2011: 129)

From the beginning of drama in ancient Greece onwards cruelty has constituted a prominent performative element. In classical Greek tragedy infanticide, suicide, incest, rape, mutilation and cannibalism were common and accepted features of a play. In the ‘Tragedy of Blood’, in particular the ‘Revenge Tragedy’, of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean Theatre violence, madness, murder and torture were immensely enjoyed by the audiences, as long, however, as morality was properly restored in the end. The question therefore arises as to the purpose of cruelty in drama. “The content of tragedy”, Aleks Sierz states, “is a meeting between the waywardness of fate and some of our most intimate fears” (2001: 10). The main and most plausible reason for the existence of tragedy, as Sierz further points out, is to redeem the audience of such fears and feelings. In Aristotle’s Poetics it is argued that the experience of a tragedy can and shall have the effect of a purification, of a catharsis, upon the spectator. Aristotle argues in Chapter 6 of the Poetics:

Tragedy then is the imitation of a serious and complete action that has a certain magnitude, using language that has been embellished by each of the kinds [of adornment] separately in the separate parts [of the play], through persons performing the action and not through narrative, through pity and fear accomplishing the purification of such emotions. (Aristotle qtd. in Segal 1996: 153)

Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, in particular the last section of the passage quoted above, is anything but uncontroversial. Theoreticians have struggled over the proper meaning of Aristotle’s utterance and fought for one definite understanding. ‘Catharsis’ is indeed a very ambiguous term, having diverse implications and leaving plenty of room for interpretation. It is clear, at least, that ‘catharsis’ implies the notion of healing or denotes a process that is eventually beneficial. Since Aristotle is concerned with the response of the audience and sees in tragedy a means of affecting the emotions of the audience, it can be assumed that
‘purification’ or ‘catharsis’, in the way Aristotle uses the term, refers to an emotional rather than intellectual or physical process of relief. This process is precisely this particular kind of pleasure produced through the feelings of pity and fear (cf. Segal 1996: 154-155). (Cf. Sierz 2001: 10-11)

However, Aristotle did not explicitly specify his understanding and there are three main areas of meaning from which the term ‘catharsis’ can be derived. Firstly, ‘catharsis’ can be understood in its medical sense where purgation refers to the four humours and the process of bringing them in balance again by partial discharge, respectively. Melancholy, for instance, was thought to be linked to the bodily fluid black bile and the arts were supposed to purge any imbalance into a healthy equilibrium. Secondly, ‘catharsis’ has a religious or ritualistic implication, referring then to spiritual purification. In his essay “Catharsis, Audience, and Closure in Greek Tragedy”, Charles Segal argues that the ritual aspect of catharsis is valid in any case since rites of lament and burial were important for the ancient Greek audience as a means to achieve closure and order at the end of a tragedy. “Such rituals”, Segal argues, “help the audience to achieve a sense of ‘purification’ from the strong and dangerous emotions through ritual participation and to experience the restoration of order and communal solidarity that rituals produce” (1996: 150). In fact, collective weeping and the sharing of grief at the end of a play was considered a unifying experience between human beings among the ancient Greek, characters and spectators alike, a custom that creates “a bond of common humanity between mortals” (Segal 1996: 149). Hence, Segal also highlights the notion of catharsis as being a collective and public instead of an individual experience or participation in the release of emotion in the theatre. The third aspect of ‘catharsis’ is that of intellectual clarification referring, according to G. F. Else and Leon Golden, not to audience response but to interior processes of the work itself, in other words, to the clarification of the psychology of the events within the play. (Cf. Segal 1996: 149-155, Brunius 1966: 60-62)

While it is certainly clear that all three facets of the term ‘catharsis’ have their respective validity, the question remains whether catharsis is meant to be within the action of the play or within the minds of the spectators. However, as Brunius points out, in the magnetic chain of inspiration, that is, the linkage from God to poet to performer to audience, which was considered given among the ancient Greek, everything is linked (cf. 1966: 22-23).
Hence, and in consideration of this mindset, this means that when there is pity, fear and catharsis in one link, it is in every other link as well – the creator, the actor, the character, the action on stage, the words and the audience (cf. Brunius 1966: 58-59). Likewise, all interpretations of ‘catharsis’ play together, since in ancient Greece ritual and religion were linked to mental and bodily well-being and, for Aristotle, emotions have a cognitive basis, even if a clarification by intellectual processes might not be the primary focus (cf. Segal 1996: 155). In other words, catharsis can occur in the internal as well as the external communication system, that is, within the play as experienced by the characters, as well as by the audience who watch the play.

Furthermore, later in the Poetics Aristotle clarifies that the ‘pitiable’ and ‘fearful’ actions represented are to create an emotional audience response. Pity and fear are to be aroused in the audience by the dramatic act, pity being “occasioned by undeserved misfortune” (Aristotle qtd. in Brunius 1966: 52) and fear being the result of an inkling of some painful or destructive future event (cf. ibid. 1966: 52-53). The audience shall be released from precisely these emotions by their arousal and thus experience relief and pleasure. This pleasure, according to Brunius and Segal, can be provoked because of the imitative nature of theatre which creates a distance to acts which, in reality, would cause pain. Furthermore, as Segal points out, it is specifically these empathic emotions of pity and fear that can cause this particular kind of pleasure and catharsis. Accordingly, Gamini Salgado states that it is “compassionate understanding which is the heart of tragedy” (1969: 20). Besides, the link between pain and pleasure or awe and terror has also been firmly established by psychoanalysis as well as philosophy\(^1\). (Cf. Segal 1996: 154-156, Brunius 1966: 22-23, 52-65, Paskow 1983: 61)

In his conception of tragedy as having a beneficial effect on the emotional stability of the audience, Aristotle objects Plato’s rejection of the affective quality of tragedy. For Plato,\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Most notably in this respect is Anglo-Irish philosopher Edmund Burke, who in his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) addresses the basic human emotions and questions, among others, the roots and formations of pain and pleasure, joy and grief, and, above all, the beautiful and the sublime. Burke argues that the beautiful derives from pleasure, whereas the more powerful sublime is founded on terror and every emotion akin to it, such as pain, fear or danger. In other words, the sublime, according to Burke, is an overwhelmingly terrible beauty, a “delightful horror” (Burke 1757: 67), which, however, can only be enjoyed from a certain distance to the actual danger.
pity and fear in particular belong to those dangerous emotions that tragedy, as part of poetry, stimulates in the audience. For Aristotle in turn, it is exactly these emotions which, through their arousal and subsequent release, are not dangerous but eventually beneficial and result thus in a catharsis in the spectator. However, this does not mean that a catharsis rids the spectator entirely of those emotions evoked but, as Alan Paskow asserts, transforms the spectator so that they have “new, important, and more correct cognitive informings of certain orientating feelings” (1983: 64). Catharsis, in Paskow’s words, is “an emotional response appropriate at once to a sequence of dramatic events and to the spectator’s most significant individual and human possibilities” (ibid.).

For the purpose of this thesis it is not helpful to get further into the ongoing discussion of whether the last sentence of Aristotle’s assertion refers to a possible intellectual clarification of the event, to a mental and physical purgation, or rather to the emotional and ritual purification. In fact, I think it is most reasonable and necessary to allow the term ‘catharsis’ its full range of meaning. For this thesis, I shall follow the traditional translation “through pity and fear accomplishing the purification of such emotions” (Aristotle qtd in Segal 1996: 155) and take the term ‘catharsis’ as the possibility of an emotionally as well as intellectually cleansing experience for the audience, however, with emphasis on the physicality and viscerality of this experience. In other words, I will understand the term ‘catharsis’ in the Artaudian sense, as described with the synonym ‘cleansing’ in the manifesto to the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’, which I will elucidate in the following chapter. (Cf. Segal 1996: 155-157, Paskow 1983: 59)
2. Catharsis Applied: Antonin Artaud and ‘The Theatre of Cruelty’

I will devote myself from now on
exclusively
to the theatre
as I conceive it,
a theatre of blood,
a theatre which at each performance will stir
something
in the body
of the performer as well as the spectator of the play
(Artaud qtd. in Leach 2004: 165)

Antonin Artaud, who wrote this verse letter only weeks before his death in 1948, is considered as one of the most influential if ‘unrealisable’ theoreticians in modern theatre. His search for a new form of expression that would enthral body and mind, actor and audience alike and allow his forceful truths to be conveyed has resulted most notably in his concept of the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’. Sparked by the Balinese theatre, in particular the barong dance, as well as Lucas van Leyden’s painting Lot and His Daughters, Artaud proposed a theatre that would create such an intense and harrowing experience for the performer and the spectator that they would be left in a state of purification in the end. Even though the essays Artaud wrote to define his new form of theatre are in no way consistent, nor build a coherent theory, they nonetheless open a truly ingenious and radical door to the perception of the theatrical performance and theory. Collected under the title The Theatre and its Double in 1938, his theoretical work, mostly delivered personally in lectures, has inspired numerous playwrights in modern theatre and empowered them to make innovative and daring choices in their dramatic texts and on stage. (Cf. Leach 2004: 151-167)

According to Albert Bermel, Artaud’s writing is not to be taken literally but “is itself a kind of experience that speaks to the unconscious and the senses, not to common sense” (2013: 10). In order to define his notion of the ideal theatre in general and the ‘Theatre of

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2 The barong dance is part of the Balinese theatre and stages a good spirit, that is, a dragon figure with lion-like features who helps those in need by initiating a state of trance and fights against the evil as exemplified by Rangda. Artaud stated in regard to the Balinese theatre, “[i]n a word, the Balinese have realised, with the utmost rigor, the idea of pure theatre, where everything, conception and realisation alike, has value, has existence only in proportion to its degree of objectification on the stage” (1958: 53).
Cruelty’ in particular, Artaud resorts to various forms of comparison which may appear striking and somewhat extreme, yet, as Bermel suggests, appeal rather to feeling than to intellect. Even in his younger years, Artaud found that poetry, or words, are not sufficient to convey the essence of his ideas. It thus seems only logical that he should use plurisemantic examples which approximate his ideas of theatre and illustrate his true understanding. Hence, one way to explain his ‘ideal theatre’ is by way of comparing it to a police raid in a brothel, which, like “total theatre” (Artaud qtd. in Leach 2004: 169), stirs up the emotions of the witnesses or the audience, respectively. Artaud describes the effects of total theatre as follows:

[T]his total theatre is the ideal. This anxiety, this guilt feeling, this victoriousness, this satisfaction, set the tone, feelings and state of mind in which the audience should leave our theatre, shaken and irritated by the inner dynamism of the show. This dynamism bears a direct relation to the anxieties and pre-occupations of their whole lives. (Artaud qtd. in Leach 2004: 169)

In his theatre, Artaud wants to lead the audience to a place they would not have chosen to go by themselves and bring them to a state of pain and exaltation. This state of dynamism may then be released; a cathartic process is thus set in motion, which is meant to have effects on reality while being devoid of the dangers of it. In other words, the ultimate aim of the theatrical experience is a virtual transformation of the mind. Another analogy Artaud employs in order to describe the idea of his theatre with is the image of the plague. Like the plague, Artaud argues in his essay “The Theatre and the Plague”, the theatre is “a delirium and is communicative” (1958: 27), and affects an entire collective in an identical manner. Both theatre and plague are “victorious and vengeful” and bound for the extreme, “like the plague it [theatre] reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialised nature” (ibid.). According to Artaud, theatre and plague collectively unlock powers and possibilities, waken the repressed senses and the unconsciousness and end either in death or in extreme purification. If that which is released is dark, Artaud contends, it is because life itself is dark, not the theatre or the plague. This analogy between theatre and plague appears so fitting to Artaud because theatre “like the plague […] is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorisation of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a
people, are localised” (Artaud 1958: 30). Whether compared to a raid in a brothel, the plague or a visit at a dentist or surgeon, this idea of the theatre as an upsetting yet cleansing or even morally and socially transforming experience, lies at the heart of Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’. (Cf. Artaud 1958: 15-32)

It is important to note that Artaud initially defined the term ‘cruelty’ as a purely physical impact of the theatrical experience upon the actor and the audience and shared between them. Transformation or catharsis, the essential goal of his theatre, although ultimately spiritual, is firstly felt physically. Only later Artaud added a more metaphysical and holistic dimension to his vision of the ‘ideal theatre’. Tracing the word ‘cruelty’ back to its etymological origin Artaud later defined the term as “strictness, diligence, unrelenting decisiveness, irreversible and absolute determination” (Artaud qtd. in Leach 2004: 169), and hence argued that cruelty was like a “living vortex engulfing darkness, in the sense of the inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue” (ibid.). In other words, cruelty is all-engrossing and inexorable, demands the extreme and will take everything to extremity. (Cf. Leach 2004: 168-169)

Artaud refuses to narrow down the semantic dimension of ‘cruelty’ to gratuitous bloodshed and mutilation for the sake of mere sensationalism (cf. Artaud 1958: 102) but sees the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ as a theatre that is above all “difficult and cruel for [him]self” (Artaud 1958: 79). It is not the cruelty that is directed against another person, Artaud further elucidates, but, on the level of performance, it is “the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us” (ibid.). This does not mean that the superficial associations with cruelty, that is, blood, torture or murder, are completely excluded from the stage, only that they are not the major aspect of Artaud’s understanding of this concept; neither are they employed at random and without necessity. In his essay on Antonin Artaud, Robert Leach posits therefore that the “blood and gore” (2004: 170) image that is so often attributed to the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ should be seen as a symbol for the complex metaphysical cruelty Artaud attempted to formulate. However, apart from explaining what

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3 Artaud also compares his theatre to a dental visit and states that the spectators should go to his performances “as they would to a surgeon or a dentist […] knowing, of course, that they will not die, but […] thoroughly convinced that we can make them cry out” (Artaud qtd. in Leach 2004: 172).
‘cruelty’ in the Artaudian sense is not or what it can be compared to, respectively, Artaud fiercely attempts to defend and delineate in numerous variations what ‘cruelty’ actually means and how it is to be generated on stage. Thus, he uses the terms terror, violence and danger (cf. Bermel 2013: 14) in order to supplement his conception of ‘cruelty’ and states that “life cannot help exercising some blind rigor that carries with it all its conditions, otherwise it would not be life; but this rigor, this life that exceeds all bounds and is exercised in the torture and trampling down of everything, this pure implacable feeling is what cruelty is” (Artaud 1958: 114).

The notion of necessity in connection to his understanding of cruelty and of theatre reappears in numerous of his arguments. In his comparison of the theatre to the plague, Artaud considers theatre as social necessity and argues that without an element of cruelty theatre is not possible (cf. Artaud 1958: 99). Cruelty, according to Artaud, is needed in the spectacle in order to shatter “the defences of performer and spectator alike, [...] the solitude of the self, and [to] bring communion and personal metamorphosis” (Leach 2004: 170-171). Artaud sees human beings in a state of degeneration (cf. Artaud 1958: 99) from which they have to be awakened in “nerves and heart” (Artaud 1958: 84). In order to achieve this, the spectator is in the focus of the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’. Artaud’s theatre draws on myths and employs collective dreams and fears. It is to be a place in which one’s deepest desires and drives are visualised; a place in which the spectator is to be furnished with “the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior” (Artaud 1958: 92). According to Artaud, experiencing the theatrical realisation of such nightmarish atrocities would be far more terrible for the spirit than their actual commitment in real life and thus have a more powerful effect on the spectator. As Albert Bermel phrases it, Artaud’s theatre is “a facing of the worst that could happen, followed by a refreshing release from it” (2013: 14). It needs to be noted at this point, that it is never about physical or spiritual torture but is rather to be seen as a form of spiritual healing through confrontation, not as “by-product” (Bermel 2013: 21), as Bermel puts it, but as ultimate objective.
Another essential aspect results from the idea that the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ is aimed at the general public not an elite. The reasons why Artaud considered his theatre to be best suited as mass spectacle are that it focuses on a sensory and emotional impact rather than an intellectual one; it draws on common myths; it breaks away from theatrical masterpieces; and it wants to transform or cleanse its audience. Additionally, the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ wants to achieve a sense of unity in the audience, to be more precise, a feeling of being one with oneself as an individual as well as of being a union with the people around, that is, the other spectators. For the duration of the performance the spectators should become a union as an audience by collectively experiencing the action and as an individual by physically and psychically experiencing the play on multiple levels. This means that the spectacle is to affect the whole audience as a community similarly while simultaneously affecting the single spectator in a holistic way. All senses are to be involved and actively engaged and, moreover, the performance is supposed to create an overlapping of the senses through various forms of stimulation (cf. Artaud 1958: 125). As Bermel argues, unification means wholeness, which, by extension, comes to signify healthiness in the sense of personal completeness (cf. 2013: 21). To summarise, by collectively witnessing the outbursts of the unconscious on stage and thus living them by proxy, the spectators become a temporary unity and, without having had to fear any real dangers, re-emerge out of the theatre healed from their destructive desires. The performance, including those who create it, becomes a form of therapy and redemption, or as Bermel puts it: “[t]he cast and director join forces and turn themselves into a collective scapegoat, a revival of the poor man who volunteered to absorb all the evils in a community and then to be exiled or killed” (2013: 22). (Cf. Bermel 2013: 14-23)

With the spectator thus at the centre, the spectacle is to surround them. Light, sound, imagery, action, all should envelop the audience, which, furthermore, is not positioned separated from the stage but is to be in the middle of the performance. The spectators would be seated on turnable chairs and the stage is to be obliterated, so that, instead of having two spaces, or “two closed worlds” (Artaud 1958: 86), as Artaud calls it, stage and auditorium would become one. This set up is supposed to facilitate the communication between spectacle and spectator, the latter’s sensibility being attacked from all sides and without intermission (cf. Artaud 1958: 86). As Artaud posits, “just as there will be no unoccupied point in space, there will be neither respite nor vacancy in the spectator’s mind or sensibility. That is,
between life and the theatre there will be no distinct division, but instead a continuity” (1958: 126). Besides, the constant “visual and sonorous outbursts” (Artaud 1958: 86) in which the audience should be immersed are chosen first for their physical quality, for example the vibration of a sound, and only secondly in relation to the signified (cf. Artaud 1958: 81). In terms of the setting, Artaud proposes the use of huge manikins and masks, which become a kind of double of the actor or characters, respectively. In addition, the lighting plays an important role. Light should not be used merely to illuminate or to colour but should in itself be powerful and suggestive. According to Artaud, “fineness, density and opacity factors must be reintroduced into lighting, so as to produce special tonal properties, sensations of heat, cold, anger, fear and so on” (Artaud qtd. in Leach 2004: 178). The most essential elements on the production side of the Artaudian theatre, however, are the actors. As Leach argues, “the actor is he who is the pain, exaltation, fear, lust, as well as the one who expresses it” (2004: 179) and has to be as well as represent the secrets of the soul. According to Artaud, the actors should not only explore the deepest and most intense facets of their selves but also make contact with pure forces, that is, with whatever triggers the unconscious – thus putting the actors in the position of a medium. (Cf. Artaud 1958: 81-126)

With regard to language, Artaud favours physical language over the language of words, the former addressing primarily the senses, the latter the mind. By physical language Artaud means everything that can be expressed onstage and by means of which the theatre differentiates itself from speech, that is, movement, gesture, voice and sound. In the Artaudian theatre, movement is to be “the visible sign of an invisible language” (Leach 2004: 180). In particular, group movements, moving, for instance, in unison, in different speeds or freezing in a pose, are common in Artaud’s plays and thus often take on a dancelike quality. Gesture, in turn, is considered a language of its own and the theatre’s “substance and mind” (Artaud qtd. in Leach 2004: 180) that could convey ideas and attitudes (cf. Leach 2004: 180). Sounds are meant to build an equivalent to gestures, not merely decorate them, and replace words in the theatre. This means that the human voice should be used as an instrument and produce new, unaccustomed noises and rhythms, such as cries, howls and the like, rather than words. Thus, the power of words in theatre would be destroyed and language and vocalisation would become a form of incantation. In addition, musical instruments, newly invented or forgotten, could also create sounds never heard before. This entire mise-en-scène, from lighting to
requisites to movement and sound, is defined by Artaud as poetry of space. Rather than verbal images it is supposed to create material images and to substitute the poetry of language (cf. Artaud 1958: 39). Moreover, it is meant to involve and transform the spectator, who is at the center of it all. As Artaud posits, the “Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood” (1958: 122). Just as Artaud sees bigger than life-size puppets and masks as the double of the actor and the actor as a double of the human being, theatre is the double of life and vice versa. For Artaud, true theatre emerges when the doubles coalesce (cf. Leach 2004: 173). (Cf. Artaud 1958: 38-46 and Leach 2004: 180-185)

3. Cruelty Continued: The Eruption of Cruelties on the British Stage

Catastrophe is also birth. Out the ruins crawls the bloody thing, unrecognisable in the ripped rags of former life. Ghastly breaths of unfamiliar air! Like the infant, expelled from the silent womb, screams red its horror, then tastes oxygen. I have to find my life.
(from Thomas Middleton’s Women Beware Women qtd. in Gritzner and Rabey, eds., 2006: 17)

Artaud’s innovative ideas for the theatre have also had bearing on British drama, especially from the 1960s onwards. One of Artaud’s claims for the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ that has not been mentioned yet is that the theatre has to be concerned with themes of the present. The British theatre scene in the early sixties was looking for a stage language that would fit their own time and found in Artaud’s philosophy its inspiration. With Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz leading the way, the movement took the ideas of Artaud and applied them in their idiosyncratic way. As Marowitz emphasises: “what ought to be made clear is that we are not trying to re-create the theatre of Artaud, or trying to take his own old formulas and make them work as he himself failed to do. We’re just using him as a kind of springboard into new areas which we feel ought to be explored” (Marowitz qtd. in Schnierer 1997: 65). The theatrical experiments that emerged during that time were termed ‘Theatre of Cruelty’. Yet, this title was chosen as homage to Artaud and not to indicate a continuation of his theatre (cf. Brook
1968: 55). What fascinated Brook and Marowitz most was Artaud’s proposition to diminish the importance of the word and to find a theatrical language that goes beyond words, to emphasise movement and improvisation as well as to bring a ritualistic aspect to theatre. Akin to Artaud, it was Brook’s intention to “crack the spectator on the jaw, then douse him with ice-cold water, then force him to assess intelligently what has happened to him, then give him a kick in the balls, then bring him back to his senses again” (Sierz 2001: 18). (Cf. Shepherd 2009: 165-166, Schnierer 1997: 64-65)

In the following ‘Theatre of Cruelty’-season in 1964, one of Artaud’s own plays was staged for the first time, namely Spurt of Blood, as well as new plays, such as Peter Weiss’s The Marat/Sade – heralding thus the emergence of provocative theatre in Britain. What the plays have in common is not only that they smashed taboos by depicting nudity and violence, so that they were termed ‘dirty plays’, but they have also changed the British theatre scene permanently. Firstly, the exploration of Artaud’s ideas resulted in the questioning of the written text as primary medium as well as the status of the writer. Secondly, through Brook and Marowitz Artaud became known to the public at large which furthered a formal recognition of his theories. In addition, a certain mode of stage language could now be attributed to Artaud and thus named. ‘Cruelty’ on stage became a style and representation as such was reconsidered. Plays that had emerged before the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’-season of 1964, such as Ann Jellicoe’s The Sport of My Mad Mother (1958) and David Rudkin’s Afore Night Comes (1960), would now be classified under the aspect of Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ due to their attempt to break away from the logical and rational structure of the straight or legitimate theatre with its focus on spoken dialogue. Especially in the form of the happening, as initiated by the American artist and composer John Cage in the 1950s, Brook saw Artaud’s ideas realised. Involving multiple art forms as well as various senses while being mostly non-verbal and non-stationary, and excluding story or plot lines, a happening implements what the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ was searching for. As Brook states, “the theory of Happenings is that a spectator can be jolted eventually into new sight, so that he wakes to the life around him” (1968: 61). (Cf. Shepherd 2009: 165-166, Schnierer 1997: 65-66, Sierz 2001: 17-18, Leach 2004: 193)
Besides, the influence of Artaud led Brook to write *The Empty Space* (1968), in which he introduces his theories of the ‘Deadly Theatre’, the ‘Holy Theatre’, the ‘Rough Theatre’ and the ‘Immediate Theatre’. Heavily informed by Artaud, all four forms can, according to Brook, exist on their own or side by side, with the ‘Deadly Theatre’ being bad theatre, that is, not only commercial theatre but boring theatre that lacks intensity, honesty and passion. In other words, Brook’s ‘Deadly Theatre’ is everything Artaud considered to be wrong with theatre at large. However, as Brook explains, deadly does not mean dead but rather something that is at the bottom of its possibilities, in fact, “something depressingly active, but for this very reason capable of change” (1968: 45). ‘Holy Theatre’, on the other hand, is comparable to Artaud’s ‘ideal theatre’, that is, a powerful, immediate theatre in which the text is replaced by the event itself and the unconscious can be manifested on stage. This is the reason why Brook calls the ‘Holy Theatre’ also ‘The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible’ (cf. 1968: 47, 55). It derives from the belief that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear, with the invisible containing “all the hidden impulses of man” (Brook 1968: 80). The invisible, according to Brook in *The Empty Space*, is visible at all times, yet cannot be perceived without certain conditions. Holy art, and as part of it holy theatre, provides these conditions and thus presents the visible-invisible. Brook is not uncritical about Artaud’s visionary theatre, yet he is impressed by Artaud’s notion that theatre can be a place where the audience shall be liberated from their everyday selves and meet a greater reality (cf. Brook 1968: 60). Theatre, then, would be a holy place. (Cf. Brook 1968: 11-80)

Cruelties and violence continued to be represented on stage in the British theatre of the 60s, yet serving a different purpose. While Brook and Marowitz attempted to put into practice what Artaud could only theorise about and experimented with improvisation, physicality and vocal techniques, Edward Bond used explicit scenes of violence and aggression in order to provoke his audience to an emotional response and educate them morally. In contrast to Artaud, Bond’s cruelty is conceived much more narrowly and used not as dramatic device to produce a cathartic effect but as a didactic tool for social criticism and political education. Bond calls this the ‘aggro-effect’, that is, shock tactics that shall “disturb an audience emotionally, […] involve them emotionally” (Bond qtd. in Shepherd 2009: 167), and further, force the audience to reflect on and analyse the violent acts in order to search for the reasons and meaning of the represented violent, aggressive or extreme acts. Bond developed his
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concept of the ‘aggro-effect’ out of Bertolt Brecht’s ‘alienation’ or V-effect, originating in the German word *Verfremdung*, to which he attributed a societal function. Brecht’s epic theatre induces the spectator to reconsider habitual objects, acts and systems and contemplate their significance on an intellectual level. According to Brecht, the V-effect “consists in the reproduction of real-life incidents on the stage in such a way as to underline their causality and bring it to the spectator’s attention” (Brecht qtd. in Leach 2004: 118). Likewise, Bond uses his aggro-effect in order to call attention to something “desperately important” (Bond qtd. in Sierz 2001: 19), yet he combines intellectual analysis with emotional involvement. In his “Preface” to *Lear* (1972), Bond declares his view that violence and aggression are not innate in human beings but triggered by society and claims, “aggression is an ability but not a necessity” (1972: Lviii). Since, according to Bond, violence is a considerable part of contemporary society, it must not be omitted in art. Hence he argues, “people who do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence” (1972: Lvii). In other words, violence is not a necessity in human beings, but since it is a part of society, it is a necessity in art. Bond stages violence as mimesis of society, however, enhances and transforms it so that, in the words of Simon Shepherd, “the surface appearance of ‘normality’” (2009: 168) may be destroyed and the audience is provoked to reflect on and analyse the cruelty presented to them. (Cf. Shepherd 2009: 167-168, Schnierer 1997: 93-98, Leach 2004: 111-120)

In the 1980s, Howard Barker returned to a more Artaudian sense of cruelty. Like Artaud, Barker pursued the dramaturgical approach of a Wagnerian ‘total theatre’ (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), fusing all available elements to an overwhelming aesthetic unity. However, the core of Barker’s theatre is anxiety, that is, anxiety as an audience response to the performance, created from the very beginning of the theatrical experience. Therefore, Barker employs the exordium, a surreal episode of strong visual imagery, recorded sounds, such as music, cries or breaths, and rhythmical movement, which is performed before the opening of the actual play. According to Barker, the exordium introduces form and sets the mood in order to “overwhelm the resistance of the public” (Barker qtd. in Gritzner and Rabey, eds., 2006: 67) and render possible a “spiritual experience” (ibid. 2006: 30). Barker’s theatre operates against what he calls ‘Humanist Theatre’, i.e., according to Barker, a theatre which provides the audience with plays that convey the illusion of the existence of clear messages
A HISTORY OF ‘CRUELITIES’

and easily interpretable human interactions. Instead of the ‘Humanist Theatre’, Barker proposes a ‘Theatre of Catastrophe’, a theatre which deliberately avoids determinacy and clarity in order to create anxiety in the spectator and send them home “disturbed and amazed” (Barker qtd. in Shepherd 2009: 168), as he states in his manifesto *Arguments for a Theatre* (1989).

Barker’s deliberate avoidance of clarity or didactic purpose and simultaneous construction of ambiguity and uncertainty link him to Samuel Beckett, with whom he also shares the retroactive quality of his plays (cf. Gritzner and Rabey, eds., 2006: 62). However, while Barker and Artaud’s theatre are akin in their scenic plethora and determination to confront the audience with extremes, with pain and terror, they deviate in three central points. Firstly, in contrast to Artaud, Barker relies on language in order to achieve his effect of anxiety. Secondly, while Artaud wants to purge his entire audience simultaneously and similarly, Barker rejects such a collective experience in favour of a separated individual response. Thirdly, Barker’s ‘Theatre of Catastrophe’ rejects the possibility of catharsis, the main purpose of theatre for Artaud, and thus denies the spectator moral or psychological redemption. Yet, through Artaud as well as through his conception of Greek tragedy, Barker has prepared ground for the radical texts that entered the British stages in the Nineties, with Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane leading the way in pulling down mimetic and moral restrictions. For Kane as well as for Barker pain and beauty belong to the same realm. (Cf. Gritzner and Rabey, eds., 2006: 22-68, Leach 2004: 115, Shepherd 2009: 168-169, Müller, ed., 1993: 221-226)

In the 1990s, the British stages erupted with truly provocative and confrontational plays that are marked by their relentlessness, intransigency and readiness to smash all taboos in language, action and image. Aristotle, Artaud, Brook, Bond and Barker, all added to this “shock fest” (Sierz 2001: 36) of the ‘Nasty Nineties’. Initially named ‘New Brutalism’ or the ‘Blood and Sperm Generation’, the term that prevailed was ‘In-Yer-Face Theatre’ (cf. Sierz 2002: 109). In his 2002 essay on IYF-Theatre, Aleks Sierz argues that this name is best suited to describe the trend because it “suggests what is particular about the experience of going to the theatre and watching extreme plays – the feeling that your personal space is threatened. In other words, it powerfully suggests the relationship between play and audience” (2002: 109).
The phrase ‘in-your-face’ was borrowed from American sports jargon of the 1970s and, until the 1990s, assumed the meaning of being “aggressive, provocative, brash” (qtd. in Sierz 2002: 109) with the implication of having to see something from very close. The *New Oxford Dictionary* (1998) now describes ‘in-your-face’ as something “blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or to avoid” (qtd. in Sierz 2002: 109), while the *Collins English Dictionary* (1998) additionally attributes ‘confrontational’ (cf. Sierz 2002: 109). In a way, the phrase ‘in-your-face’ describes the zeitgeist of the decade in the Anglophone world, considering, for example, the birth of Grunge, the music genre which is also characterised by its rawness and claim to authenticity, or the rising popularity of Quentin Tarantino’s celebration of violence in cinema.

In-Yer-Face-plays were indeed extreme in every possible way. Not only did these plays depict violence and sex on stage, they showed explicit scenes of physical and psychological brutality and degradation, sex in form of rape, including anal rape, and pornography, as well as other societal taboos such as drug abuse, blasphemy and nudity. Similarly, language was pushed over the limit. The use of swear words did not only include the word ‘fuck’ in an extensive manner, a line that has been crossed already in the 1960s, but also the even more verbally offensive and aggressive ‘cunt’. There were simply no borders that were not dared to be transgressed, not only on the level of content but also on the structural level. Aristotle’s unities of place, time and action were broken and perverted; plots and characters were dissolved and fragmented. Besides, although IYF-plays are political, they are often deeply personal. Most intimate and private moments were dragged under the limelight and literally held into the audience’s faces. Since the playwrights were not restricted by any censoring, theatre censorship was abolished in 1968 in Britain, and these plays were predominantly performed in small auditoriums, which means an extreme closeness and immediacy between audience and stage, the experience of watching an IYF-play could be exceedingly intense and discomforting. (Cf. Sierz 2001: 7-10, Sierz 2002: 110)

Their rendering of extremes in form and content as well as their relentlessness to force the spectator to see and watch link these plays unquestionably to Artaudian theatre. However, IYF-Theatre does not have Artaud’s aspiration to shape the response of the audience and to provoke a catharsis, but it deliberately confronts them with what is troubling, forbidden or
disturbing in a most intense manner. These plays were not intellectual plays but, as Sierz puts it, more like an “emotional punch” (Sierz 2001: 3). Yet, not everything that was put on stage met these demands and not everything that is shocking is also of artistic value and substance. It is important to differentiate between sensation and sensationalism, between empty shock tactics and a visceral and experimental theatrical performance. Yet those plays that fall into the latter category went deeply under the skin and thus answered Artaud’s claim to affect, disturb and shake the audience emotionally. Aleks Sierz posits that, IYF-Theatre is “a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm” (2001: 4). “[A]t its best”, Sierz further states, “this kind of theatre is so powerful, so visceral, that it forces audiences to react” (2001: 5). To conclude, In-Yer-Face Theatre builds upon the foundation that has been laid half a century before and thus dared to move towards a confrontationalism and extremism in content, form and aesthetics that was exceptional and reached its peak in the Nasty Nineties.

4. Catharsis Revisited: New Perspectives and Interconnections

Film theory adds an interesting aspect to these theatrical concepts and forges a bridge between Aristotle’s concept of ‘catharsis’, Artaud’s cleansing cruelty, Brook’s visible unconscious, Bond’s didactic ‘aggro-effect’, Barker’s induced anxiety and the confrontational theatre of the Nasty Nineties. One of the central concepts of film theory, which is also informed by psychoanalysis, is that the spectator oscillates between a state of identification and objectification, between the modes of seeing the image as ‘self’ and as ‘other’. Identification is a narcissistic process of imagining being more ideal that can also entail masochism, since this ideal can never be reached. Like in the mirror phase Lacan attributed to the Imaginary, the reflection in the mirror appears as an ideal and thus constitutes the illusion of wholeness. Objectification, on the other hand, is an object-oriented process that demands distance to the onscreen image and can thus involve eroticism as well as voyeurism and sadism. In terms of the theatre, and in relation to the theatrical approaches discussed above, this cinematic concept seems crucial in the understanding and the workings of a cathartic or at least affecting audience response. In Imagination, Identification and Catharsis in Theatre and Therapy (1997), Mary Duggan and Roger Grainger also discuss the processes of identification and
objectification and argue that catharsis depends on the process of identification “whereby we are imaginatively united with someone who is not ourself but henceforward belongs to our sense of self” (1997: 81). However, this identification is ‘secondary’ rather than ‘primary’, which means it is identification as a social experience “with regard to someone else rather than simply with them” (ibid.). The objectification of the image, according to Duggan and Grainger, is one of the main functions of theatre because theatre “makes us take immediate account of what is not ourself but has the very greatest relevance to ourself: the other experienced and understood precisely as other” (1997: 85).

To conclude, for a spectator to be affected in the manner Aristotle or Artaud argued for, some degree of identification with the characters of the play is essential. Objectification, in turn, involves a certain distance which allows a critical contemplation of the action on stage. Such a detached evaluation is necessary in particular when it comes to social criticism or the representation of historical or political cruelties. The interplay of both modes is crucial in the theatrical experience because, in the words of Duggan and Grainger, “we are distanced in order to become involved, thought being drawn into action in order to be transformed by feeling” (Duggan and Grainger 1997: 81), in other words, “thought-through-feeling, feeling-through-thought” (ibid.). Furthermore, the processes of identification and objectification enable the spectators to gain an understanding of themselves when confronted with atrocities, violence and brutality as well as of the cruelties happening in the world every day, as the following analyses of three plays by Sarah Kane, Harold Pinter and Martin McDonagh will show.
Love in Extremis: Sarah Kane’s Cleansed

5. Love in Extremis: Sarah Kane’s Cleansed

Tinker        Four.
              Three.
              Two.
              One.
              Zero.
(Cleansed 2001: 109)²

“At the root of experimental theatre”, Aleks Sierz states, is the willingness to put yourself “through hell in order to exorcise your inner demons” (2001: 10). British playwright Sarah Kane does so and leads her audience into dark and painful places that nonetheless sparkle with poetic beauty, tenderness and affection. Kane’s third play Cleansed is an outstanding example of this dualism of extreme brutality and suffering on the one hand and beauty and love on the other. Being the second part of an unfinished trilogy that started with Blasted (1995) and deals with love and hope in extremis, Cleansed was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in London on 30 April 1998 (cf. Kane 2001: 106). Any comments or information on Kane’s personal life or the media reception of her debut play Blasted are here consciously omitted in order to facilitate the focus on the work itself. Cleansed is a one-act play of twenty scenes and is summarised by the blurb of the playtext as follows: “In an institution designed to rid society of its undesirables a group of inmates try to save themselves through love” (qtd. in Sierz 2001: 112).

This group of inmates can be divided into four intertwining relationships that are all marked by the play’s central theme of love. The main relationship is the incestuous and in some way necrophilic bond between Grace and her dead brother Graham. The relationship between the realist Rod and the idealist Carl is marked by romantic love and betrayal, while Grace and Robin have a mother/son as well as teacher/pupil connection. The last of the four story-lines is the asymmetric relationship between an unnamed stripper referred to as Woman and Tinker. Tinker appears as the controlling agency of the play and is also involved in every other relationship or rather circles around them as a hovering danger. Each character in Kane’s Cleansed is in love and governed by love, yet this love is cruelly tested, betrayed and

²Throughout this paper the reference entry for Cleansed will be abbreviated with C.
driven to extremes. In an interview with Claire Armitstead from the *Guardian* Sarah Kane explains her means to render a subject like this, “[i]f you want to write about extreme love, you can only write about it in an extreme way” (Kane on *Cleansed* qtd. in Saunders 2009: 74). In *Cleansed*, Kane keeps her word by having crafted a vivid testimonial of love in extremis.

There are five major literary influences that inspired Kane to this spectacle of love and cruelty. In terms of structure, Kane consciously modelled *Cleansed* after Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck* (1837), in which due to its episodic form and non-chronological plot the scenes are “like balloons that in a way float above ground but at the same time are tied to the earth, rooted but floating” (Kane on *Woyzeck* qtd. in Saunders 2009: 42), something Kane strived to achieve herself. The setting in *Cleansed*, which is divided into The White Room (the university sanatorium), The Red Room (the university sports hall/ torture chamber), The Round Room (the university library), The Black Room (the showers in the sports hall that have been converted into peep-show booths) and the yard “just inside the perimeter fence” (C 107), derives from the station-like setting in August Strindberg’s *Ghost Sonata* (1907), in which the rooms have likewise assigned names and functions. In ‘Love me or kill me’ (2002), Graham Saunders argues that *Cleansed* and the *Ghost Sonata* also share a dreamlike atmosphere that results from the refusal to specify time and place (cf. 2002a: 94). This dreamscape is set against the real world, the one “on the other side of the fence” (C 109, 129) from where only peripheral sounds, such as “the sound of a cricket match in progress” (C 109), “the sound of a football match in progress” (C 129) or the voice of a singing child, drift inside the university ground. According to Saunders, *Cleansed*’s setting is what has become a defining motif in expressionist drama, namely the technique of the *Stationen* drama in which “the use of rooms as places of discovery and revelation for characters constitute a form of ongoing journey or pilgrimage” (Saunders 2002a: 94). Similarly, *Cleansed*’s main character Grace wanders through the rooms of Tinker’s institution, thereby evoking and shedding parts of her self-hood until arriving at the innermost core of the physical and personal space.

In terms of character constellation, Kane was informed by William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (1601). The relationship of Grace and Graham resembles the one of Viola and...

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5 The title of Graham Saunders’ book, ‘Love me or kill me’, is a direct quote from Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed* and is therefore set in italics as well as in quotation marks.
Olivia, who both think their respective brothers dead and obsessively grieve for them. However, in Shakespeare grief becomes the source of comedy, whereas in Kane grief remains a pain-filled pit in which Grace loses herself in order to restore her brother to life. In her delusional state Grace not only resurrects Graham in her imagination but disguises as him and ultimately becomes him. While in *Twelfth Night* there are also cross-dressing and gender identity mix-up motifs, Viola’s dressing up as a man is not done in order to take on the identity of her brother, as Grace does, but is used as a device in Shakespearean comedy whereby the female characters “pass through a state of being men in order to become women” (Stephen Greenblatt qtd. in Saunders 2002a: 95). Moreover, in Shakespeare’s play the gender identities are finally restored, whereas in *Cleansed* even the physical body of Grace is crudely and cruelly transformed into a male body in the end, thereby having completed the embodiment of her brother and the loss of self. The theme of transformation, mixed identities and loss of self- hood is not only exemplified in Grace becoming Graham but can also be traced in the other characters of the play, in particular Robin, Woman and Carl, who in the course of the story obtain different identities from their own, yet not as drastically as Grace. In *Cleansed*, identity or the abandoning of the self becomes a question of sacrifice with the false assumption to thereby gain the object of love.

The loss of self also plays a major role in Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977), another decisive influence on Kane. In an interview she paraphrases Barthes’ comparison between the situation of a rejected lover and that of a prisoner in Dachau and asserts that the connection between the two is the “loss of self. And when you lose yourself where do you go? There’s nowhere to go: it’s actually a kind of madness” (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 76). In another interview she clarifies, “[w]hen you lose the object of love, you have none of the normal resources to fall back on. It can completely destroy you. And very obviously, concentration camps are about dehumanizing people before they are killed” (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 76). In *Cleansed*, Kane grasps this notion literally, as the characters are situated in a location that very much resembles a concentration camp, as well as metaphorically in their pursuit of the respective love object. The dehumanising aspect with which Kane creates the link between imprisonment and infatuation is understood by her as people put “in a situation in which they lose themselves” (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 76).
and, being devoid of a sense of self, get to a state of absolute nihilism. Grace reaches this state of being at the end of the play:

**Grace/Graham**  

Loved  

Me  

Hear a voice or catch a smile turning  
from the mirror You bastard how dare  
you leave me like this.

Felt it.  
Here. Inside. Here.

And when I don’t feel it, it’s pointless.  
Think about getting up it’s pointless.  
Think about eating it’s pointless.  
Think about dressing it’s pointless.  
Think about speaking it’s pointless.  
Think about dying only it’s totally  
fucking pointless.

(C 150)

**Love in Extremis: Sarah Kane’s Cleansed**

Love in extreme states of existence, as mentioned above, is the central theme of *Cleansed*. Not surprisingly, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) with its exploration of the boundaries of love was a direct inspiration to Kane. In Orwell’s dystopia the love between Winston and Julia is not only an act of defiance against a merciless and oppressive system but is also being tested to the extreme by that very system (cf. Saunders 2002a: 92). The question of whether love can endure torture and betrayal also figures prominently in *Cleansed*, in particular in the relationship between Rod and Carl. Kane declares, “both *Blasted* and *Cleansed* are about distressing things which we’d like to think we would survive. If people can still love after that, then love is the most powerful thing” (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2002a: 92). Tinker thereby assumes the role of O’Brien, being torturer, ally and redeemer at the same time, or as it is phrased in *Cleansed*, doctor, friend and dealer. Furthermore, *Cleansed* as well as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* address the issue of how torture hinders the expression of love as well as the difficulty of what can actually be promised in love.
In Scene Two, which is the first scene that features Carl and Rod, Carl promises everlasting love, that he would even die for Rod and swears to him: “That I’ll always love you./ [...] That I’ll never betray you./ [...] That I’ll never lie to you.” (C 110). While Rod might seem cynical and cold-hearted at first glance, replying “You just have.” (C 110), and that he would neither die for him nor can promise him anything, he in fact knows about the fragility and impossibility of such promises. With accepting Carl’s proposal, Rod can only but honestly assert that “I love you now./ I’m with you now./ I’ll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray/ you./ Now./ That’s it. No more. Don’t make me lie to you.” (C 111). He thus emphasises and acknowledges the temporary nature of human feelings as well as the limits of language. Later in the play, it is exactly Carl who breaks his promise and betrays Rod under Tinker’s torture. Thus Carl’s pleading “Not me please not me don’t kill me Rod not/ me don’t kill me ROD NOT ME ROD NOT/ ME” (C 117) directly echoes Winston’s frantic outcry “Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! […] Not me! Julia! Not me!” (Nineteen Eighty-Four 1949: 329). For Winston, the real betrayal lies not in giving information about Julia that was tortured out of him but in stopping loving her. “And yet, in the sense in which he intended the word, he had not betrayed her. He had not stopped loving her; his feelings towards her had remained the same” (Nineteen Eighty-Four 1949: 313). Thus, this cry to put precisely and only the loved person in his stead is the actual and irrevocable betrayal and the end of all love; and this sort of betrayal Kane seizes in Cleansed as well. It is therefore essential to mention Kane’s connection to Nineteen Eighty-Four because Carl’s utterance quoted above reflects all the force Orwell evoked in his novel, enhancing thus Cleansed’s intensity and effect.

Another of Orwell’s motifs that appears in Cleansed is the rat. Being reminiscent of Winston’s worst fear in Room 101, rats are also directly connected to torture in Cleansed as they carry away severed limbs or gnaw at the bleeding stumps. In Scene Eight, “a single rat” (C 129) appears and “scuttles around between Rod and Carl” (C 129). It is their reencounter after Carl has been mutilated by Tinker for the first time and had his tongue cut out. Rod’s utterance “And the rats eat my face” (C 129) as a comment on Carl’s betrayal evokes the

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6 In consideration of the poetic quality of the playtext, I use slashes in direct quotes to indicate a new line as it affects the speed of reading and to convey the lyricism of the playtext.
image of Winston’s personal torture instrument. The lone rat becomes a dozen rats in the following scene featuring Rod and Carl, however being then scorched to death with “The few that remain […] running around frantically” (C 141), culminating in two remaining rats, “one chewing at Grace/Graham’s wounds,/ the other at Carl’s” (C 149) and a deafening squeaking. Again, Kane consciously uses Orwell’s imagery and builds upon the anxiety and tenseness created in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the rendering of the relationship between Rod and Carl. Besides, there is a long history of the rat being used as a symbol for betrayal and disloyalty considering for instance the phrase ‘to rat somebody out’, meaning to betray someone, the idiom ‘to smell a rat’, that is, becoming suspicious that something is wrong about a situation, or the term rat attributed to a person, denoting the he/she is a traitor. Kane uses this motif, however, not only to underline the theme of betrayal and heighten the intensity of her play but also to add a historical and political dimension to it.

The theme of love and betrayal is not the only reverberation of Orwell’s dystopia. As Graham Saunders points out in *About Kane* (2009), also Orwell’s linguistic device of Double-Speak plays into *Cleansed*. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the Ministry of Peace actually conducts war, the Ministry of Love undertakes interrogations and torture, truth means manipulation of information and plenty systematic rationing and starvation. Euphemism or the inversion of the actual meaning of a word or name has also been a common practice of actual totalitarian regimes. Likewise the label ‘university’, the textually alleged location of *Cleansed*, is deceptive and its function reversed. Instead of being an open place of intellectual and personal growth, it has been turned into a confined space ridden by oppression, humiliation and pain. There is, however, one exception where the institution indeed becomes a place of learning. For a short period of time, Robin assumes the role of a student and Grace that of a teacher. Robin, “a nineteen year old boy” (C 113), who has fallen in love with Grace, is taught by her how to count, read and write after she notices that he is illiterate, “Could be pretty soon, me leaving./ Could be in thirty, Tinker said./ Could be – ” (C 115). Hence, Grace explains to Robin, who still wears her clothes, “It’s like talking without your voice. Same words you/ use

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7 It is noteworthy, however, that this information on the setting is provided for the readers of the text and not necessarily the spectators of the performance.
all the time. Each letter corresponds to a/ sound. If you can remember which sound/ corresponds to which letter you can start building/ words.” (C 123).

Yet any act of kindness is relentlessly undermined by the repressive brutality of Tinker and betrayed in the end. When Tinker becomes aware that Robin has bought a box of chocolates for Grace he forces him to eat them all himself and then, as Robin wets himself in distress, he commands, “Clean it up, woman” (C 141), yet only after having rubbed the boy’s face in the puddle. Robin desperately tries to wipe his own urine first with the now empty box of chocolates then with the books that represent his intellectual emancipation and the expression of his affection for Grace. Tinker does not stop here and wordlessly coerces Robin to burn all of the books, the symbol of learning and love, thus completing the betrayal on Grace.

Robin Gracie.
Tinker (Tosses Robin a box of matches.)
Robin (Looks at Tinker.)
Tinker (Looks back at Robin.)
Robin (Piles up the spoiled books and burns them.)
Tinker All of them.

Robin burns as many books as he can and watches them go up in flames.
Grace enters, vacant and tranquilized, with Graham.
She watches.
Robin smiles nervously.

Robin Sorry. I was cold.

Graham leads Grace towards the fire.
She warms her hands from the heat of the flames.

Grace Lovely.
(C 141)

In Robin’s case, his introduction into the linguistic world results not only in his betrayal of his love but eventually also in his death. Upon understanding what letters and especially numbers mean he understands also how long he has to stay in the institution. His initial “Leaving soon. Going to my mum’s” (C 115) and the nonsensical “Could be in thirty” (C 115) is replaced by the knowledge of what ‘thirty’ means, a knowledge he is not able to
bear. Taking Grace’s tights, which he still wears, Robin forms a noose and hangs himself, incessantly uttering “Grace” (C 144), who is not responding. In *Cruelty and Desire in the Modern Theatre* (2011), Laurens De Vos emphasises that Grace not only assumes the role of a teacher but also that of a substitute mother and love object to Robin (cf. 2011: 134-135). Robin, who is still in a pre-Oedipal stage, according to De Vos, longs for the union with the mother, who is also the first Other, and thus attributes a dual role to Grace. This is rendered by Robin uttering, “My mum weren’t my mum and I had to choose/ another, I’d choose you. [...] If I had to get married, I’d marry you.” (C 126). In the Oedipal constellation, as De Vos points out, Graham would assume the role of the father, who prevents the unity between mother and child. When Grace is asked about her former boyfriends by Graham and Robin alike, Graham as well as Grace put an “end to Robin’s Oedipal drive” (De Vos 2011: 135) by simultaneously negating Robin’s question if she will be his girlfriend.

De Vos further argues that Kane “obliges her characters to strive for unconditional love, at the risk of their own lives” (2011: 135). This relentless commitment to complete love that leads to self-annihilation is not only exemplified in Robin but in Rod as well. While initially refusing to make any promises to Carl, it is he who in the end says, “I will always love you./ I will never lie to you./ I will never betray you./ On my life.” (C 142) and actually keeps it. When asked by Tinker who it is going to be, meaning who is going to be either tortured or killed, Rod answers “Me. Not Carl. Me.” (C 142), whereupon his throat is cut and he is allowed to die without being further tortured. It is this attitude of an uncompromising commitment to love in which the nucleus of Kane’s use of cruelty lies. De Vos argues accurately that the closer a character comes to the real, that is, to “the desire that can never be fully satisfied” (2011: 135), the closer they come to annihilation. Robin, though not in a Lacanian understanding, approaches his desire, that is, a union with his m/other/love object Grace. Wearing her clothes, being taught and introduced into the linguistic world by her, brings him closer to his desire. Yet, ultimately it is the unbearable truth of his sentence that leads him to self-annihilation. The only person that could have rescued him, that is, the object of his love Grace, is so heavily sedated that she does not react at all, leaving Robin devoid of her friendship and motherly affection. By losing his object of love thus after gaining the knowledge of his sentence, he has, in Kane’s words, no resources to fall back on and destroys his self.
The searching and longing for the original unity that is central to Lacanian theory and also applicable to Cleansed’s characters may be elucidated with a comparison to Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s The Symposium. While Lacan, to put it simply, assumes this original unity to be with the m/other, it is for Barthes the “total union with the loved being” (2001: 104) that creates wholeness in the human being. Kane’s speculation on the subject in love and the loss of self at a rejection by the object of love also plays into this desire for such a union. In Aristophanes’ narration of a creation myth in which there were initially three sexes, male, female and “androgynous” (cf. Plato 1953), the gods split the human beings in half in order to destroy their power leaving them forever yearning for their other part. The myth purports that every human being was originally a double being consisting of either two men, two women or a man and a woman, and had the form of a sphere, hence being able to move like a gyroscope. Yet, after they were split in two they sought for each other and embraced, “longing to grow into one, they began to die from hunger and self-neglect” (Plato 1953). As the race started to die out, Zeus took pity in the split human beings and turned their genitalia to the front so that they may come as close to a unity as possible and in their “mutual embrace” (Plato 1953) may procreate. “So ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, seeking to make one of two, and to heal the state of man” (Plato 1953). This utterly romantic thought seems farfetched and contradictory to the cruelties exemplified in Cleansed. Yet, Kane considers her characters to be in some way completely romantic (cf. Kane qtd. in Saunders 2002b: 131-132) and dissolves the apparent contradiction by explaining that for her “nihilism is the most extreme form of Romanticism” (ibid.). Plato, Lacan, Barthes and Kane thus meet in their ideas on love and wholeness which are expressed in Cleansed as a striving for love that is equivalent to “the desire and pursuit of the whole” (Plato 1953), and a consequent destruction of the self. In Cleansed, cruelty and love thus seamlessly melt together in the rendering of love in extremis.

5.1. “It’s just the beginning”: The Physicality of Cruelty

In Sarah Kane’s Cleansed there is a plethora of open and explicit cruelty that is directed towards the characters by each other and thus indirectly to the audience as well. The spectator is thereby positioned in the role of the silent witness, unable to avoid or flee from the acts of
violence and yet likewise unable to intervene or prevent them. In the course of the play, there are major and seemingly minor acts of physical, psychological, mental and verbal cruelty which each character, with the exception of Tinker, has to endure. With this, Kane is not only testing the boundaries of British theatre and the limits of representability as such, but she also confronts the audience with what is almost unbearable to watch and yet omnipresent in everyday lives. Kane’s physical cruelties are not mere acts of blunt sensationalism but spring from and hence reflect pressing, contemporary or historical issues that are often too readily blinded out by Western societies. Although she rejects seeing drama as journalism, Kane’s most extreme acts of cruelty derive from real life events. In an interview with Dan Rebellato she explains, “I’ve been so appalled and horrified but similarly compelled that I can’t help but put them [acts of violence] in my plays. […] I really don’t invent very much. […] All you have to do is look at the world around you and there it is.” (Kane in Rebellato 1998: 44’).

There are two conspicuous examples of the representation of such acts of violence in Cleansed that have to be mentioned in this context. One is the suicide of Robin, which has already been mentioned above; the other is the attempted crucifixion of Carl. Both acts of cruelty are based on true events, as Sarah Kane stated in the interview with Rebellato in 1998. According to Kane, the case of Robin, who kills himself after becoming literate and therefore comprehending the length of his sentence, is modelled after an eighteen year old boy who was put on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela. Like Robin, this boy was illiterate and did not understand his sentence of forty-five years imprisonment. Upon being taught to read and write by Mandela and other prisoners and realising what the number of years meant, he hung himself, being likewise unable to bear his fate (cf. Rebellato 1998: 46’). As naming is of importance in Kane’s play, as I will elucidate in subchapter 5.2.1., it seems unlikely that the resemblance between the name ‘Robin’ with ‘Robben Island’ is a mere coincidence.

The other incident that has been viewed as especially cruel by many reviewers of Cleansed is the attempted crucifixion of Carl in Scene Four:

Tinker There’s a vertical passage through your body, a straight line through which an object can pass without immediately killing you. Starts here.

(He touches Carl’s anus.)
Carl (Stiffens with fear.)

Tinker Can take a pole, push it up here, avoiding all major organs, until it emerges here.

(He touches Carl’s right shoulder.)

Die eventually of course. From starvation if nothing else gets you first.

Carl’s trousers are pulled down and a pole is pushed a few inches up his anus.

(C 116-117)

This act of cruelty, as Kane explains, is based on a form of torture Serbian soldiers used against Muslims during the Bosnian War (cf. Rebellato 55’). It could be almost a week until the victims of impalement would die and over hundreds of Muslims were killed in this manner (cf. ibid.). The Bosnian War, which lasted from 1992 to 1995, was very influential for Kane, to say the least. Being, in her own words, “appalled and horrified” (Rebellato 44’) by the war crimes in Bosnia and the prolonged refusal of international politics to intervene, Kane addresses this topical issue of the time in her plays, not only in Cleansed but first and foremost in her debut play Blasted, in which she brought the Bosnian War to England. Being asked about the violence in her plays and in the world at large, Kane declares that, “I tend to think actually anything that can be imagined […] someone somewhere has done” (Rebellato 55’).

According to Kane, violence is the most urgent problem of society and as human beings and needs to be confronted. It is a necessity to “see the things we already know happen” (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 103). Theatre offers a way to present violence differently and thus enables a better understanding of the cruelties committed in the world. This understanding of what it means to be violent and to suffer violence is what Kane strives to achieve with her plays through the implementation of these acts of cruelty (cf. ibid.). Susan Sontag is in line with Kane when she maintains that there is a difference between violence, suffering and pain depicted as journalistic evidence and as being represented in art, in particular through narratives. In Regarding the Pain of Others (2004), she argues, “[h]arrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much
help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand” (2004: 80). However, although Kane makes references to violence that has actually been used, she consciously avoids explicitly specifying these events in her plays in order to avoid their referential limitation to a particular location or situation, be it South Africa, Bosnia or Nazi Germany in the case of *Cleansed*, but resonate beyond their historical and geographical significance (cf. Kane qtd. in Saunders 2002a: 94).

There is a crucial distinction between a violent play on the one hand and a play about violence or that depicts violence on the other. The phrase ‘a violent play’, as Lucy Nevitt rightly points out in *Theatre & Violence* (2013), insinuates that the play itself is an act of violence (cf. 2013: 10). The wording in the description or analysis of a play portraying violent or cruel acts is of particular importance when it comes to Kane’s plays. Many reviews tended to list the acts of cruelty as though they were all that constituted the play; as though, as Nevitt puts it, they were “the ingredients of the play” (2013: 10). However, as Nevitt emphasises, in order to grasp the meaning and significance of the cruelties represented in art, it is essential to “move beyond simple causality” (2013: 49) and consider the circumstances as well as the context in which they are depicted. In *Cleansed*, Kane denies the readers/spectators a causal link of the acts of cruelty a priori and implements them in a suddenness and unexpectedness which further contributes to their haunting and shocking effect (cf. Opel 2001: 384). This results in cruelty being experienced not only on the contentual level but also on the structural level while simultaneously promoting a contemplation of violence as metaphor. Kane’s implementation of cruelty has multiple dimensions that on the whole constitute a compressed fabric of the dramatic world that is *Cleansed*. This is also why some scenes will be discussed more than once in this thesis, however, in varying contexts so as to decode their diverse layers.

What is important to understand in terms of Kane’s cruelty is the translation of metaphorical utterances into physical realities, a strategy that applies to almost all of the cruelties committed in *Cleansed*. Although Tinker’s acts seem arbitrary, unmotivated and open a gap of comprehension at first sight, the explanation for his atrocities is the more harrowing in its simplicity. Tinker takes literally what is meant metaphorically and verifies the validity of what is said and of language; wishes become physical reality; words become
acts. This is what triggers the cruelties committed against Carl and Rod. When Carl affirms that he would die for Rod in Scene Two, “**Tinker is watching**” (C 112). Tinker takes Carl at his word and tests his assertion for its validity. In the subsequent impaling scene, discussed above, Carl betrays his love and is henceforth punished whenever he attempts to beg for forgiveness and to express his love again. This pursuit of expression is also what Kane emphasises in this respect. She notes that, “[i]t’s not about the actual chop, it’s about the person no longer being able to express love with his hands, and what does that mean?” (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 77). A naturalistic depiction of these acts does thus not subserve. On the contrary, as Kane argues, “I think the less naturalistically you show these things, the more likely people are to be thinking, what does this mean?” (ibid.). In other words, in contrast to the utterances of the characters, Kane’s stage directions are not to be taken literally. Some directors have taken up this notion and conducted a deliberately unrealistic, abstract or aesthetically stylised approach to render Carl’s mutilations. In the first performance of *Cleansed*, which was directed by James Macdonald and designed by Jeremy Herbert, blood was represented by red cloth that extruded from the mouth or wounds of amputation; rats were represented by bags (cf. Sierz 2001: 114, Saunders 2002a: 89). Such a rendering enhances the metaphorical implications of Kane’s cruelties and the focus on the question of the meaning of these acts.

While the scenes featuring Rod and Carl comprise mutilation and murder, the acts of cruelty committed against Robin are marked by degradation and psychological and physical torture. In his first scene, Robin is forced to undress in front of Grace, leaving him “*shivering with his/ hands over his genitals*” (C 113). In Scene Seven, Tinker destroys Robin’s attempt to write by setting his sheet of paper on fire; in Scene Fifteen, he forces him to burn all the books, as has been mentioned above. However, the cruellest scene in this respect happens moments earlier. Robin is sitting amidst his books, when Tinker enters and “**pulls Robin up by the hair**”, “**puts a knife to his throat**” (C 138) and verbally assaults him. After noticing the box of chocolates Robin has bought for Grace, Tinker relentlessly forces him to eat the content of the entire box. Again, each act of love, in this case the buying of the box as a token of affection, is destroyed and the ‘guilty’ agent punished. This is indeed one of the cruellest scenes for the audience, for the figure Robin and possibly for the actor playing him.
Altogether 24 pieces of chocolate are tossed at Robin, who is forced to eat one after the other in a rigorously repetitive pattern and cries and wets himself in the process.

Robin *eats the chocolate, choking on his tears.*  
*When he has eaten it, Tinker tosses him another.*  
Robin *eats it, sobbing.*  
Tinker *throws him another.*  
Robin *eats it.*  
Tinker *throws him another.*  
[...,](C 139)

As Saunders points out, the scene was deliberately extended and its cruelty enhanced after the first performance. Initially, according to the play script of 1998, the box contained only twelve chocolates. In the rewrite, another layer was added thus prolonging the act of torture and refuting the audience’s expectation of an end of the ordeal after the first layer of chocolates has been consumed (cf. Saunders 2009: 30). Thus, although Robin is subjected to this act of cruelty, the audience is relentlessly exposed to it, having to find themselves in a position of voyeurism and silent witness. Furthermore, Kane again foregrounds the ambiguity of entities that are usually associated with happiness and pleasure. What was a token of love and joy a moment before is now reversed into utter humiliation, pain and degradation. According to James Macdonald, “Kane wanted people to experience something emotionally before experiencing it intellectually” (qtd. in Saunders 2009: 30-31). This persistent forcing of the audience to look and feel certainly achieves this goal of emotional experience. It is also the prerequisite of a fundamental, intuitive as well as intellectual understanding of these ritualised acts of physical cruelty.

### 5.1.2. Cruel Voices and Painful Silences

The scene discussed above also points towards another dimension of Kane’s implementation of cruelty, that is, language as a means of torture and executor of violence. In *Cleansed*, the physicalisation of words is heightened to the degree that voices literally become perpetrating presences. In Scene Ten, Voices emerge as a choric character, while the group of men from whom they arise remains invisible. In the words of De Vos, “[l]anguage [...] becomes
carnalised; it is turned into a body itself” (2011: 139). These disembodied Voices function as a body and not only abuse Grace verbally, but what is more, they also implement physical violence on her, beat her and rape her. With the same relentlessness as in the scene discussed above, the audience, just as Graham, is only left to watch.

**Grace is hit once on each crack.**

**Grace**  Graham Jesus save me Christ

**Voices**  He can never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) never (crack) save you (crack)

(C 131)

Since in *Cleansed* figures of speech are staged on the body, as has been elucidated above, it seems only consequent that language itself should become a physical presence. Besides, as Deubner points out, the spoken words of the Voices are comprised of assonances, alliterations and rhythms and thus lyrically echo the machine-gun fire at the scene’s climax (cf. 2012: 131). The brutal violence used against Grace aims at destroying her not only physically but also psychologically and mentally. In particular the act of rape involves, in addition to physical degradation and cruelty, psychological trauma. The Voices reappear in Scene Twelve where they further pursue Grace’s destruction, this time mentally as they call for “Frazzl[ing] it out” (C 135) right before she receives electro-shocks and her “body is thrown in rigid shock as bits of her brain are burnt out” (C 135). De Vos quotes Hillary Chute who notes that, “Kane’s plays utilise, mobilise, redirect, redeploy, make rhythmic and make violent the designified ‘flatness’ of language in its range of cultural locations, dramatising and performing its lack, and the layers of language that constitute, represent, enact and violate subjectivity” (Chute qtd. in De Vos 2011: 140). Furthermore, since the Voices apparently remain unheard by Tinker, it could be assumed that they are constituted as a fragment of Grace’s own identity which aims at her own destruction. Also Robin states to have heard an inner “Voice” (C 115) that told him to kill himself. This aspect of self-destruction and of the fragmented self will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapter.
Scene Ten also suggests another aspect of verbal cruelty, that is, fear and pain induced by the announcement of an act of violence. While Graham advises Grace to mentally prepare herself for the pain in order to become immune to it, “Switch off your head […] If you know it’s coming you’re prepared./ If you know it’s coming/ […] You can surf it” (C 132), Tinker uses verbal suggestion as a means of torture in itself. In Scene Four, that is the impalement scene, Tinker never actually fully carries out his threat of crucifying Carl. Yet, the careful and detailed description of the act alone causes Carl to imagine the pain before he can physically experience it and thus evokes enough panic and fear in him to denounce his lover Rod. The announcement of torture is already a component of torture. In other words, language itself suffices to be an act of torture and cruelty. Similarly, insults and verbal assaults are more than words of description. Nevitt notes that, “[t]he abusive term is being used not to describe the person but to attack and oppress them. It isn’t a description but an action, a violent act” (2013: 30). In Cleansed, the Voices as well as Tinker perform such violent acts multiple times, Tinker in particular against Robin and the Woman, the Voices against Grace. In one instance, Tinker even verbally rapes the Woman as he coerces her to masturbate in front of him by commanding, “OPEN YOUR FUCKING LEGS./ […] TOUCH FUCKING TOUCH.” (C 137), while she pleads “Don’t do this.” (C 137). Nevitt further argues, “[t]he hateful language therefore constitutes oppression. It does not simply describe or refer to hatred or abuse; it embodies hatred and abuse, and its repetition creates and reiterates the circumstances that render some people powerful and others oppressed” (ibid). Correspondingly, the Voices and Tinker use abusive language as a means of degradation as well as to establish power over others.

In addition to voices as perpetrators, torture through verbal suggestion and verbal assaults as acts of violence, Kane employs a lyrical minimalism that implements cruelty and pain through silences. In The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World (1985), Elaine Scarry argues that there is no language of pain only a verbal approximation by means of comparison or similes, through, as Scarry terms it, a ‘language of agency’. Hence, words such as ‘burning’, ‘pounding’, ‘boring’, ‘shooting’ or ‘splitting’ may be used to describe one’s pain or phrases like ‘It feels as if I’m stabbed in the stomach’ or ‘It feels as if my head is being hit with a hammer’, as Nevitt notes (cf. 2013: 65). According to Scarry, pain is not only invisible but cannot be accurately described or communicated. Thus, the pain of another
person is impossible to be imaged or understood, especially when visible signs of pain such as physical wounds are absent (cf. Nevitt 2013: 64-65). The notion of pain having no words is also taken up by Laurens De Vos, who argues with reference to Scarry that “pain is something that reaches beyond language. It cannot be controlled and contained by words” (2011: 139). As Scarry puts it, “[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (Scarry 1985: 4). Also Anna Opel is in line with this concept when she argues that extreme experiences like pain or pleasure lie beyond language (cf. Opel 2002: 154). In other words, pain exceeds language and simultaneously brings us back to a state before language, that is, sounds as immediate expression like in infancy.

The acts of cruelty implemented in *Cleansed* are certainly such extreme experiences of which Opel speaks and contain such a tremendous amount of pain that they lie beyond language and are therefore verbally omitted. Thus, in addition or in contrast to embodied voices, there are various instances in *Cleansed* in which the characters are voiceless, fall silent or are silenced. The most obvious case is that of Carl, whose tongue is cut out as he tries to apologise to Rod for his betrayal. Henceforth, Carl is rendered speechless, but “waves his arms, his mouth open, full of blood, no sound emerging” (C 118); in Scene Eight he “Looks at Rod. He opens his mouth. No sound comes out.” (C 129) and again “Tries to speak. Nothing.” (C 129). In the final scene, after realising that his penis has been transplanted onto Grace, Carl “lets out a silent scream” (C 146). Robin, who is not fully able to comprehend the meanings of words, remains silent in his inability to express himself verbally, as the stage directions read for him: “Opens his mouth to answer but can’t think of anything to say.” (C 115); “Tries to speak. Nothing” (C 115). After her surgical transformation, Grace is unable to find her voice and to articulate herself but is only able to stammer “F– F– F– ” (C 145). Also Graham as well as the Woman fall silent when they try to verbally express their feelings at being with their loved one as indicated by ellipses, “I used to … think about you and…/ I used t… wish it was you when I …/ Used to…” (C 120). Rather than using words the characters stare, “Pause. They look at each other in silence.” (C 119), and the stage directions various times read: “Silence” (C 107, 109, 125, 147, 150) or “Pause” (C 108, 112, 115, 119, 149). In *Cleansed*, Kane uses silences in order to render that which is inexpressible, unrepresentable;
pain or terror which exceeds language and can only be understood on an abstract non-verbal level. In particular Carl’s silent scream is an ultimate expression of pain that, without using words or even sounds, can be understood universally. Besides, the inability to communicate pain or pleasure verbally also links up with the impossibility of expressing one’s feelings in their entirety, which already has been hinted at and will further be elucidated in chapter 5.3..

5.2. “Nobody kills themself here”: Destructing the Self

The first scene of Cleansed functions as a form of prelude to the entire play; it literally counts down to start the action as exemplified by the very first quote and introduces the reader and spectator to Kane’s use of cruelty. Not only does this scene explicitly and vividly depict a taboo subject both in real life as well as on stage, that is, drug abuse including death by overdose, but it also does so in the most heightened way possible, entailing a mass of implications. This scene is the first instance in which a character aims for his/her own destruction and asks for cruelty committed against him/her in order to achieve this objective. The visually arresting and painful act of cruelty that is on the surface of the scene is the injection of heroin into Graham’s eye. On various levels, the eye is the most sensitive spot of the human body, physically and psychologically, considering for instance the notion of being blinded to become metaphorically seeing, the phrase ‘to stare death in the face’ or the proverb of the eyes as windows to the soul. A violent penetration of this body site reflects and simultaneously conducts the forceful penetration of the personal comfort zone of the witness of the scene, that is, the spectator or the reader, respectively – as made possible through the process of identification and objectification. On a deeper level, this act of cruelty is only the visible mark of the desire for self-annihilation. Like the fruiting body of a fungus this act of cruelty stands out for the world to see, yet the spores or source of it is Graham’s wish not to be. He is the first figure in Cleansed who declares, “I want out” (C 107). This ‘out’ denotes out of the enclosed space of the institution, out of the enclosed space of the body and out of one’s self. Tinker, the redeemer, the dealer and doctor, “adds another large lump of smack to the spoon. […] adds lemon juice […] fills the syringe” (C 108) and grants Graham’s wish. It is not an overdose by accident but a conscious decision to move beyond the limits and
Love in Extremis: Sarah Kane’s Cleansed

destruct body and self. Graham himself states in this first scene, “I know my limits” (C 107). It is cruelty committed against one’s self with the act being executed by another party.

Indeed, this first act of cruelty is, in Tinker’s words, “just the beginning” (C 108). Tinker proves to be the redeemer and perpetrator not only in Graham’s case but also in the other instances of self-destruction in the play. The central figure in terms of self-annihilation is Grace. In contrast to her brother Graham, it is not so much the wish of not being anymore that constitutes Grace’s primary desire but rather of being someone else, or more precisely, to be the object of her love Graham. The fact that her self becomes obliterated in the process of becoming this Other appears to be a mere side effect, yet it is unquestionably the most critical loss as has already been hinted at by Barthes. Grace’s destruction of her self-hood is not an immediate and abrupt act as it is in Graham’s case but systematic and gradual. While Graham wants ‘out’, Grace wants ‘in’, which in the first instance means the inside of the secured space of the institution, where Tinker does not “let anything leave the grounds” (C 113). Grace demands to see her dead brother’s clothes, which are worn by Robin, and commands him to exchange them with hers. When Grace is fully dressed in her brother’s clothes, she breaks down and collapses and expresses her wish to stay in Graham’s stead by declaring, “I look like him. Say you thought I was a man” (C 114). With the exchange of clothes, Grace sheds the first part of her self and obtains Graham’s outward appearance, his ‘skin’, as well as his spatial position in the institution. Besides, this act introduces not only Grace’s self-destruction but also the beginning multiplicity of Grace that is indicated by Robin dressing in Grace’s clothes.

As Paula Deubner points out, Grace transcends the limits of her own identity and adjusts her exterior alongside her inside (cf. 2012: 141). In a state that knows no limits and where wishes are granted for better or worse, Grace awakes with Graham being clean and sitting at her bedside. He affirms, “More like me than I ever was” (C 119) before he dances “a dance of love for Grace” (C 119). In this dance, Grace mirrors and incorporates Graham’s movements and voice so that they become hers and thus further reduces the alterity between her and her brother.

Grace dances opposite him, copying his movements.
Gradually, she takes on the masculinity of his movement, his facial
Finally, she no longer has to watch him – she mirrors him perfectly as they dance exactly in time. When she speaks, her voice is more like his.

Graham You’re good at this.

Grace Good at this.

Graham Very good.

Grace Very good.

Graham So / very very good.

Grace Very very good.

(C 119)

According to Deubner, this moment does both establish identity and extinguish it (cf. 2012: 141). Grace further approximates her new identity as Graham by touching Graham’s lips, putting her finger in his mouth and kissing him. The scene culminates in Graham and Grace having sexual intercourse, that is, as Aristophanes’ myth narrates, the closest two separate individuals physically can be together. This separation is also resolved, at first mentally, as indicated by Grace’s answer to Robin’s question what she would change if she could, “My body. So it looked like it feels./ Graham outside like Graham inside” (C 126), which signifies that she already mentally sees herself as Graham, as well as on a physical level. In Scene Ten, Grace is beaten and raped by an unseen group of men during which she keeps eye contact with Graham, who holds her head between her hands. The subsequent stage direction reads: “Graham presses his hands onto Grace and her clothes turn/ red where he touches, blood seeping through./ Simultaneously, his own body begins to bleed in the same places.” (C 132). This image not only evokes the notion of stigmata, the highest Christian symbol for (self-)sacrifice, suffering and identification, but also the advanced emotional and bodily fusion between Grace and Graham. Like in the dancing scene before, a moment of mirroring is followed by autonomous incorporation. Hence, in the subsequent scene Grace states, “My balls hurt” (C 134), which implies that she now feels the male body on a psychological level. The only stage that remains in completing the process of becoming the Other is to fulfil Grace’s wish and surgically transform her body “So it looked like it feels” (C 126).
As in Graham’s case, this act of cruelty is an act of utter self-destruction which is conducted by another person – Tinker. In Scene Eighteen, the surgical correction has already been performed. Grace’s breasts have been removed and Carl’s penis has been stitched onto Grace. Grace has not only been disposed of her female parts but also of the capacity for speech as she can only stammer, “F– F–” (C 144). Tinker, in his ambiguous role as redeemer and perpetrator, comments on her new appearance like a godlike authority who grants wishes for those in his grace, “Nice-looking lad./ Like your brother./ I hope you – / What you wanted.” (C 144). As though she was his creation he names her, “Can’t call you Grace any more./ Call you … Graham. I’ll call you Graham” (C 146), and thus concludes her transformation. Grace finds her voice and can finally pronounce what she wants to express, “Felt it.” (C 146). As Grace states in her final monologue, which has been quoted above, this ‘feeling it’ is central to her existence and gives sense to life and death, because, as she says, “when I don’t feel it, it’s pointless” (C 150) (cf. Opel 2002: 149).

Scene Eighteen marks the point of utter dissolution and disappearance of Grace’s self in the Other, of the subject in the object. In the words of Bruno Bettelheim whom Barthes quotes, it is a situation “without remainder, without return: I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever.” (2001: 49). Grace’s destruction of self, however, connotes a double loss. Through becoming Graham, Grace loses not only herself but in fact also her brother or the illusion of him. Thus, both, Tinker and Graham bid Grace goodbye. In the last scene, the stage directions no longer differentiate between Grace and Graham; the destruction of self and the rebirth as Other has been completed; a union between the subject in love and the object of love reached. De Vos refers to Alenka Zupančič who argues that the real might be reached either as the unimaginable other or as the Same (cf. 2011: 127). Grace has annihilated her self and thus arrived at the real as she entered a state of being simultaneously the Other and the Same. Now, Grace has the absolute reassurance that her loved object will always be here, “Here now./ Safe on the other side and here./ Graham./ […]/ Always be here./ Thank you, Doctor.” (C 150). Grace’s last words, “Help me” (C 150) thus lack a point of reference since there is no self, no ‘me’ left any longer. Kane implements these acts of cruelty not only as a visible symbol for a self-destructive drive, for cruelty committed against one’s
own self, but by doing so also trespasses the taboo of sex and incest represented on stage as well as the boundaries of gender and identity.

Robin is another character in *Cleansed* who destroys himself as has been elucidated above. Yet, there are some differences to the case of Grace and Graham. On the one hand, Robin commits the act of suicide himself, the reasons for which have been explained above, while in Graham and Grace’s case there is an external person who executes the destroying act. In Robin’s case there is rather a not-acting, a cruel passivity that leads to his annihilation. While Grace remains utterly apathetic to Robin calling her, Graham takes his hand and holds eye contact with him, similarly to Grace when she is raped. Graham’s intervention as he pulls at Robin’s legs, although ambiguous, seems to be an act of mercy rather than of malevolence. However, in contrast to Grace and Graham, Robin’s suicide, albeit a conscious act, is avoidable, since it is committed out of desperation rather than determination. This is demonstrated by his initial wish to be as indicated by the following lines: “Nobody kills themself here. […] Nobody wants to die. […] I don’t want to die do you want to die?” (*C* 115). Furthermore, right from the beginning, Robin’s identity is dependent on and determined by at first Graham and then Grace. Robin is linked to both by wearing their clothes and he also actively creates and affirms this relation. In the conversation about wishes, Robin declares that his only wish would be that Graham was alive again and insists upon Grace’s objection that Graham was indeed in his life because “They gave [him] his clothes” (*C* 126). As Grace becomes a double of Graham, Robin becomes a double of Grace. However, between the poles of Grace, Graham and Tinker, he is not able to establish an autonomous, stable sense of self that can survive. Thus, with his suicide, not only Robin’s self is destroyed but, in a way, another part of Grace is shed alongside it.

The character of Carl has also to be mentioned in this respect. In his case, the destruction of identity is only self-induced in so far as he commits himself to Rod, which in Rod’s eyes equals “suicide” (*C* 109) – which eventually proves to be true due to Tinker. As Carl’s body is reduced limb by limb and he is stripped of everything outward that constitutes his self, as exemplified by tongue, hands, feet and penis, as well as his love object Rod, Carl in the end also assumes a fragment of Grace’s identity. The cross-dressing motif that has been established with Grace and Robin is further extended to Carl. As Grace dresses in Graham’s
clothes and Robin in Grace’s, so Carl in the last scene is dressed in Robin’s clothes, that is, “Grace’s (women’s) clothes” (C 149). Metaphorically speaking, he has taken on her skin, like Grace took on Graham’s. Reduced in this way all that is left for Carl is “crying” (C 150, 151) and reaching out to Grace/Graham in his unbroken need to make genuine human contact. This is also the core of Kane’s play, as she states, “[t]hey [the characters in Cleansed] are all emanating great love and need. The obstacles in the way are extremely unpleasant, but that’s not what the play is about. Because what drives people is need, not the obstacle” (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 78). Chapter 5.3. will be dealing with this aspect in more detail.

5.2.1. “Sweetheart honey baby”: The Importance of Naming

For the characters in Cleansed there is a discrepancy between their respective identities and the way they are seen. As a logical consequence, the characters also insist on being addressed by their proper name. Anna Opel supports this assumption when she argues that the figures seem to claim to be named as those whom they feel to be without being determined by the ideas of others (cf. 2002: 132). Hence, Tinker in the very first scene claims, “I’m a dealer not a doctor.” (C 107) only to later tell the Woman, “I’m a doctor.” (C 122). Both, Grace and Graham, express their gratitude for fulfilling their wishes by telling Tinker, “Thank you, Doctor.” (C 108, 150). Likewise Rod has to remind his boyfriend Carl to call him by his name when he nicknames him ‘Baby’, “Sweetheart honey baby I have a name. You love me/ so much why can’t you remember my name?” (C 110). Grace corrects Robin when he addresses her with ‘Miss’ and later reminds him again, “I have a name” (C 124), which she also teaches him to spell. When Grace has lost her identity, she does not name herself anymore but is named by Tinker who baptises her Graham. The Woman in the peep-show booth, who has no name at all, is also called Grace by Tinker, “I’ll give you whatever you want, Grace.” (C 123). In this context, the nameless Woman becomes Grace to some extent as Tinker projects his love for the unattainable Grace onto her and thus imposes Grace’s identity upon her. In their last scene, that is Scene Nineteen, they even take on the positions of Grace and Graham as their sexual intercourse mirrors at times – including the exact same wording – Grace and Graham’s love act in Scene Five. The scene is closed with the stripper telling Tinker her name was Grace. As Grace sheds parts of her self throughout the play, it seems to flourish
elsewhere instead. Grace’s identity is multiplied in the Woman who dances for Tinker as well as in Robin, who dresses in Grace’s clothes, is addressed as ‘woman’ by Tinker and hangs himself with the tights of his object of love. Also Carl from whom everything has been taken, including his identity, is dressed in Robin’s/Grace’s clothes as the dazzling light blinds everything out. In Cleansed, naming means establishing and controlling identity, one that is either chosen by the respective characters themselves or assigned to them by others. Furthermore, naming marks the difference between life and death. Carl’s naming of Rod when tortured by Tinker executes his betrayal. Rod refuses to give a name when he is put in the same situation and refers to himself instead. By calling Grace Graham in the end, Tinker seals the loss of Grace’s identity.

Besides, the names as such, Grace, Robin, Tinker as well as the title Cleansed, are more than a way of designating someone or something. Rather, they ascribe qualities or carry historical, religious and political implications. The name Tinker does not only mirror his dilettante attempt to physically transform Grace, by calling this cruel and ambiguous figure Tinker, it is presumed that Kane may have taken revenge on the theatre critic Jack Tinker who had reviewed her first play. Robin is not only a unisex name, he is a unisex character, assuming parts of both Graham’s and Grace’s identity. The name Grace entails various implications, for instance in terms of describing a specific kind of beauty or attractive quality, or in a religious context where it can refer to being in favour of a divine power or being redeemed by that power. The notion of redemption also plays into the multiple meanings of the title of the play. The word ‘cleansed’ has positive and negative connotations, depending on the context in which it is used. On a personal level, ‘cleansed’ can refer to emotional purification, to redemptive love as well as to the destruction of self-hood. On a political level, ‘to cleanse’ conjures up the atrocity of physical slaughter as in ethnic cleansing which happened in the Bosnian War. The literality of Kane’s names matches the way casually or thoughtlessly spoken words are taken literally and implemented into acts. The insistence on accurate appellation also reflects the cautiousness or even scepticism towards language as a means of conveying emotional sensibilities that is inherent in Cleansed’s characters. This feeling of necessity for verbal precision is also exemplified by the various repetitions of words and sentences in Cleansed. In Sprachkörper (2002), Anna Opel points out that in Cleansed it seems that language emanates a possible hazard and that only with a trenchant use
of language truth could be attained (cf. 2002: 151). In Cleansed language has a weapon-like quality, that is, the potential to injure or destroy.

5.3. “Lovely”: Beauty and Love as Purifying Forces

In Cleansed, acts of cruelty, suffering and destruction are seamlessly intertwined with tokens of utter beauty and genuine love, which allows the play to obtain a redemptive quality. In Scene One, for instance, the snow adds an uncanny beauty and serenity to Graham’s distressing assisted suicide. In all its cruelty it is in particular Carl’s declarations of love which stand out as a testimonial of love in extremis. The more Carl’s means of expression are curtailed the more desperately he tries to communicate his love. When Tinker has cut off Carl’s tongue Carl writes in the sand in front of Rod “Say you forgive me” (C 129); when his hands are cut off, he offers “a dance of love for Rod” (C 136) which is accompanied by The Beatles’ song “Things We Said Today”; when his feet are cut off, Carl hugs and kisses Rod and makes love to him. As Opel notes, this is a transcending moment of unity that stands in contrast to physical and psychological cruelty (cf. 2002: 150). After enduring betrayal and suffering, love still prevails as Rod revises his declaration of love, “I will always love you” (C 142; my emphasis) and “They hug tightly, then go to sleep wrapped around each other” (C 142). Like the Beatle’s song says, “Love is here to stay and that's enough”. The motif of the ring that has played into their relationship throughout the play, with the ring being a symbol of unity and everlasting love, comes to stand for Carl and Rod’s union as a pair of lovers and for the incorporation of the Other. Even in the worst event, that is the death of the beloved as Tinker cuts Rod’s throat, there is boundless affection, beauty and hope which is exemplified by the simple but powerful stage direction “He is held.” (C 142).

A song also accents Grace and Graham’s relationship, namely “You Are My Sunshine” by Jim Davis and Charles Mitchell. This intertextual reference is exceptionally fitting for Cleansed, firstly, because it refers to the recurring motifs of the sun, light and burning and thus by extension to the naming of the play; and, secondly, because its lyrics, in particular the line “You'll never know dear, how much I love you”, reflect the impossibility of expressing and conveying one’s love in its entirety that is so central to Cleansed. The sun
becomes the symbol of Grace and Graham’s rapport. Graham not only calls Grace “Sunshine” (C 118, 134), but also a sunflower “bursts through the floor and grows above their heads” (C 120) when they complete their act of love and thus becomes the epitome of their love. The yellowness of the sun and of the sunflower is resumed in Scene Ten. It is the scene in which Grace is brutally and relentlessly beaten and raped by the Voices. At its climax, that is the several minutes lasting stream of gunfire which shoots the wall to pieces so that “huge chunks of blaster and brick are blown from the wall” (C 133), “Graham shields Grace’s body with his own, and holds her head between his hands” (C 133). When the gunfire finally ceases, he “uncovers Grace’s face and looks at her” (C 133) and the entire ground becomes immersed in daffodils. As the stage directions read: “They [daffodils] burst upwards, their yellow covering the entire stage” (C 133).

Every time the sun comes up, literally or as represented by flowers, songs or the warmth of a fire, Graham or Grace remarks: “Lovely” (C 121, 133, 141). Indeed, it is sheer loveliness that pits itself against the cruelties and atrocities committed. When Robin learns to write Grace’s name, he is asked what the marks are on the piece of paper. Robin answers, “Flower.” (C 128) and adds, “She smells like a flower” (C 129). Grace is the flower, the sun and the sunflower that turns towards the sun. In Scene Twelve, Grace lies sunbathing in “a tiny shaft of light” (C 134). Yet, as the term ‘cleansed’ has an ambiguous meaning or the box of chocolates came to signify, love and suffering are never totally disconnected in Cleansed. Likewise has the sun a dangerous and threatening quality. The scene ends with Grace getting electro-shocks and “The shaft of light grows bigger until it engulfs them all. It becomes blinding” (C 135). Also in the final moments of the play the sun comes up, “gets brighter and brighter” (C 151) until the light is blinding. White light is the combination and inclusion of all colours of the spectrum. Similarly is Grace, the epitomised ‘sunshine’, the instance which combines and internalises all opposites and sometimes sheds rays of light on someone else, like Robin, the Woman, Carl or Graham, who is also nothing other than a fragment of her identity.

The character who is truly redeemed in the end appears to be Tinker. As David Greig points out in his introduction to the Complete Plays, “Kane finds in Tinker, whose actions are psychotically wicked, the same humanity that she finds in the characters who suffer his
torments” (Kane 2001: xii). Although Tinker is the executor of most of the torture, there are various moments of tenderness. So when Grace is sedated for the first time by Tinker, he “strokes her hair” (C 113); when Carl is unconscious after being beaten – which is initiated by Tinker – he “kisses Carl’s face gently” (C 116), which is repeated after Grace’s operation: Tinker “kisses Grace very gently” (C 146). What becomes apparent, however, is that Tinker is only able to perform these acts of love when the recipient is in a state of oblivion. Although Tinker is continuously watching the couples from the distance, he “(Looks away.)” (C 108) or “looks at the floor” (C 113) when he is directly confronted with genuine human contact, i.e., in De Vos words, with “human vulnerability, affection, friendliness, or sexuality” (2011: 130). De Vos further notes that Tinker “cannot bear the sight of the human body unless he finds himself in a superior position” (ibid.). Only in the last scene with the Woman Tinker can break his self-constructed boundaries and is able to stand to look her in the eye and declare his love. This is mirrored by the Woman breaking out of the confined space of the partition. Only now can she approach him, or can he be approached, respectively. However, Tinker’s catharsis is an ambiguous one, considering the destructive quality of love and the impossibility to communicate one’s feelings in their entirety as exemplified by the other characters. As all characters seem to have reached a dead end, a point of neither being able to return nor moving forward, Tinker, in the words of Deubner, lapses into this circular roundel of the cruelty of love (cf. 2012: 146) as the deafening sound of squeaking rats and the blinding light engulfs them all.

While reviewers have mostly listed the acts of cruelty in Cleansed, one could as easily list the acts of love. The dances of love, which are both an expression of love as well as a gift to the beloved, the kissing, the gentle stroking of the other’s hair, the acts of physical love, the holding of hands or holding the other in one’s arms, the warmth of the sunlight, the flowers and songs - these moments of love, beauty and tenderness withstand the events of harrowing cruelty that are implemented in Cleansed. The concomitance of love and cruelty in this play as well as the mode of positioning the reader/spectator to bear witness to these acts of both extremes constitute not only an emotionally forceful and intense theatrical experience but one that has a cathartic or cleansing effect on the audience. Kane explains the reason for implementing these acts of cruelty as follows:
There’s only the same danger of overdose in the theatre as there is in life. The choice is either to represent it, or not to represent it. I’ve chosen to represent it because sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality. If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future, because experience engraves lessons on our heart through suffering. (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 84-85)

In consideration of Scarry and Nevitt’s contemplations on pain, I argue that Kane’s cruelty is likewise visually unrepresentable and verbally inexpressible. The cruelty in Cleansed is ultimately an inner cruelty that has no representation in images or in words. What is possible, however, and this is in fact what Kane does, is an approximation through comparisons, through mirroring or echoing of other sources, or, in other words, through a mode of agency. Thus, since Kane’s (inner) cruelty has no images or words in themselves and is therefore not expressible as such, it functions like a mirror that reflects the violence that is there in the world at large. To put it differently, the cruelty Kane implements and discusses in Cleansed is there but not representable; it is as though its surface was a mirror that displays the actual cruelties of the world and appears as such to us. This means that truisms like “I would die for you” are used, because there are no words for the feelings that actually are in need of being expressed. Similarly, Kane uses actually committed cruelties, such as impalement, suicide, rape and torture to stand for the (inner) cruelties that defy representation. Thus, the visible acts of cruelty in the play, that is, torture, mutilation, murder, and so forth are the visible manifestations of the inner cruelty Kane actually implements and gives the form of the cruelties of the external, actual world.

This technique results in a multidimensional cruelty in Kane’s play, not only in terms of visible and invisible, inner and outer cruelty, but also in a multidimensionality on the surface level alone. Kane uses “theatrical imagery to add a further dimension to linguistic meaning” (Saunders 2002a: 88), and vice versa, and furthermore contrasts both by extending meaning to its opposites and highlighting the ambiguous nature of entities. In regard to violence in the theatre, Kane argues that, “I think if we want a theatre – and I do – which is able to deal with the full range of human emotions, then it must be able to represent the full range of human experience – no matter how violent and supposedly degrading that is” (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 82). Paula Deubner also notes that the connecting principle in terms of
content is that of the coexistence of violence and tenderness, with both being often symbolized in a single word, image or act simultaneously (cf. 2012: 129). Furthermore, each replica relates to another, each action and image implies and refers to another and all three elements, replica, action and image, finds its correspondence in each other, that is, a “physicalisation of lyrical imagery” (Greig in Kane 2001: xii) (cf. Deubner 2012: 129). In this way, Kane does not only make aware of the cruelties in the world and enhance an understanding of violence as such but also furthers a contemplation of violence as metaphor by compressing content, image, language, and action in a highly poetic form that is simultaneously massive and light, personal, political, and symbolic and contains a distilled beauty and intensity.

In this remarkable union of condensed language, ritualized cruelty, love and pain in extremis and an extraordinary theatrical imagery Kane meets Barker’s ‘Theatre of Catastrophe’ as well as Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’. De Vos notes that “the Theatre of Cruelty and tragedy explore the borders of humanity” (2011: 26), limits Kane likewise tests and even oversteps in her plays. Barker argues that tragedy is the “darkest and yet simultaneously the most life-affirming [of all art forms], for precisely by standing so close to the rim of the abyss it delivers expression to the inexpressible” (Barker qtd. in Saunders 2002b: 131). Kane herself once declared to be a fan of Joy Division and elucidates, “[t]o create something out of despair is for me the most hopeful life-affirming thing a person can do” (Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 105) corresponding thus with Barker. The reference to the British band seems very fitting for Kane’s work. In particular their song “Love Will Tear Us Apart” (1980) seems to paraphrase Cleansed, where love literally as well as metaphorically tears people apart. In accordance with this line of thought, Graham Saunders comments on Barker’s statement that “[n]ot only do all of Kane’s characters stand close to the ‘rim of the abyss’, but they often launch themselves into the abyss itself” (2002b: 131). In the case of Cleansed, it is not a question of “Love me or kill me” (C 135), like Grace asks for, but it is always both. Furthermore, De Vos notes that “[t]he idea of the Theatre of Cruelty […] involves bridging the rupture between body and language, between things and words and thus attaining a divine position where all opposites have merged” (2011: 60). In Cleansed, Kane achieves such a cathartic union by deliberately and relentlessly confronting herself, her
characters, the actors as well as the audience with extreme cruelties and taboos, yet simultaneously immersing them in love, compassion and beauty.
6. Lulled into Danger: Harold Pinter’s *The Hothouse*

GIBBS

[...] Now, Lamb, what I’d like is for you to help us with some little tests. Will you do that?

LAMB

Tests? I’d be delighted. That’s what I hoped I’d be doing when I first came down here.

(*The Hothouse* 1980: 238)\(^8\)

In contrast to Sarah Kane’s verbal minimalism, Harold Pinter floods his audience with words. While Kane seeks to reach an ultimate truth of expression through utter precision and scarcity in language, Pinter uses a torrent of words in order to bury true intention and meaning underneath it – left to be excavated by the audience. The characters in *Cleansed* try to convey their innermost feelings with words; Pinter’s characters use words in order to hide them. In this gush of words language becomes a labyrinth, which leads audience and characters alike either to frustrating dead ends or dangerous escalation. In Pinter’s *The Hothouse*, words are weapons used to attack or to defend and, as Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson put it, “barbs to protect the wired enclosure of the self” (1983: 12) or to build prisons for the verbal opponent. Hierarchical order, bureaucratic structures and the dominance over another person are conducted by as well as mirrored through language. Yet, the true cruelty of it runs in the undercurrent of speech. However, physical violence is not omitted but erupts when dialogues escalate and the menace underneath surfaces. Similar to *Cleansed*, Pinter’s *The Hothouse* is set in a false sanctuary, an obscure “rest home” (*HH* 232) of institutionalised torture by those in power for those without it for the sake of ‘humanity’ (cf. *HH* 214). The focus, however, is on those presumably in power, the staff members, while the patients or rather inmates remain voiceless and invisible. Thus, *The Hothouse* is not only a fiercely dark-humoured work about verbal violence, hierarchical structures and bureaucratic cruelty but also one which addresses the issues of actual political imprisonment, torture and murder, the abuse of power and the corruption of state authority.

\(^8\) Throughout this paper the reference entry for *The Hothouse* will be abbreviated with *HH*. 

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Harold Pinter wrote his two-act play *The Hothouse* in 1958, however, decided against publishing it and put it aside. Instead he continued his dramatic career with *The Caretaker* (1959) and only came back to his shelved fifth play in 1979. After slight changes, “mainly cuts” (Pinter in *HH* 186), according to Pinter, *The Hothouse* was first performed in 1980 in the Hampstead Theatre, London. In the accompanying booklet to the play performed at the Trafalgar Studio One in 2013, theatre critic Matt Trueman writes that *The Hothouse* is Pinter’s “dark farce about state institution designed, perhaps, to curb – or rather castrate – social dissidence” (*The Hothouse Booklet* 2013). In fact, Pinter changed his mind about staging the play because, as he explains in a 1982 interview, “[i]t was fantasy when I wrote it, but now it has become […] far more relevant. Reality has overtaken it” (Pinter qtd. in *The Hothouse Booklet* 2013). His utterance refers to the revelation of political dissidents being abused and thus silenced in psychiatric institutions in the Soviet Union (cf. Shami Chakrabarti in *The Hothouse Booklet* 2013). The people in the ‘care’ of Roote, Gibbs, Lush and Miss Cutts are also “not criminals” nor “any Tom, Dick or…or…er…Harry” but “people specially recommended by the Ministry” (*HH* 197), who have neither a voice nor the power to speak for themselves but are at the mercy of a rigid and corrupted officially sanctioned hierarchical system. The following chapters discuss the aspects of institutionalised dehumanisation, bureaucratic cruelty and the unrelenting struggle for supremacy, as well as language abused as weapon and as origin of torture and physical violence in Harold Pinter’s *The Hothouse*.

6.1. “*Someone hasn’t been sending in his report*”: The Cruelty of Bureaucracy and the Power of Authority

In Harold Pinter’s *The Hothouse*, everyone has to know their place and position and everything has to be recorded, documented and filed because as former colonel Roote, the head of the mental institution that is the hothouse, explains, “the keyword [is] order” (*HH* 214). This order is sanctioned by a Ministry, the highest authority and ultimate legitimacy, and entails a rhetoric of utter dehumanisation and cynical euphemism up to the point of physical cruelty, deliberate distortion of reality and brutal disregard of human life. A seemingly trivial example of the power of the belief in and subjugation to state control in *The Hothouse* is that of the typewriter. Upon being informed that the typewriter on which Hogg is
supposed to write his report is inoperative because of rust, Roote denies the fact simply because “[i]t’s a Ministry typewriter” (HH 256), ergo it cannot be flawed, and adds, “[r]ust. Never heard such rubbish” (HH 257). The discrepancy between reality and unconditional obedience to state authority or bureaucracy accumulates in The Hothouse from the very start of the play. Patient 6457 cannot be dead because the desk diary says otherwise; the typewriter cannot be broken because it is sent from the Ministry; “this numbers business” (HH 197) cannot be changed because that “was one of the rules of procedure laid down in the original constitution. […] And that’s how it’s got to remain” (HH 198). Roote is in the position of the director of the house because, as Gibbs so pointedly remarks, he “called [his predecessor] sir, then, sir” (HH 196), just as Gibbs does now. Furthermore, Roote cannot leave his post because, as he insists firmly, he is “a delegate” (HH 304), yet without being able to explain “of what” (HH 306). To be “delegated”, “entrusted”, “appointed” and therefore “AUTHORISED” (HH 306-307) is all the legitimisation that is needed in order to exercise unquestionable power, including torture, rape and murder.

In the very first scene of the play, Roote and his first subordinate Gibbs desultorily discuss the health of patient 6457, sparking thus a highly ludicrous dialogue concerning the fate of two patients. While the persistence of officious formality and bureaucratic accuracy mixed with stubborn insistence and exaggerated bafflement is initially the source of laughter for the audience, the notion of some lurking danger and hidden cruelty already runs invisibly underneath the overt current of comedy. The unalterable circumstance that “[t]he patients are to be given numbers and called by those numbers” (HH 198), as Roote affirms, and the subsequent confusion of two patients, especially in consideration of the latest events, 6457 has died and 6459 has given birth, evokes the notions not only of bureaucratic incompetence but of abuse of power, political imprisonment, incarceration of dissidents and mass murder. Replacing names with numbers is a method of dehumanisation that has been used, for instance, in concentration camps in Nazi Germany. In her essay “Harold Pinter’s The Hothouse: A Parable of the Holocaust” (1993), Rosette C. Lamont draws a comparison between Roote’s hothouse and the killing apparatus of National Socialism. She rightly argues that depriving human beings of their names connotes a deprivation of their personal identity, of their individuality and of their humanity and means a reduction to “elements of statistical facts” (1993: 41). This act enables a “bureaucracy of killing” (Lamont 1993: 42) that involves
a detached, unaffectionate treatment of life and allows human life to be “nullified by the bureaucratic stroke of a pen” (ibid. 1993: 44). Roote sharply refuses to change a rule laid down by his predecessor and rather chooses to work within this system that has delegated, appointed and authorised him. Still, he acknowledges the flaws in the numbers system when he belittlingly utters:

I often think it must depress them...somewhat...to have a number rapped at them all the time. After some of them have been here a few years they’re liable to forget what names their fathers gave them. Or their mothers.

Pause
One of the purposes of this establishment is to instill that confidence in each and every one of them, that confidence which will one day enable them to say ‘I am...Gubbins’, for example. [...] We lose sight of their names and they lose sight of their names. I sometimes wonder if it’s the right way to go about things. (HH 197-198)

Authority, hierarchical structure and tradition have to be maintained, order and good manners preserved and formalities and regulations have to be complied with – without further deliberation. Hence, the fact that there is a “slight discrepancy” (HH 191) in the records is worth more attention and indignation than the sudden death of a patient; a patient whom Roote “knew [...] well” (HH 199) and “had quite a lot to do” (HH 199) with, yet whose death he cannot remember nor any other “damn thing about him” (HH 199) although he had signed his death certificate. The ensuing guessing game between Roote and Gibbs as to 6457’s appearance does not provide any decisive information on the patient that would mark him an individual but rather conveys the subordination of Gibbs, who is meticulously mindful of not contradicting his superior. When asked by Roote if 6457 was “[f]airheaded” (HH 199), Gibbs replies, “[n]ot darkheaded, sir” (HH 200), when asked if he was tall the answer is “[c]ertainly not small.” (HH 200), and so forth – a game that shall be repeated with patient 6459 and Lamb in the course of the play. The only features that stick out are that patient 6457 was “[p]rematurely grey” (HH 201) and “had a slight limp. Whenever he walked anywhere…” (HH 201), signs, however, anyone in the ‘care’ of such a state-subsidised ‘rest home’ could develop.

This ambiguous institution constitutes, in the words of Lamont, a complex metaphor for simultaneously being a “prison/insane asylum/laboratory/no-exit sanatorium/Russian-style
psychiatric clinic/torture chamber, and finally the hottest of houses, a crematorium” (1993: 41). Like in the psychiatric institutions of Nazi Germany, Lamont emphasises, the hothouse is a “mockery of the act of healing” (1993: 41) where systematic destruction is conducted under the guise of an institutionalised place of healing with the help of medical and bureaucratic rhetoric and the legitimisation of the state. Upon the investigation of relatives, such as the visit of the mother of late patient 6457, Gibbs’ subordinate Lush drowns her in a stream of medical phrases and absurd questions of definition. In his “recital” (HH 233) Lush does admit that 6457 “is now departed from us” (HH 232) but explains that he has been moved to a convalescent home, while pointing out to the mother that this institution is, however, a rest home, leaving out the information that her son has, in fact, died of “heart failure” (HH 191), according to the death certificate.

Ah, Mrs 6457, I said, it’s not quite so simple as that. It’s not quite so simple as that. In a rest home, you see, you do not merely rest. Nor, in a convalescent home, do you merely convalesce. No, no, in both institutions, you see, you are obliged to work and play and join in daily communal activity to the greatest possible extent. Otherwise the concepts of rest and convalescence are rendered meaningless. […] So, I continued, you can rest assured that if your son was moved from here to another place it was in his best interests, and only after the most extensive research into his case, the wealth and weight of all the expert opinion in this establishment, where some of the leading brains in this country are concentrated; after a world of time, care, gathering and accumulating of mass upon mass upon mass of relevant evidence, document, affidavit, tape recordings, played both backwards and forwards, deep into the depth of the night; hours of time, attention to the most minute detail, unstinting labour, unflagging effort, scrupulous attachment to the matter in hand and meticulous examination of all aspects of the question had determined the surest and most beneficial course your son’s case might take. The conclusion, after this supreme example of applied dedication, was to send your son to a convalescent home, where we are sure he will be content. (HH 232-233)

What is striking is not only the utter cynicism of Lush’s speech, especially the phrases “expert opinion” and “the leading brains” given Gibbs’ cruel ambition, Roote’s lack of memory and the fact that he has entirely given up on visiting the patients, or the flood of official and medical rhetoric and the evasion of truth through the misuse of language but also the extension of the dehumanising number system to the dead patient’s mother, simply called “Mrs 6457” (HH 232) by Lush. Furthermore, Lush emphasises the “carte blanche from the Ministry” (HH 233), which renders everything that happens in the ‘rest home’ legal and legitimised. This includes apparently also the rape of a patient or the subsequent murder of
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her child. Roote does not mind if “the men [dip] their wicks on occasion”, as long as it is “in the interest of science” and “for the good of a female patient” (*HH* 219) and, of course, a report will be sent: “After all, the reactions of the patient have to be tabulated, compared with others, filed, stamped and if possible verified!” (*HH* 219). Hence, upon being informed that patient 6459 has given birth to a boy, the point that seems to outrage Roote most is that “[s]omeone hasn’t been sending in his report!” (*HH* 219). Again, priority is given to bureaucracy not humanity and medical and bureaucratic rhetoric as well as the Ministry’s carte blanche supply the legitimisation for whatever ‘treatment’ the staff sees fit.

The same kind of manipulative and deceptive language that is used by Roote, Gibbs and Miss Cutts has been implemented in totalitarian regimes where the use of double talk and euphemisms lulls people into danger or even death. In his essay “‘You’ll Never Be without a Police Siren’: Pinter and the Subject of Law” (2004), Marc Silverstein argues in regard to Roote’s declaration concerning patient 6459 that this impersonal medical jargon combined with the phraseology of personal compassion not only authorises rape or murder but makes it invisible to be conceived as such (cf. 2004: 46). Without being discernible as an offense, there is also no perpetrator who has to answer for it. This decriminalisation of the state’s own action by the state through a ‘debased language’ is one of Pinter’s central political concerns, as he remarks in his interviews with Mel Gussow. Furthermore, Pinter maintains that this ‘debased language’ is not only used by authoritarian states but also by democratic republics to guise their involvement in what would be considered criminal or inhumane. As he states, “you have the rhetoric of the free, the Christian, the democratic, but underneath the rhetoric what you have is excrement, vomit, urine, blood, mutilation, horror, deprivation, poverty” (Pinter qtd. in Gussow 1994: 73). Likewise, the vocabulary of Roote and his underlings are an example of the way in which “the state has ‘decriminalised’ its own actions through ‘a debased language’ to such an extent that even its own ‘delegates’ perceive no contradiction between the ideals expressed in their rhetoric and the violent brutality of their action” (Silverstein 2004: 46). In fact, through the subtle codes of legitimisation by those in power, these acts that would be regarded as dehumanising or criminal become not only decriminalised, but, what is more, permissible and even idealised (cf. Silverstein 2004: 49).
What becomes evident in the course of the play is that Roote himself is the actual perpetrator and father of 6459’s child. Yet only when Gibbs has found a scapegoat to stand in as culprit, that is, the naïve but eager locktester Lamb, does Roote designate the act as crime:

ROOTE
[...] A rapist on my own staff and I don’t know what he looks like!
LUSH
Was it rape?
ROOTE
Of course it was rape. You don’t think that sort of thing happens by consent, do you?”

(HH 268)

Roote applies double standards since it is “for the good of the female patient” and “in the interest of science” (HH 219) as he “found it it in [his] experience” (HH 219), yet it is declared rape when the same act is ascribed to Lamb, who is and has always been “virgo intacta” (HH 249). What is more, when Roote speaks of crime, it is committed on the side of the staff and not on the side of the patients, who are however treated like criminals. The definition of crime is that of some act being declared a crime by those in power. Hence, a crime is a construct like the power structure itself. Once the empowered, in this case the director of the hothouse, define what is a crime and what is not, and once human beings are deprived of their names, their identity and their rights and only count as numbers in a bureaucratic system, the eradication of human life becomes easily conductible. Accordingly cruel and absurd in its deliberately distorted logic is the discussion as to what shall happen to the newborn baby of patient 6459. Roote simply orders to “[g]et rid of it” (HH 220), whereupon Gibbs interposes: “The mother would have to go with it, sir” (HH 220). The dialogue that follows reflects the valuelessness of human life and the cruel and clinical reasoning of those who exercise power over those without it that is exhibited in The Hothouse:

GIBBS
Don’t you think the mother might miss the baby, sir?
ROOTE
I won’t miss it. Will you miss it?
GIBBS
No, sir. I won’t miss it.
ROOTE
Then why should the mother miss it?
In her essay “Torture in the Plays of Harold Pinter” (2010), Mary Luckhurst notes that since his earliest plays Pinter has been interested in power politics, cruelty and violence and has pitted the powerful against the helpless. In Pinter’s later plays, she adds, “the empowered and the victimised are identifiable from the start, their roles are not reversible, and they are symbolic of a larger picture of state oppression and abuse” (Luckhurst 2010: 359). There is no doubt that Pinter’s *The Hothouse* is a fiercely satirical piece on oppressive state power and what is termed by Amnesty International the “bureaucracy of repression” (Amnesty International qtd. in Luckhurst 2010: 363). However, in *The Hothouse*, as well as in the other earlier plays, the empowered are not exempted from becoming the victims. Apart from the patients, not only Lamb, “not a very important member of [the] staff” (*HH* 268), is lured into the position of the victim but the entire staff falls victim to Gibbs’ unrelenting ambition and cunning. Yet, the fact that the empowered can become the victimised does not change the system that upholds these hierarchical structures in the first place. On the contrary, the ruthless fight for supremacy within the system rather maintains the very system and the tradition of hierarchy and authoritarian power that has been set up by that system. Even prior to the massacre that ends the rule of Roote it is indicated that power has never been handed over peacefully in the hothouse. When Roote talks about the power structure of the house and his rise to the top, he struggles to find the appropriate word to cover the reality behind it, as indicated by an ellipsis before and after the word he finally chooses. When he speaks about his predecessor ‘… retiring …’ (cf. *HH* 196), it appears to be the same euphemism Lush uses when he refers to patient 6547 ‘departing’ (cf. *HH* 232). Gibbs seizes power like his predecessor did before him and is hence in accordance with the tradition that Roote so highly values. Also Lamb seems to carry on a tradition of the house:

**GIBBS**

By the way, your predecessor used to give us a helping hand occasionally, too, you know. Before you came, of course.

[...]  
**LAMB**  
[...] My predecessor, did you say?  
**GIBBS**  
Yes, the chap you took over from.  
**LAMB**
Oh! Did he really? Oh, good. I’ve often wondered what he … did, exactly. Oh good, I’m … glad I’m following in a tradition.  

(HH 242-243)

The belief in an ideal as established by predecessors, in other words, following in the traditions in the hothouse, is not only a form of opportunism but a way of evading responsibility for the violent acts that are committed here. As Silverstein rightly notes, in *The Hothouse* “Pinter displays the violent results of such traditions” (2004: 48). These traditions are incorporated to such an extreme degree that Roote does not even see a discrepancy between his ideal of ‘humanity’ and the cruel and corrupt practices that are conducted by him and under his rule. Lamb also wants to belong to these traditions without fathoming however what they actually entail. Even when he does, in other words, when he has received the first electro-shocks, he remains totally blind to the implications of his treatment and the possible danger he is in. At the end of his interrogation, which is also the end of the first act, he hence utters: “I’m rather enjoying this, you know.[…] I’m ready whenever you are” (HH 254). However, Lamb does not only want to follow in a tradition, his true aim is to connect with other people, as he tells Miss Cutts: “You’re the only friend I’ve got here, to be quite frank. I don’t seem to be able to … reach the others. Don’t know why. After all, I share their interests. Wouldn’t you say?” (HH 211). He so utterly wants to fit in and belong to “a group of people in which group common assumptions are shared and common principles observed” (HH 252) that he offers himself willingly to be sacrificed. He is literally the lamb that is lead to the slaughter in the name of tradition and as Roote claims “for humanity, of humanity and by humanity” (HH 214).

As mentioned above, this ‘humanity’ serves as a rhetorical guise and as legitimisation for acts of cruelty and violence against other human beings for the sake of power, that is, the maintenance or gaining of it – while the word itself has lost its actual meaning. Hence, the rape of patient 6459, the death of patient 6457 and the participation of Lamb in the experiments fall under or are rather authorised by this said ‘humanity’. Moreover, Silverstein argues that “the hothouse undertakes the ideological project of creating the very ‘humanity’ it invokes to legitimate its practices” (2010: 45). While the system decriminalises its own actions, it criminalises every questioning of its rhetoric. The patients may not be referred to as
criminals but they are certainly treated as such. While they are to be instilled with “confidence” \((HH\ 198)\) and reintegrated into society, no patient ever seems to have left the hothouse alive, nor would they be able to question the system after their treatment in the sound-proof room 1A. In other words, the system produces precisely such subjects that will uphold that very system, even if they are destroyed by it. In the end, no one is safe from being the next lamb that is sacrificed for the sake of ‘humanity’ – except the authoritarian system itself that buries its cruelty beneath the powerful rhetoric of bureaucracy and hierarchical structures.

6.2. “The snow has turned to slush”: Words as Bullets, Language as Weapon

In addition to the potential cruelty of officialese and political rhetoric that has been discussed in the previous chapter, language, or its lack, plays a crucial role in the establishment of hierarchical order and the maintenance of power. In Pinter’s \textit{The Hothouse}, the constant fight for supremacy is in its first phase conducted entirely through speech. Roote and his underlings only resort to physical violence when words are no longer sufficient to uphold one’s position. Hence, in \textit{The Hothouse}, language takes on the quality of a weapon and words are fired like bullets. Pinter’s use of language is thereby diametrically opposed to Kane’s. In Pinter, speech is not only used in abundance, but it is also trenchantly applied in order to obscure meaning and truth. While Kane’s characters desperately try to find an accuracy in language that could utterly express their thoughts and feelings, Pinter’s characters are, as he himself states, “inexpressive, obstructive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling” (Pinter in \textit{Introduction to Plays 1}: xii). However, it is “out of these attributes that language arises. A language […] where under what is said, another thing is being said” (ibid.). It is therefore difficult to keep quotes from Pinter’s works short because this “language locked beneath [speech]” (Pinter in \textit{Introduction to Plays 1}: xiii) is only discernible through the continuous text.

The notion of a buried subtext holds also true for silences. In his speech “Writing for the Theatre”, Pinter gave at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962, he states, “[t]here are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of
language is being employed” (Pinter in *Introduction to Plays 1*: xiii). In this, there is also another divergence from Kane. While in *Cleansed* silences become the truest expression of emotion, an expression of the inexpressible, Pinter implements silences in *The Hothouse* as a means of withholding knowledge and information. However, both silences carry meaning and reveal actual thought or intention. Hence, in *The Hothouse* there is not exactly a ‘failure of communication’, a characteristic that has so often been attributed to Pinter’s work, but rather a “deliberate evasion of communication” (Almansi and Henderson 1983: 22). As Pinter argues, “I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves” (Pinter in *Introduction to Plays 1*: xiii).

The characters in *The Hothouse* have and know their position on the hierarchical ladder, yet there is a constant struggle for power between Roote, Gibbs and Lush underway. Already in the first act, Roote stresses his authority towards submissive yet keen Gibbs and almost every dialogue goes astray and evolves into a power struggle that reaches its dead end when one has won over the other. When Roote and Gibbs discuss the future of patient 6549’s baby, that is Roote callous order: “[g]et rid of it” (*HH* 220), the conversation goes completely off topic with the only thing of importance is having the last word.

```
GIBBS
The mother would have to go with it, sir.
ROOTE
Why?
GIBBS
Can’t live without the mother.
ROOTE
Why not?
GIBBS
The mother feeds it.
ROOTE
I know that! Do you think I’m and idiot? My mother fed me, didn’t she?
GIBBS
Mine fed me.
ROOTE
But mine fed me!
(HH 221)
```
These verbal power struggles become even more pungent and dangerous in the second act. While Gibbs is exceedingly officious, Lush is plainly insubordinate up to the point of hostility. Words are used not for the purpose of conveying meaning but as stratagem in the game of power. Hence, Lush’s repeated sentence “The snow has turned to slush” (HH 255, 264, 269, 276, 300) is, although initially an innocent remark on the weather, used to provoke and defy his superior Roote, who after the third repetition finally loses his patience: “I don’t care whether it is true or not. I don’t like to have a thing repeated and repeated and repeated! Anyone would think I was slow on the uptake. The snow has turned to slush. I heard it. I understand it. That’s enough” (HH 269). Indeed, Lush’s sentence reflects the theme of heat that is indicated by the title of the play and which is addressed in the opening of the second act, metaphorically as well as literally. Not only has the weather become so warm that “[t]he snow has turned to slush” (HH 255); Roote’s office seems to have become increasingly hot too and the verbal duels and power struggles become more and more heated like the tempers of the protagonists. Already before Roote’s outburst because of Lush’s constant reference to slush, which is certainly not an accidental choice of words given its rhyming quality, Lush teases and tantalises Roote to such an extent that the latter resorts to physically aggressive behaviour. Especially when Lush brings up the sensitive subject of the birth of the baby, Roote forgets all sense of decorum while Lush sustains his menacing politeness.

LUSH
But surely you achieved results with one patient very recently. What was the number? 6459, I think.
ROOTE through his whiskey in LUSH’s face. Lush wipes his face.
LUSH
Let me fill you up. (He take ROOTE’s glass, pours, brings the glass to ROOTE, gives it to him.) Yes, quite a substantial result, I should have thought.
ROOTE throws his whiskey in LUSH’s face. LUSH wipes his face.
LUSH takes ROOTE’s glass, pours, brings the glass to ROOTE, gives it to him.
But perhaps I’m thinking of 6457.
LUSH grabs ROOTE’s glass and holds it above his head, with his own. Slowly he lowers his own.
Cheers.
He drinks, and then gives ROOTE his glass.
(HH 263-264)
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Lush challenges every utterance of his superior yet employs a cunning mixture of flattery, mockery and accusatory inquiry in order to lure Roote into revealing his true nature, albeit, at the risk of his own life. Twice, Lush manages to make the conversation escalate into physical violence and to reveal Roote’s fierce cruelty that is otherwise masked by his (incompetent) bureaucratic and (corrupt) humanist demeanour. Roote indeed gives Lush some “leeway” but not “that much leeway” (*HH* 258; my emphasis). As Roote reproaches Lush: “It’s not so much the language, it’s the attitude of mind that’s nasty, unwholesome, putrid” (*HH* 300). While the dialogues between Roote and Lush are a constant, playful yet dangerous fight for gaining ground, the conversations between Lush and Gibbs are marked by downright hostility and open contempt for one another. Gibbs directly accuses Lush of incompetence: “You know, Lush, I don’t know how you’ve lasted here. You’re incompetent, you’re unwholesome and you’re offensive. You’re the most totally bloody useless bugger I’ve ever come across” (*HH* 230); and at their question and answer game concerning Lamb’s appearance, Lush contradicts Gibbs out of sheer spite and mockery:

```
ROOTE
Tall?

GIBBS
No, sir. Small.

LUSH
Tall.

GIBBS
Small.

[...]
```

(*HH* 273)

What starts out as apparently friendly banter is never without menace. In the course of the second act the situation between Roote, Gibbs and Lush aggravates and starts to disintegrate into mayhem, laying bare the cruelty that has been hidden beneath the language of formality from the very outset. Lush randomly and defiantly interposes his sentence “The snow has turn to slush” (*HH* 300) right before Roote thrusts a piece of Christmas cake at him and tries to force feed him when Lush spits it out, muttering “[m]uck and slush” (*HH* 301). This, however, only sets the second and more brutal escalation between Lush and Roote into motion. With not much inhibition left and under the influence of alcohol he consumed with Roote, Lush increasingly closes in on Roote and daringly calls him and his position into question so much so that it is a wonder he does not end up locked away with the other social
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Lush does nothing less than exposing the corrupted nature of the very power structure itself which sustains itself through brutal oppression, such as silencing dissidents, and unquestioned authority. Thus, he questions the legitimisation of the establishment that they work for as well as Roote’s authority as the head of it. Fearing the loss of control in the face of the far more articulate speaker Lush, Roote resorts to brutal physical violence in order to maintain his
position. However, by doing so he drops his mask of “Churchillian […] self-regard” and “regal […] banal cosiness” (Stokes 2001: 32) and reveals the cruelty and brutality of his person. After this incident, Roote’s involvement in the murder of 6457 and the impregnation of 6459 is anything but unimaginable. As Roote himself says, “[i]t’s unbelievable, isn’t it Lush, the things that go on?”, whereupon Lush replies, “It almost is, sir.” (HH 268; my emphasis).

The time of fun and games is finally over. Inbetween heartily wishing each other a “[h]appy Christmas” (HH 282) and “[t]he best of luck for the new year” (HH 283), Miss Cutts, who tries to maintain her position by having an affair with both Roote and Gibbs, incites the latter to murder the former. The menace and cruelty that has been boiling beneath speech is surfacing and erupts as physical violence. Roote already suspects Gibbs of wanting to take his place, when he confronts Gibbs concerning the annual Christmas speech: “You’re dying to make it, aren’t you? Why don’t you make it?” (HH 304). Like the radiator in Roote’s office, the atmosphere between the three of them has become dangerously scalding. Roote has already lost his grip on power and openly suspects Gibbs of wanting to murder him: “You’re sure you didn’t come here to murder me? […] Yes, you did! I can see it in your eyes!” (HH 307). The menacing verbal power struggle between Roote, Gibbs and Lush culminates in physical aggression when the three of them actually draw knives and openly threaten each other. Before any violent act happens, however, the ominous sounds of “a long sigh […] A long keen [and] A laugh” (HH 309) coming somewhere from the insides of the hothouse are heard for the second time in the play.

The notion that “something is going on” (HH 302), that “[s]omething’s happening” (HH 295) is noticed by Roote as well as Gibbs. Also Lush becomes apprehensive in the end when Roote commands him to go with Gibbs to investigate and Lush utters: “I don’t want to go with him.” (HH 311). All this, the sounds as well as the rising menace and violence in the dialogues of Roote, Gibbs and Lush, foreshadows the massacre that ends the rule of Roote and with it the lives of all the staff members, except Gibbs. In The Hothouse, the true cruelty lies, however, not in the murder of the staff or the patients but in the undisturbed continuance of the dangerous power structure of a corrupted state system, in which psychiatric facilities are used as means to silence social or political dissidents, torture is disguised as therapy,
murder is declared death by heart failure and rape is said to be for the good of the patients. The characters in Pinter’s *The Hothouse*, with their flat personalities and monosyllabic names, are easily exchangeable pieces in an overall authoritarian system that upholds its control through abuse of language that dehumanises its subjects to numbers on a page and implements a cruel bureaucracy which leaves rape, murder and torture unpunished provided a report is being filed. Accordingly, after the massacre in the hothouse Ministry man Lobb comments towards Gibbs: “Rather unfortunate business. You’ve made out your report, I take it?” (*HH* 322). In the end, Gibbs has replaced Roote but the oppressive state system remains the same and relentlessly runs on in the name of tradition and order.

### 6.2.1. A Sigh, A Keen, A Laugh: The Interconnection of Language and Torture

What is crucial in an understanding of Pinter’s *The Hothouse* is, as Ariel Dorfman notes, “that language is where the other, parallel violence, the cruelty exercised on the body, originates” (2009). Cruelty is not only implemented in the subtext of speech in *The Hothouse*, as has been discussed in the chapters above, but also openly in the form of interrogation and subsequent torture through electro-shocks. In the play, language and physical violence are irrevocably interconnected, that is, language as precursor of physical violence but also as agent of physical violence. In his essay “Harold Pinter’s Theatre of Cruelty” (1993), Martin Esslin argues accordingly, language is “an instrument of torture, […] a medium through which power is exerted between individuals” (1993: 32). In the gullible and ambitious Lamb, Gibbs finds the perfect scapegoat to pin the impregnation of patient 6459 on as well as “a very willing subject” (*HH* 239) for his cruel, “little tests” (*HH* 238). Gibbs lulls Lamb into a false sense of security by using euphemisms like ‘little tests’ for torture by electricity and an overly intimate language. When Gibbs has attached the electrodes to Lamb’s wrists and temples, he thanks him by saying: “Jolly good. Don’t go to sleep, will you? We’re awfully grateful to you, old chap, for helping us” (*HH* 243). Lamb does not suspect the danger he is in, even after the first blow of electric current has been sent through his body so that he “jolts rigid, his hands go to his earphones, he is propelled from the chair, falls to his knees, twisting from side to side, […] emitting high-pitched cries” (*HH* 244). In his desire to be agreeable and possibly promoted, he instead “emits a short chuckle” (*HH* 244) and without objection earnestly
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attempts to participate in the verbal third degree that drowns him in a ceaseless and degrading stream of verbiage.

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CUTTS

After your day’s work, do you ever feel tired, edgy?

[...]

CUTTS

Full of desire?

GIBBS

Full of energy?

CUTTS

Full of dread?

GIBBS

Drained?

CUTTS

Of energy?

GIBBS

Of dread?

CUTTS

Of desire?

(*HH 246-248*)

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Miss Cutts and Gibbs shoot their questions like bullets at him and deliberately do not leave Lamb time to answer. In Pinter’s interrogation scenes, as Mary Luckhurst points out, a confession is completely irrelevant, “[t]here is no interest in extracting information, because the judgement on the victims is a foregone conclusion and their crime more about who they are than what they might have done” (2010: 366). Accordingly, Lamb is not subjected to the cruel stream of language and electro-shocks because he committed a crime that needs to be confessed. The reason for him being in interviewing room 1A is Gibbs needing him out of the way, firstly, so that he can be turned into the culprit in regard to the rape of patient 6459 and, secondly, so that Lamb cannot carry out his duty of testing the locks that renders the final massacre on the staff possible. Hence, the interrogation is not about giving a correct answer; it is about disconcerting, degrading and destroying the human being that is subjected to it. Interrogation is only another means of authoritative power to exercise control, to oppress and to dehumanise. In particular the targeting of sexuality, such as Gibbs and Cutts employ with Lamb when they drill him with questions on his virginity, is according to Amnesty International one of the most commonly used methods of dehumanisation (cf. Luckhurst 2010: 363). The assailants thus not only degrade their victim, they verbally enter and attack...
the most intimate and private spheres of a person, denying them their privacy and very individuality. Besides, Lamb not resisting the interrogation renders him an accomplice in his own torture and, moreover, shows his integration in the system that exercises its power over and on him.

The connection between sex and power also takes on another form in the hothouse. Miss Cutts maintains sexual relations with both her superior Roote as well as her colleague Gibbs and seems to be attracted by their position of power or ambition to gain it. Moreover, Cutts is not only attracted by the display of power but also of cruelty. When she narrates the first meeting between her and Roote she states: “[a]nd in your eyes, bold and unashamed, was desire. Brutal, demanding desire. Bestial. ruthless, remorseless” (HH 317). The wording in this statement expresses the extreme interconnection of cruelty as an integral component of power and sex for Cutts. This connection is heightened to the degree that Cutts becomes sexually aroused at the use of violence, in verbal and physical form, against another person. In particular in interviewing room 1A she can live out her sadistic tendencies and gain sexual pleasure from watching another person in agony. In other words, the execution of power through the process of interrogation and exercise of physical cruelty has the effect of a sexual climax on Cutts – with utter disregard for human life, be it that of Lamb or any other person. As she asserts towards Gibbs:

It’s such a fun room 1A. I think that’s my favourite room in the whole place. It’s such an intimate room. You can ask the questions and be so intimate. I love your questions. They’re so intimate themselves. That’s what makes it so exciting. The intimacy becomes unbearable. You keep waiting for the questions to stop, to pass from one intimacy into another, beautifully, and just when you know you can’t ask another one, that they must stop, that you must stop, that it must stop – they stop! – […] and we can continue, in room 1A […] and it’s question time, question time, question time, forever and forever and forever. (HH 294)

To be in the position of the interrogator, of asking these “intimate questions”, is to be in the position of power. Language, thus, “is shown to be an instrument of power, the very embodiment of power” (Malkin 1992: 62) and to be a weapon with which power and cruelty are exercised on the body. Although Cutts appears utterly subservient to the men in power and is overly concerned with pleasing them with her femininity (cf. HH 225-226), she actually wields power herself and uses it in order to gain sexual pleasure as well as to maintain her
position. She vigorously incites Gibbs to murder their superior and her other lover Roote, “You promised you would. Didn’t you. Do it now.” (HH 296), and to return to room 1A in order to, as Gibbs puts it, “satisfy [her] personal whim” (HH 298) and ruthlessly exercise verbal and physical cruelty on other human beings.

As has been hinted at, interrogation and torture in *The Hothouse* are not about gaining information or forcing a confession but aims at destroying individuality. As Roote himself states, the patients are to be reintegrated into society, yet not as autonomous, free-thinking individuals but as submissive subjects. So far, however, no one seems to have survived Roote’s “instilling of confidence”. Luckhurst emphasises correspondingly, “the tormentors indulge in an exercise of cruelty and destruction with the intent if not of complete elimination, then of permanent damage” (2010: 360). Indeed, Lamb does not die in the end but is rendered speechless in the final scene of Act One. After having received multiple electro-shocks language fails him and he is reduced from being overly talkative and eager to a state of silent catatonia. As the concluding stage directions read: “LAMB in chair. He sits still, staring, as in a catatonic trance.” (HH 328). This final stage image mirrors the end of Act One and, in addition, is reminiscent of *Cleansed*’s scenes of electrocution.

LAMB sits.
The red light begins to flick on and off.
LAMB looks up, stares at it.
We hear the loud click of a switch from the control room.
The microphone in the room has been switched off.
The red light gradually grows in strength, until it consumes the room.
LAMB sits still.
(HH 254)

In fact, all persons that have been subjected to the hothouse’s treatment have fallen silent, or rather were silenced. In the entire play, no patient has the power to speak for themselves and everything the staff conveys about them implies their state of voicelessness and powerlessness. When Gibbs talks about the funeral of patient 6457, he states that, “[t]here were no last words” (HH 202), which can mean either that no one spoke at his funeral or that 6457 did not utter any last words, possibly because he was no longer able to speak. Patient 6459 is referred to as being “noncommittal” (HH 216) when it comes to the clarification of
the question as to who is the father of her child. Lamb, in turn, is described as “[n]ondescript” (HH 273), denying him thus any characteristics that would render him an individual, similarly to patient 6457 and patient 6459. The only sounds that emerge from the patients that are confined in the hothouse are a long, amplified sigh, keen and laugh (cf. HH 291, 309). Twice these sounds are heard and break the power struggles of the staff before they finally culminate in the pandemonium of squeaks, rattling chains, reverberating clanging of locks, “[w]hispers, chuckles, half-screams” (HH 319).

Hence, utter powerlessness means in The Hothouse also the loss of power over speech and language. Moreover, with the annihilation of language through the infliction of pain, such as induced by torture, the victim’s self is annihilated. In The Body in Pain (1985), Elaine Scarry claims that torture and as part of it verbal interrogation destroys language and, furthermore, deconstructs it and with it the worlds from which it originates and which it creates. This means not only that the victim is brought back to a state anterior to language, that is, screams and cries, but that through extreme pain “the created world of thought and feeling, all the psychological and mental content that constitutes both one’s self and one’s world, and that give rise to and is in turn made possible by language, ceases to exist” (Scarry 1985: 30). She further elucidates, “as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject” (Scarry 1985: 35). To sum up, intense physical agony, as produced through torture for instance, has the capacity to end self, voice and world; it is, in the words of Scarry, “world-destroying” (1985: 29). According to Amnesty International, electro-shocks are, after beating, the most commonly used practice of physical violence (cf. Luckhurst 2010: 364) and, on the basis of substantial research, human rights organisations assert that torture is commonly “part of state-controlled machinery to suppress dissent” and is “most often used as an integral means of a government’s security strategy” (Amnesty International qtd. in Luckhurst 2010: 358).

In The Hothouse, verbal cruelty generates physical cruelty and, as Esslin asserts, “[v]erbal cruelty, which always lurks in any dialogic situation – all dialogue being a fencing for positions in a pecking order – is […] only different in degrees from physical cruelty as exercised by the torturer and executioner” (1993: 32). Pinter’s preoccupation with torture and
the torturing power of language in *The Hothouse* reflects a deeply critical mindset in regard to state control, hierarchical order and oppressive state systems. Mark Batty argues accordingly, “Pinter’s chief political concerns are essentially humanitarian; he is concerned with the relationship between the state and the individual and how the self-perpetuating concerns of the former often obscure and override the dignifying rights of the latter” (2001: 91). In *The Hothouse*, cruelty is not only revealed overtly in the torture and subsequent silencing of Lamb – the dramaturgical core of the play. Cruelty also lies in the language itself that is employed by the staff members on their respective positions of the hierarchical ladder in their struggle for power. Hidden underneath the callousness of officialese, medical jargon and bureaucracy runs the sheer disregard of human life. In his essay “The Hothouse: Harold Pinter’s Tribute to Anger” (2002), Rudolf Stamm calls *The Hothouse* thus an “outcry against an [sic] hierarchical, bureaucratic and inhuman organization of society, and against the abuse of language for the contrary of communication” (2002: 298). The difficulty for the audience lies not only in excavating the true meaning behind speech and in recognising that it is an abuse of language but in reflecting on the cruelty demonstrated in regard to their own reaction and to the world at large. Like Lamb, the audience itself is deceived and lulled into the dangers of the play’s undercurrent, firstly, by being tricked into laughing at the incompetence and impertinence the staff members exhibit, and, secondly, by being tricked into believing that this was a place of healing. What is more, laughter is provoked despite the growing knowledge of “the horror underlying the humanism” (Silverstein 2004: 45). By luring the audience by means of comedy into the bureaucratic and hierarchical cruelties of the hothouse, Pinter incites them to discern these hidden cruelties and, furthermore, to examine and question their reaction to them as well as their pertinence in their lived realities.

However, Pinter does not merge the opposites between language and action to attain the divine position De Vos attributes to the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’; on the contrary, Pinter highlights these opposites. In *The Hothouse*, the cruelty of bureaucracy, of oppressive state systems, of hierarchy and formality is hidden behind language but amplified and exaggerated to such an extent that it stimulates laughter while being simultaneously plain to see. Pinter offers neither relief nor catharsis but traps the readers/spectators with Lamb in room 1A in an immobilised stillness and inability to change the structures that they were provoked to experience and laugh at. In the end, the audience finds themselves in the position of the
disempowered patients of the hothouse, who have remained largely without face or voice, and is made to feel their helplessness in the face of an overpowering, oppressive and dehumanising system. In the 2013 production of The Hothouse by the Trafalgar Studios, this notion has been taken literally. A part of the audience was seated directly onstage with the actors and thus with Lamb in his torture chamber, rendering the experience even more visceral. They became voyeurs or rather silent, powerless witnesses to the cruel power struggles of Roote, Gibbs and Lush and the exercise of cruelty on their victims. Pinter once famously stated concerning The Hothouse’s successor The Caretaker that, for him, it was funny up to a point, after which it ceases to be funny and it was because of that point that he wrote it. This is certainly also true for The Hothouse in which the comedy like the use of language, with all its repetitions, pauses, contradictions, figures of speech and empty phrases, is used in order to mask the layer beneath; a layer that, when unmasked, exposes the cruelties and dangers of unquestioned state control that legitimises through its authoritarian hierarchy, bureaucracy and insistence on order crimes that are therefore no longer discernible as such. The cruelties of bureaucracy, language and torture conducted through the abuse of power that lurk in The Hothouse render it a highly critical and political satire of a play whose pertinence reaches far into the life and politics of today.
7. Stories of Cruelty: Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*

MICHAL. Tell me a story.
KATURIAN. I thought you wanted to burn all my stories.
MICHAL. Tell me the one about the little green pig. […]
MICHAL. You remember how it goes, Katurian, come on. The first word goes “once”, the second word goes “upon.” I think the third words goes “a,” and the fourth word goes … oh sugar, what’s the fourth word?

(From *The Pillowman* 2003: 43)\(^9\)

The themes of interrogation, institutionalised torture, authoritarian power and physical abuse, i.e. in the form of beating and electro-shocks, have already been discussed in the analyses of Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed* and Harold Pinter’s *The Hothouse*. Martin McDonagh’s 2003 play *The Pillowman* also takes up these subject matters but adds an interesting aspect to them, that is, acts of cruelty solely evoked in the imagination of the reader/spectator through the telling of stories. *The Pillowman* was originally produced by the National Theatre at the Cottesloe in London and comprises three Acts of five scenes, whereby Act One and Act Two consist of two scenes and the final act of one scene. What is extraordinary in McDonagh’s play is the inclusion of, in total, ten narrated or paraphrased short stories that were written or are told by the protagonists. Each character in *The Pillowman* is in some way a storyteller himself, narrating stories of their past, their imagination or their fictionalised past in the course of the play. Each character is also haunted by their past, in particular by their childhood experiences of abuse or molestation - a theme which also haunts the stories themselves. As one of the police officers sums up Katurian’s thematic priority, ‘Y’know, your theme, ‘Some poor little kid gets fucked up’. Your theme.” (*PM* 13). The thematic cruelty of the stories, fictitious or autobiographical, is mirrored or rather complemented by the acts of cruelty that are physicalised on stage. It is sheer physical brutality that McDonagh forces his audience to witness – Katurian’s two most atrocious tales are acted out and Katurian himself has to endure “excessive force” (*PM* 53) used against him by the police. Yet, the cruelties that *The Pillowman* conjures in one’s imagination are in no way inferior to the visualised acts of cruelty. In fact, as John Istel argues in his article “Minor Offenses”, “McDonagh spins [these

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\(^9\) Throughout this paper the reference entry for *The Pillowman* will be abbreviated with *PM*. 

stories] into our adult imaginations. That seems to be part of the writer’s point: Our imaginations are always more frightening than the banality of everyday violence, interrogation and executions” (2005: 119).

The question as to in how far the creator can be held responsible for the acts committed by the creation plays a central role in McDonagh’s pitch black comedy (cf. Lonergan 2012: 113). In The Pillowman, the notion of legacy bridges past, present and future; legacy in terms of what we leave behind when we die and in terms of how or in how far the past, in particular one’s childhood experiences, influences our behaviour as an adult. Katurian and his older brother Michal experienced torture when they were children; Katurian as an unknowing witness, Michal first-hand. The police officers Tupolski and Ariel also had a “problem childhood” (PM 18) and now enjoy inflicting pain on their suspects in the name of an authoritarian regime. All children in the narrated or re-enacted stories of Katurian, with one exception (“The Little Green Pig”), experience physical abuse through adults. The newspaper reports of two murdered children, a third one missing, crimes for which a writer of short stories and his intellectually disabled brother are held accountable for and put through the mill. Cruelty, in The Pillowman, is an integral part of all the life-stories of the characters in the play and of almost all the characters within Katurian’s stories. Stories of cruelty, fact or fiction, narrated or experienced, performed to witness or conjured up in one’s imagination are the fabric of McDonagh’s The Pillowman.

7.1. “Once upon a time”: Cruelty in Narrations/ Narrated Cruelties

As mentioned above, storytelling is a central element in McDonagh’s The Pillowman. The stories that Katurian wrote and for which he is held in prison are drenched with cruelties committed against children. Having witnessed excessive torture as a child, his brother Michal was tortured by his own parents in the adjoining room, Katurian’s stories “got darker and darker and darker” (PM 23). Hence, his stories feature a little girl who kills her abusive father by putting razor blades into little men she carved out of apples and then dies the same way that night as she “chokes to death by her own blood” (“The Little Apple Men”); a little barefoot boy who shares his food with a stranger and gets his toes cut off in return (“The Tale
of the Town on the River”); the story of “The Pillowman” tells about a man made out of pillows, who helps children to commit suicide in order to save them from “years of pain that would just end up in the same place for them anyway” (PM 31) and eventually kills his own child-self. Also the two policemen Tupolski and Ariel mould their fantasies into the form of stories. The brutal Ariel, who was sexually molested as a child by his father, imagines himself receiving “sweets in thanks” (PM 53) from children when he has become an old man for having protected them in his profession as a police officer, “because I’d know … I’d know in my heart, that if I hadn’t been there, not all of them would have been here. Because I’m a good policeman. […] good in the sense of I stand for something. I stand for something.” (PM 53). His colleague Tupolski, who is less physically violent but does more “detective work” (PM 57), also narrates a story which he even provides with a title. “The Story of the Little Deaf Boy on the Big Long Railroad Tracks. In China.” tells the tale of a little deaf boy who is almost run over by an approaching train was he not saved by “this strange old man” (PM 59) who lives in a tower within sight and throws a paper plane out of the window at the right moment. Tupolski uses this story with the bulky title as an allegory for his work as a detective and insists: “the old wise man, see, he represents me […] [and] [t]he little deaf retarded boy […] represents my fellow man. […] I shall save that idiot from that train, I shall save my fellow man from those criminals, and I won’t even get a word of thanks for it” (PM 60).

While Tupolski and Ariel insist on standing for something, on representing something, Katurian strongly objects that his stories stand for anything other than themselves, “I’m not trying to tell you anything. It’s supposed to be just a puzzle without solution” (PM 14).

There are two aspects to the stories that are narrated or at least paraphrased that are essential. For one, these stories show the power of storytelling or the effect a story can have on the person who reads or hears it. Although the diverse cruelties committed (or almost committed) on children are merely narrated, they excite very strong and vivid images in the mind of the recipient. It is cruelty generated in the mind, within ourselves. Furthermore, in particular Katurian’s stories reawaken deeply rooted childhood fears, like the tales of the Grimm Brothers or Heinrich Hoffmann, as they are a way for Katurian of coming to terms with his own childhood. Especially the German fairy tales collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, published under the title *Children’s and Household Tales* (1812), feature numerous acts of cruelty and violence committed against children by adults, often their own parents.
Patrick Lonergan argues that “such stories are shocking because they take the values that we regard as unshakeable (such as the notion that parents will always protect their children), and then consider what happens when those values no longer apply” (2012: 112). These stories implant the notion of uncertainty into one’s concept of family and safety, the simple but painful thought that one might be abandoned in the dark forest by one’s own mother and father; that one’s grandmother might not be who she says she is; that stepmothers cast one out to die and hand out poisoned food to make sure; or that parents sacrifice their first-born in return for wealth or cut off their hands so the devil may take them. However, as much as causing fear and terror, these stories provoke the feelings of pleasure and excitement. Tales of the dark, the gruesome or the grotesque answer an intrinsic human desire for being frightened, for being excited, disgusted or horrified by stories in any shape or form, that is, by something that can be experienced from a safe and distanced position without any real threat to one’s life.10

The story that is most reminiscent of the Grimm’s fairy tales is Katurian’s only autobiographical story “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother”. This story is not only narrated, it is acted out in the second scene of Act One and tells of the cruel upbringing of Katurian and his brother Michal. While Katurian was showered “with nothing but love, kindness, warmth, all that stuff” (PM 22), his brother Michal was locked in a room and tortured for seven years by their parents. However, the sounds of “the low whirring of drills, the scritchety-scratch of bolts being tightened, the dull fuzz of unknown things electrical, and the muffled screams of a small gagged child” (PM 23) seeped through the walls into Katurian’s room and influenced his story-writing. In the fictionalised narration of the events, Katurian adds his trademark twist that ends the story in a “fashionably downbeat mode” (PM 24), that is, Katurian finding the rotten corpse of his brother years later. The end of the fictionalised story differs from Katurian’s life-story in that Michal, of course, was not dead but was found by his brother “alive, as such, but brain-damaged beyond repair” (PM 25) on the day of Katurian’s

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10 There are manifold theories attempting to explain the psychological reasons for the pleasure induced by fictionalised horror, from Aristotle’s theory of ‘Catharsis’, to Sigmund Freud’s notion of ‘The Uncanny’ and the unconscious, Carl Gustav Jung’s concept of the archetypes and the collective unconscious or more current theories by neuroscientists or psychologists, whose elaboration would, however, lead too far afield for this thesis. Fact is, that fear and pleasure are very closely related on a physiological level and have a very similar effect on the body. (cf. Gander 2015)
fourteenth birthday and that the younger brother suffocated their parents with a pillow the same night in revenge. This notion of revenge or of poetic justice is also one of the characteristics of Grimm’s fairy tales. For instance, the bad wolf who has eaten all little goats gets his belly cut open and filled with heavy stones instead so that he drowns (“The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids”) or dies (“Little Red Riding Hood”) painfully; Hansel and Gretel, in turn, burn the witch in the very oven in which she wanted to kill and cook the children. Also Katurian’s stories feature the aspect of revenge, for instance in “The Little Apple Men”, in which the girl who is mistreated by her father gives him carved apple men studded with razor blades and tells him that “they’re not to be eaten, they’re to be kept as a memento of when his only little daughter was young” (PM 11), well knowing that he will eat them to spite her. Yet, the motif of revenge is even more strongly present in the life-stories of the characters of The Pillowman. Not only Katurian kills his parents with a pillow, also Ariel has suffocated his father in the same way for having sexually abused him as a child.

Another similarity between the stories of The Pillowman and fairy tales is that of opposing pairs and dualities. There are not only two very different brothers who grew up very differently in two adjoining rooms, there are two policemen, who very clearly epitomise the classic good cop/ bad cop constellation, holding Katurian and Michal now in custody again in two adjacent rooms. The present mirrors the past, however, reversed. While Katurian had to listen to Michal being tortured as a child, now Michal hears the screams of his brother being tortured while he is in the safe room. The little girl who believes she is Jesus reincarnated (“The Little Jesus”) has two sets of parents, one being very gentle and good, the other, the foster-parents, being extremely cruel – being reminiscent of the two ‘education methods’ of Katurian and Michal’s parents. Also the structure of the play is separated into realistic, physicalised acts of brutality, as in the interrogation scenes, and narrated stories of cruelty. The stories themselves are in turn divided into stories that are merely told, paraphrased or read out loud, and stories that are acted out on stage. Besides, in The Pillowman, the stories mirror the acts. Michal not only re-enacts Katurian’s stories, so that two children are murdered in the way of “The Little Apple Men” and “The Tale of the Town on the River”, Tupolski and Ariel also use stories in order to allegorise their world view. Katurian, in turn, epitomises the protagonist of “The Pillowman” by killing his brother in order to save him from torture and the execution by the police.
The other aspect in regard to the use of stories in *The Pillowman* is that they incite the contemplations of storytelling as art form and as a craft and thus highlight the fictionality of the play as an artistic construct. In their analyses of Katurian’s stories, Katurian, Tupolski and Ariel various times come to discuss literary techniques, their attitudes towards storytelling, themes (cf. *PM* 13) and titles (cf. *PM* 58). Early in his interrogation Katurian argues, “The only duty of a storyteller is to tell a story” (*PM* 8). Katurian’s stories are without any political or autobiographical implications, as he claims not very eloquently: “I say if you’ve got a political axe to grind, if you’ve got a political what-do-ya-call-it, go write a fucking essay, I will know where I stand. I say keep your left-wing this, keep your right-wing that and tell me a fucking story!” (*PM* 8), and further asserts, “[i]f there’ are children in them [his stories], it’s incidental. If there is politics in them, it’s incidental. It’s accidental” (*PM* 13). For Katurian, every writer who uses their past as creative inspiration is “too fucking stupid to make anything up” (*PM* 52). As they investigate a possible causality between the murders of Andrea Jovacovic and Aaron Goldberg and Katurian’s stories, Tupolski and Ariel, however, maintain that his stories are “pointer[s]” (*PM* 15), standing for something other than themselves, as do their own stories. As Tupolski states, “[i]t is saying to me, on the surface I am saying this, but underneath the surface I am saying this other thing” (*PM* 15). As Lonergan points out, the interrogators thus assume the role of literary critics, “who must delve below the surface meaning of a story in order to understand the truths that underlie it” (2012: 105). Katurian, of course, processes his childhood experience of having had to witness his brother’s torture, yet he does not reflect on his writing in order to avoid confronting himself with the fact that he profited from Michal’s torture as a writer. Hence, Katurian is not able to explain the meaning of his own stories and tells the two detectives to draw their own conclusion, whereupon Tupolski replies, “‘We can draw our own conclusion’ is, sort of, our job” (*PM* 10). Indeed, Tupolski analyses every word Katurian utters and is preoccupied with finding the true meaning behind it. When Katurian describes his parents as ‘funny’, Tupolski therefore clarifies, “For ‘funny’ I guess I read ‘stupid fucking idiots’” (*PM* 9).

In contrast to Tupolski and Ariel’s search for meaning and linkages, Katurian begins to question the veracity of stories that claim to be true. In the course of his interrogation, Katurian is shown newspaper articles reporting on the murders of the children. However, as he starts to reason,
A man comes in to a room, says to another man, “Your mother is dead.” What do we know? Do we know that the second man’s mother is dead? […] No, we don't. […] All we know is that a man has come into a room and said to another man, “Your mother is dead.” That's all we know. First rule of storytelling. “Don’t believe everything you read in the papers.” (PM 28)

Katurian concludes that since the newspaper is run by the police it could likewise convey misinformation. In his story “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother”, Katurian’s parents trick him into believing that they had only pretended to torture his brother. In the interrogation room, Tupolski and Ariel again pretend to torture Michal, asking him to scream as if in pain and using fake blood like his parents in the story, who used “a little pot of pig’s blood” (PM 24). This charade of Michal’s torture by the police is even directly broached in the play. Michal states he screamed because “[h]e [Ariel] asked me to scream. He said I did it really good” (PM 27) and Tupolski comments on Ariel’s blood red hands when he returns from Michal’s interrogation room, “that’s so obviously fake blood” (PM 21). Hence, Katurian can only “draw [his] own conclusions” (PM 10) and comes to believe that “[t]his is just like storytelling” (PM 28), meaning that he and his brother are being framed. The Pillowman thus raises the questions of what do we really know when we are told a story; in how far is the agent who tells the story trustworthy; what is truth and what is fiction and what differentiates both; or are we simply tricked and led to believe something so that a surprising twist may be achieved in the end? McDonagh plays with the categories of fact and fiction and consciously deceives the reader/spectator various times adding clever twists to the plot like Katurian does in his stories.

7.2. “It isn’t a crime, you write a story”: Cruel Fiction becoming Cruel Reality

In The Pillowman, cruelty features most prominetly in Katurian’s short stories and the life-stories that are narrated by the protagonists. As mentioned above, the re-telling of these stories causes the acts of cruelty to be imagined and thus visualised in our minds. However, the physicalisation of cruelty on stage also plays a crucial role. On the one hand, physical cruelty finds its form in the violence Katurian is being exposed to during his interrogation and subsequent execution by Tupolski and Ariel, two “high-ranking police officer[s] in a
totalitarian fucking dictatorship” (PM 18). On the other hand, it is presented in the staging of two of Katurian’s stories, namely, “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother” and “The Little Jesus”. The interrogation scenes of Act One and Act Three incorporate various aspects that have already been mentioned in the discussion of Cleansed and The Hothouse. For instance, as is a common method during interrogation, Katurian is brought into a state of uncertainty and anxiety by being asked absurd questions or by having his utterances restated as follow-up questions.

TUPOLSKI.   […] Anyway, so why do you suspect we have brought you here?
KATURIAN.   I’ve been racking my brains, but I can’t think.
TUPOLSKI.   You’ve been racking your brains but you can’t think?
KATURIAN.   No.
TUPOLSKI.   Well, yes or no?
KATURIAN.   Yes,
TUPOLSKI.   Huh?
(PM 6)

Furthermore, the accustomed practice of filling out forms as a necessary act of bureaucracy leads Katurian to convey information about his brother. In the end of the round of questions, Tupolski simply “puts his pen down, then tears the form he has been filling in in two” (PM 9), with Katurian realising that he may have told more than he otherwise would have. Likewise, Katurian is tricked into delivering his stories without knowing why he is being asked to recount them. Another mode of interrogation is the announcement of severe violence which leads the person concerned to imagine the pain before he/she physically feels it. From the very beginning Ariel tells Katurian that he is “going to hit [him] so hard in the fucking head” (PM 6) or is going to send electro-shocks through his body. Having to listen to the screams of beloved ones is also used to torment the suspect. When Katurian hears the screams of his brother his behaviour changes drastically from being subservient to being aggressive and demanding. In the course of the interrogation, the two detectives not only “[d]isconcert and destabilise the prisoner with asinine nonsense, [as it is] in all the guidebooks” (PM 55), they thematise the interrogation as such and comically expose it as a performance itself. Ariel and Tupolski discuss their methods of interrogation, question each other’s performance as an interrogator and divulge the torture of Michal as being staged, using screams and fake blood for dramatic effect. The nonchalant manner in which they highlight the interrogation as a
Stories of Cruelty: Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*

performance and their comedic quarrels about their respective methods and qualities as detectives, prevents the notion of danger or empathy despite the thematic cruelty. Hence, Tupolski’s polite and matter-of-fact appeal to Ariel, “Hurry up and torture the prisoner, please, Ariel. We’ve got to shoot him in half an hour.” (*PM* 54), causes more befuddlement and amusement than it conveys actual threat.

When it comes to the two stories that are staged, comedy is overtaken by grotesque cruelty. The story “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother”, which is staged in the second scene of Act One and narrates Katurian and Michal’s upbringing, not only suggests extreme physical violence used against a child, but it is stylised in such an exaggerated and caricatured manner that it distances the audience from the atrocious acts. Katurian’s mother, for instance, is said to wear “a lot of diamonds” (*PM* 38) and to talk in a peculiar way (cf. *PM* 38), while his father had “a goatee and glasses” (*PM* 22), being reminiscent of the typical horror-film figure of the mad scientist who conducts immoral and cruel experiments. Katurian’s entire childhood was such an artistic experiment in three parts. Apart from the final murder of his parents, the physical cruelty is not visualised on stage. The imagery rather supports the horror that is primarily evoked by the story itself told by Katurian. In contrast, in the physicalisation of the story “The Little Jesus”, the atrociousness of the story and the acts staged balance each other. Every station of the little girl’s way of the cross is played out for the audience to see.

FOSTER PARENTS. Do you still want to be like Jesus?
KATURIAN. And, through her tears, she said, “Yes, I do.” (*The parents place a heavy cross on the girl’s back. She walks around with it in pain.*) So they made her carry a heavy wooden cross around the sitting room a hundred times until her legs buckled and her shins broke and she could do nothing but stare at her little legs going the wrong way, and they said to her …
FOSTER PARENTS. Do you still want to be like Jesus?
(*PM* 48)

While in the former story McDonagh employs horror film motifs, in this tale he directly refers to the religious story of Jesus’ crucifixion. Although the visualisation of a mutilated and tortured child borders tolerable limits in its cruelty, the Christian iconography however cruel itself has an alienating effect due to its religious implications.
These two stories not only take a special position because they are acted out, they also function in reversed order to the other stories that are told in the course of the first act. The two tales “The Little Apple Men” and “The Tale of the Town on the River” first implant the images of cruelty into the reader’s/spectator’s mind. As a second step, these images are brought into reality when Michal confesses to have modelled the murders on the children after them. What has been considered a very cruel but fictional story before thus becomes a real event within the dramatic world. In other words, fiction becomes truth, imagination becomes reality. This doubling of the stories, that is, the narration of the tales in the first act and the subsequent telling of their re-enactment in the second act, increases their significance and enhances the cruelty inherent in the stories. The story “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother” works in a similar manner when the reader/spectator learns at its end that it is indeed an (almost) true story. In the case of “The Little Jesus”, however, the re-enactment of the story is confirmed before the content of the story is revealed. Michal claims that the killing of the third child was “[l]ike, um … she was like in, um … ‘The Little Jesus’” (PM 39), whereupon “Katurian looks at Michal a while, hands to his face, and, as he pictures the horrific details of the story, he slowly starts to cry” (PM 39). Like the third man in the story “The Tale of the Three Gibbet Crossroads”, the reader/spectator can only infer from the reactions of others that this story must surpass all the other stories in its horror and cruelty, a notion that is confirmed when the story is staged in the second scene of Act Two.

After having suffered immense torture as a child, Michal is no longer able to feel empathy for another person in pain. Hence, his accounts of the murders of the children are utterly devoid of remorse as he confesses to his brother, “[t]he little boy was just like you said it’d be. I chopped his toes off and he didn’t scream at all. He just sat there looking at them. […] God, he bled a lot. You wouldn’t’ve thought there’d be that much blood in such a little boy” (PM 34). The question of responsibility and legacy runs through the entire play. Michal conducted the murders out of his childhood trauma of violation and used Katurian’s stories as guidebook, as he tells his brother, “I wouldn’t have done anything if you hadn’t told me, so don’t you act all the innocent. Every story you tell me, something horrible happens to somebody. I was just testing out how far-fetched they were” (PM 35). The horror at the cruelties in the stories and in the play is, however, undermined by humour. Despite its
atrocities, the play is wildly funny. One particular humorous example is Katurian and Michal’s reflection or re-telling of their recent past:

KATURIAN. And then what happened?

MICHAL. And then what happened? (Pause.) When I won the discus?

KATURIAN. And then what happened three weeks ago?

MICHAL. Oh. And then I done some children in.

KATURIAN. And then you done some children in. How is that a happy fucking ending? And then you got caught and executed, and got your brother executed, who hadn’t done anything at all. How is that a happy ending? And, hang on, when did you win the discus? You came fourth in the fucking discus!

MICHAL. We are not talking about…

KATURIAN. You came fourth out of fucking four in the discus! “When I won the discus.”

( _PM 41 _)

In _The Pillowman_, cruelty finds its form in the imagination as well as on stage. Furthermore, the theme of cruelty is very directly addressed, discussed and contemplated on by the characters. However, it is in the humour, the various twists and the mimicry of familiar media imagery presented as realism that identification, empathy or a critical contemplation of violence are negated as soon as they are evoked. In his review of the play for _The New York Times_, Ben Brantley writes, “[l]et’s make one thing clear: Mr. McDonagh is not preaching the power of stories to redeem or cleanse or to find a core of solid truth hidden among life's illusions” (Brantley 2005). Nonetheless, there is a sense of redemption, however twisted, within the stories as well as achieved through the stories, not for the audience but for the characters of the play and the protagonists of Katurian’s stories. It is a redemption found through and in the telling of stories, through the act of creation that remains even if the creator is gone. As Katurian explains to Michal, “[i]t isn’t about being or not being dead. It’s about what you leave behind” ( _PM 41 _). With _The Pillowman_ McDonagh has created not so much a play about cruelty than a play that employs cruelty as a means to celebrate the art of storytelling as a human capacity and necessity. Brantley argues accordingly, “[f]or what ‘The Pillowman’ is celebrating is the raw, vital human instinct to invent fantasies, to lie for the sport of it, to bait with red herrings, to play Scheherazade to an audience real or imagined” (Brantley 2005).
To sum up, although there is a redemptive quality within the stories of the play, the audience is hindered from having a redemptive experience themselves. Through the use of humour and the constant highlighting of the processes of fictionality, the spectators/readers of the play are actively discouraged firstly, from getting emotionally involved with the characters, and secondly, from contemplating the cruelties depicted on a deeper, critical or psychological level. Similarly to the works of Quentin Tarantino or Stephen King, cruelty and horror are an aesthetic mode in McDonagh’s play. However, *The Pillowman*, like the tales of the Brothers Grimm, appeals to an innate human fascination with stories of the dark and grotesque. Thus it also stands in the tradition of the Grand Guignol\(^\text{11}\), which staged exclusively plays of horror and the macabre and featured extreme or exaggerated graphic violence for entertainment purposes (cf. Peirron 2006). However, this does not mean that McDonagh implements cruelty for its own sake, but it is a tenderness and affection in or despite of cruelty that he seeks to convey. As he states,

> I suppose I walk that line between comedy and cruelty because I think one illuminates the other. We’re all cruel, aren’t we? We are all extreme in one way or another at times and that’s what drama, since the Greeks, has dealt with. I hope the overall view isn’t just that though, or I’ve failed in my writing. There have to be moment [sic] when you glimpse something decent, something life-affirming even in the most twisted character. That’s where the real art lies. (McDonagh qtd. in *Decadent Theatre Company*)

Indeed, in the course of the play, the characters express their affection, respect or compassion towards one another. In the end, Katurian and Tupolski agree on their mutual admiration for each other. As Tupolski promises to keep his word and save Katurian’s stories, Katurian answers, “I respect that. And I know you don’t care if I respect that or not, but either way, I respect that” (*PM* 62), whereupon Tupolski replies, “Well, I respect that you respect that” (*PM* 62). Ariel, who throughout the play cannot wait to inflict pain on Katurian, is the

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\(^{11}\) ‘Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol’, which means ‘The Theatre of the Great Puppet’, was established by Oscar Metenier in Paris in 1897 in order to stage his extreme naturalist plays. His theatre was the first in France to feature characters of the underbelly of society, such as vagrants, prostitutes, criminals, etc., and let them speak in their own language. His successor Max Maurey turned the theatre into a “house of horror” (Peirron 2006) with emphasis on fear, insanity and everything akin to what Julia Kristeva calls ‘the abject’. The Grand-Guignol overstepped every imaginable boundary in the depiction of bodily or mental states but also used comedy in order to relieve the tension of the spectators. After the real life horrors of the Second World War, the theatre closed in 1962. It can be seen as a predecessor of the genre of the horror and splatter film. (cf. Peirron 2006).
one who eventually rescues the stories from destruction and takes pity in Katurian and Michal’s fate. Katurian deeply loves his brother and wishes to have saved him from all the horror he had to experience as a child, even if that meant that he would have never written his stories. In his final moments, Katurian dedicates his last story to Michal and tells of the Pillowman visiting him as a child and offering him the choice of avoiding all the pain he will have to endure. Yet Michal declines as an act of love for Katurian, “Well, I think we should probably just keep things the way they are, then, with me being tortured and him hearing and all that business, ‘cos I think I’m going to really like my brother’s stories. I think I’m going to really like them” (PM 68-69).

The importance of the art of storytelling is at the centre of The Pillowman. Accordingly, cruelty is hardly presented on stage but rather lies in the stories that are recounted in the play and stem from memory and imagination. In other words, the audience is predominantly confronted not with depicted cruelty but with narrated and thus imagined cruelty. Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman may lack the psychological depth of Kane or the political consciousness of Pinter; nor does it answer to what Artaud called for in the theatre, this ‘blind rigor’ that Kane achieves through her poetic style and relentless imagery and Pinter through his ingenious use of language as form of power. Nonetheless, McDonagh contributes to the investigation of cruelty in contemporary drama. Not only does he add an important aspect to this area of focus, that is, the significance of narrations of cruelties as a means of processing one’s past and mediate one’s fantasies, in addition to storytelling as a method to evoke acts of cruelty in one’s imagination and implant them in one’s mind. In its entertaining as well as gruesome exploitation of cruelty, The Pillowman contrasts Pinter’s highly critical approach as well as Kane’s emotional, reflective quality and, thus, highlights the dimensions and force of these works and points out the different uses and effects cruelty represented on stage can have.
Conclusion

Cruelty takes many forms and sizes in the three plays that are discussed in this thesis – from physical violence to psychological brutality to cruelty originating in language. If the manifestations of the cruelties that are employed in these plays were to be pinpointed to one verbal description, distilled to one essence, the three words would be physicalisation, language and imagination - physicalisation for Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed*; language for Harold Pinter’s *The Hothouse*; imagination for Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*. Very obviously there are plain acts of physical violence in every one of the plays, from *Cleansed*’s systematic mutilations, to *The Hothouse*’s legitimised torture, to *The Pillowman*’s narrative re-enactment of child-abuse. There are scenes of drug abuse, rape, murder, suicide, mutilation, degradation, intimidation, brutality, sadism and execution. But cruelty goes farther than violence and these acts are only the surface expressions of a cruelty that is rooted somewhere far more deeply. In Kane, this origin lies in an inner cruelty; in Pinter it is the accusation of state oppression; in McDonagh it dwells in fictional templates. The definitions of physicalisation, language and imagination are an attempt at finding a verbal approximation for the realms in which these nuclei of cruelty exist.

In terms of *Cleansed*, physicalisation comprises the entire body, the corporeal and the psychological territories of a human being. In Kane’s play, cruelty is manifested as an outward cruelty directed towards others as well as an inward cruelty directed towards the self. In *Cleansed*, the macrocosm of physical, real life cruelty mirrors the microcosm of inner, genuinely individual turmoil and mayhem. In *The Hothouse*, Pinter’s political outrage at oppressive state systems, merciless bureaucracy and legitimised criminal acts finds its expression in the cruelty of language. Verbal cruelty, as manifested in power struggles, modes of interrogation and malicious officialese, generates as well as disguises physical cruelty. *The Pillowman* draws on familiar motifs from horror films, fairy tales and Christian mythology and evokes images of extreme cruelty in one’s imagination. By doing so it exploits an innate human fascination with what is dark and grotesque in order to celebrate another human fascination, capacity and necessity, that is, the art of storytelling. Narrations of cruelty become visualisations of cruelty, on stage and in the mind.
The cruelties in these three plays stem from different points of origin and also differ in their relation to the world. Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed* is less overtly political than its predecessor *Blasted*. It nonetheless has severe political pertinence and employs motifs such as imprisonment and torture, yet rather to put flesh on deeply psychological and emotional states of being. In the subsequent play *Crave*, for instance, Kane goes even one step further and omits this ‘skin’ completely and only focuses on the cruelties inside one’s self without providing them with a visible body at all. Pinter’s *The Hothouse*, in turn, is a fierce outcry against inhuman, degrading and life-destroying practices conducted by unquestioned state power and its hierarchical systems. While Kane and Pinter use cruelties in their plays in order to raise awareness and condemn these acts happening in the world outside the theatre, McDonagh, like his protagonist Katurian, denies his work political implications. Instead, *The Pillowman* implements cruelties in the imagination in order to question the link between creator and creation as well as the effects, possibilities and responsibilities of narrations.

What is noticeable in the juxtaposition of the plays is the notion of love and compassion in the face of cruelty. Kane and McDonagh show us a world full of love, beauty and tenderness amidst and despite unimaginable horrors and cruelty. Pinter’s world, on the other hand, is utterly devoid of love and humanity for the sake of power and order. In all three plays, the characters strive for genuine human interaction and contact and even sacrifice themselves for this cause. In a world filled with love, such as in *Cleansed*, it is possible to reach this objective in the end and also *The Pillowman* ends on a note of love and compassion, despite death and misery. Yet, in a loveless world such as in *The Hothouse*, Lamb can only fail and cruelty is all that remains. Even in rendering the consequences of its lack, the creation of and insistence on something life-affirming, something decent and tender in the face of despair, suffering and cruelty is a message that all three playwrights ultimately convey in their works.

Yet, in order to do so and to recognise this possibility, the confrontation with the cruelties of the world is indispensable. There are so many forms of cruelty in everyday life, in love, war, relationships, in language, in state systems, in politics, in bureaucratic dehumanization, in physical violence, psychological brutality, and so forth. In order for art to reflect, deal with and present this world, or in particular for theatre to create worlds
recognisable as similar to the world we live in, cruelty simply cannot be omitted. In showing these cruelties that we experience in all their diversity in everyday life in a selected and reduced manner on stage, theatre has the ability to facilitate the discernment, critical contemplation and understanding of real life cruelties in all their ambiguity. Cruelty in theatre is an act of confrontation with what is frightening, uncomfortable and terrifying, on a personal as well as on a political level, in order to make us see and understand. Better than journalism, as Susan Sontag said, “[n]arratives can make us understand” (2004: 80). Maybe this understanding triggers change. As Sarah Kane states:

If we experiment in the theatre, such as an act of extreme violence, then maybe we can repulse it as such, to prevent the act of extreme violence out on the street. I believe that people can change and that it is possible for us as a species to change our future. It’s for this that I write what I write.
(Sarah Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 82)
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