

A MIRROR OF OUR OWN ANXIETY: CIVILIZATION, VIOLENCE AND ETHICS IN MARTIN CRIMP'S *CRUEL AND TENDER*

Mircia Aragay
University of Barcelona
aragay@ub.edu

In the context of the ethical turn that has gained ground in contemporary thought since the 1990s, this article reads Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* (2004), a rewriting of Sophocles's *The Trachiniae* (430 BCE), in the light of the historical and ethical rupture represented by the Holocaust and the long shadow it casts over contemporary Western civilization. Drawing mainly on the work of sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, which is, in turn, deeply informed by aspects of Emmanuel Lévinas's thought, it is argued that Crimp's play, particularly his reworking of Sophocles' female characters Deianeira and Iole into Amelia and Laela respectively, unmasks the violence inherent to post-Holocaust, globalized Western civilization. At the same time, like Bauman and Lévinas, the play posits the need to re-activate the pre-societal ethical core in individuals that will enable them to become the recipients of each other's testimony and thus build bonds of mutual responsibility. Ultimately, it is claimed, through an 'aesthetics of response-ability', *Cruel and Tender* interpellates spectators themselves as ethical subjects, as 'double witnesses' both to the manifestations of violence and testimony in the play, and to themselves as they engage in the process of meaning-making.

Keywords: Martin Crimp; Zygmunt Bauman; ethical turn; post-Holocaust; testimony; globalization

UN ESPEJO DE NUESTRA PROPIA ANGUSTIA: CIVILIZACIÓN, VIOLENCIA Y ÉTICA EN *CRUEL AND TENDER*, DE MARTIN CRIMP

*En el marco del giro ético que ha tenido lugar en el pensamiento contemporáneo a partir de la década de 1990, el presente artículo se aproxima a *Cruel and Tender* (2004), donde Martin Crimp re-escribe *Las traquinias* (430 AC) de Sófocles, a la luz de la ruptura histórica y ética del Holocausto y de la sombra que arroja sobre la civilización occidental contemporánea. Tomando como referencia principal el trabajo del sociólogo y filósofo Zygmunt Bauman, el cual a su vez incorpora aspectos clave del pensamiento de Emmanuel Lévinas, se propone que la obra de Crimp, en especial su re-elaboración de los personajes femeninos de Sófocles, Deianeira y Iole, como Amelia y Laela respectivamente, desenmascara la violencia inherente a la civilización occidental actual, globalizada y marcada por el Holocausto. A su vez, la obra postula la necesidad de re-activar el núcleo ético pre-social de los individuos, que debe permitirles convertirse en receptores del testimonio de los otros y erigir así vínculos de responsabilidad mutua. Se argumenta, en último término, que a través de una 'estética de la responsabilidad', *Cruel and Tender* interpela a los propios espectadores como sujetos éticos, como 'testigos dobles' de las manifestaciones de violencia y testimonio en la obra, así como de sí mismos en cuanto a constructores de significados.*

Palabras clave: Martin Crimp; Zygmunt Bauman; giro ético; post-Holocausto; testimonio; globalización

1. Rewriting Sophocles through a fractured ethics

Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* (2004) is a play of many fractures. Most obviously, perhaps, as a rewriting of Sophocles's *The Trachiniae* (430 BCE) it fractures the classical narrative of Heracles, his wife Deianeira, their son Hyllus and Heracles's prisoner of war Iole, by updating it to the early twenty-first-century context of the global 'war on terror' and by introducing a series of changes to both the characters and the narrative itself that have been often noted, not least by Crimp himself. Aleks Sierz usefully summarises the thrust of Crimp's play:

Instead of Deianeira and Heracles . . . Crimp has Amelia and the General [who is] fighting the War on Terror . . . Set in their temporary home close to an international airport, the play starts with Amelia talking to her chorus: a housekeeper, a physiotherapist and a beautician . . . The General . . . is now under investigation for war crimes. He sends home the only two survivors of a siege of an African city, which he has reduced to dust. One of them, Laela [Sophocles's Iole], is the daughter of an African leader. As Amelia soon discovers, she is the General's mistress – and he has destroyed a whole town to possess her. The tragedy unfolds when [Amelia] sends [the General] a . . . potion concealed in a pillow. (Sierz 2005 no page number)

The potion is a chemical that wrecks the General's body from within. Amelia commits suicide, offstage, and the General is taken away by Jonathan, a government minister, to be judged for war crimes, also offstage.

John Ginman highlights two further key ruptures of Sophocles's narrative in *Cruel and Tender*. Firstly, in Crimp's play Amelia *consciously* sends the General the pillow into which she carefully inserts a glass tube containing the poisonous chemical, while Sophocles's Deianeira remains "the unwitting executor of the Gods' intentions" (Ginman 2004: 113). Secondly, both Crimp's text and Luc Bondy's premiere production for the Young Vic "focus[ed] tellingly on the role of the younger characters", not only James, the Hyllus figure, whom Ginman discusses at some length (2004: 116), but crucially, I suggest, Laela, transformed from Sophocles' non-speaking Iole into an increasingly articulate young woman whose relationship with Amelia is revealingly transmuted by Crimp too.¹ In 'Sophocles and the War against Terror', published three days after Bondy's production opened, Crimp himself shed light on what to him are two particularly significant emphases in *Cruel and Tender* vis-à-vis Sophocles's play. There is, to start with, the gender division "universally required", argues Crimp, "to prosecute war. The man is specially trained and specially dressed to legitimate killing . . . while the woman stays rooted in and helps to define the civilian world". Further,

. . . Sophocles had the brilliant idea of writing a play in which this gender split is explicit: not only do male and female live in separate worlds, but husband and wife . . . don't even meet . . . he devotes the major part of the play . . . to a woman who struggles to deal with the man's absence, violence and infidelity. (Crimp 2004b: 35)

¹ Bondy's production opened at the Young Vic on 5 May 2004 and transferred to the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord (Paris) on 22 September 2004. It was Bondy who encouraged Crimp to take Sophocles' play "in a new direction for his [Bondy's] first English-language production" (Crimp 2004a: note in the playtext, no page number).

To this extent, *Cruel and Tender* follows *The Trachiniae*; however, Crimp's play foregrounds the way in which "Amelia resists control, rejects the label 'victim'" (Crimp 2004b: 35). And secondly, writes Crimp, in *Cruel and Tender* Sophoclean 'exile' becomes "the classic non-place of the developed world . . . a perpetually illuminated international airport . . . close to the X-ray machines which allow us to examine the entrails of our luggage for favourable or unfavourable omens" (Crimp 2004b x3: 35).

These departures from Sophocles's play have been mostly addressed in the light of what Michael Billington described as the "rash of Greek drama" (2004b: 28) on the English stage around the time *Cruel and Tender* opened. It was mostly Euripides that was re-discovered – two productions of *Iphigenia at Aulis* (Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, February 2003, dir. Anna Mackmin; National Theatre, June-September 2004, dir. Katie Mitchell); one of *Ion* (Mercury Theatre, Colchester, June 2004, dir. David Hunt); another two of *Hecuba* (Donmar Warehouse, November 2004, dir. Jonathan Kent; Albery Theatre, RSC London season, March-May 2005, dir. Lawrence Boswell) – and the resonances of these Greek revivals with the contemporary context of the war in Iraq, terrorism and the 'war on terror' were highlighted by numerous commentators (Billington 2004a, 2004b; Clapp 2004; de Jongh 2004; Ginman 2004; Gross 2004; Jones 2004; Kingston 2004; Sierz 2006b: 63; Spencer 2004; Taylor 2004; Woddis 2004). While it would be futile to dispute the connection, I do propose to suggest that its significance in the case of Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* may be deepened by re-examining the play in the light of another kind of fracture – the historical and ethical rupture represented by the Holocaust and the long shadow it casts over contemporary Western civilization.

2. The ethical challenge of 'liquid modernity'

As Nicolas Ridout points out in *Theatre & Ethics* – an important contribution to the move towards ethics that has recently taken place in theatre and drama studies, in consonance with the wider ethical turn that has gained ground in contemporary thought since the 1990s – the Nazi genocide has led "to a number of fundamental reassessments of European civilisation and culture" (2009: 49-50). Sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, drawing on previous work by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and, above all, Emmanuel Lévinas, has been highly articulate in this respect. His contribution, I suggest, seems especially pertinent in the context of the attempt to read *Cruel and Tender* as a play informed by a post-Holocaust sensibility. Needless to say, the relationship I draw between Bauman's work and Crimp's play is not one of cause and effect, or of that much-maligned term, *influence*, but rather one of conjunction. Although belonging to different generations, as early twenty-first-century Western citizens Bauman (b. 1925) and Crimp (b. 1956) form part of the same post-Holocaust, late capitalist milieu and respond to it in ways that resonate strongly with one another. In other words, they provide part of the context for each other's work.²

² For a recent full-length study that investigates the relationship between ethics and contemporary theatre via the work of Lévinas and Bauman, see Helena Grehan's *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age* (2009). Where Grehan focuses on performance art – works by Societas Raffaello Sanzio, Théâtre du Soleil and TheatreWorks, among others – this article seeks to explore a similar connection in the case of a specific instance of contemporary text-based theatre. As regards the Holocaust, in *Voyages au bout du possible: Les théâtres du traumatisme de Samuel Beckett à Sarah Kane* (2006), Elisabeth Angel-Perez approaches work by Howard Barker, Peter Barnes, Samuel

In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), Bauman set out to dismantle one of the foundations of modern European thought, the Enlightenment-derived narrative according to which the values and practices of modernity – rationality, efficiency, industrial potential, technological know-how, bureaucratic regulation – impose “moral constraints on [the] otherwise rampant selfishness and inborn savagery of the animal in man”, therefore making progress and civilization possible (1989: 5). From this Hobbesian perspective, the Holocaust signalled a failure of the modern civilizing effort, a moment when “the eternal beast” broke free and civilized rules of behaviour were suspended (1989: 95). For Bauman, instead, the notion that (Western) civilization is based on the absence of violence and savage cruelty is a myth, a convenient, self-legitimizing narrative; on the contrary, the horrors of the Holocaust “uncovered [the violent, cruel] face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar face we so admire . . . each of the two faces can no more exist without the other than can the two sides of a coin” (1989: 7). The Holocaust was, in short, a product of modernity, glaringly exposing its contradictions.

Bauman stops short of proclaiming that the Holocaust was “a ‘paradigm’ of modern civilization, its ‘natural’, ‘normal’ product, a view which would perversely belittle its importance and significance” (1989: 6; emphasis original). Rather, such extreme violence and cruelty are *possibilities* inherent to modernity, since it is the rational, efficient, technological, highly bureaucratic world of modern civilization that made the Holocaust thinkable, even ‘reasonable’. In other words, Bauman is particularly concerned with the ethical and moral conditions of possibility of Holocaust-like phenomena, which he sees as intrinsic to modernity itself. Like Lévinas, he argues that human beings have a natural, pre-social inclination to feel responsible for other human beings, particularly those who suffer or are in need – a responsibility for the “naked face” of the Other that is the precondition for a truly ethical life according to Lévinas (1989: 83). The Holocaust revealed how, provided with the sophisticated technical and conceptual tools of modern civilization, human beings can bring about a scale of brutality and destruction that would be inconceivable if their actions were guided by their natural drives. Bureaucratic, economic and technological efficiency produce moral indifference and ethical blindness; the increase in the physical and/or psychic distance between violent acts and their consequences suspends moral and ethical propensities; the demand to obey commands from superiors blurs moral dilemmas and any sense of personal responsibility; and making the humanity of the victims invisible by evicting them from one’s ‘universe of obligation’ uproots the self’s natural ethical condition (Bauman 1989: 21-27, 1993: 125).

Since the early 1990s, Bauman’s critique of modernity has been overlaid by a passionate yet critical engagement with the issues and debates raised by postmodernity and globalization – in his terms, by the passage from ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ modernity. Unlike other theorists of postmodernity, such as Jean-François Lyotard, who welcome and celebrate this transformation, Bauman views postmodernity as a fractured condition. For Bauman, the crumbling of ‘solid’ modern structures – including distinctly demarcated nation-states, stable identities based on ‘belonging’, hierarchical groupings and strong centres – in the wake of the Reagan-Thatcher neoliberal era and the fall of the Berlin Wall “augurs an unprecedented degree of emancipation from constraints” (2008: 25) that is simultaneously exciting and frightening, pregnant with both chances and threats. In particular, a healthy scepticism about

Beckett, Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill and Sarah Kane that is not explicitly about the Nazi genocide as “un théâtre de l’après-Auschwitz” (2006: 16). The book includes a short chapter on Crimp’s *Attempts on her Life* (1997), where Angel-Perez refers briefly to *Cruel and Tender*.

the grand narratives of modernity goes hand in hand with a deep anxiety about the frailty and provisionality of human bonds and a fixation on the body as the only tangible grounding for individual identity. In this respect, drawing on Michel Foucault, Bauman argues that in the 'liquid-modern' era of global capitalism, the regime of surveillance extends to all areas of existence, including, crucially, personal identity – individuals, relentlessly interpellated as consumers, constantly discipline their bodies in order to inscribe the demands of the market on them, the palpable bearers of their identity.³

It is the ethical challenge posed by globalization that particularly concerns Bauman, specifically the fact that globalization has so far taken an unbalanced form that has increasingly polarized the distribution of benefits between a privileged minority and the deprived and oppressed majority of the world's population, located particularly, albeit not exclusively, in the so-called *Third World*. While globalization is both inescapable and irreversible, and it has brought to the fore, "*objectively*", our planetwide dependency and responsibility for one another, there are actually few signs that the privileged few "are willing to take up in earnest the *subjective* responsibility for that objective responsibility of ours" (Bauman 2008: 26; emphases original).⁴

This is precisely where Bauman has focused his attention. Drawing increasingly on Lévinas's work, his central concern is with the ethical implications of postmodernity and globalization; more precisely, with drawing up a viable ethics for the post-Holocaust, 'liquid', irrevocably fractured habitat. The lifting of pressure brought about by the crisis of modernity means, for Bauman, that human beings *can* become more attuned to the inner promptings of their moral nature, to their pre-societal inclination to feel responsibility for the Other, systematically curbed by modernity. However, in the context of postmodernity, what Lévinas terms 'being-for' the Other – a recognition of the Other in all their nakedness and vulnerability – is not an uncomplicated position to occupy, since "we rediscover [the inclination to care for others] at the same moment that all guidance about how to behave morally is taken away from us" (Smith 1999: 163-64).

3. *Cruel and Tender*: unmasking the violence of civilization

It is an error, Bauman warns, to believe that civilization and violence are mutually exclusive. Western civilization has thrived on the master narrative of its triumph over the supposedly innate human predisposition to cruelty and violence, but this is no more than a self-legitimizing illusion. In fact, the violence inherent to civilization has been transformed and redeployed, "taken out of sight, rather than forced out of existence" (Bauman 1989: 97), in two crucial ways. In the first place, the dominant discourse on the sanctity of the human body has become a fundamental symbolic expression of the narrative of the suppression of violence – "the care which is taken not to invade that most private of spaces, to avoid bodily contact, to abide by the culturally prescribed bodily distance" (Bauman 1989: 96). And yet, as noted above, Western civilization, in its post-Holocaust, late capitalist incarnation, has developed highly efficient mechanisms of interpellation that discipline bodies into exercising

³ Of course Bauman's is not a solitary voice in this respect. Jean Baudrillard, for one, points out that in a contemporary consumer society bodies are first and foremost understood as objects of "narcissistic investment" (2005: 277).

⁴ Again, Bauman's view chimes in with that of other analysts, such as geographer and anthropologist David Harvey, whose compelling investigations of 'space' underpin his influential notion of the 'uneven geographies' of postmodernity and globalization (Harvey 1989, 2006).

strict self-regulation, even in the form of self-directed violence. In our technological, media-saturated civilization, such mechanisms have become increasingly invisible, “ever more immanent to the social field” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 23). Crimp’s *Cruel and Tender* makes this process visible on stage through transmuting the Greek chorus into the triplet formed by Housekeeper, Physiotherapist and Beautician, who tend Amelia’s body – painting her toenails, prompting her to use her exercise machine, massaging her shoulders – with a view to inscribing it with the ‘desirable’ market values.

A second means for the redeployment of violence, one that also figures prominently in Crimp’s play, has consisted in moving it elsewhere:

... [enclosing it] in segregated and isolated territories, [evicting it] to the ‘twilight areas’, off-limits for a large majority, [exporting it] to distant places which on the whole are irrelevant for the life-business of civilized humans (one can always cancel holiday bookings). (Bauman 1989: 97)

As mentioned, the General is involved in precisely one such displacement of violence, in this case on African – ‘Third World’ – territory. In this connection, the city he has besieged and destroyed is no other than Gisenyi, in Rwanda, where the provisional government was held during the Rwandan genocide, which, in its purposefulness and sheer scale – an estimated 800,000 Rwandans, mostly Tutsis, were killed between April and June of 1994 – was likened to the Holocaust. Significantly, in ‘Sophocles and the War against Terror’, Crimp describes at some length how the process of writing *Cruel and Tender* began “by collecting photographs”, *visible* evidence of such displacements of violence – a picture of a Liberian ‘government commander’, another of an American soldier carrying an Iraqi child, a third of a woman running along a Sarajevo pavement while a UN soldier takes aim at some out-of-frame target (Crimp 2004b: 35). The third picture, Crimp points out, articulates the conventional gendering of war and violence; in this sense, it leads directly on to his reworking of Sophocles’ Deianeira into Amelia and of Iole into Laela, who become nothing less than the sites where the three terms in my title – civilization, violence and ethics – compellingly converge.

Amelia, contracted out by her father to marry the General, then a mere soldier, when she was fifteen, and actually married and mother of a child at eighteen, has experienced from an early age the symbolic violence late capitalism exercises on bodies, particularly those of women, as it drills them into submission. At fifteen, “when the first man [the soldier who would subsequently become the General] came to my father / wanting me”, she was already self-regulating efficiently – she listened outside the door “in the very short skirt / and the very high-heeled agonising shoes / I had begged and begged to be allowed to wear” (Crimp 2004a: 1). At the same time, it is precisely through her body that she attempts to enact resistance – “I ran up to my room. Locked the door. Stopped eating” (Crimp 2004a: 1), a self-directed form of violence that lays bare the first of the two displacements of violence Bauman identifies as characteristic of ‘liquid’ modernity.

As already noted, the disciplining of Amelia’s body is enacted on stage by the Housekeeper, the Physiotherapist and the Beautician. At the same time, the General, “sent out / on one operation after another / with the aim – the apparent aim – of eradicating terror”, “only sees [his] child at distant intervals / like a farmer inspecting a crop / in a remote field” (Crimp 2004a: 2) – a juxtaposition that reveals how the exporting of violence to distant territories depends on the exercise of another kind of (submerged) violence at home, whereby women are subjectified into passive, recipient roles: a field yielding a crop.

“[S]he’s like a bird in a box”, claims the Beautician early on in the play – “You mean like a parrot?”, asks the Physiotherapist (Crimp 2004a: 6-7), endlessly repeating, that is, the kind of abject submission disciplined into women through a plethora of cultural products, epitomised in *Cruel and Tender* by Billie Holiday’s ‘My Man’, which Amelia dances to in Part One, Scene Two (Crimp 2004a: 10-11). Ultimately, Amelia discovers she has been disciplined into non-existence. She first finds a document where the General gives power of attorney over his estate to his male descendant, their son James, in case of death or mental incapacity – as Amelia points out, “this whole ridiculous document seems to be written / as if I no longer exist” (Crimp 2004a: 8). Secondly, and decisively, she finds out that the African girl the General has sent home, Laela, is actually his mistress, the main reason he razed the city of Gisenyi and the only reason he eventually phones home at the end of Part One – “He’s on a plane. He’s asking to speak to Laela”, Jonathan, the government minister, tells Amelia (Crimp 2004a: 24).

Part Two opens with Amelia inserting the tube with the chemical into the pillow, which she asks Jonathan to take to the General. Although she claims the tube contains a love potion designed to make a soldier feel “an absolute need for the love and the reassurance / of the person he was closest to” (Crimp 2004a: 30), its associations with violence and death are too obvious to ignore. Robert, Amelia’s friend from university who provided her with the chemical, “was given a budget [...] to develop weapons” (Crimp 2004a: 28-29) and was eventually found by a stream with his throat cut (Crimp 2004a: 30).⁵ In Part Two, Scene Two, Amelia reports that the young African boy the General has sent home with Laela has been “poking his fingers into [her] perfume drawer”, where she kept the tube with the chemical, and has “momentarily stopped breathing” (Crimp 2004a: 34-35). In addition, the play opens with Amelia’s unambiguously stated refusal to be made into a victim – “Because I’m not a victim – oh no – / that’s not a part I’m willing to play” (Crimp 2004a: 1) – which is reinforced in Part One, Scene Three, where she rejects Jonathan’s patronising lies about Laela and the young African boy in terms that are worth quoting at some length:

If you call me distressed
Jonathan
one more time
or use my name
Jonathan
one more time tonight I won’t scream
no
what I will in fact do
is *stuff your mouth with barbed wire.*
Because forgive me
but I’m starting to find *the way you speak*
an atrocity which makes cutting a man’s heart out
seem almost humane.
[...] don’t and I repeat
don’t think you can what?
‘spare my feelings?’
because I am not a child

⁵ Ellipses within quotations from *Cruel and Tender* are exceptionally signalled by three dots in square brackets, so as to distinguish them from pauses in the text, which Crimp signals by means of three dots.

and I do not expect to be treated like a child
in my own house – is that clear? (Crimp 2004a: 21-22; emphasis added)

Amelia, that is, brings to the surface the violence underlying the discourse – “the way you speak” – which subjectifies women into submissive, child-like roles and the correspondingly violent reaction this may elicit from women themselves – “I will [...] stuff your mouth with barbed wire”, in the extract above. In these and other ways, it is strongly intimated that Amelia’s ‘present’ to the General of the pillow containing the tube is a conscious decision;⁶ an attempt, that is, to make the ‘suppressed’ violence of late capitalist, ‘liquid’ society visible, thus undermining the self-legitimizing fiction of its ‘non-violence’ and ‘rationality’. Rather than depict a (Hobbesian) world “where civilized people behave with pre-civilized brutality” (Ginman 2004: 118) and a character, Amelia, who “inhabits an intermediate, uncertain space between possibilities of social control and aggressive outburst” (Ginman 2004: 115), I suggest *Cruel and Tender* seeks to unmask, primarily through Amelia, the latent sources of violence inherent to contemporary Western civilization.

When her son James tells Amelia about the effect the chemical has had on the General – “And there’s this thing on his back, Mum – no – not on his back but under it – this thing under his skin – like an animal under his skin – it’s crawling – it’s crawling under his skin – like an animal, Mum, trying to slide out from underneath – which is the chemical, the animal under the skin – the pain [...] the gift of pain” (Crimp 2004a: 40) – it is made clear that Amelia’s poisoning of the General has inscribed on his body a pain that is comparable to the pain she has long experienced as a woman disciplined into submission, into docile acceptance, for instance, of her husband’s constant infidelities, which she likens to “having my face sprayed with acid” (Crimp 2004a: 22).⁷ The scene ends with Amelia’s revelatory fantasy about driving to the airport with Laela, which culminates in her first act of self-inflicted bodily violence:

The two wives will drive to the airport in their husband’s car to collect their husband from
the airport – what d’you think? [...]

Laela goes out.

I know what we can do, Laela:

[...]

How about we lie down on the rubber track

and ask to be X-rayed

because obviously

there’s obviously something inside of us

Laela

some sharp object

some spike

[...]

So they’ll ask us to strip.

And when we’ve stripped

⁶ In contrast, Sierz (2005) claims Amelia believes she is sending the General a love potion.

⁷ It is true that the play’s first violent climax, the poisoning of the General, takes place offstage (Ginman 2004: 115) – a form of displacement, one might argue, concurrent with the constant attempt to divert violence away from contemporary Western civilization. However, crucially, the inscription of violence on the General’s body – the material consequences of the poisoning – are tangibly displayed on stage, firstly through James’s description and subsequently, in Part Three of the play, through the General’s own corporeal presence, to which I return below.

[...]
 one of those women with a rubber-glove
 [...]
 will push her hand deeper and deeper into us
 until the tip of her finger rests
 just so
 on the spike.
Laela reappears, holding glasses.
 And she'll say
 'I suspect you of terror.
 You have a concealed weapon.
 I can feel it next to your heart.'
 'Oh really?' I'll say 'D'you mean love?'
 And she'll say 'Not love
 no
 I'm talking about this spike.
 Have you concealed this spike deliberately?
 Or could it have been placed there
 without your knowledge?'
 And I'll lie to her
 I'll say 'Deliberately of course.'
 Because otherwise
 I could be mistaken for a victim
 and that's not a part
 Laela
 that I'm prepared to play.
*Amelia clenches her fist around one of the shattered wine-glasses on the table and squeezes as hard as she
 can. When she finally opens it, some of the glass drops out, some remains sticking to her hand.* (Crimp
 2004a: 45-46)

The 'spike', placed next to Amelia's heart without her knowledge, points to the violence – the cruelty – intrinsic to post-Holocaust, late capitalist Western civilization, the violence it inscribes within people's bodies, at the very core of their being, without their even noticing, through highly effective, barely conscious mechanisms of self-regulation – a violence that is submerged, "a concealed weapon" in the quotation above, but no less terrifying for that. Ironically, contemporary civilization's own instruments of surveillance, represented here by the scanning machine, can detect this implanted violence and turn it into an accusation against the subject, making her feel personally responsible for it.⁸ And so Amelia eventually directs the violence against her own body – firstly, by clenching her fist around the shattered wine-glass; subsequently, in the gap between Part Two and Part Three, by committing suicide. But rather than constituting Amelia as a victim, both are represented acts of rebellion that signal her refusal to continue cooperating with a system, an entire civilization, that is founded on a violence it self-righteously denies and displaces.

In addition, as the 'spike' speech reveals, Amelia's body also contains the potential for love or tenderness. Love is a 'concealed weapon' in a different sense – it represents, I suggest, for Crimp as for Lévinas and Bauman, the self's natural inclination to care for

⁸ Ian Burkitt (1999: 53), like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 23-24) and, as already noted, Bauman, points out that in contemporary Western civilization control of individual bodies is mostly exercised from a distance, 'non-violently', yet very efficiently leading to self-regulation. Technology – surveillance cameras, scanning machines – epitomises this kind of displacement of violence.

other human bodies; an ethical core buried under the self-disciplining, violence-inducing strictures instilled by civilization, which suppress the mechanisms of empathy. It is this other ‘concealed weapon’ Amelia paradoxically rediscovers through her ‘spike’ speech, crucially by addressing it to Laela, who becomes, from the moment she comes back with the wine glasses, its recipient. Amelia’s speech, in other words, is an act of testimony – the paradigmatically post-Holocaust “mode of our relation to ... the traumas of contemporary history”, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub state in their seminal *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992: 5) – that implicates the two women in a thoroughly ethical mode of being and relating, a bond of mutual responsibility.⁹ From the moment Laela returns with the glasses, she offers

... embodied presence to commune with ... the other’s [Amelia’s] pain/knowledge. Bodies, in this perspective, can be thought of as ethical in at least two ways: first of all, insofar as their very being is the source of particular values and value-judgments; and second, insofar as they are able and ready to be implicated in relationships of testimony, or to become ... communicative bodies. (Fraser and Greco 2005: 31)

This moment signals a turning point for Laela. Absolutely silent, like Sophocles’s Iole, when she is first brought to Amelia’s home, it is only at Amelia’s insistence that she shows her tongue, thus proving her potential to become an articulate subject – “Thank god for that”, says Amelia (Crimp 2004a: 15-16). Part Two, Scene Two, however, begins with Laela’s body, “*exactly like Amelia in the earlier scene*”, being disciplined by the Beautician and Physiotherapist while her mind is simultaneously drilled by her reading aloud some advice in a women’s magazine on how to best please a man sexually (Crimp 2004a: 25). When, parrot-like, she repeats the dominant gendered attribution of violence to men – “Boys need to fight. Boys must fight. Boys must kill – must learn to kill. Boys need to fight – they need to learn – they need to kill. Boys need to kill. Boys need to fight. Boys must fight. Boys must kill – must learn to kill. Boys need to – ” (Crimp 2004a: 27-28) – Amelia interrupts her by hitting her, an act of physical aggression that, again, makes manifest the symbolic violence being exercised on Laela. The scene, however, ends very differently. When Laela becomes the recipient of Amelia’s testimony, of her pain/knowledge, when she ‘is there’ for Amelia (Ridout 2009: 64), she takes the first step towards rediscovering her own ethical core. And indeed, the play ends with Laela trying out her new-found voice as she reads out loud, not from a woman’s magazine any more, but from Hesiod’s *Works and Days* – “I wish I was not of this people, I wish I was dead or still un...un... [...] Or still...unborn [...] Men will turn the cities of other men to dust without reason. Shame and truth will put on white dresses and hiding their...beauty from the people will abandon the earth” (Crimp 2004a: 70). As she rejects this, our inhospitable civilization – which has led to Amelia’s suicide – and refuses to help clear out its mess, the evidence of its cruel violence lying all around them – “That is *your* job”, she tells the Housekeeper (Crimp 2004a: 70) – the play closes on a minimal affirmation, the barest suggestion that the bridge

⁹ It is mostly women in Crimp’s plays who are able to regain contact with their ethical core, often through acts of testimony. Corinne and Rebecca in *The Country* (2000) are cases in point. As Mary Luckhurst points out in her discussion of *Attempts on her Life*, possibly Crimp’s most experimental, self-reflexive play to date, the playwright’s work displays a consistent interest in representing the victimization, sexual and emotional exploitation, marginalization and silencing of women in patriarchy, while at the same time interrogating the limits of such representations (2003: 53, 57).

towards a different world may lie with the younger generation: the tableau made up of Laela herself, James and the young boy he holds in his arms.¹⁰

4. Spectatorship, witnessing, ethics

Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* impels the spectator to become an active witness, rather than a voyeur or passive recipient – a 'double witness' (Felman and Laub 1992: 58) in fact, both to a series of manifestations of violence in the play and the passing on of testimony from Amelia to Laela, and to him/herself as s/he engages in the process of meaning-making. Spectators, that is, are interpellated by the play as ethical subjects. The theatre at large, Ridout points out (2009: 59-61), provides a forum where the Lévinasian 'face-to-face' encounter with embodied Others – both the actors on stage and fellow spectators – holds the potential for a re-activation of spectators' ethical capacity to respond by deploying what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls an "aesthetic of responsibility (or response-ability)" (Lehmann 2006: 185; emphasis original). At a time when artists are "bereaved of binding schemas and foolproof methods" (Bauman 1997: 111), when there are no "trustworthy received forms left in the arts, so every time you have to find a way of starting from scratch" (Crimp in Sierz 2006a: 357), it is such an aesthetic that *Cruel and Tender* sets out to discover.

The spectator, 'faced with' Amelia's acts of violence – hitting Laela, poisoning the General, clenching her fist around the shattered wine-glass, committing suicide – and her passing on of her testimony to Laela, is confronted with a series of images of the human body causing and/or undergoing pain which s/he is challenged to respond to, to 'interpret'. To add one further example to those already discussed, in Part Three, 'faced with' the visible consequences of Amelia's poisoning of the General – his shattered body, attached to a urine-bag and regularly convulsing in pain – the spectator is urged to re-examine the master narrative of the sanctity of the human body, "the trained revulsion we feel whenever we see or hear that sacred space being trespassed on" (Bauman 1989: 96), so as to ask him/herself about the causes that may have led Amelia to undermine such a disciplinary injunction and render the General's body so utterly vulnerable. Performance can highlight such moments of heightened spectator interpellation – thus, Bondy's premiere production of *Cruel and Tender* foregrounded Amelia's first act of self-inflicted violence by having the actress Kerry Fox slash her wrist with a piece of glass and then smear every piece of furniture with blood.

Finally, the act of critical writing about a work is in itself an ethical response to it (Ridout 2009: 63). My own response to *Cruel and Tender*, inevitably limited, consists in reading it as a play that is primarily concerned with re-activating the spectators' ethical capacity to react to, possibly to resist, the massive pressure of a civilization that generates and then displaces violence, denying any responsibility for it. Crimp has argued, regarding photographic representations of contemporary terror and violence, that they are windows

¹⁰ *Cruel and Tender* was modified during rehearsals for Bondy's Young Vic production, which means that there are two versions of the play. The ending of the Young Vic unpublished version departs from the published version this article quotes from in that Laela is not hesitant and does not need the Physiotherapist's help to be able to read the word "unborn". In addition, the Housekeeper's injunction to Laela to help clean up the mess is suppressed. Instead, the play ends on Laela reading from Hesiod, with James sharing her lines about fathers and sons, and the stage being drowned by music – an even sharper focus indeed on the younger generation. I thank my colleague Clara Escoda for this information.

on to events and that “The darker it gets outside, the blacker a window becomes, and the more it turns into a mirror” (2004b: 35). From this perspective, and circling back to the beginning of this essay, *Cruel and Tender* is not so much a play about terrorism per se, as a play about ourselves, our own civilization and its violent underside, a reflection of our own anxiety.¹¹

Works Cited

- Angel-Perez, Élisabeth 2006: *Voyages au bout du possible: Les théâtres du traumatisme de Samuel Beckett à Sarah Kane*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Baudrillard, Jean 2005 (1998): ‘The Finest Consumer Object: The Body’. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, eds. *The Body: A Reader*. London and New York: Routledge. 277-83.
- Bauman, Zygmunt 1989: *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity P.
- 1993: *Postmodern Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity P.
- 1997: *Postmodernity and its Discontents*. Cambridge: Polity P.
- 2008: *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* Cambridge and London: Harvard UP.
- Billington 2004a: ‘*Cruel and Tender*’. *Guardian* 14 May: 31.
- 2004b: ‘Terror of Modern Times Sets the Stage for Greek Tragedy’. *Guardian* 19 June: 28.
- Burkitt, Ian 1999: *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity and Modernity*. London and New Delhi: Sage.
- Clapp, Susannah 2004: ‘News Flash from Troy’. *Guardian* 27 June: 33.
- Crimp, Martin 2004a: *Cruel and Tender*. London: Faber.
- 2004b: ‘Sophocles and the War against Terror’. *Guardian* 8 May: 35.
- de Jongh, Nicholas 2004: ‘*Cruel and Tender*’. *Evening Standard* 14 May. In *Theatre Record* 24.10: 632.
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub 1992: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fraser, Mariam and Monica Greco, eds. 2005: *The Body: A Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ginman, John 2004: ‘*Cruel and Tender*: Metaphysics and Performance in a Time of Terror’. *Western European Stages* 16.3: 113-18.
- Grehan, Helena 2009: *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gross, John 2004: ‘*Cruel and Tender*’. *Sunday Telegraph* 16 May. In *Theatre Record* 24.10: 635.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri 2000: *Empire*. Cambridge and London: Harvard UP.
- Harvey, David 1989: *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- 2006: *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. London and New York: Verso.
- Jones, Oliver 2004: ‘*Cruel and Tender*’. *What’s On* 19 May. In *Theatre Record* 24.10: 634.
- Kingston, Jeremy 2004: ‘*Cruel and Tender*’. *Times* 15 May. In *Theatre Record* 24.10: 634.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies 2006 (1999): *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel 1989 (1984): ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’. Seán Hand, ed. *The Levinas Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell. 75-87.
- Luckhurst, Mary 2003: ‘Political Point-Scoring: Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on her Life*’. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13.1: 47-60.
- Ridout, Nicholas 2009: *Theatre and Ethics*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sierz, Aleks 2005: ‘Programme Note for *Cruel and Tender*’. Ljubljana: National Theatre of Slovenia.

¹¹ Research towards this article was carried out with the financial support of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (FFI2009-07598/FILO). A preliminary, considerably shorter version was presented at the conference ‘Fractured Narratives: Pinter, Postmodernism and the Postcolonial World’, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 5-7 November 2009.

-
- 2006a: 'The Question is the Ultimate Discomfort: Martin Crimp in Conversation with Aleks Sierz'. *New Theatre Quarterly* 22.4: 352-60.
- 2006b: *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*. London: Methuen.
- Smith, Dennis 1999: *Zygmunt Bauman: Prophet of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Polity P.
- Spencer, Charles 2004: 'Cruel and Tender'. *Daily Telegraph* 15 May. In *Theatre Record* 24.10: 633.
- Taylor, Paul 2004: 'Cruel and Tender'. *Independent* 24 May. In *Theatre Record* 24.10: 635.
- Woddis, Carole 2004: 'Cruel and Tender'. *Herald* 18 May. In *Theatre Record* 24.10: 635.

Received 27 February 2011

Revised version accepted 27 June 2011

Mireia Aragay is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Barcelona and Life Fellow of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. Her research interests focus on Harold Pinter and contemporary British theatre, film adaptations of literary classics and critical theory. She has published widely in these areas, including, as editor, *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship* (Rodopi, 2005), and as co-editor, *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). She is Principal Investigator of "The representation of politics and the politics of representation in post-1990 British drama and theatre", a three-year research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (FFI2009-07598/FILO; <http://www.ub.edu/cbtbarcelona>).

Address: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya. Universitat de Barcelona. Gran Via 585. 08007 Barcelona, Spain. Tel.: +34 93 4035686. Fax: +34 93 3171249.