Exploring Text and Emotions

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and Julien Zanetta

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In memory of
Atle Kittang

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An Absence of Character: Subjectivity and Emotions in Martin Crimp

Mads Thygesen, DANISH NATIONAL SCHOOL OF PLAYWRITING

The British playwright Martin Crimp is well known for aesthetic innovation and new types of performative art, which lead to the significant absence of character in his work. However, neither the precise textual nature of this absence, nor the way it functions as the precondition for an intensified emotional response both on stage and also between the stage and the audience, have received the attention they richly deserve in the analysis of Crimp's plays. This article examines the innovative structure of *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), in which Crimp presents three short scenarios about fragmented identities, confronting us with a significant absence of character. In the three scenarios, in which the act of storytelling is itself dramatised, Crimp moves away from a "solid" concept of character (defined by staged presence and embodied oneness) towards a dissemination of subjectivity in dialogues (assigned

to anonymous speakers) about absent characters and events.[1] Being distributed between multiple voices, this subjectivity requires a synthesising effort by the audience without standard references to traditional types of characters or speech acts. The audience is left with an enhanced emotional investment in the plays, a formal appeal that Crimp, as we shall see, intensifies with strong thematic emphasis on emotions such as horror and anxiety. This dramaturgy of absence echoes the form and style of Crimp's ground-breaking play *Attempts on Her Life* (1997),[2] and elaborates upon themes explored in his previous work, including his persistent examination of subjectivity in language. With his characteristic tone of voice and inventiveness of form, Crimp furthers Samuel Beckett's vivid and experimental effort to rethink subjectivity in theatre and drama; plays such as *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), *Advice to Iraqi Women* (2004), and *Fewer Emergencies* (2005) paved new ground for the theatre, in terms of both textual and performative aesthetics. The point I will make in this paper is that paradoxically, as it were, the type of absence evoked by Crimp actually leads to the presence of an enhanced emotional response.

1 Characters are the persons, in a dramatic or narrative work, endowed with moral and dispositional qualities that are expressed in what they say – the dialogue – and what they do – the action. A broad distinction can be made between the two dominant approaches to character and characterisation in Crimp's work: in plays dominated by the dramatic method – *e.g. The Country* (2000) and *The City* (2008) – Crimp presents the characters talking and acting and leaves the audience to infer the motives and meaning behind what the characters say and do. In *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) and *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), in which the act of storytelling is itself dramatised, the actors intervene authoritatively in order to describe, conjure and often evaluate the actions and motives of absent characters.

2 See Sierz (2006: 49-56); Middeke (2011: 88-92); Dennewald (2004: 43-71).

Often shaped as fragments rather than stories, Crimp's plays illustrate his use of sharp, satirical language in conjunction with strong images of human suffering to create social and political critique free of common sense and rhetorical clichés. In *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), for example, Crimp subjects the conventional notion of character in theatre and drama to meticulous deconstruction. In the course of the seventeen scenarios, we are presented with different stories about a woman called Anne (also Anya, Annie, Anny and Annushka – perhaps it is the same name in different languages), but the true nature of her identity is never revealed. As a whole, the construction of her identity takes the form of a "free play" of signification beyond the control of stable interpretation. Instead of a dramatic representation of actions and characters, Crimp gives us multiple passages of dialogue about "Anne", who has different, incompatible identities: a lover, an artist, a terrorist (of left and right persuasions), a porn star, a refugee, and even a brand-new car... And unlike more conventional plays, where the identities of characters are clearly marked, the dialogue about this elusive character is voiced by a number of anonymous speakers (a dash at the beginning of a line indicates a change of speaker):

– 'I feel like a screen.'

– She's lying there, isn't she, with the tube in her poor thin arm, looking terribly pale, whiter in fact than / the *pillow*.

– 'Like a TV screen,' she says, 'where everything from the front looks real and alive, but round the back there's just dust and a few wires.'

– 'Dust and a few wires.' Her imagination...

– She says she's not a real character, not a real character like you get in a book or on TV, but a *lack* of character, an *absence* she calls it, doesn't she, of character.

– An absence of character, whatever *that* means...

(Crimp 2005a: 229)

In this example, quoted from the sixth scenario entitled "Mum and Dad", the reality of the main character's fragmented state is revealed to us: the character ("little Annie") feels like a disconnected screen, all surface and no depth. In fact, during the whole course of the seventeen scenarios, Anne is continually and consistently defined by an absence in body and essence, that is to say without a recognisable appearance and identity. She only has a suspended presence in the unstable and floating speech of others. If her body or essence is, at times, close to an embodied presence or to an identity, it only happens in passing and only in order to be dismantled in various ways: loss of memory, loss of language, loss of place etc. This is the general logic of absence in Crimp's work.

But this motif of absence is not restricted to Crimp's masterpiece of 1997. It also defines the tragic fate of the characters in more conventional plays such as *The Country* (2000) and *The City* (2008), in which characters (embodied by actors) are defined by actions and events. The principal issue for my analysis, however, is the way in which the theme of absence, or absence itself, is married to the presence or evocation of emotion in *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), which can be read as a follow-up to *Attempts on Her Life*.

Fewer Emergencies explores an absence of character in a manner that follows the epistemological path of poststructuralism, and yet Crimp manages to combine this endeavour with his own brand of strong emotional content and political engagement.[3] If we observe this absence of character through

3 Crimp's fragmented dramaturgy and its representation of subjectivity and contemporary society is akin to the philosophical critique of Jean Baudrillard. Both point to late modernity's expulsion of "depth" and "truth" in favour of surface and contingency. In fact, *Attempts on Her Life* opens with an epigraph taken from Baudrillard's essay "The Mirror of Terrorism" of 1990: "No one will have directly experienced the actual cause of such happenings, but everyone will have received an image of them" (Crimp 2005: 198). Following Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum, *Attempts on Her Life* revels in poststructuralism and consumer culture: the thought-provoking scenario "The threat of international terrorism™", in which terrorism becomes a trademark on a par with "Vogue™", "Diet Pepsi™", "Fantasy Barbie™", "Fantasy Ken™", and "God™", is a case in point (Crimp 2005a: 241-244).

the lens of contemporary drama theory, Crimp's work can be placed within the theoretical frameworks of Elinor Fuchs' *The Death of Character* (1996) and Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of *Postdramatic Theatre* (2001).[4] But unlike Fuchs and Lehmann, who both focus on the deconstruction of dramatic character within contemporary theatre and drama in relation to poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, and therefore tend to dismiss the emotional content of contemporary plays, I aim to explore how the notions of subjectivity and emotion are bound up with the form and content of *Fewer Emergencies*.

Subjectivity and emotion

The most direct path towards an understanding of the particular intersection between subjectivity and emotion in the works of Crimp may be found by way of a detour through his satirical short story *When the Writer Kills Himself* (2005):

> When the writer kills himself, the other writers feel like they've been punched – just here – in the stomach. They're up on the marble roof of a cathedral – in Milan, as it happens – and when they hear the news they stagger towards the edge and only just save themselves from toppling off. So. The writer has killed himself! What a terrible thing!

4 Cf. Poschmann 1997; Birkenhauer 2005; Worthen 2005. For an insightful reading of Crimp's work that is at once both clear about the status of subjectivity within contemporary theatre and also sensitive to the structure of his plays, see Martine Dennewald's "An den Rändern der Identität: Überindividuelle Figurkonzeptionen bei Crimp, Kane, Abdoh und Foreman" (2004: 43-71).

It's like being punched – just here – in the stomach! They gaze up at the stone saints on their pinnacles. The clear blue sky starts spinning. (Crimp 2005a: xi)

As typical of Crimp's more experimental theatrical works (*e.g. Attempts on Her Life*, 1997), the events are narrated by someone outside the story, who refers to the characters as "he", "they", or simply by their occupation, *e.g.* "the writers", "the critics", and "the directors". *When the Writer Kills Himself* is a story about a tragic suicide within the theatre community, but the chillingly ironical third-person narrator turns tragedy into satire as the self-deception and hypocrisy of the writers are exposed to ridicule and scorn.[5]

In the opening passage "the writers" experience the emotional impact of their fellow writer's tragic suicide. Here we find another signature of Crimp's style of writing, for the narrative distance is suddenly disrupted by the utterance "just here", drawing the reader's attention to the body of the subject of the utterance. Given that the verbal expression "just here" functions as a *proximal* marker, understood in this instance as close to the speaker, the body of the speaker becomes the site of the emotional impact. The writers, we are told, feel like they have been punched in the stomach. And as the story develops, this important motif intensifies, as the body becomes a site of sorrow, lament, envy, anger, and self-doubt. At night, for example, the writers "find themselves waking up in the dark with an unpleasant feeling in their mouths: they've been grinding their teeth. All this homage, all this reverence: the dead writer is getting on their nerves" (Crimp 2005a: xii). And insofar as the work of the dead writer is now finally "understood" and reassessed by the critics in "long and

5 For more on the issue of Crimp's satire, see Sierz 2006: 142-156.

reverential reviews", the artistic and existential significance of the tragic event finally dawns on the other writers: "How sensible to die! Especially in the theatre! [...] We too (they think) would like to die – only we're too old, and have too many responsibilities" (Crimp 2005a: xii).

In this passage, the ironical narrator suddenly changes from the distanced third-person "they" to a far more engaged position of an inclusive "we." Here, the narrator casts him or herself in the role of speaker for the body of writers who seem to share the same unwelcome thought. We – the readers – are thus led also to believe that the narrator shares these thoughts and emotions with the rest of the writers. In the last paragraph of the text, this belief is developed even further, when the change of the pronoun is made permanent, as the collective body of writers is gathered for a final celebration at the theatre: "We writers feel fresher and more alive than we have for months. We clap our hands. We pour out another glass of wine – even if the white is by now unpleasantly warm. Each of us looks at the fool opposite, and wonders what that smile means" (Crimp 2005a: xiv).

In this incisive satire about writers and critics, which brings to mind Roland Barthes' seminal essay about the so-called "Death of the Author" ("La mort de l'auteur") from 1968, the theme of absence, or absence itself, emerges from the overwhelming experience of death. The text, however, is not about the death of the author (in the strict sense of Barthes' essay), but about the *experience* of loss and death. It is about the emotional state evoked by the image of death. And the textual articulation of subjectivity, as I have stated at the beginning of this article, follows the epistemological path of poststructuralism in a manner that strengthens this existential anxiety: Crimp's mode of writing posits the human subject not as originator or shaper of the work, but as a site of "enunciation" within the discursive framework of

the text. According to the theory of Émile Benveniste (and subsequently Barthes), the concept of *l'énonciaton* (usually translated into the uncommon term "enunciation") is based on a distinction between "what is being said" (*l'énoncé*) and "the act of saying it" (*l'énonciation*), sometimes simply translated into "statement" (*énoncé*) and "utterance" (*énonciation*).

The concept of enunciation, in short, refers to the discrete and always unique act by which the language is actualised by a speaker (Barthes 1977; Benveniste 1971: 217-222). The subjectivity discussed here, then, has to do with the capacity of the speaker to posit him or herself as the "subject". For Crimp and Barthes, however, "writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (Barthes 1977: 142). Asserting that "the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I," Barthes denies the presence of the author in the text: "language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it" (Barthes 1977: 145). In other words: Barthes' essay redefines the subject as an "effect" or "function" engendered by the internal play of textual language. This is one of the central arguments of "La mort de l'auteur", when Barthes denounces the author as a figure invented by our society and critical discourse in order to set limits to the inherent free play of meaning in any literary text. Crimp's work is driven by an equally strong epistemological scepticism about the constitution of the human subject and a culture of criticism tyrannically centred on the author – "his person, his life, his tastes, his passions" (Barthes 1977: 143).

The satirical aspect of *When the Writer Kills Himself*, which can be read as a commentary on Barthes' poetics, or even as a parody of it, gets right to the heart of Barthes' seminal piece: "When asked to give interviews about the dead writer, it is only with extreme reluctance that they accept. When asked to explain the significance of the work, they rub their eyes with their knuckles as they patiently reply that its significance lies precisely in its resistance to explanatory discourse" (Crimp 2005a: xii). In this passage, tragedy becomes satire as Crimp deliberately manifests an attitude of amusement toward the self-absorbed attitude of the writers. Formulated as a critical observation of a certain type of person (writers, critics, directors) or institution (the theatre community), Crimp's satire is also, and perhaps primarily, a method of critique. It refers to someone or something as the "butt of a joke" that exists outside of the work itself. His work always oscillates between chillingly cold irony and the manifestation of strong cultural anxieties, as in the narrator's description of the reaction of other writers and their attempts to diagnose the texts of the dead writer as thinly veiled suicide notes: "When the sick feeling has gone, the writers make their way back down the spiral stairs and head straight for their bookshelves. They pull out the works of the dead writer and examine them for clues" (Crimp 2005a: xi).

However, we experience a strong sense of irony and satire when the writers attempt to decipher and explain the meaning of theatre texts by seeking traces of the man or woman behind the work: "Hold the pages up to the light and it's like a watermark or a security-feature in a bank note: each sheet of paper turns out to be indelibly marked 'suicide'" (Crimp 2005a: xi). In this comic passage, clues pointing to the reality of his tragic fate – "suicide" – are indeed present, but the whole notion of the hidden voice of the singular person, the author 'confiding' in us, is profoundly alien to the structure of Crimp's satirical narrative. On the one hand, there is a deep sense of irony and a rejection of contemporary theatre culture and criticism. On

the other hand, however, the writing itself has a strong sense of tragedy: it springs from the experience of loss; it obsessively returns to the unavoidable image of death.

Illustration 1. Actors Steen Stig Lommer, Tammi Øst and Henrik Birch in Face to the Wall *("Ansigtet mod væggen", directed by Jacob F. Schokking, Café Teatret, Copenhagen 2008). Photo: Thomas Petri.*

Fewer Emergencies

The strong intersection between subjectivity and emotions such as loss, horror, fear, and cultural and existential anxiety as discussed in *When the Writer Kills Himself* is even more evident in the theatrical works of Crimp, as can be seen in his short play *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), a trilogy that follows a similar path both in terms of form and content. However, most of the dramaturgical principles I will explore are not expressed in terms of a single narrative voice, but through dialogue performed by shifting constellations of actors.

Fewer Emergencies interweaves three short scenarios written for the theatre: "Whole Blue Sky", "Face to the Wall", and "Fewer Emergencies".[6] Crimp's triptych juxtaposes a close-knit family in domestic crisis ("Whole Blue Sky"), unspeakable public violence ("Face to the Wall"), and a surreal account of a boy who is trying to protect himself from the world outside his bedroom window ("Fewer Emergencies"). The focus of each scenario revolves around a character that we never see. The triptych format, which brings to mind the favoured form of Francis Bacon's grotesque paintings, presents three studies for a portrait of a single figure (a woman, a man and a child), set in one textual frame. In each scenario, the portrait of the unseen character is discussed by a group of nameless speakers, who meditate on the story of the isolated figure. In fact, the three scenarios are "hinged" together by the recurring motifs of suffering selves, set against a gloomy suburban nightmare.

The first scenario, "Whole Blue Sky", presents a story about a premature marriage:

2 She gets married very young, doesn't she.

3 Does what?

6 Two of the pieces, "Fewer Emergencies" and "Face to the Wall", were originally written and performed in 2002. In 2005, however, Crimp decided to add a prequel, "Whole Blue Sky", to complete the trilogy.

2 Gers married, gets married very young, and immediately realises–
3 Oh? That it's a mistake?
2 Immediately realises–yes–that it's a mistake.
3 She doesn't love him.
2 Oh yes, she loves him, she definitely loves him, but it's a mistake all the same.

(Crimp 2005b: 7)

As the scenario is written for three actors, the dialogue is a conversation between three anonymous speakers. In fact, the situation is shaped like an argument – or a game of invention – in which a group of speakers are cast in the roles of third-person narrators; the speakers do not represent a character within the events related but stand "outside" those events.[7] As the scene progresses, we – the audience – must ask ourselves: Who are these narrators? Are they actors rehearsing a play? Writers working on a script? Or is this the internal dialogue of a woman who suffers from depression and schizophrenia? These questions, however, remain unanswered. Furthermore, in addition to the absence of named characters, the time and place are marked as "blank" (Crimp 2005b: 5), and the speakers are simply indicated by a number at the beginning of each line. Yet Crimp emphasises that speaker number 1 must be played by a female actor. The choice of speaker 1's gender, I would argue, is important because it establishes an ambiguous correlation between this female and the topic of the speakers' conversation: a woman who presumably suffers the sad fate of an unhappy marriage. Indeed, at one point Crimp's rather sparse stage directions quite deliberately emphasise this correlation as speaker 1 "*silently counts, using her fingers*", the years of her unhappy marriage (Crimp 2005b: 15).

7 By elevating discourse above character and action, Crimp "displaces" the primary elements of drama in order to establish distance – or what Brecht called "Verfremdungseffekt" – in place of the illusion of reality aimed at in conventional drama (Brecht 1963: 155-164).

In the beginning, the woman falls in love with a man. "She definitely loves him," we are told, "but it's a mistake all the same" (Crimp 2005b: 7). What starts as passion becomes marriage, marriage becomes pregnancy, the baby "cements the marriage" (Crimp 2005b: 9), and soon enough motherhood gives way to depression. She sees her whole life, we are told, stretched out in front of her like a "corpse", or perhaps it is "more like a motorway at night–a band of concrete stretched out in front of her with reflective signs counting off the miles–mile after mile after mile" (Crimp 2005b: 7). And indeed, the story of her life is presented to us like an unending slideshow of gloomy and depressing images. Although we are initially told that the family "make a picture of happiness" (Crimp 2005b: 9), the "Whole Blue Sky" is soon clouded by images of domestic dispute and violence. These images, which torment the soul of the main character, seem to have a sickening reality but, in fact, we see no trace of the real events. The horror is conveyed to us through the dialogue of the three speakers, and everything that happens takes place within the discursive framework of the dialogue (or perhaps more accurately: the actions and motives of the absent character are constructed during the course of the dialogue between the three speakers). With nothing but dialogue – a game of language played by the three unnamed speakers – at his disposal, Crimp fills the stage with the imaginative landscape of the life story of the absent figure. However, the story itself and the performative manner by which the woman's identity comes to life through discourse tell us that our knowledge of other people and the world they inhabit is incredibly limited.

At the end, the story suffers the same fate as the main character, who finally succumbs to a mental state characterised

by the breakdown of thought processes:

1 Is that understood: I don't want to hear you talk about it ever again.
2 In front of the guests.
1 In front of the guests. In front of anyone. Not tonight and not ever again.
2 Says who?
1 I'm sorry?
2 Says who: not tonight and not ever again.
3 Says who? Says Mummy.
1 Says what?
3 Says Mummy.
1 *(smiles)* Not says Mummy, sweetheart, not says Mummy: says the voice.

(Crimp 2005b: 20)

The second piece, "Face to the Wall", is a story about a massacre at a primary school – much like the high-school massacre of Columbine in 1999 or later killing sprees of the same kind – told by four speakers, who attempt to re-enact the terrifying events. At the beginning of the piece, the speakers set out to recollect the shocking actions of the killer, in order to comprehend the motive behind them:

2 Yes? says the teacher, How can I help you?
1 Shoots him through the heart.
3 Shoots the teacher right through the heart.
1 The children don't understand–they don't immediately grasp what's going on–what's happened to their teacher?–they don't understand–nothing like this has ever / happened before.
3 Nothing like this has ever happened before–but they do understand–of course they understand–they've seen this on TV–they've stayed up late as a special treat and they've seen this on TV–they know exactly what's going on and this is why they back away–instinctively back away.
1 Okay–so they back away–the worst thing they could do–back away–but they back away–they back away against the wall.

2 Against their pictures on the wall–'My house'.
3 'My cat'.
2 'Me and my cat'.
3 'My house', 'Me and my cat', 'Me in a tree', and it's interesting to see the way that some of them / hold hands.

(Crimp 2005b: 25-26)

In this lucid example, Crimp's dramaturgical approach and sensitivity to violence resemble one of the characteristics of Greek tragedy, namely the presentation of terrifying events, not to the eye of the audience, but to the ear by the report of a messenger. And, just like the conventions of the tragic messenger scene, Crimp's evocation of violence through dialogue functions as a dramaturgical device that triggers a powerful emotional response in the audience. Because we are definitely not spared any details of the horror evoked, either in this short exchange or elsewhere. Moreover, Crimp amplifies the effect of terror and pity when he juxtaposes the horrifying images of violence with the children's innocent drawings of houses, cats and trees. In short, the sensations of horror occur when the comforting notion of "home" is shattered by the contingency of violence. In the narrative of the speakers, the children "instinctively hold hands" as they flinch away from "the warm metal of the gun" (Crimp 2005b: 26-27), but the killer shows no sign of conscience or remorse when he shoots the children one by one. Indeed, the tone of the speakers is equally callous: "He shoots child A–in the head [...] He moves on to child B. He shoots child B–in the head" (Crimp 2005b: 27).

The lack of empathy – and, more importantly, the lack of motive – which is much debated by the speakers is left to hang unexplained for the whole scene: "Life's treating him very well", "His job is fine–well paid and rewarding", his wife is "charming and tolerant", and his "children are

fine" (Crimp 2005b: 28). In short: the killer is an average person, living a perfectly normal and happy life, with no background wound/story that can justify or explain the random act of violence: "So he's not a sympathetic character," speaker 3 concludes, "We can't feel for him", "Cry for him", "He's never suffered", "Experienced war", "Experienced poverty", or "Torture" (Crimp 2005b: 32). This theme of (lack of) identification correlating with (lack of) emotion guides the nameless speakers into a debate about a multitude of self-contradictory explanations. Indeed, the seemingly random ideas for potential motives are brought to the point of absurdity when speaker 1 suggests that the killer feels angry when the postman is *sometimes* late: "It's not the postman's fault–he knows it's not the postman's fault–sometimes there are problems sorting the letters–the machine for sorting the letters has broken down, for example, and the letters have been sorted by hand–or perhaps there are lots of parcels and every parcel means a conversation on the doorstep" (Crimp 2005b: 33).

Similarly, the scene of violence is located not as something seen, but as a "space" known and evoked by the nameless speakers: "He moves to child C. Child C tries to duck away. But to no avail. But to no avail. He shoots child C–good–in the head" (Crimp 2005b: 27). The violent event itself is located in the "collective" imagination of the speakers, but what is physically absent is made even more present in the context of the mind's eye. In his lucid reading of Crimp's theatrical works, Martin Middeke observes that this "deflection of action into narrative excellently succeeds in diverting both representation and perception of graphic violence into the realm of imagination – a strategy that does not make violence seem less disturbing but rather creates an atmosphere of spellbinding emotional intensity" (Middeke 2011: 95). This important relationship between the structure

of the play and the emotional content is also sketched out by Aleks Sierz: "Crimp's innovative trilogy of short plays *Fewer Emergencies* (Royal Court, 2005) uses a radical form to tell three familiar stories – an unhappy marriage, a school massacre and a street riot. In each case, a small group of unnamed speakers narrate the stories, all of which collapse under the weight of their own emotional content" (Sierz 2011: 60). In other words: "Whole Blue Sky", "Face to the Wall" and "Fewer Emergencies" all share this dramaturgical approach to the aesthetic experience of violence: the emotional impact of violence is triggered through dialogue and narration, not by visceral images or physical actions, and the violence itself has no reality outside of the instance of discourse that defines it.

The dialogue constitutes the basic building block of Crimp's plays. It is worth noting that each scene is a spoken exchange, an argument, between multiple anonymous speakers. It is also worth noting that there is a fair amount of beautifully crafted repetition and intentional redundancy in Crimp's dialogue, perhaps partly because he wishes to add a sense of confusion and spontaneity to the scene. In fact, there are numerous examples of verbal redundancy and uncertain speech patterns, during which the speakers are working out what they wish to say. In the three separate scenarios, then, redundancies and repetitions expose and express meanings and emotions that would otherwise be imperceptible to the audience. In *The Full Room* (2002), Dominic Dromgoole captures an important aspect of Crimp's dialogue when he asserts: "The accuracy with which he catches the insecurities of modern speech, its need for affirmation and terror of exposure (the 'isn't it?', 'doesn't it?', 'don't we?', that lurk after every phrase are never spoken here, but always felt), that accuracy becomes strangely transfixing, and beautiful" (Dromgoole 2002: 62-63). And, certainly, Crimp's characters

share a strange love for phatic speech patterns, saying things not to communicate meaning but to keep the conversation going. In "Face to the Wall", these phatic patterns become apparent when the speakers constantly correct, comment upon, or even reinvent the story as if they were in fact situated in the middle of a brainstorming session. The phatic elements, I would add, increase together with the self-referential elements when the verbal exchange is at its most heated emotional state. Notice, for example, how speaker 1 stutters and repeats himself during one of the most horrific sequences of the dialogue:[8]

1 An aerosol–that's right–that's good–of blood–which he hadn't foreseen–he hadn't foreseen the aerosol of blood–or the sound–is this right?–this is right–or the sound of the distressed children when his head was on the white pillow–on the white pillow–don't help me–when his head was on the white pillow picturing the scene–but now–don't help me–but now it's clear–now the picture is clear–and there's another sound–what's that other sound?–don't help me, don't help me–the sound of his heart–no–yes–yes–the sound of his heart–the sound of his own heart–the sound of the killer's heart sounding in the killer's head–that's right–that's good–which he hadn't foreseen–he hadn't foreseen the sound of his own heart in his own head–filling his head–his own heart filling his head with blood–popping his ears–popping his ears with blood–like a swimmer–not swimmer–don't help me–like a diver–this is right–diving into blood–he's like a diver diving into blood–that's right–that's good–very good–down he goes–down he goes away from the light–diving into blood–popping–popping his ears and what are you staring at?–eh?–eh?–what are you staring at?–turn away–look away–no–turn away–that's right–turn away or you're next–be quiet or you're next–that's right– that's good–you saw what happened to child A, you saw what happened to child B, you saw what happened to child C–you saw what happened to child C–you saw what happened to child C–no–yes–no–don't help me.
Pause.
Don't help me–
4 You saw what happened to child D.
1 Don't help me–you saw what happened to child A, you saw what happened to child B, you saw what happened to child C–you saw what happened to child D, so–so–you saw what happened to Child D, so–
4 So shut the / fuck up.
1 YOU SAW WHAT HAPPENED TO CHILD D, SO SHUT THE FUCK UP. CUNT. CUNT. LITTLE CUNT. I SAID DON'T HELP ME.
Long pause
3 So he's not a sympathetic character.

(Crimp 2005b: 30-31).

Here Crimp is showing a struggle against the loss of memory. Speaker 1 seems to have forgotten what to say. Losing track, he constantly interrupts and questions himself (*e.g.* "is this right?–this is right"), but stubbornly refuses to be prompted by the others, hence the repetition of the utterance "don't help me". In fact, speaker 1 explodes when another speaker takes over. Again, it is open to interpretation whether he has forgotten his lines or is suffering from true emotional distress. In terms of both identification and the theatrical state of enunciation, it is important to notice how speaker 1 gradually dives into the mind of the killer.

To articulate his gory vision of the killer's fractured consciousness, he constructs an overwhelming series of symbolic images. Like most creations of the mind in the world of Crimp's sinister and morbidly humorous plays, these images seem to have a strong emotional impact on the speaker: he slowly takes on the role of the killer. And when he finally addresses the absent victims (in performance, I would add, the outburst is likely to be directed at the audience and/or actors for dramatic effect), the growing uncertainty and

8 In the stage directions, the gender of speaker 1 is indicated as "male" (Crimp 2005: 23).

conflicting emotions are reflected in the violence of his outburst: "YOU SAW WHAT HAPPENED TO CHILD D, SO SHUT THE FUCK UP. CUNT. CUNT. LITTLE CUNT. I SAID DON'T HELP ME". This dramatic transformation, in which Crimp – as in the case of "Whole Blue Sky" – establishes an ambiguous correlation between speaker 1 and the central character of the killer, is immediately juxtaposed with the hilarious and somewhat redundant conclusion from speaker 3: "So he's not a sympathetic character" (Crimp 2005b: 31).

From the instant we hear about the killing, we are waiting for the obligatory moment when the motive is revealed. Crimp does two things to prevent this from happening. Firstly, he delays it: in the course of the dialogue the speakers lose track of all the possible explanations, and consequently they fail to uncover a convincing motive. Secondly, in a final twist, the seemingly inevitable culmination of the dialogue is interrupted by a *Twelve-Bar Delivery Blues* song:

Son son, your daddy's not well
Son son, your DADDY'S A SHELL

There's another person
Speaking these lies
There's another person
Looking out through my eyes.
Son son, he's filing reports
Son son, he's PROMPTING MY THOUGHTS.

(Crimp 2005b: 35)

Illustration 2. Actors Steen Stig Lommer, Tammi Øst and Henrik Birch in Face to the Wall *("Ansigtet mod væggen", directed by Jacob F. Schokking, Café Teatret, Copenhagen 2008). Photo: Thomas Petri.*

In the end, then, we find a thematic pattern that "hinges" the first two scenarios together: both characters (woman and man) are terrorised by internal voices "prompting" their thoughts. What is most striking about "Whole Blue Sky" and "Face to the Wall", however, is not the dissemination of subjectivity into an anonymous murmur of voices (embodied by actors), but the way in which Crimp approaches the juxtaposition of absence and emotion. As we have seen in both plays, Crimp's writing – despite the distinctive humour and

self-reflective irony – strives above all else for an emotionally charged dialogue, in which the all-pervading sense of absence is tied closely to a certain terror and despair at the core of modern life.

The last, title scenario "Fewer Emergencies" echoes this formal and thematic pattern as we are told about the abandoned child, Bobby, who becomes trapped in his own miniature world. Locked away by his overprotective parents, Bobby finds himself wounded and trapped in the house, while violence rages in the streets. Given that Bobby is also the name of the woman's first-born child in "Whole Blue Sky", we could conclude that this scenario stages another fragment of the same story. The central motif of the story now, however, is not depression, but a state of fear and paranoia. It all begins with a simple conversation about the situation in Bobby's neighbourhood: "Well things are improving. Things are improving day by day," we are told (Crimp 2005b: 41). The happily married parents have locked Bobby in at home, while they – just like the parents in "Whole Blue Sky" – have gone for a boat ride. And, as we have come to expect, the evocation of simulation and anxiety, which resemble central motifs found in the previous scenarios, soon emerges from Bobby's story:

1 They're smiling–that's right–in spite of themselves. Or rather–no–correction–they know they're smiling–but equally they know the kind of smile they're smiling resembles the kind of smile you smile in spite of yourself.
3 Say that again.
1 I can't say that again, but what I can say is that they still sing that little song.
2 They don't.
1 They do.
2 They don't.

1 They do, they do, they still sing that little song like something you hear in the supermarket.
3 Or in the DIY superstore, or on the porno film–when the swollen cock on the porno film goes into the swollen cunt.
2 So things are looking up.
1 Things are definitely looking up–brighter light–more frequent boating–more confident smile–things are improving day by day–who ever would've guessed?
2 Mmm?

(Crimp 2005b: 42-43).

Here, the use of explicit language is designed to shatter the simulation of happiness. And as the secret song that the woman refuses to sing to her child in "Whole Blue Sky" reappears within the context of "Fewer Emergencies", the narrative correlations between the two separate scenarios thicken. Just like the parents, who are trapped in a simulation of contentment as "the two of them could set sail like that towards the world's rim" (Crimp 2005b: 43), Bobby is trapped in the dreamlike world presented to us by the speakers. For Bobby, however, the more frequent boating means more absence. The child is locked in "for his own protection" (Crimp 2005b: 45). Furthermore, despite the many improvements to Bobby's neighbourhood, which, for example, include the removal of 'unwanted' elements such as "Mexicans", "Serbs", and people who don't clean up "their own dog-mess" (Crimp 2005: 44), the streets are filled with the imminent danger of violence, riots, and emergencies. In fact, speaker 1 determines that: "Things *are* improving–less rocks are thrown–less cars completely overturned–less shots fired–there are fewer emergencies than there used to be–but all the same, there's an emergency on right now. It's on right now. And I'm sorry to say that one of those shots came through the kitchen window and caught poor Bobby in the hip" (Crimp 2005b: 46-47). To the extent that this scene is also concerned with the stag-

ing of verbal exchange, a game of language played by three nameless speakers, this utterance gains the performative effect of "doing-by-saying" when speaker 1 takes on the role of authority within the context of the dialogue.[9] By way of polite persuasion and convincing repetitions, the others are led to believe by speaker 1 that a stray bullet does injure Bobby in this very instance. Crimp deliberately and self-reflectively plays with the speaker's linguistic capacity to invent and generate mental images of actions, spaces and emotional states.

In *Fewer Emergencies*, this game of invention is taken to its utmost extreme when we are told about the key to use in emergencies:

> 1 Cupboards–that's right–of precious wood installed by joiners for all of Bobby's things–all of the things Bobby will need in life for pleasure and for emergencies.
> 2 Candles?
> 1 Well naturally there are candles, boxes of matches, fresh figs, generators and barrels of oil. But there's also a shelf full of oak trees, and another where pine forests border a mountain lake. If you press a concealed knob a secret drawer pops open–inside is the island of Manhattan. And if you pull the drawers out, spilling the bone-handled knives and chickens onto the floor, spilling out the chainsaws and the harpsichords, there at the back, in the dark space at the back, is the city of Paris with a cloth over it to keep the dust out. There's a wardrobe full of uranium and another full of cobalt. Bobby's suits are hanging over a Japanese golf course. His shoes share boxes with cooked prawns. On one little shelf there's a row for universities–good ones–separated by restaurants where chefs are using the deep-fryers to melt gold and cast it into souvenir life-sized Parthenons. And hanging from the shelf, like the Beethoven quartets and fertility clinics, is the key, the key to use in emergencies, the key to get out of the house.
>
> (Crimp 2005b: 45).

9 See Austin 1962; Benveniste 1971; Derrida 1988. In "Analytical Philosophy and Language", Émile Benveniste supported J.L. Austin's theory of performatives, but demonstrated that a performative statement is nothing outside of the circumstances that make it performative. A performative utterance, as Benveniste puts it, is an act of authority. Anybody can shout "I declare a general mobilization," Benveniste explains, but if the proper authority is lacking, such an utterance is no more than words. Without authority, then, the performative utterance "reduces itself to futile clamor, childishness, or lunacy" (Benveniste 1971: 236).

In this example, the infinite topography of the drawer hides an unreal landscape of madness and imagination. Or to put it metaphorically: there is a secret world inside Bobby's "house" – a huge and varied world full of landscapes, islands, cities, monuments, objects, etc. – but Bobby is trapped, despairing, in this world. He wants to reach the key. He wants to open the door. He wants to share his secret world with the dangerous people outside his house. "He must be mad," we are told (Crimp 2005b: 47). In the end, the wounded child attempts to climb the spiral stairs, desperately reaching for the key, but never quite reaching his goal: "That's right, Bobby-boy. Watch the key. Watch the key swinging" (Crimp 2005b: 49). This supreme moment of bathos epitomises how Crimp, through the conjuring of an absent character and indeed even absent world, evokes powerful emotions – here the cathartic emotions of terror and pity – simultaneously tinged with underlying humour derived from the ludicrousness of the image depicted solely through the spoken word.

In conclusion

In this article we have seen how the specific absence of character in Crimp's *Fewer Emergencies* brings particular emotional landscapes into play: depression ("Whole Blue Sky"), terror ("Face to the Wall"), and paranoia ("Fewer Emergencies"). It is in these three short plays – seen collectively as the study

of three clustered features of characters – that Crimp has chosen to present his gloomy vision of the constitution of the human subject. These three scenarios stand out, therefore, as a sequence of stories about "absent" characters and their hollow, meaningless lives. They do not, however, offer us a consistent three-act narrative, according to traditional dramatic practice. They offer a juxtaposition of emotional states (depression, terror, paranoia), but in spite of, or rather because of the absence of an embodied subject on stage to which they can be permanently attached, the emotions emerge with extraordinary intensity because they can only be located in the viewer. Oscillating as he does in his plays between very ironic and comical language and images of the utmost terror and violence, Crimp finds in this dramaturgy of absence a stimulus more potent and emotionally charged than that which traditional dramatic form can normally offer.

This exploration of the absence of contentment and fulfilment in modern life is not just restricted to Crimp's more formally innovative work, such as *Fewer Emergencies* and *Attempts on Her Life*. It also defines the tragic fate of the characters in more conventional plays such as *The Country* (2000) and *The City* (2008). Whether Crimp writes about a married couple who succumb to a mere simulation of love, as in *The Country* (2000: 366), or portrays a writer who – just like Bobby – resides in a vast city of "invented characters", as in *The City* (2008: 62), his work never fails to evoke a terror and despair at the core of modern life. Consequently, the aesthetic strength of Crimp's plays does not lie merely in the absence of characters or the deconstruction of conventional dramatic form. Nor does it derive solely from the constant oscillation between irony and pathos. It emerges from the cruel, dense and meticulously controlled dialogue that holds a remarkable ability to engage the audience simultaneously in enthralling discursive spaces and heightened emotional states.

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