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Blasted's Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible

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Blasted's Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible

The picture-frame or proscenium stage [...] reinforces the pleasures of perspectival space, in which each object has a measured and appropriate position within the whole – a ‘whole’ produced by a ‘single and immobile eye [I],’ positioned to see/know the relations between, and meanings of, the objects in view.¹

I want to suggest that by seeing the blind spot within the visible real we might see a way to redesign the representational real.²

Loved me last night.

I didn't want to do it.

Thought you liked that.

No.

Made enough noise.

It was hurting.³

After a decade of *Blasted* criticism that has revolved almost fetishistically around the play's gruesome violence against its central male character, Ian, scholarship on Sarah Kane's notorious first play is at last beginning to move beyond this primal scene. Sean Carney's 2005 *Theatre Survey* article, "The Tragedy of History in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*," offers, for me, a model for the next generation of readings: taking as his critical touchstone the moment *after* violence, when Ian's disembodied head appears on stage, Carney explores the relationship

between the aesthetic, theoretical and phenomenal in *Blasted*, reimagining the play as a contemporary tragedy through the lens of Adorno and Benjamin.⁴ As he shifts the critical centre of gravity away from Ian's gory rape and onto the moment when death's spectral head forces our confrontation with history as an event both experiential and theoretical, personal and collective, Carney invites us to problematize what we think we know about the operation of violence in Kane's play. And yet, for all the pleasure I take in this critical shift, I remain unsatisfied by it. As much as I would like to move beyond talking about *Blasted*'s violence *qua* violence, I cannot. Something has for too long been missing in *Blasted* scholarship, apparently invisible to it, and Carney's otherwise excellent essay reproduces this aporia even as it marks the beginning of a new critical moment for the play. What is missing is a thorough exploration of what we think we know about *Blasted*'s *other* victim of violence: Cate.

This essay marks, I hope, another critical beginning for *Blasted*: an attempt to come to terms with what is at stake in Kane's representation of Cate, and in particular of Cate's rape by Ian, a key event in the play left provocatively unstaged between its first and second scenes. Despite Kane's own disinterest in feminism,⁵ and despite the relative disinterest of feminist scholars in this play,⁶ I contend that *Blasted* needs to be viewed through the lens of contemporary feminist critique, particularly the feminist critique of realism, in order for its full social impact to be felt. At the heart of my own interest in Cate is not her rape *per se*, but the thing that makes it different from all the other moments of violence in *Blasted*: we do not get to see it.

Much of my current work centres upon theatrical representations of sexual violence, and thus I have been reading, writing and thinking about Kane for several years now. Along the way I have become, and remain, flummoxed and disheartened by Cate's marginalization in *Blasted*

criticism, and especially by the near-total lack of scholarly engagement with the unique representational circumstances of Cate's rape.⁷ *Blasted*, as we all know by now, is infamous for the on-stage violence that provoked an extraordinary outcry in the press after its premier at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1995.⁸ Hardly an essay on the play appears that does not rehearse in some manner the story of the original outrage as it assesses the value of Kane's overwhelming spectacle of suffering, whether the scholar in question believes *Blasted* to be phenomenologically compelling, inciting its audiences to "*feel differently*,"⁹ or representationally naïve, failing at the very ethical challenge it claims to pose.¹⁰ And yet Cate's rape, the very first act of violence committed in the play, is remarkable for being a spectacular non-event; its revelation after the fact in scene two is even delayed by several minutes of dialogue. While we can see it coming – Kane foreshadows the rape in Ian's sexual forcefulness on pages 7, 12, 14, 15, 17, 23, his homophobic comments on 19, and Cate's cryptic "Have to tell her. / She's in danger" during her first psychosomatic fit on page 9 – Cate's rape is hardly the source of the original *Blasted* "controversy," and is hardly that to which the scholarship refers when it revisits the terms of the outcry. The assumption behind much *Blasted* criticism, in fact, is that the only violence that really matters is that which befalls Ian, allows him to suffer for his sins and to seek redemption: it's the stuff that happens after a mortar blast blows the stage apart at the end of scene two, sweeping Cate away, that *really* counts.

This is the frame within which scholars typically read Cate's rape: as a premonition of the violence that will later overwhelm the stage, as a harbinger of the more "real," and really violent, spectacle to come. It is not marked as particularly significant in itself; instead, Cate's experience is routinely read as an early signifier of what many critics point to as Kane's principal referent: the thinness of the line between catastrophic suffering and the so-called normal in a

world filled with sexual, racial and political violence both at home and abroad.¹¹ This is not to say that Cate's violation is ignored in the criticism¹²; rather, following Kane's own claim that the logic motivating a rape in a hotel room in Leeds has a direct link to that which powers large-scale wartime violence elsewhere,¹³ several critics now understand the Soldier's rape of Ian in scene three as a deliberate and punitive rehearsal of Ian's earlier violence against Cate.¹⁴

Although on the surface this appears to be a progressive reading, a sensitive exploration of the far-reaching implications of allowing sexual violence against women to become culturally normalized, it embeds a larger problem: it neatly erases the circumstances of Cate's specific, highly localized violation even as it attempts to account for it in a broader context. In this reading, Cate's experience quickly becomes metaphor, an easy cipher for the politically-coded violence that appears so spectacularly before our eyes in the latter half of the play: violence between men, the violence of war, the violence the Soldier commits on Ian's body, violence *we can all see*.¹⁵ In other words, I am suggesting that *Blasted* criticism appears to suffer from an ocular anxiety all too common to the reception of rape in our culture at large: if we cannot *see* Cate's violation, how are we to read it and account for it? How are we to understand ourselves in relation to it? How are we to bear witness to it?¹⁶ Better, perhaps, to find a way to displace its affect, to look for its traumatic rehearsal on Ian's body; better to displace Cate's addled, unclear suffering so that the more familiar shock of war may appear in its place.¹⁷

In response to the critical tradition that either ignores or passes over the offstage, uniquely *invisible* nature of Cate's violation, I contend here that Cate's rape is significant *for its very purposeful elision*, and that in ignoring its offstage status we risk missing the play's most trenchant critique of the workings of realism. Cate's rape lies at the heart of this critique because, far more than Ian's more spectacular violations, it draws attention to the ocular apparatus on

which the power of the realist spectator pivots: Cate's rape raises the very questions realism papers over, questions about the limits of our vision and the possibility that seeing and knowing are not necessarily coeval. Ian's suffering, of course, poses ocular challenges of its own – whether the violations he experiences be realistically or stylistically portrayed, they demand that we develop for ourselves an ethics of encounter, make a choice about the extent to which we are willing to watch, to engage his body and its affects as a subset of our own. But the challenge Cate's body poses is more complex for being affectively trickier. Her demand is less that we witness her suffering than that we be prepared to recognize her suffering as *lacking* a witness,¹⁸ as always already disappeared; that we understand her suffering within the context of its evasive representation, as a kind of critical non-event against which she – and we – need to battle in order to claim for it any kind of social ontology, to claim for her any kind of justice. Cate's rape, located beyond both sight and earshot, is not so hard to “explain” away (if one wanted to – and plenty still do) as a gesture of love, or anyway as somehow consensual.¹⁹ It thus invites both audience interpretation and a certain amount of audience discomfort, if not outright evasion and denial, and in the process conjures up the history of rape's representation – which is to say rape's history of being *effaced within* representation. Choosing not to stage Cate's rape – and I maintain, like Sean Carney and Christopher Wixson, that it is an intentional choice, key to the social and generic critique Kane launches in the play – Kane taps into this history, confronting her readers and viewers with the challenge of bearing witness not just to the “missing” rape, but to rape's very history of effacement, rape as missing-ness itself.²⁰

My argument proceeds below on two assumptions. First: that Kane's choice to leave Cate's rape unstaged is both deliberate and politically marked, and can be understood as a critique of representation that challenges specifically the gendered and spatial dynamics of

modern realism. *Blasted*, as I suggest above, does not just stage what is “missing” from much contemporary theatrical, filmic, or televisual representations (brutal human suffering, alongside our failure to engage that suffering as anything other than object, as anything other than “other”) in an impulse to get us to see or, as the prevailing critical wisdom has it, “feel” it more deeply.²¹ The play’s purpose is not simply to return to the viewfinder that which we’ve unfortunately left out, or chosen to ignore out of fear or apathy or xenophobic anxiety. If that was the case, why stash Cate’s rape offstage? Why leave it, of all moments of violence in the play, so obviously *unrepresented*? Rather, beginning with Cate’s rape and centering around it as the pivotal, because conspicuously absent, moment of violence in the play on which all others turn, *Blasted* stages sexual violence’s representation as a process of disavowal, of often brutal cover-up. Similarly, it suggests that violence’s *reception* is also a matter of strategic elision, an (unconscious?) refusal to see coupled with the extraordinary impulse to see something else as substitute for the feared/loathed object. It does not stage what is missing, what we fail to see, so much as it stages the *process* of our failure to see it. The play puts us, as spectators – and, specifically, as I will argue, as spectators of realism – on trial, challenging the precepts by which we understand our power, authority, and claims to knowledge in the theatre.

My second assumption follows directly from this last claim. While the reception controversy surrounding *Blasted* in particular and Kane in general appears on the surface to revolve around the ethics of violence’s representation on stage, a second look reveals that its true obsession is with genre, specifically with the status of contemporary realism²² and the privilege accorded its spectator. The reviews in the British press following James Macdonald’s revival of *Blasted* at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in April 2001 nicely rehearse these twin anxieties, with a telling difference.²³ Many reviewers who had slaughtered the play in 1995

worked hard to locate its dramatic value the second time around (perhaps most notably Charles Spencer in *The Daily Telegraph* and Michael Billington in *The Guardian*). Critics generally declared the play to be smoother and more coherent in revival, for two reasons: first, because the shift into the larger, more conventional downstairs space allegedly “dissipated” the shock value (read: physical immediacy) of the play’s violence (Michael Coveney, Nicholas de Jongh), rendering its atrocities less disorienting and more “organic” to the action (Spencer); and second because, the reviews implied, critics now recognized more clearly the play’s dramatic heritage. This process of finding value was, in other words, a process of “making sense” of the play: the critics could praise their new understanding of Kane’s work and seamlessly elide that understanding with kind words for the work itself. The same critics who had damned Kane in 1995 both for her brutality and for the confusion it engendered in them could, by 2001, claim that they at last had a grip on what she was doing (and to whom she owed her dramatic debt). They did not praise *Blasted* universally, to be sure, but their reviews sounded a palpable level of recognition (even at times of comfort) missing from the original screeds, recognition which in turn mobilized new generosity toward the play.

Both recognition and generosity ultimately turn in these reviews upon a subtle but important shift in classification. Michael Billington’s self-reflective 2001 review nicely sums up the generic anxiety that ghosted so much of the earlier resistance to *Blasted* and its supposedly gratuitous violence: “The difficulty with the play was always structural: that it yoked together two apparently irreconcilable worlds.” Critics who declare *Blasted* a failure tend to privilege the overtly realist first half as the “true” play and then complain that the rest departs confusingly from this model: they charge, in effect, that Kane fails realism itself by breaking with her play’s own internal logic. In the revival reviews, however, the majority of critics managed to reverse

their or their newspapers' earlier positions on the play by implying that the play's second half is really its "true" self and calling the entire thing absurdist. Yoking Kane to Beckett (and especially to *Endgame*, as Benedict Nightingale did in *The Times*), these critics declared *Blasted* a contemporary echo of a monumental mid-century (male) playwright's body of work, on whose social value and generic innovation they could all easily agree. At the same time, they managed to save realism from Kane: if she is *really* following Beckett and not Osborne, critics need not fear that she is attempting to disembowel the genre on which so much of their own cultural power has been built. Tellingly, John Gross, one of the two critics (Sheridan Morley was the other) bold enough to insist that Kane's play remained, for him, disjointed "nonsense," was also one of the few critics who continued to damn it through the lens of political post-war realism. His verdict: "There is no real political dimension to what we are shown, and no social depth."

Gross's argument that Kane's horrific spectacles come out of nowhere, attach to no larger social history, and therefore serve no social-realist purpose (again, effectively "failing" realism) echoes Sanja Nikcevic's recent *New Theatre Quarterly* article on British brutalism in a European context. Nikcevic is palpably angry with "in-yer-face" playwrights like Kane and Mark Ravenhill, arguing that their work "never potentializes change" because the worlds they conjure are "not political but fatalistic": "They offer violence on an archetypal level as something inherent in us, not as the consequence of a social structure, *as a political play would show*; instead we're given the dramatic equivalent of a horror movie. Evil is omnipresent, and claims innocent victims" (my emphasis).²⁴ I consider Nikcevic's generalizations too broad and in places inaccurate, but they are ultimately significant less in themselves than as a symptom of the generic anxiety that shadows and motivates them. Nikcevic, like Gross, cries out for Brechtian-style political realism, demands the safe contours of a clearly marked genre. The *real* problem

with *Blasted* – as Kane herself noted to Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge – is not context but continuity²⁵: its lack of unity makes spectators uncertain of their own place at, and in relation to, the play. Only when we are immersed in a continuous world can we get truly comfortable in our seats; only then can we assume the safe distance that is the privilege of the spectator who *learns*.²⁶ Nikcevic’s critique of Kane’s stylistic competence masks the fear of the loss of this very privilege,²⁷ just as the play’s more favourable British revival reviews reassert the readerly privilege of Billington, Spencer, Nightingale et al by insisting that the play can be read as a unified absurdist piece. The assumption in both cases is that audience expectations about the meanings that attach to genre must be met in order for the play to be any good; when the play is said to fail, it is because it fails to make those expectations the privileged centre of its attention.

Thus does anxiety, and often anger, over the play’s violence turn out, at bottom, to be but the symptom of a much more uncanny fear of the loss of spectatorial control. *Blasted* is not so much horribly violent as it is violently unpredictable, resisting the kind of audience premonition on which both naturalism and dialectical realism thrive and thus leaving audiences unprepared for what may come, and how they might react. It is perhaps no surprise that those who support Kane’s stage violence tend to argue that she forces audiences into critical discomfort, and thus into a reassessment of the role of affective response in the theatre (the “phenomenological” school of Kane criticism, including Aston, Campbell, Carney, Brannigan, Wixson, each with varying inflections), while those who resist it privilege the spectator’s taste and authority as they claim that Kane’s over-the-top violence represents only her failure to understand and to use the codes of political realism appropriately (Nikcevic, Innes; see also Iball, “Room Service,” 327-8). Here, then, lies the second prong of my argument. Insofar as Kane may be said to have provoked a crisis in postwar British drama, and insofar as Cate’s rape has provoked what I would call a

crisis of disavowal in the critical literature on the play, these crises have to do with Kane's relentless and discomfiting exposure of both the underlying assumptions driving stage realism's continued authority in certain performance circles, and the role of realism's all-powerful spectator in the maintenance of that authority. Kane's violence doesn't so much "blast" realism open as it provokes questions about the extent to which realism, so tentatively reliant on the privilege it accords the spectating eye, is always already ripe to be blasted, always on the cusp of what Elin Diamond calls its own hystericization.

What we don't see, how we don't see it

Kane's choice to leave Cate's rape unrepresented is perhaps, in the context of theatre history, more conventional than innovative. Greek tragedy relegates all violent acts to narrative and provokes a centuries-long debate over the place of violence in the theatre. Classical French tragedy follows the Greek pattern, linking violence to indecorousness and making "decorum" a central tenet of much theatre criticism from the seventeenth century forward. Shakespeare and his contemporaries may appear at first to be a brash exception to this rule of decorum, and yet for all its various brutalities against bodies of all sexes, classes and races, Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy does a remarkable job of effacing the violence against *women* on which so many of its plots turn. The very idea of domestic violence against women in this period, understood by the purposefully vague "reasonable correction," was both unclear and intensely subjective, and could easily be disputed by husbands in a court of law. Rape, meanwhile, remained tethered to its earlier roots as a property crime committed by one man against another's goods, despite late-sixteenth century laws making a woman's non-consent essential to its definition; as a result, rape was never *really* about the woman to whose body it happened.²⁸ This early modern pattern of

exposure and effacement – in which women are obviously brutalized, but their status as victims of brutality is not itself obvious in their cultural moment – translated violence against women to the stage as a nagging question mark, an uncertain and deeply ambivalent act, in plays from Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* to Heywood’s *A Woman Killed With Kindness*. Its longer legacy has been a tendency in art and literature, as in the courts and in the media, to fetishize the body of the ravished woman as at once horrific and titillating, both acutely visible and yet perniciously beyond comprehension.

As I argue for the political reverberations of Cate’s “missing” rape (and what it may reveal to us about the stakes of too-comfortable spectatorship), I am interested especially in *Blasted*’s response to this latter representational history, to rape’s vexed ocular and ontological status in both Western theatre and Western culture. In order parse the larger critical potential of Cate’s rape, I take my cue from Peggy Phelan’s work on the political power of invisibility, or what she characterizes as “the power of the unsurveyable,” in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*.²⁹ Cautioning that her project is not to call “for greater visibility of the hitherto unseen,” and noting that “[t]here is an important difference between willfully failing to appear and never being summoned,” Phelan uses the work of Jacques Lacan to build a theory of the political value of the “blind spot” – what lies unseen at the heart of all representation, at the point just beyond the vanishing point. Phelan argues that the blind spot, as it marks the moment when vision fails to produce knowledge, seeing to produce belief, has the power to reveal “the *limit* of the image in the political field of the sexual and racial other” (my emphasis) – that is, to reveal the limit of what we think we know about the bodies and experiences of our others.³⁰ For Phelan, to be visible is not instantly to be powerful; rather, it is to be caught in the “trap”³¹ of unequal relations between self and other, snagged by the ocular conundrum that says we may only ever

see ourselves clearly via the purloined looks of others. The trap of the visible is of course the trap of Lacan's mirror stage and after, the mistaken belief that what we see in the glass (or on the stage) is who we are, that every image on the retina is a direct (rather than inverted) reflection of our looking eye, a reflection that elides the other into a whole and discrete image of our selves. Within this ocular economy, invisibility is a marker of power, of the position of self as observer: "he who is marked with value is left unremarked," Phelan tells us, while she who is made visible is marked "rhetorically and imagistically" as property, as an object in a transaction that allows the spectating eye to "secure a coherent belief in self-authority, assurance, presence" via the return of (his) look.³²

As Phelan takes up Lacan's discourse on eye and gaze, vision and the blindness that lies, paradoxically, at its core, she turns a controversial theory of subject-formation into a feminist theory of spectatorship – or rather, a theory of the limits of spectatorial power. Lacan's gaze represents *lack* in seeing, the power of the observer as fundamentally uncertain, always at risk. This gaze appears to us, uncanny, in those moments when our look falters, the visual field fissures, when sight no longer simply equals knowledge or power and we realize, even if only for a moment, that we must look out because we cannot look inward, because our eyes work only in one direction.³³ Phelan argues for the political power of just these moments of radical disorientation: that by harnessing invisibility we might harness something of the power of Lacan's gaze. Not the power to see all, but the power to expose the limits of sight as a tool for self-knowledge and self-actualization; the power to reveal the dangers inherent in a scheme of subject-formation predicated on the other as an expendable player in the drama of the self.

I realize that I take a risk by invoking Lacan in an essay about sexual violence, its vexed representation in Kane's play, and its status in Western culture at large. Lacan's work has long

been the subject of polarizing debate, especially among feminist scholars. For each, like Phelan, who argues for the political value of Lacan's most controversial theories, there are others who suggest that Lacan's work can be totalizing, romantic, and politically dangerous as it over-privileges an antagonistic view of the workings of vision in ordinary subject-formation and fails to engage its theoretical objects (such as the eye itself) on material as well as metaphysical terms.³⁴ Indeed, Phelan's own work suffers somewhat by association: as she deploys Lacan's gaze and its power to disrupt the ostensible certainties of the visual field she also risks romanticizing the disappeared or "unrepresentable" as *inherently* disruptive. The line between willfully failing to appear and never being summoned is not always firmly drawn: in some cases, the difference is literally a matter of one's perspective, something that risks reifying rather than challenging the power of the observer to see and know the "truth" of its object. While I have tremendous respect for the work Phelan does in *Unmarked*, I would argue that in re-deploying this work for critical feminist or critical race analysis we need always to keep the specific circumstances of a given "disappearance" in view, and to pay attention to the ways in which that disappearance explicitly engages Phelan's blind-spot *as* blind-spot, making it overtly visible and thus available for debate, analysis, and further critique. This is exactly what I believe Kane's representation of Cate's rape accomplishes: because this representation is grounded in rape's history of cultural disavowal, its ambivalent performance history, as well as the vexed history of the female body in realist representation, and because, as I argue below, Kane takes pains to draw attention to the missed or forgotten status of Cate's rape throughout her second scene, *Blasted* makes not just Cate's rape but the rape's very disappearance one of the central subjects of its political critique. Phelan's blind spot works best as a critical tool for performance analysis when it is able to challenge the axiomatic relationship between seeing and knowing, language

and the eye, upon which the relationship of spectator to spectacle so often depends. The missing becomes radical when it actualizes the gap between what we want to see and what we are willing to see, to recognize, to encounter as truly other than ourselves.

Blasted's Hysteria

Theatrical realism – and here I speak deliberately of a very specific kind of realism, the new social drama of the late nineteenth century, what Elin Diamond calls “Ibsenite” realism,³⁵ and its twentieth-century progeny – is the genre of hyper-visibility, and thus the ideal handmaiden of a visual economy organized around the coincidence of “eye” and “I,” vision and identification.³⁶ “Mimetic correspondence has a psychic appeal because one seeks a self-image within the representational frame,” Phelan writes.³⁷ Realism relies for its signifying power on a closed, carefully self-selected world, alongside the promise that its spectators will eventually see all that world has to offer, in order to perpetuate the truth of its narrative. Of course we *know* there is a world outside the drawing room/kitchen/bedroom we see on stage, just as we know that we are watching a theatricalization of the real rather than the “real” itself. But the promise of realism is that all we need know will be contained within this closed room; comings and goings will be attended by a narration of events beyond, and will ultimately affirm the centrality of this place, here, in which we find ourselves. All this means, of course, that realism is not really obsessed with the visible at all; in fact, it is more deeply, neurotically, concerned with what *can no longer* be seen, with the stuff it has had to shove beyond its frame in order to instantiate that frame as the container of all relevant truth and knowledge. Realism relies not so much on the power of the visible as on the strategic elision of everything outside its defined visual field in order to guarantee the singularity of its projected reality – just as the economy of the visible real

relies on the elision of the “blind spot” in order to perpetuate the subject’s faith in his or her own specular powers. To create a naturalized world, everything Aristotle might have called “improbable” must fall out of the frame.

Realist stagings are, then, especially vulnerable to the critical power of the missing, the deliberately absent/ed image that returns to haunt the stage as realism’s excess. Elin Diamond points to just such an image at the end of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, one of the landmarks of modern social realism. As Hedda exits the stage for the first time at the end of the play, departing into an inner room also on stage but separated from the main playing area by curtains, she draws our “eyes to the vanishing point,” to “a space present but out of sight,”³⁸ to a space haunted by the spectre of everything the play has not shown us, cannot show us about Hedda, about who Hedda *might* be. Before committing suicide upon this inner stage, Hedda makes one last appearance as a head popped, puppet-like, through the curtains. Diamond, channeling Phelan, captures exactly the critical potential of this moment: “The old puppet trick shivers the wholeness and completeness of the mimetic body, in which actor is subsumed in character, and for one moment [Hedda’s] hysterical body is explicitly equated with the unseen: that which realism represses.”³⁹

In the prevailing (sympathetic) argument about *Blasted*, the play is said to challenge post-war British “kitchen sink” realism; it blows a hole in its fourth wall when the mortar bomb goes off at the end of scene two, bringing with it both the Armageddon of the outside war and a crack in the frame of John Osborne and after. This argument gets traction from Kane herself, who told Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge that the bomb “fractures” the “structure” of the play, disturbing the image, created by the first two scenes, of *Blasted* as “a piece of social realism.”⁴⁰ I have no intention of disputing this reading, but I would like to complicate it by suggesting that much is to be gained from understanding “social realism” in this case as both a contemporary

and a historical phenomenon, not only as a version of *Look Back in Anger*, but also as a version of *Hedda Gabler*, of what Elin Diamond calls the “medical melodrama”⁴¹ that powers realism in its earliest and most potent modern incarnation. In her important article, “Realism’s Hysteria: Disruption in the Theatre of Knowledge,” Diamond makes a twofold argument. First, that realism relies for its truth-effects on the figure of the hysterical woman with a past, whose previous transgressions must be both confessed *and* translated onto her body in order for audiences to enjoy the ocular proof of the play’s positivist inquiry and receive the payoff of the reality effect; and second, that realism is always already at risk of its own hystericization, because it must suppress the complexities and multiplicities of its pathologized female lead if its reality-effects (the “truth” of her illness, of her social abnormality) are to retain their potency.

Thinking Kane through Diamond, *Blasted* through *Hedda Gabler*, we might remember that Cate, the lone female figure on stage, is deliberately cast as psychically damaged; indeed, Elaine Aston has already read Cate as a bona fide hysteric.⁴² But this is no medical melodrama of old: Kane links Cate’s “hysterical” fits directly to the spectre of earlier sexual violence committed against her,⁴³ and thereby to the play’s own “missing” moment – Ian’s offstage rape of Cate. She thus connects Cate’s traumatically-induced illness directly to broader anxieties over the “missing” that lie latent in the realist scene itself, and Cate, rather than acting as a diversion or substitute for realism’s own hysteria (as Diamond argues the “sick” female lead is designed to do), becomes an active symptom of realism’s buried baggage, a signifier that haunts. Cate’s traumatic eruptions risk traumatizing the scene itself. Her fits mark her body with the sign of what realism yearns to rationalize: the causes behind her “illness,” causes that turn out to be traceable not to her own misbehaviour or to her body’s rebellious physiology, but to her social and physical mistreatment in a world where women – especially vulnerable young women –

remain the quintessential Other in the drama of the powerful male self. Understanding *Blasted* as a critical rethinking of the scene of early modern social realism – as realism hystericized, mimesis unmade, to appropriate Diamond’s language – thus also allows us to understand that Kane’s critique of genre is a specifically *gendered* critique, a challenge to early realism’s bottom-line misogyny. She takes issue not only with the position of the so-called “fallen” woman at the heart of the realist narrative, but also with the material dimensions of that woman’s trauma and suffering, dimensions on which the genre depends but which it cannot fully admit to either sight or hearing, vision or narrative.

Understanding *Blasted* as realism’s hysteria also allows us to account for Kane’s important coda to her statements (quoted above) on *Blasted*’s structural fracture: when the bomb goes off to end scene two, “[t]he play,” she notes, “collapses into one of Cate’s fits.”⁴⁴ These fits are the play’s ultimate unknown quantity, inaccessible to all but Cate, and only partly accessible to her; they are emphatically, palpably beyond the realm of our visible real, the limit of this text. If Cate is a politicized hysteric, both source and harbinger of the play’s own hysteria, the bomb blast does not simply blast her away, making room for Ian, the Soldier, and the play’s “real” scene of suffering. Rather, it embeds her missed scene of suffering *into* the physical structure of the stage, translates her earlier bodily and psychic trauma onto the whole of the space; it reproduces her – and the play’s – hysteria architecturally and renders realism’s hidden excess literally excessive, as the detritus of a bombed-out building. Kane’s bomb does not blast away the fourth wall, either (scenes three, four and five never address spectators directly: technically the fourth wall remains in place, though the back wall of the stage set has been irrevocably torn). It blasts *into* the closed room of the realist picture plane, maps the limits of realism’s visual control. The blast leaves a hole; the hole points, Hedda-like, to the vanishing point. It wrecks the

fantasy of realism's stifling interiority, and messes with its deceptively simplistic equation of truth with (confessing) body, knowledge with (all-seeing) eye. The hole becomes the locus of disappearance – the moment when stage pictures fail us – creating not an invisible wall but a visible threshold, site of both realism's power (the exits and entrances that guarantee the centrality of the closed room) and its imminent unmaking (the exit as an entrance onto the unknown *somewhere else*, as Stoppard's *Play King* puts it).

The blast produces a hole, and the hole stages the gap in our knowledge. It forces scenes one and two into confrontation with the disavowal of rape that underwrites their narrative; it also forces the play's spectators into confrontation with the limits of realism's ever-open eye. Realism politicizes vision, although the coercive operations of the reality-effect make it hard to tell until one's own politics collide with the argument advanced on stage. To drive home this point, *Blasted*'s three final scenes overtly politicize the desire for ocular proof attached to realism's ideal spectator as they confront *real* audiences with the limits of what we are willing to admit to sight. Excess returns with a vengeance as the abjected, repressed image of Cate's rape returns on Ian's body. I want to be clear here that I am not arguing that Ian's rape echoes Cate's in order simply to rehearse or re-enact it, to punish Ian for being a "bad witness" or otherwise to link her "casual," "domestic" abuse to the larger traumas of war.⁴⁵ While I do not dispute these readings, I am arguing for something more: that Ian's rape is not a substitution for Cate's rape but a supplement to it, designed in its uncomfortably visible corporeality not to return that rape to the stage but rather to call our attention to its very absence, its status as disappeared. Ian's rape appears emphatically as both the memory of Cate's rape *and yet not* Cate's rape; in this hypnoid form it becomes a challenge to spectators to witness *both* his suffering and *more than* his suffering, to see the missed moment it both embeds and covers up, perhaps deliberately or

perhaps inadvertently, with his own pain. In its excessive presentness, Ian's rape calls upon us to encounter absence, to witness, as Kelly Oliver argues, what lies beyond the distancing and differentiating power of the eye, "beyond recognition," beyond the specular dichotomy that organizes realist space into "us" and "them," self and other.

The eye, Oliver argues, has the power to connect as well as to separate human beings, to produce two subjects met in their complex alterity rather than a subject and an object produced through simple binary difference.⁴⁶ In response to those who read Kane's principal theatrical intervention as affective, who believe her critical gesture is to produce a change in audience feeling, I want to assert that Kane seeks also, perhaps much more so, to change the way we see.⁴⁷ She creates the conditions for a critical encounter *with our own eyes*, and advances the possibility of the audience member as a witness – not just to that which lies before our eyes, but more crucially to that which lies beyond them, at the limit of their powers. This is witnessing as a radical form of humility: can we see when we don't see, and recognize what that failure to see might mean for our others, might mean for a woman like Cate, so easily dismissed as slow or disposable or "asking for it"? Reading, watching, witnessing scenes one and two of *Blasted* through scenes three, four and five, can we confront the destructive consequences of a process of subject-formation predicated on self versus other, one that is marked by the careful policing of our field of vision into that which counts as "Real" and that which is marked as abject, untrue, inconsequential, outside the frame?

In the remaining pages of this article, I explore in detail the ways in which Kane deploys Cate in *Blasted*'s first two scenes in order to rehearse the terms and conditions of the medical melodrama, expose its underlying premises, and transform the realist spectator who diagnoses into one charged to witness beyond the visual plane. Finally, I extend my argument on the status

of Ian's rape in scene three, and in particular on its architectural dimension, in an effort to advance some possibilities for how we might better make the hysterical practices of *Blasted's* stage tangible in performance, available not just for critical analysis in the pages of a learned journal but also to audiences of potential witnesses in the seats of a theatre.

Rape beyond realism

But naturalism is neurotic. It was an impossible project. Theatricality haunts its dreams.⁴⁸

In its historical incarnation, social realism is inextricably linked to the "problem" of the modern woman. Hedda, Nora, Rebecca West – Ibsen's iconic heroines chafe against the confines of a Victorian world that cannot account for them even as the dramatic structure that contains them finds a way to pathologize their chafing, indulging in the fantasy that late 19th century women's problems are traceable to women's unruly bodies as much as (and often far more so than) to endemic social issues. While Diamond notes that the realist problem play understood and respected the "complexity of moral issues,"⁴⁹ often making society's guilt part of the performance (and indeed, nowhere is this more true than in Ibsen), its centerpiece remained the guilt of the woman, its discovery, and the anatomization of her motives. Diamond points to the careful, detailed preparation Elizabeth Robins afforded Hedda's hysterical symptoms as she plotted a "mental pathology" for the character for the London premier,⁵⁰ and notes that, in the shift from melodrama to realism, hysteria on the stage became a matter of just such a plotting, of an etiology converted into clues for an audience that replaced melodrama's expressive, obviously theatrical gestures and actions designed to signal madness.⁵¹ The modern stage heroine, unlike the heroine of melodrama, is *not* acting (at least, not deliberately); she is sick, demands our cure. The spectre of mental illness, supported by the burgeoning new science of psychoanalysis and its

late-19th century investigations into hysteria, creates the conditions through which we may both pity and judge the woman in question. Nora slams the door, Hedda pulls the trigger; audiences proceed to deliberation, focusing on the minutiae of the case history before them as they decide where to lay their sympathies.⁵²

Kane's most compelling challenge to realism is precisely her reconfiguration of this "problem" of the sick woman. Cate's fits – their cause apparently unidentified but clearly understood as illness, something about which she has consulted a doctor⁵³ – mark her as sick from the play's first moments, just as her appearance at the hotel room with Ian marks her as sexually available, perhaps even promiscuous. These coincident signifiers – Cate as sick and Cate as sexually free – return us immediately to the scene of early social realism and its impulse to identify and diagnose the wild (hysterical) woman who must be tamed (cured). The usual clues are left for us: what exactly is wrong with Cate? For what has she come, *really*? What does she mean when she says cryptically that her fits have returned since "dad came back"?⁵⁴ But something is different, too: Cate's illness and its clues are not drawn out for our edification; they do not await our diagnosis. Rather, her fits erupt early, and repeatedly, into the play's visual space, asserting themselves as trauma *on her body* and consistently drawing our attention to the missing piece of the puzzle, their cause.⁵⁵ Cate's fits mark the eruption of her damaged body into the comfortable space of the clue, into the anticipated distance between the audience and the possibility of diagnosis, becoming a powerful sign of a charged absence (of what is missing; of what we miss) as well as a charged echo of the violence stage realism does to women's bodies as it medicalizes their suffering for audience edification while eliding or downplaying that suffering's social and political dimensions.

Cate's fits mark the critical difference between Kane's medical melodrama and its antecedents: they signal a gap in knowledge, a missing piece of Cate's puzzle, but they do not couch it in anything approaching audience seduction. In fact, Kane makes sure that the cause of Cate's fits, while superficially fitting the conditions of a medical mystery, are in fact not much of a mystery at all. In scene one, Kate gets nervous, begins to stutter, and risks falling into a fit when Ian calls her stupid or makes unwanted sexual advances.⁵⁶ In scene two, post-rape, she attacks Ian; during the skirmish he "*wrestles her onto the bed*" while she grabs his gun and points it at his groin, stammering "I d- d- d- d- d- [...]" (which we might fill in as "I didn't want to," "I don't want to," or perhaps even "I dare you"). Cate then falls into a fit and faints, after which Ian brutally "*simulates sex*" on her prone body, gun to her head, linking her fits explicitly to violent sex in a gruesome dumbshow.⁵⁷ This symptomatic pattern, coupled with Cate's early comments about the link between the fits and her father, assert quite plainly that the fits are her psychosomatic response to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse: they are the material, performative manifestation of Cate as rape and abuse victim. In fact, the trajectory of events in scenes one and two makes so obvious the link between Cate's abused body and her mental illness that any analysis of these scenes as a version of the realist medical melodrama needs to state the obvious: the pleasurable "discovery" of the source of Cate's illness is a startling let-down. Far from forming the climax of the play, and far from allowing us the power of discovery, it reveals *itself*, messily and uncommonly early. We get not the payoff of diagnosis but only the discomfort of the fall-out, the experience of watching Cate suffer and struggle rather than the supposed pleasure of reading the clues left by a compliant, if damaged, body.

Why reveal this central, apparently climactic information so early and so plainly? One answer is obvious: if the realist problem play turns on discovery, to subvert discovery is to

subvert its *modus operandi*. But there is another, more salient answer: in Kane's "hysterical" version of the medical melodrama the source of Cate's illness is not, in fact, the principal object to be discovered. As I noted earlier, Ibsenite realism is predicated on the telling of certain secrets and the careful hiding of others – those that might point to the limits of its power to imagine and to compass the woman (in) question. In *Blasted*, the *real* secret is not that Cate is ill because she has been sexually and otherwise abused; it is that Cate is ill primarily because her abuse has been elided, dismissed, ignored by those around her, leaving her unable to access and deal with it consciously. Cate is positioned, lure-like, as a conventional hysteric who has suffered an originary trauma, but the real mystery of her trauma is why nobody seems to care what has caused it. No one in Cate's world has been willing to recognize its source and to deal with it responsibly: her doctor tells her she will "grow out of" the fits, obscuring their potential origins while papering over their extreme and deleterious consequences. Cate knows only that the fits make her "go," sometimes quite far away. When she makes the (admittedly brief) association between the fits and her father for Ian, he simply ignores it.⁵⁸ The fits rehearse Cate's trauma only because it has not been acknowledged and abreacted; they are not so much a symptom of rape as they are a symptom of rape's ongoing disavowal. The secret beyond the play's secret, then, is rape's endemic effacement and the consequences of that effacement for Cate's bodily and psychic integrity, and thus *Blasted's* "realist" stage is always already doubled, hypnoid, encoding both the secret we (should) too easily uncover *and* the secret of its all-too-ordinary cover-up.

Realism's medical melodrama turns on the confession: at some point the fallen woman needs to spill the beans, confirming our nascent diagnoses and granting us access to the last of the clues we need to complete the case study. Things may not turn out exactly as we expect –

Nora leaves; Hedda commits suicide – but the confession remains the climax of the modern realist mystery play, and that confession must, crucially, be confirmed by both word *and* body. To Nora’s shocking admission of her crime we add her wild tarantella; to Hedda’s revelation of past dealings with and desire for Lövborg we add her thinning hair and her obsessive refusal to speak of her pregnancy. In each case the flesh offers the confirmation of the proof, and in each case the flesh is resolutely sexualized. The confessing body, as Diamond reminds us, was central to Freud’s construction of the talking cure in the late nineteenth century, and it was his special power as analyst to read through the body both the truth of the patient’s illness and those moments when a patient’s verbal confession *lacked* truth.⁵⁹ The body is the fulcrum through which secrets are revealed, the mechanism through which “no” turns out to mean “yes.”⁶⁰

In the fallen woman’s confession, her body speaks to us, her spectators-cum-analysts, of her most contraband powers and desires. But, as Diamond notes, the confessional scene is more than just erotic climax; it is also carefully orchestrated, a piece of pornographic theatre that demands not just truth but a “truthful performance.”⁶¹ The theatrical dimensions of the scene are, of course, obviated in order to produce the image of plain, unadulterated honesty; nevertheless, the confessional hinges on the theatrical, and theatricality itself is one of those “missing” elements on which realism so completely relies/which it so completely denies. As Dan Rebellato writes, fin-de-siècle realism is “theatre against itself”: “the fact that the plot has been invented, the lines of dialogue written, is an almost intolerable secret.”⁶² Nowhere is this secret more at risk of unexpected exposure than during the confessional scene, when the disguised “truth” of the female body may so easily be revealed as the invention of one man’s pen channeled through one woman’s command performance.

In *Blasted*, Cate cannot confess the source of her trauma (she has clearly repressed it fully, and in any case it's the analyst's job to determine sources, hers only to reveal symptoms), but she can confess her sexual desire – which is, of course, what all fallen-woman confessions are ultimately designed to expose. The first two scenes of the play are dutifully devoted to Ian's attempts to get Cate to confess that she wants him, and that she wanted it when he forced himself on her. Ian insists she loves him; she says “No more”; Ian reminds her that she “Loved [him] last night,” and she responds with her explicit non-consent: “I didn't want to do that.” Ian then uses the evidence of her body against her: “Made enough noise,” he insists, trumping her verbal rejection with apparent physical proof.⁶³ As Hargreaves reminds us, Ian's rewriting of Cate's testimony has remarkable staying power; a number of critics continue to consider her relationship to Ian, and to her own experience of violence, ambivalent at best, at worst a form of repressed sexual hunger (see my note above). Luckily, like her realist predecessors, Kane does not rely on Cate's words, or Ian's interpretation of them, alone to make the case for Cate's “desire”; instead, she stages Cate's body in two separate moments of “confession.” Of course, these are not realism's typical confessions, any more than Cate's hysteria is typical of the genre. Instead of offering Cate's body as proof of her unspoken desire for Ian, Kane stages, during scene two, a pair of live rehearsals of Ian's rape of Cate, each of which embed both the tenor of his violence and the normative expectation of Cate's reciprocal desire. They thus confess not her hidden love, but the coercive discourse that attempts to rewrite rape as female pleasure.

I have written elsewhere of the risks, and the feminist potential, of what I call rape's “metatheatrical return.” Rape's legal and social history is marked by its rehearsal for public witness after the fact; it was (and in some cases still is) an event that needed to be recast as a crime between men in order to have any chance at prosecution. Against this history, I assert the

potential of a different kind of rehearsal of sexual violence: one that speaks not rape's homosocial dimension but rather cries out the complexity of the crime and its experience for its female victim, one that muddles the clarity anticipated by a normative "return" of rape to public, male space. In the second scene of *Blasted*, Kane achieves just such a resistive metatheatrical return. Not only do her rehearsals oppose vehemently the expectations of the realist confessional scene, but in light of realism's anxiety over theatricality these scenes also maintain the explicit scent of performance about them. They appear as metatheatrical moments in which the macabre re-enactment of rape follows the script of no-means-yes, but only up to a point. Finally, each rehearsal breaks away from that script, revealing it *as* script, and "confesses" Cate's rape as violence and trauma, not sex and love. Each rehearsal unmakes the logic of the confessional climax, exposes rape as the secret hidden behind the veneer of Cate's "unconscious" desire, and returns theatricality – the "truth" of realism as skilful fakery – with a vengeance to the stage.

As an unconventional hysteric who insists that her experience of her own body matters, Cate exudes the theatrical: her fits of fainting and catatonic stillness mar the veneer of the real by pointing to the actor's virtuosity in feigning an alternate bodily state. The political potential of Cate's fits comes to a head early in scene two when, in response to Ian's act of rape, she points his gun at his groin, struggling and stammering. Soon she faints, and Ian "*lies her on the bed on her back,*" "*puts the gun to her head, lies between her legs, and simulates sex.*" Then, "*As he comes, Cate sits bolt upright with a shout*"; he scrambles off her, "*point[s] the gun at her from behind,*" and she begins "*laugh[ing] hysterically, as before, but doesn't stop.*"⁶⁴ Soon, laughter turns to "*crying her heart out,*" followed by a final collapse. Ian's "simulation," complete with loaded gun, is of course not "sex" at all but a real-time rehearsal of the moments-earlier rape, and, as he comes, what is meant in his script of the event to be Cate's articulation of pleasurable

submission turns out to be an uncanny wave of emotion that he cannot, or will not, recognize as traumatic. (Significantly, this brief scene appears early enough in scene two that Cate has not yet insisted verbally on her non-consent; it is our first introduction to the possibility that Ian has molested her.) Cate's body refuses its consent by interrupting Ian at the crucial, climactic moment of orgasm, both invoking and denying Ian's expectation of her sexual desire for him. Her "hysterical" laughter is an image of pleasure defamiliarized, a signifier of pleasure's opposite staged within the frame of pleasure's demand. At the same time, her hysterical laughter is a throwback to melodrama: she laughs like an actor in a play, signaling her status as performer. Cate's laughter needs to be read as both spontaneous (produced apparently unconsciously, if we suspend our disbelief) and carefully scripted (produced consciously, by an actor in a play, performing "by the book"), both "real" and "theatrical"; as a genuine expression of sexual trauma, and as a conscious refusal to play Ian's game. Now it is up to us to decide which is more truthful: Ian's script of the event, or Cate's resistive performance.

The rape's second rehearsal follows this same pattern of climax and reversal but is a great deal more overtly theatrical. Cate wants to leave; Ian insists she stay. He locks them both in the hotel room and tells her he loves her; she asks why she can't go home.⁶⁵ Cate then pulls a complete about-face: she kisses and touches him, and eventually begins to perform oral sex on him as he narrates the details of his brutal, top-secret government work. Her body appears, at first glance, to be confessing the desire her words would consciously deny; her no was a yes after all. But then, the reversal: Ian, again reaching climax, calls himself a "killer" and comes; as he says the word "killer," Cate bites down hard on his penis, holding it in her teeth for as long as she can.⁶⁶ It seems, once more, that Ian's script has been both performed and perverted. What was apparently sex turns sharply to violence; just as Ian bit Cate's genitals during her rape,⁶⁷ she

bites his now. Having had her desire to leave denied, having had her rejection of Ian refused, Cate plays the role Ian has scripted for her, but again she plays it resistingly, staging his demand for her desire alongside the “proof” of its opposite. Cate’s pleasure turns out to be nothing but a carefully constructed performance, brilliantly brought to an unexpected climax. Cate is not ill but actor in this moment: her body offers the idealized illusion of desire, and then makes the “truth” of that desire permanently elusive. Far from being uncertain of her sexual wants, she appears instead boldly assertive of her corporeal rights.

These rehearsals of “sex” that are also both acts of rape *and* explicit moments of performance provoke a host of questions for Kane’s audience. If sex is always violence here, but is also always performance (Ian “simulates” sex that is really another form of rape; Cate simulates desire that is really violent hate), which story is to be believed? Is what we see really what we get? What exactly are we seeing? Ian’s rape of Cate takes place offstage, but returns to realism’s visual plane as a series of oblique mirrors, simulacra, as mimesis confused.

“Confessions” turn out to be tricks: the body acts rather than abreacts. The ocular proof is no proof at all; seeing loses its perspectival quality, becomes multidimensional, a question not of sifting carefully-laid bits of evidence but of grasping at multiple angles even as they shift, slip in and out of focus. Realism’s quest for truth, for the confession that brings climax and relief along with answers, is relentlessly denied as Kane, even from within realism’s formal apparatus, “calls into crisis the seeable field of realism’s stage.”⁶⁸

The final question hangs in the air, even as the mortar bomb splits open the upstage wall: what, if anything, can we see with certainty?

Thresholds of the visible

Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant.⁶⁹

Cate leaves the stage seconds before the Soldier arrives, heralding the beginning of the play's other half. A few moments later, scene two ends in a blinding light and a huge explosion. When lights come up on scene three, there is a hole in the rear wall of the stage, while dust continues to fall from the caved-in plaster.⁷⁰ *This* is what we see with certainty, then: a rough gap in a sturdy structure, a violent tear that mars realism's pristine enclosure. If realism is a genre glued together by its architecture – little rooms, fourth walls – Kane's attack on its physical space marks her most forceful, deliberate interruption of its logic.

Beatriz Colomina writes of the architecture of realism via the work of fin-de-siècle architect Adolf Loos. She notes how carefully gendered are the spaces in his houses, how *theatrically* those spaces are oriented around the possibility of complete, all-encompassing sight. She notes as well the central importance of the threshold to the creation and maintenance of these separately gendered, fully specularized worlds: the women's rooms, she writes, “not only overlook the social spaces but are exactly positioned at the end of the sequence, on the threshold of the private, the secret, the upper rooms where sexuality is hidden away. At the intersection of the visible and the invisible, women are placed as the guardians of the unspeakable.”⁷¹ The women can see but, more importantly, can be seen – up to a point. It is their job both to be on display and to carefully elide with their decorative presence all that is to be kept offstage.

I suggested above that the mortar blast generates the image of realism's vanishing point. Insofar as our eyes are drawn to that hole in the wall, we are drawn to a scar on the stage that operates as the architectural trace of the missing, of realism's gendered baggage, of Cate's rape and its ongoing deferral. The scarred space is also, perhaps, the image of the inaccessible: of

what Cate really wants, where she goes when she has a fit, where she goes when she leaves the hotel room; of the wound rape makes, the thing we can't see even when we manage to witness sexual violence empathetically. The hole signs missing-ness, what is lost, what is gone; it is elision embodied, and insofar as it competes with the action on stage for our attention, it announces elision as both the central preoccupation of this play, and as a condition we, as its spectators, must therefore confront.

Of course, as I conjure us all before the hole in Kane's wall I realize I am dreaming an ideal spectator of my own. My analysis of *Blasted* has thus far been primarily textual; I have examined the script of the play and argued for the ways in which it deliberately enacts the elision of rape, politicizing both its disappearance and the codes of realism that underwrite that disappearance. But can this analysis have a life in performance? How get a room full of spectators to *see* absence, to recognize the politicization of their vision as part of their obligation to Cate, as her witnesses? While I could never presume such a unified response to any performance – nor would I wish it – I want to conclude by arguing that Kane's mortar-blast hole is one site at which we might play with the possibilities of staging, forcefully and directly, *Blasted's* central elision.

If the hotel room is this play's stand-in for social realism's drawing room, it matters that its confined space is not simply destroyed, but cut open, galled, visibly wounded like Cate is wounded when Ian bites her, makes her bleed. The blast violates the stage's body by creating a new, intensely visible threshold, one that pulls our eyes, calling attention to the power of realism's thresholds to decide what gets in, to their function as gate-keeper. This is the physical backdrop against which the Soldier rapes Ian with his revolver in the middle of scene three. It matters that the Soldier couches his violence simultaneously in talk of love and rape, in the

violence done to his girlfriend, Col, and in the violence that he himself has suffered and enacted in the theatre of war.⁷² Love and hate, sex and violence, power and desire blend in his words, returning the discourse that surrounds Cate's rape emphatically to the scene. As the Soldier brutalizes Ian, the play stages two competing centres of attention: the act of violence laid before our very eyes, and acts of violence past, invoked both by the Soldier's confused talk of love and pain and by the omnipresence of the hole as a sign of what (and who) has gone missing, even in this intensely visual scene. An audience member unwilling or unable to witness Ian's suffering might well choose to rest her eyes instead on that hole, mercifully empty of brutality.

A hole in the wall is, to be sure, not a particularly compelling dramatic device on its own; it is less an active absence than simply *nothing*. This may be one reason why the British revival production of *Blasted* appears to have done away with it: the "ceiling collapses and windows shatter in a bomb attack," writes Nicholas de Jongh in his April 2001 review, but there is no hint of anything more. And yet in its apparent absence I sense the loss of what the hole could be, could do, in performance. Shattering the ceiling and windows maintains a certain unity in the transition from "domestic" to "war-torn": the bomb attack might not immediately make sense to audiences, but its effects are realistically staged ("as seen on tv"), leaving no uncanny residue and letting the play continue logically. Now we leave Cate's story; now we enter Ian's. In contrast, a production of *Blasted* that seeks to stage Kane's hysterical realism, to render tangible the absence of Cate's experience within the image of Ian's own, needs to retain just such an uncanny residue, and to make it echo. The blast-hole commemorates the moment Cate leaves the stage, but it also marks her as somehow broken, incomplete, not fully accessible. It is a gash in the face of our knowing. It is also, then, the perfect place to locate a screen, to turn an ordinary hole in the wall into the literal site of fantasy and projection, and then to turn it around *on us*.

Earlier, I discussed two moments in which Cate's rape returns, with difference, to Kane's stage. These returns do not simply represent what we missed the first time around, but rather stage the process of rape's disappearance and prompt us to ask a series of questions about what we know of Cate's experience, and how we know it. I suggest now that the provocative blast-hole that memorializes Cate's disappearance in the printed text of the play might become the site of a third "metatheatrical return" in performance, a return that requires us to see Cate, even in disappearance, layered over and against Ian's final, brutal climax. In counterpoint to Ian's on-stage rape, the hole-as-screen might feature a series of pre-filmed sequences designed to unsettle prevailing assumptions about the relationship between Cate and Ian's separate experiences of violence and about what constitutes the "proof" of rape in this play (and elsewhere). Some of these sequences could follow – could try but *fail* to follow – Cate as she travels outside the hotel room, beyond the physical limits of the play: not to show us what we are missing, but to show us again *how* we miss, what we cannot capture of Cate beyond the performance's physical plane, even in another medium that claims for itself realism's power to reveal all. Over and against Ian's dramatically visible rape, Cate's parallel, elusive performances could appear to us as literally "unsurveyable," calling into question both the parameters of her experience of violence in the play *and* what we think we know about the moment of violence taking place immediately before our eyes.⁷³ I realize these parallel performances would inevitably risk reifying the notion that Cate's violations are merely a version of Ian's own, but they also encode another possibility. Ian's anal rape is, for many, the "key" moment in *Blasted*, the "gest" that explains the play; it thus forever risks oversimplification. Fracturing this key moment into multiple performances may just grant it the power to place two competing realities in view: the uncomfortable reality of

sexual violence's immediate affect alongside the play's broader commentary on the history and politics of its representation. Rape as oblique performance: a constant process of slipping away.

Blasted leaves us in the no-man's land between two violent events, one visible, one invisible. To hear the Soldier speak of his crimes and his desires is to hear the echo of Ian's desperation and justifications in scenes one and two; to watch Ian's rape and mutilation is to see Cate's rape in hindsight, the spectacular elision that both frames Ian's suffering and competes with it for our attention. At once rape is present and absent to us; the wrecked stage space encodes its hypnoid representational status, makes that status, as much as the violence of rape itself, central to the scene's argument. To witness beyond recognition is, just like this, to see and not see at once, to recognize not oneself in one's other but the gaps in one's field of vision, the imperfections of sight that make that process of recognition so seductive, so potentially violent. Sarah Kane's *Blasted* demands such a witness by staging both realism's enchanting illusions and the uncanny image of its vanishing point, the rape that is, the rape that is not, and the politics of their competing articulations. Her response to realism lies resolutely along this faultline, the line of what realism misses, covers up, disavows in its struggle to instantiate the truth of its world. In Kane's world, on the other hand, there are always at least two truths: the one we see, and the one from which we try but fail to avert our eyes.

¹ Elin Diamond, "Realism's Hysteria: Disruption in the Theater of Knowledge," in *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 5.

² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

³ Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, in *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), 31.

⁴ Sean Carney, “The Tragedy of History in Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*,” *Theatre Survey* 46.2 (2005): 275-96.

⁵ Sarah Kane, interview by Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, in *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, ed. Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge (London: Methuen, 1997), 134-135.

⁶ Elaine Aston is the lone serious exception. Aston, “Sarah Kane: The ‘bad girl of our stage’?” in *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights, 1990-2000* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

⁷ Christopher Wixson, in a thought-provoking article on the spaces of realism in *Blasted*, mentions in passing that Kane “chooses” not to stage Cate’s rape (“‘In Better Places’: Space, Identity, and Alienation in Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*,” *Comparative Drama* 39.1 [Spring 2005]: 76). As far as I know, he and Sean Carney are the only critics to note the offstage status of the rape, and to note it as a deliberate choice on Kane’s part (Carney, “The Tragedy of History,” 276). Unfortunately, Wixson does not elaborate on this point, and elsewhere risks eliding its significance by claiming that “Kane in *Blasted* strives to represent onstage what is often only implied or relegated offstage, moving the margins to the center” (75). Similarly, Carney spends surprisingly little time discussing this key moment of offstage violence – a notable omission given his interest in debunking the myth of Kane as a shock artist.

⁸ Given the widespread notoriety of Kane’s opening night, I do not want to rehearse the comments and complaints of the critics here. Aleks Sierz does a nice job of reading the outraged reviews with a critical eye in his exploration of the play (*In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* [London: Faber and Faber, 2001], 93-99). In a more recent assessment, Annabelle Singer notes the awkward irony of the play’s single press night, at which “all but five of the audience members were critics, and all but three of the critics were white, middle-aged men. Kane and

others have pointed to the particular offense these critics might have taken to Ian, a white middle-aged journalist who commits the atrocities in the first half of the play and falls victim to them in the second half” (“Don’t Want To Be This: The Elusive Sarah Kane,” *TDR The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 48.2 [2004]: 145).

⁹ Aston, “Sarah Kane,” 82. See also Alyson Campbell, “Experiencing Kane: An Affective Analysis of Sarah Kane’s ‘Experiential’ Theatre in Performance,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 46 (2005): 80-97; John Brannigan, “From Anger to *Blasted*: Trauma and Social Representation in Contemporary Drama,” in *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 136-61; Ken Urban, “An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane,” *PAJ* 23.3 (2001): 36-46, and “Towards a Theory of Cool Britannia: Coolness, Cruelty, and the ‘Nineties,’” *New Theatre Quarterly* 20.4 (2004): 354-372.

¹⁰ See Helen Iball, “Room Service: En Suite on the *Blasted* Front Line,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 15.3 (2005): 320-329, and Sanja Nikcevic, “British Brutalism, the ‘New European Drama,’ and the Role of the Director,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 21.3 (2005), 255-272.

¹¹ Peter Buse, “Trauma and testimony in *Blasted*: Kane with Felman,” in *Drama + Theory: Critical Approaches to Modern British Drama* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2001), 186; Tom Sellar, “Truth and Dare: Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*,” *Theater* 27.1 (1996): 32. This is also the almost-universal conclusion drawn by reviewers of the 2001 Royal Court revival of the play; I read their commentary in greater detail below.

¹² Although this was common in the early critical response to the play, which was thoroughly preoccupied with cataloging Ian’s suffering and typically mentioned Cate merely as his sexual partner. The latter bias is repeated in some of the more cursory contemporary readings of the play. See Stanford Sternlicht, *A Reader’s Guide to Modern British Drama* (Syracuse: SUP,

2004), 236; Stephen Unwin with Carole Woddis, *A Pocket Guide to 20th Century Drama* (London: Faber + Faber, 2001), 249; and Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 531.

¹³ Kane's comments on the subject read the critical anxiety produced by the shift from hotel room to war zone as one related to form rather than content: "In terms of Aristotle's Unities, the time and action are disrupted while the unity of place is retained. [...] The unity of place suggests a paper-thin wall between the safety and civilisation of peacetime Britain and the chaotic violence of civil war" (interview by Stephenson and Langridge, 130-31).

¹⁴ Graham Saunders, "*Love Me Or Kill Me*": *Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2002), 46; Buse, "Trauma and Testimony," 178-9, 186.

¹⁵ Obviously, the violence of war is, in *Blasted*, not simply between men, although the Soldier and Ian are its visible emissaries; Kane makes a point of embedding the spectre of the wartime rape of women (with special reference to the Bosnian rape camps) in the Soldier's gruesome story of his girlfriend's violation and murder (*Blasted*, 47). While I do not wish too forget this important context, my goal here is to advance a reading of Cate's rape – that is, of the "domestic" violence of the first half of the play – that accounts for it *as such*, and not simply as an echo of the sexual violence of wartime. Kane herself was emphatic that the domestic mattered as much as the military in her play, and was deeply frustrated by how easily homegrown, peacetime violence against women could be elided in the press (interview by Stephenson and Langridge, 130). This is the violence, and this the elision of violence, with which I deal below.

¹⁶ Although we have made remarkable strides in valuing the testimony of female rape victims, we continue to prefer an "ocular proof" wherever possible: the evidence provided by rape exams

and DNA testing will always carry more weight than a woman's words. On the historical obsession with rape's ocular proof, see my "Rape's Metatheatrical Return: Rehearsing Sexual Violence Among the Early Moderns," *Theatre Journal* 58.1 (2006): 53-72.

¹⁷ Even some of the finest readings of the play act out this perverse critical elision of Cate. Carney takes great care to theorize the phenomenal world of the play, and yet he too dismisses Cate's experience as code for Ian's. Cate's hysterical fits, which other critics have duly noted are likely associated with prior abuse (David Ian Rabey, *English Drama Since 1940* [London: Longman, 2003], 205; Buse, "Trauma and Testimony," 181), Carney reads as a vehicle to introduce what he calls the play's "major concern": "death, and the attitude of the living towards it" (278). For him, these fits are a cipher for Ian's "eventual state" (287) on the threshold between life and death, but he accomplishes this reading at the expense of the fits' effect on Cate and their central connection to her history of abuse.

¹⁸ Mieke Bal, "Calling to Witness: Lucretia," in *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001), 100.

¹⁹ One of my graduate students, Allison Hargreaves, offered me some excellent evidence of how certain critics continue, intentionally or not, to perpetuate the argument that Cate's rape is somehow potentially ambiguous. John Brannigan, for example, names the rape as such, but also contends that Cate is "confused" in her communication to Ian, and cites her biting of Ian's penis (Kane, *Blasted*, 31) as evidence that she is no "passive victim" (Brannigan, "From Anger to *Blasted*, 153). In response to this and similar readings constructing Cate as ambivalent and implicitly challenging her non-consent, Allison points out that, on the subject of her sexual desire, Cate is never confused: over the course of scenes 1 and 2 she offers at least twenty variations on "no," "stop" and "don't" in response to Ian's advances ("Rape and the Politics of

Disavowal: A Study in Sexual Violence and Critical Reception,” Unpublished paper, May 2006, 12). Even sensitive critics tend to infantilize Cate, commenting on her mental deficiency and her thumb-sucking (Aston, “Sarah Kane,” 83; Carney, “The Tragedy of History,” 278). The implication, for Hargreaves, is that Cate is an unreliable witness and cannot be trusted to comprehend the complexities of her own experience (“Rape and the Politics of Disavowal, 12).

²⁰ Medieval and early modern scholars have done some of the most significant work on rape’s evasive representational history. See Barbara J. Baines, “Effacing Rape in Early Modern Representation,” *ELH* 65 (1998): 69-98; Jody Enders, “The Spectacle of the Scaffolding: Rape and the Violent Foundations of Medieval Theatre Studies,” *Theatre Journal* 56 (2004): 163-81; Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, eds, *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991); Coppélia Kahn, “The Rape in Shakespeare’s *Lucrece*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 9 (1976): 45-72; and my “Rape’s Metatheatrical Return.”

²¹ Aston, “Sarah Kane,” 82.

²² Singer, “Don’t Want To Be This,” 146; Kane, interview by Stephenson and Langridge, 130.

²³ All the reviews to which I refer below can be found in *Theatre Record* 26 March – 8 April 2001, 418-23.

²⁴ Nikcevic, “British Brutalism,” 264.

²⁵ Kane, interview by Stephenson and Langridge, 130.

²⁶ While I am an avowed Brechtian in my own realist leanings, I think it important to ask to what extent any realist theatre, including Brecht’s, eschews audience comfort or narrative continuity. Brecht’s innovation was to insert dialectical argument into the structure of realist theatre, but his plays remain invested in a particular kind of world-making, and in the (gendered) pleasure of the spectator who smokes and thinks.

²⁷ Nikcevic, “British Brutalism,” 263-4.

²⁸ On the effacement of rape in early modern representation see Baines, as well as my “Rape’s Metatheatrical Return”; on the problem of “reasonable correction” and women’s legal recourse in the event of abuse, see Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), especially 206-19.

²⁹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 94.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 11, 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 15.

³⁴ One such theorist is Kelly Oliver, whose work I engage below. I would like to thank one of *Theatre Survey*’s anonymous reviewers for reminding me of the controversial position Lacan’s work, and Phelan’s uptake of it, occupies in our own critical field.

³⁵ Diamond, “Realism’s Hysteria,” 4.

³⁶ My thinking in this section follows the feminist critique of realism already in circulation. In addition to Diamond, see Jill Dolan, “‘Lesbian’ Subjectivity in Realism: Dragging at the Margins of Structure and Ideology,” in *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance*. (Michigan: U Michigan P, 1993), 159-78.

³⁷ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 5.

³⁸ Diamond, “Realism’s Hysteria,” 28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Kane, interview by Stephenson and Langridge, 130.

⁴¹ Diamond, “Realism’s Hysteria,” 8.

⁴² Aston, “Sarah Kane,” 84.

⁴³ Kane, *Blasted*, 10, 14, 26-27.

⁴⁴ Kane, interview by Stephenson and Langridge, 130.

⁴⁵ Saunders, “*Love Me*,” 46; Buse, “Trauma and Testimony,” 185; Brannigan, “From Anger to *Blasted*,” 153.

⁴⁶ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2001). Oliver proposes a new view of subject-object relations, one that retains key notions common to dialogic theories of subjectivity from Lacan to Butler, but which more fully explores the implications of what she calls the “address-ability” and “response-ability” inherent in moments of intersubjective encounter. See especially her introductory chapter, pages 5-7.

⁴⁷ Rabey, *English Drama Since 1940*, 207.

⁴⁸ Dan Rebellato, “Anton Chekhov: The Death of the Author,” Program Note. *The Seagull*, by Anton Chekhov, in a version by Martin Crimp. National Theatre, London. 8 July 2006.

⁴⁹ Diamond, “Realism’s Hysteria,” 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 29, 30.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵² Of course, while this call to assessment may embed an ideal spectator, it also makes room for a variety of responses from *real* spectators. Diamond notes two very different responses to *Hedda Gabler* arising from the original London production – a damnation by male theatergoer H.E.M. Stuttfield, who reads in the play the disease of modern feminism (3), and a moment of identification by a female theatergoer who declares that “Hedda is all of us” (6).

⁵³ Kane, *Blasted*, 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Sean Carney picks up on Cate's suggestion that there is pleasure in the place to which the fits take her, that their experience can be likened to an orgasm ("The Tragedy of History," 278, 283). We need, however, to remember that Cate's fits are a response to both immediate trauma and the remembrance of past traumas, manifested as a kind of corporeal shut-down that produces solace in substitution for that traumatic remembrance. To call the fits moments of *jouissance* is to forget their roots in sexual abuse, a risky proposition.

⁵⁶ Kane, *Blasted*, 9, 14-16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 26, 27.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁹ Diamond, "Realism's Hysteria," 16.

⁶⁰ "The verbal revelation is obviously more vital, but the word must be *verified* by the body's visible mimesis. Without this physical signal Freud cannot be sure that he has heard the secret" (Diamond, "Realism's Hysteria," 17). Should we doubt the sexual dimension of this secret – or the intentional sexualizing of the scene of its discovery – Diamond offers a snapshot of Jean-Martin Charcot caught in the act of applying his "sex-baton" to a patient's ovaries, inciting hysterical attacks that look oddly like orgasm (13).

⁶¹ Diamond, "Realism's Hysteria," 16.

⁶² Rebellato, "Anton Chekhov: The Death of the Author," np.

⁶³ Kane, *Blasted*, 31.

⁶⁴ Kane, *Blasted*, 27.

⁶⁵ Kane, *Blasted*, 27-28.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁸ Diamond, "Realism's Hysteria," 28.

⁶⁹ Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (Princeton: Princeton Architectural P, 1992), 83.

⁷⁰ Kane, *Blasted*, 39.

⁷¹ Colomina, "The Split Wall," 81-82.

⁷² Ibid., 42-50.

⁷³ As I imagine this staging of Ian's rape, I think of Julie Taymor's film *Titus* and the staging of the play on which it was based: both used what Taymor called "Penny Arcade Nightmares" in counterpoint to the narrative material on stage. I think also of Phyllida Lloyd's 2003 production of *The Duchess of Malfi* at the National Theatre, London, in which Bosola's parade of madmen performed in counterpoint to a rock-video style barrage of images from the Duchess's public and private life projected on a large screen above and behind the stage. And, of course, I think of Yvonne Rainer's film work and Phelan's meditations upon it; see *Unmarked* 71-92.