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Kim Solga

The University of Western Ontario

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Body Doubles, Babel's Voices:
Katie Mitchell's *Iphigenia at Aulis* and the Theatre of Sacrifice

[T]he symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing.¹

1. Body doubles

16 July 2004: I'm a sweaty bundle of jitters in the back of the National Theatre's Lyttleton auditorium, shifting from side to side in my seat. On stage, Hattie Morahan and Kate Duchêne, playing Iphigenia and Clytemnestra in Katie Mitchell's production of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, collapse into one another, a messy tangle of clutching limbs. Iphigenia has just pleaded with her father Agamemnon (Ben Daniels) for her life, but to no avail. She knows now that she must be murdered so that his fleet may make fast for Troy, setting in motion a chain of events that will lead to the staging of one of ancient Greece's foundation myths of democratic civilization. And yet for Mitchell this is not a moment of grandiose gesture or carefully coded sorrow: Morahan and Duchêne are overwhelmed by their emotions in a manner that is rarely seen in British (or North American) stage realism. They seem unable to get up; the women who form the chorus help them struggle into chairs. Morahan says that they must sing 'a last song, we must sing it together':² they duly force a cheerful, journeying tune, through convulsive tears

¹ Jacques Lacan, 'The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis' (1956), in Anthony Wilden (trans.), *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), pp. 1-87 (p. 84).

² I saw *Iphigenia at Aulis* twice: once live, at the Lyttleton Theatre, in mid-July 2004, and again on archive video at the Royal National Theatre archives in London on 18 July

and loud gasps that punctuate the song, awkwardly, with upset that seems somehow too real, too much, for a play. They grab at each other's faces, desperate for last touches of comfort. Then, lights down: Achilles (Justin Salinger) enters, tells the assembled group that Odysseus has decreed Iphigenia must die. The only low, low light on stage filters through the huge windows that mark the upper edges of the Lyttleton proscenium, radically foreshortened for this production. Iphigenia's body, clad in her white wedding dress, stands out starkly, remarkably bright against the moment's gloom. The only other object that catches my eye is the mannequin at centre stage who wears Iphigenia's white veil, the other portion of her dress's couture; together, girl and mannequin provoke a double-take, sear onto the darkened stage the uncanny image of a future lost in the ruse that has brought Iphigenia to Aulis not for marriage, but for murder. For a tense moment, we see Iphigenia, literally, as two bodies: the ethereal, other-worldly, virgin-white mannequin body dressed for giddy anticipation, and the all-too-worldly body, in its

2006. The video I watched was recorded on 1 July 2004. Mitchell used Don Taylor's 1990 translation of the play (reprinted by Methuen in 2004 as the production text), but her cast also made a number of additions and improvisations in performance (see Maria Shevtsova's interview with Katie Mitchell, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 22:1 [2006], 3-18 [p. 14]). While I do not want to diminish the value of Taylor's excellent translation or its obvious importance to this production's overall effects, because Mitchell and her actors work with text in an interrogatory way (see my arguments below), frequently toying with or even discarding the language of the play as written, I have chosen to take all quotations from the performance I watched on archive video, cross-referenced with the 2004 Methuen text only when the audio was unclear.

shadow, of a young girl viscerally and psychically overwhelmed by panic, grief, the terror of what is to come. Iphigenia becomes a snapshot negative: her pain and fear are tangibly, forcefully unmarked³ against the white of her duty to father and country. For that tense moment we see her two bodies collide, feel them chafe hard against one another.

The moment that follows brings thunderous change. The women barricade themselves in the dilapidated building where they are lodged, their voices rising against the vast din of the army's machinery outside, in the wings. The lights come down, and then, immediately, back up – cold, white, antiseptic, institutional. Iphigenia, shouting, fighting with Clytemnestra, surprises everyone as she suddenly embraces her fate: 'I must die, and do it with dignity'. An old, 1940s-style standing microphone is brought on stage; with it, she will now orchestrate a command performance of her own sacrifice, piped over the P. A. system toward the crowd of citizens waiting just offstage. Those of us in the Lyttleton house, however, form another kind of crowd, another kind of audience to Iphigenia's sacrificial staging: we may count ourselves privy to her backstage preparations. We will not hear her perfect, unflinching self-abnegation, and we will not see her miraculous transformation into a deer on the sacrificial altar – the transformation that will supposedly confirm Iphigenia was correct to submit, was rewarded for the willing gift of her body to slaughter, was not (in fact) slaughtered at all. Instead, we will see the making of this 'miracle', the tricks of the theatre that allow a young girl's violent destruction to be passed off as a glorious gift to military adventure, made into myth as

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

anything but murder. More than that: we will see the incredible, visceral struggle of the body beneath the show and collide with the difficult question of how to encounter it, how to move beyond our comfortable empathy to a more rigorous ethics of spectatorship.

What happens to a body when circumstance demands it enact its own forgetting? How does it react, and what does it abreact? This is the story of the vulnerable, violated female body forgotten, effaced, elided – by the machinations of performance. This is the story of sacrifice’s careful staging – and of the sacrificial body’s unexpected, performative return.

Perhaps I risk stating the obvious when I say that theatre is a remarkably ambivalent medium. While many performance scholars (and I gladly include myself in these ranks) cleave whole-heartedly to theatre’s power to represent injustice and provoke social activism, students of Michel Foucault and after also know well performance’s potential to act on behalf of state power, as national governments stage-manage the appearance of their authority on a grand scale. From early English royal entry pageants to the executionary theatres of the French Revolution; from Argentina during the Dirty War to contemporary North Korea to George W. Bush proudly costumed as Commander-in-Chief on the deck of an air-craft carrier in the Persian Gulf, state performances routinely mask the loss of human life with the pompous spectacle of national good, neatly effacing massive suffering by eliding it with bodily sacrifice as a patriotic, even salvific practice.⁴

⁴ Diana Taylor has written extensively on the pageantry of Argentina’s Dirty War; see her *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997); for a look into the state pageantry

Theatre, in other words, embeds the malevolent power of what Diana Taylor calls the ‘disappearing act’: the power of performative erasure, through which personal trauma and loss may be staged as public gain and violence as an act of grace, of national or cultural salvation.⁵

In my work I am particularly interested in a specific facet of this power of performative erasure, in which women who have been or are about to become the victims of violence – even, and in fact especially, the most seemingly mundane, domestic acts of violence – are enlisted to make their suffering disappear (or appear as other than suffering), to enact its public cover-up. Their stagings reframe violence against women as the reflection (rather than inversion) of a benevolent patriarchy, masking that violence’s very source in the latter’s authority and thus protecting it from the threats misogynist violence poses to its claims of good governance. These acts of erasure have a long and difficult history: any heavily patriarchal culture relies for its perpetuation on the containment and subordination of differently sexed and gendered bodies, and thus on the performative and discursive elision of the routine violence of subordination that is the crucial stuff of its power.⁶ But the disappearing acts that frame violence against women

of contemporary North Korea, see Suk-Young Kim, ‘Springtime for Kim Il-sung in Pyongyang: City On Stage, City As Stage’, *TDR*, 51:2 (Summer 2007), 24-40.

⁵ ‘[D]oesn’t theatre allow us to deny what we see with our own eyes?’ Taylor describes this phenomenon as ‘percepticide’: the denial of what one sees that colludes with violent power (*Disappearing Acts*, pp. 125, 123).

⁶ The perils of representing violence against women in public space have garnered a good deal of recent feminist attention, especially in medieval and early modern studies. Much

are not restricted to such cultures, nor are they restricted to a distant past: we see them still in the increasingly egalitarian West, in contemporary rape trials where the burden of

work has been done on what Barbara Baines calls the “effacement” of rape in Renaissance England, while scholars such as Frances Dolan, Emily Detmer, Margaret Hunt and Laura Gowing have explored the representation of domestic violence against women through the eighteenth century. See Baines, ‘Effacing Rape in Early Modern Representation’, *ELH*, 65 (1998), 69-98; Dolan, ed., *The Taming of the Shrew: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Bedford, 1996), pp. 1-38; Detmer, ‘Civilizing Subordination: Domestic Violence and *The Taming of the Shrew*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 48:3 (1997), 273-94; Hunt, ‘Wife Beating, Domesticity and Women’s Independence in Eighteenth-Century London’, *Gender and History*, 4:1 (1992), 10-33; and Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). Both Jody Enders and I have explored the specific tangle of rape’s effacement with acts of performance; see Enders, ‘The Spectacle of the Scaffolding: Rape and the Violent Foundations of Medieval Theatre Studies,’ *Theatre Journal*, 56 (2004), 163-181, and Kim Solga, ‘Rape’s Metatheatrical Return: Rehearsing Sexual Violence Among the Early Moderns’, *Theatre Journal*, 58 (2006), 53-72. For a trans-historical perspective on rape’s evasive representations, see Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, eds, *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). Finally, Diana Taylor’s work on the spectacles of elision during the Dirty War in Argentina represents a thorough and non-Eurocentric read of the ways in which women’s bodies in violence have been bound to the performance of South American machismo. See her *Disappearing Acts*, in particularly ‘Caught in the Spectacle,’ pp. 1-27.

proof of non-consent continues to be placed on victims, and in the countless women each year who are abused at home and yet perform, on their public stages, the role of devoted, loved, and protected wife. For me, two questions emerge from the long history of performative disavowal that ghosts women's bodies in violence. First, when women are forced to enact the disappearance of their suffering, how do they accomplish it? And, second: when they do, what remains behind, lurking just beyond the edges of the act? How should we, as spectators but also as witnesses, respond both to that act and to its after-image, the dark shadow of its remainder? Or, to put this conundrum in broader terms: how may performance become the tool of violence's reckoning – specifically, of our reckoning with violence against women, and with the disappearing acts that characterize its public history – rather than simply the tool of violence's erasure?

Katie Mitchell's *Iphigenia at Aulis*, staged at the Royal National Theatre in the summer of 2004, offers me an ideal vehicle through which to explore these questions. The play embeds a dramaturgical problem: despite Euripides' trenchant critique of war and the mundane barbarities that sustain it, at play's end he asks that Iphigenia sacrifice herself, gloriously and seemingly without prompting, to that very war. Audiences reared on psychological realism are, not surprisingly, primed to ask why, to delve into Iphigenia's young mind looking for the clue to her about-face.⁷ Mitchell, however, is not

⁷ Several reviewers of Mitchell's production took some pleasure in looking for this clue. Aleks Sierz read in Morahan's portrayal 'the teenage passion of a *Big Brother* fan' looking for martyrdom (*Tribune*, 25 June 2004); Patrick Marmion saw instead a 'panting, semi-sexual idealism' in her embrace of sacrifice (*Daily Mail*, 25 June 2004). John Gross, noting the scholarly controversy that has emerged over Iphigenia's change of heart,

at all interested in the promises of discovery made by standard-issue psychological realism, and she is not interested in representing the ‘why’ of Iphigenia’s choice. Instead, she offers her audiences the ‘how’, in excruciating detail: how Iphigenia enacts the erasure of her impending violence, how the spectacle of sacrifice is built and on the burial of what precarious, vulnerable bodies it relies. Following Stanislavsky but also departing intentionally from the conventions of contemporary British and North American realist acting, Mitchell employs a technique I, like Roberta Barker,⁸ characterize as a form of ‘radical’ naturalism, a science-based method of physical action that foregrounds the visceral experience of affect rather than affect’s mimesis, both for actors and for audiences.⁹ The result is the distressing, disquieting return of the body that rushes,

called Morahan’s performance ‘the embodiment of youth intoxicated by military propaganda’ (*Sunday Telegraph*, 27 June 2004). In each case, reviewers characterize Iphigenia’s choice as a childish one, something that allows them to lay blame for her actions at the feet of the character’s youth without having to reckon with the larger ethical problem Morahan’s performance makes manifest – that of violence’s imbrication in the self-conscious theatricality of the moment.

⁸ See Roberta Barker’s discussion of Mitchell’s 1992 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *A Woman Killed With Kindness* in her *Early Modern Tragedy, Gender, and Performance, 1984-2000: The Destined Livery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

⁹ Mitchell has spoken at length in interviews about her working process, which she characterizes as a Stanislavskian technique (Gabriella Giannachi and Mary Luckhurst, eds., *On Directing: Interviews with Directors* [London: Faber, 1999], p. 97) telescoped

retches, panics, feels *too much*, and makes *us* feel too much in the process – in other words, the body banished by conventional acting technique, the body banished by violence’s carefully-constructed performative cover-up. As Hattie Morahan forces Iphigenia’s uncanny, suffering body up through the gap left by her not-quite-seamless performance of sacrifice, the violence produced by theatricalizing that body’s denial – the violence of the reality effect itself – becomes the subject of the last portion of Mitchell’s production. Watching, listening, and – as I will argue – responding physically to Iphigenia’s experience from backstage at the state’s power brokerage, we in the audience are privy both to her act of erasure and to the distress of its production. We encounter at every turn two bodies: the body sacrifice decrees, the body that gives itself up supposedly willingly, but also the living, breathing, frightened, clutching, sweating, sobbing body that sacrifice denies, *must* deny in order to stage-manage the image of patriarchal power it is meant to manifest. As Iphigenia prepares to die, she infects the body of authoritarian

through her study and observation of directors such as Anatoly Vasilyev and Lev Dodin in Russia, Poland, Lithuania and Georgia in 1989. Her process involves lengthy, intensive research and textual preparation (Shevtsova, interview with Mitchell, pp. 7-8; Helen Manfull, *In Other Words: Women Directors Speak* [Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1997], pp. 103-4), including research trips undertaken with her design team, as well as plenty of work on text and intention with her actors in the rehearsal room. Actors work both ‘outside in and inside out’, weaving their emotions through specific, repeated physical actions in a manner designed to produce particular emotional effects within the audience (Shevtsova, interview with Mitchell, pp. 10-11).

discourse, the body of performative convention, with the body it discards as both meaningless and yet profoundly threatening.¹⁰

¹⁰ While my focus in this article is narrowed to *Iphigenia at Aulis*, I want to note that the practices of Mitchell's radical naturalism I explore below are in no way restricted to her work on this production. They have become her directorial signature, and I see, in particular, extraordinary parallels between their effects in *Iphigenia* and their effects in Mitchell's acclaimed 1992 staging of Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed With Kindness* at The Other Place, starring Michael Maloney and Saskia Reeves. (I saw Mitchell's *A Woman Killed With Kindness* on archive video at the Shakespeare Centre Library in Stratford-upon-Avon on 11 July 2006.) In Heywood's play, as in Euripides', the central dramatic conceit is the destruction of a young woman made to appear as something entirely less malignant, something more akin to a gift from God or an act of grace. Anne Frankford is banished by her husband for the crime of adultery, and yet his promise to "kill" her "with kindness" resonates through the play as a covert act of torture that refuses to reveal either its punitive roots or its vicious intent. Like Iphigenia, Anne embraces her fate: she starves herself to death in penance. But, also like Iphigenia, the cost of that embrace threatens both physically and psychically to overwhelm Anne. Reeves' performance, like Morahan's twelve years later, staged both the body that embraced and the body overwhelmed: barely able to speak her praise to her husband and her Lord, Reeves' voice during her climactic deathbed scene was audibly ravaged, rasping, her frame barely able to heave itself up into a sitting position. Meanwhile, both she and Maloney wept and keened loudly and sloppily in a manner that eerily anticipated the later work of Morahan and Duchêne.

2. Babel's voices

To get to *Iphigenia's* central moment – the moment of violence's uncanny transformation, of the title character's desperate attempt to stage her own murder *sous rature* – we first need to back up a bit. The centerpiece of Mitchell's production is in fact not Iphigenia at all, who plays a minimal role until her big scene late in the show, but rather the chatty, sycophantic chorus of women from Chalcis, clad in black mid-century Dior-style dresses, their handbags, compacts, and autograph books at the ready. As numerous reviewers noted, these women were fidgety, twittering birds, 'fussy, twitchy, a constant neurotic fluster of grooming and lipstick'.¹¹ They never stopped moving, rarely stopped talking – and at several key moments they found themselves trapped in the bright glare of lights beamed, surveillance-style, onto the stage from the auditorium space. These lights always came up with an unholy, industrial clang that echoed through every body in the theatre; pinned by their eye, the women amped up their already anxious, manic energy. Splayed against the set's back wall, stuttering their lines to the audience/the lights, they fussed and dropped their handbags, attempted (inevitably failed) escape into the wings, and broke into measured foxtrots at the sound of dance music piped over the P.A. system. Reviewers' assessments of the chorus women were decidedly mixed. Approximately half found them to be an effective representation of the work's major themes, a strong reminder of how the mundane, in times of war, can become

¹¹ Victoria Segal, *Sunday Times* (27 June 2004).

vicious, discombobulating, threatening.¹² Others found that their excessive fidgeting and garbled speech marred the performance, distracting audiences with moments of misplaced comedy or farce.¹³

The chorus women's mixed reviews are no surprise to me, for they perfectly telescope the larger ethical questions I perceive at the heart of Mitchell's work in this production and elsewhere: What characterizes 'good' acting? How is it supposed to make us, in the audience, feel? What extra-theatrical purposes does it serve? Does good acting provoke a cathartic reaction? If so, who benefits? When is good acting benign, laudable, and when is it potentially malignant, a risk to performers and spectators alike? Mitchell's women of Chalcis were, from the moment they entered near the top of the show, a clump of awkward bodies press-ganged into an existing set of social and performative conventions; the pressure to act properly bore down on them physically and psychically. Under that pressure, they relentlessly messed up convention, making us painfully aware

¹² See Benedict Nightingale, *The Times* (24 June 2004), Paul Taylor, *The Independent* (25 June 2004), Susannah Clapp, *The Observer* (27 June 2004), Victoria Segal, *Sunday Times* (27 June 2004), Matt Wolf, *International Herald Tribune* (7 July 2004), and Rachel Haliburton, *The Spectator* (10 July 2004). All London-based reviews of Mitchell's *Iphigenia at Aulis* are collected in *London Theatre Record* for 17-30 June 2004, pp. 821-27. I have drawn all reviews I reference from this source.

¹³ See Patrick Marmion, *The Daily Mail* (25 June 2004), Nicholas de Jongh, *The Evening Standard* (23 June 2004), Charles Spencer, *The Daily Telegraph* (24 June 2004), John Gross, *The Sunday Telegraph* (27 June 2004), Michael Billington, *The Guardian* (23 June 2004), and John Thaxter, *What's On* (30 June 2004).

of the scripted lines within which they were unable to keep their bodies. Speaking to Maria Shevtsova about the chorus, Mitchell characterized the women's experience on stage as a kind of endless, sinister audition, a decidedly theatrical process of psychic and somatic control:

The performers were given very simple, concrete instructions to achieve the effect. They were told that the lights suddenly went on and they saw hundreds of men sitting in front of them, leaning back and smoking. The men said nothing, they just looked at the women. It frightened the women, who finally came to the conclusion that the men were expecting something of them. And, then, dance music was suddenly pumped through the PA system in the room where the women were and the women felt that they were being instructed to dance.

However, they had no partners and they were afraid, so they didn't always dance well.¹⁴

Accosted by an audience (one, rather ironically, that sounds remarkably like Brecht's idealized group of contemplative male smokers), the chorus women were constantly made aware of the need to produce a particular look and feel, a specific set of reality effects; they were constantly reminded that they were on a stage, and that their watchers had certain expectations. The ethical circumstances that surrounded their being on that stage, however – imminent war, a restless army, their ambivalent, uncertain responses to Agamemnon's cruel trick on his wife and daughter – prevented them from complying altogether willingly with performance's demands. Their conscious attempts to generate the expected reality effect (the soothing appearance of the waving crowd; dancing for the

¹⁴ Shevtsova, interview with Mitchell, p. 13.

good of the war effort) were thwarted at every turn by gut reactions, by their bodies' urges to flight, by the eruption of unconscious anxieties – low-level panic. What the chorus women produced was not conventional 'good' acting at all, but the failure of that convention in the face of the bodily and emotional needs it attempted to over-write. There was an urgent compulsion to conform, to 'act natural', coupled with a panicky need to acknowledge what was being sidelined by the demand that provoked the compulsion. There was not proper naturalism, but naturalism performed under the fear of – indeed, as a form of – physical and emotional violence.

One of the most controversial aspects of the chorus was its engagement with the play's text: Mitchell asked the chorus performers largely to disregard it. As she explains in her interview with Shevtsova, she was less interested in the meaning of the chorus' words than in the women's actions and reactions to the time, place and circumstances in which they found themselves: 'I said: "You have just got to keep talking because there are these men sitting there, looking at you, and, if you do not keep talking, they might do something really ugly to you." That, I think, is a hard acting task, particularly in British theatre, because here the text is often seen as sacred and it is a risky business not to speak it very clearly in a production'.¹⁵ Mitchell's comments (inadvertently?) link the British

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 14. Mitchell's fears were in part well founded; a number of reviewers commented unfavourably on the actors' 'blurred voices' (John Gross, *Sunday Telegraph*, 27 June 2004) or her broader liberties with the text (Gross; Carole Woddis, *The Herald*, 25 June 2004); Susannah Clapp, *The Observer*, 27 June 2004). But at least as many reviewers understood Mitchell's intentions and responded accordingly. In the *International Herald Tribune*, Matt Wolf went so far as to invoke the expected

theatre establishment's anxiety over the centrality of the speech act in stage realism ('the text is often seen as sacred'; 'You have just got to keep talking') with the possibility of real violence beneath the surface of that anxiety and its fraught expectations ('if you do not keep talking, they might do something really ugly to you').¹⁶ Viewed through this lens, the men staring down Mitchell's chorus seem to be much more than just representatives of a generic theatrical establishment: they channel the makers of early, Ibsenite stage realism, naturalism at its inception, when the principal subject of the realist stage was the woman with a past, and when any woman, should she fail to act her feminine part properly, might become suspect and fall under difficult scrutiny.¹⁷

establishment reaction – 'Aha! So Euripides wasn't good enough for Katie Mitchell, you are tempted to respond' – only to challenge it with high praise in his review for *The International Herald Tribune* (7 July 2004).

¹⁶ Earlier in her interview with Shevtsova, Mitchell makes a similar comment: 'Much mainstream theatre here is very preoccupied with words and hearing them spoken clearly. There is less interest in representing human behaviour accurately [...]. Expressions of human behaviour in theatre tend to be either exaggerated or too discreet or made up of self-conscious and artificial gestures and sounds. This type of theatre does not interest me' (pp. 8-9). It is, of course, these very 'self-conscious and artificial gestures and sounds' that the chorus women attempt and fail to make before the glare of the lights.

¹⁷ My comments here and below build on Elin Diamond's influential work on stage realism, psychoanalysis and hysteria in her 'Realism's Hysteria: Disruption in the Theater of Knowledge' (in *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* [London and New York: Routledge, 1997], pp. 3-39).

Early realism understood the stage as a public venue for the talking cure emerging from within psychoanalytic discourse at approximately the same time; its money shot was the sick or hysterical woman's all-important confession. For that woman, resolution on this stage meant saying the right words, speaking the script on spec, while carefully stage-managing her embodied reactions – it meant the all-important *performance* of her body's truth,¹⁸ a reality-effect designed to confirm her audience's knowledge of and power over her. In *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud shows his readers how completely the talking cure relies on a rigidly conformist body aligned with the truth of the spoken word. He *knows* when Elizabeth von R. has not told him the whole truth, because her body rebels: her symptoms return.

As a rule the patient was free from pain when we started work. If, then, by a question or by pressure upon her head I called up a memory, a sensation of pain would make its first appearance, and this was usually so sharp that the patient would give a start and put her hand to the painful spot. The pain that was thus aroused would persist so long as she was under the influence of the memory; it would reach its climax when she was in the act of telling me the essential and decisive part of what she had to communicate, and with the last word of this it would disappear. I came in time to use such pains as a compass to guide me; if she stopped talking but admitted that she still had a pain, I knew that she had not told me everything, and insisted on her continuing her story till the pain had been talked away.¹⁹

¹⁸ Diamond, 'Realism's Hysteria', p. 16.

¹⁹ Quoted in Diamond, *ibid.*

The pain talked away: Freud's method, however potentially curative, works to erase the language, the evidence, of Elizabeth's body. He reads that language, but only in order to eradicate it; finally, her words will speak the truth he desires, making her body's speech redundant (and proving *his* speech all-powerful). How crucial, and yet finally how forgettable, is Elizabeth's body in Freud's passage: her pain makes his analysis possible, mimes his expectations – and then it simply goes 'away'.

Or does it? Peggy Phelan offers a remarkable reading of the mis-placement of the body in *Studies in Hysteria*,²⁰ and reminds me that before there was a talking cure, there was a physical cure, a clinical commitment to somatic experience within the psychoanalytic apparatus that precedes Freud's obsession with the curative potential of the 'right' language. Rather than placing himself at a physical and emotional distance from his patient, the analyst would strive to make an embodied connection with that patient, to touch as well as read that patient's pathology. For Phelan, the talking cure that disavows its debt to and inescapable connection with the bodies of its subjects will find it cannot compass the flesh it pretends to master with speech;²¹ her example is Josef Breuer's patient, Anna O. Once her treatment had ended, Anna apparently defied her analyst by generating an hysterical pregnancy that implicated him, and specifically his

²⁰ Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 44-72.

²¹ Like Phelan, Diamond theorizes a female body that may sign on stage 'before' the referent, disrupting both naturalism's and psychoanalysis' claims to compass the complexities of the female subject within their individual truth-telling (truth-making) discourses. See 'Realism's Hysteria'.

sexualized body, in their work together.²² Her body erupted, manic, from within the comfortable frame of his analysis, leaving residual traces of his speech on, and in, her flesh.

This is exactly the eruption, the defiance – of profane body into sacred text; of acting body into watching body; of proper, contained speech by the complex psychosomatic experiences of brain and flesh – accomplished by Katie Mitchell’s radical naturalism. Her performers disrupt the stage frame by producing not too little realism, but much too much: not one seamless performance body, readable through the consistent arc of its spoken and body languages, but the body psychological realism anticipates alongside the bodily affects and experiences it suppresses, discards, deems unassimilatable or mimetically unconvincing.²³ This is not a Brechtian practice –

²² Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, pp. 64-7. Phelan notes that aspects of this story may be apocryphal. Perhaps truth, perhaps fiction, its resistance to the analyst’s (or the scholar’s) certitude only reinforces Phelan’s argument: the analysand’s body may not be so easily autopsied by the analyst’s sure speech and exacting gaze.

²³ I realize that my commentary here risks generalizing a generic ‘realism’ based on the work of the early naturalists. I do not wish to lump all realisms under this form, but my comments also seek to imply a key link between late nineteenth-century naturalism and the psychological realist practices that continue to dominate mainstage performance in England and North America. We remain surprisingly invested in the kinds of narratives (the secret and its discovery; the character with an awkward past) pioneered by the early realists, and we continue to give pride of place to the latter as masters of theatrical form and as theatrical moneymakers – I think of the regularity with which Ibsen and Chekhov

Mitchell's actors never step out of character; quite the contrary²⁴ – although it holds the same disruptive, de-realizing potential as Brecht's best work does. Rather, following Elin Diamond, I would characterize Mitchell's radical naturalism as a form of realism's hysteria. She materializes her text's controlling discourses, renders language physical – at turns gorgeous and brutal. She pulls words across her performers' bodies, marks those bodies with language's most violent traces, producing the body of discourse (the body discourse anticipates, demands) as a symptom rather than a sign of cure. Pressing psychological realism to its limit, Mitchell's actors rush manically about the stage, twitter and trip, worry their props, gasp and sob to the point of retching, as the conforming body expected by naturalist mimesis collides with the affective and physical disavowals that guarantee that body's adherence to a rigorously unitary performance ethos. Hers are

are programmed, their popularity in drama schools, and of event stages dedicated to the work of the period such as the popular Shaw Festival at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Meanwhile, some of the most innovative non-realist performance of the last few years has picked up on our studious fascination with fin-de-siècle forms. See Kim Solga, 'Blasted's Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible', *Modern Drama*, 50:3 (2007), 346-74.

²⁴ For a Brecht-influenced analysis of some of Mitchell's earlier work, see Barbara Hodgdon, 'Making it New: Katie Mitchell Refashions Shakespeare-History', in Marianne Novy (ed.), *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance* (New York: St Martin's, 1999), pp. 13-35. Mitchell spoke at length with Maria Shevtsova about the tools she provides for her actors to help them stay in character throughout a performance, both backstage and onstage (interview, 12).

performances that literally haunt: ghosts emerge even as the actors attempt to play their characters 'straight'.

3. Precarious speech

When Hattie Morahan's Iphigenia finally steps up to the microphone under the bright, expectant lights that are the chorus women's plague, ready to put on her show of sacrifice, her voice seems to pull free from her tiny, vulnerable frame. It bounces around the Lyttleton auditorium once, twice, three times, shuddering me with its reverberant echo. Even as Iphigenia prepares at last to speak her father's language, it is that very language (of murder's performative erasure, of brutal violence acted, naturally, as willing sacrifice) that suddenly resonates, haunts, acquires a queer materiality. Her voice, amplified by the microphone, is too loud; it is not especially natural. It sounds mediated, technologized, imposed; meanwhile, Iphigenia herself oscillates between panicked uncertainty and sure-footed delivery, and we hear the sound of both in her strangely doubled, tripled, vocal echoes. Katie Mitchell, as I have argued, resists mainstream British realism's preference for properly measured speech over the awkward, excessive sounds of aching, unruly bodies in crisis; *Iphigenia at Aulis* responds by amplifying and distorting that measured speech at the moment when its reality effects count the most, the moment when theatre is engaged to make over murder. Speaking of the work of Griselda Gambaro, Diana Taylor asks: 'how to stage "blinding" onstage?'²⁵ Mitchell responds: by translating the act of blinding into another sensory register, one in which blinding becomes perceptible, tangible, as a violent act of *representation*. Iphigenia's microphone

²⁵ Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, p. 125.

– quite despite her own best efforts – mutates the language of violence as gift, as glory, as national sacrifice, into precarious speech; in the powerful yet hollow reverb of her voice we hear the echo of her body in the process of its going missing.

Iphigenia's sacrificial performance before the microphone begins with the same kind of awkward, jumbled jumpiness that characterizes much of the rest of the physical movement in this production. Morahan fumbles to turn on the mike while every other actor on stage seems wired to explode. She struggles, visibly and audibly, to invent her 'heroic' speech on the fly; she alternately grips and lets go of the microphone's stand, pressing her hands to her face and stammering 'uh's into the air. Iphigenia's fumbling gestures embody the 'willing' sacrifice as a performative figment, demonstrating the extreme pressure violence's rhetorical disappearance exerts on the body that must disown the suffering it feels. In Iphigenia's panic, her strain to make the speech of a lifetime despite her body's resistance to the script of sacrifice, I see and hear the devastating loss – of life, of future, of family – her words work to erase. 'I dedicate my body as a gift for Greece': each word is carefully intoned, Morahan leaning into the mouthpiece for good measure. 'Take me, sacrifice me, and then to Troy. Plunder the whole city, and when you leave it leave a ruin. That will be my memorial'. She steps back, momentarily unable to continue; she takes her hands off the microphone stand, which she has been clutching for support, and pushes the heels of her palms hard into her eyes. I watch her strain for both language and the tongue to speak it; at several moments, she breaks down, gasping and crying, even as she channels the voice of the state through her body. She instructs her mother not to weep as she claims 'I am the lucky one', but these words stick and she is overcome. She tries not to cry into the mouthpiece. As she declares her final willingness

– ‘this blood of mine will cancel the gods’ decree, and the ships will put to sea’ – she gulps the last word, weeps, falls away, then returns to the mike, always conscious to ensure that her convulsing head is below its own. Greece must not hear these forbidden sounds.

Mitchell’s technique in this scene is one of selective amplification: Iphigenia’s grand speech resonates through the walls and to the waiting crowd, boosted by the microphone’s power, while those in her immediate space (including the auditorium audience) also hear and see her bodily grief on a more intimate scale, hear and see it collide with the microphone’s grand echo. The contrast is revelatory. Iphigenia’s body seems pulled from itself, pulled apart, by language given a dimension of physical force from the microphone’s powerful amperage; her words become, literally, a violent and violating speech act meant to negate *in utero* the violating impact of the other, far more brutal event on the horizon. Hers is plainly not a heartfelt speech; it is what they want to hear, what needs to be said, crafted under what may look for many audience members like uncomfortably familiar, oddly ‘real’ extremes of duress. It is also a speech crafted visibly for and through the powers that surround and circumscribe this young girl: her microphone is *their* tool, their idol, the thing that is supposed to make the state’s voice (the voices of Agamemnon, Menelaus, Odysseus, Achilles) seem remarkable, natural, unbreachable. Thus must her body match now the dimensions of its mimetic frame, must her small voice, amplified a thousand-fold, mirror and confirm the force of its own. But, like the chorus women’s foxtrotting bodies of earlier scenes, neither Iphigenia’s voice nor her body can conform seamlessly to the performance convention that ensnares her at this moment; backstage, we see through her manic rushing and momentary breakdowns

cracks in the image of authority she projects, hear through her heaving sobs, carefully hidden from the microphone's mouthpiece, the trauma masked by words of false comfort.

Mitchell's selective amplification works to produce troubling contrasts between Iphigenia's two bodies – between the suffering body and the state body, the body of discipline and discourse and the body in contraband mourning – but it also works to generate uncanny collisions between the body Iphigenia struggles to hide and the bodies of her spectators, seemingly ensconced at a safe distance from the overwhelming grief on stage. These collisions are most powerfully focused in the unexpected, largely accidental moments of crossover between the scene's auditory zones, when Morahan's stammering or crying is briefly picked up by the microphone and the sounds of her pain and uncertainty fall over the auditorium in waves, reverberating in each of our watching bodies with the visceral force of amplified sound. For a moment, whether we wish it or resist it, find it harmless or upsetting, we embody the ghost of Iphigenia's own grieving, the affect Morahan desperately attempts to sign away but which returns to the scene, endlessly, as the unshakeable sensation of loss. Iphigenia asks the chorus women to sing into the microphone; they offer 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. Their weeping mixes openly with the melody as both are fed through the amplifier, producing a striking vocal dissonance I feel in my gut as much as in my brain, in that way bass-inflected sound has of shuddering the abdomen. 'Theatrical convention allows for splitting of mind from body, enabling the audience to respond either emotionally or intellectually to the action it sees on stage without responding physically,' writes Taylor.²⁶ Once more resisting, refusing, convention, Mitchell implicates me, my body, and its history in this story,

²⁶ Ibid.

insisting that a just response to Iphigenia's experience must be more than cognitive, and far from simply binary.

4. Acts of witness

The sometimes broken, sometimes doubled voice Mitchell echoes through Iphigenia's microphone is not (or not just) the voice of earlier feminists who have raised the radical potential of aurality against the tight strictures governing visual representations of the female body. Rather, it is the voice Judith Butler attributes to what Emmanuel Levinas calls the 'face': word and image confounded, scrambled by one another, leaving spectators bereft of the usual tools of performative encounter. In her *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler reads the face not as human, visual icon of profound familiarity, but rather as a kind of proto-speech, 'a scene of agonized vocalization'²⁷ that disrupts any claims to the familiar, the sense of the same, we might seek in another's face. Levinas' face represents the sacrificial script reversed: not flesh made into (W)ord, body forced to conform to the shape of a comforting language, but rather word made flesh, text interrupted and mutated by the sudden tangibility, undeniability, of embodied suffering. The face signs the Christian prohibition against murder – 'thou shalt not kill' – and yet it may not be assimilated seamlessly into God's Word (into the words of any god) for it speaks in excess of Symbolic language, speaks 'an agony, an injurability, at the same time that it bespeaks a divine prohibition against killing'.²⁸ The face, in other words, manifests the power of violence alongside the force of its too-easily-elided

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 133.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

consequences (agony, injurability), articulating ‘the wordless vocalization of suffering that marks the limits of linguistic translation’ in the formula governing violence’s performative erasure. ‘The face, if we are to put words to its meaning, will be that for which no words really work’, Butler writes; ‘[it] seems to be a kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense, the sonorous substratum of vocalization that precedes and limits the delivery of any semantic sense’.²⁹ The face, finally, is the sound of human suffering in the act of begging a witness, staged in front of (in the face of?) the equally ardent and powerful call to translate that suffering into some other kind of sign. It is the voice not *before* language but *beneath* it, expelled by it, the agonized sounds language disavows in order to constitute itself as text, as the mark of civilization. The face is thus also, and most importantly, a call to ethics,³⁰ a call for me to witness the limit of my power to represent the experience of an other; it provokes instead a different kind of encounter, one that challenges the very way in which I come to know that other, and know it from myself.

At the microphone, Iphigenia becomes this face. When the mike picks up her and the other women’s unadorned sounds of agony alongside the sacrificial script of glory and salvation (‘My sacrifice brings salvation to the Greeks, and victory’, Iphigenia tells the crowd; she rushes away from the mike, frantic, as the chorus women continue to cry and sing), we see, hear *and* feel the sounds that script expels, ‘the sound of language evacuating its sense’; it moves us toward a visceral encounter with Iphigenia’s experience that the normative regulations governing her violence’s performative erasure cannot

²⁹ Ibid., p. 134.

³⁰ Ibid.

contain, anticipate, or express. Mitchell's radical naturalism offers in these uncanny sound-images – in their power to enter our bodies, change momentarily our somatic response to the performance – much more than realism's hysterical body-double, come to spook the boards of mainstream British theatre. In Iphigenia's climactic scene I read no less than Mitchell's ethics of spectatorship, her challenge to the ways in which we have been schooled to encounter, politely, the embodied stories of our stage.

At a roundtable discussion on empathy, activism, and performance at the 2007 ATHE conference in New Orleans,³¹ Sonja Arsham Kuftinec argued that we continue to understand 'empathy' from within a largely enlightenment imaginary characterized by clear distinctions between inside and outside; within this framework the objects of our empathy will always exist somehow beyond the bounds of citizenship, in a space of undifferentiated otherness clearly detached from ourselves. This form of empathy is conventionally cathartic; it is a substitute for ethical engagement, one that reaffirms the centrality of he or she who experiences suffering from a distance while further marginalizing empathy's recipients, the bodies in true crisis. In place of this bankrupt, self-serving version, Kuftinec called for an empathy that might allow audiences to feel 'with' rather than 'for' the other, producing an engagement that is simultaneously

³¹ 'Regenerating Praxis: Roundtable on Empathy, Activism, and Performance in Times of Crisis' at the ATHE 2007 Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA, 26-29 July 2007. This panel featured Rhonda Blair, Gay Gibson Cima, John Fletcher, Anne-Liese Juge-Fox, Linda Kintz, and Sonja Arsham Kuftinec, and took place on Friday, 27 July in the Rhythms ballroom at the Sheraton New Orleans. All quotations from Kuftinec and Kintz in this paragraph are taken from my personal notes from the event.

affective and intellectual. Linda Kintz responded to Kuftinec's call with a return to Brecht and to the gap or 'pause' that motors all his theatre theory: the moment when character, performer and spectator are each held in suspension, as individuals, before actor 'becomes' character and spectator is pulled into the stage world. In that pause, Kintz argued, 'I' am not yet 'you', but I am also not quite myself, the self I am most comfortable imagining *as* myself. We all stand apart from our roles, and I as spectator, if only for a moment, stand outside or beside myself, uncertain of my ground. Brecht, of course, never sought to banish emotion from the stage; his *Verfremdungseffekt* is above all a process of defamiliarizing the kinds of emotional attachments to which fin-de-siècle stage realism had become accustomed. Kintz glosses Brecht for twenty-first century performance by suggesting that the power to de-realize emotion in performance need not yield only the clichéd, contemplative smoking spectator; it may also generate the opposite, a profound spectatorial 'undoing'.

I noted above that Mitchell is no Brechtian, but her performance ethic takes up what Kintz characterizes as Brecht's call to unsettle the watching body, to politicize not just realism's commitment to a certain kind of (contained) affect but also our spectatorial attachment to particular brands of stage emotion, as well as our belief in what stage emotion is meant to accomplish (and for whom). Mitchell's actors work not to make us feel for them, but to make us feel alongside them, to feel *what they are doing*: as they flutter, babble, never stop moving, I feel my heart rate increase, my stomach turn from

the motion sickness.³² Their actions trouble my watching with uncertain, manic feelings that I cannot quite locate, but also cannot eradicate: as Iphigenia races between her mother, the other women, the mannequin and her microphone, between her self in pain and her self in performance, her voice oscillating between blubbering cries and a disquieting, disembodied echo, I can also find no place to rest my watching, no place for a stable encounter with her experience. I twist and fidget in my seat, cycle through my own low-level psychosomatic reactions to the terror she projects. This is not – or not just – what we might colloquially call ‘sympathy pains’, or more complexly ‘neuroempathy’;³³ Morahan’s performance compels me to project something of her trauma onto my body, but it also prevents me from feeling like myself, from feeling in the usual way at a play. It throws the very apparatus of contained, distanced audience feeling into disarray.³⁴ This is ‘naturalism’ not as acting convention but as audience

³² ‘All the work on the physicality of emotions was designed so that the emotion targeted would occur in the audience. [...] The actors were all working to unsettle you, and they were primarily doing that physically’ (Shevtsova, interview with Mitchell, 10-11).

³³ Rhonda Blair spoke about empathy’s roots in neuroscience during the ATHE roundtable I cite above. She noted that neuroempathy is characterized by a shared mental representation between self and other, a mirroring of the body in empathy that represents a simultaneously physical and emotional response to another body in crisis. Our responses in such situations are not necessarily conscious, and are tied directly to how we imagine the other’s pain in relation to our own.

³⁴ As I trace my own responses to *Iphigenia at Aulis* I am keenly aware that I cannot claim to speak for any other spectator; I offer my entirely subjective reactions to the

provocation, a somatic response that generates in turn an ethical choice: as Iphigenia's performance at the microphone grows less and less convincing, it pushes me to move beyond traditional viewing modes and toward what Kelly Oliver calls witnessing 'beyond recognition'.³⁵

To witness beyond recognition is to understand the experience of the other as both profoundly connected to our own, and yet quite beyond the boundaries of our immediate

production not as definitive, but as one possible response alongside what I believe to be its profound potential. Moreover, I am aware that the nature of the auditorium in which this production was staged no doubt had an important effect on how Mitchell's actors' work might have been received by a gamut of spectators. While one could easily argue that the grand and formal qualities of the National Theatre's Lyttleton auditorium would detract from the intimate suffering on stage, encouraging distanced watching despite the manic fluster of the characters, I suspect the opposite. The voice emanating from Iphigenia's microphone, for example, resonated with particular power around such a huge space, and the sonorous clangs of the various machinery employed during the production – to, for example, slam doors shut or bring the safety curtain down – were made literally palpable as a result of their own vast echoes against the high walls. If anything, I found the collision of the large, formal, proscenium space and Iphigenia's troubled embodiment to add to, rather than to limit, the disorienting effects Mitchell sought to produce. My thanks to Caridad Svich for prompting me to think more about the Lyttleton space itself in relation to my argument.

³⁵ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

understanding. The witness beyond recognition is not an eyewitness; rather, he or she distrusts the evidence of sight and looks for other ways, other sensory, affective, and intellectual avenues, to bear witness to what is *not* immediately visible or recognizable, to what lies, as Diana Taylor might say, beyond the act of blinding, the disappearing act. When we spectate, Roger Simon argues, we engage actively with what we see and hear, but we also work, just as actively, to manage our experience of the other's story at a safe distance from ourselves (what Kufinec might call an enlightenment practice of empathy). Simon points out that there is nothing wrong with this form of spectatorship; it is an essential human practice that makes most intersubjective encounter possible. But he also notes that spectatorship alone can never produce a genuinely ethical encounter, an encounter with the other *as* other that is the province of the witness, because it refuses to place the spectator him or herself in a position of emotional or epistemological vulnerability, of 'undoing'. For Simon, as for Linda Kintz, witness is both an act of embodiment and an act of dis-embodiment: as a witness I become implicated in the story of the other, become 'obligated' by his or her testimony,³⁶ while also allowing myself to become profoundly disturbed, disarticulated, by the foreign contours of that story. Witnessing makes us question who we are, what we think we know, and how we know it; it 'is neither a metaphor for simply being emotionally moved by another's story nor a traumatic repetition', but 'signals a recognition of an encounter with difficult knowledge

³⁶ Roger Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 92.

[...] that which brings me more than I can contain'.³⁷ The witness to trauma, as Dori Laub puts it, must also be prepared to be 'a witness to himself [sic]'.³⁸

How does Katie Mitchell, finally, show us to ourselves, demand a reconfiguration of our knowledge of this girl Iphigenia, her violence, its loss? Her speeches over (her time run out), Iphigenia is hauled bodily offstage. 'Not one tear, mother!' Morahan shouts, frantic, as she is pulled away; left behind, Clytemnestra crumbles, shrieking and sobbing, to the floor as the door clangs shut. That clang is louder than life; like so much else here it has an uncanny voice, and as that voice booms through the auditorium it makes once more manifest the haunting, echoing sounds of loss that have littered the preceding scene. Then, the door comes down; loud, loud machine noises fill the entire space. The ceiling rains in; the chorus women run away. Iphigenia is murdered – and the house goes, literally, to pieces.

An old man enters to tell Clytemnestra of Iphigenia's miracle transformation on the altar, but by now the damage is done. The soothing promise of salvation for mother, daughter, and for Greece he brings (and which Achilles echoes, as he tells Clytemnestra to 'put away' her grief and anger against her husband) cannot erase the physical force with which Mitchell has performed Iphigenia's final erasure, translated it not into signs, into text, but into a kind of architectural destruction, an almost earthquake-like Armageddon. We do not see either the violence of sacrifice or sacrifice's supposed conversion into the body/text of myth; instead, we hear in our assaulted ears and feel in our jolted frames the resonance of suffering and terror that cannot simply be talked away,

³⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁸ Quoted in Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, p. 27.

easily turned to comfort, even as the old messenger attempts once more, futilely, to do just that. For Roger Simon, the ‘touch of the past’ that moves the witness is world-shaking in this very way; it is a remembrance that is ‘always incomplete’,³⁹ a story for which we don’t quite have a proof, impelling us ‘into a confrontation and reckoning not only with stories of the past but also with ourselves as we *are* (historically, existentially, socially) in the present’.⁴⁰ To act as Iphigenia’s witness is to ask the question: how does what I have just seen, or what I have just *failed* to see, change the way I will look from now on? Will I remember Iphigenia as the echo of an old man’s fond language? As the echo of her own choking narrative of sacrifice? Or will I remember her by the force of her ravaged sounds echoing through my body, by the shock of the blasts that shook my seat, brought a building down? In whose reality effects – in whose ‘reality’ – will I invest my faith, and why?

This is what performance, at its best, can do for the women who are the victims of its disappearing acts. It can stage the call to witness that ghosts all spectatorship, and demand of an audience these crucial choices: how will I choose to see and hear? What risks, what encounters with body, with affect, will I permit myself, and from what will I turn away? How will I let this scene change me, change what I expect from the theatre? This kind of performance – call it a feminist performance of violence – does not ask how it might make the experience of violence’s loss *seem* real on stage. Rather, it asks Taylor’s question: how stage a blinding? When a woman’s body in violence, suffering, panic and fear promises to go so spectacularly missing – as does Iphigenia’s here – this

³⁹ Simon, *The Touch of the Past*, p. 101.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

rebel transformation returns not just that body but the chilling echo of its absence to the scene of representation, and asks us to engage with the sounds, the sensations, of loss.