

**TITLE: Adapting musicology's use of affect theories to contemporary theatre-making: directing Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life***

The event onstage is brought about by language. But the language itself doesn't need to be understood. The truth of the scene is elsewhere.  
(Crimp in Sierz, 2006: 99)

In this assertion, playwright Martin Crimp makes clear that his use of language is only partially to do with the way it signifies lexically; in performance, language is sound - concrete and material - which works upon the embodied spectator in a range of ways. This is not a new idea; theatre phenomenologists such as Bert States (1985) and Stanton B Garner (1994), for example, have usefully theorised the corporeality of spoken language and Hans-Thies Lehmann notes the 'autonomization of the signifier' in 'postdramatic theatre', where the material qualities of signifiers (in this case words) equal their signifying potential (2006:64). However, drawing on affect theories and, in particular, some of the various ways that they have been used in musicology, offers some new insights into affect as compositional element and tool. While theatre and performance studies have engaged with affect over the last decade, for example in the work of José Esteban Muñoz (2000), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Jill Dolan (2001; 2005), James Thompson (2009) and Fintan Walsh (2009), I would like in this article to focus on two specific approaches to affect in performance that come from critical interpretations of affect at work in music.<sup>1</sup> At its most basic, musicology is a very broad term encompassing 'all study of music other than that directed to proficiency in performance or composition' (Kennedy, 1996: 502). Clearly, this conveys none of the intricacies and complexities of the vast range of concepts and approaches used under the term and the debates about its methodologies. As a non-specialist in music, or musicology, I will not enter into those debates here but argue, rather, that there are examples of musicological analysis that can be readily adapted to

performance composition and which offer strategies for dealing with contemporary dramaturgies.

Thus, in the article, one strategy I'll 'adapt' is David Epstein's idea of 'shaping affect' in performance (1995). Clearly, this belongs to the process of interpretation at the stage of preparation and rehearsal. I take the other strategy, Jeremy Gilbert's 'affective analysis' (2004), which belongs predominantly at the stage of assessing the way a work of art – in this case music – has made both a significant and affective impact on someone experiencing it. As a theatre director, I'm particularly interested in thinking through affect as a practical, compositional tool in rehearsal, so I've adapted this further to what I have called an 'affective approach', implying a process in which an ongoing reflection and analysis feeds back into the work on the rehearsal room floor. I suggest that we lack a focus on affect in theatre studies that mirrors a similar absence that Gilbert, amongst others, argues in terms of cultural studies in general. Epstein notes this absence (in musicology) stemming from affect's incompatibility with language, the tool through which we generally do our analysis. Taking Gilbert and Epstein's ideas, the article applies them to my own process of directing Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (Queen's University Belfast, 2009), to argue that Crimp intricately structures a dramaturgy of affect, which is designed to work on the audience in a particular way and which challenges directors to find a way of 'shaping affect' in performance. Looking at specific examples of dramaturgical decisions in the performance-making process, I suggest that these strategies of affective shaping and analysis open up new ways to approach the performance 'event' Crimp envisages. From a practitioner's perspective, Crimp sets up two key challenges for directors: how to locate what actually *is* the 'truth' of a scene that is brought about by language, but is not reliant on the signifying qualities of it, and how to structure

this linguistic *event* in performance. In the end, I acknowledge that affect is rather fragile in performance, but argue that both its fragility and incompatibility with language do not undermine its crucial relationship with meaning and, ultimately political investment. A critical and theoretical failure to find a way to articulate the impact of affect in performance has resulted in plays such as *Attempts* being maligned as ‘post-political’ (Hamidi-Kim, 2008), and, thus, the article urges an aesthetic and political reimagining of these new dramaturgies.

### **An ‘affective analysis’ and ‘shaping affect’**

Not dealing with affect is more comfortable than dealing with it inadequately. We deal thereby with but half an artistic loaf, however; what we ignore is critical to the artistic process. Lying behind all judgements which pertain to performance, to the shaping of artistic concepts, are criteria of ‘rightness’ whose roots are intuitive, essentially affective – seemingly, though not definitively beyond the grasp of discourse and reason.

(Epstein, 1995: 127)

Two theatre practitioner-theorists who do deal with this ‘half of the artistic loaf’ and have formulated ways of thinking about it are Eugenio Barba and, perhaps most successfully, Anne Bogart. Barba posits an ‘organic dramaturgy’ that sits alongside a ‘narrative dramaturgy’ and ‘which is the composition of the rhythms and dynamisms affecting the spectators on a nervous, sensorial and sensual level’ (2000:60). Bogart goes further in terms of a practical methodology, by focusing on *composition* through breaking down performance into elements – ‘Viewpoints’ – and creating a dramaturgy based on an arrangement of these elements that is not merely in the service of explicating the spoken text (Bogart and Landau, 2005). Neither, however, utilises a vocabulary or concepts of affect<sup>ii</sup> which, I suggest, offer a new and useful perspective to add to theatre and performance methodologies, not least because of their potential to elucidate the relationship between affect and (political)

meaning.

Crimp's dramaturgy, particularly in *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) and his later trilogy of short plays, *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), works very differently to a dramaturgy based on the dramatic staples of character or causal plot development, and the plays have consequently, unsurprisingly, been described as 'postdramatic' (Barnett, 2008; Jürs-Munby 2006). Whilst Lehmann's concept is useful, particularly for identifying 'aspects' of performance at work in theatre resistant to traditional, hermeneutic critical methodologies (2006:145–174), Epstein and Gilbert's use of affect offers both a critical framework and a practical way of thinking about directing this work. Affect theories have emerged across the range of visual and performing arts over the last fifteen years as a way, albeit contested (Hemmings, 2005), of analysing the impact of art and culture that is not based solely on the hermeneutic pursuit of unearthing 'meaning.' Gilbert, who is a cultural theorist who writes on music, suggests that cultural studies' reliance on seeking 'meaning' has resulted in the neglect of the experiential and aesthetic qualities of the art event. As he puts it: 'cultural studies is always about *what things mean*. Like Tolkien's elves, cultural studies makes everything – even the trees – speak' (2004). He argues that this focus on meaning, through the Western philosophical tradition of splitting mind and body and privileging the former, and the hegemony of Saussurean semiotics in critical theory, has come at the expense of the development of an analytical framework that can address both the *specific*, experiential qualities of cultural output and theorise the social and political implications of that experience. He draws on Deleuze and philosopher Brian Massumi to propose in response an 'affective analysis', dealing with both signifying and asignifying qualities of the aesthetic object. Like States' 'binocular approach,' which marries the semiotic and phenomenological in theatre

analysis (1985), this approach shifts attention to the specific, embodied experience of the spectator/ listener, without losing sight of the relationship of this experience to an ultimate meaning. The key way that Gilbert does this is to look at the affective specificity of the material qualities of art, in this case, music. Using the example of ‘militant black nationalists Public Enemy’, he explains the appeal of the band to a suburban white youth, who seemed to completely ignore their political lyrics, through the affective specificity of the music itself:

The affective qualities of Public Enemy’s music were never that different from those of the heavy rock which was the most popular form with this audience: loud, fast, aggressive, offering the male participant the experience of exciting empowerment... It was the speed and power – the affective specificity – of the music. (Gilbert, 2004)

Building from Lawrence Grossberg’s writing on affect and rock culture, and Richard Dyer’s writing on disco, Gilbert’s focus is on the ‘corporeal nature of musical experience’. He suggests, further, that ‘this is an observation with significance way beyond the study of music’ (ibid.). As he notes in relation to speech, ‘the tone of the speaking voice determines responses to it more surely and immediately than does the content of the words spoken’. This has potential application, then, to a theatre where the event is ‘brought about by language’ but not necessarily reliant on the ‘meaning’ of the words.<sup>iii</sup>

Epstein, as his comment above suggests, also bewails the lack of focus on affect, arguing that it has primarily been neglected not because of its ‘ostensible imprecision as phenomenon, but its incompatibility with language’ (1995:130). He proposes that analysing the relationship between *structure* and affect offers a way to approach the neglected experiential part of the performance equation. Without specifically referencing Deleuze, his argument echoes Deleuze’s understanding of *composition* rather than narrative content being directly related to the affective power

of an image. Speaking of cinematic power to produce a ‘shock to thought’ using the example of violence, Deleuze argues:

When the violence is no longer that of the image and its vibrations but that of the represented, we move into a blood-red arbitrariness. When grandeur is no longer that of the composition, but a pure and simple inflation of the represented, there is no cerebral stimulation or birth of thought. (cited Gormley, 2005:18)

Epstein builds on this using neurophysiology to identify structure and affect as ‘two sides of the same coin’ (128). Dealing with the affective potential of music, he proposes that:

More important than describing affect is to seek the mechanisms by which it is structured. Those mechanisms, perceived and understood, offer the key to the shaping of affect, indeed its modulation as part of the performing process... As we shape structures, modulating the intensities that demarcate them, we likewise shape affect. And shaping, as every musician knows, is the essence of interpretative performance (1995:130).

Epstein’s concept of ‘shaping affect’ has proved invaluable for me as a director in addressing both Crimp’s structure and the musicality that is a major compositional feature in his work.

### **Crimp: shaping a dramaturgy of affect.**

As with Sarah Kane, who experimented with the possibility of using language for its ‘rhythm rather than its meaning’ (Saunders 2002:129), musicality is embedded in Crimp’s writing. Crimp is an accomplished and knowledgeable musician who automatically uses a vocabulary of musical terminology in his discussion of his own work. He says that in the early days he regarded his text as a ‘musical score’, and assumed actors could just ‘get on with it’. However,

[w]ith a musical score, if it says *forte* and someone is playing *piano*, it’s easy to correct, but acting is more complicated, and the more experienced you get,

the more you realise that perhaps *piano* might be a better choice than *forte*.  
(Crimp in Sierz, 2006:87)

A clue to Crimp's approach to structure and the concrete value of language as sound is evident in his description of his 'favourite thing' in his 1993 play *The Treatment* as 'the scene with the three overlapping conversations'. Already complex structurally, he adds:

And I particularly enjoy it when I hear it in a foreign language. It's like music. It's tremendous... just for a moment not to be able to hear individual conversations, but just this mixture of conversations. (Ibid., 99).

Crimp here describes the joy of being released in the theatre from the signifying value or referential task of words. This is very reminiscent of how Gertrude Stein seemingly found a way to enjoy being in the theatre: seeing Sarah Bernhardt perform in French, Stein seems to have stumbled accidentally on a realisation that 'the most satisfactory theatre experience for her was one in which language was no more nor less expressive than gesture and in which experiencing the performance provided more pleasure than understanding the play' (Bowers 2002:124). For Stein, therefore, as for Crimp in the example above, the *experience* of the foreign, non-signifying (for those who do not know the vocabulary or syntax) language points the way to the idea of a theatre that 'created a thing in itself and it existed in and for itself' (ibid.). As Epstein would assert, however, it also points to structure: in order to produce this 'music'-like moment – not about meaning but about affect – Crimp has clearly *structured* it in a particular way, using 'three overlapping conversations'. In both *Attempts* and *Fewer Emergencies* Crimp uses many specific linguistic and structural devices to create this 'event' even in a familiar language: use of simultaneous strands of dialogue and polyglossia; the tightly constructed use of rhythm through dashes and slashes in the text – accelerating and slowing down to build tension; the use of capital letters, not

necessarily implying an increase in volume, but implying some dynamic shift; structural symmetry; thematic motifs, which recur in much the same way as in music; the actual use of music and song, for example the ‘Twelve-bar Delivery Blues’ in ‘Face to the Wall’ or the little asignifying scat song at the end of ‘Fewer Emergencies’: ‘Doo doo-ba-dee doo doo doo ba-doo... (2005: 49); scenes, or ‘scenarios’, in *Attempts* that are written in verse and can be turned into song or performed in a range of ways that maximise the rhythm and rhyme of the language. In many of these devices words function less as signifiers than as concrete sonic material.

This compositional specificity works in a different way from realist dialogue, which is inherently focused on the linear progression of language to create sentences and responses. Beyond training in speaking verse – particularly Shakespearean – Western theatre training, arguably, focuses a great deal on the playing of realist, contemporary dialogue and finding a psychologically coherent approach to character enactment; in general, the issue of using the materiality of language to produce an ‘event’ or ‘experience’ is marginalised in favour of finding meaning or motivation in choice of words and actions. It is in this precise area that theatre, and theatre studies, has much to gain from the adoption, or adaptation, of musicology’s use of affect theories, both theoretically and in practice. Crimp’s performance ‘event’ ‘brought about by language’ is at the heart of *Attempts on her Life*, and demands of the director an approach that identifies how Crimp has compositionally structured the language as sonic ‘event’ and how this might guide the overall affective shaping of the performance. In my practice-based thesis on Kane, my key research questions – and, ultimately, a methodology I called an ‘affective approach’ – emerge from the models Epstein and Gilbert offer: how does a creative team develop a way to shape the work



collectively to maximise the potential of the affective specificity of its dramaturgy? And how does this affective, ‘non-signifying’ material work to eventually produce a ‘meaningful’ theatre? Working on Crimp’s plays it is clear that this is not a methodology that applies only to Kane, but offers a much wider application to writers who are structuring, or shaping, the written word on the page in non-dialogic compositions.

### **An ‘affective approach’**

Building from Gilbert’s ‘affective analysis’, an ‘affective approach’ aims to look at the way his dual model can be utilised as a performance-maker. Gilbert points to Massumi’s seminal essay ‘The Autonomy of Affect’, in which he identifies the reception of artistic work as functioning through an ‘immediate bifurcation in response into two systems’ which operate ‘in parallel’: the ‘signifying order’ and ‘intensity’ or ‘affect’ (2002:24). While the former relies on cognitive systems to decode and interpret their meaning, the latter works immediately and directly on the body. In terms of applying this to Crimp’s work where the ‘event’ is brought about by language, there are two major things at work in *Attempts* that impact on the audience: language structured both as the ordering of words in order to signify, and language as arranged as asignifying, affective material. Given that the play world of *Attempts* is created linguistically, with little dramatic ‘action’ or character-based emotion, it may seem counterintuitive to focus on its corporeal impact on the audience, but that is precisely what Crimp has constructed through language.

As noted above, our practical training in the theatre and philosophical training in the humanities privilege the tidy, rational, signifying tine of the fork. Epstein’s shaping of affect, however, offers a way to deal with its ‘messy’, affective partner

(126). While Gilbert, as States before him in theatre, stresses that it is vital not to simply throw out one side of the equation (despite its hegemonic position) for its neglected other, in the rest of this article I will mostly leave aside the well-trodden path of reading signification and focus in detail on the way affect has been structured in Crimp's work. Perhaps the best and most complex example of how this might work in practice, and the implications for the theatre director, is the end of Scenario 16, 'Pornò', in *Attempts*. Here the linguistic composition directs focus onto the asignifying fork of Massumi's split, in which the intensity or affect of the image is produced through its 'strength' or 'duration' (24). In this scenario, Crimp's affective specificity is structured through the composition of four tracks of simultaneous and/or overlapping 'dialogue', use of foreign language and music:

*Music intensifies. The speakers divide, creating two simultaneous strands, each strand impassively translated into a different language:*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| - Anne has hosed down the streets of Bucharest... | - Anne will now demonstrate the crash position...              |
| - [translation]                                   | - [translation]  |
| - ...and listened to the foetal heart.            | - ...which you should adopt when instructed by the stewards... |
| - [translation]                                   | - [translation]  |
| - She has melted with the ice-caps...             | - Head down.   |
| - [translation]                                   | - [translation]  |
| - ...and flowed into the fertile deltas           | - Knees drawn up.  |
| - [translation]                                   |  |

(Crimp, 2005: 275-6)

The specificity of Crimp's text gives a lot of indication as to how to shape the moment affectively – but the director still has a great deal of choice in how to interpret this. My dramaturgical interpretation of this moment was that it should

produce the ‘climax’ of the play; not an Aristotelian climax of plot, but an affective or experiential climax. In terms of the ‘intensity of the image’ – this was where I wanted to produce the most ‘intense’ or affective’ moment. Not necessarily *signifying* in the first instance of experiencing it – but making a corporeal impact through an overwhelming build up of sound and visuals whose strength would inflect any meaning-making retrospectively.

The use of foreign language in the scene insists on words as sounds that may not be carriers of meaning for the majority of the audience. It becomes about a musical arrangement of the delivery of the various strands into an aural composition. As director you have to balance words as signifiers and words as ‘notes’. Which are delivered *piano* and which *forte*? What strand has precedence? How do movement and visual elements add to this?

In his analysis of a ‘curious moment’ in Schumann’s Fourth Symphony, Epstein talks about a build, or crescendo – what he calls a *Steigerung* – that seems relevant to this moment of affective climax in *Attempts*. He notes that ‘the critical issue here is what a crescendo, in its deepest sense, truly means’. At its most narrow interpretation it suggests an ‘increase in loudness’, but this alone does not convey the ‘continually mounting sense of overall intensity’ that would qualify as a *Steigerung* to German musicians. He suggests, rather, that

Such a *Steigerung* would involve every element of the music – sound, timbre, dynamics, registration, instrumental doublings and other features of orchestration, and, far from least, the affective sense of the music, to which all elements contribute (1995:147).

When I asked my composer, Nick Gillian, to try to explain to me how he had composed the music for this scene, he responded with a very specific, detailed analysis. I quote him at length here because I would like to convey both the different

ways that we speak about composition and also that tricky dialogue that takes place between directors and composers/sound designers as one tries to produce a concrete sonic interpretation of quite abstract instructions. Thus, Gillian wrote:

My inspiration for writing the music for ‘Porno’ came prior to even seeing an initial rehearsal of the scene. I had a clear concept of the task the piece needed to accomplish, given keywords from the director such as creating a ‘wall of sound’ and ‘it should feel like the stage is about to explode’. Combining these directions with the stage directions provided by Crimp, such as the ‘*music intensifies*’, I knew the piece had to use all aspects of rhythm, instrumentation and dynamics to create this sense of unease, suspense and intensity. On reading the script, I felt unsure of Crimp’s suggestion of ‘*Gypsy Music*’ being used as the backing to this scene. This initial thought was reinforced when I saw rehearsals of the scene, as at even this early stage of rehearsal the scene already had built up a strong sense of rhythm and dynamics which I felt the genre of gypsy music would not enhance. I therefore continued with my initial concept for the piece in writing an ‘epic film style orchestrated piece’ (2009).

It is interesting that Gillian and I both decided to override the ‘gypsy’ thematic and genre Crimp specifies; in Gillian’s case, quite ‘intuitively’, but also clearly connected to the compositional structure he was working towards. In much the same way that Epstein writes of the ‘curious moment’ where major interpreters of Schumann diverge from the composer’s ‘indications in the score’ (1995:127) our interpretation explicitly veered away from Crimp’s stage directions. While these directions have a signifying and referential value, indicating a more directly content-specific role to do with specific marginalized ethnicities and identities, at this particular historical moment the focus on a ‘gypsy’ identity seemed less urgent than it might have been at the time of Crimp’s writing in the late 1990s. Therefore, in semiotic and cognitive terms, I was less attached to the ‘gypsy’ thematic and more committed to the global experience of the post-‘war-on-terror’ world. Rather than a referential staging, or representation of an (other’s) experience onstage, however, my primary goal was the shaping of an affective climax aimed at producing the lived embodiment, or actual experience, of a

moment of terror. Gillian, likewise, took my directorial instructions for this ‘event’ and musically/ compositionally shaped it accordingly:

The way the piece is mixed plays as much a role in creating a ‘*wall of sound*’ as the music itself. I used a ticking metronome which was looped and placed through a number of effects chains to create an uneasy opening of the music (with the metronome representing the concept of a ticking bomb in the background). This rhythmic foundation was then built upon by double basses and cellos playing a repeating motif that rotated through a minor and major chord progression which evolved every eight bars, with additional notes being added on each evolution. The heavily syncopated double basses and cellos were accompanied by violins playing a repeated two-note phrase that also rotated through the minor and major chord progression. The violins were placed through a delay effect that repeated every crotchet of the bar, gradually fading away two bars after it had been initially triggered. This meant that the delayed violin motif was layering the minor phrase over the new major phrase and *vice versa* on the next bar, which started to build up the ‘wall of sound’ across the frequency spectrum. The rhythmic motif of the strings was supported by timpani, accenting the first beat of every bar. As the piece progressed, more notes were added to the lower strings motif and extra backing layers of strings doubled up the delay effect. This gave the piece the sense of expansion, as it progressively grew not only in volume but also across the frequency spectrum. At bar 59 (55 seconds), the piece grows exponentially, with horn ‘flatters’ and a French horn melody being added along with cymbals and other percussion. A growing string and vocal crescendo also starts to build at this stage, which intensifies and finally explodes at the end of the piece with a vocal ‘aaahhhh’ at bar 75 (1:27 seconds). The final vocal scream is then sent to a delay effect which catches the peak of the crescendo and quickly fades away, giving the piece an eerie ending as it builds with such dynamics only to be left with the fading vocal scream dying away (2009).

I had a composer, therefore, who clearly understood how to ‘involve every element of the music’ in order to create a *Steigerung*: it certainly got very loud, but that was only a part of the growth in intensity. Turning now to the staging of the scene, obviously music is only one strand of what is happening in theatrical performance. Adapting Epstein’s model, my job as a director was to ‘involve every element’ of *theatre*, shaping affect through the composition not only of the aural but the visual and gestural, to produce a theatrical *Steigerung*: Crimp’s ‘event’.

Figure 1. 'Pornò' in *Attempts on Her Life*, Brian Friel Theatre, Queen's University Belfast, May 2009. (Photo: neilharrisonphotography.com)

In aural terms, while previously lines in the foreign languages had equal weight with lines in English, in terms of building up the layers of sound I wanted and, given that the two more or less simultaneous strands in English were going to be hard enough to decipher, I opted for the foreign lines to sit *piano* under the English strands, which moved from *forte* to *fortissimo* as the whole moment built in intensity – using pace, dynamics and the music which, following Crimp's directions, 'intensifies'. It is here that the director's compositional craft becomes about how the other stage elements combine to build this intensity. Visually, lighting plays a major role. In this moment 'runway' lights in the raked floor of the stage flashed – returning to a device set up in a previous scenario and thus using *motif* to produce a 'build' in signifying systems. At the same time it also picked up the 'signifying' values of one strand of the speech which details adopting the brace position on a plane for a crash landing. The lights therefore work significantly, but also – flashing away – they add affectively to a sense of mounting panic and emergency. Similarly, the return of pockets of red light, picked up a visual motif which was a slower, incremental build throughout the whole production from an almost monochrome opening on a large white rake.

Figure 2. The set for Scenario 1 'All Messages Deleted', *Attempts on Her Life*, Brian Friel Theatre, Queen's University Belfast, May 2009. (Photo: neilharrisonphotography.com)

As the play progressed more and more red elements were introduced by way of props, practical lights and costume, picking up from Scenario 1's answering machine lights, the 'big red bag of hers' introduced in Scenario 6 and the 'tiny tiny shoes' of Scenario

9. The stage became fuller and fuller with each scene, notably through the extravaganza and excess of the Busby Berkeley-esque take on ‘The Girl Next Door’, ostensibly an asignifying dance routine with shoes, but also a hyperbolic and ironic response to the fear of the shoe bomber in the days of our ‘war on terror’.

Figure 3. Scenario 14, ‘The Girl Next Door’, *Attempts on Her Life*, Brian Friel Theatre, Queen’s University Belfast, May 2009. (Photo: neilharrisonphotography.com)

This process culminated, finally, in a peak of redness, fullness and intensity at the moment of *Steigerung* in ‘Pornò’ (see Figure 1).

Gesturally, this was one, very rare, moment where I opted for a literal set of physical actions. This was not something that I had even considered for a long time – believing that the language and sound would bring about the experiential impact. However, trying out synchronised actions onstage late in rehearsals, it was immediately apparent that the ‘intensity’ of the moment was heightened by these actions.

Figure 4. ‘Pornò’ in *Attempts on Her Life*, Brian Friel Theatre, Queen’s University Belfast, May 2009. (Photo: neilharrisonphotography.com)

Gestures such as reaching for the ‘oxygen masks’ and assuming a brace position filled out the stage even more and somehow exponentially highlighted the growing sound. In the same way that the chorus of voices produced a very different affect from a solo voice, the gestures and movement of this odd ‘chorusline’ of bodies worked on both a signifying and affective level; recognising that the bodies onstage were (suddenly and illogically) preparing for a crash landing was less important overall than that immense combination and intensification of sound and movement. The aim for me was not to clarify the individual linguistic strands or show what it was ‘about’: it was to produce a corporeal impact. When the production and design teams

watching rehearsals described this moment as making them ‘feel physically sick’ I was convinced we had achieved the impact I desired. To return to Crimp’s assertion that ‘the language itself doesn’t need to be understood. The truth of the scene is elsewhere’ (in Sierz, 99), the truth of the scene, for me, was in trying to create a feeling of being inside this noise and panic, and feeling that the whole theatre, not just a represented ‘room’ onstage, was at risk of exploding. This relies on affectively shaping a moment that is not about watching a representation, but feeling an aural and visual assault on what Garner calls the ‘lived bodiliness’ of the spectator (1994: 28). It is based on what Gilbert stresses as the specific quality of sound: that it is registered not only ‘on the ear’ but ‘*throughout the body*’ (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999:44; emphasis in original).

I should point out that affect is a fragile beast, less robust and reliable than its dramatic counterparts of plot and character. All this affective intensity, for example, is subject to technical elements and actor precision and ability. The ‘Pornó’ scene relied on seven radio microphones and two table microphones for speakers and the music on another channel. If one microphone fails, or the music for some unknown reason just fails to play (as happened on one occasion) then the balance and the moment is significantly altered. With the music at the ear-crunching level the composer/sound designer and I wanted we could not hear the actors – even though they were literally giving it everything they could dynamically (yelling) and even with microphones up as high as technically feasible. So adjustments and compromises are made; but it did head towards a realisation of what I think Crimp had affectively shaped as playwright.

### **Meaning, and a potential political stake**



In the end, what is the purpose of this affective shaping, beyond Stein's 'pleasure' of 'experiencing the performance'? Crimp's argument that in the 'event onstage' understanding the language is not necessary, does not mean – as some critics have argued – that this use of language does not ultimately have 'meaning.' Berenice Hamidi-Kim, for instance, sees *Attempts on Her Life* as epitomizing a 'post-political theatre' which rejects the 'framework of modernity', the 'great founding stories' and a 'teleological conception of history based on a belief in Reason' (2008:42); as such, it undermines the spectator's ability to make 'meaning' (44). Part of the problem, as Hamidi-Kim sees it, is the focus on asignifying elements of performance:

Emphasis on sensory reception also characterizes post-political theatre, which confirms its rejection of consistency and of any well-argued discourse about the state of the world (44).

This resistance to the sensory 'event' of theatre has proved remarkably persistent in much theatre criticism, which is often still tied to the logocentrism of Western metaphysics,<sup>iv</sup> but Massumi's theorising of affect offers a way to rethink 'postmodern power after ideology' (2002:42). He does this by offering a connection between affect and 'the practice of everyday life, and the relations of experience that engage us in the world, and our ethical practices' (Zournavi, 2006). While space does not permit a detailed analysis of Massumi here, Gilbert and film theorist Paul Gormley (2005), have provided interpretations of his work in relation to music and film, by outlining how the immediacy of the affective in art does not remain 'autonomous' and outside of political significance.<sup>v</sup> Through what Massumi calls a "backward referral in time" the immediacy of an image is ultimately organised into 'meaning' (2002:28). Gormley clarifies this point, arguing that 'at the affective moment when the image first assaults us, we are temporarily outside meaning' but '[a]t the same time this moment of disruption also has an impact on *the way in which we make meaning*'

(2005:10; my emphasis). Thus, Gormley suggests that what Massumi is theorising is a ‘body-first way of knowing’: we experience an affect firstly corporeally but ‘this material bodily response subsequently becomes meaning’ (ibid.). In brief, Massumi’s key argument that I want to stress here is that this ultimate ‘meaning’ is dependent upon the impact/intensity/ affect of the ‘event’ experienced through the body in the theatre – even if it was not directly, or literally, ‘signifying’ in the moment of its presentation in the theatre.

The aim of affectively shaping an asignifying, corporeal impact is not gratuitous, then, or without ulterior motives in terms of critiquing and engaging with ‘the state of the world’. Applying this thinking to Crimp’s theatre, it can be argued that his affective dramaturgy works on the strength of its ‘immediacy’ – but not with the aim of its impact ending there. This brings us back, finally, to Gilbert’s assertion of the importance of looking at both sides of the fork: the affective specificity of the artwork *and* the ‘semiotic contexts’ in which it takes place. I cannot measure the political impact, or ‘effect’ as Thompson would call it (2009), of our production of *Attempts*, but, rather than pinning down a single meaning through representation linked to (fear of) terrorism and the world post-9/11, I hope it offered a felt, embodied, ‘sickening’ experience of that lived condition, and that ultimately it produced all sorts of individual ‘meanings’ through its *intensity*, or *affect*: its ‘body-first’ methodology.

## **Conclusion**

Epstein and Gilbert’s methodologies have become an indispensable part of my directorial approach and raised ongoing practical questions for me: how do I shape affect in performance? Rather than the process of rehearsal being always about

‘meaning’ and motivation, can I shift towards the neglected aspect of what the theatre event ‘feels like’ and bring the whole team – performers, designers, technicians along with me? And by creating intensity of affect, can I rely on Massumi’s ‘backward referral in time’ to produce what Elaine Aston calls ‘a post-theatrical sequel’ – in which the experience resonates and finally becomes meaningful in political/social terms (2003:83)? Shaping affect is a dramaturgical task – while we always do it intuitively at some level, some playwrights are shaping affect in their composition of non-traditional texts, as a way of offering a significant theatrical experience unmoored from the tethers of character and plot. By ignoring affect in rehearsal and in criticism – because it is less compatible with language and sits outside the dominant modes of analysis – we undermine any theatre, but particularly these non/‘post’-dramatic texts with their dramaturgies of affect.

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<sup>i</sup> I have argued for a dramaturgy of affect and an ‘affective approach’ to directing in my PhD thesis, ‘Experiencing Kane: An ‘affective approach to Sarah Kane’s experiential theatre in performance’, (Campbell, 2009), from which I draw much of the theoretical material here. See also Campbell, (2005).

<sup>ii</sup> Josephine Machon (2009) sets out to ‘address the dilemma of verbally analyzing experiential performance work in order to foreground the significance of this style in theatre’ (3), but does not utilize affect theories. This is not a criticism: as a subject area we need a whole new range of methodologies to deal with this work. I raise it more to illustrate that some of musicology’s uses of affect could be drawn on productively to add to this discourse.

<sup>iii</sup> See also Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, (1999) for an analysis of the historical and philosophical understandings of the relationship between ‘music, meaning and pleasure’. Here they argue for the materiality of music as sound that works viscerally on the body.

<sup>iv</sup> See Nikolaus Müller-Schöll (2004) for an analysis of this logocentrism and his argument for ‘theatre done in a political way’ (42).

<sup>v</sup> I have outlined this in more detail in a forthcoming article ‘From *Bogeyman* to *Bison*: A herd-like amnesia of HIV/AIDS in theatre?’, *Theatre Research International* 36:3 (2011).