

Divergent Subjects: Disrupting the Inherited Lifelines of Global Capitalism in Alice Birch's *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (2014)

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Abstract: This paper analyses Alice Birch's *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (2014), referred to by Birch herself as her "theatrical manifesto" (Birch, 2017). Radically subversive in terms of form, it is structured into three acts, each comprising different short scenes, which sketch the "affective scenarios"¹ of neoliberal, consumer capitalism and how they shape dominant understandings of love, marriage, romantic relationships, and happiness, among other things. Drawing on Sarah Ahmed's statement, in *Living a Feminist Life*, that "power works as a mode of directionality, a way of orienting bodies in particular ways"², the paper claims that, through its subversive, post-dramatic form, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* puts into practice a series of affective strategies which aim at inviting spectators to question the dominant affects, or life "orientation[s]"³ and inherited "lifelines"⁴, of patriarchal, neoliberal capitalism. Such strategies, which are the affective emphasis carried by some words, purposefully capitalized, and which can be performed with an affective charge, and the introduction of a character/actor confusion which takes place in critical moments, aim at creating an indeterminacy which may contribute to questioning the objects of happiness⁵ in Western society. Furthermore, it aims to create a divergent type of subject, one who is "dis-oriented" from the life paths and definitions of happiness of neoliberalism, thus also pointing the way to a possible reconstruction of values.

Keywords: Alice Birch, contemporary British theatre, the "affective turn", feminism, Sarah Ahmed, happiness studies

Alice Birch, who started writing, as she herself has put it, "as soon as she could write"⁶, is the author of six full-length plays: *Little Light* (2015), *Many*

1 BERLANT, L. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham ; London : Duke UP, 2011, p. 9.

2 AHMED, S. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham ; London : Duke UP, 2017, 43.

3 AHMED, S. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham ; London : Duke UP, 2006, p. 1.

4 Ibid, p. 17.

5 AHMED, S. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham ; London : Duke UP, 2010, p. 21.

6 Notes taken at the Round Table led by Arnaud Anckaert, Alice Birch, and Séverine Magois,

Moons (2011), *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (2014), *We Want you to Watch* (2015), *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017) (for which she received the Susan Smith Blackburn Award in 2017), and *[Blank]* (2018).⁷ She is also the author of the stage adaptations *Ophelias Zimmer* (2016), a feminist adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; *Shadow (Eurydyce Speaks)* (2016), based on Elfriede Jelinek's *Schatten (Eurydyke sagt)* (2004), which is a feminist rewriting of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth; and *La Maladie de la Mort* (2018), which rewrites Marguerite Duras's 1982 homonymous novel. All of the above have been directed by Katie Mitchell.⁸ She is also the author of the script for the

as part of the Theatre, Youth and Drama Symposium, organized by Constantin Bobas, Claire Hélie and Véronique Perruchon, which was held at Lille University on 2 February 2017.

7 Birch made this comment at the opening ceremony of the symposium "Youth, Theatre and Drama" which was held in Lille University, France, and where she was the invited playwright. The conference was organized by Constantin Bobas, Claire Hélie, and Véronique Perruchon, and it lasted from 2 to 3 February 2017. It included a Round Table with Alice Birch, stage director Arnaud Anckaert, and translator Séverine Magois, a translation workshop with students led by Magois, and a performance of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*, directed by Anckaert. *Little Light* (2015) is Birch's "first full-length script" (see SIERZ, A. *Little Light*, Orange Tree Theatre. [Review]. In *New Writing for the British Stage*, 2015 [cit. 22. 5. 2018]. Available at: <http://www.sierz.co.uk/reviews/little-light-orange-tree-theatre/>), despite it having been staged and published after *Many Moons* at the Orange Tree Theatre, in Richmond, where it ran from 7 February to 7 March 2015, directed by David Mercatali. *Little Light* prompted Aleks Sierz's revealing remark that "[n]ew writing doesn't come much better than this" (Ibid). *Many Moons* (2011), Birch's "first full play to be staged" (Cf. Notes taken at the Round Table led by Arnaud Anckaert, Alice Birch, and Séverine Magois) was first staged at Theatre 503, where it ran from 20 May to 11 June 2011, directed by Derek Bond. *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (2014), which has been performed in New York, Australia, and New Zealand, and was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of the Midsummer Mischief Festival in the Other Place in Stratford-on-Avon, where it ran from 21 to 29 June 2014, directed by Erica Whyman. *We Want You to Watch* (2015), an indictment on pornography, was developed in collaboration with RashDash, a company founded by Abbi Greenland and Helen Goale, and it ran at the National Theatre Temporary Theatre from 15 June to 11 July 2015, directed by Caroline Steinbeis. Birch's *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017) also ran at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs from 3 June to 8 July and was also directed by Mitchell. *[Blank]*, her latest play to date, is a National Theatre/Clean Break co-commission, directed by Marianne O'Shea and Alex Fraser, which ran at the Orange Tree Theatre, the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre, and the National Theatre, as part of the National Theatre Connections Festival 2018, consisting of a series of sixty scenes, some connected, others less so, about adults and children impacted by the criminal justice system.

8 *Ophelias Zimmer* (2016), a co-production by Berlin's Schaubühne and the Royal Court, conceived by Katie Mitchell and created by Birch, and written in German with English subtitles, ran at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs from 17 to 21 May 2016

acclaimed film *Lady Macbeth* (2016), directed by William Oldroyd, for which she received the British Independent Film Award for best screenplay in 2017.⁹

Her theatre has often been compared to that of Caryl Churchill, Sarah Kane, and Martin Crimp, particularly regarding formal experimentation.¹⁰ Her play *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*, in particular, was endorsed by Simon Stephens and called a “landmark” by Mark Ravenhill¹¹, and the fact that Mitchell has directed her last two plays to date attests to her increasing importance as a playwright. This paper, therefore, seeks to contribute to explore what is arguably one of the most important female and feminist theatrical voices in the UK by focusing on *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*, one of her most experimental plays to date.

Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again has been referred to by Birch herself as her “theatrical manifesto”¹² in terms of how it is representative of the crisis of the values of neoliberal globalization and of the fault lines relating to the neoliberal consumer capitalist construction of acquisitive, individualist subjectivities in hyper-connected, globalized societies.¹³ It contains all of the

after it opened at the Schaubühne in December 2015. *Shadow (Euridyce Speaks)* was first performed at Berlin’s Schaubühne, where it ran from 28 September to 3 October 2018, and then at Théâtre de la Colline, in Paris, where it ran from 19 to 28 January 2018. *The Malady of Death* (2018), a multimedia work which interrogates pornography and the male gaze, ran at Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord from 16 January to 3 February 2018 before being staged at the Barbican from 3 to 6 October 2018 with Laetitia Dosch as the woman, Nick Fletcher as the man, and Irène Jacob as narrator.

- 9 Lady Macbeth, a feminist rewriting of Nikolái Leskov’s *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, is about a woman who is stifled by her loveless marriage to a bitter man twice her age and her passionate affair with a young worker on her husband’s estate with the acclaimed actress Florence Pugh as Katherine, Cosmo Jarvis Sebastian as her lover, and Paul Hilton as Alexander, her husband.
- 10 BILLINGTON, M. Anatomy of a Suicide Review – A Startling Study of Mothers and Daughters. In *The Guardian*, 2011. [cit. 22.05.2018]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jun/12/anatomy-of-a-suicide-review-royal-court-alice-birch-katie-mitchell>.
- 11 Notes taken at the Round Table led by Arnaud Anckaert, Alice Birch, and Séverine Magois.
- 12 Personal Interview with Alice Birch. Lille (France), 3 February. Unpublished material, 2017.
- 13 In a personal interview with the writer, Birch stated that she considers *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* to be her “theatrical manifesto”, where she set out her aims as a playwright. Birch mentions it was written in response to *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas, which she was shocked by. However, she was attracted by “how unapologetic it was”. The *SCUM Manifesto* is a provocative essay which seeks to enact social change and overthrow the government by destroying the male sex. As shall be seen, Act Three of *Revolt. She Said. Re-*

themes that are present in Birch's dramaturgy, such as the sexism that pervades language and relationships, the presence of neoliberal values at work, an unequal world order where Westerners feel "proud of [their] empathy"¹⁴, the passing on or inheritance of dominant gender and neoliberal values in the family, and the possibility of divergence and of interrupting the system through radical resistance or even violence.¹⁵

Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again, which is a feminist exploration of language and revolt, adopts post-dramatic strategies, or what Sara Grochala in *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure* calls a "liquid dramaturgical structure"¹⁶, such as the refusal to create dramatic characters, understood as subjectivities, as well as a linear plot, and the dramatization of two different spaces/scenes which play out simultaneously on stage, in order to reflect what Bauman defines as the "fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change"¹⁷ of liquid modernity. Its ultimate aim, as shall be seen, is to contribute to unsettling basic notions and definitions of happiness in Western society, which are based on the dominant narrative of "advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope"¹⁸.

volt Again, where "four women" claim they want to "dismantle the monetary system" and mention the possibility to "eradicate all men", resembles the manifesto; however, like the whole play, which is on the side of gender equality, it distances itself from Solanas's radicalism, producing instead a critique of the modes of the operation of power. See *Midsummer Mischief: Four Radical New Plays*. (Timberlake Wertenbaker: *The Ant and the Cicada*. Alice Birch: *Revolt. She said. Revolt Again*. E. V. Crowe: *I Can Hear You*. Abi Zakarian: *This is Not an Exit*). London : Oberon Modern Playwrights, 2014, p. 100.

14 Ibid.

15 *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* was published in 2014 in a volume entitled *RSC Midsummer Mischief Festival*, comprising four short feminist-themed plays by Birch, Timberlake Wertenbaker, E. V. Crowe, and Abi Zakarian in response to the provocation by historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich that "well-behaved women don't make history". It was written after *Many Moons*, after which Birch has claimed she worked "quite quietly for a time and kept thinking about form. Although I was quite frightened about the RSC, I wrote it in three days". Cf. Notes taken at the Round Table led by Arnaud Anckaert, Alice Birch, and Séverine Magois, as part of the Theatre, Youth and Drama Symposium, organized by Constantin Bobas, Claire Hélie and Véronique Perruchon, which was held at Lille University on 2 February 2017. The volume also includes *The Ant and the Cicada* by Timberlake Wertenbaker, *I Can Hear You* by E. V. Crowe, and *This is Not an Exit* by Abi Zakarian.

16 GROCHALA, S. *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure*. London ; New York : Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 17.

17 BAUMAN, Z. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge ; Malden : Polity, 2012, p. viii.

18 HALBERSTAM, J. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham ; London : Duke UP, 2011, p. 89.

This paper transposes Berlant's affective analysis of contemporary society into the key of drama, since her understanding of the present as a "mediated affect"¹⁹ can crucially contribute to illuminate aspects of contemporary theatre and performance practice. *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* sketches, in Berlant's words, the "affective scenarios"²⁰ of neoliberal, consumer capitalism, presenting a 21st-century society that is loaded with affects which adhere to and shape dominant understandings of love, marriage, romantic relationships, and happiness, among other things, and which appear to "travel along already defined lines of cultural investment"²¹. Indeed, it reflects how relational goods such as love or happiness are, in Ahmed's words and as she expounds in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, "effects of circulation"²², and how some of these relational goods, or "happy objects"²³ as Ahmed calls them, enter "our near sphere with positive affective value already in place", becoming "happiness-causes, before we even encounter them"²⁴.

Departing from Ahmed's statement in *Living a Feminist Life* that "power works as a mode of directionality, a way of orienting bodies in particular ways"²⁵, this paper analyses Birch's *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* as a radically subversive play which through a post-dramatic use of form puts into practice a series of affective strategies with the aim of inviting spectators to question the dominant affects or life "orientation[s]"²⁶ and inherited "lifelines"²⁷ of patriarchal, neoliberal capitalism, thus contributing to undoing the internal borders of spectators, which, "as capitalism itself (...) constitute a very real limit to thought"²⁸.

19 BERLANT, L. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham ; London : Duke UP, 2011, p. 4.

20 Ibid, 9.

21 PEDWELL, C. – WHITEHEAD, A. Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory. In *Feminist Theory*, 2012, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 123.

22 AHMED, S. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh : Edinburgh UP, 2004, p. 8.

23 *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*. (Eds. Marianne Liljeström, Susanna Paasonen). London ; New York : Routledge, 2017, p. 34.

24 Ibid.

25 AHMED, S. *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 43.

26 AHMED, S. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, p. 1.

27 Ibid, p. 17.

28 *After Globalization*. (Eds. Eric Cazdyn, Imre Szeman). Oxford ; Malden : Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 7. Ahmed's notion of "turning", being "orientated", or "in line" with others builds on Judith Butler's theories of subject formation, which in their turn also recall Louis Althusser's notion of how ideology hails individuals or constitutes them as subjects. The inheritance of "lifelines" is also the main topic and concern of Birch's last play to date, *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017), which also makes use of the overlapping of scenes/spaces on

Such strategies are the introduction of a character/actor confusion which takes place in critical moments, the affective emphasis carried by some words which are purposefully capitalized in the text by Birch herself, and which can be performed with an affective charge, and the disruption of narrative in Act Four as the previous act is destroyed by a bomb and ends in a feminist revolution, literally destroying the play's form itself.²⁹ These strategies aim at creating an indeterminacy which may prompt spectators to contribute to questioning the objects of happiness³⁰ of Western society and create a divergent type of subject, one who is "dis-oriented" from the life paths and definitions of happiness of neoliberalism, thus also pointing the way to a possible reconstruction of values.

Arguably and from this point of view, the play might provoke what Rancière has called "a transformation in the distribution of the sensible"³¹ by disrupting the obviousness and naturalness of the perceptual and epistemic underpinnings of late capitalism, "effect[ing] new forms of the circulation of speech, of exhibition of the visible and of production of affects, [which aim to create] a new topology of the possible"³². Based mainly on "individual fulfilment", the play implies, such neoliberal values prevent individuals from

stage as a central formal device. See AHMED, S. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, pp. 15–17. As Birch puts it, *Anatomy of a Suicide* asks whether "once the suicide taboo has been broken in a family, does it become easier to repeat later? And I wanted to look at how does one break out of that pattern so the cycle doesn't become inevitable?" See BIRCH, A. I'm Interested in Whether Trauma Can Be Passed On through DNA. [Interview]. In *The Guardian*, 2017. [cit. 22. 5. 2018] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jun/04/alice-birch-anatomy-of-a-suicide-play-interview>. In this case, the simultaneity of scenes on stage is the play's core of resistance since certain key words are repeated in the three stories, thus encouraging spectators to draw connections between them as well as with the contemporary structures of patriarchal oppression, which in the play are only obliquely dramatized.

29 Such an ending led Dominic Cavendish to call the play "a cluster bomb of subversion". See CAVENDISH, D. *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* by Alice Birch. [Review]. In *The Telegraph*, 2014. [cit. 22. 5. 2018]. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10917888/Midsummer-Mischief-The-Other-Place-at-the-Courtyard-Theatre-Stratford-upon-Avon-review.html>.

30 AHMED, S. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham ; London : Duke UP, 2010, p. 21.

31 ROCKHILL, G. Introduction. In RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translation Gabriel Rockhill. New York : Continuum, 2004, p. 4.

32 CORCORAN, S. Editor's Introduction. In RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. (Ed. and translation Steven Corcoran). London ; New Delhi ; New York ; Sydney : Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 23.

creating solidarities or rebuilding confidence in our collective capacity to change the world.³³

**Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again as a “Theatrical Manifesto”:
Orientations, “Negative” Globalization, and the Need for Feminism**

This paper focuses on two key scenes of the play – namely, “Revolutionize the Work. (Engage with It)” and “Revolutionize the World. (Do Not Marry)”, which take place in Act One – as well as on Act Four, which presents the possibility of a feminist revolution. “Revolutionize the Work. (Engage with It)” dramatizes the violence of neoliberal values at work and presents a job interview where the interviewer and the interviewee are stuck in an argument because the interviewee does not want to work on Mondays. In this context, Birch makes an actor act as if s/he “has forgotten their line”³⁴, and blurs the distinction between the character and actor in order to take the theatrical situation to a point of collapse and lead spectators to realize “the circulation of everything in the form of a commodity”³⁵ in the context of neoliberal globalization.

In this scene, the interviewers confront the interviewee, who is usually played by a woman, by asking her all kinds of questions in order to discover why she does not want to work on Mondays, which brings to the fore the expectations placed on women by neoliberal logic. At first, they ask her if she wants to “try to get pregnant”, since “women want that”; then, since she keeps insisting that she just wants “more time off”, the interviewer begins to lure her with all types of consumer capitalist seductions.³⁶ Indeed, he informs her that they have “put vending machines in the corridors” and a “bar on the rooftop terrace and we’re doing Happy Hour Fridays, or that they can “organise Spa days” and “do more face masks and pampering”, to which she

33 PENNY, L. Life-Hacks of the Poor and Aimless: On Negotiating the False Idols of Neoliberal Self-Care. In *The Baffler*, 2016. [cit. 22. 5. 2018]. Available at: <https://thebaffler.com/war-of-nerve/laurie-penny-self-care>.

34 *Midsummer Mischief: Four Radical New Plays*, p. 64.

35 NANCY, J-L. *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. (Eds. and translation François Raffoul, David Pettigrew). New York : State U. of New York, 2007. p. 37.

36 As shall be seen, and from now on, whenever specific words from the play’s quotes are capitalized, it is an emphasis present in the play itself. As Birch puts it in the opening stage directions, “the use of upper and lower case letters (...) is all there to help the actor in terms of pacing and the weight of their words”. See *Midsummer Mischief: Four Radical New Plays*, p. 45.

responds that she refuses to recognize the bar as a “real or legitimate space”, thus denying that she has any desire to acquiesce to such offers or that this corresponds to her idea of happiness.³⁷

It is at this point that the play blurs the boundaries between the characters and the actors. Unsettled by her smile and resistance, the interviewer's role begins to collapse – “Do you want a pay rise? Is that it? Do you want to be paid as much as / as the / *perhaps it's not clear whether the actor has forgotten their line, or it is the character tripping over a word* / as the / the – sorry – as the boys? / . / Stop smiling.” In this situation, the girl answers that she is contracted to smile, but there also seems to be a confusion as to whether it is the character or the actor who is responding: “(Again, is this the character or actor?) I'm contracted to smile.” The stage directions announce that “[i]t feels like the actors aren't sticking to their lines, *perhaps*”. Indeed, the dialogue reaches a point of absurdity as social and theatrical roles begin to break down, and the interviewee finally leaves with a victorious “I'll see you on Tuesday.”³⁸

The scene is a critique of the obsession for productivity in the work place that characterizes neoliberal societies and which is one of the tenets of the dominant narrative of happiness. As Lisa Blackman puts it, the dominant definition of happiness is “aligned with success and satisfaction in the work place (...) through the establishment of happy life-skills”³⁹. By taking the theatrical situation to a point of collapse, the play seeks to open what Brian Massumi has termed a “margin of manoeuvrability” in order to induce spectators to a “change in capacity” which might lead them to find “different ways of connecting to others and to other situations”, thus overthrowing the myth of individual fulfilment through work.⁴⁰

In “Revolutionize the World. (Do not Marry)” Birch presents a scene where an unspecified character makes a marriage proposal to another one but utterly fails to convince him/her, as he is repeatedly and adamantly rejected. Since the characters' gender is unspecified, this scene could be played by two men, two women, or a man and a woman. The feminist politics of the play seems to suggest, however, that a man should make the marriage proposal, while

37 Ibid, pp. 64–68.

38 Ibid, pp. 67–69.

39 BLACKMAN, L. Is Happiness Contagious? In *New Formations: Happiness*, 2007/8, No. 63, p. 15.

40 MASSUMI, B. *Politics of Affect*. Cambridge ; Malden : Polity, 2015, pp. 3–6.

the woman resists the offer. In the scene, the more the male character keeps insisting on marriage and offering media-ridden, conventional images of happiness and conjugal life, the more the female character brings out a subtext of sexism beneath the external glow of heterosexual marriage:

“-All I said was that I wanted to live my life Next to yours
 -No you didn’t
 -That I wanted to love you forever
 -That isn’t what you said
 -(...) That I want to buy Dogs and then bury those dogs in the back garden we share
 -No
 -I said I wanted to do my online food shop with you and go on all my main holidays with you and
 -Did not hear you say a single one of those words
 -(...)
 -You Essentially said you wanted to reduce your income tax.
 -.
 What?
 -And inherit my pension.
 -I did not
 -(...)
 -That you want me to give up my name
 -You can you can / Keep your
 -/ That you want to turn me into Chattel
 -If I – I just
 -A thing to be traded
 -Can we
 -That I am to become your possession, your property, a thing you own – given to you by a man I don’t really speak to anymore holding a bunch of fucking bluebells and wearing a meringue in some kind of enormous shaming event in which I am supposed to be a Silent Walking Symbol of virginity yet simultaneously be Totally Relaxed about all the sex we are having whilst you get to walk around Doing All the Talking in a suit.”⁴¹

41 *Midsummer Mischief: Four Radical New Plays*, pp. 59–61.

By sheer force of repetition, commonplace images such as “I want to buy dogs and then bury those dogs in the back garden we share” or “I wanted to do my online food shop with you and go on all my main holidays with you”, which are images of romantic love produced by a neoliberal consumerist world and therefore tinged with economic subtext, are foregrounded and then interrogated. The scene thus affectively deconstructs the narrative of romantic love and marriage, prompting spectators to question and reject what Lauren Berlant calls “the good life” and which, paradoxically, is “for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless and at the same time find their conditions of possibility within it”,⁴² and it does so by pointing to a possible “gap between the affective value of an object and how we experience [it]”⁴³, that is, between how the narrative of romantic love circulates and how it may be truly felt.

In a student production of the play that took place in Lille 3 (Lille University) on 3 February 2017, and which was part of the symposium “Youth, Theatre and Drama” where Birch was the invited playwright, the performance tried to bring out the coercive aspect of marriage through an affective *mise-en-scène*.⁴⁴ Birch’s dramaturgy is, indeed, based on affect, and all her plays contain the initial stage directions that “[t]he spacing of the dialogue, the use of upper and lower case letters and the punctuation is all there to help the actor in terms of the pacing and the weight of their words”⁴⁵. In that specific production, the part where the woman infuriatedly claims that she is to become his “possession”⁴⁶ was suddenly uttered not just by the main female character to whom the man had proposed but by a group of female characters at once who began to say the lines increasingly loudly and powerfully, acting in the form of a Greek chorus. They made special emphasis on the words Birch herself capitalizes, and on which the semantic effect of the scene rested, such as “Chattel”, “Walking Symbol”, “Totally Relaxed”, or “Doing All the Talking in a suit”. By suddenly shouting these crucial words out

42 BERLANT, L. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham ; London : Duke UP, 2011, p. 97.

43 *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*, p. 34.

44 This production was directed by Claire Hélie, who was also co-organizer of the symposium “Youth, Theatre and Drama”, together with Constantin Bobas and Véronique Perruchon, and which was held in Lille University, France, from 2 to 3 February 2017. It included a Round Table with Alice Birch, stage director Arnaud Anckaert, and translator Séverine Magois, a translation workshop with students on Birch’s unpublished monologue “Salt”, led by Magois, and a performance of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* directed by Anckaert.

45 *Midsummer Mischief: Four Radical New Plays*, p. 45.

46 *Ibid*, p. 61.

loud, the performance achieved an interruption of the spectators' affective and cognitive frames, who were made aware of how marriage may in some instances become a patriarchal trap for women.

The student production in Lille thus brilliantly took Birch's affective dramaturgy to its point of paroxysm and, through building a female chorus on stage, it sought to prompt spectators to realize that following the dominant life paths is not "automatic" but that there is a "pressure to make such conversions", since "we find our way and we know which direction we face only as an effect of work, which is often hidden from view".⁴⁷

Divergent Subjects, Interrupted Narratives: Resisting the Inheritance of Neoliberal Lifelines

Such a questioning of the lifelines of neoliberal capitalism culminates in Act Three, which portrays the possibility of a feminist revolution.⁴⁸ Indeed, Act Three, where the characters describe enduring forms of sexism and female oppression, such as enforced marriages, or the sexism inherent in many forms of pornography, ends in an explosion as there is a "[l]oud noise. It is cold. It is bright. And then it is black"⁴⁹. The explosion is then followed by Act Four, where four women claim they will "overthrow the government", break up all couples and "eradicate all men (...) as a necessity".⁵⁰

Operating politically "through its form, as well as through its content"⁵¹, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* thus breaks with any possible narrative as the stage – and by extension the world – is literally blown apart. Thus, the play's fragmented form, which "destroys itself"⁵², enacts and literalizes the refusal to reproduce or inherit the "lifelines"⁵³ of neoliberal, globalized society, interrupting the play's narrative itself. In *The Contemporary Political Play*, Sarah Grochala analyses what she calls the ethics of the "disrupted story"⁵⁴, and claims that the refusal of many contemporary plays to move forward

47 AHMED, S. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, pp. 16-17.

48 The possibility of a feminist revolution is a constant in Birch's plays, and it is particularly explored in *We Want You to Watch* and in the script of the film *Lady Macbeth*.

49 *Midsummer Mischief: Four Radical New Plays*, p. 99.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

51 GROCHALA, S. *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure*, p. 4.

52 Notes taken at the Round Table led by Arnaud Anckaert, Alice Birch, and Séverine Magois.

53 AHMED, S. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, p. 17.

54 GROCHALA, S. *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure*, p. 181.

through a coherent narrative has an ethical potential. Quoting Jean-François Lyotard, she claims that “narratives play a role in defining the legitimacy of actions” and in “communicating the knowledge of ‘how to live’”.⁵⁵

Since narrative is “likely to condone any harmful act it represents, even if the playwright’s intention is otherwise”⁵⁶, in the context of the neoliberal manipulation of affect, the only response and possibility for change can be a radical refusal to provide any form of narrative. Instead, Act Four seeks to carve a space for affects other than the ones promoted by patriarchal neoliberalism, showing how the current political order is still “evidently and inevitably androcentric”⁵⁷, and from the destruction of the old lifelines it invites spectators to conceptualize a utopia where the political order can be reimagined not just as a structurally unequal “disembodied set of ideals” but as a place where the “bodily origins of men and women have meaning”.⁵⁸

Conclusions

By introducing a confusion or disalignment between the actor and character through its affective dramaturgy, which encourages actors to pronounce specific words with an affective intensity, and by radically fragmenting the play’s narrative by literally destroying its form in Act Four, Birch shows how the “negative affects”⁵⁹ of neoliberalism lead the characters to a point of collapse or even breakdown, and invites spectators to become divergent subjects who may explore “ways of connecting to others and to other situations”⁶⁰ outside the models offered to them by the existing configurations of affect.

Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again thus provokes spectators into thinking about the “politics of (...) ‘lifeline[s]’” under neoliberalism and the relationship between “inheritance” and “reproduction” of lifelines encouraging them to inhabit a body which “is not extended by the skin of the social”. Instead, it encourages them to create their own “impressions”, resisting their being

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid, 183.

57 CAVARERO, A. *Stately Bodies: Literature, Philosophy, and the Question of Gender*. Translation Robert de Lucca, Deanna Shemek. Ann Arbor : Michigan UP, 2002, p. 154.

58 Ibid, p. 9.

59 See NGAI, S. *Ugly Feelings*. London : Harvard UP, 2005, p. 3 and CVETKOVICH, A. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham ; London : Duke UP, 2012, p. 3.

60 MASSUMI, B. *Politics of Affect*, p. 6.

“pressed into lines”, and to leave marks which attest, like the play’s form itself, to “the refusal to reproduce”.⁶¹

Most importantly, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* thus seeks to create a divergent subject, one who might become aware of how “power works through affect to shape individual and social bodies”⁶² and of the tacit norms that structure relationships. As Ahmed puts it, norms become “anchoring points” as power turns us “toward certain objects, those that help us find our way”.⁶³ According to Ahmed, it does make a difference “*which way subjects turn*”, as “different worlds might even come into view”.⁶⁴ Arguably, the play’s strategies of disruption may allow for “intermittent acts of political subjectivization”⁶⁵ in spectators, thus breaking the “[c]onsensus”⁶⁶ over late capitalist definitions of happiness, for them to find new definitions of love, empathy, and happiness, outside the neoliberal, consumer capitalist model.

From this point of view, the play works like an “affective system of change”, that is, as a work that generates new “precepts and affects”, prompting spectators to “think differently, to sense anew and be exposed to affects in unpredictable ways”. The ethical dimension of art, indeed, lies in its “connective, expansive and deterritorializing” character; and in its possibility to function, using Deleuze’s terminology, “as a line of flight, traversing individual and collective subjectivities and pushing centralized organizations to the limit”.⁶⁷

Translated by the author

61 See AHMED, S. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, pp. 17-20.

62 PEDWELL, C. – WHITEHEAD, A. Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory. In *Feminist Theory*, p. 120.

63 AHMED, S. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, p. 1.

64 *Ibid*, p. 15.

65 ROCKHILL, G. Introduction. In RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, p. 3.

66 CORCORAN, Steven. Editor’s Introduction. In RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, p. 11.

67 See *The Deleuze Dictionary*. (Ed. Adrian Parr). Edinburgh : Edinburgh UP, 2010, pp. 140-150.

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