

**تقنية الصوت بعد جديد لتصوير دراما
معاصرة: دراسة في مسرحية مارتن
كريمب محاولات حول حياتها**

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**Sound Technology as a New Dimension to Perceive
Contemporary Drama: A Study in Martin Crimp's
*Attempts on her Life***

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المخلص

لم تعد للكلمة هيمنة مطلقة في تيار التقاليد الدرامية المعاصرة حيث قل تأثيرها بنسبة كبيرة مع محاولات المسرحيين إدخال شيء من الصوت والموسيقى والرقص والتمثيل الصامت الى النص المسرحي. إن توظيف التكنولوجيا الصوتية في الأداء المسرحي يقودنا الى حقيقة أن المنطوق لم يعد يحمل التفوق على أشكال التعبير الأخرى على خشبة المسرح. يمكن تتبع هذه الحقيقة في أعمال العديد من الكتاب المسرحيين مثل أبيا ، أرتود ، بيسكاتور ، بريخت ، جروتوفسكي وغيرهم ؛ لأنها تكتسب أهمية كبيرة في الإنتاج الحديث للأعمال المسرحية المعاصرة.

تعد هذه الدراسة محاولة لإلقاء الضوء على مسرحية مارتن أندرو كريب "محاولات حول حياتها" (٢٠٠٧) لمعرفة أهمية استخدام التكنولوجيا الموسيقية والصوتية في ادراك وفهم مغزى هكذا نصوص مسرحية حيث تم الاعتماد على المدرسة التفكيكية النقدية لفك ألغاز معاني النص التي لم توصلها لنا الكلمات. وكما أقرت كاتي ميتشل، مخرجة المسرحية، لدان ريبيلاتو خلال احد عروض المسرحية انها تستمتع باستخدام الصوت والفيديو كطريقة جديدة للتفكير في كيفية بناء المعنى! إن اهتمام البحث هو فحص ما يسميه موراي شافر بيئة الصوت الأكبر التي يعيش فيها الناس. وبعبارة أخرى ، نعتزم معرفة اي تفسير للمعنى يمكن أن يحصل عليه المرء عندما يتناول تحليل هكذا مسرحية معاصرة حيث لا توجد روابط درامية تقليدية لبناء النص مثل شخصية البطل او شخصيات الساندة او حبكة درامية وما الى ذلك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: محاولات حول حياتها ، دراما معاصرة ، المدرسة التفكيكية ، مارتن كريب.

Abstract

The dominance of word that is common in the main stream of the dramatic tradition seems minimized with contemporary playwrights' endeavours to inject into the veins of drama variations of sound, music, dance, and mime. The employment of sound technology in performance makes it clear that the spoken word does not hold supremacy over other forms of expression. This fact can be traceable in the works of many playwrights like Appia, Artaud, Piscator, Brecht, Grotowski and others; as it acquires a due significance in the recent productions of contemporary theatrical works.

The study is an attempt to shed light on Martin Andrew Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* (2007) to see the significance of using musical and sound technology in understanding the play. As Katie Mitchell, the director of the play admitted to Dan Rebellato during the run of *Attempts*¹ that she enjoys using sound and video "as a new way to think about how to construct meaning."² The main concern is also to examine what Schafer calls the "soundscape"³ the larger



environment of sound in which people live. In other words, we intend to see what kind of interpretation one might get when he/she deals with such contemporary play where no conventional dramatic association is there like setting, protagonist, characterization and plot. Deconstruction as a critical approach is used to recognize other meanings that words do not give.

Key words: *Attempts on her Life*, contemporary drama, Martin Crimp, theatrical tradition, deconstruction.

The New Dimension of Sound Technology

To tackle a contemporary theatrical issue is really enjoyable as it takes a researcher into a space of context in real time he/she can feel. Crimp's theatre, always reflects and affected by social context is intellectually rich and open to be re-evaluated. His tempting theatre is important due to the type of collaborations with notable directors with whom he moved stage performance forward. To be specific, Katie Mitchell is the most regular sign in this trend. Both, Crimp and Mitchell have adopted interest in contemporary drama; developing it as urgent area for scholars to debate through the lenses of experimentation. Their presentation of a fragmented work challenges the audience to answer the question what constitutes a play?

Under the influence of Beckett, Martin Crimp (1956-) begins to appear at the end of 1970s with plays of absurd tradition. In the 1990s, Crimp appears a striking dramatist with issues like the critical change in family relationships, the issue of woman and the rapid deterioration of the social ties but with different presentation as he shows an interest in theatrical form and language rather than in narrative. His masterpiece *Attempts* that is translated into many languages, presents a character of unseen woman in various roles but she does not appear on stage. Crimp employs only her sound to play these roles. Besides, a group of cast who comment, dance and act like unknown roles mostly under the pressure of lights and high music. We totally agree with Wattenberg, a critic, when he describes the play as "the current challenge, a play that has no plot, no dialogues that are attributed to no particular speakers".⁴ The text does not concern with well-made plot and characters. It comes out loosened with seventeen scenarios of unconnected events. It seems that each is about a phase of Anne's age with comments come from the cast.

Though theatre is often thought as a place of seeing, the rising interest in podcasts, oral histories, voice studies, new sound technology, and immersive theatre practices make playwrights and directors focus on the role of sound in recent theatrical performance. However, the belief in the conviction that theatre should be an art which says less yet shows more, encourages us to find more interpretations over this play.



Elinor Fuchs emphasizes in her influential study "The Death of Character" that the notion of character in its traditional sense is no longer exists after the 1980s.⁵ As such, there is neither clear character nor expected plot to perceive the theme of a play. This contemporary deconstruction replaces the text "as a free floating signifier that is bound to no particular origin or individual psychological causation."⁶ This paves the way for us as researchers to have "Derrida's Citational Theory" to analyse this play. This theory argues that "the notion that every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion."⁷ In this respect, the play can be appreciated as expositions of citational, rather essential events of original characters. This might be the core of our assumptions of analysis or conclusions later on.

Moreover, at a time of technological advancement, the aural aspect of performance has emerged as a unique topic for theatre research, providing a distinctive approach for critical analyses while raising important theoretical questions about recording, reproduction, and the interplay of live and recorded sound onstage. As Patrick Michael Finelli, a Professor of Theatre History and Theory in the School of Theatre and Dance at the University of South Florida has shown that "the time is now right for revisiting theatre history and re-evaluating performance theory and criticism from the perspective of aurality, in order to address the traditional dimensions of voice and other agents involved in sound transmission and reception".⁸

Obviously, sound has always been an important element in theatre. Looking back to Shakespeare's time, we see that the audience went to "hear a play" rather than see it as far as the appearance of the ghost's sound that reveals all the secrets of the king's murder side by side with the music used. Recently, this element of hearing goes beyond this to reshape the role of the audience and encourage them to serve as mental co-creators of the performance work. This is quietly done by using many techniques that employ sight-deprivation while rising dependency on music and textual musicality. This can be really grasped when the play is seen or attended. The performance may suggest what this problematic play is about. In fact, the essential idea is about attempts to reveal the woman's life (Anne) who does not appear on stage. The type of sound and music and the comments given by actors reflect what type of complexities our life has. No one can decide unless doing a lot of attempts and sometimes it is in vein. Like the attempts made on stage (seventeen scenarios) to identify something about Anne's mysterious life.

Back to the term "deconstruction" we mentioned before, it is really important to spot a light on as a strategy to deconstruct the conventional



dramatic association of the text to find a meaning. Deconstruction is simply defined as "a method for perusing which uncovers the inconsistencies and mysteries in the consistent structures of philosophical and artistic writhing".⁹ This, in fact what our major intention is about dealing with the text of *Attempts*. Historically, deconstruction is a form of literary appreciation and criticism that is used interchangeably with poststructuralist movement. It challenges the principles of finding truths by elevating reason over imagination and passion. It helps thinkers and philosophers reshape the convictions towards a better thinking and then a better understanding. In short, rational thinking leads to the truth of meaning that could help people find answers to their social questions and problems. We agree that words are vehicles of meanings if they correspond to perceived matters and objects without any form of ambiguities. Thus, words can tell what a text means but not how it means. It is the task of the intellectuals to give the answer of how by analysing the form via the terms of deconstruction. This is considered a shift in the way we appreciate our priorities in life. Deconstruction emphasizes that human utterance can always have a provisional meaning and this utterance waits someone to give another meaning.¹⁰

Known for her foremost experimenters with the latest video and sound technology, Mitchell has been an example of a great director with a reputation at "London's National Theatre". In many of her works, she works with amazing groups of designers and actors. Together, they constitute a notable experiment in the incorporation of multimedia (video and sound technology) in theatre. In doing so, Mitchell breaks out the limits of the theatrical listening experience by "opening the study of sound to previously neglected areas, such as television, video games, and mobile media".¹¹

Mitchell's direction of Crimp's *Attempts* is a case in point. Here, the play is suggestive with technological references in which the central character Anne is never seen, but is described by different reactions: a rock star, a terrorist, a porn star, even a car. Earlier in his life, Crimp stated his fond of directing and creating sound. In *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, Aleks Sierz quotes "I was definitely the kind of pupil who loved acting, directing, adjusting the focus of the lamps, creating sound cues on an old tape recorder at home".¹² This trait finds expression in Mitchell's direction of the play. However, before we go into details with the play, it is important to demonstrate Mitchell's approach to direction. In her speech about the adapting the text for the stage in Katie Mitchell's productions, Julie Campbell, an English author, who wrote extensively on Samuel Beckett, points out that "Drama, for me, is only fully experienced in performance, and part of the excitement of performance is to see how different directors choose to present a text".¹³ She further states that:



[A]uthorial intention is very basic in relation to the question of directorial freedom. Terms such as “Intentional Fallacy” and the “Death of the Author” have become such familiar concepts that they cannot fail to feed into discussions surrounding textual integrity and directorial interpretation”.¹⁴

It is true that *Attempts* is directed by several directors such as Tim Albery and Gerhard Willert but what makes Mitchell’s direction a unique one is her talent and full understanding of the mentality of the author and the demands of the contemporary audience. Through the direction of *Attempts* Mitchell tries to keep the audience “inside” the consciousness of the protagonist (Anne) who does not appear. Unlike the radio texts, by using sound technology or music, Mitchell bridged the dissension created between the visual, the body we see, and the sound we hear so as to help the audience share the inner thoughts of the protagonist. Moreover, the sound holds an important place as it is the only access to the past of the protagonist from childhood to maturity. This past in turn is seen through the present by the cast on stage. In doing so, the audience’s subjective reaction is distanced by the music to encourage them to share Anne’s memories in her present.

The aural accuracy of Mitchell’s approach thus provides a ‘technology’ that processes the circumstances of the text as a material aspect of a wider performance aesthetic. This approach is coincided with Crimp’s project who “has been the modernist one of experimenting with language and form”.¹⁵ Crimp, as Sierz states, is against “the formality of traditional theatre forms [which] merely lull the audience to sleep; the writer has to wake them up”.¹⁶ To this end, Crimp does not assign *Attempts* any number of actors, leaving it to the director to give the final shape of the play with the help of music and the sound of the protagonist.

Mitchell has shown herself to be unusually attuned to systemic operations, and their capacity to facilitate the creation of performances and to generate alternative dramaturgical structures. Her engagement with procedural forms has enabled her to develop a distinctive directorial practice that offers an efficient, although indirect, critique of systematic structures. Rather than constituting a capitulation to the politically disempowering structures of neoliberal societies.

We argue that this work has represented a crucial site for developing our understanding of extant and possible relationships between individuals and institutions, and between humans and the non-human. This metaphysical relationship justifies the wall resistance against the production in its first reception. As we know, British theatre adheres to social realism and



naturalism. What is important to British culture is to see reality manifested on stage. It is far from imaginative and metaphysical representation. Contrastingly, in Mitchell's version, *Attempts* becomes "a phantasmagoria of video effects, fast-paced acting and visual bravura".¹⁷ So one of the challenges that faced Mitchell's production of *Attempts* is how to make the audience accept the work without naturalistic and linear plot, scenes, dialogue and characters. Accordingly, both play and production are attacked by the critics who saw it as "a woeful example of Mitchellitis – a dreadful form of directorial embellishment".¹⁸ While others see it as "two hours of debasing trash",¹⁹ with Crimp's insulting nonsense. In spite of these bad reviews, some saw it "as a suggestion of 'what the brave new theatre of the 21st century will look like – both on stage and page'".²⁰ Similarly, Susannah Clapp praises the "visual creativity" of the production, describing the play as 'a blow on behalf of bewilderment'.²¹

Like her adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Mitchell presented *Attempts* by an ensemble of performers who employed the same techniques of "addressing the audience directly, acting-out multicharacter scenes, filming one another with video camera while also playing live music".²² Lacking of characters, *Attempts* lends itself to a directorial approach which emphasizes images over character or plot. In such concern, Crimp has said that in writing this play, "it was the "the happiest writing", partly because he felt free from the obligation to create naturalistic characters and a linear plot".²³ Though the play advertises itself as "Seventeen scenarios for the theatre," all these scenarios are linked together by revolving around the life referred to in the title, that of a woman who appears to be a complete enigma. In "Girl Next Door", her multiple identity reaches amusing climax when she is described as everything from "a cheap cigarette" to "a dyke with a femme".²⁴ By this fluid identity, Crimp "evokes a contemporary world characterized by consumerism, ethnic hatred, sexual violence, and inauthenticity".²⁵

Much criticisms of the play, however, come from Anne's contradictory character. Yet, I think the power of the play resides in the character's ambiguity. Anne's character as absent becomes liable to so many interpretations which need people's participation in decoding her mystery by new opinions and interpretations. In his comment on Anne, Michael Billington argues that Anne is "basically a vehicle for the writer's moral rejection of a selfish, materialist civilization based on consumer fetishism".²⁶ On her side, Mitchell wants to concentrate on the function of media as a means of transmitting the truth. Moreover, the sound technology used through the performance enhances the moral favour by increasing the ambiguity of Anne. In doing so, she draws the audience's attention to the hidden corruption



in society. Tim Albery states that “*Attempts* becomes a very serious play about the distortion of reality that we live with every day”.²⁷ Anne represents everyone who is fragmented by the political, economic and social circumstances. The pressure of these factors is manifested by the same pressure of the unseen force, acted upon the actors.

As mentioned before, *Attempts* is a social critique of modern fragmented society. Anne is a vehicle to communicate the different hues of this society. In “TRAGEDY OF LOVE AND IDEOLOGY,” she puts the responsibility “for the terminal injustice of this world” upon:

- The leaders who in her naïve and passionate opinion have destroyed everything she values in the name (a) of business and (b) of laissez-faire.
- In the name (a) of rationalization and (b) / of enterprise.
- In the name of (a) so-called individualism and (b) / of so-called choice.
- The basic ingredients in other words of a whole tragedy.

In her speech about the motifs in *Attempts*, Mitchell sees the issue of children and the challenges they face by terrorism, sexual exploitation, media manipulation and artistic pretension as a main idea behind writing the play. This view of a child being exploited goes beyond that to encompass the sickness in different wakes of modern life. In “FAITH IN OURSELVES,” the unknown speaker states that:

- Devastation. The harmony of generations / has been destroyed.
- Exactly. This enclosed, secure world has been torn apart.
- The harmony of generations has been destroyed. The women have been raped. The little children have been disembowelled.
- The women have been raped, and then disembowelled.
- The men have hacked each other to pieces.
- Brother has killed brother.
- Cousin has murdered cousin. Brother has raped sister.
- The soldiers are laughing even though these are their own cousins, their own *parents*, their / mothers and fathers.



- Burning their own *parents* in the sacred orchard.
Burning them
alive and laughing.(17)

Like Wordsworth's Lucy Poems, Anne can be interpreted as a human being and as a part of nature. The speaker said, "There is the person, and there is the tree. There is Anya the woman, and there is Anya the tree". (17) This ecological relationship between human and non-human has been destroyed.

- And this is why we sympathise.
- Not just sympathise, but empathise.
Empathise because ...
- ... because Anya's valley is our valley.
Anya's trees are our trees.
Anya's trees are our trees. Anya's family is
the family to which we all belong. (21)

In addition to many questions raised by Anne, from the violent acts of terrorism to the refugee camps, the motives behind modern war acquires significance. She reports how:

the war is a war against a government that takes the
bread out of the
working man's mouth and gives it to the
pornographers and
abortionists of this world.
Is a war against the God-forsaken *faggots*.
Is a war against the crack dealers and the Blacks.
Is a war against the conspiring *Jews* and their
attempts to rewrite
history.
Is a *crusade* against the degenerate images which
masquerade as *art*.
Is a war against all those who would deny our right to
bear arms.

And Annie has like this inner light. (49)

To conclude, the play, as a text, has nothing to do according to the well-known traditions of drama. It is a deep reflection of a playwright's insight who finds nothing that can transmit his images on stage. The unseen character is a real representation of what we are around. Nothing fixed that we can grant about. 'Attempts' of the title refers that we can do nothing but attempt to know truth and meaning. In contemporary drama, the theatrical conventions are futile to help people perceive what is going on. Place, time, characters and plot have no role to build up a scene. Sound technology and the music used



during the show pushed to nowhere and to no time to emphasize Crimp's message. This, as we believe, the new direction Crimp is after. The advanced technologies submerge all facts and interpretations with a very exclusive perspective. Clear truths are hard to find and this is definitely the case of understanding what the character of Anne is. This appreciation is justified by the trend of the deconstructionist as he/she expects the reader to deconstruct not to recreate the content to find out the unconsciousness of the text. He is not only after the surface components of sentences; he investigates every entry to recognize the inconsistency and irregularities.

Ultimately, it is kindly recommended to watch the play through the site provided at the end of the works cited to make easy access to our study-assumption. We intend to end our study with a statement mentioned at the very beginning of the play "No one will have directly experienced the actual cause of such happenings, but everyone will have received an image of them."²⁸

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wx6jrXg8UG8> Attempts on her Life - Martin Crimp - YouTube

1 *Attempts* here and elsewhere in this study refers to *Attempts on Her Life*.

2 Dan Rebellato is a Professor of Contemporary Theatre Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance. Centre for Contemporary British Theatre. Katie Mitchell and the Politics of Naturalist Theatre. ed. / Benjamin Fowler. London : Routledge, 2018. p. 39-71 (4x45).

3 The soundscape is a term coined by Raymond Murray Schafer who is a Canadian composer, writer, music educator and environmentalist perhaps best known for his World Soundscape Project, concern for acoustic ecology, and his book *The Tuning of the World*.

4 Richard Wattenberg, 'Attempt on Her Life' Review, Updated Article March 5, 2011, p.1. https://www.oregonlive.com/performance/index.ssf/2011/03/theater_review_no_plot_no_clea.html

⁵ Elinor Fuchs in Liz Tomlin "Citational Theory in Practice ..." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 2014. Vol. 24, No. 3, 371-375.

⁶ Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philosophy to Performativity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 182.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. By Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p.320.

⁸ Patrick Michael Finelli, "Sound Studies: Voice and Aurality in the Theatre", *Theatre Journal*, Theatre and Dance Faculty Publications at Scholar Commons, v. 64 (Fall 2012):446.

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11 Michele Hilmes, "Foregrounding Sound: New (And Old) Directions in Sound Studies," *Cinema Journal*, v. 48, n. 1 (Fall, 2008):116.

¹² Quoted in Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, second Edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), P. 3.

¹³ Julie Campbell, "Staging Embers: An Act of Killing?", *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, v. 7, Beckett Versus Beckett (1998): 92.

¹⁴ Ibid., 95.

¹⁵ Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, second Edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), P. 10.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Aleks Sierz, "Reality Sucks the Slump in British New Writing," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, v. 30, n. 2 (May, 2008): 103.

¹⁸ Quoted in Aleks Sierz, "Reality Sucks the Slump in British New Writing," p. 103.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Quoted in Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, p. 51.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Katie Mitchel's Waves and Martin Crimp and Katie Mitchell's Attempts on Her Life, reviewed by Neil Blackadder, *Theatre Journal*, v. 60, n. 1 (Mar., 2008): 141.

²³ Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, p. 52.

²⁴ Martin Crimp, *Attempts on Her Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) p.65. Any other reference to the text will be to the same edition. Only page number will appear at the end of each quotation.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 196.

²⁸ M. Crimp, *Martin Crimp: Plays*. (London: Faber and Faber 2005) P.198.