

**« Perhaps That Taste of Nothing Is What You Can Taste » :
Sensory Landscapes, Absence, and Objects in Martin
Crimp's « The Country »**

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When Martin Crimp's *The Country* was first performed at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2000, critics focused on its Pinterian echoes, the popular motif of betrayal, as well as its attack on the rural myth, and described it as a disturbing and ambiguous play. Despite its unsettling elusiveness and coolness, *The Country* is a hot piece, in which sensual and sexual tensions permeate chilling verbal exchanges between cryptic – and seemingly unemotional – characters. Staging an intricate web of sensory reactions, provoked by the (im)materiality of language and the evocative potential of props, this drama effectively «works through affective nuances [...], acoustic and visual, which develop an almost haunting presence in their absence» (Angelaki 2012: 97). Examining Crimp's sensory landscapes and his subtle dialogue between presence and absence, this article aims to demonstrate how, in an opaque play built on ellipses, the body *sous rature* speaks as loud as the ostended body.

After dismembering dramatic and theatrical conventions in his acclaimed postmodern jigsaw *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), the eclectic British playwright Martin Crimp tried to re-order the fragments of stage narrative in *The Country*, which was broadcast on BBC radio in the same year and first staged, in a slightly modified version, at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 11 May 2000, under the direction of Katie Mitchell. As Crimp himself put it, «*Attempts on Her Life* was a play that pulled plays apart, so this [*The Country*] is a play where I attempt to put a play back together again»¹.

Although they obviously differ from a variety of points of view, the two dramas have something in common. If Crimp's 1997 masterpiece, translated into more than twenty languages, has crossed (trans)national borders, *The*

¹ Quoted in J. Whitley, "The Enigma that is Mr Crimp" [online], *The Telegraph*, 11 May 2000. Last accessed 22 May 2016. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4720678/The-enigma-that-is-Mr-Crimp.html>.

Country has entered the repertoire of several theatres across Europe and overseas. Moreover, as Vicky Angelaki observes, their formal antithesis should not lead us to think that *Attempts on Her Life* and *The Country* are diametrically opposed to each other. Rather, in different ways, both plays «work[] to negate the audience's expectations and deny convenient endings, subverting theatre norms. The difference is that *The Country* cancels these expectations from within the very genre it ostensibly serves, subtly but just as effectively; the way in which it subverts form through content produces a strong defamiliarization effect»².

By reworking what is conventionally defined as a traditional structure – five (short) acts – and exploring a popular (and somewhat hackneyed) theme such as marital infidelity, *The Country* stimulates and challenges the audience through dramatic ellipses, disturbing innuendos, subtle power games, and a profound sensory impact exerted by evocative words and props.

The play revolves around Richard, a negligent GP and recovering drug addict, and his wife Corinne, a forty-year-old London couple who have recently moved to the country with their children to start a new life. One night, Richard brings home a twenty-five-year-old American woman, saying he found her unconscious by the roadside. Corinne is suspicious from the start and finds out that, overlooking his professional duty, her husband has induced Rebecca to overdose and has bought her a gold watch. In fact, Richard's beautiful patient/lover, who moved to the country to carry out a research project on historical subjects, is the only reason why the family has left the city. Moreover, during a tense telephone conversation with his senior partner Morris, it emerges that Richard has neglected a dying patient in order to stay with Rebecca. In the middle of the night, Corinne – who is deeply upset – leaves the house with the children. In the final act, two months later, the reunited couple is celebrating Corinne's birthday: Richard promises to stay away from drugs and gives his wife an expensive pair of shoes as a present. However, this seeming reconciliation is no guarantee of

² V. Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke-New York 2012, p. 97.

future happiness, as Corinne suggests at the end of the play: «What if I have to spend the rest of my life simulating love?»³.

Nearly all the critics who saw the first production of *The Country* at the Royal Court in 2000 focused on its Pinterian reverberations, the theme of betrayal, as well as Crimp's attack on the Virgilian idea of the pastoral, and defined the play as disturbing, cryptic, cold, and chilling. For instance, the *Mail on Sunday's* Georgina Brown described *The Country* as «a creepy, unsettling piece», in which «Crimp detects the tumour of betrayal with a specialist surgeon's precision and accuracy»⁴, an assessment that was entirely consonant with Sarah Hemming's words in the *Financial Times*: «It is a cold piece, admirable rather than likeable: you feel you are watching a perfectly executed clinical dissection but you search in vain for a heart»⁵. Similarly, in the *Daily Telegraph*, Charles Spencer stressed Crimp's (seeming) lack of warmth and empathy: «his dramas may generate interest, but they never generate warmth. [...] we long for the flesh-and-blood drama of real people in real relationships rather than all this chilly artifice»⁶. This «glacial evasiveness», William McEvoy wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph*, pervades a play in which «language screens off emotions: its surface meaning is unsteady and opaque, opening up a gap for secondary (and often sexual) meanings to proliferate»⁷.

Despite its allusive and symbolical import, it can be argued that *The Country* is a hot piece, in which deep sensual and sexual tensions lurk under the «microscopically calculated»⁸ verbal surface. As Katie Mitchell points out, it is a play dealing (un)explicitly with bodies, a piece which subtly and disturbingly interweaves several senses:

On one level, *The Country* is about what people do with their bodies: sticking syringes full of heroin into them or fucking each other, with all the mental effects of betrayal and confusion that that involves. Although the children

³ M. Crimp, *The Country*, in M. Crimp, *Plays Two: No One Sees the Video, The Misanthrope, Attempts on Her Life, The Country*, introduced by the author, Faber and Faber, London 2005, pp. 285-366 (366).

⁴ G. Brown, *Mail on Sunday*, 21 May 2000; *Theatre Record*, vol. XX, no. 10 (2000), p. 616.

⁵ S. Hemming, *Financial Times*, 24 May 2000; *ivi*, pp. 620-621 (621).

⁶ C. Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 2000; *ivi*, pp. 616-617 (616).

⁷ W. McEvoy, *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 May 2000; *ivi*, pp. 617-618.

⁸ P. Taylor, *Independent*, 18 May 2000; *ivi*, p. 620.

never appear onstage, the minute that Corinne feels a real threat, she ships them bodily off to a safe place. Bodies: whether you put pure water into your body or have an alcoholic drink. It's a very visceral play. If you go through it carefully, there are countless moments when touch, or taste, or smell is mentioned. All the senses are engaged⁹.

Creating a labyrinthine network of sensory reactions, elicited by the (im)materiality of words and the evocative power of stage objects, Crimp's play «works through affective nuances [...], acoustic and visual, which develop an almost haunting presence in their absence»¹⁰.

It might be argued that *The Country* features two opposite but complementary kinds of bodies: bodies *in praesentia* – visible, palpable, and prominent onstage figures, especially Rebecca – , and bodies *in absentia*, existing *sous rature*, that is (im)material and elusive traces left by offstage characters such as Morris, the couple's children, and Sophie, their part-time nanny.

In this light, Rebecca is probably the most significantly embodied character in the play: her sensual figure is a pivotal dramatic and theatrical object from the very beginning. Crimp's play starts *in medias res* and, in line with his penchant for elusiveness and ambiguity, the British dramatist «artfully withholds information to generate suspense»¹¹. As David Nathan puts it in his review, this playwright «is sparse with his information, clearly believing, as Pinter does, that we are not entitled to any more information than would normally be revealed in an overheard conversation between two people who have known each other for a long time»¹². Indeed, the first act opens with a domestic duologue between Richard and Corinne, who is nervously cutting out some pictures to go round the cot with a pair of scissors (one of those disturbingly recurring objects in the play). The first sinister reference to the young American woman appears after a few lines, when Corinne starts questioning Richard about this mysterious stranger: «This person. Is she asleep? When will she wake up?»¹³. Although the

⁹ Quoted in A. Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp* (2006), Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London-New York 2013 (2nd edition), p. 203.

¹⁰ V. Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange*, cit., p. 97.

¹¹ M. Billington, *Guardian*, 17 May 2000; *Theatre Record*, cit., p. 618.

¹² D. Nathan, *Jewish Chronicle*, 19 May 2000; *ivi*, p. 617.

¹³ M. Crimp, *The Country*, cit., p. 292.

doctor affirms that he saved the defenceless woman for medical reasons, his wife understandably becomes more and more suspicious. Towards the end of the act, Corinne briefly describes Rebecca's harmonious body («frail young ... slim young ... *abandoned* at the / side of a road»)¹⁴, ironically comparing her to a heavenly «vision»¹⁵.

The second act opens with Corinne carefully observing Rebecca's expensive wristwatch, a material trace of her husband's infidelity. She confesses to Richard her irresistible urge to touch the body of the uninvited guest: «I wanted to touch her. [...] To see if she was hot»¹⁶. The adjective *hot*, which at first might merely be related to Rebecca's physical temperature and state of health, at a deeper level hints at her magnetic sensuality:

- [...] Why did you uncover her?
 - I was curious about her arms, actually. Have you looked at her arms?
 - No, I haven't looked at her arms.
 - Her legs, then. Have you looked at her face? Haven't you looked at her? Haven't you looked at any part of her?
- Pause.*
Aren't you curious?¹⁷

The foreign body of the unwelcome Other thus becomes an evocative, mysterious, and appealing locus permeated with sensory intensities. Aptly, in the 2000 production of the play, the Anglo-Indian actress Indira Varma's Rebecca, who «radiate[d] a tetchy sensuality»¹⁸, had an alienating impact, performing a fascinating and exotic «otherness that contrasted well with the Anglo-Saxon Englishness of the main couple»¹⁹. The white, very British, and middle-class character of Corinne, played by Juliet Stevenson, examines every single part of the beautiful and ex-centric figure of her rival through touch and sight, in order to uncover not only her body but also her innermost secrets. At the same time, she is obviously provoking her unfaithful husband (Owen Teale) to catch him at fault. As far as the *mise en scène* of these first two acts is concerned, two different paths can be

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 304 [original emphasis].

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 306.

¹⁷ Ivi, pp. 306-307.

¹⁸ M. Billington, *Guardian*, 17 May 2000, cit., p. 618.

¹⁹ A. Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, cit., p. 57.

followed: some theatre directors decide to keep the unsettling body of the intruder offstage until the third act, creating suspense by increasing the sense of menace, while others expose her sleeping figure from the outset, enhancing the corporeal dimension – that was the case in the Zurich and Manchester productions in 2001 and 2005, respectively²⁰.

The Country is a carefully constructed piece which triggers various kinds of sensory actions and reactions. Corinne's senses (touch, sight, and smell) serve as a strategic weapon to explore (and experience) Rebecca's body and to discover the truth about her lying husband («[s]he sniffs at him for tell-tale bodily odours»)²¹, who is still addicted to extra-marital sex and heroin. An even more explicit instance is provided by the defamiliarizing discussion between Richard and Corinne about the flavour of the local water that, according to the woman, has a worryingly pure taste. Their insistent reiteration of the word *taste* (eleven occurrences) stresses the extent to which the senses permeate Crimp's play, even at a linguistic level:

- *Taste* this.
- What?
- *Taste* it.
- He sips the water.*
- I can't *taste* anything.
- But there's a *taste* of something.
- What?
- Something ... I don't know... purity. D'you think it's safe?
- It's water, that's all. It's a glass of water.
- But shouldn't there be something in it?
- It's just a glass of water.
- That's what I'm saying.
- It's water – it's pure – and so perhaps it has a *taste*.
- You can *taste* it then?
- I can't *taste* anything. It has no *taste*. It *tastes* of nothing. But perhaps that *taste* of nothing is what you can *taste*²².

In keeping with this, in the fifth and final act, we find a slightly varied duologue on the same topic, in which the term *taste* is repeated another nine

²⁰ See P. Buse, "Sollicitations téléphoniques: *La Campagne* de Martin Crimp", in É. Angel-Perez and N. Boireau (ed. by), *Le théâtre anglais contemporain (1985-2005)*, Klincksieck, Paris 2007, pp. 153-168 (154).

²¹ S. Marlowe, *What's On*, 24 May 2000; *Theatre Record*, cit., p. 616.

²² M. Crimp, *The Country*, cit., pp. 294-295 [my emphasis].

times, thus reinforcing the central role played by the sensory dimension in the play:

- How is the water?
- [...]
- Delicious. Cold. Why?
- What does it *taste* of?
- *Taste* of? Nothing.
- Really?
- Why? What should it / *taste* of?
- You used to think it had a *taste*. When we first came here. It worried you.
- (*laughs*) What did?
- (*laughs*) The *taste* of the water. The *taste* of the water worried you.
- The *taste* of the water worried me? What did it *taste* of?
- It didn't *taste* of anything.
- Then why did it worry me? It doesn't worry me now.
- Good²³.

Comparing these two carefully constructed duologues revolving around the sense of taste, it is interesting to note how the strained relationship between Richard and his wife has (seemingly) changed during the play. In their first verbal exchange, Corinne's emotional distress and alertness, caused by the arrival of the unexpected guest, rise to the surface: the woman perceives the unusually pure taste of water as an insidious threat to her safety. In the second duologue, two months later, the reunited couple appear more relaxed. Corinne, who now seems to feel at ease in the domestic space, enjoys the pleasant and fresh taste of the water and laughs at the ghosts of her past fears.

In *The Country*, Crimp constantly plays with onstage visibility and invisibility: while the main characters (Richard, Corinne, and in particular Rebecca) have a tangible theatrical presence, other important figures (Morris, Sophie, and the children) are deliberately kept offstage. In fact, these absent characters interact with the onstage action through (im)material words and material props.

Richard and Corinne's children, for instance, are mentioned many times throughout the play, but they never appear. Angelaki suggests that their physical absence, or, more precisely, the absence of «child actors that actually embody child characters in this and Crimp's other plays, is further

²³ Ivi, pp. 347-348 [my emphasis].

indication of the fact that we are dealing with a stage universe from which innocence has been banished»²⁴. These ghostly children, who «don't have names»²⁵, are most vividly evoked through verbal exchanges in the fourth act, staging Richard and his young lover. Rebecca insists on having a shower, but Richard prevents her from going upstairs, passing through the children's room and invading the most intimate area of the family's domestic territory. At this stage, he still believes that his children are peacefully sleeping in their beds, not knowing that Corinne has left the house with them in the middle of the night:

- I promise to tip-toe. Let me just tip-toe up and see. Let me just listen to them breathe. Or, if they're awake, I could tell them a story.
- They don't want to hear a story.
- But everybody wants to hear a story, don't they? I could say: Hello. I'm Rebecca. I'm the maid. Let me tell you a story. Would you like me to tell you a story?
- They don't want / to hear a story.
- Oh yes please, Rebecca, tell us a story²⁶.

Here, storytelling features as an effective strategy to evoke, and therefore mediate, the physical. In this scene, which is worth quoting at length, the corporeal dimension is translated into 'palpable' words by Rebecca, and the narrative starts flowing from this linguistic transposition. The American student appropriates the structure and dreamlike imagery of a fairy tale to conjure up her physical encounters with the doctor (for instance, the conventional opening formula and the reiteration of the vocative «children» to capture the (absent) intradiegetic listeners' attention):

- [...] Well once upon a time, children, there was a girl, there was a bright young girl, and she was sick, and she needed some medicine. So she went to a doctor –
- Listen to me.
- She went to a doctor and she said, doctor, doctor, it hurts, I need some medicine. But the doctor wouldn't give her any. He said, go away – don't waste my time – I have no medicine. So she went back again and she said, doctor, doctor, it really hurts, I need some medicine. And this time the doctor went to the door. He locked the door. He said: I need to take a history – roll up your sleeve. So she rolled up her sleeve and the doctor took a history. Then, children, he got one instrument to look into her eyes. And another instrument to listen to

²⁴ V. Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange*, cit., p. 113.

²⁵ M. Crimp, *The Country*, cit., p. 340.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 341.

her heart. And when he'd looked into her eyes and listened to her heart, he asked her to undress.

- Rebecca.

- He asked her to undress. And when she'd undressed, he said: I see now how very sick you are – you need some medicine. She said: Doctor, am I going to die? He said: No, it's simply that your eyes are very dark and your skin is very pale. Your skin is so thin that when I touch it like this with my lips I can feel the blood moving underneath. You're sick, that's all. You need some medicine. So the treatment began.

The treatment was wild, children. It could take place at any time of day or night. In any part of the city. In any part of her body. Her body ... became the city. The doctor learned how to unfold her – like a map²⁷.

Rebecca's unconventional narrative, which reworks and defamiliarises the traditional template of a bedtime story, is marked by a pronounced shift in register. While in the first part of the tale the medical examination is described in more pragmatic terms (the doctor takes a history, investigates the body of his patient for signs of disease, reaches a diagnosis, and prescribes treatment to alleviate pain), the last section progressively veers towards the symbolic dimension. In a highly evocative (and provocative) way, Rebecca embodies the urban as a metaphor of moral corruption: in Clara Escoda Agustí's terms, she «is made to become what Richard needs her to be – if Corinne is 'the country', she must become 'the city', standing for risk, passion and 'illegality'»²⁸. This unusual narrative technique, which immediately attracts the attention of the audience, demonstrates that Crimp's play, as Angelaki points out, «only adheres to conventional form on the surface so as to subvert it along with the spectators' expectations, disturbing the habitual associations of a certain type of language and narrative with a specific kind of verbal matter»²⁹. The monologue works on two levels: addressing Richard and Corinne's children, Rebecca makes them present and, at the same time, through the inherent corporeality of language, she «reassert[s] her sensory physicality [...] and place[s] it at the epicentre of a revelation that both intimidates and rivets. This affect applies

²⁷ Ivi, pp. 341-342.

²⁸ C. Escoda Agustí, *Martin Crimp's Theatre: Collapse as Resistance to Late Capitalist Society*, de Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2013, p. 192.

²⁹ V. Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange*, cit., p. 109.

to both herself and the audience; the revelation is intimidating because of its content and riveting because of its form»³⁰.

If the children's presence is conjured up verbally, the characters of Morris and Sophie reach the stage through a domestic object, an old-fashioned phone that «semble tout droit sorti d'un musée»³¹. This phone disturbingly rings until the Beckettian end of the play («*Neither moves. The phone continues to ring*») ³², repeatedly interrupting Richard and Corinne's tense conversations and increasing the sense of menace for the audience. For Crimp, the phone has always been a disturbing object, «an instrument of doom»³³. As he declared in an interview, «hav[ing] a life of their own»³⁴ and being largely instrumental in constructing narratives, stage objects perform an essential role in plays. Stanton B. Garner argues that, like other theatrical signs, stage objects «bear a burden of signification, participating in narrative, social, and other codes. As part of this activity, props function metonymically to designate the entirety of a dramatic world, signifying its fictional extension through specific points of actual materiality»³⁵. Even more relevantly, he draws an interesting parallel with the linguistic system: «[l]ike language, props extend the body's spatializing capacities and its projective operations»³⁶. This is exactly what happens in *The Country*: far from being a lifeless object («le téléphone est loin d'être un banal objet inanimé») ³⁷, the phone erupts into (and disrupts) the domestic sphere («il exige avec insistance, fait intrusion») ³⁸, adding to the (im)materiality of the unvoiced offstage characters by giving them a means of expression and 'projecting' them into Richard and Corinne's country house.

This incessant ringing of the phone is just one of the disturbing and threatening sounds dominating Crimp's aural landscapes. Characterised by

³⁰ Ivi, p. 110.

³¹ P. Buse, "Sollicitations téléphoniques: *La Campagne de Martin Crimp*", cit., p. 166.

³² M. Crimp, *The Country*, cit., p. 366.

³³ Quoted in A. Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, cit., p. 105.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 106.

³⁵ S. B. Garner, Jr., *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1994, p. 89.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ P. Buse, "Sollicitations téléphoniques: *La Campagne de Martin Crimp*", cit., p. 165.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

minimalist aesthetics, Mitchell's original production at the Royal Court in 2000 made an effective (and affective) use of aural inputs, showing how, as Stephen Di Benedetto states in *The Provocation of the Senses in Contemporary Theatre*, «sound triggers visceral sensations, which in turn evoke mood in the context of performance»³⁹. The audience's perception was indeed affected by a wide range of different stimuli laden with sinister resonance and increasing the sense of discomfort. The various nuances of these «audio-scapes» are described in detail by Angelaki:

As spectators took their seats, a high-pitched sound of bird chirping reverberated, growing increasingly louder. There was an abrupt shift and marked contrast when the bird chirping gave way to the aggressive, amplified sound of scissors as the first scene opened to Corinne [...]. [T]he space between scenes was filled with palpable tension as a sound resembling the hammering of a nail against a wall, set against rhythmical music, spread across the auditorium. Seconds before the opening of each scene, the sound was slightly modified: sometimes the knocking became stronger, overtaking the melody, while at other times it resembled a rapid heartbeat, or the musical score of a thriller, agonizing and persistent. It was between the penultimate and final scene that the sound was at its strongest, only to fade back into bird chirping in an anti-climatic, poignant segue into the couple's final stage moments⁴⁰.

Angelaki's account of the aural subtext of the play and of its material rendition in performance gives a sense of the profound impact of this auditory, or, more generally, sensory stimulation on the theatregoer's body and mind. Though most spectators may think that grasping the meaning of an elusive play such as *The Country* is a purely cerebral operation, in actual fact the senses contribute substantially to our perception and interpretation of Crimp's dramatic universe. In Di Benedetto's words, «[a]s the brain fires and experiences the sensations that stimulation and context provide, the triggers become a part of our experience. The attendant's body is pivotal to the theatrical event because the body is both the means by which the attendant's brain receives stimulus and the means by which the brain interprets the event»⁴¹.

³⁹ S. Di Benedetto, *The Provocation of the Senses in Contemporary Theatre*, Routledge, New York-Abingdon 2010, p. 125.

⁴⁰ V. Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange*, cit., p. 99.

⁴¹ S. Di Benedetto, *The Provocation of the Senses in Contemporary Theatre*, cit., p. 6.

Operating on different levels of perception, *The Country* is a challenging play which invites us to explore various sensory landscapes as well as the close relationship between what is said and what is left unspoken, embodiment and disembodiment, materiality and immateriality, presence and absence, stage and audience. In an enigmatic and multi-layered piece rooted in dialogue and interspersed with dramatic and theatrical ellipses, the seeming absence of the body speaks as loud as its onstage presence. Crimp's textual and linguistic games intriguingly conjure up the corporeal dimension, making clear that (not only bodies but also) words are tangible and thus 'matter' in the double sense of the term, being crucial from a lexical and semantic perspective, but having an intrinsically physical substance and an inherently sensory potential as well. Staging powerful linguistic landscapes and «evidencing how language can make or break physical presence, the play defamiliarizes the concept of physical embodiedness equalling presence»⁴². Similarly, in Crimp's theatre stage objects play a pivotal role: specific props such as an old telephone ringing incessantly are therefore able to render invisible characters present, materializing them on the stage through the sensory stimulation of the spectators' bodies and minds. Revolving around the presence of different kinds of absence (narrative and physical), *The Country* thus offers its audience a subtly immersive theatrical experience which has the capacity to appeal to the intellect and, at the same time, to the senses.

⁴² V. Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange*, cit., p. 112.