GAO XINGJIAN VS. MARTIN CRIMP IN BETWEEN MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with the plays by Gao Xingjian- a Chinese contemporary playwright and Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2000- and Martin Crimp a contemporary English playwright. The plays from both authors will be looked at from a comparative perspective within the theoretical framework linked to the debate between modernism and postmodernism, as inspired by Calinescu's theory. Calinescu's theory is based on the idea that Postmodernism is a 'face of modernism': he speaks about recurrent aspects ('similarities') of Modernism in Postmodernism, not only in terms of the repetition of patterns from the past in the present culture, but in terms of a natural historical evolution of Modernism into new cultural forms.

The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to prove Calinescu's idea of continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism through the work by the two playwrights and by doing this it inevitably demonstrates a link between two writers coming from two different continents, hence a connection between Eastern and Western Literature. This thesis carries out an investigation into the two writers' dramatic texts and searches for signs of modern and postmodern elements and highlights how these elements coexist. In particular, in each chapter the thesis will carry out a close reading analysis of one or more plays by each author: in the case of Gao, we focus on post-exile plays, written after he left China in 1986 and are analysed chronologically; in the case of Crimp, the plays in question are not in strict chronological order but almost in parallel order to Gao's plays as they were written from the 1990s up to the present day.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1

Theoretical framework and Gao Xingjian's 'new' theatre

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The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to prove Calinescu's idea of continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism through the work of the two playwrights, which will inevitably demonstrate a link between two writers coming from two different continents, hence a connection between Eastern and Western literature. This thesis carries out an investigation into the two writers' dramatic texts and searches for signs of Modern and Postmodern elements and highlights how these elements coexist.

Before going into detail on the theoretical approach and background of this thesis, a brief outline of the two playwrights' careers will be given as well of the motives inspiring the comparative approach.

1.1. Gao Xingjian

Gao Xingjian was born in 1940 in Guanzhou, Jang Xi province. He studied French at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute and went on to become a translator for the Chinese Writers Association, having spent ten years previous to this in a re-education camp during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Subsequently he became playwright in residence at the People's Art Theatre in Beijing in 1978, where he produced experimental and ground-breaking plays, such as *Alarm Signal* (1982) and *Bus Stop* (1983), the latter seemingly being inspired by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. His work, which openly ignored the prescripts of Socialist Realism had attracted suspicion and criticism from the Communist regime; *The Other Shore* (1986) was censored and banned from being performed in Mainland China. After leaving China on a tour to Europe, he settled in Paris as a political refugee almost in what one could call a voluntary exile. He went on to publish one of his major novels, *Soul Mountain* completed in 1989, based on 10-month walking tour along the Yangtze River, which he undertook after being erroneously diagnosed with lung cancer. He was made Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1992 and awarded the Prix Communauté Française de Belgique 1994 (for *Le somnambule*) and the Prix du Nouvel An chinois 1997 (for

Soul Mountain). Despite being surrounded by many controversies and attracting criticism from the Chinese authorities that questioned his Chinese 'artistic' identity, he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2000. This thesis will look at his latest plays written after the self-imposed exile in 1986. Gao Xingjian currently lives in France, where he continues to write essays, plays and is dedicated to his passion for painting using a classical Chinese style. His work is widely celebrated in Europe (it is interesting to note that no major production of his plays has taken place in the UK) as well as in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan. He recently produced a film *Silhouette sinon l'ombre* (Digital Média Production and Théâtre du Gymnase, 2006) together with Alain Melka, and Jean-Louis Darmyn, in conjunction with Triangle Méditerranée (Marseille).

1.2. Martin Crimp

Crimp was born sixteen years later than Gao in 1956 in Dartwood, Kent. Similarly to Gao Xingjian he showed an aptitude for languages; and even though he went on to read English and not French at St Catherine's College Cambridge, he has translated and adapted many plays from French into English, such as Ionesco's *Les Chaises/ The Chairs* (1997), Moliere *Le Misanthrope/The Misanthrope* (1996) and Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes/The Maids* (1999). Beckett was a great inspiration to Crimp, as he was also for Gao: Crimp's first ever play *Clang* (produced at Cambridge during his undergraduate years) was based on the work of both Ionesco and Beckett. Before going into drama, in 1978 he wrote a collection of short stories *An Anatomy* and a novel *Early Days*. The Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, London offered him a platform for his first plays until his professional debut with *Living Remains* in 1982. After his play *No one sees the video* was staged at the Royal Court in 1990 he established himself as a major figure in British theatre influencing other writers such as Sarah Kane. Later on, in 1997, he became writer in residence at the Royal Court, and was awarded the prestigious John Whiting Award in 1993. In 1997 his groundbreaking play *Attempts on Her Life* was staged at the Royal Court receiving mixed reviews. His work, seen as bold and experimental, has so far avoided categorisation and has not been identified within major dramatic trends. Despite influencing writers of the 1990s such as Sarah Kane, he distanced himself from *in-yer-face theatre*[1], from which his plays greatly differ, rejecting the usage of explicit visual violence. His artistic isolation from major theatrical trends has to some extent relegated him to what Aleks Sierz calls a 'secretive' artistic

[1] See Aleks Sierz, *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001).

career. Referring to the ten-year anniversary of the staging of *Attempts on Her Life* and celebrating this play's revival in 2007 at the National Theatre, London, Sierz says:

> Although his name appears in neon in the theatre capitals of Europe, with his work a big hit at last year's Festival d'Automne in Paris, here he is better known for his translations (most recently *The Seagull* at the National Theatre) than for his original plays.[2]

Sierz finds the reason for the British audience's scepticism in Crimp's challenging and intellectual experimentalism, whereas his theatre has found a relative degree of recognition in continental Europe. One should not forget that Sarah Kane's work followed a similar path with a recent return to her work in the UK. However, I would argue that Crimp's case is even more problematic: his theatre in its originality is beyond localised dramatic trends; it did not adapt to the staging of explicit violence in 1990s (despite the critical diffidence of the time, this kind of theatre attracted major media attention due to the very nature of the works) and has resisted a return to a 'socially' engaged realism typical of the last ten years, that theatres like the Royal Court seem to promote. Similarly to Gao, Crimp found it difficult to be fully accepted by the audience of his own country. This is also largely demonstrated by the lack of academic studies of his theatre apart from a semi-academic book on him by Aleks Sierz, and a few articles published on academic journals such as the ones by H. Zimmermann, Mary Luckhurst, and in France by Elisabeth Angel-Perez. Martin Crimp still continues writing in the UK: *The City,* his latest play has just recently been staged at the Royal Court and he has written a libretto *Into the Little Hill* for the famous British composer George Benjamin. This thesis will mainly look at the plays after *Attempts on Her Life*, with the exception of *Playing with Repeats* staged in 1989.

Having looked at these two writers' careers, one can say that despite the obvious differences, Gao and Crimp share common artistic models of inspiration, namely French absurdist theatre and Beckett, a willingness to challenge the conventions from their own country as well as a sense of artistic isolation that goes beyond cultural movements and categorisations. This sets up a good foundation for comparison and for exploring their cultural identity in relation to Modernism and Postmodernism; however, before exploring the cultural background linked to Modernism and Potsmodernism, the comparative approach that inspired this study will be examined.

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[2] Aleks Sierz, "Martin Crimp: Why the British playwright is stranger in our midst", *The Independent* (Thursday, 8 March 2007).

1.3. The Comparative approach

In his Nobel Prize speech Gao Xingjian talks of a literature that both transcends national boundaries and makes profound revelations about the universality of human nature.[3] It is in the spirit of Gao Xingjian's artistic vision that this thesis embarks on a comparative study. Furthermore, one needs to refer to Zhang Longxi, Professor (Chair) of Comparative Literature and Translation at the City University of Hong Kong, who published pioneering books in the field of comparative literature and China.[4] His arguments validate a comparative approach in terms of a dialogical interaction, not based on the outdated understanding of cultural universality, but still condemning the wrongdoings of an indiscriminate relativism and submission of reality to the supremacy of textuality:

> [...] the understanding of culture and history is not, and not merely, a matter of subjective projection, linguistic coherence, or ideological control. [...] To insist on the reality of history outside discursive construction is not to go back to a naïve uncritical, positivistic notion of objectivity, but to resist the pervasive influence of the so-called linguistic turn, the much-inflated notion of 'textuality' that subsumes everything under a model of linguistic formulation. At the same time, to recognize 'reality external to discourse' is also to reaffirm the value of lived experience in shaping our understanding and knowledge.[5]

The basis for a comparative approach is, therefore, beyond linguist textuality and relativism and encompasses knowledge and experience as important cultural values; within these terms a dialogical interaction can take place. The notion of dialogical interaction derives from his revival of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics ('Dialogue – the genuine desire to listen to the voice of the other person or text, and the effort to reach beyond oneself to communicate with that person or text')[6] and Levinas' idea of the 'Other' not only as 'alter-ego' but as 'as what I myself am not', which leads to the idea that 'understanding the Other is an act "outside the subject", an act always trying to listen to the voice of the other person, to engage that person in a concrete situation, and thus an act with profound moral implications.'[7]

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[3] Gao Xingjian, "Wenxuede liyou," *PMLA published by Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. 116, No. 3 (May, 2001), 602-60.
[4] See Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites – from Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Studies of China*, *Allegoresis – Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and his latest book *Unexpected Affinities – Reading Across Cultures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) an expanded version of the lectures given at University of Toronto in 2005.
[5] Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites,* 2-3.
[6] Ibid., 5.
[7] Ibid., 6.

To some extent, Zhang's ideal of a dialogical relationship between cultures might seem to be a generic attempt to revive humanist values of knowledge and of experience. However, one needs to see that Zhang's attempts are aimed at overcoming the negative effects of relativism and textual supremacy. Zhang envisages the possibility to surmount the West-East dichotomy by looking for similarities and not only for differences:

> When crucial differences between Chinese and Western cultural and political background are ignored, it is very important to point out the danger of such an oversight; but when China and the West are set up in a rigid and mutually exclusive dichotomy, it is then absolutely necessary to point out the many similarities, what is shared and common in languages, literatures, and cultures of the East and the West.[8]

Zhang condemns the widespread tendency among scholars to emphasise the differences between the East and the West, as affected by the 'paradigm of relativism' and advocates for a journey of exploration of both differences and similarities. Within this context, comparative literature and literary criticism need to go beyond the detail of textual differences and the issues related to translalability:

> In literary criticism, difference will be prominent on the level of textual details, as every poem or play or novel is different from every other, and it will take some distance of 'standing back' to discern a similar thematic pattern or structure in different works.[9]

'Standing back' and looking at the big picture validate the process of comparing texts coming from China and the West, not necessarily by assuming *a priori* a sense of universality between cultures and at the same time remaining inside the boundary of historical contingency. 'Standing back' still implies an activity of exploration and analysis that accounts for textual differences but is capable of looking beyond that, looking for potential similarities that might lie therein. Zhang's approach to literature and philosophy applies exactly this principle; this is not the space to go into particular examples of his comparative analysis but his principles can be of inspiration for approaching works by two authors that are apparently very dissimilar. What encourages us to take on Zhang's approach is the affinity that Zhang's principles share with Gao's inspiring speech talking about a common ground for literature from different continents. It is Zhang and Gao's approach to literature that justifies the comparative undertaking of this thesis.

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[8] Ibid., 13.
[9] Zhang Longxi, *Unexpected Affinities*, 20.

1.4. Terms of the comparative study

This introductory chapter will be looking at the theoretical framework of Postmodernism/Modernism that will explain the concept of continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism; it will then go into detail about the development of Modernism and Postmodernism in literature and theatre in both the West and China. Apart from the theoretical framework, the novelties of Gao's theatre will also be looked at, as introduced by the play *The Other Shore*, which will explain the development of the themes, the spiritual/ ritual relation and the concept of subjectivity and language that will all become terms of reference for the following comparison with Crimp.

1.4.1. Theoretical framework. Postmodernism: Calinescu's interpretation

Calinescu's theory is based on the idea that Postmodernism is a 'face of modernism': he speaks about recurrent themes ('similarities') of Modernism in Postmodernism, not only in terms of the repetition of patterns from the past in the present culture, but in terms of a natural historical evolution of Modernism into new cultural forms. Calinescu's accounts of Postmodernism can be found in *Five Faces of Modernity*, where he defines the origins and evolution of Postmodernism in philosophy, art and literary forms as deriving from Modernism and representing one of its phases:

> My own theory or, better, understanding of Postmodernism remains largely metaphorical and can best be stated in terms of physiognomic 'family resemblances' to which I have referred earlier. Postmodernism is a face of modernism. It reveals some striking likenesses with modernism (whose name it continues to carry within its own), particularly in its opposition to the principle of authority, an opposition that now extends to both the utopian reason and the utopian unreason that some modernists worshipped.[10]

On the one hand, his theory of Postmodernism is based upon the idea that Postmodernism seems to move away from Modernism towards the very denial of Modernism and its values and principles. For instance, Postmodernism differs from Modernism in that it deals with the idea of what reality is and how power influences its definition: to a certain degree, Postmodernism suggests that reality does not exist but is constructed, as language is made up of dominant discourses. On the other hand, Calinescu identifies 'physiognomic "family resemblances"' between Postmodernism and Modernism in terms of cultural forms, and in philosophical questions, Postmodernism shares common themes with other faces of Modernism such as avant-

[10] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 312.

garde, kitsch and camp, as well as continuing with questions on authority and power, and the Utopia of reason and of reality. He states that:

> Were it not for this larger modernism, the partial similarities and expressive differences among these faces would melt away and become meaningless. We would no longer become attracted to compare and contrast them. We may then assume that as long as we compare and contrast them, modernism survives, at least as the name of a cultural family resemblance, in which, for better or for worse, we continue to recognize ourselves.[11]

In his view, Modernism survives through continuous reference to it in the context of Postmodernism and through comparisons between the features of each. Calinescu sees Modernism as a large spirit with a variety of faces, with which culture can always be identified.

In this sense, his idea is similar to McHale's notion of culture as being made up of changing shifts and returning moments. McHale defines the modernistic ideological attitude as being epistemological, asking the questions 'What is to be known? What is reality? Who knows it? How do they know it and with what degree of certainty? How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to the another and with what degree of reliability?', whereas the Postmodern attitude is defined by the ontological questions regarding 'What is a world? Does reality exist? What kinds of world are there; how are they constituted? What is the mode of the existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world it projects?'. McHale's assumption follows the theory that both sets of questions, and therefore both attitudes, can coexist at a given time, one being the 'dominant' feature and the other the secondary. However, with a shift of time, a shift in ideology also occurs, where the secondary feature becomes the dominant or primary.[12] Calinescu mentions McHale's definition and theory of change, with the dominant prevailing in a given period but still coexisting with the other, and by doing so he stresses the link of Modernism to Postmodernism. McHale almost goes even further than Calinescu by suggesting that both attitudes always coexist at the same time. Moreover, McHale defines them as two distinctive cultural systems that are linked by their common doubting and denying the validity of other cultural systems, such as

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[11] Ibid., 312.

[12] "Push epistemological questions far enough and they tip over into ontological questions – the progression is not linear and one-way, but circular and reversible." Brian McHale, "Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernism Writing," in *Approaching Postmodernism: Papers Presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism, 21-23 September 1984, University Of Utrecht,* ed. Douwe Wessel Fokkema, Johannes Willem Bertens, Hans Bertens (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986), 75.

Realism and Enlightenment. Calinescu, on the other hand, still believes in Modernism as a dominant phase of Western culture surviving in its different phases.

Another of Calinescu's papers elucidates his interpretation of Postmodernism: 'Introductory remarks: Postmodernism, the mimetic and theatrical fallacies', presented to the Workshop on Postmodernism at the XIth International Comparative Literature Congress in 1985, a year earlier than his essay 'On Postmodernism'. In the above paper, Calinescu deals with the idea of Postmodernism as an individual cultural system more distinct from Modernism. He defines Postmodernism as being 'self-consciousness of the cultural present' or 'a joyous rebirth of diversity after the austere negativity of Modernism'.[13] In other words, he seems to suggest that Postmodernism is the term used to refer to anything which is accountable as being culturally present and contemporary and which to some extent changes the main values of Modernism into its own diversity and indeterminacy. The clear distinction between Modernism and Postmodernism in his essay does not contradict his original theory, however. Calinescu's paper for the workshop explains and focuses on the general undetermined nature of the idea of Postmodernism as a cultural and philosophical construct, but he reconfirms the link between Modernism and Postmodernism. As he says at the end of his paper, there are many Postmodernisms in the same way as there are many Modernisms.

For the purposes of this study on Gao Xingjian and Crimp's theatre, apart from these speculations on Postmodernism and Modernism, an important aspect to be taken into account is the link between Modernism and Postmodernism, and McHale's idea of elements coexisting in a given period of time. In McHale's terms, Gao and Crimp's literary work is an example of the integration of both attitudes, Modernism and Postmodernism, but, as Calinescu suggests, one aspect does not dominate the other.

1.4.2 Beyond Calinescu: the Modern-Postmodern debate

In terms of the debate between Modernism and Postmodernism, this thesis goes further than Calinescu's definition since while looking at the different plays, it also takes into account of the philosophical ideologies linked to this debate. In my thesis especially in its second half, I make reference to a wide range of philosophers such as Lacan, Nietzsche, Foucault Baudrillard Derrida etc.

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[13] Matei Calinescu, "Introductory remark: Postmodernism, the Mimetic and theatrical fallacies," in *Exploring Postmodernism: selected papers presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism at the XIth International Comparative Literature Congress, Paris, 20-24 August 1985*, ed. Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 1987), 7.

In this sense, I propose to employ a more comprehensive definition that accounts for their philosophical and cultural impact. Lyotard's definition of Modernism and Postmodernism that Simon Malpas talks about in his book *The Postmodern* provides an exhaustive explanation of the philosophical and ideological implications offered by Modernism and Postmodernism. Lyotard's explanation links together the different philosophical and ideological debates that my thesis engages in while analysing the different plays. Lyotard contrasts both Modernism and Postmodernism to realism as 'potentially disruptive forms' that dislocate 'recognition by alluding to what a particular culture represses or excludes from its normal means of communication.' According to this definition, both Modernism and Postmodernism act as 'disruptive' forces questioning the premises of realism in terms of imitation and reproduction of reality. When Lyotard comes to distinguish between Modernism and Postmodernism, he affirms that Modernism 'invokes only as absent content, while the form, thanks to its recognisable consistency, continues to offer the reader material for consolation and pleasure'. Postmodern forms, instead, bring into play 'the unpresentable in presentation itself' by challenging the reader in both forms and content[14]. Lyotard's definitions[15] are concerned with literary and artistic forms but in principle they can be extended to the definition of the two categories and their philosophical and wider ideological implications. In philosophical terms, Postmodernism is considered an anti-foundational philosophy that disputes foundations of discourse, asking questions like 'What guarantees the truth of your foundation (that is, starting point)'.[16] At a philosophical level, postmodernism is believed 'to intensify modernity's antinature animus where there are no foundations and all difference is contingent.'[17]Furthermore, Postmodernism is defined as an 'extension of the quintessential late modern thought that all of life is an interpretation, which in turn is nothing'[18].

In this context both Modernism and Postmodernism can be understood as questioning epistemological and ontological certainties. Pippin gives an excellent distinction between Modernism and postmodernism in philosophical terms:

> Whereas in modernism the typical modern experience that 'all is solid melts into air' or 'the centre does not hold" had prompted the creation of

[14] Simon Malpas *The Postmodern* (London & New York, 2005), 29
[15] In his book *The Postmodern Condition* he talks about the rejection of grand narratives, i.e universal theories , which translates for a 'disdain in all its main disguises', Stuart Sim " Postmodernism and philosophy" in *Postmodernism* ed. By Stuart Sim (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 8
[16] Ibid.
[17] Gregory Bruce Smith *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the transition to Postmodernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11
[18] Ibid. 9

> subjective center", an autonomous self-defining artist, for postmodernism there is no center at all.[19]

While modernism questions the centre, the centre no longer exists for Postmodernism. In other words, Modernism shows the contradictions of these certainties, while Postmodernism questions the very existence of these certainties by 'calling for a transformation of critical assumptions as culture attempts to respond to the immanent critique of these categories',[20] i.e. the fragmentation and deconstruction of ontological truths. In literary terms deconstruction is used not as synonymous with 'destruction' but closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means 'to undo' – a virtual synonym for 'to de-construct.'[21] In philosophical terms, the term deconstruction seemingly enacts an investigation of the different components of ontological certainties, based on the assumption that none of them leads to an absolute truth.

The thinkers and their ideologies used in this thesis perpetuate a process of challenging and questioning these certainties as explained by the philosophical and ideological distinction. In terms of the concept subjectivity, for instance, by speculating on the idea of the unconscious, Freud 'disrupts its (consciousness) processes of organising experience and further decentres the founding moment of the 'I think', and by doing so questions the Cartesian certainty of the 'Cogito ergo sum'[22]. Malpas' book reports that in a Postmodern fashion, Lacan goes even further than Freud. Lacan displaces the subject and relates it to an unattainable, projection of a desire that can never be satisfied because this very desire is the product of the symbols created by a culture, by a symbolic order foreign to the very object of desire. By describing this continuous process of desiring where the Other is more than the other itself, Lacan makes 'a reciprocal recognition between the self and the other' impossible. This leads to radically challenge 'the self-knowing, self-legislating subject of modernity'[23].

In more strictly philosophical terms, Nietzsche's 'romantic nihilism' announcing God's death also challenges the epistemological certainty of human rationality by reiterating the existence of contrasting unbalancing forces of rationality and

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[19]Robert B. Pippin *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On dissatisfactions of European high cultures* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 156
[20] Ibid.
[21] Cfr. Ch. 3, footnote 93
[22] Simon Malpas *The Postmodern*, 67
[23] Ibid., 68

irrationality. He, then, resorts to the idea of *Übermensch*, identified as an overall standing being, who, however, embodies this extreme sense of irrationality. Despite Nietzsche's nihilism being associated with Modernism, the nihilist essence of his philosophy has led the way to the thinkers and philosophers who seemingly fit a Postmodern definition and ideological model. One could argue that by leaving human existence without a centre at bay of irrationality and nothingness Postmodern ontological questions have emerged. Ideologies from philosophers and thinkers like Derrida, Baudrillard and Foucault have, in fact, root in Nietzsche's nihilism.[24]

By referring mostly to linguistic constructions, in an extreme fashion Derrida, for instance, talks about the 'other' and the 'difference' and language itself as a product of this duplicity, but also talks about the 'differences' inhabitating the cultural constructs of ideals whereby there is always a gap between ideal and reality, irrationality and irrationality. Derrida's theory of deconstruction epitomises Postmodern philosophical premises:

> Derrida's version of deconstructionism is that all existence is text. There is experience per se that is shared by all human beings; everything is surface that constantly reconstitutes itself.. Absence dominates all presence, we all left to pursue 'traces' of an absent itself. What is concealed, for example, on the margin or in spaces between the lines becomes as important as what is present in the words of a text.[25]

Derrida's ideas embrace the linguistic sphere but have important philosophical implications, as mentioned above.

Baudrillard, instead, talks about the binary opposition between the rational and the real being totally abolished by the predominance of the first on the latter and by reality being 'hyperealised' by the projections of rational models onto the real, i.e. simulacra. Baudrillard's extreme vision of the disappearance of the real leads to question the Postmodern itself and to some extent the Modern, and envisages the need to return to pre-modern almost primitive condition.

Foucault explores in detail the agents, the external forces within society affecting the individual and questions the ideas of freedom and governability that takes on from Nietzsche's idea of genealogy:

> Genealogy reveals that history could have been *other* that what it has been; history in keeping N's use of genealogy is shown to be the product of successive power struggles that are understood as discontinuous.

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[24] Cfr. Gregory Bruce Smith *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the transition to Postmodernity*; *The Later Foucault* ed, Jeremy Ross (London: Sages Publicatios, 1998), 23-26

[25] Gregory Bruce Smith *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the transition to Postmodernity*, footnote 13, 9

> Contingency and freedom remains undefined freedom involves 'the possibility of no longer being... what we are[26].

In comparison with Foucault's, Sartre's idea of freedom was still embedded in a Cartesian concept of philosophical freedom[27] based on the relationship between consciousness, being and nothingness[28], which was typical of Modernism. Foucault's idea of freedom, instead, is intended to break from this very chain of contingency as created by 'humanism and rationality as exclusionary terms'[29], i.e. the binary opposition between rationality and irrationality, sanity and madness etc.

As we can see from above, by looking at Postmodern philosophers and thinkers, one cannot avoid noticing the link and continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism, that as Lyotard's definition seems to suggest is inevitable. Similarly to Nietzsche other thinkers like Barthes, Adorno and Jung who still inhabit a Modern sphere are strictly linked to the above Postmodern ideologies.[30] Especially, the latest post-structuralist Barthes's ideas of the 'death of the author' and multi-layered interpretations etc. cannot but linked to Derrida's Postmodern ideas of differences. Moreover, the distinction between Modern and Postmodern thinkers reflects an underlying ambiguity as modern thinkers like Nietzsche are also associated with Postmodernism; and Postmodern thinkers like Foucault were not aware of Postmodernism when developing their ideologies. In this sense Lyotard's definition as much as Calinescu's approach helps us understand that there is continuity between both.

For the sake of this thesis during the analysis of the plays, the ideas and main concepts of the above philosophers will be further investigated and looked at in connection to a basic definition:

> Postmodernism is fundamentally a sign of disintegration, of transition, of wanting faith in modern ideas of progress, and the Enlightenment project in general. It primarily represents the latest and most intense form of modern self-dissatisfaction, which is the shadow that has followed modern thought since its conception[31].

In this sense, Postmodernism carries through a process of dislocations, of challenging and deconstructing cultural, social and linguistic certainties that the pre-

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[26] Jeremy Ross, ed. *The Later Foucault*, 23
[27] Astradur Eysteinsson & Vivian Liska, ed., *Modernism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), 154.
[28] Steven Earnshaw, *Existentialism: a guide for the perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 87-88.
[29] Jeremy Ross, ed. *The Later Foucault* (London: Sage publications, 1998), 23
[30] Cfr. Hugh J. Silverman, Donn Welton, ed. *Postmodernism and Continental Philosophy* (New York: State of New York University Press, 1988).
[31] Gregory Bruce Smith *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the transition to Postmodernity*, 283

modern period, i.e. Realism and Enlightenment had formulated and developed. This process had already started with Modernism, which had showed the contradictions of these certainties.

The implication of such a general philosophical outlook on the two trends is manifold and complex. When looking at the plays, therefore, this thesis will look at their philosophical ideological underpinning of the plays by linking them to the thinkers and the ideologies, who are part of either Modernism or Postmodernism.

1.4.3 Modern and Postmodern literature

The basic assumption regarding Postmodern literature is that it represents the exhaustion resulting from the modernistic worship of pure art, and broadens the belief in 'uncertainty/provisionality' to that of impossibility. There is, then, a rejection of the idea of literature for the sake of aesthetics, the worship and defence of the high and elite form of writing, in favour of mass cultural forms.[32] Moreover, with regard to the belief in uncertainty, Calinescu refers to Fokkema's idea of modernistic poetics using hypothesis, and Postmodernism using impossibilities.[33] In his book *Literary History,* Fokkema states that modern literary texts use a selection of hypothetical constructions expressing uncertainty and provisionality.[34] In Postmodern texts, on the other hand, the belief that reality is a made-up construct of fictions dispenses with the use of hypothesis altogether, and Postmodern writers only seem to write about the impossibility of formulating hypotheses in literary forms:

> A new existential or 'ontological' use of narrative, different from the main psychological one found in modernism, duplication and multiplication of beginnings, endings, and narrated actions, the parodic thematization of the author (the reappearance of the intrusive or manipulative author, but now in a distinctively self-ironic vein); the less non-parodic but more puzzling thematization of the reader, the treatment on equal footing of fact and fiction, reality and myth, truth and lying, original and imitation, as a means to emphasize undecidability, self-referentiality and meta-fiction as means to dramatize inescapable circularity, extreme versions of the unreliable narrator, sometimes used, paradoxically, for purposes of rigorous construction.[35]

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[32] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 292.
[33] Ibid., 304.
[34] Douwe Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984), 14.
[35] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 304.

In addition, with more specific concern with the aesthetics of literature, Calinescu mentions the parodic use of rhetorical devices and the use of unconventional figures such as deliberate anachronism, tautology, and palinode or retraction:

> Postmodern writers make use not only of refutation and correction, but more generally of figures and devices that belong, I would suggest, under the larger category of palinode. The Greek etymological meaning of the word 'palinode' (i.e. taking back what one had said in a ode or song praise) has long been extended to comprise any explicit withdrawal of a statement (be a recantation, an admission of having been mistaken, of having been a dupe, or a recognition of having lied whatever motive, serious or playful).[36]

Linda Hutcheon expands on the idea of parody by saying that:

> Parody –often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality- is usually considered central to postmodernism [...] Parody also contests our assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness [...] works to foreground the *politics* of representation. [...] postmodernism parody is value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations.[37]

Hutcheon sees that parody becomes a tool to question the past and to challenge ideological positions. Apart from parody, according to Barry Lewis, the following are other devices that are considered to be typically postmodern among others: pastiche, fragmentation, looseness of association, paranoia[38]. Pastiche is defined as an imitation of elements from other works recombined in such a way that the original sources cannot be recognised.[39]Fragmentation is referred to the disintegration of the four elements element of a linear narrative, plot, character, setting and theme, whereby multiple endings are used, the author interferes with the narration, the text is broken into short sections, separated by space, titles, numbers and at times introduce material unrelated to the main plot. Fragmentation confirms postmodern 'wariness of wholeness.'[40] Looseness of association, instead, 'welcomes chance into the compositional process.'[41] Paranoia is related to texts that 'incorporate representations of (fictional) paranoid interpretations (conspiracy theories) or paranoid reading practices, or they thematize paranoia itself, thereby reflecting on and anticipating, and

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[36] Ibid., 309.
[37] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 89-90
[38] Barry Lewis "Postmodern and fiction" in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* ed. by Stuart Sim (London: Routledge, 1998), 19
[39] Margaret A. Rose *Parody: ancient, modern and postmodern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 72
[40] Barry Lewis "Postmodern and fiction", 20-21
[41] Ibid.

perhaps pre-empting, actual readers' paranoid reading.[42] In essence, all these devices that can be traced in many works of fiction seemingly achieve what Lyotard described as the 'presentation of the unpresentable' and confirm the philosophical attitude that Postmodernism looks to question ontological certainties. In the analysis of the plays, these devices will be accounted for together with other features peculiar to the plays themselves.

1.4. 4 Postmodernism in China

The link between China and Postmodernism can be explained by these two points: first, the international element which makes Postmodernism a unique widespread complex cultural system, to use Fokkema's words.[43] One aspect of Postmodern contemporary culture is a gradual internationalisation, which has often been referred to as cultural globalization and colonialism. The relevance of Postmodern values to Chinese culture is clearer when speaking about literature in more specific terms. Secondly, Gao being an international intellectual *sui generis* who kept his Chinese identity and had already welcomed Western ideologies through his knowledge of French literature and use of non-Chinese literary forms, aimed at recreating a new Chinese theatre.[44] It is not by chance that the play in question resulted in exile and the following plays were written abroad, where they have been produced ever since.

Chinese literature does not make the same ideological assumptions regarding Postmodern aesthetics as Western culture: for instance, the loss of faith in reality is a typical Western philosophical idea. Chinese literature has different motivations from Western culture: it was born after the need to subvert a paradigm of literary modernity mainly based on the idea of historical progress as advocated by the authority.[45] Nevertheless, the Chinese started to imitate devices from Western Postmodern literature in fiction and other literary forms after the eighties. To some extent, the Chinese borrowed Western aesthetics in search of alternative means of expression. For instance, Fokkema's poetics of hypothesis and impassivity can be compared to the principles of 'hypotheticality' and 'theatricism', which will be referred to and explained later on in

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[42] Brian McHale *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 172

[43] Douwe Fokkema, "Is there a future for research on Postmodernism?" in *Exploring Postmodernism*, 234.

[44] Mabel Lee, "Gao Xingjian and the Issue of Literary Creation for the Modern Writer" in *Soul of chaos-Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, ed. Kwok-Kan Tam (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001), 28.

[45] Yang Xiaobing *The Chinese postmodern: trauma and irony in Chinese avant-garde fiction*, (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 2002), 23.

this chapter, as these terms are mostly used in reference to theatre. However, the motivation behind their use has its origins in writers' attempts to defy the Socialist realism imposed by the authorities.

1.4.5 Modern and Postmodern theatre in the West

As far as 'Postmodern theatre' in particular is concerned, the main figures to note are Grotowsky and Artaud, who are often defined as belonging to either Modernism or Postmodernism. These two figures are important in Chinese theatre, as they were a direct inspiration to that movement in China. It is no coincidence that both of them looked to East-Asian theatre as inspiration.

For the purposes of this thesis, we need to acknowledge that Artaud played an important role in the development of the avant-garde led the way to 'Postmodern theatre'. The main issues that were borrowed from him came from his *Theatre of Cruelty*, as described by Terry Hodgson:

> Artaud's *First Manifesto* was published in 1932 and encouraged a rebellion against psychological theatre, by which he meant drama dependent on language, therefore making appeal not to the senses but to the intellect [...] where all is verbalized, the spectator grows unaccustomed to theatrical immediacy. Artaud aimed to reverse this process: 'we need a theatre that wakes up...nerves and heart...' he said, a theatre 'the burning magnetism of whose images' will provide a 'therapy of the soul'. His *Second Manifesto* in 1933 proclaimed the need to rediscover 'essential passions' through the recovery of ancient myth... He wished to attack an audience's whole organism and to effect [...] a more profound state of perception.[46]

In terms of the theatre-audience relationship, Artaud's theatre targets the audience by shocking it, by appealing directly to its senses. In technical terms, his theatre becomes anti-linguistic and anti-textual, privileging the use of the theatrical language of light, colour, movement, gesture and space. This point of view is a return to 'popular, primal theatre sensed and experienced directly by the mind, without language's distortion and pitfalls in speech and words.'[47] In brief, Artaud's theatre aims to free the theatre from the colonization of written language, to quote Connor[48], and from any form of cultural discourse, and the use of non-linguistic tools defies abstraction and repetition and turns the performance into pure sounds and sensations. In this sense Artaud's theatre is defined as a 'pure' form of theatre or 'Total Theatre'. In

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[46] Terry Hodgson, *Modern Drama from Ibsen to Fugard* (London: T. Batsford Ltd., 1992), 172-173.
[47] Antonin Artaud, "The Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto)," in *The Theatre and Its Double*, ed. Antonin Artaud (London: John Calder Ltd., 1958), 70.
[48] Steven Connor, ed., *Postmodernist Culture – An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 144-145.

Derrida's words, it is a sort of theatre that fights against logocentrism and the structure of repetition[49] and, using Artaud's own words, creates 'a Total Theatre', where the theatre language, exploited to its maximum, achieves powerful effects on the audience, who are absorbed completely by the performance and cannot perceive it intellectually or at a rational level.

Grotowsky, on the other hand, mainly focused on the role of the actor and on techniques for developing the actor's inner freedom. In *Towards A Poor Theatre,* he explains his concept of a theatre eliminating the use of technology on stage and concentrating on the actor's language, which, in contrast with Stanislavsky's naturalism, is made up of stylized signs. In his actor-training programmes, the acted signs are the result of the actor's intimate layer coming out in the form of elementary, primary signs, which exploit all actors' physical resources.[50] His ideas on theatre shared Artaud's intentions: freedom from conventions and from the text, intellectual abstraction, and refusal of repetition in favour of spontaneity. In both cases theatre is conceived as intense, and is to some extent simplified to its primary tools of communication. However, Grotowsky, who was more specifically concerned with the actor-audience relationship than Artaud's performance-audience relationship, developed a set of techniques, and became increasingly interested only in the actors and their personal spiritual search for freedom. Hodgson speaks of Grotowsky's idea of the actor as a Samurai warrior in search of the spontaneity of a primal state. In a radical protest against society and convention, Grotowsky formed a community of actors and embarked with them on his pilgrimage, to the extent that their work is not even open to an audience.[51] His ideas had a great deal of influence on Gao's theory of theatre, as we can see in *The Other Shore*. Gao focuses on the role of the actor in the performance and on his own concern with theatre 'world play', where the actors play both the character in the play and themselves as actors on stage.

In the sixties and seventies more radical forms of theatre developed from Artaud's idea of the theatre as participating in the fight against repetition: Michael Kirby, speaking about the origins of 'Happenings', stresses that the influence of Artaud's theatre was at its most formative after the publication of *The Theater and its Double* in 1959.[52] Happenings appeared for the first time in New York at the very end of the fifties. Mostly, they have non-verbal characters; performers carry out tasks: in

[49] Ibid., 147.
[50] Terry Hodgson, *Modern Drama from Ibsen to Fugard*, 174-175.
[51] Ibid., 175.
[52] Michael Kirby, "Happenings an Introduction," in *Happenings and other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 21.

Kirby's words, the 'execution of a generally simple undemanding act',[53] to the extent that the acting exists at the same level as the physical aspects of production. The actors' function is reduced to that of props, of becoming physical objects themselves. As far as the language is concerned, the Happenings use merely lists of random words and phrases and vocal, pure sounds: the visual and physical element is predominant. Although they reject the structure and plot of traditional plays, they are far from being improvised, especially some of the first examples, as Kirby seems to suggest: their composition is always prepared, but with more freedom given to the actor in comparison with traditional theatre. In terms of the performance mode, the location and setting is the most important element in the Happenings, which break with the status quo of conventional theatre as an institution and a pre-set-up location, and the difference in the time-space dimension between audience and performance disappears. Kirby speaks of 'non-matrixing' performing in connection with Happenings, with the stagehands not being 'matrixed' but forming part of the performance, and the acting comparable with the action of the athlete performing in the same time/place as the spectator.[54] Actors do not project an artificial personality on the audience, but instead, as mentioned earlier on, are just acting out simple tasks. The absence of a time-space difference between performance and audience is also conveyed by the use of location and by the actors involving the audience. Interesting locations have included classrooms, sporting events and shopping centres, and in some cases the performance exploits the physical relationship between spectator and performing elements by making the audience part of the acting and invading the audience's space. The Happenings as an evolution of Artaud's ideas represent a theatre of effect, which has illogical and non-intellectual meaning:

> [...] We are aware of a significance and of a 'meaning', but our minds cannot discover it through the usual channels. Logical associations and unambiguous details that would help to establish a rational context are not available. There is no relevant framework of reason to which impressions may refer.[55]

Kirby explains the symbolism of the Happenings as working at the level of the unconscious.

Later on, in the seventies and eighties, other forms of Postmodern theatre appeared in Europe and the United States, and these continued to use the same principles as Happenings, but some of them even developed improvisation techniques

[53] Ibid., 8.
[54] Ibid., 7.
[55] Ibid., 10.

and boundaries between non-theatrical forms such as 'Dance and Theatre', which blurred the clear distinction between theatrical genres: Tanztheater in Germany with Pina Bausch and physical theatre in Great Britain, are some of the most important. In his book on Postmodern theatre, Connor mentions further examples: 'Radical Postmodern Theatre' in France the 'Ontological-Hysteric Theater' of Richard Foreman in the United States. The latter, in particular, is an interesting example of a theatre that started off with the idea of performance installation and the assumption that the performance always has to be new, genuine and spontaneous in itself, and went further towards destroying the textual element of a play completely: the language is recorded and circulated by actors but no text seems to exist.

In recent years, it is important to stress a major difference between the theatrical scenario in Great Britain, dominated by a return to neo-naturalism, and the eclectic continental European scenario fragmented with experimentations, the revival of pre-modern oral forms, dance performances and also some forms of realism[56]. Post dramatic theatre is, also, a term that has been used in regard to experimental theatre in continental Europe, which to some extent Martin Crimp has been associated with, as will be further explained in the following chapter[57].

1.4.6 Modern and Postmodern Theatre in China

With regard to the question of Modern and Postmodern theatre in China, references to the changes of Chinese theatre after the Cultural Revolution are needed to understand Chinese theatrical landscape and identify whether or not these terms are applicable or not to Chinese recent and contemporary theatre.

Shiao-Ling S. Yu says that "the end of the Cultural Revolution ... marked the beginning of a new era in Chinese drama."[58] Chen Jide talks about unprecented freedom given to art after 1978 Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Plenary Meeting and 12th National Congress Meeting in 1982, which allowed the growth of avant-garde theatre (*xianfeng xiju*).[59] In reality artistic freedom could not go far as directly criticise

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[56] Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout, ed., *Contemporary Theatres in Europe – a Critical Companion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).
[57] Hans-Thies Lehmann *Postdramatic theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006).
[58] Shiao-Ling S. Yu "Introduction" in *Chinese Drama after the Cultural Revolution, 1979-1989* ed. Shiao-Ling S. Yu (Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 4
[59] Chen Jide *Zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000* (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chuban She, 2003), 10

the Party: despite a public admission that the Cultural Revolution had been a national disaster[60], a play like Sha Yexin's *Jiaru wo shi zhende* (*What if I were real*, 1979) that criticised the institutions was suspended by the authority after forty-six shows (that included ten *neibu yanchu*, 'internal shows' open only to theatre critics and experts etc).[61] It is unquestionable, however, that in the Post-Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao period at the end of the 70s a process of radical change started to transform the theatrical landscape. Despite not being able to directly criticise the Party, theatre practitioners were able to break free from the boundaries of socialist realism and as Isabella Labedzka stresses, they were able to focus on artistic form and not just on content.[62] This was accompanied by the debate on theatrical methodologies and the function of theatre connected to a broader cultural and artistic debate that Ferrari and others define as *wenhua re* ('cultural fever').[63] The theatrical debate and the production of theatrical work from the end of 70s into the 80s saw both a return to Western sources as well as a return to tradition.[64]

Translations of absurdist theatrical works of the like of Ionesco, Genet, Beckett, Albee etc. introduced modernist Western theatre to China[65]. Moreover, modernist experimental approaches to theatre by Meyerhold, Brecht, Artaud and Brook entered the Chinese debate on theatre that had tried to distance itself from realist theatre and Stanislavsky, which had been associated with Socialist realism.[66] In 50s Shanghai director Huang Zuolin[67] had already started the debate on theatrical methodology by comparing Stanislavsky, Mei Lanfang[68] and Brecht in an essay published in 1962.[69]

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[60] Shiao-Ling S. Yu "Introduction", 3

[61] Rossella Ferrari *Da Madre Courage e i suoi figli a Jiang Qing e i suoi mariti. Percorsi Brechtiani in Cina* (Venezia: Cafoscarina, 2004), 115.

[62] Isabella Labedzka *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre- from the Word to the Image* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 17

[63] Rossella Ferrari mentions Zhang Xudong's *Chinese Modernism in the era of reforms* (1997), Wang Jing's *High Culture Fever* (1996), and Zhang Ning's *L'appropriation par la Chine du theatre occidental* (1998). Rossella Ferrari *Da Madre Courage e i suoi figli a Jiang Qing*, 61.

[64] See Dong Jian " Zhongguo xiju zhengdai daihua de jiannan licheng", 13-14 and Shi Xusheng "20 shiji Zhongguo huaju yu xiqu de guanxi yanjiu" (1-32) in *Zhongguo xiandai xiju zhon da xianxiang yanjiu* ed. Shi Xusheng (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe ; Min Tian *The poetics of Difference and Displacement; Twentieth Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 175-192; Shiao-Ling S. Yu "Introduction", 5-7 etc.

[65] See Shi Xianrong et al. *Huangdanpai xiju ji* (Shanghai: Shanghai Yiwen, 1980)

[66] In the 50s the Stanislavsky's method was imposed as the only method as part of the reform of traditional theatre. During the Cultural Revolution and due to the decline in the relationship between the Soviet Union and China, Stanislavsky was delegitimized and only later re-introduced in the 70s. Rossella Ferrari *Da Madre Courage e i suoi figli a Jiang Qing*, 33-34 and 60

[67] Huang directed Brecht's *Mother Courage* in Beijing in 1959. Huang, also, together with Chen Yong directed *Jialilüle Zhuan* (*Life of Galileo*) in March 1979, which was the first foreign text staged in China after the Cultural Revolution. Rossella Ferrari, 45, 59-88

[68] One of most famous modern Peking opera actor.

According to Shiao-Ling S. Yu among others[70], Huang Zuolin urged to opt for a Brechtian methodology against Stanislavsky's limitations of realism and naturalism, recognising the fact that Brecht wrote his essay on the alienation effect after watching a performance by Mei Lanfang.[71] Ferrari, instead, refers to Zhou Xian's "Bulaixite de youhuo yu women de 'wudu'" ("Brecht's seduction and our 'misinterpretations'") and talks about a misinterpretation of Huang Zuolin's preference for Brecht's approach to theatre. Later on in 80s, Huang Zuolin in his work as a director and in his studies of Brechtian theatre went onto theorising the conception of a *xieyi* theatre encompassing a fusion of Stanislavsky, Mei Lanfang and Brecht's approach to theatre[72] (the *xieyi* approach will be dealt with later in this chapter). Huang also emphasized the importance of Brecht's idea of the relationship between actor and his role and the actor and the audience in relation to the idea of fourth wall. [73] The Chinese theatre of 80s took on Brechtian ideas of an anti-illusionism and the 'A-effect': Gao Xingjian's *Yeren*, Liu Shugang's *Yige sizhe dui shengzhe de fangwen*, Chen Zidu, Yang Jian and Zhu Xiaoping's *Sanghuiping jishi*, *Zhongguo Meng* written by Sun Huizhu and Fei Chunfang, directed by Huang Zuoling in Shanghai in 1987 are among the major examples.

As far as a return to Chinese traditional forms of theatre is concerned, Western modernism and the cultural fascination with the West[74] corresponded to a rediscovery to traditions. Yan Haiping highlights that in the mid-80s Western modernistic techniques appeared very similar to many aesthetic formulations of traditional music drama. He uses the example of *Pan Jinlian: the History of a Fallen Woman* in 1986, a 'redramatization of an ancient Chinese story in the form of regional music drama'[75] that also encompassed Western modernist elements. Shiao-Ling S. Yu affirms that Western modernist symbolic style of presentation and the absence of the fourth wall are also features of traditional theatre. Some of the theatre work of the 80s incorporated singing, recitation, stylised movements relying less and less on spoken drama.[76] Min Tian talks of Chinese *xiqu* being 'reinterpreted, displaced and being used in contemporary Chinese

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[69] Huang Zuolin "Stanislavsky, Mei Lanfang he Bulaixite xijuguan bijiao" in *Zhongguo xin wenyi daxi* (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chuban gongsi, 1986), Vol. III, 3-8.
[70] Shiao-Ling S. Yu refers mostly to the articles by Zhang Li, Ding Yangzhong and Adrian Hsia in *Brecht in East Asian Theatre* and Willian Hui Sun's article in *Drama in the People's Republic of China.*
[71] Shiao-Ling S. Yu "Introduction", 5
[72] Cfr. Huang Zuolin *Wo yu xieyi xiju guan*, ed. Jiang Liu (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1990)
[73] Huang Zuolin, "Mantan xijuguan"in *Xijuguan zhengmin ji* (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1986), vol. 1-18
[74] Wan Shuyuan "Xiju chongbai yu guannian cuojue" in *Yingui yuekan*, (July 1987), 17-18
[75] Yan Haiping "An introduction to contemporary Chinese drama" in *Theatre and Society –an anthology of contemporary Chinese drama"*(New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), xxii
[76] Shiao-Ling S. Yu, "Introduction", 6-7

theatre from and an anti-illusionist perspective' by the 'displacement and re-placement of both the avant-garde and the traditional.'[77]

What starts to take shape, then, it is the idea and practice of *wanquan de xiju* total theatre. The latter revives Chinese traditional dramatic practices making use of a wide theatrical linguistic spectrum, *chang nian zuo da* (singing, reciting, playing and acrobatics).[78] In particular, Chen Jide talks about *wanquan de xiqu* in relation to Gao's early theatre and he stresses that *wanquan de xiju* is a combination of both Western elements and Chinese traditional drama. This resulted into a kind of theatre that is neither like opera nor like ballet but uses a wide range of theatrical devices, such as costumes, props and make up as well as actors' vocal capabilities to attract the audience's attention and maintain it. He refers in particular to the concepts of *juchangxing* and *jiadingxing* that are concerned with the relationship audience-actor and reality-fiction and will be looked in more details when referring to Gao's theatre.[79]

With the fusion of the two poles, Western Modernism on the one hand and traditional theatre on the other, Chinese experimental theatre emerges in its different nuances in 80s. Three main terms and categories have been used to define and distinguish Chinese theatrical trends: *tansuo xiju* (explorative theatre), *shiyan xiju* (experimental theatre) and *xianfeng xiju* (avant-garde theatre). The artistic differences between the three terms cannot be easily defined insomuch that one cannot easily distinguish the type of work that might belong to each category. Chinese sources like *Zhongguo xiandai xiju zhongda xianxiang yanjiu* edited by Shi Xusheng mostly uses the term *tansuo xiju* when referring to the theatre of 80s and *shiyan* as being part of their practice[80]; as expected, Chen Jide's book on avant-garde theatre talks mostly of *xianfeng xiju* and its experimental nature.

In this regard, Labedzka follows Wu Hung's inclination to use the term 'experimental' to define Chinese modern theatre, since this term can easily refer to both artistic innovation and ideological search for new values and contents:

> The concept of 'experimental theatre' seems to be less problematic in describing certain aspects of modern Chinese theatre as it encompasses

[77] Min Tian *The poetics of Difference and Displacement; Twentieth Century Chinese* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 191
[78] Isabella Labedzka *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre*, 20.
[79] Chen Jide *Zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000*, 265-266
[80] In particular refer to Zhuang Ying "20 shiji 80 nian Zhongguo tansuo ju yanju" (291-382) in the collection of essays.

> [...] the artists' attitude towards the institutionalized theatre, tradition, theatrical language and the relations between the stage and the audience.[81]

Amongst the plurality of genres and factions one also find plays that revisit Chinese history coming from what Yan Haiping defined as "critical realism" of the early 80s, which bitterly criticised the repressive policies of the Cultural Revolution in a similar fashion to Sha Yexin's play mentioned above. Among the most prominent playwrights seemingly belonging to this trend, there are Ling Longyun with his play *Xiaojing hutong* be consistent – here you give English translation of Chinese title, but elsewhere you don't. it is better to give English translation of titles in all cases at first occurence, Zong Fuxian, Zhong Jieying, Yao Yuan and Lijie.[82] This waved the path to the historical plays that 'sought to employ premodern historical materials to create dramas that were allegorically relevant to the contemporary social situation'[83], a type of drama invented by Guo Moruo in 20s: examples were Yan Haiping's *Li Shimin*, Chen Baichen's *Dafeng ge,* Lu Jiaji's *Tang Taizhong* and *Xinting lei* [84].

In reference to experimental/ avant-garde theatre, Ya Haiping continues saying that one of the reason that led Chinese theatre to adopt Western modernist drama was to be found in the idea of 'socialist alienation' as formulated by theorists, such as Wang Ruoshi, editor at the that time of *People's Daily* and supported by Zhou Yang, the minister of culture in line with 'a rediscovery of humanist discourse of Karl Marx's early writings':

> Wang, Zhou and their supporters were arguing that the Chinese socialist project had over the decades turned into the opposite of the ideal of socialism- had become aleniated from itself- and that the Marxist theory of class struggle in the hands of the 'ultraleftists' had been used to fabricate class struggle in a socialist society.[85]

Still according to Yan Haiping, this led to the quest for 'modernist subjectivity, where the claim of individuality and individual creativity is prominent'[86]. In terms of avant-garde theatre, Chen Jide defines its three main aspects: *yishu shiyanxing* (artistic experimentalism), *xianfeng de sixiang* (avant-garde ideology) mainly questioning institutionalised values; *bentuxing* (return to one's nation origin).[87] Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua who directed Gao' s *Juedui xinhao*, *Chezhan* and *Yeren*, etc. were

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[81] Isabella Labedzka *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre*, 11
[82] Yan Haiping "An introduction to contemporary Chinese drama", xii-xiii
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid. xv-xvi
[85] Ibid. xvi
[86] Ibid. xix
[87] Chen Jide *Zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000*, 8

regarded as main exponents of avant-garde theatre[88], in particular, Gao Xingjian was claimed to be the ultimate avant-garde artist[89]. In this regard, from his part, Lin Zhaohua denies belonging to this trend by saying that " I am the man in the middle, I am rather a reformist"[90]; he continues saying that drama should learn from tradition, which he regards as the real spirit of Chinese drama but it should also learn to move forward[91]. Despite sharing a common ground with avant-guard principles, Lin Zhaohua distances himself from any artistic movement in an attempt to affirm his own individuality as an artist and director.

Similarly to Lin Zhuhua, other directors in the 90s like Mou Sen, Meng Jinghui develop their own unique strategies, so that one can talk of distinct directorial separate styles.[92] The stress on artistic individuality is one of the important change of Chinese theatre going into 90s. In the context of the Shanghai theatre so-called *jingpi xiju* (treasure theatre) of 90s[93], Meng Jinghui affirms that there is a need in Shanghai to create a kind of avant-garde different from Beijing avant-garde theatre, which in his view has not gone far enough in 'liberating' theatre in both artistic and ideological sense.[94]Meng Jinghui attempts to distance himself from the theatre of the 80s: he defines the theatre of 80s as being *tansuo xiju* while he defines the theatre of 90s as *shiyan xiju*. He continues saying that while in 80s theatre had been largely influenced by the West, in 90s, Chinese theatre had developed its own style centred on the role of the actor in theatre and each director created their own individual style. He places himself together with Lin Zhaohua, Mou Sen (founder of the first Independent theatre group in China *Xiju chezhan*- garage theatre)[95] and as each of them had created their own style, he also had developed his own, which was aimed to work closely with actors and the audience in developing a sort of *jiduan de gexing* 'extreme individuality'[96] or what Labedzka calls 'an analitycal approach on stage (and off stage)' aimed at 'self-liberation' and at generating 'the sense of pleasure' and awakening 'energy'[97]. The

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[88] Ibid. 22.
[89] Wu Weimin, "Lun dangdai Zhongguo wutai de 'xianfeng xiju' ", 85 in Isabella Labedzka *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre*, 15
[90] Lin Zhaohua "Xiju de shengming li" in *Wenyi yanjiu*, 2001 no. 3, 76
[91] Ibid.
[92] Isabella Labedzka *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre*, 21
[93] This kind of theatre coincided with the staging by Shanghai Youth Theatre in 1992 of English playwright Pinter's *The Lover* in Chen Jide *Zhongguo dang dai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000,* 33
[94] Meng Jinghui, Zhao Ningyu "nianjing de xiju, nianjing de ershiyi shijie-dangdai xiju tanhua lun", *Dianying yishu*, 2001 no. 1
[95] Rossella Ferrari *Da Madre Courage e i suoi figli a Jiang Qing*, 142
[96] Interview with Meng Jinghui "Shiyan xiju de duihua" in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* ed. Meng Jinghui (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 2000), 351
[97] Isabella Labedzka *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre*, 85

emphasis of this kind of theatre is on the performative experience rather than textual drama and as Ferrari affirms, some of the works were mostly work in progress.

Ferrari, in fact, mentions the Mou Sen's experiment in 1993 together with the poet Yu Jian, where fourteen students from *Beijing Dianying xueyuan* (Beijing film academy) went through four months training that became a pseudo-mythical experience, which resembled Grotowski's method.[98] Mou Sen's independent theatre has been considered as the 'flagship of the marginalized theatre' as it produced work that brought together performance art, physical theatre, installation etc. through the use of non-professionals.[99] Mou Sen, Meng Jinghui marginalised the use of the text in the construction of the dramatic experience leading in some cases to its total absence.

In the 90s, the focus dramatically shifted towards a perfomative and director-centred theatre[100] as theatre practitioners and especially directors were in search of more extreme theatrical ways,[101] whereby the figure of the playwright and the importance of the text have been greatly diminished.

In this sense we can understand Zhao's criticism directed at the anti-literariness of this kind of theatre for creating performances that can hardly be called theatre and are not dissimilar to other art forms such as dance:

> When theatre is no longer an art using language, it is no longer an art that transcends language but, rather, an art with no language: a sort of performance hardly distinguishable from 'Performance Art' built mainly upon 'body language' and 'circumstantial support'.[102]

Zhao's negative outlook on the 90s theatrical landscape is not the only one: Chen Jide distinguishes between the avant-garde of the 90s and that of 80s saying that in the 90s that instead of continuing exploring new ways in the art of drama, theatre practitioners looked into more commercial avenues, such as writing or producing for television and many amateurs' groups emerged, instead.[103] When referring to the theatre of the 90s Shi Xusheng talks about the *pizuan* (fatigue) of the theatre in this period that had been weakened by the absence of references to *shengming yiyi* (meaning of life) and

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[98] Rossella Ferrari *Da Madre Courage e i suoi figli a Jiang Qing*, 142.
[99] Lin Shen "Theater in Contemporary China" in *China Today. An Encyclopaedia of Life in the People's Republic*, ed. Jing Luo, (London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 646.
[100] Hu Xingliang *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiju sichao* (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1995), 394.
[101] Chen Jide *Zhongguo dang dai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000*, 34.
[102] Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, 137-138.
[103] Chen Jide *Zhongguo dang dai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000,* 35.

the dissolution of artistic purity thanks to the use of meaningless 'playful' experimentation.[104]

In reality, many playwrights left behind modern spoken drama; Shiao-Ling S. Yu talks of a decline in audiences due to the competition from movies and films and partially for the lack of freedom given to playwrights; he continues saying that two strategies have been adopted: one is the creation of smaller theatre movements ad the other is the rise of *xiju xiaopin* (dramatic sketches) that could be easily adapted for TV.[105] In a more optimistic tone Yan Haiping states that there are still dramatists continuing writing for theatre while turning into commercial writing for sustenance.[106] Lin Shen also mentions an increase in theatrical creations on colleges and university campuses due to the government strategy to establish art disciplines in university education.[107]

Going back to the discourse on Modern and Postmodern theatre in China, one can definitely affirm that the theatrical forms emerging from 80s belong to a modernist tradition whether it is difficult to identify a Postmodern trend. However, the theatrical forms emerging from the 90s, the emphasis on the performative and on the *work in progress,* the interdisciplinary nature of the works combining physical theatre, visual art etc. share some similarities with American happenings and some extreme of Postmodern drama. This is not a coincidence as some of the Chinese practitioners of 90s trained in the States: this is the case of Jing Xing that produced in 1996 the first dance theatre work in China (*Half Dream, Red and Black* series and *Typpsy and Concubines*).[108]Zhao, instead, uses the term Postmodern theatre in reference to Hong Kong and Taiwanese theatre of the 90s.[109]

As far as the impact of Chinese theatre on Gao's, in particular, is concerned, Gao's theatre emerged from the experimental/ avant-garde theatre of 80s of which he was believed to be a main exponent. Moreover, he took part to the debate on theatre by publishing his first collection of essays (*Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu* in 1988) in the 80s and similarly to Huang Zuolin he expresses his preference for a Brechtian

[104] Shi Xusheng "20 shijie zhongguo huaju yu xiqude guanxi yanjiu", 18-19
[105] Shiao-Ling S. Yu "Introduction", 28-29
[106] Yan Haiping "An introduction to contemporary Chinese drama", xxv
[107] Lin Shen "Theater in Contemporary China", 646
[108]Ibid., 647
[109] Martha P. Y. Cheung and Jane C. C. Lai, ed., *Oxford Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997).

approach to theatre.[110] Moreover, Huang Zuolin's idea of *xieyi* directly influenced some of Gao's principles. The ancient aesthetic of painting *Xieyi* stands for 'a form of art mediation that aims at transcending language or any other medium'.[111]Huang's use of the term equates with Brecht and to some extent Mei Langfang's anti-illusionist idea of theatre whereby the 'fourth wall' has to be broken down[112]. *Xieyi* stands, therefore, for non-illusionism.

This is further developed through Gao's ideas of *juchangxing*, *jiadingxing*[113]. Chen Jide talks at length of the first two when referring to Gao's theatre and the idea of Total Theatre. He also uses an additional term, that of *zonghexing* (synthesization), a term that describes the theatrical experience and its features encompassing different artistic forms, that of literature, music, dance, architecture, which Chen affirms is not one of main Gao's concerns. *Jiadingxing* is referred to an acting approach where the actor returns to storytelling, and from the point of view of storytelling he enters the role; by doing so, he works through one's own acting self and the role of the character but maintains some kind of neutrality in performing it. *Juchangxing* is referred to the audience's awareness that what they experience is a theatrical fictional representation of reality.[114]

Zhao further defines *Juchangxing* (theatricism) as follows:

> Theatricism stresses the particularity of theatre as an art by bringing into relief the texture of medium, or, in other words by exposing the traces of the play being presented as a piece of art. It foregrounds the artificiality of drama by intentionally mocking the efforts of covering the traces, thus renouncing effectively the supposition that what is being staged is genuine simulation of reality.[115]

According to above definition, we could argue that the origins of this idea lie in Western modern art, such as the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose method for actors, *biomechanics* reduced to their expressions of emotions to controlled movements, 'a sense of complete self-awareness and self-control in performance.'[116] Directors such as Grotowsky and Briton Peter Brook also made use of this approach. However, theatricism was one of the ideas that resulted in a theatre made mostly by directors and

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[110] Cfr. Gao Xingjian "Wo yu Bulaixite" in *Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu* (Beijing, Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), 52-56.
[111]Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, 170.
[112]Min Tian *The poetics of Difference and Displacement; Twentieth Century Chinese*, 177.
[113] It is worth noting that the idea of *jiadingxing* was the essence of Chinese *xiqu,* according to Hu Weimin. "*Huaju* yishu gexin langchao de shizi" in *Xiju guan zhengming ji* Vol. 1, 1986, 219.
[114] Chen Jide *Zhongguo dang dai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000,* 255-260.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Edward Brown, *Meyerhold: a revolution in theatre* (London: Mathuen, 1995), 176.

with little concern for the text. Gao incorporates the idea of theatricism[117] into his theatre, but, as his own response to the director's tyranny, he urges playwriting to think about stage-directing and playwrights to take more control of their plays.[118]

Following Chen's definition, the term *jiadingxing* appears to be very similar to the definition of the term *jiuchangxing* given by Zhao. However, by translating the term as 'hypotheticality', Zhao further distinguishes between the two terms. Whereas *juchangxing* rejected the idea that theatre was a mimesis of reality and put the emphasis on the artistic process itself, *jiadingxing* does not try to reproduce reality through the physical presence of objects, but reminds the audience of a sense of reality through symbolism and metaphors. Hypotheticality is based on the notion that the stage representation of a play does not benefit from bearing a resemblance to reality. Theatricism exploits artificiality as a way of distancing theatre from reality, and hypotheticality preserves a certain degree of resemblance:

> The purpose of theatricism, as we are told, is to remind the audience that everything on stage is artificial and, therefore, unreal, whereas hypotheticality aims at convincing that what is offered on stage could be true, though hypothetically.[119]

Sy Ren Quah, instead, speaks only of the term *jiadingxing,* translated as 'suppositionality': he argues that this notion is related to two other key concepts *xijuxing* (dramaticality) and *juchangxing* (theatricality), which is the equivalent of Zhao's theatricism. In Sy Ren Quah's words, suppositionality suggests that every element in the theatre is 'artistically represented, subjectively imagined and thus, fundamentally unreal.'[120] In his definition, again, there is no clear distinction between the different concepts, especially between *jiadingxing* and *juchangxing*. The distinction given by Zhao, instead, highlights the internal contradiction of these two concepts: hypotheticality is concerned with a degree of resemblance to reality by stimulating the audience's imagination, whereas theatricism aims at stimulating the audience's interpretation by keeping a distance from the play without emotional subjective involvement. Gao's contribution lies, in particular, in avoiding this internal contradiction. He rethinks the concepts of hypotheticality and theatricism in creating a more coherent theatre, which avoids the mere aestheticism and formalism resulting from

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[117] Gao Xingjian, "Wode xiju wode yaoshi," in *Meiyou Zhuyi*, (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd, 1996), 237.
[118] Gao Xingjian, *Dangdai xiju xin zouxiang* Part 1, (Hong Kong: Mingbao Yuekan, December Issue 1993), 54.
[119] Ibid., 47.
[120] Sy Ren Quah, "Space and Suppositionality in Gao Xingjian's theatre," in *Soul of Chaos*, ed. Kwok-kan Tam, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 169.

the use of alienation in the form of theatricism. Gao seems more inclined to create a 'hypothetical theatre'.[121]

With regard to hypotheticality, the validity of Sy Ren Quah's discourse lies in his explanation of the extent to which Gao's theatre exploits this principle by engaging the audience's attention and employing actors' actions. In the case of *The Other Shore*, for instance, the use of space through actors' actions on stage and the infusion of their imagination in an extremely minimalist way suggests the idea of a real space. Therefore, as suggested by both Chen Jide and Zhao it is in this play that Gao's theatre refines use of hypotheticality.

1.5 Gao Xingjian's theatre changes with *The Other Shore*

The Other Shore is the play that signals a breakthrough in Gao Xingjian's playwriting work, personal life and career. The play was written in 1986 but never reached the stage in China. The Deputy President of the Beijing People's Art Theatre Yu Shizhi, despite being the most open-minded 'art leader' of the time, stopped rehearsals.

The play was rehearsed under Lin Zhaohua's direction, but its content had become too sensitive for official Party critics. Gao's plays had already caused conflict with the authorities in the past. In the early eighties, the play *Bus Stop* had received harsh criticism from official state critics due to its social messages and its 'existentialistic' nature.[122] In 1983, *Bus Stop* had been highly criticized for more than half a year in the 'Clearing Away Spiritual Pollution Campaign' by hard-line party ideologues. He Jingzhi, Deputy Head of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, who was in charge of art and literature, had described it as an evil play.

In the case of *The Other Shore*, Gao received criticism and censorship. At a personal and professional level, this censorship had a large impact. Gao lost the support of state-run theatres and consequently decided to become a freelance playwright; moreover, in a highly significant development, he left China and moved to Paris a year later. He has not since returned to Mainland China. The great impact of this play on Gao's life and his position in Chinese theatrical circles raises the question as to the reasons why *The Other Shore* had such an impact and provoked such a reaction from both the authorities. A clue is given by the possible political messages of the play,

[121] Ibid., 48.
[122] Ibid., 8.

which were far from being educational in a politically socialist sense. Critics such as Jo Riley and Michael Gissenwehrer have seen a political message in the play:

> The play centres around the problem of the individual facing the masses – how the individual is tempted towards certain ways of behaving by the masses, how he may also be abused by the masses and forced into certain ways of behaving, and how relationships of power are key to understanding the individual in society.[123]

Moreover, *The Other Shore* seems to communicate a different philosophical message from *Bus Stop*:

> This could be said to be a philosophical play, a play on how human beings lose their own identity in order to survive in society. But, entirely different from the *Bus Stop*, which is also called a philosophical play, in *The Other Shore* there is no teaching of any doctrine at all. It inveighs against any effort of collective discourse which, the play shows, can only lead to tyranny.[124]

Despite the anti-dogmatic nature of the play, there is a renewed sense of spirituality in the subtext, which might have irritated the authorities. As mentioned above, despite being more open to artistic freedom, the authorities were still used the power to censor artists and writers.

Both the apparent political message of the play and its philosophical aspects are definitely contingent causes of its censorship, but these were by no means intentional on the part of the author. Gao's literary representation of modern society in general and his reaction to Chinese political issues in particular are not his primary aim: in his famous article 'Meiyou Zhuyi' he believes that his writing is independent of any political or ideological 'ism'.[125]

The main theme of the play to be considered in comparison with those from the movement is the novelty of its theatrical mode. Whereas the plays of the movement were to a certain extent attached to reality, and their techniques cleverly balanced so that they did not represent a threat to the government line, Gao's play attempted to further stretch the boundaries between reality and spirituality, objectivity and unconscious. The play distanced itself radically from the theatrical representation of reality by developing abstraction, and in its disruptive structure an aesthetical mode of theatrical presentation was created. It was the unfamiliarity of Gao's play to Chinese theatre that weakened Gao's position as he was considered the main exponent of avant-guard/ experimental theatre.

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[123] Jo Riley and Michael Gissenweher, "The Myth of Gao Xingjian," in *Soul of Chaos*, 125-126.
[124] Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, 131.
[125] Gao Xingjian, "Meiyou zhuyi", in *Meiyou Zhuyi*, 8-17.

The three main innovative elements can be summarized as follows: Gao's use of hypotheticality, which refers to the mode of representation as well as the actor-audience relationship; Zen Theatre, the spiritual function of the theatre; Tripartition and metadrama, the actor-character relationship. The above three elements correspond to three main themes in the play, 'Location', 'Mysticism' and 'Characters'.

The element of the location of the play is linked to the title of the play *the Other Shore*, which represents the overall theme of the play, the essential drive of the characters' search. The other shore is the place that the characters are striving to reach at the beginning, and is the place where the characters find themselves, as well as the object of their search and the drive behind their journey. It is interesting to note that in Zen Buddhism *prajñā pāramitā* means literary 'the wisdom that leads to the other shore', then referred to as wisdom.[126] The characters are faced with the impossibility of defining the other shore; this constant motif to the play is suggested by the surreal ambience that surrounds the characters and the stage directions that Gao uses to describe the location of the play and the actors' actions. Especially in reference to the latter, the innovative use of representing reality, which goes under the principle of hypothecality, becomes clearer. The actors' actions shape the location through appealing to the audience's imagination and not through the physicality of objects. Sy Ren Quah explains the ambience of the play referring to Gao's conception of the starting point of acting as an understanding of theatrical space through actions and words.[127] Liu Zaifu interprets the play representing struggle of the individuals to overcome their loneliness under the pressure of society[128]. The use of space strictly related to actors' actions represents one of the important aspects of Gao's theatre, *jiadingxing*[129].

In particular, Zhao suggests that Gao's intention is *xifu,* 'convince' but the word Gao uses is *zhefu,* 'charm.'[130] According to Quah, Gao develops this principle dealing with the direct connection between physical space on stage and the psychological impact of actors' actions using this space in relation to the audience: he refers to Gao's

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[126] Roshi Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1980), 374.
[127] Sy Ren Quah, "Space and Suppositionality," 165.
[128] Liu Zaifu *Gao Xingjian lun* (Taibei Shi : Lianjing chuban she ye gufen youxian gongsi, 2004), 86
[129] In this respect Gao emphasises the relationship between the actors and the audience, where the actors stimulate the audience's imagination in "Jiadingxing"- *Dui yi zhong xiandai xiju dezhuiqu* (Beijing : Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988) p. 38.
[130] Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, 48.

idea of 'psychological field'*(xinli chang)*[131], which creates through the exploration of actions and words the suppositional setting of the play.[132]

The second aspect to be considered is the underlying motif of the play, which related to the spiritual, and unreal ambience amplifies the mystic dimension of the play. The religious component of the play is neither moralistic nor ethical but is shaped by the spiritual journey, which involves characters' humanity and is expressed at vary emotional levels. The journey is not progressive and consequential but develops through the random sequence of actions. Chen Jide and Ma Jian define as a sort of game transforming reality into imaginary[133]; in particular Ma Jian talk about a scary passage from life into death. At the heart of spirituality is the motif of searching, which all characters are engaged in.

To have a better understanding of this aspect of Gao's theatre, looking back at his previous plays would be helpful to demonstrate a continuity in his works. As distinguished by Zhao and mentioned above in this thesis, one category and period of Gao's production was named his Mythological/Ritual work, which include the plays *Necropolis* and *Tale of Mountains and Seas* as well as the novel *Soul Mountain.* Even though the plays were written shortly after *The Other Shore,* they present elements that are less refined than in *The Other Shore* in terms of spirituality and theatrical aesthetics. In fact, those plays definitely present distinctive technical novelties but still in embryo: we could argue that Gao had taken a greater risk in *The Other Shore* and then gone back on his footsteps in conceiving the two later works. However, these two plays explain Gao's intention in terms of spirituality, religion and morality as well as the expression of those in a theatrical mode, the ritual.

Necropolis was inspired by an old Chinese opera *Cleaving Open the Coffin* (Da Pi Guan), telling the story of the philosopher Zhuang Zi testing his wife's fidelity by faking his own death. *Tale of Mountains and Seas*, instead, is inspired by the legends of gods in an ancient collection of Chinese myths, *Mountains and Seas* (5th to 3rd century BC). Both plays were meant to be revivals of a national epic, which had gone missing in Chinese culture.

In both of them, there is a clear reference to Chinese rituals and Confucian morality: Gao disapproves of Confucius' morality and his plays result in the

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[131] Gao Xingjian, "Bi'an daoyan houji," in *Meiyou zhuyi*, 225.
[132] Sy Ren Quah, "Space and Suppositionality," 166.
[133] Ma Jian "Cong xianshi shihui dao moxuyode bi an- pingshuo Gao Xingjian de xiju 'Bi An'" in Juedu *Gao Xingjian –2000 shouwei Nuobei'r wenxue Jiang dewu,ed. Ling Manshui* (Xianggang: Mingbao chubanshi, 2000), 168, Chen Jide *Zhongguo dang dai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000,* 261.

deconstruction of Chinese ritual in a traditional sense. In the case of *Necropolis*, the morality of the play is dubious as it is meant to be as serious as would have been expected in a traditional epic. *Tale of Mountains and Seas* struggles in dealing with legends as historical material and in bearing philosophical significance. Gao treats them as folkloric material and by doing so devalues the Confucian morality: in other words, Gao makes a choice and prefers to emphasise the folkloristic elements of these legends, which were originally written in vernacular[134]. An important element that both plays share, however, is Gao's revisited interpretation of Chinese tradition, which reflects the conflicts of modern China within an antireligious context of Communist China:

> The purpose of conferring this kind of 'folk' theatre with greater meaning power is to endow it with rituality. Gao Xingjian insists that modern Chinese theatre should return to its ritual source in order to restore its vitality as an art.[135]

Then, it is added:

> What he wants is to resurrect the rituality which is latent in the collective unconsciousness of the Chinese common people. His goal is a higher communality that can change the very nature of modern Chinese theatre at present appeals only to urban, educated population.[136]

This ambition has resulted in developing a theatrical practice where the ritual is present as mostly a performing element on the stage.

The ritual presence can be found in a previous play, *Wild Man*: in the article 'The Myth of Gao Xingjian', the character Old Singer, the narrator of the play, is pointed out to perform rituals that revive the rituality of the Chinese past:

> The Old Singer is a central figure who binds and mediates the various worlds as a shaman might do in traditional '*nuoxi*' or exorcism theatre and ritual. He carries out an exorcist ritual to bring rain by dancing the magic mine-step Luo dance (*Tiao yubu*) to send the drought-bringing devils to the four corners [...] the Old Singer has a key role to play in binding the events on stage to a cosmological pattern.[137]

In this play the ritual is only partly present, whereas in the Mythological/ Ritual plays, rituality and myth are central to the play: their validity is Gao's main concern as he is directly focused on dealing with the relationship between rituality and religion within the Chinese context. In this sense, *The Other Shore* is closer to *Wild Man* than to the other two: ritual is part of the performance in the creation of the ambience but does not seem to represent the main meaning of the play. However, the focus of the plays

[134] Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, 115.
[135] Ibid., 116.
[136] Ibid., 119.
[137] Jo Riley and Michael Gissenweher, "The Myth of Gao Xingjian," 123-124.

seems to explore the same essence of rituality, its spiritual component, and challenges it by treating it with a sort of abstract distance. In its indefinite structure *The Other Shore* does not directly retell a mythical legend but talks abstractedly about a journey, sense of loss and search. The rituality is in the background in Zen Master's ritual, in Man's prayer as a performative element; the spirituality is more present in the sense of death, loss. The challenge arises when Man's confusion, loss of confidence and holiness, are through the character shadow projected in the play.

The same article interprets the sense of spirituality as deriving from Buddhist belief:

> While one would hesitate to claim that creating a play around the theme of otherness or another being is intended in a solely Buddhist sense, Gao is certainly exploring such a state on the stage-itself another world. One element of Buddhist philosophy can be seen in the search to step beyond oneself, to reach a state on nothingness, have no-thought.[138]

According to this interpretation, Gao's main focus is on the exploration and representation of Buddhist spirituality, which is in its nature rather abstract and based upon search and projection of the self towards nothingness. This assumption would explain the abstraction of the play: the characters' struggle between nothingness and individuality. In terms of performance, the presence of ritual works at abstracting the content by creating an ambience and by limiting Buddhist presence to a symbolic appearance on stage with the Zen Master.

Zhao further defines the spirituality of the play by specifically referring to Zen Buddhism[139]According to his vision of Gao's theatre, all the post-exile plays starting with *The Other Shore* embark on this idea of theatre. Therefore, even though his mythological period follows *The Other Shore* chronologically, *The Other Shore* announces the spiritual trend of his later productions. Gao targets rituality in his two Mythological/Ritual plays, but he develops elements of spirituality in *The Other Shore* through a deeper investigation of ritual and spirituality as performative forms.

The evolution of the spirituality defined as Modern Zen Theatre, therefore, continues and refines itself in the later works: for this reason, clearer explanation on the Zen Theatre will be given when analysing the other plays.

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[138] Ibid., 128.

[139] "Zen in particular is the product of the fusion of Indian Buddhism with Chinese Culture. [...] Its acknowledged founder was Bodhiharma, who is supposed to have have transported the peculiar tradition underlying Zen from India to China. [...]The Chinese Zen Movement takes its space within the sphere of Chinese Mahāyā Buddhism. [...] In Zen is found the Mahayanist negativity [...] The key terms are 'empty' (*śūnya)* and 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*), which apply equally to the metaphysics and to the way of meditations" Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen enlightenment: origins and meaning* (New York: Weatherhill, 1979), 25-26.

Another aspect to be considered is the role and actions of characters in the play, which mostly lack personal connotations and psychological depth. To some extent, they are a functional part of the system of the performance, creating the rhythm and progressing the performance. The only way to distinguish them is their role in the play, which at a level of abstraction is defined by the antagonism and the internal conflict between counterparts, gradually coming out from the unfolding of events. However, to some extent it is possible to draw a distinction between the main characters, such as Man and Crowd, from the sort of characters presented as a vision, such as Mother, Woman, Young Girl etc. and the inhabitants of this strange place, such as Card Player, Zen Master and Stable Keeper.

In particular, Man develops throughout the play as a character with a more complete and fuller personality through his story and background. However, as the denomination Man indicates, he is not referred to as a specific person with a name and identity. In this case, generality depersonalises Man as a character, who comes to represent a man *sui generis*.

The best example of the depersonalisation of characters is Crowd, who are referred to in most of the text as an indefinite group having one voice that speaks for all; though in some parts individual members are defined, but generally as either Person, followed by a letter of the alphabet, or by gender.

The use of these characters can also be explained as a consequence of Gao's intention to use the play of an actor training rather than in social terms. In this case, Crowd would represent a group of actors trying to conform to one another. The actors make use of their fullest potential by creating the role together with their acting partners. In this play, the characters use alternatively the second and third person when they refer to themselves. This is defined by Zhao in 'Gao Xingjian's theory of "Triplication":

> He first called it the triplication of the actor (*yanyuan sanchongxing)*, but later triplication of the theatre *(juchang sanchongxing)* [...] His main idea is that while realism stresses the performed, and theatricism stresses the performance, triplication tries to separate both of them from the actor leaving him a neutral 'self' in between. The subjectivity, isolated and extracted in this manner, stands at the distance to the performance. The actor is now able to examine both his own person and his role but rising above both the presented and the presenting.[140]

In practical terms, the use of triplication implies actors' use of split-person lines, which Gao argues derive from the use of 'asides' and 'self-addressing' in Chinese

[140] Ibid.

Opera. Gao himself explains that the three persons correspond to 'his own person', 'an actor, a neutral medium that does not bear a relationship to his own particular experiences', and 'the character he creates'.[141] The use of this device seems a further development of filter of subjectivity and announces what has been defined by most critics, such as Zhao and Amy Lai, as Gao's metadata and his use of 'Dramatic I/ Dramatic She.'

As Lai distinguishes between Gao's play written during his exile, the tripartition seems to evolve towards a further abstraction of the self and its fragmentation: the result is more radical as Lai explains that the dramatic narrative no longer wants to achieve an alienation effect, but the alienation itself becomes the theme of the play.[142]Moreover, she adds that another consequence of the self-fragmentation is characters' sense of failure in the post-exile plays: Gao's characters are unable to control their consciousness, and therefore are imprisoned within their subjectivity.[143]To some extent, fragmentation and alienation becoming the object of the narrative itself and explain the sense of failure, which seems to define Man's condition in the play. However, in the post-exile plays, metadrama goes beyond the general sense of failure and dissatisfaction with the other shore and develops as a technique for creating and manipulating the actors way of communicating with the audience.

Having looked at the main elements of the play, one can argue that Gao starts to construct a new theatre, defined as 'Theatre of Zen': if we only refer to the spirituality at the roots of Gao's theatre, Zen philosophy represents the motivation behind the use of new theatrical devices, the search for a renewed sense of spirituality. However, Gao's theatre goes further than that by encompassing the two cultural systems of our times, Postmodernism and Modernism. In *The Other Shore*, the above-mentioned features demonstrate this connection. Therefore, the next part of this paper will look into the presence of Postmodern and Modern elements in the play.

1.5.1 Postmodern elements

Postmodern elements will be examined first of all. Looking specifically at the play, its plot, its structure, and Gao's own interpretation of hypotheticality and theatricism all share common aspects with Postmodernism.

The text itself presents a decentralized structure and defies any certain interpretation as well as leaving its meaning open to manifold possible interpretations at

[141] Gao Xingjian, "Jinghua Yetan," *Zhongshan* 4 (1987): 204.
[142] Amy T. Lai, "Gao Xingjian *Monologue* as Metadrama" in *Soul of Chaos*, 139.
[143] Ibid.

different levels. We can compare this sort of text to what is considered hypertext[144] in the Postmodern sense:

> Postmodern hypertextual systems, especially those that integrate multiple works [will] become our dominant textual vehicle, both the way we read and what we understand literature to be will be altered.[145]

In his book *From Text to Hypertext* , Silvio Gaggi speaks of decentralized and polyphonic texts in terms of Jameson's ideas on narrative in Postmodern texts:

> Postmodern hyperspace is so ubiquitous that it cannot be escaped; one is always in it, disoriented by its organization and by the 'logic of the simulacrum.' One cannot find a place from which one might be able to evaluate or analyse, from which one might engage in an 'old-fashioned ideological critique' that would make political judgment and effective action possible.[146]

As far as the idea of hypertextuality and this play are concerned, it is worth referring to the introduction to Gao's *The Other Shore* by Gilbert C.F. Fong, which says that:

> The plot is made up of disjointed narrative units that do not apparently or necessarily connect with one another, at least in coherent manner. However, each unit can be seen as self-contained and is interesting and creates meaning by itself.[147]

Jo Riley and Michael Gissenwehrer speak of Gao's intention to create an abstract play as a way of examining man and his role in society:

> [...] his role to other men for it goes beyond the framework of the fixed space of a railway carriage, or bus stop, for example [...] the play proceeds along the idea of gaming.[148]

Zhao speaks of episodicity, which developed from the use of multiple plot-lines in *Wild Man*[149]:

> First, we can see that the multiple plot-lines in *Wild Man* have disintegrated into true episodicity, that is, a cluster of episodes linked only by a vague theme, which in the case of the *Other Shore*, is Man's experiences in society and his ultimate awakening. Starting from this play,

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[144] 'Hypertextuality' has also been used by Gérard Gennette a French literary theorist associated with structuralism and Barthes. He defines this term as the relationship between a text B ('hypertext') and a prior text A ('hypotext'), where the text B is moulded on the text A. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degree* (Palimpsestes: second degree literature) (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

[145] Silvio Gaggi, *From Text to Hypertext: Decentring the Subject in Fiction, Film, the Visual Arts, and Electronic Media* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1998), 154.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Gilbert C. F. Fong, "Introduction" in *The Other Shore*, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999), xxvii.

[148] Jo Riley and Michael Gissenweher "The Myth of Gao Xingjian," 126.

[149] Li Kehuan "Gao Xingjian de duo shengbu yu xiadiao xiju"in *Gao Xingjian xiju yanjiu,* ed. by Lin Guorong . (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1987), 147

> almost all of Gao Xingjian's plays are fragmented into structure. The drama interest, even of plays with a plot-line such as *Nocturnal Wanderer*, lies in its episodicity.[150]

All the above definitions regarding the text and its structure can be considered novelties in Gao's theatre and identified as Postmodern devices: the structure of *The Other Shore* can be traced back to Calinescu's definition of literature of multiple narratives with multiple beginnings and endings.

Gao himself in "About The Other Shore" speaks of this play as being different from conventional drama, as it avoids creating a coherent plot. He mentions that his aim is to create a pure dramatic form like music.[151] The effect is the construction of an illusory dimension, which exploits the principle of theatricism in terms of the relationship between reality and theatre, theatre and audience. To some extent, it is not reality that is the focus but the performance itself with regard to this aspect of Postmodern theatre, as Connor seems to suggest.[152]

The focus on performability rather than representation is clear, especially at the beginning, with the game with the rope: where the actors seem to be engaged in self-training. This aspect can be explained with reference to Fong's use of the term 'self-reflexivity' as being typical of Postmodern theatre.[153] Moreover, tracing the origins of Postmodern theatre to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, he defines Postmodern theatre as using parody to criticize theatre practices themselves. Parody[154] as a Postmodern device used mainly to create an impression of reality but not to reproduce reality itself can be traced back to the idea of hypotheticality.

Exploring the similarities with Postmodern theatre even further, the lack of plot reminds us of Foreman's theatre as described by Chantal Pontbriand, who said that the spectator at Foreman's plays is bombarded with a multiplicity of visual and auditory events.[155] Richard Foreman himself spoke about his theatre in these terms:

> The pleasure I take is the pleasure of undercutting; interrupting; an impulse I want to (and do) make. The impulse is registered, but allowed to twist, turn, block itself, so that blockage, that reaction to its energy,

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[150] Henry. Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, 133.

[151] Gao Xingjian, "Guanyu Bi'An" (On the Other Shore), in *Gao Xingjian xi ru liu zhong* (Taibei Xindian Shi: Di jiao chu ban she, 1995), 68.

[152] Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*, 144-145.

[153] The self-reflexivity of the Postmodern theatre is further developed in Gao Xingjian's *Bi'an*, which is a parody as well as ridicule of the falsity and artificiality of theatre in its realistic function of imitation. Kwok-tan Tam "Gao Xingjian and the Asian Experimentation in Postmodernistic Performance," in *Soul of Chaos*, ed. Kwok-kan Tam, 205.

[154] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 89-90.

[155] Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*, 144.

> produces a detour, and the original impulse maps new, contradictory territory.[156]

However, if Postmodern theatre relies on the immediacy of the present as against the horror of repetition and slavery to the text, Gao remains faithful to the textuality of theatre. In particular, the type of language used is colloquial, as Gao's intention is not to use 'institutional' theatre language but a sort of 'living language'. Gao praises the use of the vernacular in the literature of the fifteenth century as being closer to the living traditions of the time and being more appropriate to theatre than the cultivated language of modern theatre in China.[157] The use of language itself in the text of the play still has an important function. Gao himself stressed that, in *The Other Shore*, he focused heavily on the power that theatre can enhance in language: it is not only the literal meaning of the words that matters but the musicality, the connection of words in a phrase.[158]

With a close look at the dialogues important elements are to be considered, as the dialogues between characters create the relationship and underline internal conflicts that otherwise would not be clear. The dialogue between Shadow and Man, for instance, which is not a proper dialogue but a sort of unidentified chorus, uses words not intended to convey any specific meaning; it is a playful flow of signifiers in post-structuralist terms.[159] In this sense the loss of meaning can be compared with the rhetoric figure palinode,[160] using Calinescu's terms, and can still be considered Postmodern.

The use of language, however, as well as the function of the text, is one of the aspects that can ambiguously be traced back to either Postmodernism or Modernism. This assumption brings us to the next section of this paper, dealing with elements that are more particularly modernistic.

1.5.2 A modernistic approach

Another way of looking at the narrative in this play is to consider the influence of Artaud's idea of 'Total Theatre', where spectacle is a primary element in the sequence of elements, reversing Aristotle's beginning-middle-end sequence:

> After sound and light there is action, and the dynamism of action: here the theatre, far from copying life, puts itself whenever possible in

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[156] Richard Foreman "Notes on the Process of Making It: Which is Also the Object," *Reverberation Machines: The Later Plays and Essays*, ed. Richard Foreman (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1985), 191.
[157] Gao Xingjian, "Wenxue Yu Xuanxue Guanyu Lingshan," *Jintian* 3 (1992): 212.
[158] Gao Xingjian, "Meyou Zhuyi," in *Meyou Zhuyi*, 10.
[159] See Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs, Semiotics, Literature and Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
[160] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 307.

> communication with pure forces...[that is,] whatever brings to birth images of energy in the unconscious, and gratuitous crime on the surface.[161]

In reversing the sequence, Artaud gives greater priority to those elements concerned with the means of representation than those concerned with what is represented. In the light of Artaud's ideas, as far as the narrative is concerned, it can be suggested that one possible way of gaining an understanding of the narrative mode of *The Other Shore* is to avoid making any assumptions about the story and its plot and to focus on the structure of the play itself, the moments, the scenes through which the play develops. It is not possible to regard the structure of the play in the light of a 'plot' – clear sequence of events in a traditional sense. However, as suggested by Fong, it could be argued that there is a sort of pattern used either intentionally or otherwise, where the play seems to be divided into units or scenes not introduced by clear divisions, as is the convention, but by simple stage directions and changes in characters' dialogues. If we still attempt to distinguish a plot in the play, it can be suggested that the plot starts off with the playful intermezzo of actors playing with the rope that structurally introduces the passage of the characters to the other shore, a passage that is both physical and emotional. The play then introduces the characters/actors in their new physical and emotional dimension, set in dreamlike situations; where characters/visions appear and disappear after interacting with each other.

For example, the play can be divided into sections as follows:

1. Before going to the other shore: game with the rope
2. After arriving on the other shore: Confusion
   Women
   Men in Crowd
   Mother-Man
   Card Player
3. First Break stage direction: Zen Master
   Young Man-Young Girl
   Young Man-Old Lady
4. Second Break stage direction: Plaster Seller
   Mad Woman-Men in Crowd
5. Third Break stage direction: Shadow-Man
   Man-Young Lady and Persons (A to J)
   Man-Stable Keeper
6. Fourth Break stage direction: Man-Shadow-Mannequins-Crowd
7. Actors

In this sense, there are two elements that help create the structure of the play: the stage directions in the text and the characters themselves.

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[161] Antonin Artaud, "No More Masterpieces," in *The Theatre and its Double*, 61.

Whereas in traditional plays the structure is determined by the events represented on stage and actions are chosen in order to convey the narrative of the play, here, the process seems to be reversed. The elements 'stage direction' and 'characters' create the structure of the play. It is the sequence of exits and entrances that forms the play's development, which does not correspond to a temporal or logical sequence. The pattern as such is created by stage direction, external characters (for example Card Player, Zen Master, Plaster Seller) entering, dialogue between two or more characters, and the disappearance of either one of the characters or of both. These sequences of units of scenes add a sort of rhythm to the development of the play, which becomes faster and faster towards the end. The speed is indicated by the presence of more dialogues in the first unit of scenes, fewer dialogues in the following units, and monologues and a lack of extensive dialogues towards the end. Moreover, the role of Crowd and their behaviour is another point of reference in the change of rhythm: Crowd's behaviour is more dynamic at the beginning of the play and towards the end, whereas in the middle it is restricted to the background. The dynamic role of Crowd towards the end and the diminished length of scene units create a certain climax of the play. The climax can be seen as a resolution of the dialogic rhythm of the play and to some extent signals the gradual end of the characters' actions on stage. The penultimate scene sees Man and uncontrollable mannequins and is the high-point of the action, with an almost total absence of dialogue as Man is left dealing with almost neurotic mannequins. In the last scene, the actors cease to be characters and look back at their play and identify themselves in their function as actors.

In this sense, the patterns of the different moments in the play can be seen as a formal and aesthetic choice rather than being directed by a story line. To support this idea, the article 'The Myth of Gao Xingjian' says that *The Other Shore* is not written in a nonsensical manner, as Gao makes intentional use of repetition and puns on word-sounds and tones (the four tones in the Chinese language) to empty and change the words and their meanings.[162]

The result is abstraction: there is more a sequence of patterns, tones like movements of music, as Gao says when he speaks of pure forms of theatre as music.The comparison with Artaud's idea of lyricism comes naturally:

> Departing from the sphere of analysable passions, we intend to make use of the actor's lyric qualities to manifest external forces, and by this means to cause the whole of nature to re-enter the theatre in its restored form.[163]

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[162] Jo Riley and Michael Gissenweher, "The Myth of Gao Xingjian," 128.
[163] Antonin Artaud, "The Theatre of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)," in *The Theatre and its Double*, 83.

Whereas Artaud speaks of external outbursts or effects on the audience, Gao's impact on the audience occurs at a deeper level by presenting a sequence of units within a narrative body, which is built on a certain structural cohesion of motifs, forming 'lyrically' a sense of musical abstraction.

In fact, one of the differences between Artaud and Gao lies in the nature of the language itself, which is again related to the idea of hypotheticality, where the language and the performance itself are aimed at evoking reality through imagination.

As far as the impact on the audience of this narrative structure is concerned, Jo Riley says:

> Whether the passage to the other side is representative of the passage into death, the passage into liberation into earthily body, or passage into life, or has any other meaning, Gao leaves the audience to decide.[164]

If there is any symbolic order, it is apparent and is given by what the reader-audience reads in to it from a particular angle.

Another modernistic element of the play is related to Brecht's idea of theatre within theatre[165] and Gao's metadrama[166], as demonstrated by the last scene of the play, which sees the actors commenting on the play itself. Brechtian theatre essentially showed a certain level of social commitment, which is not explicitly Gao's intention. However, the connection between Brecht's theatre[167] and Gao is the idea of metadrama as developed in this play. Gao's metadrama reflects the modernistic spirit of his play, which investigates the layers of the character/actor's subjectivity.

In terms of actors, it could be argued that Gao reflects some of Grotowsky's principles relating to the training of actors through the exploration of their own subjectivity[168]. However, as has been mentioned above, the intention of the play as actor training is not a central element, rather the spiritual journey of Gao's theatre. It is no coincidence that Gao's theatre is defined as Modern Zen Theatre: there is a basic philosophical attitude that Gao shares with Modernism. Modernism questions reality and the nature thereof in an epistemological sense (what does reality represent?, and so

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[164]Jo Riley and Michael Gissenweher, "The Myth of Gao Xingjian," 126.

[165] See Bertold Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: the development of an aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang; London: Eyre Methuen, 1978); and Margaret Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht-Forty Years of British Performances* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

[166] Gao was not the only one to experiment with Brechtian principles; among others Liu Shugang, Sha Yexin. Rossella Ferrari, *Da Madre Courage e i suoi figli a Jiang Qing,* 191.

[167] The influence of Brecht's theatre in China and viceversa goes as far as 1930s. This is thoroughly documented in Rossella Ferrari's book.

[168] Gao talks about Grotowski in the following essays : " Xiandai xiju shoudian"p. 2; Juchangxing, 10. in *Gao Xingjian xiju yanjiu -Dangdai xijuja yanjiu congshu.* Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 1987 etc.

on) but does not go as far as Postmodernism in speaking of a deconstructed dimension that we call reality. In the same way, Gao's spiritual attitude supposes a certain degree of belief in a transcended dimension, defying Postmodernism's spiritual cynical nihilism. The comparison will be clearer in the analysis of the post-exile plays. The hybrid nature of Gao's theatre, which is more visible in his later plays, positions Gao within the continuity of a certain modernistic tradition and is therefore a good example of Calinescu's idea of Postmodernism as a face, and part of a phase of Modernism. In terms of the narrative structure of the play, this play is definitely the most self-reflexive of all Gao's plays, even those of a later date, but elements of several traditions, especially modernistic, are still present in so far as Gao's theatre still experiments with dramatic modes of representation and anti-representation in a sort of theatrical game.

Moreover, as mentioned above, another important aspect that differentiates Gao's play from Postmodern theatre and Chinese theatre of 90s is Gao's interest in the textuality of theatre, which in this particular regard positions him closer to Modernism than Postmodernism. Zhao summarizes the main differences between Modern and Postmodern theatre:

> Postmodern Theatre boasts of being non-literary. It often refuses a script, which is a step further from being non-literary. It means a refusal of all prearrangement and design: the performance should be left to occur by itself on stage. Gao's carefully written Zen plays are, of course, 'literary scripts', although they do not contain a well-structured plot (as is the case of Postmodern Theatre).[169]

The literary aspect of Gao's theatre will be a more important feature in the post-exile plays than in *The Other Shore*, which makes use of more non-literary elements, such as actions, music, and the physicality of actors. In one of the first post-exile plays, *Between Life and Death*, the literary element is predominant as a one-woman monologue unfolds the entire play.

In conclusion, as far as the presence of Postmodern and Modern elements in Gao's theatre is concerned, *The Other Shore* is a good example of Calinescu's theory. In terms of Gao's theatre works, *The Other Shore* signals a clear breakthrough as new elements of his theatre start to emerge: as mentioned above, these can be identified as: Gao's use of hypotheticality, linked to the concept of Tripartition and metadrama, the theatre of the Zen. These two aspects can be linked respectively to the two general aspects: first, the modes of theatrical representation in relation to the concept of subjectivity and language, and secondly, the spiritual/ ritual relationship.

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[169] Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, 213.

1.6 The framework of the textual analysis

In the following chapters of this study, the focus will be on the analysis of each individual post-exile play, which will be compared to Crimp's plays within the theoretical framework of Postmodernism and Modernism. In particular, in each chapter the thesis will carry out a close reading analysis of one or more plays by each author: in the case of Gao, the focus will be on post-exile plays, written after he left China in 1986, which will be analysed chronologically; in the case of Crimp, his plays will not be analysed in chronological order but will include the plays written from the 1990s until now.

The analysis will search for the presence of the two aspects deriving from the new elements of Gao's theatre that *The Other Shore* introduces: the question of spiritual/ ritual as a link between Gao' s theatre and the Zen; the modes of theatrical representation encompassing both the principle of hypothecality and metadrama, which are linked to the discussion on the representation/exploration of subjectivity or – using Sy Ren Quah's words –'psychological field and language as a means of representation and entity itself in the theatrical experience.'[170] The use of themes inspired directly by Gao's theatre suggests that the terms of reference in the comparison are, in fact, Gao Xingjian's works. This does not mean that Crimp's theatre is unjustly using functions of Gao's theatre, rather it means that there is an intention to redeem Chinese literature from being the victim of a Eurocentric perspective and look at the West through the eyes of the East. Moreover, the reason behind this choice is dictated by the apparent maturity of Gao's theatre that has defined and prescribed its own principles. I use the word 'apparent' here because Gao's maturity seems to be determined *a priori* by his career as a Noble Prize winner and by his essays about theatre that parallel his writings. In particular, for this reason, as far as the idea of spiritual/ritual is concerned a wider definition is needed.

In Gao's case the spiritual or spirituality is mainly linked to Zen Buddhism and the idea of reaching out for a transcendence beyond language, beyond the material as it has been discussed when referring to *The Other Shore.* However, especially referring to Crimp's theatre, we need to look at the spirituality in a broader sense as in Crimp's play unlike Gao, there is no clear reference to a particular 'belief'.

[170]Sy Ren Quah, "Space and Suppositionality in Gao Xingjian's theatre," 144

> [spirituality is] the experiential side of religion, as opposed to outward beliefs, practices and institutions, which deals with the inner spiritual depths of a person. Zaehner has claimed that there are four types of spirituality within and between religions: loving union with a personal God; a sense of oneness with the absolute and the world, a sense of being separate from the world and becoming one with one's self.[171]

The above definition distinguishing four main types of spirituality mainly links spirituality to a religious belief in a supernatural being; however, with exception of the first type the other three seem to refer to a 'inward' or 'inner' experience of the individual connected to a generic awareness of an 'absolute' that inhabitates a space beyond and above materiality. Especially, the last type is concerned with the relationship between the individual and one's self, internal self. The latter communicates a philosophical connotation, because it seems to refer to a question of identity and of the self. To some extent, this definition of spirituality accounts for a wider meaning of the word that can be linked to a generic existentialist search for an inner deeper 'self.'

Moreover, when referring to contemporary society, the same definition refers to the 'recovering in the spiritual consciousness of nature, a new materiality that integrates the material, the humane and the translucent.'[172] This opens up to the possibility that spiritual/spirituality can be attributed to any tendency towards a dimension beyond the surfaces of materiality. This also occurs in Crimp's plays where the characters are in some instances engaged in existential quests and existential dilemmas. In this case one should not forget that being Postmodernism only about surfaces and materiality in its meaningless, any tendency towards spirituality, the questioning of spirituality itself in the two playwrights' texts can be interpreted as a sign that in a modernist fashion, both writers are still referring to the existence of a 'centre', of an ontological certainty.

Another element that highlights the presence of spiritual tendencies in the plays is the ritual or rituality. The ritual can be linked to the spiritual and considered the outward expression of the spiritual. The ritual as defined in reference to Gao's play *The Other Shore* is a performing element on stage and becomes gradually exploration and representation of Buddhist spirituality. Rituality, therefore, has a strictly religious meaning as well as becoming a vehicle to question this meaning and spirituality itself. By looking at the term rituality/ritual in a broader sense outside the strictly religious connotation, one discovers that it is not easy to define what rituality/ritual consists of

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[171] R. Goring, ed. *Larousse Dictionary of Beliefs and religions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 499
[172] Ibid.

and what defines it. There is still an ongoing debate in social sciences and history of religion on the matter.[173] In *The Bull Dictionary of Religion* it is said:

> First, religious practice was viewed in part as symbolic before 'ritual' came into use as a term referring to religious action. Second, the term 'ritual' was used synonymously with 'rite', 'religious practice', 'religious ceremony', or 'worship' before it became a concept of a specific form of action. Third, it developed in connection with other concepts such as 'magic' and 'taboo.'[174]

From the above comments, the term ritual was not only always and is not only strictly associated with religious practice. The 'ritual' can embrace a broader range of meanings. Two general approaches to the ritual were formulated by Goody:

> On the one hand, the ritual is seen as an aspect of social action. Consequentially, the definition of ritual embraces almost all action that is standardized in some way. [..] On the other hand, ritual is looked upon as a category of action that requires a special kind of interpretation. In this case, the problem is to determine the criterion that distinguishes ritual from non-ritual behaviour. Such a criterion cannot be found.[175]

The ritual can refer to a set of social actions following a given pattern and a controlled mode of behaviour as well as carrying a 'special' meaning that needs to be deciphered. According to this definition, ritual can be either a random repetition of actions or a category of actions with special meaning. In my view, the ritual is a combination of both aspects and what distinguishes ritual from non-ritual patterns is the set of pre-established conventions that surround the actions in a given situation, its 'special' circumstances, pre-determined sets of symbolic vocabulary. In the case of Gao's plays, the ritual is easily recognisable as it is associated to Zen Buddhism and its sets of conventions and symbolic vocabulary. In the case of Crimp, in identifying the ritual one will make use of and refer to the wide range of symbolic vocabulary from Western culture and the ritual will be explored at a performative level as to express particular meanings linked to an exploration of spirituality, intended in the case of Crimp's plays, as exploration of the inner self, of a dimension beyond materiality.

In particular the two categories, ritual and spiritual will looked at as connected to each other – the ritual as expression of the spiritual- but also as excluding each other almost in dichotomous relationship- the ritual representing materiality and spiritual representing the 'immanent' beyond materiality. The nature of this dichotomy is mainly

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[173] Kocu von Struckrad, ed. *The Bull dictionary of Religion* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007), 1633
[174] Ibid. 1636
[175] Ibid. 1639

referred to Gao's plays that, as mentioned earlier on, unlike his earlier plays aim to explore the spiritual of the Zen ideology, leaving behind the ritual. In this respect, especially in the first two chapters, this dichotomous relationship will be partially linked to the idea of life and death, where ritual is linked to life and spiritual to death. The link between these dichotomous relationships is, however, far from being strict as in some instances the representation of the ritual comes to be linked to death.

Another aspect that will be looked at is the discussion of gender, which is the only element that is not inspired directly by Gao's theatre. The gender relationship between masculinity and femininity is common to both writers and in both cases has been at times overlooked by critics. The gender relationship is an underlying motif in both sets of plays and links to another aspect of Postmodernism-Modernism, the deconstruction of gender roles and their representation. The link between Postmodernism-Modernism and gender, as well as feminism, is not an obvious one[176]; the deconstruction of gender roles and their representation is, however, a phenomenon induced by structuralists and post-structuralists that gender scholars and feminists have made use of in their struggle for women's equality. Moreover, recent feminist trends, such as postfeminism and the Third Wave[177] have emerged from the discourse of Postmodernism. The questions that will be explored here are: do the writers deconstruct gender roles? How does that define them in terms of the Postmodernism/Modernism dichotomy? Are they championing feminism? Which kind of feminism? Reference here will be made mainly to Second Wave feminists and theorists like Cixous, Kristeva, Butler and others from postfeminism and the Third Wave; the debate will be linked to questions of 'un-gendered self' that Gao seems to deal with in Chapter Two. The Chinese approach to gender will be accounted for, as will be clear in relation to the

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[176] This is connected to the debate on whether or not postmodernism has aided the feminist cause. Judith Evans *Feminist theory today: an introduction to second-wave feminism* (London, Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications , 1995), 125-26

[177] Post-feminism and Third Wave feminism are often confused terms (a seminal book like *Third wave Feminism*- Stacy Gillis *et al.*, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, Second Revised edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) - stresses the difference between the two but fails to give an accurate definition of post-feminism but accounts for 'Third Wave' Anglo-American discourses and the survival of feminism while seemingly condemning post-feminism). In the same book Amanda D. Lotz's "Theorizing the Intermezzo: The contributions of Post-feminisms and Third Wave Feminism" in *Third Wave Feminism*, 71-85- provides different definitions of the term. From those, I will mainly use the term post-feminism to describe an 'after-feminist' trend criticising feminism for its failings - Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999)-, for its redundancy and radicalism -L.S. Kim "Sex and the Single Girl in Postfeminism: The F Word on Television," *Television & New Media* 2(4) (November, 2001): 319-334, Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996)-, for its oppression against men (Natash Walter *The New Feminism*; Rosalind Coward, *Sacred Cows: is feminism relevant to the new millennium?* (London: Harper Collins, 1999).

femininity/masculinity dichotomy that runs throughout the thesis and with regard to masculinity in Chapter Five. The result of this exploration will challenge the widespread view of Gao's misogynism[178] and in the case of Crimp will ask the question whether a male writer can be a feminist writer to the extent that his discourse can be totally embedded in a feminist perspective. The first plays analysed here, *Between Life and Death/ Attempts on her life,* have a clear feminist agenda, which is carried through until the very last set of plays that nevertheless seem only to elude to it.

The next chapter deals with the above mentioned plays, *Between Life and Death* and Crimp's *Attempts on Her life*, which are both very similar and deal with a female character (absent or not) and the fragmentation of femininity. The third chapter looks at Gao's *Dialogue and Rebuttal* and Crimp's *The Country*: these are two very different plays but both authors achieve a kind of theatre that seems to transcend more effectively than other plays the Modernism/Postmodernism boundaries. The fourth chapter focuses on Gao's *Nocturnal Wanderer* and Crimp's *Play with Repeats,* which both seem to follow a Postmodern model of playful fragmentation and deconstruction at the cost of originality, especially in the case of Gao's play. The last chapter, unlike the other three, deals with four shorter plays: Gao's *Weekend Quartet* and *Death Collector*; and Crimp's *Whole Blue Sky* and *Fewer Emergencies.* This final chapter carefully looks at the plays and assesses their link with Modernism and Postmodernism but also reveals how Gao's theatre is losing its Chineseness and almost seems to abandon the idea of a Zen Theatre. Both sets of plays suggest that there is a gradual exhaustion of the elements that had made the other plays very original and thus almost transcending the two cultural categories in question. The most important aspect of this last chapter is that despite the differences, the four plays share a commonality of themes and concerns, where the abandonment of the Zen spirituality can be read not only as Gao's loss of cultural identity but perhaps as an attempt to go beyond cultural boundaries.

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[178] Kam Louie, "Review: In Search of the Chinese Soul in the Mountains of the South," *The China Journal* 45 (January, 2001): 145. Cf. Rojas, Carlos. "Without [Femin]ism: Femininity as Axis of Alterity and Desire in Gao Xingjian's *One Man's Bible*." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 14, 2 (Fall 2002).

CHAPTER 2

Between Life and Death – development of tripartition and the idea of the 'originary self' in comparison with Martin Crimp's _Attempts on Her Life_.

This chapter deals with Gao's play *Between Life and Death*, written in 1992 after he left China in 1987, and compares it with Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*, written ten years later, in 1997. Both plays focus on a female character, her subjectivity and identity: Gao's play is a direct representation of a female character on stage; in Crimp's play, the character is represented through the voice of the actors on stage talking about her possible identity. The comparison takes into account the three main themes mentioned in the introductory chapter: life and death, the overt motif of Gao's play, which is, instead, hardly present in Crimp's play; narration/reality, an underlying motif of Gao's play – which is also concerned with the use of language and is the structural backbone of Crimp's play; and man/woman dichotomy, the main theme of both Gao and Crimp's plays. Each of these themes is investigated from the point of view of both content and the use of theatrical devices. First, the chapter deals with *Between Life and Death* and *Attempts on Her Life* individually, looking at their relationship to the Modernism/Postmodernism dichotomy, then it compares the two plays.

2.1. Between Life and Death

Between Life and Death has been seen as expressing the general existential unease of modern society[1] as well as dealing with human predicaments yet only with in internal emotional dimension[2]. At a more simple level, this play can be seen as Woman's unconscious trip through her present and past, and between life and death; the trip through the unconscious is more defined than in *The Other Shore* and seems to be constructed around a narrative dimension. Distractive elements to the main narrative focus are the background characters, whose presence is, however, linked to the content of Woman's speech. The sense of a narrative element is given by the use of 'she' instead of 'I'. As the title suggests, this play shifts from a discourse on life to a discourse on death. Like *The Other Shore* this play lacks a formal division into scenes and acts, but could theoretically be divided into three moments, which gradually unfold the narration. The first moment sets the character in the present and focuses on Woman's relationship with Man, a background character that never speaks. The second

[1] Liu Zaifu *Lun Gao Xingjian zhuangtai* (Xianggang : Ming bao chu ban she you xian gong si, 2000), 84
[2] Liu Zaifu *Gao Xingjian lun* (Taibei Shi : Lianjing chu banshi ye gufen you xian gongsi, 2004), 109

is concerned with her past and her memories. The third part sets her in the present, a negative disruptive present, which projects the character towards death.

Between the hypothetical three moments, the gradual development of the play is articulated by the appearance and disappearance of the background characters. The appearance and disappearance of these characters seemingly marks the beginning and the end of each hypothetical scene, and therefore these characters become formal devices dividing the play into scenes. The motif of self-destruction and disintegration is present from the very beginning. The play starts with a semi-realistic, overtly confessional monologue by Woman addressed to Man, who, almost always present on stage, responds to her negative statements about their relationship with mimed gestures. The play travels through Woman's unconscious and moves towards the consumption and disintegration of both her as a character and her language, fragmented in parallel.

2.1.1. Life and death

This aspect of the play is a development of the spiritual tension that Gao had started to investigate in *The Other Shore*: the spiritual and the ritual of Buddhism as a performative form – Modern Zen Theatre – based on the idea of *xieyi* or non-illusionism.[3] In *The Other Shore* the performative form of the spiritual had contributed to the abstraction of the play, the rarefied ambience of its construction, the subtle tension between nothingness and the characters' individuality expressed by the symbolic presence of religious figures such as the Buddhist monk.

In *Between Life and Death*, the spiritual and the ritual take on concrete and almost cruel forms. The spiritual is concretised by the journey of the play itself between life and death, and by the speech of Woman, who, on the whole, makes little specific reference to a spiritual belief. The journey sees the character first talking about a general sense of guilt and a search for consolation and a resolution to it, which assume almost religious connotations. Guilt, search for consolation, and references to a non-specific religious belief define the nature of the character's spiritual crisis, which is concerned with reflections on life and death. It is within this framework that one can see the relationship between ritual and spiritual and their connection to Zen Buddhism. A general sense of guilt is expressed quite early on in the play:

> It's all her own fault, she asked for it, and she asked for it, and at the same time she gave other people a sense of troubles.[4]

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[3] Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Theatre*, 59.

[4] Gao Xingjian, "Shengsijie" (Between Life and Death), in *Gao Xingjian juzuo xuan* (Hong Kong: Mingpao Chubanshi You Xianggonsi, 2001), 67.

Her speech introduces the audience to the idea of sin and guilt. In these early parts, the idea of sin is associated with femininity; being a woman means being sinful, as shown by the continuation of the above statement:

> She says that she wasn't the only one; most girls were like that [...] she says she's talking about a bad girl, and the bad girl is herself.[5]

According to her mother's teaching, women were destined to suffer from deadly sins:

> When she was alive she always said that it was difficult being a woman, she says her mother said women suffer five hundred times more than men. She didn't understand why women had had to suffer from so many more deadly sins. [...] Yes, sins, she'd brought sins upon herself.[6]

Sin is also associated with sex, which is described as a filthy act within a filthy and sinful society:

> She says the first time she made love to a man and saw the semen down her leg, she felt so disgusted and almost threw, now she does not have the same reaction any more, the world is in fact a very filthy place, including herself [...][7]

The idea of femininity as a source of sin is present throughout her speech. When she describes a woman doctor, one of her friends, she uses expressions like 'she-devil', and claims that women can be more vicious than men.[8] Her sense of guilt is also connected to her past and her relationship with her mother; she feels guilty that she did not cry over her mother's death.

In her sinful life she finds, to some extent, a kind of redemption in isolation and escapism:

> Right she's cut off all her ties with the outside world, she's cut off her ties with the outside world, she's cut off her ties with her lovers, friends, and enemies and with those she once loved but no longer loves, those who admired her but whom she didn't admire.[9]

However, seclusion does not bring her any consolation but is a heavy burden for her. She uses in this instance the image of a locked room whose key can no longer be found; being locked in her own home leads to despair, and the room itself becomes 'a horrifying abyss overnight'.[10] Forgiveness is not a possibility, no consolation for her

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 64.
[7] Ibid., 68.
[8] Ibid., 66-67.
[9] Ibid., 55.
[10] Ibid., 57.

sense of guilt. Neither does religion bring her any comfort due to her limited belief in a superior spiritual entity, even though at first she feels that faith could be a solution:

> She says she thought that good or bad she must have faith, that she should be a follower of the Buddha or she should believe in God. Whenever she passed by a church, she'd always be deeply moved by the singing mass. She also says that she also wanted to a have a dog.[11]

As we see from the above quote, she has an eagerness to embrace a religious belief, yet she yearns for a spiritual belief as much as she yearns to own a dog. In this part of the play, her spiritual ambition and longing are represented as a superficial yearning for any type of consolation. Later in the play, however, when she mentions again her need for religious faith, she expresses her regret at having missed out on the benefits of religion, which could have helped her overcome her despair:

> Perhaps the merciful Bodhisattva is to release her from purgatory, but unfortunately she can't be exalted to paradise and *sukhavati*, the land of the pure. All the while she is wandering between the misty clouds and among the big Chaos [...][12]

She defines her state of perdition as wandering into a big Chaos. The spiritual and religious figures appearing on stage are described as an intimidating and menacing presence. This conveys the idea that her spiritual journey is one of despair. The figures linger around her as a reminder of her spiritual lassitude, and to some extent their menacing presence increases her sense of guilt. Whereas in most of the play the sense of guilt is mainly self-inflicted, in later parts of the play she explains that men are the source of sin in her life:

> Ever since she was a young girl she had been shy and bashful, mischievous, self-indulgent and even masochistic, she realizes it, it was all because of him.[13]

This statement towards the end of the play does not redeem the character and in a way reduces the spiritualism of the play, which is brought back to the level of the secular.

On the whole, her struggle does not appear at first as a spiritual crisis in the sense of a search for truth and enlightenment. To some extent guilt, in the sense of an acknowledgement of having committed sin, is the marrow of her despair and her journey. The ideas of guilt and sin are part of her family legacy: the relationship with her mother, her father's unfaithfulness, etc.; and are also associated with the idea of

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 73.
[13] Ibid.

femininity – being a woman in itself is a source of guilt, as all women are sinful – and her personal disbelief in a happy future. Gao presents the character as dealing with a subjective quest rather than a universal one.

The motif that projects the character towards a quest for spirituality is that of death, which is already present at the beginning of the play. After interacting with Man, Woman finds that one of her legs has been amputated, an act that seems to be self-inflicted. At first, she is surprised and questions whether or not the amputation is real and whether or not she is still alive. Then she talks about death and pain, which she connects to death as necessary proof of her own existence.[14] Another clear reference to death is at the beginning of the final part, where a masked man appears in a long black robe. At that moment, Woman is talking about her experience of driving in the middle of the motorway, seeing flashing headlights and being caught in the midst of fog. Suddenly the masked man turns around and blocks her way, and from his left arm a red sleeve falls down. She interprets this action as a warning of a calamity.[15] In this context the masked man could represent the approach of death. The passage that follows gives a vivid description of her reaching out for death:

> She feels like she's gliding on a glacier and she can't stop, she sees only a big mass of blackness, any time now she's going to slip into the cracked icy layers and plunge into the deep dark water of death [...][16]

In this context, death is seen not as an escape from pain but as a way to reach purity following the Buddhist teaching of release from materiality (nirvana):

> It's not that she doesn't know what the Buddha has said, that the four elements of life are mere emptiness; it's just that she can't free herself from the vanities of human life. So she prays in a whisper, pleading the merciful Bodhisattva to look after her, to help her to sever her ties with the mortal world.[17]

This is the only clear reference to Woman's commitment to Buddhist belief. In this moment of the play, however, which represents the highest spiritual instance, she unmistakably states that her materialism, her attachment to life, is too strong for her to reach enlightenment. In this passage, we also understand that life, or rather the state of being alive, is mostly meant in the sense of a recognition and acknowledgment of her existence by others; it is no coincidence that, in her attempt at ascetic redemption, her

[14] Ibid., 56.
[15] Ibid., 69-70.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 70-71.

first words of regret are about the achievements that have not been recognised by others; which shows a fear of being forgotten.

The failure to reach enlightenment, to redeem herself, plunges her from the level of the spiritual to that of the secular. The following scene presents a nun with a grey iron-like complexion wearing a Buddhist robe, whose presence is menacing and devoid of spiritual connotations. In a gruesome depiction, the nun cuts into her own stomach and gives Woman her intestines[18]. In the meantime, Woman is again in despair and longs for spiritual cleansing but is mainly lost in emotional turmoil and distress. This scene is the beginning of Woman's physical destruction, and leads to her state of mental instability.

Through its vivid visual representation, through Woman's journey, death assumes a twofold meaning as physical disintegration – the amputated leg – and emotional pain. Firstly, death is placed in a dialectical relationship with life, but the concept of being alive is not its immediate opposite. On the contrary, we could argue that death is the continuation of life itself; death helps the character to acknowledge her own existence and to some extent could bring her to eternal life by leading her to reach enlightenment. Secondly, the concept of death assumes almost a functional attribute, as it cannot exist in its own right; spiritualism is seen as a function of pain and loses its original purpose. Spiritualism, the reaching out for enlightenment, is understood only as an escape from pain and from guilt or sin, and as being strictly connected to the personal legacy of the character. In this sense, despite her superficially religious, ritualistic representation – she wears a religious dress – the figure of the nun at the end of the play contrasts with that of the Zen Master in *The Other Shore*, as she does not act in a strict ritualistic way. Her actions perpetuate the cruelty and the threat of the character's sinful life and come across as a punishment of Woman for choosing materialism over enlightenment. The nun cannot cleanse her intestines but holds them out to her with a menacing gesture. To some extent, the ritual loses its purpose and becomes the perpetrator of guilt and pain.

In *The Other Shore* Zen Buddhism was represented by the use of characters such as the Zen Master, by Man's acting out a Zen ritual and by the interaction of Man with characters such as Shadow. In *Between Life and Death*, the only concrete traces of Zen Buddhism are found in Woman's mention of Buddha and Bodhisattva and in the figure

[18] Referring to Gao's notes to *Soul Mountain* Chang Hsien-Tang states that this image might have been inspired by a Buddhist legend. This legend talks of a dispute between a Buddhist monk and a nun and ends up in blood bath. Chang Hsien-Tang "Gao Xingjian zai "Sheng sijie", "Duihua yu fanhua" he "Ye youshen" de qingyu shuxie", *Beitaiwan xuebao*, 297

of the nun, whose real religious identity is not really clear and appears an evil figure. In fact, with regard to Woman's nationality and the religious references, Zhao defines this play as one of Gao's most un-Chinese, and says that the performance descends from the spiritual to the worldly.[19] Liu Zaifu, also, affirms that Gao starts to deal with universal issues distancing himself from Chinese issues.[20]

In this sense what has fundamentally changed from *The Other Shore* is the performative element of the spiritual, the so-called 'ritual', which was present in Gao's earlier plays as a revisited form of Chinese religious tradition, which has its origins in Zen Buddhism. *The Other Shore* already showed a development from earlier plays, with Gao exploring Buddhist spirituality as a performative form and in an abstract sense as loss and a projection towards nothingness. However, the ritual was still used in that play as a means of exploration, and the focus of this exploration was Buddhist spirituality. In the case of *Between Life and Death*, we can argue that the ritual, in the sense of the revival of specific Chinese traditions, is no longer present, that the scope of the exploration of spirituality has widened to include all spiritual beliefs and that, to some extent, Gao's exploration is intended to question spirituality itself. There is, therefore, a change in the means and scope; the ritual is abandoned completely as a mode of exploration; the scope is a more ambitious philosophical quest.

Evidence of the change can be found in the use of the performative itself. In *Between Life and Death*, the unconscious activity of reviving past memories and present conflicts is the only method of exploring spirituality. On the one hand, the concrete reference to the character's past and life tends to diminish the spiritual tension and therefore seems to demystify the spiritual quest. On the other hand, transcendence and the spiritual can be traced back to the disintegration of Woman's identity. She appears in the last part of the play as an evanescent figure, whose physicality and subjectivity have been lost. The transcendental is still present, but in the form of the secular and the concreteness of Woman's unconscious struggle to resolve her crisis through spiritual and religious redemption. The journey through Woman's unconscious develops in several stages, from her concrete despair over her lost lover, through the memories of her past, to her ultimate madness and sense of dissolution, as she is threatened by transcendental figures such as the nun, a masked man and a woman-shadow. Owing to their menacing potential, the characters embodying religious and spiritual symbolism

[19] Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Theatre*, 146.
[20] Liu Zaifu *Lun Gao Xingjian zhuangtai*, 108. This is shared by other scholars, like Fang, Zixun (Gilbert Fong) in " Yi shuang lengyan choushen guanshen – cong Gao Xingjian de zhuangzuo lunshuoqi"in *Gao Xingjian –2000 shouwei Nuobei'r wenxue jiang dezhu*, 177-181ed. Lin Mangshu Xianggang: Mingbao chubanshe, 2004.

create a surreal ambience and a transcendental tension, which manages to perform the spiritual at a symbolic level. With regard to the final dissolution of Woman, who has been turned into a piece of cloth, Zhao speaks of Gao's use of Woman as serving to show the misery of life and to make the audience aware of the 'loneliness of human being'[21] in a general, almost universal sense. Therefore, even though the monologue itself can come across as referential to a subjective experience, her experience and emotional turmoil can be considered universal, which demystifies the 'ritual'.

Another aspect to be considered is the role of the silent characters in relation to Woman. This will shed more light on the extent to which this play follows the principle of Zen Buddhism. As mentioned earlier on, the presence of the other characters is not merely as active participants in Woman's quest; they also interfere with her thoughts and actions. In terms of spiritual symbolism, their presence seems to emerge from her unconscious, but they impose all their cruelty onto her as independent agents symbolising a bad omen. The link is conveyed by the symbolic connotation the characters add to her speech. The final scene of the old man and the snowflake, for instance, works at a poetic level, but it is very difficult to determine the terms of reference of its symbolic connotation as a specific reference to Zen Buddhism. According to Zhao, the old man could represent a Zen master, but in connection with Woman's speech he could also represent the figure of Woman's grandfather.

In terms of the principle of *xieyi* we should remember that Gao's spiritual investigation is not prescriptively pedagogical or moralistic. In this sense the essence of Zen Buddhism does not occur at the level of the ritual or mere abstraction of the spiritual. Instead, he uses the principle of Zen Buddhism, which states that enlightenment occurs at a kind of transcendental level[22] beyond language, and this is what Gao is exploring through this play.

This journey between life and death that the female character undertakes sees the female character herself experiencing transcendence by travelling through life to death. Her journey, though, is not straightforward as it encompasses the tension between the secular – her attachment to life – and the spiritual, between the character's own individualism and the universal nature of her own quest. The character's own individualism is gradually disintegrated by the silent characters that act as symbols for the dimension of transcendence, hence they project the character onto a universal

[21]Gao Xingjian, "Shengsijie", 147.

[22] Transcendental wisdom or *prajñā* (Cf. Chapter 1 footnote 53) at work in non-objective way [...] true, free, dynamic mirror-play of the mind." Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen enlightenment,* 48.

philosophical quest. In this regard, Liu Zaifu talks about a sort of purification of the self and he goes as far as to state that Woman represents to some extent Gao's own self going through a process of purification.[23] Chen Jide, instead, says that according to the Zen, one can free oneself beyond the body, straight through to the spiritual self, reaching what he defines as 'freedom and the ideal state of beauty'.[24] This philosophical quest seems to result in a transcendental enlightenment or using Chen Jide's terms the ideal state of beauty. Moreover, in terms of the spiritual and ritual connection, one can argue that silent characters do not act as symbols for transcendence by embodying the 'ritual'; they are not direct representations of religious figures. Therefore, they demystify the ritual but sublimate the spiritual.

From a philosophical point of view, 'sublimating the spiritual' assumes the existence of a dimension beyond reality, its transcendence – which makes the quest not of an ontological but of an empistological kind – as the play does not question reality and existence but the knowledge of this reality by referring to an 'enlightened reality' beyond language. In this sense, this play can be seen as representing epistological Modern values rather than Postmodern values. The Modernism of this play, however, will need to be looked in regards to the relationship between narration and reality.

2.1.2. Narration/reality

This section of the chapter looks at the relationship between narration and reality, questioning the validity of any representation of reality, and therefore the power and role of language in the narration itself, which Gao explores through the character's continuous questioning of the truthfulness of her own narration and through the function of language itself that becomes another character in the play. Woman's journey can be understood as a linguistic journey that explores the dream–reality and objective–subjective.

Her questioning is enacted by the recollection of her past and her expression of general dissatisfaction towards life, which follows a process from lucidity to total mental confusion, that is concretised by a gradual disintegration of language. In her recollection of events in her adult life, she expresses confusion over whether these are real events; in particular, when she talks about the dream of being raped with the help of her mother, she cannot tell whether she was dreaming or not.[25] Once the recollection of her childhood is followed by a more mystical ambience, we see Woman directly

[23] Liu Zaifu *Lun Gao Xingjian zhuangtai*, 164
[24] Chen Jide *Zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000*, 273
[25] Ibid., 65.

confronting her ghosts, her despair and her pain. Her questioning at the beginning of the play of the truthfulness of the narration, her confusion of dream and reality, are no longer present, but give way to confused nonsensical statements, where she seems to have completely lost control over her language. First, she states that she does not even know what she is talking about ('she says she doesn't know what she's saying [...] maybe she didn't say anything [...]').[26] Secondly, we see her lost in her own dreams, in which she sees herself naked and plunging into darkness and surrounded by ghosts.[27] Then, towards the end, her statements are all about the exhaustion of language and her perdition in the big Chaos and Nothingness.[28] In the end, her speech seems to affect the collapse of the narration itself. She has stopped questioning the truthfulness of the narration, but attempts to define the function of her recollections ('Is it a story? A romance? A farce?')[29] and the object of her discourse ('Is this about him, about you, about me?').[30] As her speech affects the collapse of the narration, so the collapse of the narrative elements affects the collapse of language, which is represented by the use of floating signifiers, of self-referential language – drawing the audience into its own breakdown, in parallel with the disintegration of Woman's identity. In fact, at the end, just before disappearing, Woman speaks of the dissolution of language, in the sense of empty signs, signs that have lost their 'symbolical meaning':

> What is the self? Besides these words, these empty hollow words about nothing, what else is left?[31]

This important statement provides clues as to what this play says about language, which could be defined as the unconscious and the self. However, we should first look at language as a character in the play.

Looking at Woman's speech in general throughout the play, we recognise self-referential comments on the ephemeral nature of language, on the truthfulness of narration and on the object of the narration, i.e. confusion of dream and reality. Focusing on the last of these elements provides clues to the other two. Her continuous confusing of reality and dreams seems to question the concept of memory and the ability to both recollect and retell past events. Woman's confusion in recollecting past events suggests not only the limits of language as a subjective instrument of the 'subjective' individual and therefore lacking objectivity, but the limits of human beings

[26] Gao Xingjian, "Shengsijie," 74.
[27] Ibid., 75-76.
[28] Ibid., 77-78.
[29] Ibid., 78.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

in recollecting past events precisely and objectively. It is the unconscious that plays a disturbing role in diverting Woman. Confused as to what is reality and what is a dream, she cannot distinguish between the unconscious elaboration of events and what really happened.

In this case we could use Lacan's idea of the unconscious and language: it is language itself that creates subjectivity, because the unconscious is structured like a language, and language and its symbolic order are founded on the unconscious itself. In his explanation of the 'mirror stage' Lacan argues that:

> [...] the intentional subject as split and governed by a lack is produced by the non-unified, non-sovereign status of the subject as an effect of language. It [mirror stage] points to the lack of control over meaning in the symbolic order and non-sovereign status of the subject.[32]

Lacan's rewriting of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) as 'where I think "I think therefore I am" that is where I am not' demystifies the rational and objective attempt to use language; therefore, as truth cannot be told or represented, human beings like Woman believe in the misconception of their own rationality and their own language, and end up living in a limbo between reality and dream built by their own unconscious. Taking into account this view, the ephemerality of language expressed by Woman's speech is incorrect; it is not language but the control of the speaking subject attempting a narration that is ephemeral.

At another level, if we use Lacan's mode of reading a text, we should not look for the meaning or the author's intention behind the text itself when reading this play. We should read the text considering 'the duplicity of speech as the unconscious itself', where the understanding is always incomplete. According to Elizabeth Grosz's reading of Lacan's style, the best application of his theory suggests a reading should focus on the language and its free association rather than its cohesion as a narrative form.[33] This reading would help explain the incoherencies of the narrative. However, if we take this kind of reading to the extreme, inasmuch as language and narration lose their objectivity, the author/playwright loses his authority over the text: Woman's speech could be read as an expression of the playwright's unconscious. This kind of reading would, however, limit the scope of Gao's play.

One aspect to consider in the reading of the play in connection with the narration/reality dichotomy is that written speech is not the only means used in theatre;

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[32] Chris Weedon, *Identity and culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging (Issues in Cultural & Media Studies)* (Oxford: Open University Press, 2004), 12.
[33] Elisabeth Gosz, *Jacques Lacan – a feminist thought* (Routledge, London and New York, 1997), 18-19.

there are others, too, such as the visual and audio elements[34], and the reception of the actual text is filtered by the subjectivity and the subconscious of the performers. Gao's theatre directly, and to some extent intentionally, exploits theatrical representative devices. The term 'intentional' is not used lightly in this content, as it can be seen from Gao's writing that he is aware of Lacan's ideas and intends to go one step further than him. Liu Zaifu refers to the importance Gao attributes to the self by using the expression '*ziwo shangdi*' (one self is god)[35]. In his essay 'Wode xiju he wode yaoshi' (My drama and my key), Gao Xingjian speaks of 'the self in Chaos',[36] the originary self before language itself, the state of the child before it learns the use of language – to use Freud's terms, the pre-Oedipal stage, or to use Lacan's terms, the subject before the mirror stage[37]. According to Kwok-kan Tam, Gao was deeply interested in exploring the originary self and that was a focus that comes up in much of his theatre:

> Gao Xingjian's interest in the self is not just to show how the self can be understood through the processes of detachment and objectification, that is the use of pronouns [...] he seeks to return to the originary self as a way to explore human existence in the primordial state [...] he sees the role of language to uncover the preconscious mode of self [...] Gao believes that the true self lies in the pre-linguistic state of human being.[38]

The phrase 'big Chaos' that Woman uses quite often in her speech can actually be interpreted as the original pre-linguistic state. Woman's last statement shows that she has discovered her own primordial state, the state of nothingness. The fragmentary use of language by the character, her perdition, should be read in this vein.

Taking into account the above quote in order to fully understand how Gao attempts to explore the pre-linguistic stage, we need to look at the use of pronouns and of theatrical devices. One important device present in the text is the use of the pronoun 'she' instead of 'I', exploiting the so-called principle of tripartition. In this regard, Fang Zixun talks about '*ziwo de huashen*', 'embodiment of the self' by creating an external

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[34] "The Intention and the capability to transform the text into performance, that is, into a visual representation, fundamentally marks the play text as different. That difference, however, is not readily apparent, first the text's readiness for performance is not contained in the outward form but in more fundamental structure." Thomas John Donahue, *Structures of meaning: a semiotic approach to the play text* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London; Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1993), 16.

[35] Liu Zaifu *Lun Gao Xingjian zhuangtai*, 206

[36] Gao Xingjian, "Wode xiju he wode yaoshi," 250.

[37] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as a formative of the function of the "I" as revealed in psychoanalytic experience" In *Écrits- a Selection*, ed. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1977), 1-7.

[38] Terry Siu-han Yip ans Kwok-kan Tam, "Gender and self in Gao Xingjian post-exile plays" in *Soul of chaos*, 217.

perspective.[39]This creates a kind of objectification of the narration. As the narration is in the third person, the audience's attention is diverted, and therefore it does not read Woman's life story only in a subjective key. In terms of acting, the actor can distance him- or herself from the character and go in and out of the character. This keeps the actor from totally identifying with the character, which results in a critical rendering of the character. Moreover, taking into account the performative value of the use of these pronouns, Amy T.Y. Lai says:

> Through the filter of the subjectivity of a third-person narrator, the emotional characteristics of the character under description thus appear to be distorted, diluted and exaggerated, with the result that a psychological distance is established between the narrative text and the truth about the character.[40]

In this light, regarding the character's references to the text and the narration, we could argue that this use of pronouns results in the performer's objectification of the character of Woman as well as the objectification of the narration: the audience is participating in the process that the author and the performer respectively are using in creating the play and the character and in giving a perspective on the nature of the narration itself.

In comparison to *The Other Shore,* in terms of theatrical representation, Gao seems to move further away from traditional modes of representation, in that he looks at actions and language from different angles – in this case the subjective one – which undermines and further questions the validity of any form of representation. In terms of Woman as a character, the effect is that her representation creates an exaggerated version of the character, or rather an exaggerated version of the character's reality; and the audience fully understands that her speech is fictional, subjective and therefore unreal. This is also conveyed by the relationship between the visual elements and the speech of the actor playing Woman. The other characters' actions appear to be a force, menacing Woman. Their very non-verbal nature could be regarded as a pre-verbal force menacing Woman's verbal entity, which imposes a strain on her and the other characters, who finally succumb to it. To use Lacan's terms, through the dynamic of the play the pre-verbal, pre-symbolic prevails over the verbal and symbolic, with Woman's linguistic journey being to some extent a return to the childhood dimension of no-language. This dimension of no-language can again be linked to the Zen Buddhist no-

[39] Fang Zixun " Yi shuang lengyan, chousheng guanshen- cong Gao Xingjian de zhuanzuo lunshuo qi" in *Gao Xingjian –2000 shouwei Nuobei'r wenxue jiang dezhu*, ed. Lin Mangshu, 177
[40] Amy T. Y. Lai, "Gao Xingjian *Monologue* Drama," in *Soul of Chaos*, 139.

language[41]. Zhao finds an explanation for the use of the third person in the Zen belief of enlightenment.[42]

In this sense Gao uses the third-person pronoun as a means to maintain 'neutrality', which is not understood in the sense of mere 'objectivity'. In one of his essays, Gao, focusing on subjectivity as an essential element of language, affirms that the use of specific pronouns in speech recreates that very subjectivity and the illusory nature of that subjectivity, which connects the addresser or the addressee of a speech to enlightenment. By its very nature, enlightenment is found in the illusory or in no-language, whereas the 'sensual', in the sense of 'passion', attachment to materialism, stands as an obstacle between mankind and enlightenment.[43]

Therefore, in terms of the relationship between narration/representation and reality, we can argue that the core of the play does not lie in reality and its representation: Gao plays with the perception of reality as affected by the subjectivity of the viewer using the narrative devices and ultimately language itself. To some extent, it is narration itself and not the representation of reality that is the focus of the play, which by deconstructing its very object describes the gradual passage from the dimension of linguistic discourse to the mystified dimension of no-language. As far as the connection to Modernism and Postmodernism is concerned, this play uses devices and values that are typically Postmodern, the concern with subjectivity, language, narration and deconstruction of those by means of words game. However, the projecting onto the mystified dimension of no-language resonates of a modern understanding of the reality and representation, what Fokkema calls the idea of Modernistic poetics using hypothesis[44]. In other words, the chaos, the nothingness Woman is described to experience and to reach out to projects onto the hypothesis of a dimension beyond the linguistic dimension, beyond the reality constructed by language itself.

2.1.3. Man/woman binary opposition: gender discourse

This section deals with the man/woman dichotomy, which is another of the play's main themes and is strictly connected to the issues raised in the previous section about narration in terms of subjectivity. This section focuses on subjectivity more as an

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[41] "When there is a quiescence of mental activity/ then the need for discourse ceases and /Reality, like unto cessation,/ Neither arises nor passes away." (Nāgārjuna's *Kārikā-* Acharya Nāgārjuna, Indian philosopher the founder of the Mādhyāmika (Middle Path) school of Mahāyāna Buddhism), in Gadjin M. Nagao, ed., *the Fundamental standpoint of Mādhyāmika Philosophy* (Albany: State of New York University Press: 1989), 65.
[42] Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, 190.
[43] Ibid., 150.
[44] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 292.

exploration of the gendered self, and touches upon issues regarding the gender discourse, to give a deeper insight into Gao's scope in this play. Gao has been accused by some to be a misogynist[45]. In terms of gender discourse, Fong, instead, alleges that Gao champions feminism by presenting women as victims of men.[46] However, Fong also admits that the play has a more ambitious scope, dealing with, for example, the 'subjective question of the self and the existential'.[47] Terry Siu-han Yip and Kwok-kan Tam further define Gao's intention in the play, talking of the deconstruction of Woman's subjectivity[48] as a result of Gao's interest in the 'originary self', which has been mentioned earlier on in regard to the concept of language.

Their comments reveal the author's interest in issues related to gender discourse. First of all, we need to refer to the idea on gender identities in which the author justifies the use of the third-person pronoun as being best used by female characters, who can express all their pain, whereas a man would use the first or second person.[49] The use of these terms discriminates between women and men as well as creating fixed gender attributes that potentially stereotype male and female roles. Moreover, it is important to recall the Zen admonition of women, who were associated with the idea of the 'sensual' and regarded as creatures to be tamed.[50]

Although the above comments seem to suggest that Gao's play is discriminatory, by looking at the play itself we can define exactly what the author's attitude means in practice. In this sense we need to look at the dichotomous opposition between man and woman and at the construction of Woman's subjectivity, which is certainly the focus of Gao's exploration. These aspects will need to be assessed against the elements of the patriarchal system and feminist discourses on gender that are linked to the idea of 'female' subjectivity and the construction of femininity.

The dichotomous opposition between man and woman is mainly present at the beginning of the play, when Woman is engaged in a kind of monologue/dialogue with Man, who attempts to respond in the background to the accusations Woman makes about their relationship. The interaction between the two characters reveals that in this instance Gao is not merely discriminatory against women nor is he championing women

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[45] Cfr. Zhang Ying " Gao Xingjian lun- yige shidai de bingan" in *Dangdai zazhi* 161 qi, (Tabei: dangdai zazhi chubanshi, 2001), 122-133; Fu Zhengming " Zilian kongbu he paixie xushi yi Gao Xingjian xiaoshu de jingshen fenxi" in *Jintian* (Xianggang: Hongye shudian chubanshe, 2001), 281-296

[46] Gilbert C. F. Fong "Introduction", xxx.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Terry Siu-han Yip and Kwok-kan Tam, "Gender and self in Gao Xingjian post-exile plays," 219-223.

[49] Gao Xingjian, "Juzuofa yu Zhongxin Yanyuan" (Drama writing and the neutral actor), *Meiyou Zhuyi,* 254.

[50] Cf. Jowen R. Tung, *Fables for the patriarchs* (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

in the face of oppression. The very dominant, obtrusive behaviour of Woman, not allowing Man to speak and justify himself, is an indication of unfair treatment on her part: in this instance Woman does not appear a victim at all. This is true especially in the first part of her speech. Her attitude towards Man reveals a negative side to her personality: she appears a self-centred and self-indulgent character. In the second part of her speech, when she tries to win Man back, we instead see an insecure character who, in her pleading, uses the weakness of her own sex to gain compassion.

Her speech complaining about men reveals contradictory aspects. On the one hand, her self-humiliation in her speech could suggest the idea of women still being subordinate and emotionally tied to men. On the other, it also portrays a stereotyped version of a 'hysterical'[51] woman, who is first eager to complain of Man's selfishness and failings as a partner, then, overwhelmed by the fear of losing her companion, is ready to accept any conditions, even Man's continuous cheating. Whether Gao's portrayal of Woman in this first part of the play is critical or in favour of women is hard to say: the contrast between Man and Woman is not resolved with the predominance of one over the other. In the end, Man turns into a piece of clothing on the rack and is replaced by a bald-headed, short-sighted clown, who looks at non-existent rain and then, in real rain, disappears into the darkness. This strong imagery effectively suggests the dissolution of Man's identity and expresses doubt as to his real existence as a character in his own right. Man could be a ghost or a figment of Woman's imagination. Woman, on the other hand, is described as being lost in despair, and is engaged in a self-destructive journey; she is, also, reduced to a piece of clothing at the end.

After Woman's monologue/dialogue with Man, Gao focuses on the character and the construction of her femininity. He seems to play with stereotypes of femininity by portraying again a hysterical, lost, insecure Woman. Fong comments on the matter by saying:

> This is a sad comment on the fate of Woman, and of women in general – she attempts to assert her independence, but in the end she finds that she still has to depend on Man, at least for his companionship.[52]

Fong's comments are definitely helpful, and fit the general picture of Woman as a victim of a patriarchal society. In the rest of the play, Woman expresses her sense of

[51] About physiology associated with gender refer to Charlotte Furth, "Blood, Body and Gender: medical images of the female condition in China 1600-1850," in *Chinese Femininities Chinese Masculinities – a reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstorm (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 291-312.
[52] Gilbert C. F. Fong, "Introduction", xxx.

guilt, which has been triggered by the disappearance of Man; as the passage below shows, the character even believes she has killed Man:

> She says she's never, ever in her life thought that it would end like this, that she would actually kill her man, her darling, her treasure, her little zebra [...][53]

As was mentioned in the section on life and death, the idea of sin is strictly related to the idea of femininity: to be a woman means to be sinful in a kind of biblical sense. By endorsing this idea, Gao is also reinforcing the common belief of some feminist trends that in a patriarchal society the sense of guilt is a weapon to subjugate women unjustly to men, which is a Western assumption; in her book *Church and the Second Sex*, written in the 1970s, Mary Daly levels harsh criticism at biblical passages and religious documents condemning women to inferiority, almost as a consequence of 'original sin'.[54]

As far as the representation of a patriarchal system is concerned, the play presents a condition where the 'patriarchal system' has been dismantled due to the actions of independent women like Woman's mother. The patriarchal system is understood here as the legal practice of Confucianism, which had held sway since the Han dynasty, and gave absolute power to the husband over his wife.[55] Also, in the recollection of Woman's past, the image of the people leaving the house one by one suggests that each member is willing to leave the place; this is not necessarily connected to the figure of the mother, but suggests that the equilibrium between father and mother has been lost. Gao describes a modern troubled family, in which the father has a relationship with a student, and the mother has her own lover. Individuality and, to some extent, egocentrism are the factors suggested as disruptive within the patriarchal system. In this regard, it is important to stress that, in the family system Gao describes, the dissolution cannot be directly related to the Chinese traditional or communist family system. Actually, we could easily argue that Gao avoids making concrete references to any particular society, either Western or Chinese.

Whilst a traditional patriarchal society *per se* is negatively described through Woman's words – she talks about men's infidelity and their sexual fantasies of having more than one woman – independent women are also portrayed as perverse and evil, with Woman's lady friend herself abusing Woman. In this sense gender-specific

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[53] Gao Xingjian, "Shengsijie", 54.
[54] Mary Daly, *Church and the second Sex* (Ucklefield: Beacon Press, 1981), 88.
[55] Jowen R. Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs*, 87.

connotations tend to disappear. Other female figures, for example the female silent characters are rather menacing and negative, and therefore are far from being victims. The image of the nun However, as mentioned above, if that is the case, a feminist or pro-women message – or, conversely, the glorifying of a traditional society – would be too limited a scope for a play that is instead attempting to explore the 'originary self' and ultimately Woman's subjectivity. There are a few aspects to be considered: the excessively melodramatic tones of her despair throughout the play as she recalls her past, which was dominated by emotional abuse from both men and women, the extremely tragic events of her past and her passivity and sense of perdition, her continuous self-victimising and self-pity and, last but not least, the use of theatrical devices such as tripartition. It is the last element that gives us some important clues. Looking at the use of tripartition, Gao's portrayal of Woman is filtered by a subtle irony, which is conveyed by the use of the third-person pronoun. As a consequence of the distancing effect of Woman's portrayal, the irony surrounding the character, the audience or readers are not able to either fully identify or sympathise with her pain and despair[56]. Moreover, the character's attitude and behaviour show contradictions, which can be found in the change from her accusing of Man to her pleading and submissive speech and also, towards the end of the play, in her use of Man as the scapegoat for her sinful life. While in the rest of the play she expresses her strong sense of guilt, it is only at the beginning and the end of the play that Woman rebels against the patriarchal scheme of guilt, but her rebellious tone is either unfair – as her behaviour towards Man shows – or unbalanced. In fact, the accusing tone of her criticism of Man seems to be exaggerated and the result of an emotional outburst. In this light, Gao's picture of Woman could even be interpreted as farcical.

The question regarding Gao's attitude towards feminism is only a matter of interpretation of the individual elements of Woman's portrayal and representation. Even the use of the term 'representation' in this context is misleading, which consequently undermines the question itself. First of all, as stated in the above sections, Gao's theatre does not aim to represent but to explore. Therefore, Gao does not portray women as either victims or mischievous. Looking in general at his approach to the character and to narration, the key element defining his approach to Woman's identity, and the key to reading his gender discourse, is subjectivity. Within the Chinese context, subjectivity

[56] Chang Hsien-Tang would disagree with this affirmation as he emphasises that Gao mainly lets the characters express their own internal thoughts and desire to the audience almost in an attempt to share their own conflicts. Chang Hsien-Tang "Gao Xingjian zai "Shengsijie", "Duihua yu fanhua" he "Yeyoushen" de qingyu shuxie", 296

can be linked to post-Mao female writers, whose writing was typically regarded as a desire to 'discover one self' (*renshi ziji)*.[57] However, in the case of Gao's play, subjectivity is a means to the exploration of the 'originary self'. In this regard, Chang Hsien-Tang talks about the exploration the self, of Woman undertaking a process of self-examination[58].

This section needs to bear in mind Gao's perspective on the exploration of subjectivity when dealing with the dichotomy and the approach to gender discourse. Before defining his approach to gender issues in the play we need to look at his connection and similarities to Western gender theories. The latter deal with the ideas of the originary self and feminine–masculine gender-binary identity.

Terry Siu-han Yip and Kwok-kan Tam connect Gao with feminist post-Freudian psychoanalysts and other feminist rhetoricians, such as Kristeva and Judith Butler, with regard to the exploration of the originary self:

> In post-Freudian psychoanalysis, the theorization of subject formation has rerouted its course from an interest in the Oedipal to a focus on the pre-Oedipal stage [...] Seen in this light, Gao Xingjian's later plays can be read in the theatrical experimentations with (un) gendered subjectivity as well.[59]

Kristeva, for instance, defines the feminine as the silence of the unconscious that precedes discourse, whose utterance is a flow or rhythm instead of an ordered statement, *chora*[60] (from the Greek word for 'enclosed space, womb'); the mirror phase is the first step that opens the way for the constitution of all objects which from now on will be detached from the semiotic *chora.*[61] Feminist theorists such as Butler accuse Lacan and

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[57] Chen Huifen, "Zhaohui shiluo de neibanr: 'Renshi ziji'- guanyu nüxing wenxue de sikao jiqi renlei yishi de tigao dengdeng," *Dangdai Wenyi Sichao* 2 (1987): 8. In Ravni Thakur, *Rewriting gender: reading contemporary Chinese women* (London: Zed Books, 1996).

[58] Chang Hsien-Tang "Gao Xingjian zai "Shengsijie", "Duihua yu fanhua" he "Yeyoushen" de qingyu shuxie", 295, 297

[59] Terry Siu-han Yip ans Kwok-kan Tam, "Gender and self in Gao Xingjian post-exile plays", 218.

[60] "The semiotic is articulated by flow and marks: facilitation, energy transfers, the cutting up of corporeal and social continuum as well as that signifying material, the establishment of a distinctiveness and its ordering in a pulsating *chora*, in a rhythmic but non-expressive totality." Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Columbia University Press, 1984), 40-41.

[61] "Language learning can therefore be thought as an acute and dramatic confrontation between positing-separating-identifying and the motility of the semiotic *chora*. Separation from the mother's body, the *fort-da* game, anality and orality [...], all act as permanent negativity that destroys the image and the isolated object even if it facilitates the articulation of the semiotic network, which will afterwards be necessary in the system of language where it will be more or less integrated as *signifier*... Castration puts the finishing touches on the process of separation that posits the subject as signifiable, which is to say, separate always confronted by another: *imago* in the mirror (signified) and semiotic process (signifier). As for the addressee of every demand, the mother occupies the place of alterity, her replete body, the receptable garantor of demands, takes the place of all narcistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications; she in other words the phallus. The discovery of castration, however, detaches the subject from his dependence on the mother, and the perception of this lack (*manqué*) makes the phallic function a symbolic function –

post-Lacanian theories of reinforcing a regulatory practice by defining the development of gender differences after the mirror stage, the passage to the Oedipal stage where human beings acknowledge their sexual differences. In their view, gender identity itself is a means of oppression within a heterosexual society, which has created different categories as a form of control. In this regard, Linda Nicholson, talking of Butler's ideas, states that:

> It is the very belief in gender identity as a core unity that causes our sexual orientation, which keeps from view the very political and disciplinary processes that produce the ostensible coherence of gender identity. On these grounds, then, notions of gender identity are not the point of our liberation but rather the grounding of our continuing oppression.[62]

Looking back at Foucault's ideas on power and language, Judith Butler's account of gendered identity and gender differences brings to light radically new ideas, whereby both gender and sexual orientation are constructed arbitrary attributes within the discourse of heterosexual 'regulatory practices':

> Sexuality is always contracted within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions.[63]

Butler also speaks of the pre-Oedipal unconscious as an escape from the predominance of a heterosexual discourse:

> Both masculine and feminine positions are thus instituted through prohibitive laws that produce culturally intelligible genders, but only through the production of an unconscious sexuality that reemerges in the domain of the imaginary.[64]

Nevertheless, she does not see how the originary unconscious could play any part in the process of attribution of gender identity enacted by symbolic language – which, to use Lacan's terms, is the language formed after the pre-Oedipal stage. It is symbolic language that creates power relations under the influence of cultural regularity discourses. In this sense, by admitting that sexuality is culturally constructed within the power relations of a heterosexual discourse, Butler recognises that the construction of a

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the symbolic function. This is a decisive moment with consequences: the subject finding his identity in the symbolic, *separates* from his fusion with the mother, *confines* his jouissance to the genitalia and transfers semiotic motility onto the symbolic order. Thus ends the formation of the thetic phase, which posits the signifier and the signified as an opening toward every desire but also every act, including the very jouissance that exceeds them." Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 47.

[62] Linda Nicholson, *Feminism/ Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 16.

[63] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 30.

[64] Ibid., 28.

normative sexuality 'beyond' or 'outside' this power is an impossibility.[65] In her book *Gender Trouble*, she states that the true alternative way to fight against heterosexual oppressive dominance is to state that 'genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity'.[66] In her view gender is a performative act:

> Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "performative" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.[67]

The above definitions of gender identity in terms of the originary self are relevant to the reading of Gao's plays, which, starting with *Between Life and Death*, explore these issues. In terms of comparison with the ideas of Kristeva and Butler, Gao is definitely close to Kristeva's idea of femininity, defined as the silence of the unconscious, and her interest in the pre-Oedipal stage or mirror stage, where sexual/gender differences do not exist. Butler's idea of a performative gender is conveyed through the theatrical devices employed in this play.

In order to recognise the connection between Gao and the ideas of Kristeva and Butler we need to look at the play from a theatrical perspective. As stated in the previous section of this chapter, the language, the narration itself is the protagonist of the play: as we see Woman losing her mind we also see language losing its logical orderly sense. The language enacts the character's dissolution, linking the subjective – Woman's expression of pain and suffering – to the realm of the imagination, the 'originary self' – or, to use Kristeva's terms, the 'silence of the unconscious' – which is conveyed by random broken statements, the same random flux of signifiers that Kristeva talks about. An aspect that connects Gao with Butler is the use of theatrical devices such as tripartition, which has been mentioned already in the previous section. The use of the third-person pronoun enacts gender as a performative act, in the sense of 'stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts with highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being'.[68] The use of the third-person pronoun presents the audience with the character talking about herself as if she were talking about another person altogether; therefore the audience is able to accompany and follow the character's journey.

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[65] Ibid., 30.
[66] Ibid., 136.
[67] Ibid., 139.
[68] Ibid., 33.

This has a dual result. On the one hand, the third-person narration objectifies the content of the narration as if it were heard from a third point of view, the other two points of view being the character's and the actor's. On the other hand it distances the audience from the character and prevents them from identifying with her, and we acknowledge the content of her speech and her actions as fictional and performative. To put this another way, as the audience is aware of the fictional nature of the narration, the emphasis is therefore on the performative, on the stylisation of the representation. Woman's speech acts out the performative of femininity; as the audience does not take the portrayed idea of femininity as a truthful representation, this idea loses its validity. It cannot on the whole recognise in the character of Woman the attributes she gives to femininity because of the stress on the performative, the fictional nature of the representation.

The actions and gestures of the other characters/actors on stage emphasise the theatrical effect and the added performative value of Woman's speech, these characters/actors being external forces carrying their own meaning, which affects this speech. Moreover, since these characters are played without any personality or subjective traits – the actors are reduced to mere tools of their own actions.

In relation to Butler's concept, female gender identity is meant to invalidate its biological and social connotations and free itself from the power of heterosexual discourse. In this sense her gender attributes are acted out in the form of stylisation and fictional imitation, are deconstructed and lose their power to define the character in gender terms. In this sense, Gao achieves in practice Butler's ideas opposing the dominance of heterosexual discourse, which deconstructs gender associations and conceptualisation. The journey enacted through language leads to the realm of the pre-Oedipal, or in Zen terms to the realm of no-language, i.e. enlightenment and the performative do not transcend the male/female dichotomy but deconstruct the dynamics of its discourse.

However, the end of the play – Woman's tragic end dissolved into a piece of cloth – still presents some questions in the context of gender discourse. If the deconstructing of gender identity can be understood in terms of the dissolution of the self, is it therefore suggested that the acknowledgement of gender identity is a necessary condition for building up an individual identity? Does its absence merely result in the deconstruction of the very self? Can an individual 'exist' – in philosophical terms – without being defined and gendered? No precise answers can be given at this stage as

Gao's exploration of subjectivity, gender identity and so forth is still at the level of experimentation. Furthermore, we should not forget that Gao's main focus is not fixed on philosophical and social issues alone but shifts from the exploration of humanity to that of artistic possibilities in the spirit of a Modernism that employs Postmodern devices of deconstruction and fragmentation, which will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapters.

2.2 Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*

2.2.1. Critics' reception and productions

Similarly to Gao's play, Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* is an experimental play with no plot in the traditional sense, and struggled to achieve critical acclaimin Britain. *Attempts on Her Life* was first performed in London in 1997 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, where it puzzled reviewers. On the one hand, critics praised the experimental nature of the play; on the other, they criticised its confusing narrative and the intellectuality of the text. Aleks Sierz reports in his book on the critics' responses at that time:

> Nicholas de Jongh (*Evening Standard*, 13 March 1997) began his review by seeing *Attempts on Her Life* as a suggestion of 'what the brave new theatre of 21st century will look like – both on stage and page', but ended it with the putdown: 'Just heartfelt pretension.' Paul Taylor (*Independent*, 14 March 1997) said: 'One does end up congratulating the play for the wit and agility with which it disappears up its own self-reflexive futility.' John Peter (*Sunday Times,* 23 March 1997) correctly saw it as 'a private drama whose heroine is defined by her absence', while the *New Statesman*'s Susannah Clapp (*New Statesman*, 21 March 1997) praised the 'visual creativity' of the production, describing the play as 'a blow on behalf of bewilderment'. Alastair Macaulay (*Financial Times*, 15 March 1997) made the most sustained case against what he saw a 'terrible' play, calling it Postmodern – 'post-civilisation, post-truth, post-feeling, post-teeth, post-everything' – and accusing Crimp of playing 'repulsive' manipulative games with terrorism, family, art and media. Michael Billington (*Guardian,* 13 March 1997) saw Anne as 'basically a vehicle for the writer's moral rejection of a selfish, materialist civilisation based on consumer fetishism' and argued that Crimp has 'proved that the act of theatre can still survive if propelled by moral fervour.'[69]

Since then, the play has been translated into twenty languages and largely performed in continental Europe. In Britain, there have been minor performances of the play, such as the all-female-cast performance directed by Biba Lille-West at Diorama Arts, London,

[69] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp* (London: Methuen Drama, 2007), 51-52.

in November 2004 and another small performance at BAC (Battersea Arts Centre) in the summer of the same year directed by Anne Tipton, winner of the James Menzies-Kitchin Memorial Trust Award, a prize for promising young directors. Again, both performances received hostile reviews,: Lyn Gardner, talking about the performance at BAC, acknowledged 'the theatrical knowingness of the piece with its up-tilting spotlights', but regretted that the low-budget staging made the piece 'less seductive and more irritating'.[70]

The first major production of this play in the UK took place in March 2007, ten years after its premiere, this time at the National Theatre, London. It was performed in hi-tech, multimedia style under the direction of Katie Mitchell, who had previously worked on another of Crimp's play for the 1999 Italian production at Piccolo Teatro di Milano, and had directed many of Crimp's other plays (*The Maids*, *The Country*, *Face to the Wall*, *The Seagull*). This production, with a large cast of eleven actors – four men and seven women – filled the stage with video projections, a parody of *Newsnight Review*, and actors singing and dancing to rock music. Reviews were again mixed about both the production and the play itself. Michael Billington of *The Guardian*, maybe accustomed to Crimp's style, disliked the hi-tech version by Mitchell, which in his view lacked 'the moral anger of a work which implies virtually everything in modern society conspires to reduce our sense of self' and reduced the play to being 'principally about the media's creation of an alternative reality.'[71] Sarah Hemming of the *Financial Times* admired the production whilst condemning the text itself:

> It is also a caustic attack on a society obsessed with image, technology and packaging painful truths into superficial, bite-sized clichés. It's very clever and disturbingly true. The difficulty watching it, though, is that its very nature makes it unsatisfying and repetitive [...][72]

John Peter of *The Sunday Times*, on the other hand, praised the original 1997 production for its 'emotional cohesion' and accused Mitchell's production of 'presenting a nonsequential text that becomes more immediate and more illogical and disjointed by the almost compulsive use of video images'[73]. Also, complaining about the text's self-

[70] Lyn Gardner, "Attempts on her life," *Guardian* (31 July 2004).
[71] Michael Billington, "Attempt on her life," *Guardian* (15 March 2007).
[72] Sarah Hemming, "Attempt on her life," *Financial Times* (15 March 2007).
[73] John Peter, "Attempts on Her life," *The Sunday Times* (25 March 200).

indulgence, he concluded the review by saying, 'Self-admiration is a dangerous virtue.'[74]

As one can see from these reviews, ten years on, this play still fails to impress the reviewers, sometimes despite Mitchell's attempts to make the play more accessible and at others *because of* her attempts to 'digitalise' the piece. On the whole, one could argue that there is a basic scepticism in Britain about Crimp's style. In an article in *The Independent*: published at the time of Mitchell's production, Aleks Sierz questions this scepticism on the part of British reviewers. He describes Crimp as a stranger to Britain, saying, 'The main reason for Crimp's relative neglect in Britain is that his work is challenging.'[75] This also explains why Gao Xingjian's work had a less hostile reception in continental Europe, where audiences are more welcoming of forms of theatre other than naturalism[76]. What is not easy to explain is the merely partial and rare interest by academics in Crimp's plays, which have not been seriously studied apart from in Sierz's book, Zimmermann and Mary Lockurst's essays, and in France Elisabeth Angel-Perez's essays. However, Sierz sees hope in the renewed attention of the Royal Court to Crimp's works, which are being produced in its theatres.

2.2.2. Definition of the play

In his article on *Attempts on Her Life*, Zimmermann defines this play as a postdramatic play, which is a play performed by a group of anonymous speakers who do not impersonate characters.[77] In his comprehensive book on the development of contemporary theatre in the West, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann also uses the term 'Postdramatic theatre' as an alternative to the term 'Postmodern theatre', the latter term having been established from the 1970s to the 1990s.[78] The terms 'Postdramatic' and 'Postmodern' are almost interchangeable, although Lehmann mostly refers to Postmodern theatre as being strictly linked to Postmodernism and Poststructuralism. Lehmann attempts to draw a distinction between Postdramatic and Postmodern by saying that Postmodern theatre is the theatre of 'nihilist and grotesque forms, empty space and silence',[79] whereas Postdramatic theatre is 'not only of the *empty* [my italics]

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[74] Ibid.
[75] Aleks Sierz, 'Martin Crimp: Why the British playwright is stranger in our midst.'
[76] Cf. Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout, ed., *Contemporary Theatres In Europe - a critical companion* .
[77] Heiner Zimmermann, "Images of Woman in Martin Crimp's Attempts On Her Life," *European Journal of English Studies* 7, No. 1 (2003): 75.
[78] Karen Jürs-Munby, "Introduction," in *Postdramatic theatre*, 13.
[79] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic theatre,* 25.

space but also of the overcrowded space'.[80] Lehmann's use of this term is an attempt to define a kind of theatre that incorporates its roots in the 'dramatic' tradition and is not simply confused as part of the wider context of Postmodernism or even as a product of it. Lehmann goes as far as to say:

> The adjective 'postdramatic' denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time 'after' the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre. 'After' drama means that it lives on as a structure – however weakened and exhausted – of the 'normal' theatre: as an expectation of large parts of its audience, as foundation for many of its means of representation, as a quasi automatically working norm of its drama-turgy [...] Postdramatic theatre thus includes the presence or resumption or continued working of older aesthetics, including those that took leave of the dramatic idea in earlier times, be it on the level of text or theatre.[81]

The link with earlier dramatic traditions is, in Lehmann's view, a continuity between Postdramatic theatre and Modernistic theatre. In this regard he associates Postmodern theatre with Modernistic theatre, when talking about 1970s theatre. Hence, unlike Zimmermann, he widens the perspectives of contemporary theatre and offers a complex but broader definition of 'Postdramatic', which is also in line with Călinescu's understanding of the continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism. In fact, Zimmermann's definition is limited to describing a theatrical style. The question to be asked is whether Crimp's play fits either definition, which is connected to the question as to whether it is a Modern or a Postmodern play. This can only be assessed by looking at the play itself and comparing it with Gao's. Since in Crimp's play the spiritual is totally absent, the second part of this chapter will be looking at the structure of Crimp's play instead of looking at the life/death dichotomy as expression of the spiritual. Like in the case of Gao's play, though, this section of the chapter will be looking at the use of language and self-referentiality in relation to the modes of theatrical representation, and the gender dichotomy masculinity/femininity.

2.2.3. Structure and narrative

The whole play is constructed around a centre, a female figure, who never appears on stage: the actors are talking about a woman, Anne or Anya. As the scenes develop, the characters on stage attribute different identities to her, such as a film star, a terrorist, and even an Italian car, ashtray etc. Unlike Gao, Crimp does not give any guidelines on the number of actors or any stage directions. This was not the case in the

[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., 27.

original text, however: Tim Albery, the director of the first staging of *Attempts on Her Life*, talks of the rehearsal process in an interview with Aleks Sierz, and states that the original text contained quite a few stage directions and even a setting for each scene, which Albery himself suggested removing so as to allow the audience and the actors to 'think literally', i.e. to focus on the words of the text, its musicality and rhythm. He adds in his interview that:

> *Attempts* is a template for the purest kind of play: it's just dialogue. There is nothing else: no character, no plot, no setting. The only character is Anne, who – as we know – has several different personalities, most of which are mutually exclusive. Starting with the title, which has multiple meanings, the play in its fragmentation and irresolution, is a quintessentially modernist play.[82]

His definition of this play as Modernist contradicts Zimmermann, Mary Lockkurt's – and those of many others[83]- definition of it as essentially a Postdramatic play that is Postmodern in essence. Tim Albery sees this play as embodying a modern aesthetic of purity, but fails to account for the fragmentation of meanings that has a Postmodern connotation. Zimmermann, on the other hand, regards the play as belonging within the Postdramatic tradition of a theatre that mostly exploits visual effects and the immediacy of the performance, uses improvisation as a means to create theatrical pieces and overlooks the textual element of the play. In this regard, in her article"Short Circuits of Desire:" Language and Power in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*' Augusti talks about a hybrid quality of Crimp's theatre between Postmodernism and 18th century English moralism:

> The modes through which Crimp forces both his own text and his own condition as author to "short circuit" itself (through collapse, ready-mades and Concrete Poetry) are fully integrated within a postmodern strategy. [...]The combination of irony and pedagogical interest approximates him to the tradition of earlier English moralists, like Laurence Sterne or Jonathan Swift. Crimp's position, therefore, is a hybrid one that defies any strict categorization and which takes those elements he considers to be most productive from different strategies in order to develop an integral criticism of society.[84]

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[82] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 192-193.

[83] Élisabeth Angel-Perez, "Martin Crimp: The Treatment (1993) et Attempts on Her Life (1997): Tricotage du Texte et Auto-Engendrement," *Ecritures Contemporaines* 5 (2002): 99–110.
Élisabeth Angel-Perez, *Voyagesau Bout du Possible: Les Théâtres du Traumatisme de Samuel Beckett à Sarah Kane*, ed. Élisabeth Angel-Perez (Paris: Klincksieck, 2006), 197–212.
Mary Lockhurst, "Political Point-Scoring: Martin Crimp's Attempts on Her Life," *Contemporary Theatre Review* XIII, No. 1 (February 2003): 47–60.

[84] Clara Escoda Augusti, "Short Circuits of Desire: Language and Power in Martin Crimp's Attempts on Her Life," *Ariel- a review of international English literature* 36 (3-4 July-October 2005): 104.

Angel-Perez, instead, defines Crimp's theatre as the 'theatre of the absence', about 'the mourning of representation' beyond the principle of mimesis ('Crimp creates in this play a '*spectropoétique* [*my italics*] of the scene that defines theatre anew beyond mimesis'[85]). Furthermore, she defines this play as an 'hypertext'[86] like Joyce's *Ulysses* and some of its characters, and T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland,* with which it shares the construction of a universal character and an aesthetics of fragmentation and ruin. However, she later on adds that this link with Modernist writers is broken 'by the Postmodern mark of blindness', i.e. that of 'spectralisation.'[87]

As Albery, Zimmermann and Augusti and to some extent also Angel-Perez seem to give only a partial definition of the play, this section of the chapter endeavours to give a more complete account of the play by looking in detail at its structure and representation.

The text itself has an unusual division into seventeen scenes, to which different titles are given. When the play is staged, the titles do not appear and the division into scenes is rendered by brief pauses. Looking at the script the scenes come in the following order:

1. All Messages Deleted
2. Tragedy of Love and Ideology
3. Faith in Ourselves
4. The Occupier
5. The Camera Loves You
6. Mum and Dad
7. The New Anny
8. Particle Physics
9. The Threat of International Terrorism
10. Kinda Funny
11. Untitled (100 Words)
12. Strangely!
13. Jungfrau (Words Association) OR Communicating with Aliens
14. The Girl Next-door
15. The Statement
16. Pornó
17. Previously Frozen[88]

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[85] The term *spectropoétique* refers to the capacity of the voice to 'spéctraliser' where the voice is the spectre/ghost of the word- this process is that Derrida refers to as 'Hantologie'. This will be better explained later in this chapter. Élisabeth Angel-Perez, *Voyage au bout du possible*, 209-12.

[86] 'Hypotext' is connected to the idea of hypertextuality in Chapter one footnote 64.

[87] Élisabeth Angel-Perez, *Voyage au bout du possible*, 209.

[88] Jungfrau is used in the edition 1997, it changes in the Martin Crimp *Collected Plays, Vol. 2* into "Communicating..." the script is also different. I will take into account here of the first published editions. (Cf. Martin Crimp, *Attempts on her Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), and *Collected Plays* Vol. II (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

The scenes are of different length and style; the title does not always directly indicate the content of the scene but is referred to in the text of the scene concerned, which develops through a series of dialogues between actors and some rare monologues. As has been mentioned above, the play does not develop a plot in the traditional sense, but as in Gao's *Between Life and Death* there is a sense of evolution.

The first three scenes, for instance, reveal the background to and object of the play. In particular, Scene One introduces the absent character through the messages on her answering machine, which have supposedly been left by an employer, by her mum, by friends in different parts of the world, by a mechanic who has repaired her car, who we suppose is her ex-lover and who, worried, begs her to answer the phone. The callers' identity is not made clear and guesswork is needed. The scene suggests that Anne is listening to the messages and to some extent wants to hide from the world, as we can imagine her deleting all the messages at the end of the scene. This scene, which is only heard by the audience and not presented on stage, is ironically the most realistic of the play; it suggests the idea of a character, in a particular location, who the audience is going to get to know throughout the play. The second scene describes in playful detail an encounter between a man and a woman, who are presented as being part of 'the story', the ingredients of which are those of a tragedy of love and ideology. The playwright uses this scene in a self-referential manner, and one could interpret his intention here as suggesting that the play is a tragedy in a traditional sense, where love is sacrificed for the sake of ideology. The third scene, 'Faith in Ourselves', leads into the telling of Anne's story by talking about the history of her family, which is said to be 'the history of generations written on her face'[89] and the story of Anya, a mother figure shouting about the killer of her own child. In this part of the play there are also allusions to a philosophical understanding of life and the world, which infuses the play with a spiritual ambience.

The following scenes develop with a certain degree of randomness, building up and fragmenting Anne's identity. Firstly, for instance, the scenes 'The Occupier' and 'The Camera Loves You' define the perspective on the character: 'The Occupier' gives details of the character's habits – she is very superstitious and a non-smoker. Moreover, 'The Camera Loves You' suggests in a playful, almost poetic, way how the actors are going to talk about the absent character, and they announce that she has different identities. This scene also defines the perspective being an external one, like a camera

[89] Martin Crimp, *Attempt on her Life*, 12.

watching and analysing Annie; Crimp uses the imagery of the external eye looking at her from the outside and trying to interpret the fragments of her identity.

The next scene, 'Mum and Dad', starts by talking about a picture, in which Annie is described as smiling, and goes on to talk about other possible pictures showing her in various places around the world, which show the character as part of a globalised world where travelling is easier and the distance between countries seems to have grown smaller. The 'globalism' of the absent character's environment is a hint that this play could be a satire on global capitalism, as Mary Lockurst ('Crimp deliberately allows scope for the insertion of topical local and global politics')[90] and Aleks Sierz suggest.[91] However, the scene also contains an allusion to aspects of Annie's fragmented personality. Annie appears a mysterious, complex personality, who on the one hand is outgoing and enjoys socialising and on the other hides pain and existential conflicts – she thinks she is a TV screen or a car. There are also some general allusions to her past, when she expressed her desire to become a terrorist. This is the first scene to introduce a monologue among the dialogue. Moreover, it is one of the only scenes showing any internal structure. The scene starts with the picture portraying her smiling, then, focusing on another picture, attempts to make assumptions about her potential pain and her past, and ends up focusing on the bag in the picture. The actors speculate that the bag could contain stones, a metaphor for the heaviness of her existence, alluding to her secret intention to fail in life:

> - The stones are there to keep her under however how much she thrashes, and the handles of the bag are tied to her ankles.
>
> - No question in other words of a / cry for help.
>
> - In other words she's planned all this, she's planned on thrashing, she'd thrash, and equally she knew that the bag would go on dragging her down regardless. So there's never at any point any question of the attempt failing [...][92]

The image of the bag full of stones in the picture refers back to the image of her smile. This depiction of Annie is the most intimate of the play, almost like a camera close-up on the object described on the part of the playwright, who for brief moments attempts to identify her subjectivity. In the rest of the play, Annie is for the most part

[90] Mary Lockurst, "Political Point-Scoring," 52.
[91] Aleks Sirez, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 151.
[92] Martin Crimp, *Attempt on her Life*, 27.

described from a distance based on the fragments of her identity that tell us of her individuality, her different jobs and her different roles in society.

In the following scenes, 'The New Anny' and 'Particle Physics', for instance, taking up the motif of self-objectification – her thinking she is a TV screen – Annie is referred to as a new car model in a series of statements made by the actors first in English and then translated into several languages. In the following scene, she becomes an ashtray, the kind found mostly in cheap hotels, where lovers meet: an ironic depiction, which adds a strong sexual connotation to the scene. In the same scene she is depicted abruptly, in an odd twist, as a physicist who speaks five languages and has discovered a new particle that will revolutionise astronomy.

Scenes Nine to Twelve continue to depict her as a human being and develop the allusion in the scene 'Mum and Dad'. Indeed, she is described as having achieved her dream of becoming a terrorist; a loner, an independent, cruel woman fighting for ideas of which we have not really been informed. In the scene 'Kinda Funny' there is a change in the speakers' perspective; they stop focusing on her and start talking about a man taking his new family to his mum's. We are then informed that Annie is in actual fact this man's wife, and his liaison with her seems to be linked to terrorism. Ironically the playwright underlines that the tears of the man's mother, when she is informed of his relationship with the woman, are not of joy but of sadness.

The aura of danger surrounding Annie gradually disappears when, in Scene Eleven, she is described instead as a psychotic artist. This depiction of a mentally ill, distraught Annie is an opportunity for the playwright to express some views on art, language and theatre. Scene Twelve, ('Strangely!') gives a confused account of a nameless woman who is trying to escape a country destroyed by war. In this case, it is not quite clear whether Annie or Anya is the daughter being carried in the bags or the character that is presumably carrying the bags. This scene announces the end of Annie as the subject and of the play. In a mirror-image of the initial scenes of the play, Scenes Thirteen and Fourteen again depict a romantic meeting between a man and a woman, and complete what had been said in 'The Camera Loves You', where the point of view of the character had been established. Using verse, Scene Fourteen adds some more new fragments to Annie's identity. In these scenes, a kind of fragmentation of her identity runs parallel to the fragmentation of the language, i.e. a mixing of dialogues and monologues, several voices speaking at the same time. On the one hand, there is an attempt to establish her true identity in the scene 'The Statement'; and, on the other, her

identity becomes further and further fragmented, for example in 'Pornó'. First there is a vague allusion to her being a porno star; then she is described as the saviour of the world. This idealised description of greatness is further confused by the indecision of the speaker, a young girl, who is supported by others joining her in a kind of chorus. The irony of Annie's idealisation is expressed by a parallel voice talking about her giving instructions on the aeroplane. The two voices finally come together, both talking about a kind of reconciliation.

The last scene carries on the process of fragmentation. There is a sense of demise and of a situation that has inevitably changed; her husband seems to have died. Unlike in other parts of the play, the actors show a certain degree of indecision in stating whether or not she had a husband, and whether or not she had a job. Their dialogue drifts from speaking about her to speaking about a 'ghastly thing', a 'spittoon'. The fragmentation of Annie's identity is taken to the extreme: they start discussing her reading habits and speak in greater detail about an article she read. Their focus is no longer on her but on the story of the article on the one hand, and on an object on the other. By moving the focus of the play from Annie to the story of the article and the object, the playwright brings the play to an end. This could be interpreted in many different ways; the story of the article itself – a father's murder of his wife in front of his child – could be understood to be Annie's death. The sudden change from Annie's story to the article and the chitchat of the actors adds a sense of ephemerality to the account of Anne's story: her story is referred to in the same way as any other.

The meaning of the words used in the text should not be taken literally as the language is sometimes used randomly, devoid of a specific connotation but full of irony. It is the connotation of the play as a whole that we have to look for in the text. From this perspective the play can be understood as constructing and fragmenting the identities of one individual or many individuals, as Annie could also stand for different people. The setting of the play itself seems to be dominated by the destructive presence of war and the alienation of contemporary society. The actors become the narrators of the play without being active participants; their function as the voice of the playwright is to create and recreate the object of their narration. This play could be about theatre itself and the exploration of its function, as suggested by both Sierz and Zimmermann. It is mainly because of its experimental artistic nature that we can compare this work to that of Gao under the umbrella of postmodernism and modernism.

2.2.4. Language and self-referentiality

In Crimp's play as in Gao's, there are self-referential statements about the use of language. In their account, the actors allude to a formal report or written text by mentioning elements of the speech in the course of the narration: for instance, they mention the words 'quote and unquote' to mark the beginning and the end of a formal speech. Moreover, there are clear references to the narration, which becomes the object of the play more than in Gao's play: in reporting the story, the actors give a sense of perspective on the story. There is a more direct concern with how we perceive reality and how we narrate. The narration alludes to a fragmented reality – a mere suggestion of reality similar to Gao's concept of hypotheticality – to an assumed reality, which is external to the text, yet never a direct representation of it.[93] We can talk about a kind of tripartition in the case of Crimp's play. The theatrical experience is similar to that in Gao's in terms of experimentation: both plays are concerned with the function of theatre. With reference to these plays by Gao and Crimp, critics and scholars have talked about their theatre as overtaking that of Brecht.

With regard to Gao's theatre, Sy Ren Quah identifies two aspects of the playwright's technique of alienation or tripartition, which goes beyond Brecht's ideas.[94] First, Brecht demanded that his actor should not 'become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying', as the ultimate aim of his alienation was 'to make the spectator adopt an attitude of enquiry and criticism in his approach to the [dramatic] incident.'[95] By contrast, Gao seeks to achieve alienation from the psychological contradictions of a character. The enquiring attitude that the audience develops towards the dramatic events is just a by-product of the revelation of the character's psychological contradictions. Second, Brecht occasionally instructed his actors to deliver their lines in the third person and in the past tense, but these practices were carried out only during the rehearsal process. Gao, however, writes third-person lines into his scripts. Thereby, the narrative is not just a means to achieve the effect of alienation, but becomes the theme of the alienation itself, as suggested by Sy Ren Quah.[96] In Crimp's play narration and language, or rather the absence of such a relationship, for its very experimental nature, becomes also a playground where narration and language strive to survive as the ultimate characters on stage.

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[93] Gao Xingjian "Tan Jiadingxing- xiandai xiju shoudian chu tan zhiqi," *Suibi* (1983): 98.
[94] Bertold Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 150.
[95] Ibid, 134.
[96] Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and transcultural Chinese Theater*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 85.

Aleks Sierz recommends this play as a recipe for a new kind of theatre,[97] where the alienation occurs on stage before the very eyes of the audience: to use Zimmermann's words, it takes place at the interface between the speaker or 'mouthpiece' and what is spoken; it is ultimately the character's absence from the performance. According to Angel-Perez, actors are reduced to mere 'énonciateurs.' She goes a step further and talks of Crimp's theatre as being totally stripped of any physical support; according to her, the 'voice' is the only physical support used by Crimp's theatre. She adds that this kind of theatre exploits what Derrida calls 'hantologie', the capacity of the voice to 'spéctraliser' (to be reduce to a spectre), where the voice is the spectre/ghost of the word insomuch as the word is the spectre/ghost of the voice. The effect is the 'experiencing the representation of the absence,'[98] or the theatre of the absence, as mentioned above. Crimp's piece plays with the absence of the character; and, as in Gao's play, alienation becomes the very protagonist of the play. However, on the flyleaf, Crimp refers to this play as 'a piece for a company of actors whose composition should reflect the composition of the world beyond the theatre'. This statement does not mean that Crimp is attempting to represent reality; his words have to be read in the context of the belief that reality is alienated by its own representations, or, to use Baudrillard's terms, 'simulacra'.[99] The world – here understood as reality – beyond theatre that he wants to describe is not the world itself but its own representation, its own fragmentation.

This scrutiny of language and narration reveals important differences between Gao's and Crimp's play: both focus on language, narration and resolve, making the protagonists' 'alienation' or disbelief in language the ends of representation. However, there is another aspect to be considered in the case of Crimp's approach to language and narration, which is close to Derrida's semiological idea of language and the 'supplementary' concept[100]. The sign is, defined as 'always the supplement of the thing itself,' where 'the second signification of the supplement cannot be separated from the first', and 'each of the two significations is by turns effaced or becomes discreetly

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[97] Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, 33.
[98] Élisabeth Angel-Perez, *Voyage au bout du possible*, 2010.
[99] Jaques Baudrillard, *Simulacra et Simulation*, (Debats: Galilé, 1985), 186.
[100] "Compensatory (*suppléant*) and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *take-the- place* [*tient-lieu*]. [...] Somewhere something can be filled up of *itself*, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign or proxy." In Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 145. A similar definition can be found in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990), 281.

vague in the presence of the others.'[101] This approach to language endows writing with a function in its own right: freed from the tyranny of meaning and signifiers, language becomes a playful tool. It is in this vein that we can understand the over-textual nature of the dialogue and monologues, the use of several languages in the same speech and the joining of several voices, which open up the boundaries of language and contribute to the absence of cultural specificity. The process of 'deconstruction' in Crimp's play, in the textual sense of language and of its meaning, the playful use of language still has social and cultural implications. As has been said above, the power of discourse creates and crystallises the absent character's identity by imposing social models on the object – the female figure – who is the assumed centre of the play but has no real voice in it because this figure is the result of the play's very construction.

This approach to language definitely implies that there is no understanding of language as a spiritual entity as with Gao. The whole play communicates a secular and material perspective on life and a sense of absence, which can be easily identified as the lack of meaning in life: even though Anne is said to be searching for some kind of purpose in life by choosing terrorism as a way to serve some kind of high ideal, the spiritual is not dealt with as such in the play.

The play is also very different in terms of theatrical experience due to a totally different scriptwriting approach: in his play Gao imposes guidelines, which, though only suggestions, serve to guide the staging of the play. Even though it was not the case in the original text, Crimp's is mostly a textual play, where the playwright gives only indications and notes on pronunciation and speech but no indications of any kind about the setting, the actors-characters, etc. His play could be read as a text, with descriptive, highly narrative dialogues. Moreover, the theatrical impact of the play on the audience is very different: Gao, playing with visual tools and physical performances, aims at communicating to the audience at different levels, including emotional elements that go beyond language. Tim Albery talks about the literalness of Crimp's play as being an important aspect of the play, engaging the audience at an intellectual level: the audience is challenged to link the actors' random accounts and realise the bigger picture of the play.[102] Unfortunately, the randomness and confusion that is lessened by reading the play as a text persists in the staging unless supported by a kind of staging that can arrest the audience's attention and add clarity to the performance. This is probably the reason

[101] Ibid.
[102] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 52.

why some critics did not appreciate the minor performances of this play that were reduced to the bare minimum.

In terms of the result of the respective approaches, Gao's exploration of character occurs at the level of subjectivity: Woman's memories, her past and present emotions. In Crimp's case there is a tendency to objectify the absent character by trying to see her from different angles. However, the point of observation is purely external and each observer ends up giving his own opinions on Anne. The effect is the emergence of a more fragmented figure through the subjectivity of the observers. If there is an exploration of subjectivity like in Gao, this is suggested by the use of different observers giving their subjective views on the object of the narration. Zimmermann explains that Crimp does not believe in the representation of the originary self:

> The original subject cannot be represented. Historical reality cannot be retrieved. Anne, whose suicide may be the cause of the enquiry into her life, never appears on the stage. The play's center is an absence.[103]

This is strictly connected to Crimp's belief in the impossibility of objective knowledge and observation. As his play shows the fragmentation of personality being enacted through the subjective analysis depending on the adopted point of view, an individual personality carries a multitude of connotations that defy any objective understanding of that person. This denies that psychoanalysts have any scope to analyse an individual's unconscious but reaffirms the idea of deconstruction deriving from post-Lacanian theories, where, unlike in Gao's play, deconstruction is understood as a particular kind of reading practice and, thereby, a method of criticism and mode of analytical enquiry:

> Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction.' It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means 'to undo' – a virtual synonym for 'to de-construct' [...] If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself.[104]

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[103] Heiner Zimmermann, "Images of Woman in Martin Crimp's Attempts On Her Life," *European Journal of English Studies* 7, No.1 (2003): 77.

[104] John Anthony Cuddon, ed. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, third ed. (London: Blackwell, 1991), 146-47. Also refer to Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: theory and practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991).

In this sense 'deconstruction' is an attempt to dismantle the binary oppositions that govern a text. This enacts Derrida's idea of language operating on the basis of discontinuity, of meaning as the product of an interweaving of signs and of text as produced only through the transformation of another text[105]. This kind of reading will focus on the 'aporias', or impasses of meaning or using Derrida's term, 'the point in argumentation where one appears to arrive at a place of contradiction and paradox from which no simple exit is possible[106]. A deconstructive reading will identify the logocentric assumptions of a text and the binaries and hierarchies it contains. It will demonstrate how a logocentric text always undercuts its own assumptions, its own system of logic[107].

Crimp's fragmentation of the object of the narration is concerned with the fragmentation of the personality not in a psychoanalytical sense, but in a linguistic or textual sense. It could be suggested that Crimp is dealing with Anne as a text, which is being read and investigated to show its internal aporias. Essentially Crimp's interest differs from Gao's in terms of scope; whereas Gao is interested in investigating and deconstructing Woman's identity to reach out to the 'originary' self, Crimp's interest lies in the deconstruction, the concept of textual aporias. While some post-Lacanian ideologies fit Gao's case, Crimp's could fit another of Derrida's ideas, that concerning the 'other' and the 'difference' and language itself as a product of this duplicity:

> Any signifier (or chain of signification, i.e. text) must infinitely defer its meaning because of the nature of the sign (the signified is composed of signifiers). At the same time, meaning must be kept under erasure because any text is always out of phase with itself, doubled, in an argument with itself that can be glimpsed through the aporias it generates.[108]

The originary as a philosophical understanding of logic is always a 'copy of itself and therefore a place where there is no originary, only a supplement in the place of a deficient originary'.[109] This understanding definitely dismisses Gao's exploration of the 'originary self'.

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[105] "[...] the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system. Even if there is never a pure signified, there are different relationships as to that which, from the signifier, *is presented* as irreducible stratum of the signified" Jaques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 160.
[106] Jon Simons, *Contemporary critical theorists*, 93.
[107] Cf. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*. (Deconstruction is mainly referred to Derrida but Christopher Norris engages in discussion about Richard Rorty, Jean Baudrillard, Stanley Fish, and Paul de Man).
[108] Jaques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.
[109] Ibid.

The reading of this play with reference to Derrida's ideas and within the context of deconstruction defines what Angel-Perez calls 'the postmodern mark of blindness', i.e. 'spectralisation of Crimp's theatre in terms of a linguistic fragmentation of the absent character's subjectivity'[110]. Therefore, this makes this play a Postmodern play, where Crimp's Postmodernsm, though, as suggested by Angel-Perez, emerges from Modernist works and their values. The Postmodern values of this play will be discussed more in detail later in the chapter, also in view of the abovementioned critics' definition of the play.

2.2.5. The gender debate

Unlike the theatre of many other male contemporary Western writers, Crimp's clever theatre does not epitomise a gloomy, elusive self-defence of the alienation of misunderstood males from a fragmented society and resentful self-perpetuating misogyny. The representation of a female figure in this play leads us to see his writing within a feminist perspective, where the term 'feminism', in a very general sense, refers to a cultural trend that challenges the patriarchal discourse and takes a stand for the 'female condition'. In this regard, Mary Lockurst claims that Crimp's approach to gender is a simplistic one and is one of the weaknesses of this play: 'men are wicked and brutal, women are less wicked and brutal but may be partially to blame for their own victimhood'.[111] However, I would argue that the dynamics of this play are far more complex than that and that Crimp can be truly called a feminist writer. Hence, one needs to look closely at the representation in the play and at whether or not this stand is achieved – and, if so, how. In particular, as it was the case with Gao's play, I will refer mostly to the feminist theorist Judith Butler. As the female figure is described as a mother, a porno star, a femme fatale and even an ashtray, the effect is the audience's sense of alienation from the character as an object and their difficulty in identifying with the character. Looking at the fragmentary picture given of the female figure, one can talk of an exploration of femininity through the disintegration of her very gender identity.

First, Crimp presents the female figure within the legacy of women's history: the reference to a character Anya – the woman crying for her child – as a product of her very own family history can be seen in the light of this legacy. In my view, Anya represents a woman *per se* in a traditional sense, as a mother and a wife. Later on, in the

[110] Élisabeth Angel-Perez, *Voyage au bout du possible*, 209.
[111] Mary Lockurst, "Political Point-Scoring," 60.

scene 'Tragedy of Love and Ideology', it could be argued that the figure of woman is associated with love, and man with ideology:

> - One day, Anne, he says, you'll understand my world. One day, Anne, you
> will understand that everything must be paid for, that even your ideals must
> finally be paid for.
> - He kisses her and presses her back down on to the bed. Or she him. Better still: she presses *him* down on to the bed such is her emotional confusion, such is her sexual appetite, such is her inability to distinguish between right or wrong in this great consuming passion [...][112]

As we can see from the above extract, the female figure is depicted as unable to understand Man's ideology and unable to distinguish between right and wrong, while at the same time she is associated with passion, sexual appetite and emotional confusion. However, earlier on, in the same scene, contradicting the above negative connotations, Anne is said to stand against the injustice that has been created and set by the ideology:

> - His political masters, that's right, calling him...the very political masters that she hates with every fibre as it were of her being. The very men and women that she, Anne, in her youthful idealism holds responsible for the terminal injustice of this world.
> - The leaders who in her naïve and passionate opinion have destroyed everything she values in the name (a) of business and (b) of lassaiz-faire.[113]

The remainder of the scene and the subsequent scene suggest that Anne represents nature and is understood as an entity opposed to man, who created individualism and rationalism; this depiction of her has a positive connotation as she is described as acting to preserve humanity and justice, relegating Man's ideology to being a corruptive element. The association of Anne with nature corresponds to the traditional vision of woman as mother, connected to the idea of fertility.[114] In the following scene Anya is depicted as the one who restores faith in humanity and her legacy still endures over time. These are all very traditional visions of women and in fact communicate positive connotations.

The association of the female figure with traditional stereotypes is apparent in other parts of the play, yet contrasts with a female topos of emancipation and independence. Attachment to traditional stereotypes and references to the female

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[112] Martin Crimp, *Attempts on her Life*, 10-11.
[113] Ibid., 8-9.
[114] Linda Nicholson, "Introduction," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1997) 4.

character as a modern woman draw a contradictory and ambiguous picture of this female figure. Such ambiguity emerges from the later representations of Anne as an independent dangerous enigmatic yet beautiful woman and as a terrorist. Her independence is constantly overshadowed by her association with activities controlled by men; her involvement in terrorism links Anne to men as her terrorist activities seem to help and support man's mission in the world; her depiction as a 'femme fatale' again belongs to a male construction of women's identity. In this sense, physical beauty is still an essential female attribute. Later on, Anne is also referred to as being a porno star. These depictions of her seem to revive traditional topoi that describe women as male objects.[115] Moreover, the tragic account in which a husband kills his wife at the end of the play still portrays women as victims of male dominance. By looking at these depictions, at first glance, as it was in Gao's play, it is difficult to define whether Crimp champions for feminism or criticises feminism or sees women in a traditional sense. One needs to look further at the dynamics of the gender discourse as developed in the play.

In terms of gender discourse, one needs to consider that femininity here is explored in its multiple facets, where gradual change in characterisation and the multiplicity of figures in general supports the idea that Crimp's 'feminism' might in some ways reflect Butler's ideas of gender identity as a performative act. At the beginning of the play, the role as protector of humankind is attributed to Anya, the first woman; later on, Annie is identified as a modern woman, instead, projected onto a global international perspective conveying a negative connotation: the female figure becomes involved in terrorism and loses her innocence and beauty. The gradual change sees Anne as a non–present character throughout the play from an idealised mother figure to a dangerous one, and later on as a mysterious figure. Towards the end of the play, even when she is again represented as a mother figure, she no longer fits the ideal of perfect 'mother' and woman. She is portrayed as a nameless mysterious mother, who carries her daughter – another Anne – in a bag hidden in her car, while trying to leave a country at war. At the very end of the play, she is portrayed as a mentally ill artist, another version of the female character, who is reported to be killed by her own husband. In a sense, the gradual obliteration of the figure at the very hands of men can be interpreted as an act of punishment towards a sinful 'figure'. Corrupted by Man's Ideology, the female figure tries to emulate men and escape her traditional role of

[115] Ibid.

mother and preserver of humanity. This interpretation resonates with the characters of Woman in Gao's play and her sense of guilt.

Moreover, one should look closely at representation and linguistic devices and use. One should, first of all, note that due to the total absence of stage directions, actors' speech is the only accountable element in the text about the absent character. Anne or Anya etc. are the object of the speech and are looked upon from the outside, which is made explicit by the metaphor of a camera following Anne. In other parts of the play, the actors functioning as observers look at one picture of Anne and seem to impose a perspective on the absent character, which is mostly a superficial one. The depiction given on the female figure informs us mostly of her role in society – her job, her visible skills – and of her appearance but not of her feelings. There is only one attempt to look closer and guess Anne's internal feelings in the second scene, where the actors speculate on whether or not a picture of her shows her internal turmoil.

The actors' statements fail to give a coherent account of Anne as their understanding of the character seems to crumble into uncertainty. This produces a fragmented figure emerging through the subjectivity of the observers and as said above in a linguistic or textual sense. Referring to Butler's concept of perfomative, we could argue that Crimp's feminism lies in the fact that femininity is presented in its multitude of facets. By doing so, Crimp succeeds in exposing how the matrix of the heterosexual discourse constructs gender identity and in particular femininity. Most importantly Crimp seems to suggest that women's new acquired roles, represented by the changing roles attributed to Anne still are nothing more than 'new' perfomative acts that are still embedded within this matrix. The end of the play reveals that male predominance seems to retain some power on women's renewed independence, as demonstrated by the last persona of the play, a mother/wife being killed by her husband.

Still referring to Butler's 'performative' of gender identity, Crimp's depiction of a fragmented personality functions as a sort of deconstruction of gender identity by reducing the female figure to an object with no-gender connotations. Anya is depicted by the actors as the name for a car model or ashtray. This together with the very absence of the female character on stage and the absence of any reference to the character's feelings serve as a process of both fragmentation as well as liberation. Therefore, absence and the very obliteration of the character at the end of the play are, using Butler's terms, the 'alternative' to the heterosexual matrix.

In this regard, before rushing into a conclusion, one should consider Zimmermann's view in his article on the play. He states that Crimp's dealing with gender discourses is a direct attempt to criticise how feminist artists in the 70s reacted against male dominance by expressing themselves as sexed objects through exhibiting their naked female bodies:

> Crimp's satire points up the limits of exorcising male aggression by way of public female masochism [...][116]

One could argue that still contemporary, the representation through the media of the female body[117] and of submissive female personas, perpetuates a female masochism by exploiting women's erotic desire to be dominated by men. According to the process described by Catherine MacKinnon:

> Masochism insures that pleasure in violation defines women's sexuality, so women lust after self-annihilation.[118]

Zimmermann points out that Crimp is also defying male voyeurism of the female body, the objectification of the female body as a commodity by not presenting female character on stage but throughout actors talking about her.[119]

Arguably as Zimmermann says, the absence of the character, of her voice, is part of the playwright's aim to question, in an ironic key, the representation of the female body by both the male dominated media and the feminists. It is a common view of feminist theorists that theatre as a medium objectifies 'the female body' just by representing it as such on stage.[120] The absence of the body on stage subverts this process and was a technique used by some feminist playwrights even before the work of Carole Schneemann, Ann Magnuson or Joan Jonas.[121] To some extent, then, Crimp is

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[116] Heiner Zimmermann, "Images of a Woman in M. Crimp's Attempts on her life," 84.

[117] However, the above definitions need to be seen as part of the current debate of so-called Third Wave Feminism, the media and pop-culture. The debate discusses the female viewers' 'enjoyment' in consuming stereotypical representation of women and the portrayal of male domination by pop-cultural forms, such as TV, films etc. Some trends of post feminism call for a relaxation of feminists' criticism against stereotypical representation of women. Refer to Angela McRobbie, "Postfeminism and popular culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4.3 (2004), 255-64; Stacy Gillis et al., *Third Wave Feminism*; Merri Lisa Johnson, *Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane Puts It in Box (Reading Contemporary Television)* (London: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007).

[118] Catherine MacKinnon, "A Pleasure after Patriarchy" in *Sexuality and Gender*, ed. Christine L. Williams and Adrien Stein (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 42.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, *Feminist futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), 133.

[121] Cf. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997); Edith Almhofer, *Performance Art. Die Kunst zu leben* (Wien: Hermann Böhlaus, 1986); RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art since 1960* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1998).

just reusing the technique of displacement or underdisplay used by some feminists.[122] It is the use of a feminist technique that seems to confirm Crimp as a male feminist writer, even if he does criticise the failures of feminism by denouncing the media commodification of the female body through the figure of Anne.

However, as Zimmermann points out, being himself part of this consumerist culture and as a male voyeur himself, Crimp's attempt is limited to the level of satire and parody and cannot suggest an alternative model that might inform us of direct social and cultural change. Indeed, Crimp's alternative does not inform us of a social and cultural change and only works at an intellectual and philosophical level. By looking at Crimp's play in reference to Butler's ideas, is becomes apparent that Crimp is attempting to create an alternative model to that generated within the heterosexual matrix by fragmenting that very model. This contradicts Mary Lockurst's view defining Crimp's simplistic portrayal of gender dynamics and his alleged feminism can be seen within the perspective of exploration and subversion of patriarchal gender dynamics, as was also the case for Gao's play.

The main differences between Gao's and Crimp's play in terms of gender representation can be related to the same aspects mentioned in the previous section. In Gao's play, Woman is definitely moulded on a feminine model, with the sense of guilt and sin overwhelming her as a figure and to some extent giving a one-sided representation of femininity. Crimp's representation is the product of a multifaceted depiction of this almost 'imaginary' character. As has been mentioned earlier, the approach to the creation of the protagonist is also different. Whereas in Gao's play the character, talking about herself, externalises feelings and emotions, the opposite is true in Crimp's case. Anne or Anya is the object of the speech and is looked upon from the outside, which is made explicit by the use of the metaphor of the camera looking at Anne and by the actors playing the observers and by doing so it arguably avoids the female body commodification. It could be argued, then, that by presenting a female character on stage Gao commodifies the female body. However, even though the character externalises her feelings in a kind of 'dramatic monologue', Gao's use of tripartition, of the character referring to herself with the third-person pronoun, results in an external objectification of the character and her femininity. In this sense, a process of

[122] "In performance contexts which construct the expectation of the female body on display, the body is instead hidden. [...] Feminist theatre which foregrounds male-authored violence against the female body employs a variety of techniques to underdisplay the body." For example, Franca Rame's *One Woman Show* about rape distances the rape commentary from the performer's body; *Tissue* by Louise Page about breast cancer keeps the body concealed. Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and theatre* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 95-96.

fragmentation is enacted in Gao's play, too, which, however – unlike in Crimp's – is linked to the idea of the 'originary self'. Hence, one could argue that Gao's way of dealing with gender is also aimed at disabling the patriarchal discourse, but by breaking down the boundaries of gender differences altogether, based on the idea of the 'originary self,'while in Crimp's play one can talk of a 'deconstruction', fragmentation of a gender identity. In both plays, gender dynamics are, therefore, explored yet since in both plays no male counterpart is present, it is inappropriate to talk about a complete abandonment of a gender patriarchal matrix, as a negotiation between genders does not take place and still needs to be explored.

2.3. Conclusive remarks

In relation to Gao's play, Crimp's shows a similar understanding of theatre experimentalism and theatre as a means of representation and narration. The differences are mainly concerned with the purpose of their experimentalism: even though scholars such as Huang Mei-hsu doubt Gao's commitment to Zen Buddhism and his belief in a spiritual dimension,[123] the idea of spirituality and the understanding of a dimension beyond language dictates the artist's choices and creates a dramatisation unlike Crimp's.

Ultimately Crimp and Gao come from two different traditions: Gao having a firm belief in a dimension beyond language and beyond intellectualism and stressing spirituality; and Crimp, rooted in Western contemporary ideas of deconstruction, appears to some extent to be solely engaged in the playful game of experimenting with narration and representation. As in some of Crimp's other plays, in this one, his main interest is the theatre itself, the game of signifiers, which results at times in dry intellectualism. Gao, on the other hand, despite failing, attempts to charge his play with emotional power and to give theatre a function generally linked to an ideal of the spiritual that also influences the dramatic experience of this play.

In both cases, nevertheless, one can talk about further progress on the part of the writer into the realm of two innovative kinds of theatre. As far as the Postmodernism/Modernism relationship in these two plays is concerned, we could argue that Crimp's play is closer to Postmodernism than Gao's because of the process of 'spectralisation,' and the 'absence' that Angel-Perez talks about in reference to his theatre. Moreover, Crimp's theatre seems to ask the Postmodern ontological question 'is there a reality?' In this sense, Crimp's cynicism and intellectualism contrasts with Gao's

[123] Huang Mei-hsü, "Shitang Gao Xingjian xiju zhongde seng dao renwu," in Fang Zixun: "a new era of Chinese Drama: The second session of the Chinese Drama Festival (Hong Kong, 1998) Symposium Papers." Hong Kong: Hong Kong Drama Association, the Hong Kong drama, in 2000, 296-309.

epistemological question 'what is reality?'. Especially in this play, Gao suggests that there is an 'enlightened reality', which is the very illusory dimension that Postmodern theorists argue consigns the world of knowledge to chaos. Crimp, instead, is concerned with giving life to this very chaos in an almost decadent and nihilistic manner. Reality and its representation are exploited for artistic purposes, as reality as a philosophical concept does not exist. However, as said about Gao's play, especially as for the modes of theatrical representation and the use of language, one can also talk of Gao's play using typical postmodern devices, such as word games, self-referentiality etc.

Taking into account Tim Albery's definition of Crimp's play as a modernistic piece, one can assume that Crimp's intellectualism and exclusive interest in theatre itself is actually a modernistic one championing the modernistic principle of 'art for art's sake'.[124] Moreover, unlike Postmodern artistic practices, Crimp's theatre is mainly text-based to a greater extent even than Gao's, which contrasts with the Postdramatic theatrical tradition, as described by Zimmermann, which is mostly connected to random speeches given to actors and mostly adjusted by the actors themselves during the improvisation process. Thereby, referring back to the question raised at the beginning of the section on *Attempts* as to whether Crimp's play in fact fits in with Lehmann's idea of continuity between Postdramatic theatre and a modernistic tradition, one can firmly answer that the play does seem to reflect this continuity and therefore can be defined as a Postdramatic play.

As for the comparison with Gao's play, from the above conclusion on the presence of Postmodern and Modern elements in both plays we can state firmly that both Gao's and Crimp's plays are a hybrid of Postmodern and Modern elements, which proves Calinescu's argument.

[124] Martin Puchner talks of forms of closet drama as a modernist form of drama, some variant of *l'art pour* l'art, in Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-theatricality and Drama* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 290.

CHAPTER 3

Dialogue and Rebuttal – the making of the 'spiritual' and gender deconstruction in comparison with Crimp's *The Country*

Dialogue and Rebuttal explores similar themes and employs similar theatrical devices to *Between Life and Death. Dialogue and Rebuttal* (*Duihua yu fanjie*) was written in 1992 and first performed at Theater des Augenblicks, Vienna, directed by Gao himself. This play is divided into two acts and the speaking characters of the play are generally referred to as Man and Girl[1]; unlike the two previous plays there is only one background character generally referred to as Monk, who is constantly present on stage yet does not interfere with Man and Girl's dialogue and actions.

3.1 *Dialogue and Rebuttal*

There seems to be a connection between the title of the play and its content and division; the first part sees the two characters trying to communicate with each other and engage in a kind of dialogue (*duihua*); whereas in the second part they are trapped in self-referential soliloquies as if trying to overcome emotional conflicts. There is also a slight change of ambience between the two parts. In general the setting is reduced to the bare minimum, as in most of Gao's plays. However, in the first half the setting suggests that the location of the play is Man's room, and therefore an internal space. In the second part, the setting introduces us to a surreal indefinite ambience as suggested by the characters' body position: they are both lying on the floor on a completely empty stage, and Man's body can hardly be seen except for his head. The change in setting and ambience marks a change in the themes and motifs, a passage between reality and unreality.

3.1.1 Life and death

In this play, as in *Between Life and Death*, the tension between life and death is present and connected to the motif of the spiritual. Unlike in *Between Life and Death*, here the interaction between the two characters carries out the narrative of the play[2] yet the characters themselves never explicitly talk about either life or death. Therefore, the

[1] 'Girl' is used here as Gao specifies that the character is a 'young woman' (yi nianqing nüzi) whereas Man is referred to as a middle age man (yi zhongnian nanren). Gao Xingjian, "Duihua yu fanjie," in *Gao Xingjian juzuo xuan*, 240

[2] Chen Jide *Zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000*, 273

presence of life and death is an internal theme of the play and has to be seen in a metaphorical and symbolic sense. This part of the chapter looks at how the play develops the spiritual, in terms of the life/death dichotomy, through the relationship between Man and Girl and through their relationship with the Monk as a functional character in the play.

In this regard, we need to take into account how the two characters view life and death and how they themselves are represented in relation to the idea of life and death. The play starts by presenting the characters in a concrete situation: they are a couple who hardly know each other and have just engaged in a casual sexual encounter. This gives the impression that they are almost realistic characters. For part of the play the dialogue between the two characters is driven by Man's curiosity about Girl. Girl responds to his curiosity by relating stories about her past, such as her sexual experience in India. She makes a few attempts to leave, yet she continues the conversation.

Man's eager and almost anxious curiosity portrays him as a distant observer exploring life, as though he had never lived it in the first person. In this context, in his eyes Girl symbolically represents life itself. Man is the one who actually leads the conversation as a conscious and rational participant. He is the one who changes the focus from life to death as he starts talking about his dreaming:

> **Man** I dream, when I am waiting I always dream. Dreams are more truthful than reality itself and are even closer to the self.[3]

This is one of the few statements Man makes in the first half of the play about himself, and is a key statement that helps to understand him as a character and his relationship with life and death. He continues by saying:

> **Man** One day, I dreamt that I was sinking into the ground, my whole body was falling in a deep well, surrounded by extremely high walls on both sides, or possibly I was falling from a cliff, no matter what I did just couldn't climb over and get out …[4]

From the above two utterances we understand that Man tries taking refuge in dreams to be closer to his 'self,' yet dreaming does not bring him any happiness. His dreams are dominated by a sense of imprisonment, which could symbolically be associated with death. His desire to escape into dreams fits with his nihilism and

[3] Ibid., 273.
[4] Ibid.

cynicism, which emerges when talking about language, philosophy and people in general:

> **Man** Don't you think that can make people sick? Everybody is sick of everybody! Everyone is sickening![5]

The above utterance suggests that Girl disappoints Man, and his disappointment is the implicit cause of the shift in conversation, to something more negative and dark. Moreover, later on, he creates the suspicion that he is not a real character. In this sense, on the one hand Man could represent a dead character, who is curious about life but at the same time prefers taking refuge in his dreams. On the other, Man could be not dead but only disillusioned about life, and dead in a spiritual sense. In terms of the spiritual, he talks in positive terms about reaching his 'self' through dreams, while, from his experience of nightmares and the general tone of his statements, we can conclude that this spiritual path does not lead him to a state of enlightenment. Unlike Zen Buddhism's belief in a sense of detachment from material life, Man is still linked to life and is in a kind of middle condition: he has already been detached from life and to some extent rejects it, but through his encounter with Girl he maintains a relationship with it. His detachment is driven more by disillusion than a desire for redemption or a spiritual desire for transcendence.

His attitude can be explained as a sense of alienation. As we said above, Sy Ren Quah refers to the idea of alienation. In particular with regard to Man, he adds:

> The Man in *Dialogue and Rebuttal* exudes helplessness and powerlessness. Presented though intense emotions, the meaninglessness of utterance is connected to the insignificance of existence. [...] Every individual in this world remains physically related to each other but, at the same time, spiritually disconnected.[6]

Sy Ren Quah gives a very negative outlook on the character, who is described as being almost spiritually dead.

In terms of comparison with *The Other Shore,* with reference to Man's character in the first half of the play, we could argue that he is not explicitly engaged in a quest for enlightenment; and in terms of comparison with Woman in *Between Life and Death*, Man's nostalgic tone and his words speak of general disillusionment, rather than of a personal disappointment with life. Even though, they both feel a sense of dissatisfaction with life: Woman is a victim of her past and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, her

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[5] Ibid., 279.
[6] Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Trascultural Chinese Theater*, 155.

connection to death is an individual and not a universal one; whereas Man is absorbed with his spiritual quest and his connection is therefore more universal.

As far as the character of Girl is concerned, to some extent, it is Man's existential nihilism that drives her into a pessimistic contemplation of life, which does not directly bring her upon the idea of death. In the first part of the play she never actually refers to a desire for death, as was the case with Woman in *Between Life and Death.* As mentioned above, Girl symbolically represents life but but her attitude is not an entirely positive one. In her words there is a strong sense of regret, disappointment and anger towards men. Girl's relationship with life is also dominated by a general sense of fear of the passing of time and therefore of death:

> **Girl** I don't know, yet I am afraid, I always feel a kind of fear, always afraid that [...] When I was eighteen I was afraid of being twenty, when I was twenty I was afraid of being twenty and after twenty I could feel death approaching day by day.[7]

If we compare Woman in *Between Life and Death* to Girl, we find that fear is the main trait they have in common. In the case of Woman, fear is more a projection of her past, and her fear of death is more associated with the fear of lack of recognition by others, and she is referring to a physical kind of death. Girl, on the other hand, talks of a fear of ageing, and her fear is therefore more projected into the future. As in the case of Woman, who seems overwhelmed by an emotional misery that is at times unwarranted, Girl's fear is the product of an exaggerated irrationality, considering that she is supposed to still be young. In this sense Woman is more similar to the character of Man, than Girl to Woman[8], as both Man and Woman cherish the idea of an escape from life – in the case of Man through dreams, in the case of Woman through death.

This brings us to another major difference between Man in this play and Woman in the previous play, which will help understand the representation of death in this play. In this play, unlike *Between Life and Death,* death is not portrayed as a necessity but as a consequence of the meaninglessness and emptiness of life. Looking back in particular at this play and its development, it is a game that brings death, and itself becomes almost a character in the play; the game symbolically representing the ephemerality of life. Through the game, death assumes a sense of ephemerality itself. Death is depicted as a self-inflicted act of violence derived directly from the interaction of the two

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[7] Ibid., 288.

[8] Chang Hsien-Tang attributes the main difference between Girl and Woman to the fact that the latter is concerned with her ageing, while Girl is not. Chang Hsien-Tang "Gao Xingjian zai "Shengsijie", "Duihua yu fanhua" he "Yeyoushen" de qingyu shuxie", 292

characters as they both attempt to murder each other. Zhao explains the dynamic of their inflicting violence on each other as a consequence of their attempt to use language:

> [...] life here looks like struggle between sex (symbolising all social relationships) and death. The two had physical intimacy before the start of the play, they did not seem to have communicated [...] Once they tried to use language, they unleashed fierce irrationality, becoming more and more hostile towards each other, and finally turning homicidal.[9]

Following Zhao's explanation, it is the ephemerality of language that captivates and curses the characters by leading them to death. Liu Zaifu talks of Gao's 'exquisite' (*jingzhi*) theatrical language that in this play, however, creates a dark portrayal of how 'sick' human interactions can be. [10] Similarly, Sy Ren Quah connects 'the meaninglessness of utterance' to 'the insignificance of existence'[11]. In a broader sense, on the one hand, the charm of death captivates both Man and Girl, whose approach to it is definitely more naïve. The captivation is linked to the game they are playing, where ephemerality leads to more ephemerality and feeds a sense of alienation. On the other hand, death is an expression of the hatred between the two and, rather than being self-inflicted, is inflicted on one character by the other; it is, therefore, hatred between them and against each other that leads to death.

The question is whether their hatred is real or metaphorical. In Zhao's terms, hatred can be understood as a metaphor for the effect of language, which feeds the characters with irrationality[12]. The message is rather more ambiguous than Zhao seems to suggest: either it is their own individualism that causes them to meet death or it is a symbolical representation of the meaninglessness of life that makes their act as ephemeral as it is accidental. This becomes clearer by looking at the second part of the play.

The second part sees the characters already dead; death does not unite them but divides them even further. The ambience is even more imbued with a surreal presence of death than *Between Life and Death*. The characters have lost any connection to life and are looking at their dead bodies. In this regard, Gao says that it is as though their souls are talking to their bodies.[13] In terms of their relationship and attitude, the two characters seem clearly focused on themselves and deal differently with death.

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[9] Henry Zhao, *Towards a modern Zen theatre*, 150.
[10] Liu Zaifu *Gao Xingjian lun*, 93
[11] Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Trascultural Chinese Theater*, 156.
[12] Henry Zhao, *Towards a modern Zen theatre*, 150.
[13] Gao Xingjian, "Duihua yu fanjie," 208.

It is important to point out that the characters do not refer to their personal experience by using 'I'. As it was in *Between Life and Death,* Girl uses the third person whereas Man uses the pronoun 'you'. This differentiates their discourse and further isolates them. In this sense, the characters completely abandon the communication that they had been attempting in the first half. Man enacts his philosophical search in even more dramatic terms. The idea that Girl represents life and Man death is still maintained, as Girl's speech – trapped in her recollection of the past – is connected, to some extent, to life. However, Girl can be considered an accomplice in their mutual homicide, as though she had accepted the rules of the game. In a metaphorical sense the fear of ageing leads her to choose unconsciously and participate in a homicide which can also be seen as a suicidal act.

Trapped in their own soliloquies, both characters gradually undergo a process of disintegration, which is represented linguistically by the gradual fragmentation of their speech. The end is very similar to the process of disintegration Woman undergoes in *Between Life and Death.* However, if we assume that the characters are already dead, at the end of the play we are faced with their second death, or rather a more definite death, the final passage to transcendence: as Zhao says, the 'return to the pre-language'.[14] As far as the representation of the 'ritual' in this play is concerned, in the director's notes Gao states that the dialogic form of this play is inspired by the *gongan* style of question and answer in Chinese Zen Buddhism, which he proposes to use as a form of dramatisation and not as a tool to promote Zen Buddhism.[15]

Before drawing any conclusions about the idea of death and spirituality/ritual in this play, it is important to look at Monk and his function in the play. As has been said before, Monk appears to be the only real character, in the sense that he is engaged in very practical activities. Monk acts as an independent character almost completely disconnected from the two, but at the same time complements the tone of their actions. Fong connects this figure with the dialogue of the characters in terms of 'witnessing and punctuating the drama of futility', but without being 'otherworldly, his antics being the

[14] Henry Zhao, *Towards a modern Zen theatre*, 150.

[15] This is also known as *kōan*, a language technique that literally means 'public document'. 'The Chinese term is *pinxin* (case record), suggesting a table or bench of legal authority and something public and unbiased. [...] kōan refers to the statement made by an old master, or an answer given to a question by a master [...] the answers given have no connection to the question. Since the responses make no sense with respect to the question , the *kōan* terminates ordinary understanding. [...] it functions to examine one's mind. If the respondent is an enlightened being, that person's response will indicate that fact." In Carl Olson, *The Different paths of Buddhism, A Narrative-historical Introduction* (London: A British catalogue publication, 2005), 235.

follies of his own humanities.'[16] His actions stress specific moments in the play, and at some points the characters observe him in moments of alienated contemplation, what Gao calls 'indifferent observation'[17] or what Yang Huiyi calls an oblivious search of the self.[18]

In this, his function could be compared to that of the 'present' characters in *Between Life and Death*. However, unlike the previous play, with the present characters having a loose religious connotation, Monk seems to have a more definite link to Zen Buddhism. This is evident especially from his chanting, which is reminiscent of the figure of the Zen Master in *The Other Shore*. To some extent Monk represents the so-called 'ritual'; in the director's notes Gao recommends that the actor playing Monk have some training in Chinese opera or Japanese Noh theatre.[19]

The question is whether or not his presence as a representative of the ritual has any spiritual bearing when connected to the other characters engaging in a kind of spiritual quest and seeking transcendence. Considering that he is the only peaceful character in the play, Monk could also be acknowledged as embodying the ideal of Zen Buddhism, advocating detachment from life and emotional peacefulness. Zhao and Fong speak of him representing the stage beyond language, and having achieved serenity, the dimension of transcendence[20]. The impression is that Monk's ritualism has no effect on the characters, and therefore there is a sense that it is without spiritual effect. The ambiguity behind the representation of the ritual can probably be related to Gao's exploration of the spiritual as in *The Other Shore.*

In the first instance, Man's quest or existential conflict can be interpreted as being more meaningful than Monk's repetitive rituality, and to some extent his and Girl's second death redeems them, as in the end they are reduced to worms and reach the dimension of no-language. This is especially the case for Man, who, as presented in the first half, is already in a limbo situation between life and death, survives his journey through the first stage of death and passes to transcendence, which is the second stage. However, the characters' transformation into worms could be interpreted as referred to Huineng's deconstructive idea[21] of no-thought (*wunian)*- ' as soon as thought stops, one

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[16] Gilbert Fong, "Introduction", xxxv.
[17] Gao Xingjian, "Meiyou zhuyi", 14.
[18] Yang Huiyi "Gao Xingjian de 'Zhongguo qingying jie" in *Gao Xingjian –2000 shouwei Nuobei'r wenxue jiang dezhu*, ed. Lin Manshu, 187
[19] Ibid., 136.
[20] Henry Zhao, *Towards a modern Zen theatre*, 150; Gilbert C. F. Fong, "Introduction, xxv
[21] Huineng, *The Platform Sūtra* belongs to the deconstructive trend in Chan Buddhism (Zen) – Hongzhou Chan. His strategy can be summed up as the belief in ' free flowing together with all thoughts and things' and his notion of no-thought opposing 'both the absence of thought and the attachment to thought' in

dies and is reborn elsewhere.' [22] His notion dismisses redemption in no-language and fists the dark tone of the play[23].

The cruelty of the relationship between the two characters, their death and their consequent isolation from each other could be interpreted in a negative sense. Redemption connected to violence is to some extent depicted as a deceptive and disillusioned ideal. In the second instance, if we consider this play as an exploration of the ritual and the spiritual, we could argue that the ambiguity and the extreme representation of the characters means that Gao is questioning the very essence of both ritual amounting to mere repetition, and the spiritual itself, thus the essence of Buddhism. The progression to transcendence is not projected and celebrated as a positive happening; it is as brutal and cruel as life and the characters' actions, which have caused death. The characters' isolation and mental instability is perpetuated after their death; this isolation and mental instability exhausts the spiritual itself, which is not brought about or mediated by any luminary intervention. Even though the final moment of the Monk facing a bright-blue sky strikes a positive note the characters themselves are not part of it. More than in his other plays, Gao shows the process of reaching for the spiritual beyond the ritual, and its difficult path made up of misery and cruelty, and in this moves closer to *The Other Shore*. As suggested by Sy Ren Quah, the spiritual and the striving for transcendence are also reminiscent of Western contemporary humanism, in which spirituality is dominated by a spiritual void and sense of alienation;[24] only by linking this play to Zen Buddhism – and with a knowledge of Zen Buddhism and its principles – can we read the event in a positive light. Girl, for instance, is very secular – more than Woman – and has strong Western characteristics. Girl's story is told from the point of view of a Western woman. Her experience in India is not dissimilar to that of many Western women during their travel to an East-Asian country, which is described as being as menacing as it is exotic. Man's quest is philosophically rooted in a Western sensitivity, especially his concern with language. In

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Youru Wang, *Linguistic Strategies*, in *Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism*, ed. Youru Wang (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 5, 53.

[22] Huineng, *The Platform Scripture*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: St John's University Press, 1963), 51.

[23] Huineng rejects both Shenxiu's idea of *linian* (free from thoughts) and attachment to thoughts and chooses the 'Middle Way': 'Only by practicing non-attachment within this chain or flux of thoughts can we hope to obtain liberation.' in Youru Wang, *Linguistic Strategies*, 68-69 (one cannot be sure that Gao's play is following Huineng's idea, hence it cannot be appropriately considered within the analysis of the play).

[24] Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and transcultural Chinese theatre*, 168.

fact it is language that resolves their conflict, and it is through language that spirituality is enacted.

In general terms, as in *Between Life and Death,* in this play the spiritual is still enacted through the opposition between life and death and their dialogic relationship, which is even better depicted though the opposition of the two characters, who experience life and death differently. In this case it can be argued that the passage from life into death is definitely driven by the character Man, who is presented as being in a kind of limbo between the two. Gao further explores spirituality by combining elements of both of his previous plays. The ritual, which was less present in *Between Life and Death*, is further revisited and depicted as not necessarily enhancing spirituality, which is also questioned. Girl's secularity and individuality and Man's philosophical existential quest are very important elements of the enactment of spirituality, which is strictly associated with the fragmentation of language, which possibly has a major role in this play, as will be seen in the next part of this chapter. In this sense, unlike the previous play where the focus was on the 'enlightened reality' here the focus is on the fragmentation, in a violent form, of language and existence, where both the spiritual and ritual are questioned. Therefore, there is tension towards an ontological questioning that makes this play more Postmodern than the *Between the Life and Death.*

3.1.2 Language

As in *Between Life and Death*, this play deals with the representation/reality dichotomy. As mentioned earlier on, Zhao has said about the play that its main focus is on language and that the play explores the limits of language as a tool of communication and the mechanism of meaning-creation. This section will be looking, then, at the self-referential statements, and how these question the function of language, the use of second and third person pronouns and the use of non-linguistic devices.

Many self-referential statements about language and narration are made by both characters in the play, who question language and its mechanism. The dialogue in the first part of the play seems naturalistic, as the two counterparts attempt communication. At the beginning Girl pushes for conversation, but it is Man who makes the first reference to the narration and use of language. It is only later that Girl carries the narration with continuous questions. Her questions are not directly self-referential but recreate the sense of broken-down communication, as it becomes increasingly difficult for the characters to find topics to talk about. This suggests that reality does not offer sufficiently valid meaning to be consequentially expressed in language.

Using the ideas of language mentioned in the previous chapter we could argue that the use of language represents the phase of the symbolic and in the second half the phase of the 'imaginary'[25], where the characters have lost any connection with reality as they are depicted as being already dead. The volume of words used increases rather than diminishes, however, as though the fragmentation is enacted in reverse. The impression is that the characters cannot stop using language and are damned to continue, as though they were trapped in language.

The fragmentation and exhaustion of language is a longer process than was the case with Woman in the previous play. From this perspective the reaching for the dimension of no-language is a painful process, as there is a strong attachment to language. In general terms, in the dialogue language is represented as a form of power, which empowers the characters in the first half and dominates them in the second. In terms of the interaction between the two characters, in the first half Man gives in to Girl, who, demanding he continue the conversation, asks Man to define himself using language.

In the game, where language is employed to impart commands, Man temporarily imposes his power, but Girl has no difficulty in using language to express herself. However, in the case of both characters there is some restraint, which does not allow them to reveal their feelings openly to each other, as though the language they were using was not their own. Even though they are both quite direct with each other, language is not a free tool at their disposal. Girl automatically repeats the sentence 'What more shall we talk about now?' while she expresses her intention to leave; and her unkindness towards Man seems at times to be an automatic compulsion. Language in Foucault's conception of discursive formation is 'at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its power and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.'[26] This is a vision of a 'language that speaks through us'[27] that human beings cannot control, as language has already been constructed for human beings with its sets of meaning and regulations.

The two characters' behaviour displays an underlying contradiction between what they really are and what they say. In the second part the constraint does not disappear, but is eased and loosened by the circumstances. However, the characters still

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[25] Refer to Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative if the function of the 'I'," *Écrits- a Selection.*
[26] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 216.
[27] Ibid.

use language in different ways. When Man is engaged in his soliloquy, he hardly refers to personal events or feelings. Girl is more at ease in using language to express herself; her journey is similar to that of Woman through her memories, whereas Man's discourse is more abstract and more self-referential.

As far as the use of the third-person pronoun is concerned here, unlike *Between Life and Death*, the use of the third-person pronoun is not consistent throughout the play it is used at the beginning of the first part and towards the end of the first half. In the second half, Girl uses the third person throughout, whilst Man uses the second-person pronoun. This has a similar distancing effect as in the previous play:

> The second part of the play thus deals with the Man and the Woman in their "death" stage when they are left with an existence in pure consciousness after eliminating their bodies. In their state of "self-transcendent observation"- a state of being that Gao Xingjian advocates and attempts to attain, the selves are freed from their physical bodies of confinement. [...] In their dialogue with their cut-off bodies, they come to objectify themselves as "you" and "she" defined by their intellect with ability to speak, to remember and to think.[28]

The disintegration of language occurs later and, as in *Between Life and Death*, the characters manage to reach their true self, 'the land of nothingness, where there is no self, no memory, no fantasy, no dream.'[29] Language is understood here as a mask in almost a Pinteresque[30] fashion, and alien to the characters; they do not say what they actually think. We should not forget that those such as Pinter had based their artistic vision on language used to mask and conceal reality and exploit its emptiness. As to the debate between Modernism and Postmodernism, one should consider Pinter's position as has been compared here to Gao. It is interesting to note that Pinter's theatre has been considered as a hybrid Modern/Postmodern type of theatre: in *Postmodern/Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage*, Stephen Watt defines Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* as Modernist with its depth of character psychology, in contrast to Pinter's *No Man's Land*, a later play as more Postmodern with surface characters and horizontal narratives.[31] *No Man's Land* is a play about a condition called 'no man's land', a status of humankind that never changes and never moves, where at a theatrical level language is no longer a concealment from an uncomfortable reality, embedded in the

[28] Terry Siu-Han and Kwok-kan Tam, "Gender and self in Gao Xingjan post-exile plays," 229-230.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Harold Pinter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.
[31] Refer to Stephen Watt, *Postmodern/Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

psychological depth of the characters, but from the emptiness of reality, which in itself is empty. Pinter reduces, therefore, humankind's 'inner' complexity to this linguistic emptiness. Gao's characters are not a victim of this unchanging status as they end up annihilating one another in an almost progressive process that defines a beginning and an end.

In terms of theatrical conception, as mentioned previously when relating Fong's quotation of Gao's words on theatre, however, Gao is criticising a theatre that has lost its sense of theatricality and endlessly plays with words and text without exploring the physicality of the performance. He even takes a step further than Pinter, as he suggests that language and silence – the lack of language – are not the only elements that can be used in theatre; Gao explores the physicality of theatre. Gao shows how the characters overcome this 'unchanging' status, as non-linguistic elements push them to move forward towards perhaps another dimension – that of no-language. In this sense, Gao adopts some of the physicality of Postmodern theatre that, as mentioned in the previous chapter, exploits visual elements of theatre but reaches a Modern conclusion, that of the 'enlightened reality' of no-language. This contradicts what has been said earlier on about this play being more Postmodern than *Between Life and Death*; however, I would argue that this is still the case, even though Gao's characters seem to reach this 'enlightened reality'. The process tending towards enlightenment is a problematic one, as the characters are described as imprisoned, trapped in 'death' until the very end of the play. Moreover, at a stylistic and theatrical level Gao is still reproducing devices that are typically Postmodern. Therefore, it could be argued that in its hybridism this play is closer to a Postmodern than a Modern tradition but is still different from Pinter's Postmodernism of *No Man's Land.*

3.1.3 Gender

Gender dichotomy is well represented here by having one male and one female character whose positions are strongly polarised. This part of the chapter looks at the way the characters interact with each other and how they are represented in terms of gender. The previous chapter mentions Fong's idea that Gao champions feminism, and it has been argued that Gao's exploration of gender issues cannot be easily defined. In the case of this play, the exploration of gender issues is far more complex than in *Between Life and Death.* The gender definition of Man and Girl seems to be concerned with the ideas of gender difference and is explored by the characters' interaction with

one another and through the characters' own contradictions. These will be weighted against theories on gender discourse from Second Wave feminism and post-feminism. This chapter will be first looking at how the characters evolve throughout the play.

At the beginning of the play, Girl presents a defensive attitude and continuously attacks Man from the outset. Man's response to her aggressive attitude is both physical and verbal. His head droops, and his words show penitence and even express criticism of his own gender. While Girl stresses the difference between men and women, Man strives for equality. Girl's use of language dominates Man by forcing him to define himself and, by doing so, stressing their difference. In terms of representation, Girl is as much an independent, emancipated woman as Man is submissive and passive. However, both characters' behaviours are typified by contradiction. Girl's independence is softened by statements expressing her aspiration to belong to a man, such as the following:

> **Girl** I don't know. In other words, I still have haven't found anyone, the right person to belong to.[32]

Man attempts to disguise his misogyny, but a few of his statements, using irony, convey the message that he still looks at women in a traditional way:

> **Girl** You only consider yourself smart.
> **Man** And you could be a smart girl.
> **Girl** Not necessarily. Otherwise I wouldn't have followed you here.
> **Man** In fact I prefer stupid women.[33]

Contradictions continue throughout the first part of the play. When Girl tells the story of her adventure in India she expresses a sense of fear mixed with perverted desire and sensuality, as if she liked being dominated and being an object:

> **Girl** All throughout he was very gentle, he never forced himself on me, I gave it all to him, I did not hold back ... everything was totally wiped out... After one week, I realised that a whole week had passed, I could not distinguish between day and night. My whole body was completely paralysed.[34]

The dynamics between the two characters change gradually from the beginning of the play: Man's reproaches of women increase, he shows resentment about women's writing and writers. Then when they talk about love Girl reiterates her resentment and shows emotional anger towards men, who to some extent fit typical male stereotypes.

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[32] Gao Xingjian, "Duihua yu fanjie," 251.
[33] Ibid., 251.
[34] Ibid., 249-250.

Chang Hsien-Tang affirms that Girl regards men in general in a very negative light: she thinks that men only consider women as an object of their desires.[35] The tension arises when talking about 'lovers' betrayal'; Man becomes increasingly embittered about Girl, who then says:

> **Girl** *(Sighs).* You no more than awfully lonely that you need someone to comfort you.[36]

This moment of conflict is then resolved by the game, where Man first takes control over Girl. Man's control over Girl is short-lived as Girl insists on stopping the game. Her behaviour provokes Man, who finally comes out with an outburst against women in general:

> **Man** *(Running and shouting).* If a woman became God, the world would be even more frightful. I am not certain of it but she might manage even better. I am not certain of it, she could be even worse, with the temper of little girls![37]

He excludes women from the possibility of running the world. His reaction is possibly a symptom of a sense of threat that Girl represents, which is translated into almost anger towards her. This anger is taken to the extreme, with Man attempting to kill Girl. This is a strong metaphorical image that expresses a repressed anger towards women that was not shown earlier on in the play.

After a brief interval for the characters' soliloquies, the dialogue sees the characters in less stable dynamics, with Man losing his reticence and submissive attitude and Girl being less eager to erupt in criticism, and to some extent her essential need to belong leads her to soften her attitude towards Man. However, the person who has changed the most is Man. This change is the result of the emerging contradiction. The contradiction can be seen as the internal conflict that Man faces between a more emancipated attitude and his manly resentment of women.

In the second part, communication difficulties lead to a complete lack of communication; both characters are involved in their own soliloquies, which highlight the gender differences as they use language differently. Man talks mostly in general philosophical terms, never referring to his feelings directly. Girl opens herself up to almost a complete confession. The difference in their speech goes back to the feminist idea based on gender differences and language, as advocated by Anglo-American

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[35] Chang Hsien-Tang "Gao Xingjian zai "Shengsijie", "Duihua yu fanhua" he "Yeyoushen" de qingyu shuxie, 293

[36] Gao Xingjian, "Duihua yu fanjie," 275.

[37] Ibid., 281.

feminist linguistics (Cheris Kramer, Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley) that regard language as a monolithic system[38] and therefore focus on the sexual differences in the use of language.[39] This is also in line with the general consensus by Chinese female critics in the 80s to 90s, like Wu Daiying, who in her detailed paper admits that women write and speak differently from men.[40]

As mentioned above, contradictions within the characters, and ultimately the dichotomy between Man and Girl, are key to understanding gender. Man is the character who makes more effort, trying to keep his misogyny under control, and is also the one who changes more radically, as his rage becomes more and more visible. As far as Girl is concerned, she shows herself to be an independent woman yet expresses a need to belong to someone. In one instance Girl denies being a feminist and attempts closeness with Man.

This brings us to another aspect of this play related to the attitude towards feminism. The word 'feminism' is used by both characters in a negative sense; also man uses some disdain towards feminism and their idea of emancipation. Looking at both their use of the word 'feminism' and their attitude throughout the play, Gao presents feminism as a concept imposed on the characters, since their dialogue is all about gender difference and issues relating to the same. This is a major difference from the previous play, where gender as a topic was only touched upon, and Gao had appeared to look more favourably on feminism and women's issues. In terms of social representation, Gao seems to pass judgment on feminism and independent women, in line with post-feminism[41] and its criticism of an authoritative oppressive feminism.

Looking in more detail, Gao also shows on stage the process of negotiation between the two characters – between the feminine and masculine. Referring back to Judith Butler, this translates into the enactment of the performative that occurs at the level of the characters' speech and actions on stage, as highlighted by the use of different pronouns in the characters' discourse that creates a distancing effect. If we look at discourse and language as a tool of power, one could argue that the two characters are victims of the discourse inspired by feminism and the 'patriarchal' social order alike. Girl seems to be trapped in her role of emancipated woman that 'act' according to what the Chinese critics called in the 80s western-style feminism, '*xifang*

[38] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 2001), 152.
[39] Cheris Kramer *et al.*, "Perspectives on language and communication," *Signs* 3 No. 3 (1978): 638-651.
[40] Wu Daiying, "Cong Xinshiqi Nüzuojia de Chuangzuo kan 'Nüxing Wenxue' de ruogan tezheng," *Zhongguo Diandai Xiandai Wenxue Yanju* 14 (1984): 12-18 in Ravni Thakur, *Rewriting gender: reading contemporary Chinese women* (London: Zed Books, 1996), 187.
[41] Cf. Chapter 1 footnote 87.

nüxingzhuyi,'[42] which in this case combines personal independence with sexual emancipation. We should not forget about Girl's sexual experience in India being very similar to Western women's experience of travel to exotic countries. Man tries to behave as an emancipated understanding man but he equally fails to exercise control over his female counterpart. He cherishes the dream dimension, because in the dream dimension neither gender orders rule.

In terms of gender discourse in this play, two aspects have been recognised: the contradiction of characters' attitude towards women's emancipation and the changing roles of women, present in both the first and second part; and in the second part, the gender differences emerging from the different ways the characters use language. Both these aspects show the negativity of the patriarchal and the feminist discourse. However, the end of the play, that describes the demise of both characters, is particularly significant as it sheds new light on the gender discourse of this play.

In regards to the end of the play, Terry Siu-han Yip and Kwok-kan Tam suggest that their bodies being cut off, the Man and the Woman have successfully unsexed themselves and become ungendered.[43] The lack of their bodily shape makes them ungendered and therefore free from gender order and division; Hu Yaoheng interprets the image of the beheaded woman as symbol of physical strength and nature and reaching a stage of 'super-ego' (*chaowo*)[44] as formulated by Freud[45]. Similarly, their speech is desegregated and fragmented. According to 70s Anglo-American feminist linguistics and 80's to 90's Chinese critics, language still creates gender differences, and as for Butler's idea, sex differences are still defined by bodily acts. This play brings both of these aspects to a sudden end and brings a real sense of freedom in the total detachment that comes from an abandonment of both bodily forms and language, which is linked to an ideal of nothingness and death.

Following on from the debate on the spiritual and language, this ungendered dimension does not leads to the 'originary self' but a dimension of total nothingness as the 'self' itself, unlike in the previous play, is not accounted for – with the exception of Man's references to a dream dimension. To the questions from the previous chapter on the gender 'self' and the possibility of an ungendered definition of the individual, the answer is a nihilist one, one that dismisses the possibility of any alternative 'true' discourse as suggested by Butler, one that in a post-feminist fashion does not only

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[42] Ravni Thakur, *Rewriting gender: reading contemporary Chinese women*, 190.
[43] Terry Siu-Han and Kwok-kan Tam, "Gender and self in Gao Xingjan post-exile plays," 230.
[44] Hu Yaoheng "Bainian genyun de fengshou" (Taibei: Shengjiao wenhua chubanshe, 1995), 52
[45] Freud's of super-ego is the part of human psyche that aims for perfection.

criticise the 'old' heterosexual patriarchal discourse, but also the 'modern' feminist wave.

3.2 Comparison with Crimp's *The Country*

The comparison between Gao Xingjian and Martin Crimp's plays work more at a thematic and less at a theatrical level, as the main focus of Crimp's play is not theatrical experimentation. *The Country* is seemingly a more conventional play than both *Attempts on her Life* and Gao's *Dialogue and Rubuttal*, since it sees three characters who appear to have separate, distinctive identities. The three characters are Corinne, her doctor husband Richard, and a beautiful young woman called Rebecca, his lover, whom he claims to find unconscious by the side of the road as he returns from a house call. However, there are important similarities that establish a link between Gao and Crimp's plays. Three aspects will be considered in the comparison: the relationship between spiritual and ritual, the relationship between reality and representation, and the dichotomy between man and woman.

3.2.1 The relationship between spiritual and ritual

In Crimp's play there is no explicit reference to life and death, but the countryside can be seen as a metaphorical space connected to the idea of life and death, and therefore the spiritual and the ritual. The title *The Country* suggests that the location is indeed one of the protagonists in the play, as was the case in Gao's *The Other Shore*, where the location, the 'other shore', has an important function. For this reason, in order to explore the idea of the spiritual and the ritual, this section will be looking at the 'country' as perceived by the different characters, its function in the play and the symbolic representation of the play.

The country in a practical sense represents the location of the characters themselves, but in a metaphorical sense is also the point of emotional focus. It is important to see how the characters relate to the country. The first time the country is mentioned it is being distinguished from the city in a conversation between Richard and Corinne.[46] Later on, although she does not mention the country directly, Corinne recalls her experience in the country when she discovers a chair by a stream, compares it to a

[46] Martin Crimp, *The Country*, *Martin Crimp Plays* 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 297.

fairy tale and relates it to a semi-surreal meeting with Morris, a non-present character and friend of the couple:

> - It was lovely. The land was lovely. All the hills were rolling and all the clouds were unravelling, like in a fairy tale. I felt like that girl in the fairy tale. Who's that girl in the fairy tale?
> - A goat-girl.
> - A goat-girl or something. I felt – that's right – just like a goat-girl, only without the goats thankfully. [...]I can't tell you how happy I felt, how good it felt. Which is when Morris appeared.[47]

In the above quote, it is interesting to note that Corinne associates the idea of the countryside with the following images: an old chair, a goat-girl from a fairy tale etc.

Analysing one image at a time, the old chair, for instance, seems to be a surreal image that adds a curious aspect to the countryside: Corinne is not speaking here of a bench, which is probably more likely to be in a countryside location than an old chair. In this sense, the presence of an old chair sounds fictitious, as though it belongs to the character's imagination, which associates an object with a place normally foreign to it. Her choice of an external object such as a chair tells us that she associates the countryside with human objects, and the use of the attribute 'old' seems to reflect her view of the countryside as an archaic and remote place. The use of this image is very important to understanding Corinne's relationship with the countryside, as the image of a chair is repeated towards the end of the play with a different connotation.

On the other hand, the reference to the fairy tale about a goat-girl seems to be less personal, as though she has elected to describe her feelings about the countryside by using more conventional stereotypical associations deriving from a 'pastoral' view of the countryside. In this sense 'pastoral' can be connected to the imagery used in pastoral poetry which celebrates the life of shepherds, often in a highly idealised manner[48] and is normally associated with Virgil's poetry.[49]

Continuing the analysis of the other definitions of the countryside, as she wakes up, Rebecca's approach to the countryside at the beginning is similar to Corinne's:

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[47] Ibid., 301.

[48] Cf. Paul Aspers, *What is the Pastoral?* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1997).

[49] "[...] Theocritus is normally credited with the 'invention' of pastoral as a literary genre. [...] That Theocritus wrote what himself called 'bucolic' (cowherd's) song ...a term used also by acient critics which [...] does not mean there was a separate bucolic genre. [...] Pastoral in anything like the modern sense was, in this historicizing account, the invention of late antiquity or even of Renaissance. [...] (Virgil's) *Eclogues* must unavoidably be read in relation to the pastoral tradition within which they have been inscribed." Charles Martindale, "Green politics: the Eclogues," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil,* ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 107-109.

- The sun was shining. The trees were green but each green was different. I mean the green of each species was rent green.
  Pause.
  And I found the stone. Yes. This [...] outpost [...] of the empire. Only it wasn't just a 'stone' because it had arms, like a chair. And I rested my arms along them. I rested my arms along the arms of the stone. And there was a kind of congruence.[50]

Unlike Corinne's, her depiction shows an aesthetic appreciation of the countryside, devoid of personal associations, but like Corinne's her depiction is never perfectly concrete and is even more surreal, as though in a state of limbo. Rebecca also uses the image of a chair, which is part of the countryside itself; it is a stone that looks like a chair. The depiction of her body adapting to the shapes of the chair suggests an openness to adapt to the countryside, the feeling of a harmonious relationship with it. She also speaks of darkness and light in a very poetic sense, which creates an even more surreal sense:

- It was light. Absolutely. It was very clear and light up there – so clear and light that you could see the dark coming.[51]

The difference between Corinne and Rebecca is even clearer once the two women confront each other. First of all, the difference in Corinne's approach to the countryside is of a linguistic nature:

- So you've not always lived in the country?
- What? No. Yes. This country? Yes.
- No. The country. Not *this* country. The country.
- The countryside.
- Yes. Okay. The countryside.
- No.
- Is that what you *call* it? The country*side*?
- No.
- Okay.
- It's the country. We call it the country.
- Okay. Good.
- We call it – I mean – the country, because we come from the town, but if you come from the country, then you call it ... I suppose you call it ... *(faint laughs)* I don't know what you call it.[52]

From the above quote one sees the difference in meaning between Corinne and Rebecca's use of the word 'country'. Rebecca speaks of the country as opposed to the city that she always considers her real home and the place she can go back to, whereas

[50] Martin Crimp, *The Country*, 316.
[51] Ibid., 317.
[52] Ibid., 322-323.

Corinne's idea of the country is connected to the idea of her family's wellbeing, and her choice to be in the countryside is definite – she has nowhere to return to. Rebecca assumes, first, that Corinne's choice had been dictated or inspired by an 'ideal'. She uses the analogy of Virgil's 'ideal' of the countryside. In the *Georgics* and *Eclogues*[53] Virgil describes the pastoral using the images of an idyllic natural setting, and sheltered and serene landscapes, in which shepherds tend their flocks and sing innocently to one another.

Rebecca defines a strong opposition between the country and the city, seeing the latter in a negative light. She talks about her friends who, involved in the dynamic of the city, lose their sense of being and are afraid to leave the city. Rebecca's choice and motivation appear determined by her interest in history, which is possibly the consequence of a personal search for peace, but her choice is not a permanent decision. In other words, Rebecca's approach to the countryside is a positive one, belonging to a process of cultural and, to some extent, spiritual growth, inspired by her academic experience, her knowledge and admiration of Virgil's ideal. Her view of the countryside is abstract and aesthetic, the projection of her cultural aspirations, which leads her to a kind of pseudo-spiritual pursuit, an ideal of harmony. In this sense, however, it is important to mention that Rebecca never talks of a particular quest as such, but a sense of spirituality emerges from an aesthetic appreciation of harmony and perfection. This element is a key similarity to Gao's ideal of transcendence, which – as part of a Buddhist tradition – is aesthetic insomuch as it implies transcendence.

However, it is Corinne's approach to the countryside in the later part of the play that leads us to a better investigation of the spiritual in this play. Corinne's approach to the countryside changes as Rebecca reveals that she persuaded Corinne's husband to move to the countryside. Hence, his motivations were not linked to the wellbeing of his family. Her first instinct is to leave her husband and the countryside; but, a few months later, once back together with her husband, her attitude to the countryside changes

[53] Michael Billington, "The Country" *The Guardian* (17 May 2000) - and Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp* do not mention the *Eclogues* but refer only to the *Georgics.* However, I firmly believe that the pastoral is present in both works. *Eclogues* is often inscribed with political meaning (see Charles Martindale "Green politics: the Eclogues," 107-124) and with darker reflection on nature; the *Georgics* – supposedly a poem about farming and agriculture – correspond more to an idealised form of pastoral celebrating nature and its surrounding. William Batstone, however, refers to it as 'the most fundamentally intractable works of ancient literature' dealing with farming as well as the world with didactical innuendos (William Batstone "Virgilian didaxis: value and meaning in the *Georgics,*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil,* 1251). However, scholars like Owen Schur indicate that the 'georgic' embodies the spirit of 'work', whereas the pastoral – associated with the *Eclogues* – embodies that of play and therefore, linked to a child-like sort of innocence (Owen Schur, *Victorian Pastoral* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1988), 17) For the sake of this thesis, we can attribute the 'pastoral' to both.

dramatically. In the last scene of the play, Corinne describes herself as wandering aimlessly in the countryside, where she expresses her need to find signs of human presence. The chair has disappeared and left space for only a stone, the same stone with arms that Rebecca was talking about:

> And that's when I realised, as I slithered and clattered my way long the shale, that there was nothing human.
> Well *I* was there, obviously. *I* was human, but nothing else was. I looked out for human things. Because I thought I might see – you know – a piece of wire or a spent cartridge. [...] I longed – you know – to see something human like a needle, or a piece of brick mixed with the shale. [...]
> Well I say 'the stone', but the stone had arms, like a chair. So you could sit [...] within the stone. You could rest your arms along the arms of the stone, and from within the stone, look out at the land.[54]

It is important to analyse the process Corinne undergoes as she runs through the countryside. At the start she describes her journey as aimless and expresses her sense of dislike for the old road; she says that the road was 'coercing' her, was forcing her to continue driving. However, the road stops at a ditch, and she leaves the car by leaping over this ditch. Her sense of discomfort also decreases as she starts to run like a 'girl', and a sense of freedom overwhelms her. The only obstacle to this sense of freedom is her clothes, which are not suitable for a walk in the country. The way she dresses being a physical impediment also symbolically represents the fact that Corinne does not belong, or fit in, in the countryside. The country track, like the road, also comes to an end – it just 'gives out', stops being – which liberates her and disinhibits her even further. She starts jumping from one clump to the next like a child until she reaches 'the stone' that resembles a chair, on which she can rest peacefully and in harmony with the surrounding landscape.

This process of transformation resolves Corinne's conflictual relationship with the countryside at an external, physical as well as an internal, emotional level. Externally and physically the landscape changes from an old road into a country track, until it becomes an open space with a chair-shaped stone. Internally and emotionally the countryside and the world surrounding her determines the changes Corinne experiences. Her emotional transformation can be seen by the depiction of her behaviour: first as girl-like while she runs along the country track, and then child-like while she jumps from one clump to the next. Once she reaches the stone, the transformation is complete, both emotionally and physically, as she finds peace, harmony and rest.

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[54] Martin Crimp, *The Country*, 364-365.

The chair-shaped stone has an important symbolic meaning, as it belongs to the countryside – unlike the old chair Corinne was talking about earlier in the play – but its shape makes it comfortable for Corinne or any human to sit on. Apart from representing harmony in a pastoral sense, the stone reflects the completion of Corinne's transformation, with her perception of the countryside becoming closer to Rebecca's. By doing so she unconsciously joins Rebecca's sense of the spiritual. Even though Corinne's sense of the spiritual is devoid of true aesthetic appreciation, it is certainly deeply rooted in her and has a great emotional impact. Above all, her transformation is a deep personal experience and not a conviction influenced by Richard or Morris.

Corinne's transformation could have two meanings. On the one hand her reaction reveals the conversion of intrinsic hatred of the countryside into spiritual longing; on the other, her desperate search for traces of human life could suggest that she is actually in a state similar to death and peacefulness, which could denote spiritual transcendence. It is hard to believe that Crimp intended to communicate this sense of the spiritual, but we could certainly read the idea of the country as a metaphor for spiritual death and redemption.

Death has already been mentioned in Rebecca's account. Rebecca speaks of having felt dead when she had been covered up to the head. The opening image of the play shows Rebecca lying on a bed with her head covered, and the dialogue between Richard and Corinne communicates an ambiguous message to the audience – it is not clear whether Rebecca is dead or alive.[55] The image of Rebecca's recumbent body that suggests the character might be dead introduces death to the play and also a sense of mystery, which is conveyed by the surreal account of both Rebecca and Corinne's experiences of the countryside. Peter Buse says that Richard had given Rebecca almost a deadly dosage of a medical treatment.[56]

The sense of mystery and the presence of death belong to the dark side of the countryside: the idealised place 'saving' the characters from the city, which is likened to a 'madhouse' – representing a positive dimension, a retreat from confusion, an idyllic place, to use Rebecca's words.

The countryside is an idyll on the one hand; mysterious, claustrophobic and almost dangerous on the other. Crimp presents the ambiguity of the country through the two women's approach to it. The two characters project their own view onto the countryside, but it is the country that wins over them – in a violent, almost deadly

[55] Ibid., 292.
[56] Peter Buse, "Sollicitations téléphoniques: *La Campagne* de Martin Crimp," in *Le Théâtre Anglais Contemporain*, ed. Élisabeth Angel-Perez and Nicole Boireau (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007), 153-168.

manner in the case of Rebecca, and at the end we are not even sure whether she is dead or not. (We are told that Morris finds her watch, but we are not sure whether it was Richard or Morris who killed her, or whether she has been killed at all).

Therefore, the countryside conceals a connection between spiritual and death, which resonates with the motifs in Gao's play. Unlike Gao's Man, but similar to his Girl, the two characters are not consciously in search of spirituality. The ritual accompanies the representation of such pseudo-spirituality. This is rooted in the mythological reference to the Latin tradition. As for the ideal of the pastoral, Billington, in his review of the play, calls the use of the pastoral as an 'assault' on the myth and 'deeply disturbing'.[57] The disturbing element of the play is connected to that sense of mysterious spirituality that surrounds it, which results in 'composing' a sort of magic reality, where the word 'magic' can be referred to as an inexplicable presence within nature. Evidence of this presence within the play is Corinne's emotional and physical journey through the countryside.

The ritual is also present at the level of theatrical representation, in the circular representation of Corinne cutting at the beginning of the play, and sorting envelopes at the end. Her actions are not only an expression of her inner feelings, but also build up the rituality of the play. In fact, the game of scissors-paper-stone, the leitmotiv of the play, is not only connected to the theme of the play but becomes a purely formal poetic choice, as part of the ritual of the play. Moreover, Martin Crimp explains in an interview with Aleks Sierz[58] that this play was inspired by Claude Debussy's *Preludes for Piano* (1894-1901), that celebrates Modernism through music.[59] The connection between Crimp's play and the musical piece reinforces the idea of a poetic ritual behind the conception of this play.

The journey of this play seems to encompass the emotional journey of the women through the countryside towards an ambiguous state between life and death (one could argue the ambiguity is true in both Rebecca, and Corinne's experience of peace); their journey seemingly embraces a sense of mysterious spirituality, closer to magic than transcendence, but which enacts a ritual that is embedded in the 'poetic' structure of the play. One could, then, argue that Crimp's play is permeated by a sort of magic realism that by definition adds magical elements or illogical scenarios to an otherwise

[57] Michael Billington, "The Country" *The Guardian* (13 March 1997).
[58] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp,* 106.
[59] Paul Griffiths, *A concise History of Modern Music- from Debussy to Boulez* (Norwich: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 5.

realistic setting[60]. As seems to be the case for this play, and considering that contemporary literature within the magical realist genre has been associated with Postmodernism,[61] one could argue that this play is a Postmodern one especially also in light of the apparently meaningless game of poetical images. However, one should look further at the use of language in terms of reality and representation.

3.2.2 Reality/representation and language

In order to understand the relationship between reality and representation we need first of all to consider the naturalism of this play, which is less experimental than *Attempts on Her Life* and Gao's play. Then, one can focus on the function of language, by looking for self-referential statements in the text and the interaction between the characters.

Despite the apparent naturalism of the play, in Crimp's play as in Gao's, the presence of unnatural elements plunges the play into a surreal ambience. Therefore, it is correct to say that Crimp's play continuously shifts subtly between realism and imagination or surrealism. In this sense the term 'surrealism' can be related to the practice of surrealist painters of putting together objects that would not naturally be found in the same place, like a chair in the countryside, or transforming objects through imagination, like the chair-shaped stone.[62] Martin Crimp's relationship with realism is often compared with Pinter's, especially in the case of this play. It has been suggested that Pinter's play *Old Times* inspired Crimp, who had just finished directing a reading of this play for the Playwrights' Playwright at the Royal Court in 1999. Pinter's play, like Crimp's, deals with bourgeois decadence and hypocrisies – it is about people talking of death and China at a party – and according to Crimp himself, it is a play that 'hits retrospective narration', 'about looking back'[63]. As in Pinter's, in Crimp's play the reality described is transformed into imagination, what Malcom Bradbury and James McFarlane call a 'second reality' beyond the visible but rooted to the everyday

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[60] "Magic can mean anything that defies empiricism, including religious beliefs, superstitions, myths legends, voodoo, or simply what Todorov terms 'the uncanny' and 'marvellous' fantastic. Realism, seen from the perspective of the magic, is one of the ways of grasping reality outside the matrix of what is by now disdained conventional realism" Stephen H. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang "Introduction-Globalization of Magic Realism: New Politics of Aesthetics," Stehen H. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, ed., *Companion to Magic Realism,* ed. Stehen H. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang (Suffolk: Tamesis, 2005), 14.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Cf. Briony. Fer, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (Hong Kong: Yale University Press, 1993).
[63] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 104.

domesticity, which is typical of Modernist theatre.[64]According to Peter Buse, this is not only typical of Pinter but of a kind of Modernist theatre that has developed in the last hundred years, part of Crimp's theatrical inheritance[65]. Crimp belongs to a theatrical tradition that sees imagination as 'rooted in reality', or in other words slightly deforms the representation of reality through the projection of elements foreign to it, which was typical of surrealist art.[66] If we consider, for instance, the two women's accounts of their experience of the countryside, it is the projection of their imagination onto their attitude to the countryside that creates the surreal ambience of the play. We can associate the characters' imagination with the idea of the unconscious. In Gao's *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, it is also the characters' imagination and unconscious that introduces surreal elements into the representation. In Crimp's play, the surreal ambience is mostly created by the minimalist settings and the non-present characters such as Morris and Sophie, who participate in the play without being present, and to some extent become part of the unconscious of the characters present on stage.

Language does not play as central a role in Crimp's play as it does in Gao's, and there is no disintegration of language but language bears cultural and social connotations. Similarly to *Attempts on Her Life*, where foreign languages were used in the text for theatrical effect, this play contains indirect references to the use of foreign languages. Rebecca displays her ability to talk in Latin whilst talking to Corinne:

- Well then I'd like to meet him. I'd like to talk Latin with him. And history. I'd love to discuss history.
- You 'talk Latin' do you?
- Does that surprise you?
- No. Yes. Yes it does, actually. It does surprise me / very much.
- Oh really? Because I couldn't do what I do without Latin. I wouldn't be here without Latin.[67]

Later on, finishing off her conversation with Corinne, Rebecca also says:

- Oh, shall I go to Morris?
  Pause.
  Shall I go to Morris? Shall I speak Latin? Shall I talk History?[68]

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[64] John Fletcher and James McFarlane, " Modernist Drama: Origins and Patterns," in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930,* ed. Malcom Bradbury and John McFarlane (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 499-514.
[65] Peter Buse, "Sollicitations téléphoniques: *La Campagne* de Martin Crimp," 158.
[66] Briony Fer, David Batchelor, Paul Wood, ed., *Realism, rationalism, surrealism: art between the wars*, 170.
[67] Ibid., 322.
[68] Ibid., 330.

In the case of Corinne and Rebecca, the knowledge of a foreign language, especially an ancient one, empowers Rebecca, who dominates the conversation. Moreover, from the dialogue between Corinne and Richard, who do not even know whether or not a word such as 'purse' is the proper English word, we understand that Corinne and Richard have little knowledge of the language they use. This, therefore, places them in a position of inferiority to Rebecca and Morris. This is quite clear from Corinne's comment on her first encounter with Morris:

> [...] But the thing is, is then he began to talk to me in another language. One moment it was English – the paint and so on – then the next it was like he was chanting to me in another language. I said 'What's that, Morry?' And of course I couldn't help laughing. He said, 'It's Latin. It's Virgil.'
> - Virgil.
> - Well, that's what *I* said. I said, '*Virgil*, Morris? You make me feel so ignorant.' And he did. He was making me feel very very ignorant. Squatting there. Chanting like that.[69]

Morris's talking in Latin and reciting Virgil's verses not only makes Corinne feel ignorant but also enchants her, as if his words were magic and belonged to a strange ritual. Language as part of a ritual or as a semi-religious tool is not the focus of the play, yet it fits in with its surreal ambience and the ritual of the game used at the end of each scene.

The characters' linguistic knowledge informs us about their social status; as Crimp mentioned in his interview, the characters do not belong to the bourgeoisie by birth, and therefore, even though their economic status has improved, they still lack cultural linguistic tools, which may undermine their status. This is especially true of Richard, who is ill at ease in using language when dealing with Morris, whom the couple hold in high regard. Moreover, when Corinne tries to use more refined language with Richard their communication seems to crumble, as Richard cannot understand her, which means that this is not the kind of language normally used between the two:

- What? What is it? What?
- It's just that you're being so ...
- Am I? What?
- So ... solicitous.
- Really?
- Yes.
- Solicitous.
- Yes.
- What does that mean?
- Don't you know what / it means?

[69] Ibid., 303.

- Well tell me then what it means. No, I don't. I've / no idea.
- To care. It means to care.[70]

In this light, Crimp seems to portray the bourgeoisie in a negative light, as a kind of enriched social class whose members are both ignorant and disempowered. Billington talks of the play's representation in general as 'transplanted bourgeois desperation'.[71] The reviewers all fail to see or acknowledge that Richard and Corinne actually belong to a new emerging bourgeoisie made up of 'social climbers', as it is not clearly explained in the play and is only revealed by Crimp in his interview:

> They're not people who've inherited their middle-class status – they've climbed up to it – which is why they're ill at ease with it, why Richard gives Sophie, who cleans their house, too much money – out of guilt. [...]Of course I also belong to this socially mobile generation. But scarily, and contrary to what you might think, upward social mobility has declined since the sixties and seventies.[72]

In this statement, Crimp points out the kind of bourgeoisie to which Richard and Corinne belong and their precarious status in society. Even though Sophie – the lady who cleans their house – belongs to a lower class than Richard and Corinne, they feel uneasy dealing with her. This attitude reflects Richard and Corinne's general instability. The sense of precariousness can also be extended to the other characters, Rebecca and Morris, who rely on the exhibition of personal cultural knowledge and the use of their knowledge as a source of existential escapism:

> Here he widens his vision to suggest that country life is now filled with transplanted bourgeois desperation. Richard's unseen doctor-partner constantly quotes The Georgics: what we get from Crimp is a Pinterish philippic about corrosive deceit and delusion.[73]

In other words, like Pinter, Crimp is portraying a decadent and dissolute society. Although the social message of Crimp's play is not the main aspect in the context of this chapter, it informs us of Crimp's use of language as a kind of tool in a power struggle between individuals, which, as also seen in Gao's play, is close to Foucault's idea of language[74].

This will become clearer when looking at another important aspect of the play, the self-referential use of language. As in *Attempts on Her Life*, self-referential

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[70] Ibid., 348-349.
[71] Micheal Billington, "The Country" *Guardian* (17 May 2000).
[72] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 15-16.
[73] Micheal Billington, (17 May 2000).
[74] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 29

statements about language are found, for example in the following exchange between Corinne and Rebecca:

- You want to be honest?
- Yes. I'm / trying to …
- Because the more you talk, the less you say.
- That's not true. I'm / trying to …
- The less you really say.
- […] to explain. No.[75]

The above dialogue refers to the idea of communication being to some extent forced on individuals and language seemingly failing to represent reality. In this sense it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that Crimp is addressing the issue of the unreliability of language, as in the following dialogue:

- What're their names?
- They don't have names.
- They don't have names.
- No.
  Pause.
- You know they don't have names. We have an agreement.[76]

Their omitting to give their children names reminds us of Man's inability to call Girl by a name because she does not want to be named. The playful use of language appears in the lapses in communication between characters, especially between Richard and Corinne:

- A what?
- A bag. A purse. Didn't she have some kind of …
- A purse?
- Yes. A purse. A bag. Whatever. Don't look so / blank.
- Why do you say that: purse?
- Why do I say it?
- Yes. Why do you say it when it's not English?
- What is not English?
- Purse is not English.
- I'm not speaking English?
- Of course you're speaking / English.[77]

The above example describes how the characters have some difficulty in understanding each other.

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[75] Martin Crimp, *The Country*, 328.
[76] Ibid., 340.
[77] Ibid., 297.

However, looking at how events unfold in the play, it is important to accept Crimp's denial of the idea of impossible communication. In the interview mentioned above Crimp denies the assumption that his plays deal with the impossibility of communication, saying that:

> I get irritated when people, probably influenced by European philosophy, talk about language being a barrier to communication. And they ask me whether my plays are about a failure to communicate. And I always say, 'No, I don't think so.' They are all about communicating. Obviously, some of my characters would prefer, at certain moments, not to communicate, but that doesn't mean they can't.[78]

Here, he seems to suggest that his characters are doomed to communicate as though they were forced into it, which shows a similarity to Gao's depiction of characters trapped in their communication. Comparing Crimp to Pinter, Sarah Hemmings talks of Crimp's use of language as a mask.[79]

The characters mask themselves with language and are unable to tell the truth. In this sense the characters are trapped in a pattern of using their own language again and again to gain and negotiate power, and end up hiding their own identity. The use of 'empty' repetition in the dialogue between characters, especially between Richard and Corinne, is very significant, as is the use of poetic language by Rebecca[80], who even points out to Corinne that she is talking in a 'poetic', 'pastoral' kind of language.[81] Therefore, language becomes almost a ritualistic tool in the interaction between the characters, who further 'mask' and conceal themselves within it. In a way similar to Gao's *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, the characters in this play engage in a kind of self-confession, where language, though, serves to unfold events and to describe and create non-present characters.

On an optimistic note, Michael Billington says that the characters attempt to speak the truth towards the end of the play[82], for example Corinne, who affirms metaphorically that her and her husband's love has been a continuous process of 'simulation'. However, after Corinne's statement, Richard and Corinne again become trapped in their linguistic routine of asking for a kiss, and pursue the so-called simulation of love, while the phone continues to ring:

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[78] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 105.
[79] Sarah Hemmings, "Chilled by the cold wind of betrayal," *Financial Times* USA edition (26 May 2000).
[80] Michael Billington says that "The one character (Rebecca) who seems honest and straightforward is deceived, abused and finally disempowered" but I would argue that is not the case; Rebecca belongs to this system. Michel Billington, "Theatre off the beaten track," in *Guardian* (26 May 2000).
[81] Martin Crimp, *The Country*, 331.
[82] Micheal Billington, "Theatre off the beaten track."

- [...] Kiss me.
  The phone continues to ring.
- I have kissed you.
  Pause.
- I have kissed you.
- Then kiss me again.[83]

In this context, it is important to look further at the use of language in this play in terms of theatrical devices. As in *Attempts on Her Life* reference is made to characters who are not present on stage, such as Morris and Sophie, which confirms the level of communication as a deceitful one in which characters do not reveal the truth. When Richard insists on saying that he is a 'character' like Morris, he ironically and metaphorically suggests that the characters want to remain 'characters', and therefore fictional figures; they do not want to reveal themselves, preferring to hide. Crimp is not attempting to make an absolute statement as he did in *Attempts on Her Life*, where the whole structure of the play was built around language and the representation of truth on the one hand, and fictitious narration on the other. Here, language is a playful tool that the author uses to portray the characters with irony. Unlike in Gao's play, but like in *Attempts on Her Life*, there is no disintegration of language.

In terms of the debate on postmodernism/modernism, one should point out the link between Pinter and Crimp as it was the case between Pinter and Gao. In Gao's case, the comparison with Pinter defined Gao's play as being a Postmodern one, since it shares similarities with Pinter's seemingly Postmodern play *No Man's Land.* In this case Crimp's play has been linked to Pinter's *Old Times*[84] that as said above is rooted in reality but which nevertheless has been considered as a psychoanalytic response to socially committed art that focuses on language: the twilight of Postmodernism.[85] This is not true in the case of Crimp's play, which does not describe the unfolding of characters' psychoanalytic dynamics. As said when comparing this play to Gao's, language is used here by the characters to mask and hide themselves and not as a means of self-expression; in psychoanalytical terms and using Lacan's words, the language the characters use is that of the symbolic and not of the imaginary or the unconscious.

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[83] Ibid., 366.
[84] *Old Times* (1971) is play about a married couple Deely and Kate that receive a visit from an old friend of Kate, Anna. The three characters relive their past by rehearsing it on stage.
[85] "*Old Times* reflects an extreme, crisis-ridden form of autonomous modernism, which makes for an instructive comparison with British socialist theatre of 1970s. This comparison can be mapped against the dialectic of autonomy and commitment" in Varun Begley, *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism.* (Toronto, ON: University Toronto Press, 2005), 142.

By doing so Crimp alludes to a mechanism of power and language, reminiscent of Foucault's idea of 'language that speaks through us'[86], mentioned also in connection with Gao's play. In general, taking into account the previous the association of the pastoral play with magical realism, one can link this play to Postmodernism. That would confirm the Postmodern nature of the play – that is the case also if one considers in the play the lack of narrative linearity and the apparent randomness of poetic élans. However, the latter could be linked to modern aestheticism (*L'art pour l'art*),[87] inasmuch as the social connotations of the language could be linked to the modern high/low divide of culture; and the linguistic masking element is closer to earlier plays coming from Pinter's modern period of the likes of *The Lover, The Homecoming* etc. in which plays, as in Crimp's, language is also used as a tool to observe the psychology of the characters which is closer to Freud than to Lacan insofar that the characters are used as patients to be observed.[88] In the previous play and in Gao's, instead, the mechanism of observation, language functions to unfold Lacan's status of the observer. Moreover, from these definitions of language, one could interpret that the play is rather linked to a sort of 'transcendence of the real' that exploits the symbolic and the psychology, typical of gothic tradition[89], which has been linked to Modernism[90]. However, that would mean adding further unnecessary meaning to the play; the important aspect to note is the

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[86] Cf. Chapter 3 footnote 25.

[87] The ethic of art for art's sake was first adopted by the Parnassian poets of France, Théophile Gautier and Lecomte de Lisle (1818-1894) and later on taken on in the theories of poetic composition elaborated by E. A. Poe, Baudelaire and his successor Paul Verlain (1844-1896), Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842- 1898).[Rafey Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 489]; in England it became the inspiring principle for the Aesthetic Movement and its initiator Walter Pater, who wrote *Studies in The History of Renaissance* (1873) [For the debate on art for art's sake and Walter Pater's ideas refer to Chapter one "What Is art for art's sake, and How could it be anything else?," in *Aestheticism and Deconstruction,* ed. Jonathan Loesberg (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991);
"Art was still to be 'moral' but only as an outgrowth of a concern for beauty. Baudelaire was an idealist who was concerned with the effects of materialism and technology in the field of art. [...] The Concept "art for art's sake" began to be interpreted more narrowly during modernism and High-modernism to mean that any political or moral content of any kind needed to be removed from art," David Kenneth Holt, *The Search for Aesthetic Meaning in the Visual Arts: The Need for the Aesthetic Tradition in Contemporary Art Theory and Education* (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), 82.

[88] "Freud emphasizes the revolutionized *observed-* the resulting revolutionised image of the human mind; Lacan brings out the implication of the revolutionised scientific *status of the observer*" in Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the adventure of the insight, Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge/Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 65.

[89] Cf. *Dracula* Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace talk about Gothic writing using the absurd to raise questions about reality via the symbolic of perversion in search of a world of meaning beyond reality itself. (Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, ed., *Gothic Modernisms* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2001), 2). The connection to reality, the use of the symbolic and perversion to go beyond this reality but nevertheless returning back to it is what describes the character's journey in novels like *Dracula.* By and large, Crimp's character, especially Corrine undergoes a similar process, where Richard's murder or attempt murder could represent the act of perversion.

[90] About T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* and French modernist writers like Gautier, Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace say that "... the roots of modernism can be found in the Gothic's images of perversion and disorder." Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, ed., *Gothic Modernisms*, 3.

hybridity of Crimp's play and therefore how difficult it becomes to distinguish between Modern and Postmodern elements.

3.2.3 Dichotomy between man and woman

Gender dynamics are a very important aspect of this play, which is another link between Crimp's play and Gao's. The situation is far more complex as the play presents a kind of love triangle between Richard, Corinne and Rebecca. The role of Rebecca is very important in disrupting the relationship between husband and wife, and represents the main force driving the play forward. In this play, as in Gao's, the man/woman dichotomy is investigated through the presentation of a couple in crisis.

There is a similarity to Gao's treatment in the ambiguity that emerges in terms of which gender is the more dominant, in the nature of the author's view of gender roles, and ultimately in how much this power game reflects old and new gender stereotypes.

In general the women, Rebecca and Corinne, tend to talk more, and by doing so they dominate the play. At the beginning it is Corinne who attempts to impose her language by talking more forcefully than Richard and by using more words than him. In the first scene, there is a confrontation between the two. Corinne offers her husband a glass of water asking what it tastes of. She demands that he accepts her definition of the taste and even though Richard resists her definition, he still accepts the full glass of water. Corinne continues on the attack, focussing more directly on the infidelity she suspects:

> - Well, that's just it; you were standing there with this girl in your arms, smiling. And I thought: oh look, he's lost his sense of humour. He's finally lost his famous sense / of humour.
> - But in fact you were wrong.
> - In fact I was wrong.
> - In fact my famous sense of humour survives intact.
> - In fact your famous sense of humour does-yes- survive / intact.[91]

Lizzie Loveridge analyses the pointed nature of the dialogue at this point:

> Her conversation [...] is a snipping at her husband, an undermining of his masculinity. It seems that he is a man of paper, a man who is weak and deceitful. Their conversation is a war zone as they each snip and snipe at each other. She gets the best of him as he is revealed as feckless, unreliable as a husband and as a doctor.[92]

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[91] Ibid., 296.

[92] Lizzie Loveridge, "The Country," *A Curtain Up London Review* (2006), http://www.curtainup.com/oldcountry.html (accessed August 17, 2006).

Rebecca uses language even more confidently than Corinne. Her familiarity with Virgil's poetry and the pastoral, for example, makes her the more 'cultivated' and self-assured speaker. Her use of this 'cultivated' language seems an attempt to possess language, to use man-made language against men. When she confronts Richard in scene four, insisting that she wants to take a shower in his home, she is defiant and challenging. Later on, she gives advice on how Richard could change his accommodation, in such a forceful way that it seems as though she is taking possession of it. Towards the end of the scene she confronts Richard again. She describes her first meeting with him as a doctor, making use of the third person pronoun and employing the image of being read like a map to suggest his seduction of her. To some extent, the language she uses paints a clear picture of Richard's abuse of her own body as well as functioning as a rejection of Richard's treatment:

> He asked her to undress. And when she'd undressed, he said: I see now how very sick you are – you need some medicine. [...] The treatment was wild. [..] It could take place at any time of the day and 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 map.[93]

It is an image that resonates with Foucault's view of 18th century women and of the female body as 'a medical object *par excellence.*'[94]

At first glance, one could argue that Crimp gives his female characters the upper hand in *The Country* so that they use language confidently and are able to threaten the composure of the male character. In the second scene for example, Corinne attempts to unnerve Richard with Rebecca's wristwatch:

> Corinne, alone, has a small object pressed to her ear. Richard appears, doing up his shirt, watching her. She dangles the object- a wristwatch- by its thin gold bracelet, and smiles to herself. [...] As he gets close and reaches for the watch, she snaps it back in her fist. [...] She slowly opens her fist. He comes closer, he takes the watch, she grips his hand, the phone rings. They don't move.[95]

In comparison with *Attempts on Her Life*, Corinne and Rebecca seem able to use the language that is the product of the heterosexual matrix and thus disrupt it from within. However, this dynamic changes in the last scene. Richard gives Corinne a pair of heeled shoes, a cultural trope of femininity, which in the context of this play seemingly represents Corinne's complaisance towards Richard. This is suggested by the

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[93] Martin Crimp, *The Country*, 342.
[94] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self* (London: Vintage, 1988), 112.
[95] Ibid., 306-307.

fact that Corinne does not accept the gift reluctantly, as she expresses amusement about it in a telephone conversation to Sophie, while Richard kissing her neck uses the word 'decadent' to describe his gift. By doing so, Richard seems to impose his definition on his gift; Corinne's complaisance suggests that she both accepts the gift and Richard's definition.

This act of 'repossessing the scene/space' doesn't occur suddenly but we could say that Richard appears continually to be attempting to re-possess his space and his 'patriarchal role' throughout the play and that earlier scenes lead towards this conclusion. However, if we are now going to question what appeared to be women's dominance in the play, it is important to review the way in which the events of the play unfold.

If on the one hand, we accept that Corinne's dominance relates to the way in which she uses speech aggressively against Richard, on the other, we should not forget that she is reacting to Richard's cheating, which in itself is an act of defiance towards her and women in general. Richard makes use of both Rebecca and Corinne. Richard also demonstrates his power over his wife by the very fact of bringing his lover into the house without explanation. Further confirmation that Richard is regaining his 'patriarchal role' can be found in the tone of his words that communicate a growing intensity and implicit command as the play progresses. This is particularly clear in a dialogue in which he insists that Corinne tell him about her evening. Though she is clearly reluctant to respond, Corinne gradually loses control over the situation and, using the image of the 'stone eating her heart', expresses her feeling of being overwhelmed by the conversation and she now realises she has been required to submit blindly to a relationship based on the 'simulation of love'.[96]At the end of the play, following the overall symmetrical structure of the play, Richard asks Corinne to kiss him in a way that mirrors Corinne's similar request in the first scene. Though Corinne refuses the kiss, there is nothing apologetic about his request. The roles appear reversed and Richard's re-possession of his masculinity complete.

Looking more closely at the character of Richard contextualised within the play as a whole provides another way of viewing the gender dynamics. It might seem sometimes, for example, that Richard corresponds to a negative portrayal of men according to a 'womanist' fashion.[97] Womanism or 'feminine vulgate' as defined by

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[96] Martin Crimp, *The Country*, 365.

[97] This use of the term 'womanist' needs to be distinguished from Alice Walker's use of the term to describe African American feminist writing and activism. It was first coined in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (Orlando: Harcout Brace & Company, 1984).

Rosalind Coward is a type of feminist attitude that easily and superficially blames men as natural oppressors of women's condition.[98] Crimp seems sometimes to adopt this position in his playing with stereotypes that put Richard in a bad light. Richard appears generally to be hiding a secret, hardly revealing anything of himself and protecting himself from women who, in contrast, actually take the risk of disclosing their own emotions to him. Moreover, at the end of the play, Richard's personal situation seems substantially unchanged: in spite of his affair with Rebecca, he is still married to Corinne, who has accepted both his affair and his professional misconduct as a doctor. It seems that Corinne has given into him by compromising, perhaps even by helping him kill his lover.

If Crimp's approach appears deliberately or even satirically 'womanist' on one level , the roles of two characters who are not present on stage – Morris, a friend of Corinne's and Sophie, a neighbour – seem to indicate a further layer of complexity. Morris fascinates Corinne and to some extent controls her imagination as we see, especially in the first reference Corinne makes about him. She is clearly fascinated by him and we learn that he is able to make her feel ignorant. In a confrontation with Rebecca, touching on cultural status, Corinne appears less threatened by Rebecca's cultural superiority than by his. Morris is also the one who has suggested that Corinne's relationship with her husband is based on hypocrisy or a 'simulation of love':

> [...] 'I'm sure you simulate love very well. I'm sure two of you will simulate love immaculately.'[...][99]

Corinne, by reporting his opinions and giving them credence, allows Morris to exercise a dominant patriarchal role. At the same time Sophie, the absent female character, is seen as a danger since Corinne believes that she might be attracted to Richard. Corinne, submitting herself to what might be called the patriarchal frame of mind, chooses to trust the man, Morris, and to distrust Sophie. It appears from this and also in her relationship with Rebecca, that Corinne's attachment to Richard makes it impossible for her to create a bond with another woman.

The relationship between Rebecca and Corinne is very revealing in terms of Crimp's feminism as it shows how he combines old and new stereotypes of women. Rebecca comes across as a stronger character than Corinne. It is Rebecca's decision to go to the country and Richard simply follows her. In her relationship with him,

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[98] Rosalind Coward, *Sacred Cows: is feminism relevant to the new millennium?* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 86.
[99] Ibid., 366.

overcoming his seduction she is the one who had apparently decided to break with him. Even though she portrays herself as a victim in her dialogue with Richard, she still retains some control. In the dialogue between Rebecca and Corinne, the differences strongly emerge. Corinne still tries to cover up for Richard, whereas Rebecca tries to persuade Corinne that she should rebel against Richard. Complicity between the two women is never carried through. Rebecca's advice is not followed as Corinne decides to return to Richard after temporarily leaving him. Even though at the beginning both women seem to have a similar capacity to use language and be empowered by it, Rebecca is more cultivated and is more effective because she had greater familiarity with the masculine traditions which have defined 'cultivation' in the past. In simplistic terms Corinne represents a modern woman who still cannot makes use of her empowerment and opts for compromise with her male counterpart; by accepting the countryside and Richard's shoes, she accepts a degree of male dominance. Rebecca, who makes a stand against Richard, retains her independence. In feminist terms we could say that Corinne fits and accepts the traditional role as imposed by a patriarchal system, Rebecca that of emancipated woman. If we think of Corinne and Rebecca as parts of the same woman, Corinne and Rebecca would represent the two conflicting aspects of contemporary women struggling between their traditional roles and 'modern' needs. However, Crimp's use of old and new stereotypes is more complex than this. Rebecca's seduction and abduction still make her a victim of male dominance. Her passion for Virgil and use of Latin associate her with Morris, who also likes Virgil and uses Latin when speaking to Corinne. To some extent, even though, as said above, she seems to use language more confidently than Corinne, her interest in Virgil affirms her involvement with a male dominated culture. Her mysterious disappearance suggests that being a feminist or an emancipated woman can be dangerous. There is a suggestion that rebelling against Richard and expressing her will to leave him leads to her own demise, with Corinne becoming Richard's accomplice rather than showing solidarity with her as a woman. The depiction of the characters and the unfolding of the events also show that new stereotypical practices may work against women, who by talking confidently, for example, reveal too much of themselves and are weakened in the face of men's dishonesty.

In this sense, the message of this play seems, once again, to be about the dominance of patriarchal systems and the affirmation of them as almost absolute, while the idea of women re-possessing language or using it to disturb the heterosexual matrix

seems now to be illusory. Echoing Dale Spender[100], one can argue that the language women use is man made – both Morris and Virgil seem to own the language she uses. In this sense as argued before, Crimp might seem to be adopting a 'womanist' approach, simply blaming men for women's compliance with female stereotypes. However, as already suggested, it is important to look at how old and new stereotypes conflict with each other, with the new sometimes ironically confirming old ones. One needs to take into account Zimmermann's claim that Crimp addresses an underlying criticism of feminism and demonstrates how feminism has failed to 'liberate' women.

Whereas in *Attempts on Her Life,* in a Butlerian fashion and against Zimmerman's criticism, Crimp appears to succeed in finding an alternative model to the heterosexual matrix through the absence of a female figure on stage. The dynamics between the male and female characters in *The Country*, seem rather to prove that an alternative to that matrix is not possible when there is a direct social and personal interaction between the two sexes. Talking in terms of the perfomative, in their interactions with one another all three characters are trapped in the roles which society has imposed on them, what Foucault calls 'discipline'.[101] When they try to break free from these roles, they end up being more and more restrained, bound to simulate and to 'perform'. In this sense the pessimism of this play seems to reproduce concerns of early Second Wave feminists, such as Dale Spencer, and similarly to Gao, it expresses a post-feminism perspective[102] that blames feminism for its failure to liberate women, an aspect that will be further developed in Crimp's shorter plays analysed in the final chapter.

3.3 Postmodernism and Modernism in Gao's and Crimp's play: similarities and differences

We conclude this chapter by further comparing the two plays through similarities and differences in order to define them in terms of content and theatrical form.

Both plays were written after the two plays compared in the previous chapter, and can be defined as a development of those two plays. Whereas in Gao's case *Between Life and Death* and *Dialogue and Rebuttal* are linked at the level of both

[100] Cf. Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge, 1985).
[101] "Discipline ... is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise." Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: the birth of the prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 170.
[102] Cf. Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Femminism?*

content and form, *Attempts on Her Life* and *The Country* are linked only at the level of content. By looking at this difference between *Dialogue and Rebuttal* and *The Country* we can determine whether or not they are Modern or Postmodern. In general we could argue that Gao's play, developing the modernist elements of *Between Life and Death*, becomes a Postmodern play; Crimp's *The Country* seems to regress into Modernism. This definition is not absolute as in both plays elements of the two categories intermix.

As far as *Dialogue and Rebuttal* is concerned, at the level of content we only need to consider whether the play responds to either an epistemological or an ontological question with regard to the concept of reality. Gao fails to present the 'enlightened' reality he was trying to represent in *Between Life and Death* in that he presents the characters' life and death and confuses the two categories. The belief in an 'enlightened' reality is still the motor of his conception, but is overshadowed by the madness and violence that precedes it. This brings into question the ideology of Zen Buddhism, and whether its conception of 'enlightened' reality is just another way of representing the existential idea of nothingness, which leads Postmodern ideologies to question the very idea of reality.[103] In the previous chapter the concept of 'enlightened' reality was already considered as being connected to the Postmodern idea of chaos. In this play, rather than chaos, we can talk of fragmented unconsciousnesses that are not even true to their very nature – the characters lie to themselves in their self-confession as they are trapped by language, enslaved by a surplus of language, of empty signifiers, which are part of a social mass consumption, to use Baudrillard's idea[104] (his ideas will be further explored when analysing one of Gao's shorter plays in the final chapter).

The questioning of the spiritual itself, of gender categories, of the empowerment of language, is in its 'negative' and nihilist essence Postmodern. In terms of theatrical form, Gao's play explores its theatricality outside the textual restrictions – language as a theatrical tool in the game of representation makes the play Postmodern also in the use of parody, the parody of a couple at their first meeting. The parody is developed around the characters looking at themselves in the mirror, exploiting the technique of actors'

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[103]"In [...] *Twilight of Idols*, Nietzsche seeks to show 'How the Real World Became a Fable.' [...] the 'real world'- the metaphysical real of truth persisting beyond the ephemeral world of appearance- escapes human grasp [...] once refuted the 'real world' disappears – along with its apparent world double [...] a continuation of this line of thinking was undertaken by Jean Baudrillard in the 1980s. Attending to the post modern condition of media saturation Baudrillard charted the disappearance of another kind of 'real world': the concrete, material foundation to which system of signification point." Paul Sheehan, "Postmodernism and Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* ed. Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 30.

[104] Cf. Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Objects," "Consumer Society," "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard- Selected Writings,* ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). 13-31, 32-59, 169-187.

neutrality. One aspect to be noted is the questioning of patriarchal structure and feminist influences, an aspect that will be developed in the other plays analysed in this thesis.

As far as Crimp's play is concerned, the play responds to an epistemological question: 'What is reality? Is it the world of the country, of pastoral and idyllic reality? Or that of the city?' Crimp passes a moral judgment on a kind of reality in which everybody is trapped within the social order, and says there are no ideologies. It is a matter of speech, of language that traps people, as in Gao's play, but unlike in Gao's play they remain inevitably trapped in a social sense. There is a strong sense of reality in a modernist sense, following Pinter's Modernist tradition: reality is distorted, unpredictable and cruel. At the level of theatrical representation, the play, following a Modernist tradition of early Pinter plays, lacks the extreme experimentation of *Attempt on her Life*. Crimp's return to representation in a Modernist tradition is more connected to the maturity he has reached as an author, going back and not being afraid to leave behind a small amount of his intellectualism and experimentation, yet still creating a fascinating play.

In conclusion one could argue that both plays in their own unique way, influenced by either Western or Asian traditions, have created a theatrical world where the question of the link between Postmodernism and Modernism starts to become redundant.

CHAPTER 4

Nocturnal wanderer, the abandonment of the Zen theatre in favour of a more Western negativity – in comparison with Crimp's *Plays with Repeats.*

This chapter will compare Gao's *Nocturnal wanderer* and Crimp's *Play with Repeats.* Both plays deal with the everyman's journey though a surreal dimension, and both of them challenge the very notions of reality, representation and narration as conceptualised within the Modernism/Postmodernism dialectical discourse.

4.1 *Nocturnal wanderer*

Nocturnal wanderer (*Yeyoushen*)[1] written in 1993 is one of the most complex of Gao's plays. Chen Jide affirms that Gao's writing has become increasingly more complex and less accessible[2]. It is divided into three acts with a total of twelve characters. This play talks about the nocturnal wanderings of the central character, Young Man/Traveller/ Sleepwalker, who travels through his dreams and has 'unconscious' meetings with several minor characters.

Even though, like most of Gao's plays, *Nocturnal wanderer* is the exploration and deployment of one character or two main characters' psychological and spiritual journeys, this play does not juggle with the dialectical relationship of opposites. To start with, the dichotomy life and death, and reality and the surreal of the previous two plays is not present, as Gao seems to have firmly decided to portray a character's unconscious or mental dimension and he makes this point quite clearly from the beginning. If a sense of reality is depicted, it is mainly embedded within the surreal. Moreover, many questions raised in the previous plays about the spiritual and language, for instance. are resolved in this play.

In terms of approach to the analysis of this play this chapter will be looking at three aspects of the play that reflect the kind of analysis set up in the previous two chapters and the first one: the message of the play in connection to the spiritual, as resolved through the depiction of a 'dream' dimension; the function of the dream as a depiction of subjectivity, as a narrative tool and theatrical device; and gender representation.

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[1] It also refers to the figure of a legendary god on patrol at night, where *shen* stands for 'god.'
[2] Chen Jide *Zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiju, 1979-2000* , 277

4.1.1 The spiritual

The analysis of this aspect of the play takes into account the relationship between the ritual and spiritual within the sphere of Zen spirituality. In particular, it will look at the idea of freedom and the moral dialectical relationship between good and evil; the function and the role of the characters in that matter and the meaning of the journey through a dream dimension.

Sleepwalker directly talks about freedom using the image of a purposeless walk:

> **Sleepwalker** You can walk sturdily but there is no need to hurry your pace or to look around. With no hesitation you can walk this or that direction, on the pavement or in the middle of the street. You can do whatever you like, you are free of all burdens and all restrictions. *(He walks backwards at random on his tows).* In the end you can be idle, free from all worries. In fact, all worries are man-made; people search for worries. They have this and that worry.[3]

He talks of emotional freedom and a state of mind that contradicts with human nature and the inclination to create problems for themselves. Here the very generic word *'fannao'* (worry, torment etc.) comes to signify that humankind almost needs problems to give purpose to their lives. Later in this first soliloquy, he defines himself as a man without troubles, in fact the only man 'being idle' (*wusuoshishi*) in a city.
As the 'voice of narration' – the chorus – had criticised, earlier on in the play, the city as being a chaotic place during the day and an empty and peaceful place at night, Sleepwalker adds that:

> **Sleepwalker** *(In the middle of the road.)* Everybody wants to control you, everybody wants to play God. *(He stops.)* You only want to walk aimlessly. [...] It's the so-called 'purpose.'You follow no purpose, no direction. [4]

He confirms that in his view freedom is about total independence from influences from the outside world. He claims that the ambition to take control over one's own life is a God-like activity. When he first faces Prostitute, he expresses that the condition of being alive, an idle condition of just 'living', is his 'ideal' condition. In his meeting with Ruffian, Sleepwalker tries to keep his intent by stating that he only wants some peace and quiet.

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[3] Gao Xingjian *Yeyoushen,* 330.
[4] Ibid., 332.

In order to keep his ideal condition he attempts to retreat into solitude and silence:

> **Sleepwalker** All by yourself; you speak to yourself. What are your thoughts wandering to? It isn't important. What's important is that you own your thoughts. You will be able to think deeply, while the rest of people do not value thinking. [...]It does not matter to you; it is not other people's business. You're a human being, or maybe a worm, a butterfly, or an ant. Happiness is in the contemplation of your own thoughts.[5]

Sleepwalker retreats into his own thoughts, his own subjectivity. Freedom in this sense is connected with the idea of happiness, which is associated with the idea of isolation, self-contemplation, whereby 'thinking' is stated to be an important activity.

This attitude changes throughout the play. The above statement already shows some changes from the previous statements; earlier on freedom was only described as a purposeless and idle existence, now 'thinking' activity comes into the equation as being an important part of freedom. In this sense, Sleepwalker already compromises his freedom by implicitly admitting that walking itself is not enough. His attempt at retreating under a bell jar shows his state of precariousness; in his soliloquy he places himself in a dialectical position, admitting the existence of an outside world and revealing his interest in it, as suggested by Sy Ren Quah:

> However, his utterance betrays the intrinsic nature of his existence. He considers himself to have "absolutely no problems at all", while paradoxically he cannot control from wanting himself to announce his freedom to others. He is therefore not fully divorced from the external world, because he still expects others to provide confirmation of his own existence.[6]

Furthermore, his intent is soon challenged by his encounter with Thug, who ironically takes control over Sleepwalker's actions by commanding him to move and dance etc:

> **Thug** [...] Keep exactly like that! Show yourself to me! [...] That's right. At least you know what's poking in your back.[7]

His encounter with Prostitute is fatal; his sense of freedom ends as he discovers his need to be with a woman:

> That's for sure a dream. *(Whispering).* A nightmare! *(Loudly).* You say that you would not mind a woman's company. In case someone tries to shoot you, she could be your witness.[8]

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[5] Ibid., 340.
[6] Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Translacultural Chinese Theater*, 153.
[7] Gao Xingjian, *Yeyoushen,* 340.
[8] Ibid., 346.

Apart from the sexual attraction he feels for Prostitute, his need to be with her is dictated by the fear that his encounters with Ruffian and Thug have infused into him. So it appears that external influences affect Sleepwalker to the extent that his freedom is totally compromised. Moreover, if we consider that the events involving the protagonist are part of his dream, it is actually his own unconscious that dictates these events and therefore takes control of him. On a large scale the message is that absolute freedom is a product of the unconscious and the unconscious being uncontrollable is in itself illusory.

Later on, violence becomes an important component of Sleepwalker's behaviour and links the idea of freedom to the moral dialectical relationship between good and evil. His outburst of violence is a reaction to the realisation of having failed to keep to his ideal of freedom. Sy Ren Quah explains this in the following terms:

> In a self-imposed manner, the external world continues to have an effect on the Sleepwalker's existence. His apathy toward others is a conscious choice, but is instantly transformed into hostility when his subjectivity is under threat.[9]

The above statement can be corrected by saying that Sleepwalker's violent reaction does not occur when his subjectivity is under threat from the outside world, but when his sense of freedom is controlled and threatened by his very unconscious and comes to conflict with his conscious choice of being in control of his own freedom.

The apparent murder of Prostitute links the concept of freedom to a moral issue, concerned with the dichotomy between good and evil. Even before the character's outburst of violence, Prostitute mentions good and evil when she talks of Sleepwalker as a 'good man'. However Sleepwalker, by allegedly killing Prostitute, reveals his evil side. (It is not very clear whether it was Sleepwalker or Thug who carried out the killing; Thug fired the shot but Sleepwalker pushed her in front of the gun). After having killed Prostitute, Sleepwalker is forced to defend himself from Thug's accusation.[10] In the end he accepts the deal of carrying the suitcase for Thug:

> **Sleepwalker** *(after some thoughts.)* You say first that some explanations are needed. There is no service without a price. These days, it seems a practice of doing business that is universally accepted.[11]

The 'practice of doing business' brings us back to a sense of reality devoid of freedom but dominated by the rules that are necessary and 'universally accepted'. It is

[9] Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Translacultural Chinese Theater*, 153.
[10] Gao Xingjian, *Yeyoushen*, 360
[11] Ibid., 362.

within this context that Sleepwalker executes Thug's order once again and ends up killing Ruffian:

> **Sleepwalker** Thanks God you've gotten rid of that pig. You didn't mean to kill anyone, but the circumstances forced you into it. A cornered beast would do anything, when compelled from urgency resorting to primary instincts.[12]

He is now more in control of his actions although he has no real motivation for them. This suggests that he is actually driven by the concept of freedom in the arbitrariness and meaningless of the act. If freedom is conceived as a lack of responsibility and nothingness, his act of murder could be interpreted as the ultimate act of freedom. He is responding to a kind of morality that justifies the use of violence as a form of self-defence. In general terms, this is the anarchic and pseudo-biblical morality of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.[13] Sleepwalker in the same soliloquy talks of the world as dominated by evil:

> **Sleepwalker** Of course you are wandering: the world is full of evil, you're surrounded by evil, but you don't feel totally unease about it, you even experience a certain vague feeling of pleasure when you were at it.[14]

In this sense his behaviour conforms to a society dominated by evil and individualism, people live at the expense of others and consequently his acts of violence are dictated by the society around him and are not a free choice.

In Act III the sense of pleasure Sleepwalker felt in the killing disappears as he is, instead, overwhelmed by a sense of imprisonment, created by the evil around him and linked to an increasing fear of death and frustrated desire. Desire also acquires a negative connotation as it represents a form of temptation to sin.

This part of the play resonates with the Western values of good and evil, a concept of guilt and sin that resonates of Christian values. Sleepwalker mentions and identifies himself with Jesus Christ, who Sleepwalker describes as a lonely traveller with no power of salvation. In this regard, we can refer to Foucault's idea of freedom in the Western sense, the struggle for the freedom of the self from discipline. Foucault believed that freedom from the 'disciplines' of society, from the 'government of civilization'[15] is only possible when the individual elaborates 'one's own life as a

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[12] Ibid., 367.

[13] "[...] eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, cut for cut, and bruise for bruise. If you hit one of your slaves and cause the loss of an eye, the slave must be set free." *Exodus* 21: 24- 27.

[14] Gao Xingjian, *Yeyoushen*, 368.

[15] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinov (London: Penguin, 1991), 32-51.

personal work of art.'[16] In his early works[17] Foucault studied the subject of the individual as an effect of power/knowledge networks; in the works after *Discipline and Punish* (1975), *The History of Sexuality*-Vol. I (1976), Nealon describes a u-turn towards the revival for 'the individual's potential for subversive agency.'[18]

Part of his idea of freedom combines what Colin Hearfield calls 'self-disciplinary regime of aesthetic pleasure'[19] and what McNay calls 'the ethics of the self.'[20] Foucault trusts the subject's potential for self-reflexivity, where art is not only a tool but also life itself can be a model of life. [21] Gao's depiction of the subject is an extreme dramatisation of the imprisonment of the subject within the boundaries of 'discipline'. However, unlike Foucault, Gao shows that despite being capable of self-reflexivity, the subject cannot find his true self as the imprisonment derives from within one's own unconscious.

In similar terms, Sy Ren Quah talks of freedom as absolute nothingness and purposelessness and links Gao's idea of freedom with Daoism and Sartre's philosophical ideas of existentialism:

> A key concept of French Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, nothingness, [...] refers to an emptiness that "provides both the space for being and the vacuum force to draw it into endless successions of existences." [...] "Nothingness" also reminds one of the Daoist thinkers [...] the ideal state of existence, as manifested by Zhuangzi, is expressed in three ideal models: "the superior man has no self, the heavenly man has no deeds, the sagacious man has no name" One will only achieve the ideal when one has released oneself from both external and internal circumscription [...] Ultimately; however, one has to break out of the yoke of inner

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[16] Michel Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*: *Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 49.

[17] Michel Foucault, *The birth of the clinic* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1973); Michel Foucault, *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

[18] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Foucault beyond Foucault-Power and its Intensifications since 1984* (Stranford: Stranford University Press, 2008), 9.

[19] "[...] pleasures, moreover, which do not so much satisfy the body's desire but give breath to the soul. Ethical truth is thus no longer governed by any universalising conceptual *ratio* but rather, in keeping with the Socratic notion of *parrhésia* (i.e. speak truly without the use of rhetoric – *my parentheses*), emerges through on-going aesthetic of self-conduct." Colin Hearfield, *Adorno and the Modern Ethos of Freedom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 97.

[20] "The Idea of an ethics of the self is redefines Foucault's relation with a tradition of the Enlightenment [...] From this reinterpretation, Foucault is able to deploy concepts of autonomy, reflexivity, and critique and thereby overcome some of what have been regarded as the nihilist implications of his earlier work on discipline." Lois McNay, *Foucault: a Critical Introduction* (London: Continuum, 1994), 133.

[21] "What strikes me is the fact, that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. [. . .] Why couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?" Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinov (London: Penguin, 1991), 350. Johanna Oskala, *Foucault on Freedom* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.

consciousness, which is the most difficult task. Without these constraints, one is able to interact freely with Nature.[22]

The above concepts represent the ideal, to which Sleepwalker attempts to conform but inevitably fails. Using Zhuangzi's words, Sleepwalker cannot help but be trapped by his own subjectivity and conditioned by the outside world. Therefore, he cannot reach nothingness. In fact, towards the end of the play Sleepwalker searches to redeem himself as he admits that his heart is corrupted from evil like the rest of the world. At the very end, while his only hope is to return to the routine of everyday life, a masked man, possibly representing his alter ego, blocks his way. The message is a negative and pessimistic one. The protagonist – the everyman – cannot find redemption.

As far as the links Gao-Foucault and Gao-Sartre are concerned, we can definitely argue that due to the complexity of Gao's discourse on freedom and morality deriving from the play, the link between Gao and Foucault is more appropriate. Sartre's idea of freedom promoted a Cartesian concept of philosophical freedom[23] based on the relationship between consciousness, being and nothingness[24] and was typical of Modernism[25], while Foucault's concept of freedom is the result of a detailed exploration of the agents, the external forces within society affecting the individual, which is typically Postmodern. Gao's representation of this play accounts more for the complexity of the latter than the utopianism of the former, which, thus, links Gao more to Postmodernism than to Modernism. Moreover, the negative message of this play denying the possibility of freedom reminds us of the Postmodern discontent and disbelief by thinkers such as Baudrillard, which will be touched upon in the next chapter.

The idea of freedom itself can be also understood not only in terms of Daoism but also in terms of Zen enlightenment, which represents the spirituality that Gao tries to communicate in this play. Unlike previous plays, there is a total absence of concrete religious figures. It is important to look at Gao's direction notes with regard to the representation of religion:

> The play attempts to arrive at an explanation of some traditional themes such as the relationship between God and Satan, man and woman, good and evil [...] when the play is performed in Chinese the character might be

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[22] Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Translacultural Chinese Theater*, 157-158.
[23] Astradur Eysteinsson & Vivian Liska, ed., *Modernism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, c2007), 154.
[24] Steven Earnshaw, *Existentialism: a guide for the perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 87-88.
[25] Neil Levy compares Sartre and Foucault, defined as respectively representing modernism and postmodernism, and finds parallelism and philosophical continuity that dismisses the difference labels attached to them hence the difference between modernism and postmodernism. Neil Levy, *Being up-to-date: Foucault, Sartre, and postmodernity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

> sinicized and endowed with Chinese cultural traits. For instance, Tramp may model himself after the image of *Jigong*, the Living Buddha in Chinese folklore and not the image of God in Western culture.[26]

Gao seems to write for two different groups of audiences, a Western and a Chinese one. This differentiation between the two cultural religious representations means that Chinese ritual is not an integral part of the construction of the spiritual as it was in other plays. We could also suspect that Gao is looking for a representation of the spiritual that could effectively express universal spiritual values not linked to one religious tradition. Definitely, Gao's cultural exile might have influenced his theatrical decisions. However, the question remains whether or not Gao is distancing himself from the concept of Zen theatre.

In this sense we need to look at the other characters and their functions. Old Man and Tramp are the same character in the same way that Traveller is Sleepwalker. Old Man reminds us of the character of the old man at the end of *Between Life and Death*, and keeps to some extent the same poetic connotations. Old Man/ Tramp is a contradictory figure. On the one hand, he is represented as a wise and rational figure. He advises Sleepwalker against the use of violence and he is represented almost as a father figure when he talks to Prostitute. On the other hand, his indulging into drinking wine diminishes his morality. Ironically he states that drinking wine represents the only value in life.

This character also hides a secret; he collects old lottery tickets, and in a symbolic twist this character is linked to a realistic version of characters that have lost or misplaced their tickets at the beginning of the play. The apparent meaningless of his activity fits the model of freedom as suggested at the beginning of the play by Sleepwalker.

In this sense Tramp's attitude towards life fits more the ideal of freedom than Sleepwalker. Gao suggested in his stage direction notes that Tramp should be God in a Western production and *Jigong*, the living Buddha in a production for a Chinese audience.

If we read this character in a Western context, as far as the God-like attributes given to Tramp are concerned, we should point out that the Dionysian attribute of Tramp do not fit a Christian iconography but rather a pagan one linked to Nietzsche's categories of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, whose opposition is only apparent:

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[26] Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Translacultural Chinese Theater*, 189.

> [...] The Apollonian and the Dionysian: these two very different drives run in parallel with one another, for the most part diverging openly with one another and continually simulating each other to ever new and more powerful births, in order to perpetuate in themselves the struggle of that opposition only bridged by the shared name of 'art'; [...] they appear coupled with one another and through this coupling at last give birth to a work of art which as Dionysian as it is Apollonian.[27]

The choice of Nietzsche's idea as a term of reference is not casual, as Nietzsche's combining of opposites explains the duality of the Tramp figure and also by association with the figure of *Jigong*. From a Chinese perspective, the figure of Jigong explains the contradictions in Tramp's representation. *Jigong* is the 'religious' title mostly given to Daoji, also known as 'Crazy Ji' (*Ji Diani)* a Buddhist monk from the late twelfth to early thirteenth century who lived near the city of Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province, then capital of Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). The nickname given to him by his contemporaries refers to the unorthodox conduct of the monk, who often transgressed Buddhist regulations and lived a goliardic life within the temple. However, he was also venerated as a miracle worker through arranging medicine from the rich. It is said that he went to Yanling Mountain to raise funds to reconstruct Jingci Temple that had been damaged in a fire. After his death, his fame became the subject of an enormous body of popular fiction and part of a religious cult that had expanded by the twentieth century from Beijing in North China to Malaysia in Southeast Asia.[28] According to Mehir Shahar, seventeenth century Wang Mengji's novel, *Jigong quanzhuan – Complete biography of Jigong*, stresses the pedagogical function of *Jigong* in inspiring devotees to the enlightenment.[29] The holistic function and the cult of this figure grew at the beginning of the twentieth century when religious conservative ideologies and political separatist movements adopted *Jigong* to both attract devotees though a more human and secular figure and to warn against the drawbacks of material secularity.

> On the one hand, the rebellious god has served as a mouthpiece for the most conservative ideologies; on the other hand given the right historical circumstances, his divine example could be used by those trying to change the existing order[30].

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[27] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music," in *The Nietzsche Reader,* ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 42.
[28] Mehir Shahar, *Crazy Ji- Chinese Religion and Popular Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Asian Center, 1998), xiii.
[29] Ibid., 107.
[30] Ibid., 219.

From Gao's prescriptions about a Chinese production of the play, we can assume that Gao might have intended Tramp as an iconic religious figure at a similar level to the Monk in *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, embodying, though, an interesting duality. Unlike Monk, Old Man/Tramp participates actively and interacts with the characters on stage. At the end he is even a victim of Sleepwalker, who enraged by Tramp's scornful laughs strangles him. In this regard, Zhao passes a rather severe judgment on Sleepwalker's killing of Old Man/Tramp:

> (Sleepwalker) is now too worldly and Old Man's words are a closed book to him. In a rage, he kills Old Man, thus putting an end to any possibility of enlightenment.[31]

Zhao seems to imply that Tramp, like the *Jigong,* might possess the key to enlightenment.

At the other end of the scale, Thug and Ruffian can definitely be considered as negative characters, not totally rounded but rather characters functioning as an interference with Sleepwalker's activity. Thug commands the protagonist's movements and encourages the protagonist to pursue a dubious business, the removal of a mysterious suitcase. Ruffian, instead, is seen treating both Prostitute and Sleepwalker. In terms of a moral and ethical perspective, they represent the evil side of society and their function restricts Sleepwalker's sense of freedom. In the notes to the play, Gao suggests that in a Chinese production of the play they should be presented respectively as the leader of an underworld gang and an assassin from traditional Chinese stories, thus they are picaresque figures coming from popular 'oral' tradition.[32]

The character of Prostitute, instead, does not have a Chinese equivalent. Prostitute is an enigmatic figure that should be seen in a close relationship with Sleepwalker; their relationship is very similar to the one of Man and Girl in *Dialogue and a rebuttal,* thus she cannot be recognised as a background character.

On the whole, as mentioned above, it is rather clear that the function and representation of those background characters, with the possible expectation of Old Man/Tramp, fail to construct a sense of rituality, which was more or less always present in the previous plays and the reason for that seems to lay in Gao's apparent intention to write for two different audiences – a Western one and an Eastern one. The only aspect that might resemble some sense of rituality is the use of 'magic' that Gao mentions in

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[31] Henry Zhao, *Towards a modern Zen theatre,* 154.

[32] "Early Buddhism developed from within the context of an oral culture in which verbal communication and narrative were important in spreading one's message to a mostly illiterate populace" in Carl Olson, *The Different Paths of Buddhism*, 2.

his notes as being an important element in the production of the play at a theatrical level.

The spiritual is connected to an existentialist and moral sensitivity of Western origin dominated by ethical and semi-religious concepts of good and evil, of sin, death, and redemption. The protagonist symbolically represents the Everyman experiencing guilt and fear of death as the Woman in *Between Life and Death* and Man in *Dialogue and Rebuttal.* In these two plays, morality was described more in vague, semi-mystic terms; here it is set up within the context and ambience that is totally imbedded in surrealism and evanescent transcendence. The sense of death is still present but understood as a result of physical violence.

Most importantly this play seems to address a rather prescriptive message, which is connected to the ideal of absolute social and spiritual freedom, and even attempts to deny a religious and spiritual transcendence. The message suggests that this kind of transcendent freedom does not exist subjectively; the unconscious imprisons the main character, which ends up using violence.

Therefore, the main character abandons the spiritual, once he gives in to the external world, his emotions and his instincts. By doing so, he condemns himself to insanity, symbolically expressed by the presence of the alter ego stopping him from exiting his dream.

We could go even further to interpret this play and the concept of insanity and madness as the parody itself of the very values it stands for – freedom, good and evil etc. and read it using Foucault's words. Foucault's view derives from an 'archaeological'[33] and historical exploration of madness throughout the classical age up to the eighteenth century, outside the psychoanalytical discourse on the unconscious. Madness is part of a phenomenon of social repression, created by modernity, marked by the birth of the rational bourgeois individual and the privileging of a rationale based on medical analysis that has taken over that coming from religion[34]. In other words, madness has been created 'to ring-fence reason or sanity and to create a clear distinction between madness and sanity'[35], which derives from the need for 'disciplining' and for medical society to create categories to exercise its power and governability.

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[33] "[...] there are sets of presuppositions, which Foucault calls epistemes, that elevate perception to the level of objective knowledge. These epistemes are historical and change overtime. [...] an episteme can be said to exist when there are regular relations between its objects, style of description, concepts sand thematic choices. Foucault designates this mode of analysis of the regularities that make true statements possible as 'archaeology'." Jon Simons, "Michel Foucault," in *Contemporary Critical Theorists – from Lacan to Said,* ed. Jon Simons (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

[34] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[35] Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault* (London: Routledge, 1999), 98.

Sleepwalker's insanity is ironically, on the one hand, a reaction to the overwhelming sense of morality, intended as a set of 'disciplines' in the Foucaultian sense: the 'madman', like the delinquent is the one who lives outside the 'disciplines.'[36] On the other, it is the reaction to the meaninglessness itself of the idea of freedom as represented by Old Man/Tramp, the beggar who lives outside all social convections. In this light, at first, Sleepwalker follows his sexual desires, follows Tramp's example anduses violence as a reaction to morality. By doing so he compromises his freedom; then, he reacts against the freedom represented by Tramp as he would blame freedom itself for having enslaved him. Considering Gao's depiction as a parody, the whole ideology of freedom and morality is totally condemned, as if Gao wanted to communicate the message that men cannot really be free, since the concept of absolute freedom as also described by Foucault is in itself absurd.

So the question would be, is Gao losing his faith in Zen? Or is it only the case that he is losing faith in his theatre? The only certain answer is that the connection with Foucault's idea and Gao's negativity make this play Postmodern, even more so than *Between Life and Death.*

4.1.2 Language

In this part of the chapter, we will look at the relationship between the function of subjectivity and language intended as the narrative tool in the building up of the play, as a theatrical device, and as an explored concept in its own right.

First of all, we will look at the concept of subjectivity in general by taking into account some approaches to this play. As said above, subjectivity is meant to define the character's imagination, desires and the 'unconscious', which in the case of this play comes into being through the representation of the main character's dream. A dream as the gateway to the unconscious is expressed by the metaphoric image of the door. The characters are often looking, staring, or leaning at the door, which is mostly open and at times about to close. In connection to the representation of subjectivity in this play, Gilbert Fong talks of three levels of consciousness:

> The first level is located in the real and objective world of the train coach; here the Traveller speaks in the first person. On the second level, Traveller becomes Sleepwalker in the dream. And as he speaks in the second person, he creates a third level of reality made up of self-reflections, where he takes on the role of observer, insulated from the experiencing of evil, violence, and gratuitous sexuality, a world he finds inexplicable. [...] The

[36] Jon Simons, "Michel Foucault," 188.

product of his mental processes, these "images of heart" *xinjia* has ironically become the masters controlling his consciousness. [37]

Fong describes three levels of consciousness, of subjectivity; the first is the real situation itself, the second is the dimension of the dream and the third is the one created and made up by the thinking subject himself, who to some extent is still connected to reality – his self-reflections are also concerned with reality itself – and operates in a dream dimension. We are able to identify this third level of reality as being made up of the character's imagination and desires, which in the context of the play produce a completely new dimension populated by characters such as Tramp and Prostitute, who are the transfiguration of the characters on the train. As said in the quote above, this lack of consciousness or the so-called *xinjia* takes over the character and his dream in a sequence of irrational events occurring during the dream.

The thinking capacity is an essential component of subjectivity, encompassing both rationality and irrationality. In this regard, Zhao explains Gao's choice to use the dream as the context of the play, by mentioning Lacan's idea of the unconscious intended as being beyond the subject's control, speaking to the subject while asleep.[38] We need to refer back to what has been said in the second chapter and elaborate on Lacan's theory of the relationship between subjectivity and language. Lacan suggests an intrinsic relationship between language and subjectivity; the language itself creates subjectivity because the unconscious itself is structured like a language[39].

From the reflections on subjectivity, language is revealed to play an important role, as language is the main tool used to communicate and express subjectivity.[40] Like in the previous plays, there are a few self-referential statements about language but not as many:

Prostitute She asks what enough means?
Sleepwalker You say enough is enough, enough is a word.
Prostitute She asks, *(She wipes her eyebrow.)* what is a word?
Sleepwalker A word is a word. Basically there is no meaning; you could say that they are countless meanings. It all depends on how you explain it. [...] Speaking plausibly is nothing more than repeating nonsense.
Prostitute She asks, *(She closes her left eye.)* What about you, are you not talking words yourself?[41]

In the first two acts, this is only the main self-referential discussion about language, in which Sleepwalker becomes the master of knowledge. His explanation

[37] Gilbert Fong, 'Introduction,' in Gilbert Fong, *The Other Shore,* xxxvii.
[38] Henry Zhao, *Towards a modern Zen theatre,*155.
[39] Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture*, 12.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Gao Xingjian, *Yeyoushen*, 386.

brings into light a different understanding of language, which shows that the author is moving on from the position as communicated in the previous plays. In the previous plays, language was referred to as a playful tool presented as a flow of meaningless utterances. Words were mere utterances with no meaning: in the case of *Dialogue and Rebuttal* characters were trapped by language until the final disintegration projected them onto the realm of no-language. In the case of this play, as described in the quotation above, utterances are still meaningful as they prove the characters' individual existence. As suggested by the end of the play, silence meant as the absence of utterances is the equivalent of death, of no existence. This contrasts with the Zen Buddhist belief that prescribes no-language as a means to salvation but is closer to Foucault's idea of language, which defines language as part of the power/ knowledge paradigm within a system of control.[42]

This change of understanding and approach to language reflects the same change regarding the spiritual in the previous section of this chapter. As this play deals with spiritual concerns by referring to a Western moral and ethical set of values, the approach and understanding of language is no longer understood as a means to reach transcendence and a way to salvation; its understanding is almost a secular one and influenced by a Western conception of language and definitely a Postmodern one. In this regard, the last exchange in the dialogue between Sleepwalker and Prostitute highlights that where language ends so does one's individuality:

> **Prostitute** She asks, how about you? *(She closes her right eye.)* Are you also a word?
> **Sleepwalker** Maybe, maybe not.
> **Prostitute** *(She pours some lotion on her hand.)* Maybe what? *(She closes both eyes.)* Maybe not what?
> **Sleepwalker** There is nothing!
> **Prostitute** It's over. *(She drops the cotton ball, which she used to wipe off her make-up).*
> **Sleepwalker** What's over?
> **Prostitute** Over is over.[43]

After this last exchange, Prostitute takes out from the suitcase a man's head resembling Sleepwalker's, which is, then, left rolling on the floor. This strong image suggests that Prostitute, by ending their discussion with this act, destroys Sleepwalker's subjectivity, as proven by referring to another of Sleepwalker's soliloquies at the beginning of the third act:

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[42] Cf. Chapter 3 footnote 19.
[43] Gao Xingjian, *Yeyoushen,* 387.

> In between the time when they (secrets) are unopened and opened, the feeling of mystery is the pounding of your being. The mystery is not in the boxes but in the mind.[44]

Sleepwalker talks about the mind, the unconscious, and its secrets where again subjectivity is connected to life and existence is vice versa connected to subjectivity. Later on, he reflects on the dream dimension through which he has been walking:

> You know that now you're sleepwalking, you can't even distinguish between dream and reality. You don't even dare disturb your dream, is it because such breaking from your dreams would lead to the death of your self?[45]

Sleepwalker's confusion about dream and reality mirrors the confusion between living either in a dream or in the reality as it was expressed in *Dialogue and Rebuttal.* The dream dimension makes him alive – metaphorically being 'alive' means keeping contact with his subjectivity. In this light we can understand that the image of the head rolling brings an end to his subjectivity.

However, after Prostitute has taken out the head from the suitcase and disappears, Sleepwalker continues talking about his journey through subjectivity. By doing so, his subjectivity remains intact, and the female figure of Prostitute and her behaviour as a 'prostitute' can be understood to be a product of his imagination.

At a level of narration, subjectivity is defined by the idea of the protagonist's journey through his dream, which is presented by Traveller reading a book at the beginning of the play. The function of the book is very important as Zhao mentions:

> Sleepwalker is the shadow of the passenger, who during his reading projects himself onto the world being read. [...] Sleepwalker the subject produced by the passenger reading the book (the same as watching the play), and the Sleepwalker killing the rampage is indeed the unspeakable pleasure that can only be found in the death of the subject's unconsciousness.[46]

The image of the book suggests the idea of fiction within fiction or metafiction,[47] which creates an intermingled and interdependent relationship between the author-character- audience.

In these terms, the representation seems to be strictly connected to the idea of metadrama and the actors' neutrality, where the use of the pronoun 'you' from Sleepwalker's side is an indication that the character has entered the second level of

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[44] Ibid., 369-70.
[45] Ibid., 372.
[46] Henry Zhao, *Towards a modern Zen theatre,* 155.
[47] Cf. Chapter 1 footnote 19.

consciousness. The use of the second person pronoun and the concept of the actor's neutrality is explained by the author's intention, which is expressed in his notes about stage directions. Referring to Gao's words, the actor's neutrality will enable the actor to both experience the character's inner feelings and to develop an awareness of being a performer on stage, which is a similar approach to what Gao had suggested and encouraged in previous plays. Feng Yiwang explains how in particular in this play Gao seems to let actors use their full potential[48]. Fang Zixun points out how the use of the different person pronouns has been perfected throughout the last plays[49].

In *Dialogue and Rebuttal* apart from Gao prescribing the *gongan* – a style of question and answer in Chinese Zen Buddhism – as a dialogic form between Man and Girl, the actor's neutrality is achieved though the use of pronoun 'you' by Man and the use of pronoun 'she' by Girl. Sy Ren Quah suggests that the use of the pronoun 'you' has a different effect:

> When an actor speaks to the audience using "you," the latter has difficulty in identifying with the implied addressee. This method is conventionally employed to facilitate effective interaction and to break the invisible "fourth wall," and the Brecthian narrator also uses it. In The *Nocturnal Wanderer*, however, the nature of "you" as a double-addressee introduces an ambiguity that provides a larger space for interpretation and performance. It not only intensifies Gao's dramatic world, but also proposes a new actor-spectator relationship within the theatrical space. Once psychologically mobilized to identify with the protagonist's predicament, members of the audience will be estranged from relationship with the other members of the cast and enter a similar state of isolation[50].

The structure of the play together with the image of Traveller reading the book projects the audience onto the intimacy of the character's fantasy. Moreover, a voice of narration introduces the audience to the journey of the protagonist anticipating the tone of his monologues and of his confession. In fact, 'the voice' touches upon issues that are, then, found in Sleepwalker's speech. By doing so, Gao creates a second frame that gradually leads the audience into his unconscious and plays with the idea of the book.

The use of the second person pronoun in this play is charged with a sense of intimacy between the character and the audience and in terms of subjectivity between the protagonist intended as the 'everyman' and the outside world. Whereas Man in *Dialogue and Rebuttal* seems to talk to himself trapped within a destructive subjectivity, Sleepwalker engages into a communication with the external word and ultimately with

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[48]Feng Yiwang "Ni, Yeyoushen" in *Lianghe wenxue,* Feb. 2001, 129

[49] Fang Zixun " Yi shuang lengyan, chousheng guanshen- cong Gao Xingjian de zhuanzuo lunshuo qi", 178

[50] Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Translacultural Chinese Theater*, 156.

the audience. As result of this, the audience has the impression of connecting to an intimate declaration about the character's feelings as if it was a confession directed straight to the audience:

> **Prostitute** That's it, let's go straight to your place! *(Whispering.)* How much? It's up to you.
> **Sleepwalke**r Surely it's a dream. *(Whispering.)* A bad dream! *(Loudly.)* You say you're willing to have a woman with you because there'd be a witness in case you're shot dead by a sniper's bullet. You say you're a lovely girl. It makes your heart ache[51].

The above quote is a good example on how the character's speech changing from whispering to a loud tone of voice is engaged in a conversation to both the audience and to Prostitute. Prostitute unlike Sleepwalker employs the third person pronoun only in her last presence on stage: this brings us to believe that in that moment she is dead as we enter her subjectivity, or that her thoughts are part of the Sleepwalker's imagination. The use of the 'she' pronoun is created in his mind, as Sleepwalker would be looking at himself through her in an objective attempt.

In terms of narration the effect of their interaction is both of distance and intimacy. Distance is created by Prostitute's speech, and intimacy by Sleepwalker's words. Gao achieves his intention to create a performance that allows the unconscious of the characters to speak to the audience. This vision creates a type of communication that is beyond rationality. The outpouring of thoughts would indeed demonstrate the overwhelming victory of subjectivity in the process of communication. In comparison with other plays, the enactment of the unconscious through language does not lead to self-destruction, where the dimension of no-language was glorified as a form of spiritual salvation.

Here, language continues to perpetuate subjectivity until the disappearance of the very character, which is a gradual process where Traveller has left the stage after his final confrontation with his alter ego. This meeting does not lead to Sleepwalker's suicide as suggested by Sy Ren Quah. It can be interpreted in a positive light. A positive interpretation would consider Traveller's empty seat and the image of the book left behind as the end of Traveller's train journey and the end of Traveller's reading, which in metaphorical terms could sign the end of Traveller's journey through his unconscious as well as the end of the author's narration. This would lead us to believe that the Traveller's journey though the unconscious is both temporary and exhaustive, not a continuous state of mind.

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[51] Gao Xingjian, *Yeyoushen,* 365.

By using Lacan's idea of language and the unconscious, then, the play can be interpreted as showing the dominance of language onto the 'thinking subject', which can be related also to Foucault's idea of a language transcending and even obviating individual perception rather than allowing our independent existence to flourish. Language, a set of codes, another 'discipline' of society represents another obstacle for Sleepwalker to reach his 'ideal' freedom by dominating his 'unconscious'. Unlike the role of language in *Between life and Death,* Gao shows the different facets of subjectivity through the character's interaction with other characters, other parts of his unconscious and conscious as well as the image of the book. The complexity of this play in its construction and deconstruction of the unconscious can be defined as a sort of post-structuralist work of the unconscious that again defines this play as a Postmodern play.

4.1.3 Gender

The Sleepwalker-Prostitute relationship introduces again the man-woman dichotomy as suggested in the previous plays. This section we will be looking at how the two characters view each other and how they are represented.

First, this part will look at how Prostitute, the only female character in the play, is viewed by the other male characters, especially Sleepwalker. As far as Prostitute is concerned, the way Young Man behaves with Young Woman (she is Prostitute's aliter-ego at the beginning of he play) announces a specific outlook on women. Young Man tends to patronize Young Woman by asking about the reason for her trip. Young woman reacts with silence, as she does not pay attention to him.

By referring to the female character as Prostitute, Gao already allocates the character the specific role of a woman who sells her body to men for a living. The first encounter with Ruffian depicts her exactly in that role as she negotiates the price in exchange for sexual services. Once Ruffian treats her with violence, she is portrayed as a victim of male dominance. Sleepwalker's attitude towards Prostitute seems to be different as he shows care and concern for Prostitute, who had been treated violently by Ruffian, and he feels guilty for not having helped her. Sleepwalker's view of women is a complex one as this dialogue shows:

> **Sleepwalker** You say of course it'd be a pleasure, but you don't want to die in the hands of a woman.
> **Prostitute** Do you think women are terrifying or something?
> **Sleepwalker** It depends on what kind of woman.
> **Prostitute** Don't you find them sexy? Or is it because you don't really want to do it?

> **Sleepwalker** Oh you say, you find them more than sexy. They're so lovely, so vulnerable, and so alive, unlike those deadpan images on the billboards.[52]

The above dialogue shows how Sleepwalker's relationship with women is determined by fear and suspicion; in his confessions Sleepwalker talks about women as source of temptation and sin. However, earlier on he also says:

> **Sleepwalker** *(Thinking to himself)* you understand totally and completely. Your situation is more or less the same as hers. She's already told you, but you still can't tell her that.[53]

Sleepwalker seems to experience some sort of closeness with Prostitute, and he even appears to consider her as human being equal to himself and not only as a prostitute.

His relationship with Prostitute changes throughout the play, especially in the first act. In some instances, however, he talks about her in a functional light; in the quote of the previous section he expresses his need to have a woman in case he is shot, while at the same time appreciating her 'loveliness'. Their complicity and intimacy link them together when they both attack Tramp. At the end of the first act, Prostitute is portrayed again as a victim, as she is shot while approaching the door, which creates suspicion over whether or not Sleepwalker murdered her.

In their second meeting, Prostitute, described as having a pale and cold complexion, and Sleepwalker are engaged in a direct confrontation in which it is mostly Prostitute who addresses anger towards Sleepwalker, who then questions her about her job. In his questioning of Prostitute, he expresses jealousy when asking about Ruffian and her encounter with him. His tone gradually turns more and more aggressive; he starts calling her a 'stinking whore' (*yige choubiao)* and 'loose woman' (*poxie)*[54]. We can draw a line of comparison with Man of *Dialogue and Rebuttal* in the same way that Man in the other play responds to Girl's disrespectful behaviour by attempting to kill Girl, Sleepwalker ends up killing Prostitute; his act is to be viewed as a consequence of an internal anger intrinsic to the character himself. In his dialogue with Prostitute he mentions that he has never done any harm to women, but the idea of sin held some appeal for him.

Later on in the play, Ruffian suddenly appears in the darkness; he plays with the shoe she has thrown away and stamps his foot on her hand and then she falls on her

[52] Ibid, 154.
[53] Ibid, 153.
[54] Ibid, 378

knees. In the Prostitute's dance with Thug, soon there is complicity between the two and look at Sleepwalker with disdain. Prostitute is again portrayed as a victim when attacked by Ruffian but, then, she expresses her sense of happiness when dancing together with Thug. Her happiness, which could be just an apparent façade as part of her job is short-lived; in the same way he had controlled Prostitute's movements, Thug makes her disappear with a swing of his hand. What looks like a romantic encounter between Prostitute and Thug reveals the controlling hand of a man over Prostitute, who is again portrayed as an object.

The third meeting with Sleepwalker sees Prostitute a more evanescent figure; with a pale complexion and some make-up on she appears on stage and starts to wipe off her make-up in slow almost ritualistic movements. In this encounter calm dominates the relationship between the two. Sleepwalker tired of their arguing firmly states that Prostitute had already said enough and shows his intent to be at peace with her. It is in this meeting that Prostitute poses questions about language and its meaning. The image of Prostitute could symbolically represent an actress at the end of her show taking off her make-up and talking to the writer asking about the meaning of the work. In her ghostlike complexion she addresses him with firm conviction at the end of the conversation when she says that 'it is over'. Her statement determines the end of their encounter and of her 'acting' in the drama built up by the protagonist's imagination.

Referring back to the way Prostitute is treated as a woman in the play Sleepwalker is the only one who treats her with fairness; Ruffian uses violence on her, Thug tends to control her and gives her an illusion of happiness; even Tramp treats her with suspicion. The relationship between the Sleepwalker and Prostitute is almost between equals. Sleepwalker does not simply deal with her as a prostitute; there seems to be a genuine interest and concern for her as a person. However, both characters deal with each other using stereotypes that fit a male-dominated society. The use of violence from Sleepwalker's side is the sublime expression of desire connected to the irrational need to dominate and control her.

Comparing this play with the previous one, the relationship between Prostitute and Sleepwalker is more genuine. In their confessional dialogues, we are aware mostly of their feelings towards each other. The contrast between new and old traditional gender division is not evident. The dynamic of the relationship is the projection of an old patriarchal system; Sleepwalker's changed attitude with Prostitute does not necessarily imply that he is trying to embrace a new tradition. His change is inspired by his sexual attraction to Prostitute and probably by a sense of morality.

Prostitute's depiction through Sleepwalker's words is focused on the physical depiction of her actions. In a strong poetic metaphorical fashion, the image of Young woman/Prostitute is associated with the image of the shoes she wears. As we have seen in Martin Crimp's play *The Country* shoes can carry an important gender connotation linked to male dominance of women. In this case shoes and clothing define gender differences: Sleepwalker wears boots, which are far more comfortable, while Prostitute wears uncomfortable high-heeled shoes. It can be argued that in this case the same connotation defines the changing functionality of the character. At the beginning Prostitute's entrance on stage is announced by the sound of the tipping of her high-heeled shoes and the use of an umbrella. Her fight with Ruffian is represented by the speed of her shoes noise in the background. Her feet kicking the cardboard boxes express the happiness of her first encounter with Sleepwalker.

After her murder, only the left shoe remains in the carriage where young woman was sitting, as well as one shoe heel which is found at the opening of act two, when Prostitute is described to fall out of the carriage. Thug, who wraps the shoe in a handkerchief, then put it in his pocket. After the confrontation between Thug, Ruffian and Sleepwalker, Young Woman and the shoe have gone. The shoe is the symbol attached to the female character that depicts the sequel of events affecting her. Once she is shot only one shoe is left of her and this very last shoe is, then, taken by the male characters, who had treated her as an object as if she herself was a shoe. Within a male-dominated dialectic the objectification of the shoe highlights the functionality of Prostitute's role that through the definition of her job makes her an object. The shoe is the projection of the violence enacted on Prostitute, which is also represented by a woman's head rolling down at the beginning of act three. Later on, the shoe reappears in the hands of Ruffian who throws the shoe at her. In the last meeting with Sleepwalker the shoe is totally absent as the attitude of Prostitute has changed. In her final appearance, through her ritualism she shows a strong determination to erase any sign of make-up as if the make-up was the remaining symbol of a femininity that has been used by men and abused by their violence. The shoe, like the make-up, has been erased thus bringing her 'story' to an end and liberating her.

In regard to the discourse about 'performative' there is still a dialectal investigation of gender. Here the character seems to be more blocked in a stereotyped male-dominated society, which can be viewed from two different perspectives. Firstly, Prostitute is still a functional character and in gender terms she conceals herself with what Tseelon defines as masquerade:

> The woman deflects attention from her desire for power through its opposite: constructing a very feminine non-threatening image of herself. [...] concept of masquerade is double-edged. It implies instability of the feminine position [...] it simultaneously disguises and calls attention to what it tries to hide, in the process of hiding it.[55]

Prostitute epitomises this process of hiding and at the same time attracting men's attention to her body, whereby the money in exchange for sex is, though, a form of exercising power in a negative sense. It is negative because it implies making her body an object to be consumed[56] hence it further enslaves her. Similarly fitting this stereotype, she is also portrayed as a victim of violence. Moreover, Sleepwalker himself feels a destructive love and affection towards her, who is merely an object of his desire, a response to his needs, bare instinct, and imagination. By taking the make-up off, Prostitute frees herself from the imprisonment, which formed her unnatural appearance. Sleepwalker is also viewed and 'gazed' at by Prostitute:

> The Prostitute serves first as an observer and later as a judge of the Sleepwalker's integrity in his interaction with other characters. In his contact with Prostitute, the Sleepwalker begins to see himself in a new light. As an imagined woman, the Prostitute is a 'mirror' for the Sleepwalker to see his self. In such a relationship, the Sleepwalker, who is male, becomes the "gazed". What complicates the situation is that is doubly gazed not only by Prostitute but also by himself.[57]

While talking to Ruffian, Prostitute describes Sleepwalker, and later on using the third-person pronoun, she judges him as incapable of being a man, in both sexual and psychological terms. The use of the pronoun 'she' objectifies her discourse as Sleepwalker is looking at Prostitute, a product of his imagination, who is talking about him.

Through her words, she portrays a feminist negative model of masculinity, which defines man's dominant attitude. Like in the previous play, the male character is under attack. The term 'coward' can be associated with his weakness in not defending her and in his continuous thinking.

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[55] Efrat Tseëlon, *The Masque of Femininity* (London: Sage, 1995), 37- 39.

[56] Cf. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Flamingo, 1971); Rosalind Coward *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today* (London: Paladin, 1984). A decade apart from one another, both books talk about women's difficult and controversial relationship with their body: Greer talks mostly about women's feeling of shame with their body as created by male stereotypes of femininity; Coward questions whether women's emancipation and the public exploitation of their body still perpetuates the male 'objectification' and subjugation of their body.

[57] Terry Siu-han Yip and Kwok-kan Tam, "Gender and Self in Gao Xingjian's Three Post-exile Plays", 224.

By taking into account also that Prostitute is the product of his imagination, Prostitute's 'gaze' should be regarded as double consciousness where Prostitute's judgement on Sleepwalker is created by Sleepwalker himself, thus it is a form of self-criticism.

The focus is man's exploration of his own sexuality and gender, which would explain why Prostitute appears as functional and not as a well-rounded character. If we consider the play as an whole, where all the characters are the product of Sleepwalker's imagination as well as agents interacting with Prostitute, all the characters are mirrors of Sleepwalker's self mirroring one another on the main mirror of his self, Prostitute. Within this context, the play unfolds a sort of deconstruction, fragmentation of the self, which in gender terms translates as a sort of emasculation.

The term emasculation is intended here as a fragmentation of masculinity, which finds it difficult to define itself as affected by a feminist discourse that had condemned masculinity and its attributes.[58] The male character is entrapped in the performative discourse as understood by Butler's conception; the performative discourse is created by the Sleepwalker enacting his masculinity through the very character of Sleepwalker/Young Man and the different characters such as Thug, Ruffian and Tramp, representing different negative stereotypes of masculinity. Sleepwalker/Young Man represent the character's subjectivity in its wholeness, and Thug and Ruffian both represent violence and physical strength whereas Tramp represents wisdom, morality, and fatherhood etc. Prostitute is, instead, created according to a very masculine ideal of woman but also mirrors a type of masculinity weakened by its very traditional gender canons. Sleepwalker compares himself to a model of masculinity, which he miserably fails to conform to. It is an important point that Sleepwalker uses a female figure to mirror and define his gendered self. This stresses the fact that femininity becomes the indicator of his masculinity as if masculinity cannot live independently from the female gaze, which is a constant aspect of Gao's work. Sleepwalker as well as the other male characters try to eliminate her, but Prostitute, the woman 'object' *per se* is always there reborn into a new persona, less and less 'decorated' with feminine attributes, less and less an object of male dominance.

The process of emasculation is enacted as an inverse process to that described by Butler and other feminists, in particular by Iragaray. Inspired by Freud's concept of penis envy, in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, published in 1977, Iragay talks of men's castration of women as a result of men projecting their own negative 'self' onto women.

[58] Rosalind Coward, *Sacred cows*, 91-94.

In *Sexual/Textual Politics,* Toril Moi comments on Iragaray's famous phrase 'To castrate the woman is to inscribe her in the law of the *same* desire, or the desire of the same'[59] by saying:

> The thinking man not only projects his desire for a reproduction of himself (for his own reflection) on to the woman; he is, according to Iragaray, incapable of *thinking* outside this specular structure. Thus the female castration complex becomes still more of the Same. Woman is not only the Other [...] but is quite specifically *man's* Other: his negative or mirror-image.[60]

In other terms, men use women as mirrors of men's own self driven by the desire of the same, the desire of looking at themselves in the mirror; as Toril Moi suggests reading Iragaray, women, though, become 'absence, negativity, the dark continent' and 'man's specularized Other.'[61]

Bearing in mind these dynamics in relation to Gao's play, one could argue that Sleepwalker uses Prostitute as the mirror projecting more and more a distorted image of himself. Even though the female figure is still imprisoned within this process of projection, as being part of Sleepwalker's unconscious, she re-directs the projection onto Sleepwalker himself in a form of self-criticism. Gao's representation of this process subtly describes the deconstruction of male identity by reversing the role – the female 'gaze' onto the male 'mirror'. In this regard, Chang Hsien-Tang explains that Gao's construction of gender roles and their depiction can be linked to Gao's idea of '*zhen wo, zhen shengming, zhen ziyou'* (true self, true life, true freedom) that can be linked to the idea of 'originary self'.[62] However, in the context of this play, this could be interpreted as the embodiment of how feminist gender discourse affects the construction of male identity, which will also be described by Crimp's play.

4.2 Martin Crimp's *Play with Repeats.*

Play with Repeats was first performed at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond on 12 October 1989. It is one of his earlier plays written before Crimp's work had reached national and international stature. The reason for choosing this play written ten years before the other plays considered in the thesis is connected to the similarities of this play with Gao's. Like Gao's, Crimp's play describes a character's spiritual and physical journey within dream-like surreal settings. This play was inspired by Ouspensky's book

[59] Luce Iragay, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 76.
[60] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual politics*, 132-133.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Chang Hsien-Tang "Gao Xingjian zai "Shengsijie", "Duihua yu fanhua" he "Yeyoushen" de qingyu shuxie", 298

The strange Life of Ivan Osokin.[63] Ouspensky is a Russian philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century who developed the idea of the 'eternal return' and a mystic approach to the concepts of time and space, which will be talked about later on in the chapter.

This play tells the story of the time-journey of Tony, the main character of the play, through the past, in attempt to change the present and to influence the future.

We will be looking at three main aspects: the main themes linked to the idea of time and Ouspensky's idea of 'eternal return'; theatrical representation, i.e. the structure of the play and the self-referential function of language; and the gender discourse.

4.2.1 A journey though the past

Tony, a forty-year-old man, helped by the magic of a clairvoyant Lamine – an African holy man – has been given the opportunity to return to the past and change the course of such events. In this part we will be looking at the underlying themes of this play connected to the character's journey: the motif of chance and opportunity, connected to the idea of an eternal return; the concept of history deriving from this ideology and the dichotomy of morality and triviality. It is important to note that these aspects define the ritual/spiritual dichotomy, which makes this play by Crimp the only one dealing directly with the ritual and the spiritual.

In the first scene, Tony talks about his unhappiness derived from a general sense of failure to the couple Nick and Kate that he has met at the local pub. He criticises Nick for being unemployed and therefore for missing his chances. He also criticises Kate for being a failed actress. He refers to success, career, and love, which are very material aspects of life. In his discourse with Lamine, later on in the play, he explains that he lost two main opportunities in his life. He did not take advantage of getting to know better a woman he had just met at a bus stop, and he did not fight for a promotion at work that he claims he deserved. He sees that the only solution is to go back in time with the knowledge of having missed an opportunity. It is Lawrence, a history lecturer, who gives him Lamine's card, explaining about his magic powers. The character in a sort of middle-life crisis finds in the irrational the solution to his issues:

> **Tony** We are human beings. And perhaps I'm repeating myself, but for human beings anything should be possible [...] the potential is infinite. And so what's meant to happen - which is surely the realisation of that

[63] Petr Dem'ianovich Ouspensky, *The strange Life of Ivan Osokin* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2004).

> potential - are you with me? - what's meant to happen, hasn't happened. And what *has* happened - what's happened to us- was not meant to happen. [...][64]

In a rather unconvincing and inarticulate fashion, Tony's idea of humankind's infinite potentiality could have the power even to change the course of events in someone's life. His attitude resonates of a philosophical 'positivism' or rather 'logical positivism'[65] deriving from a belief in a pseudo-scientific idea of progress.

Tony's idea of changing the course of events and therefore the concept of opportunity could be linked to an understanding of the human condition as being able to make choices, similar to St Thomas Aquinas' concept of free will as revived by Wittengstein.[66] In his words human kind had the potential to make choices and to some extent change its own destiny by making the right choices. The right choice is to make use of the opportunity life presents in a pro-active way in view of a positive and successful future. The contradiction in Tony's attitude is that he uses an irrational and esoteric tool, magic, to achieve the changes needed to reach success.

This sort of scientific positivism is well defined but firmly discredited in the words of Lawrence, the poor historian who gives the card with Lamine's number to Tony in his conversation with the latter:

> **Lawrence** [...] We are astonished when we calculate the enormity of the universe. We discover that the world consists almost of time and space, why do we seem to have little of either?
> [...] The train. [...]
> The adults in the buffet carriage are dithering over a selection of fresh sandwiches. White or brown. With salad or without. They're experiencing the illusion of choice.[67]

The possibility of choices in the everyday routine offers the illusion to humankind of free will and the power of having control over their life. Moreover, later on, he says that the train as created by 'reason' has been provided with no exits; he expresses disillusion towards rationality. The irrational resolution of using magic is presented as the only available possibility. Magic as defined by Lawrence's words is not

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[64] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats* (Nick Hern Books, 1990), 192.
[65] Frederick Copleston, *History of Philosophy: Logical Positivism and Existentialism* Vol. 11 (London: Continuum, 2003).
[66] Roger Pouivet, *After Wittgenstein, Saint Thomas* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2006), 133-35.
[67] Ibid., 245.

connected to the idea of time and space: 'he (Lamine) does not inhabit the world in a material sense.'[68] This aspect discards the ideology of logical positivism all together.

Magic implies a certain amount of faith and belief without applying the parameters of rationality; Lamine requires Tony to believe blindly in his magic. He demands some sort of blind faith and religiosity.

The magician affirms that returning back to the past will lead to a series of new possibilities, such as the enlightenment offered by the wisdom and the learning from past mistakes.

The esoteric as a way out from the uncontrollable flux of time is inspired by Ouspensky's 'eternal return' as Crimp states in his interview with Sierz.[69] Ouspensky (1878-1947), Gurdjieff's disciple – defined by many as an esoteric and occultist – viewed human existence through a metageometrical conception of the form of the world, based on the idea of the fourth dimension, a dimension existing beyond the three-dimensional parameters of the world, lying outside this world.[70] This is translated into the concept of Fourth Way, a way intended to be the principle that drives men to change and develop[71]: the First Way being that of the Fakir working on the physical body, trying to overcome physical pain (instinctive-moving centre); the Second Way, the way of the Monk, working mainly on faith (emotional centre); the Third Way, that of the Yogi, the way of knowledge and consciousness (intellectual way).[72]The 'Fourth Way' is not a combination of any of the other three since it implies an inner change but not an external one; it is the way of the 'sly man,' a man who can avoid the other three ways.[73] From this conception, the idea of eternal return[74] emerges: Ouspensky suggests that every individual once dead is reborn again in exactly the same circumstances but with no real knowledge of his return to life. Following Gurdjieff's idea of the fourth dimension, Ouspensky suggests that individuals – the higher mind- aware of the fourth

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[68] Ibid., 249.
[69] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 93.
[70] Petr Dem'ianovich Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1938), 74.
[71] Petr Dem'ianovich Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 97.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 98-99.
[74] The idea of eternal return had already been formulated by other Western philosophers, like Nietzsche. Nietzsche spoke of the eternal return (*Die ewige Widerkehr*) or eternal recurrence (*Die ewige Widerkunft*) in a similar way to Ouspensky: "all things recur eternally and we ourselves with them, and that we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us" -Keith Ansell Pearson, and Large Duncan,"Thus Spoke Zarathurstra- part III The Convalescent," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 285-. Ouspensky criticised Nietzsche's mathematical understanding of combination of units *ab infinitum*- i.e. repetitions of infinite combinations of infinite units. According to Ouspensky, the number of possible repetitions will equal zero, instead- and his idea of necessity of repetition in an Euclidean one-dimensional space. (Petr Dem'ianovich Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, 467).

dimension will be able to change the course of their new life. His approach uses both the esoteric idea and psychological method to understand the human condition; in particular he refers to metapsychology, psychology of higher dimensional perception or the psychology of higher minds, the only one who can understand the noumenal world. It is the knowledge of the esoteric that would show a way out of our current unproductive cycle of recurrence[75], a way out from the exact recurrence of events and bring change in one's own life. By combining metapsychology and the esoteric he prescribes that the individual should pursue his fourth dimension by following the Fourth Way[76]; by entrusting the individual's capacity for a 'higher' understanding, Ouspensky viewed civilization as driven by reviving consciousness[77] as part of human potential, unlike Freud's ideas of the uncontrollable unconscious.[78] Tony's positivism and ambition in Crimp's play is the embodiment of this ideology. The question is to what extent Crimp embraces this ideology in the making of this play, which will be dealt with later on in the chapter.

On a lager scale the concept of history in the play is linked to the idea of eternal return. The personal experience of the character is linked to the universal experience of humankind throughout history, which Ouspensky considers not only as history of the past but also as history of the future.[79] The first character to mention the idea of history is Heather (Lawrence's student and Tony's 'ideal' woman), who speaks of the past as a way to learn and to build up the future:

> **Heather** Just because one generation, one life, has failed, doesn't mean that the next one will. That's not logical.
> **Tony** No.
> **Heather** And besides I think we all as human beings have a duty to direct people's attention away from all that ugliness.[80]

Her approach to history is not merely a form of learning; her perspective is based upon the future as prescribed by Ouspensky' s ideas. She speaks of children as representing hope for the enhancement of humankind; in a world dominated by ugliness they are the route away from ugliness. Her attitude is a progressive one, she believes in

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[75] Petr Dem'ianovich Ouspensky, *Tertium organum (the third organ of thought): a key to the enigmas of the world* (N.Y: Manas Press, 1920).
[76] Petr Dem'ianovich,Ouspensky *The Fourth Way*, 429-430.
[77] Petr Dem'ianovich Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man's possible evolution.* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), 17-18.
[78] Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology Of Everyday Life* (London: Ernest Benn, 1966); Sigmund Freud, *Jokes And Their Relation To The Unconscious* (London: Ernest Benn, 1963).
[79] Cf. Maurice Nicoll, *Psychological commentaries on the teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky* (London: Robinson & Watkins, 1952).
[80] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 238.

the accumulation of learning and wisdom as a way to make positive changes. Like Heather, Lawrence's understanding of his history is based on the idea that one can learn from one's own mistakes. His intention is to show his students that any large-scale historical disaster could have been avoided. However, Lawrence is disappointed that his students are indifferent to his teaching:

> **Lawrence.** [...] I pointed out to them the terrible errors and misunderstanding of History, which with hindsight are so simply identified. I asked them to consider the possibility – merely the possibility – that other choices might have been made. Better choices. But no: to them the past was like a film: frame followed frame: because it was inevitable, it justified itself.[81]

In his words there is anger and disillusionment; his students deal with history as if it was fiction and he criticises their belief in the inevitability of atrocities. Lawrence's study of history fits Ouspensky's ideology insofar as students should learn from the past to avoid making the same mistakes as well as to improve the present.

Dissimilar to other students' approach, Heather's appreciation of history is of an aesthetic nature. When Heather states that we should 'direct people's attention away from all that ugliness'[82], she seems to refer to a concept of 'bad' in aesthetic terms. This affirmation needs to be read in the context of what she says later about Lawrence's approach. She claims that Lawrence, by 'staring' too long at 'ugly things' might become 'ugly' inside. According to her, Lawrence should show more often 'beautiful things'. Her vision is the construction of an idyllic condition, a world built up as a beautiful place projected onto a future populated by happy and positive children.[83] The aesthetic connotation of her vision is found in her words talking about her aesthetic experience of architectural beauty.

Lawrence's almost moral vision of history and Heather's aesthetic outlook on history lead to the other aspect of this play, the contrast between morality and triviality – the 'good' and the 'bad' – an underlying theme of the play. Tony as observer of human kind has a deep sense of morality that transcends his personal experience. Tony talks of morality in his judgment of Nick and Kate in the first scene of the first act and the second scene of the second act. His vision of 'good' and trivial is connected to the idea of success and failure. His moral judgement directed towards Nick is focused on his unemployed status; he believes that Nick has missed or is missing his 'opportunity'

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[81] Ibid., 247-248.
[82] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 239.
[83] Ibid.

He also criticises Kate, an actress who should be working in the evenings and defines her existence as a meaningless one. He, then, continues criticising their drinking habit and their pointless time spent at the pub[84].

In his view their life is 'trivial' (Nick is the one who uses the word 'trivial' first, but in an ironic sense against Tony's moralising, but as a projection of Tony's view of their behaviour), an immoral one, as it is not directed towards success and more specifically it is not enacted to 'seize' opportunities. Love and relationships come second but are equally important. That is one of the reasons why Tony admires Nick and Kate's relationship and calls them the 'lovely' couple,[85] as both of them have seized their opportunity of being together. In an ironic twist, Tony cannot live up to his own model of morality; even as he is given a second chance in both his job and with Heather, the woman of his dreams, he fails to improve his situation. Apart from refusing the promotion for no apparent reason, he then attempts to rape Heather in the pursuit of his dreams.

Lamine represents, instead, a model of the very kind of morality that is based on faith in magic and the irrational belief in a return to the past. Lamine refers to a couple of Sufi stories or dreams;[86] one of them describes a man who almost tricked death by seizing his own opportunity. The man had seen death and had made used of all his possessions before death could approach him. Lawrence, instead, represents a model of morality that encompasses magic and the personal learning experience of the individual. Nick and Kate are the antithesis to such a model of morality and are the ones outside the moral order constructed by the other characters. Nick especially does not believe in magic and intentionally avoids reflecting at a deeper level on the values of personal experience and historical awareness. He is not capable of feeling regret nor does he think about the world around him and issues affecting society. His disdain for his morality pushes him to kill Tony.

After analysing the different character's attitudes, we can argue that the morality – intended in a dialectic between good and bad – is connected with the idea of chance. Good is identified as a proactive attitude in the pursuit of success. By looking at the

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[84] Ibid, 189.
[85] Ibid, 186.
[86] I think the term 'dream' is more appropriate here. In Sufism dreams have different functions: they are shared within the Sufi group for psychological benefits and understanding, past-life dreams describe happenings from previous lives and as such they cannot be interpreted; teaching dreams give spiritual guidance. Refer to Llewellyn Vaughan-lee, *The Lover and The Serpent- dreamwork within the Sufi tradition* (Longmead: Element books, 1990).

journey in general terms, the message is a negative one suggesting that there is no possibility of change, as death brings to an end the very attempt to change destiny and immorality, as represented by Nick. There is a sense of inevitability that wisdom and learning cannot overcome. Tony himself, even if given a second change, does not manage to improve his present and his future. The message is that even if we are given the chance to return back to the past with the knowledge of now, we are bound to repeat the same mistakes, which is closer to Nietzsche's understanding of eternal return.[87] In this regard, in the interview with Aleks Sierz, Crimp says:

> [...] there are two obstacles – internal and external. In the scene at the temporary bus stop, he believes he's changed, become more assertive, but meets an external object – the woman, Heather who resists him. When he meets Franky, the Human Resources person – and refuses the job she offers him- the obstacle is internal: he can't accept the job because he realises himself is incapable of change.[88]

In this play, inevitability dominates and the power of choice is an illusive sense of control. Tony is in this sense close to the character of Sleepwalker, who can reflect upon his existence but fails to act according to his own morality.

This theme associates the characters with the ritual/spiritual dichotomy. The spiritual is connected to a philosophical and moral approach to human existence, where death and destiny compete with life, free will and triviality – Nick's indifference. The spiritual is intended in its philosophical connotation to be linked to the idea of history and an intellectual approach. Lawrence is the intellectual, whose idea of spiritual is an intellectual reflection on learning and historical wisdom. The ritual is, instead, presented in this play in the form of magic by Lamine's character, who as an old blind man is very similar to Tramp/Old man in Gao's play: they both like drinking and have a sardonic approach to life. Lamine's request for payment for his service to Tony, however, makes the ritual part of a consumerist society, based on what Thomson calls 'a casuality of competitive values.'[89]

The string pulling between Tony and Lamine at their meeting is the 'purest' example of rituality in the play and it creates a metaphorical space dividing reality – Tony's – and ritual – Lamine's. The sad Mrs Dent, Lamine's assistant, completes the picture with her presence, adding a sense of mysticism and mystery to the play as she goes in and out the room. Similarly to Gao's play, the sense of a journey presents a

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[87] Cf. footnote 14.
[88] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 93.
[89] Peter Thomson "Crimp, Martin (Andrew)," in Thomas Rigg, ed., *Contemporary Dramatists*, 6th ed (Detroit & New York: St James Press, 1999), 124.

reality deformed through the 'magic' or surreal intervention. The intervention of magic links this play with Ouspensky's belief in esoterism. The answer to the question on whether or not Crimp embraces the Russian philosopher's idea is a negative one. Crimp shows the impossibility of individuals to make use of their consciousness and by doing so change the course of the characters' own lives. Tony, like Ivan in Ouspensky's novel *Strange life of Ivan Osokin,* fails in his attempt to change his destiny even if helped by an 'higher mind' represented by the figure of the magician. Moreover, by presenting Tony's end, Crimp represents death as an inevitable occurrence and part of an overruling design. Crimp shares a similar pessimism with Gao: humankind cannot uncover their true self and take control of their lives. While in the case of Gao's play the protagonist is trapped in his subjectivity, which for its part is enslaved to the 'disciplines' of the outside society, in the case of Crimp's play, Tony is trapped within a universal dimension of time and space and cannot reach his 'true being' but is dominated by a trivial society. In terms of approach, Crimp's approach tends towards modernism; first, he applies a mystic esoteric ideology promoted in the first half of the twentieth century, which anachronistically denied the study of the unconscious but instead followed a metaphysical approach to consciousness. Secondly, even if Crimp does not totally embrace such an ideology, he seems to use an epistemological approach that questions the order of the different dimensions of time and space as well as morality itself, but is still embedded within a dualist discourse between a metaphysical and realistic dimension.

However, Crimp's work could also be interpreted as a parodic game using magic and the esoteric to ridicule humankind's existence in its meaningless. Interpreting this representation in a social sense, and referring back to Thomson's above definition, Martin Crimp's irony condemns ambition and individualism, the quintessence of modern society by showing its failure. He announces some of the motives of 1990s British theatre[90] following 'the pursuit of new theatrical and dramatic discourses' from left-wing writers rejecting 1980s Thatcherite glorification of capitalism and materialism.[91] The use of parody and the social contingency of his work defines this play as being Postmodern.

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[90] Refer to Berhard Reitz, and Mark Berninger, ed., *British drama of 1990s* (Heidelberg: Universitätverlag C., Winter 2002); Rebecca D'monte and Graham Saunders, *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[91] Keith Peacock, *Thatcher's theatre: British theatre and drama in the eighties* (Westport, Conn.; London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 9.

4.2.2 Theatrical representation: the structure of the play; subjectivity and the self-referential function of language

This section will be looking at the physical construction of this play, which is important for building up the protagonist's journey and influences. Subjectivity plays a dominant role, as in Gao's play, it is significant to reflect on the connection between the character of Tony and Nick, who can be considered as Tony's alter ego. Another aspect to consider is the role of language as the protagonist of the play.

The play is constructed by apparently changing the chronological order of events. We use the word 'apparently' as in real terms this is not what really happens in the play or rather it is not what only happens. The first scene is repeated in the second scene, of the second act with a new beginning and new end. The addition at the beginning reveals how the meeting between Tony and the couple Nick and Kate had actually started and ended. We see Tony approaching the couple he had observed from a distance while going to the pub every day. He approaches them with the intention of making their acquaintance and to communicate to them his discovery from a previous meeting with Lawrence, who had given him Lamine's business card. Considering that Tony is killed by Nick in the second act at the end of the second scene, the events that occur chronologically afterwards could not have actually happened but could only have been imagined. Moreover, considering that Tony asked Lamine to go back in time, the second act might describe the events chronologically after the events occurred in the first act. Lamine's spell should have caused a time shift to the past, Tony being the only one aware of such a time change and the one initiating the change. This should have been the case with the second act where Tony, though, seems to be completely forgetful of what happened in the first act. When he meets Lawrence in the launderette, hypothetically for a second time, his character has lost all awareness that he had previously met Lawrence. There is no sign in the second act of events of the first act, as if it were not the continuation but a 'repeat' of the first act. Tony's forgetfulness finds its explanation through the connection of Crimp's play with Ouspensky's novel; Ivan in the novel gradually loses his memory and the consciousness of his future, so what has happened cannot then be changed.

Another reading of the play would consider the indication given in the title of the play *Play with Repeats* and interpret it literally as an actual play where events are repeated. It would appear to be merely generating stylistic experimentation, a structural game. In the play there are several moments where the characters repeat the same line

almost in a mechanical and playful way, like in the following dialogue between Franky, the HR staff member and Tony, who refuses his promotion:

Franky That's ok. I understand.
Tony That's not me.
That's all. It isn't me. Is it?
Well, is it?
Franky I can't say. How can I say?
I don't think so. No.
Tony No.
Franky But listen you're welcome to think-
Tony I don't want to think. Thank you. No I don't want to think.
Franky I understand.
Tony It's not me. This isn't me.
Franky I understand.
Tony You keep saying that.
You keep saying that. [92]

The above lines show an interesting use of language; in their dialogue there is no mere repetition of lines but one character repeats one word of the other in a chain-like fashion. In the end, Tony wants to end this chained pattern of repetitions but ironically he repeats the same sentence twice. The same motif of repeats is used during the conversation between the two, when Franky answers the phone and repeats the same sentence[93]. The presence of repetitions does not occur in the second act. The character seems to be losing the awareness that he lived through the same events beforehand. In this sense the repetition of lines in the dialogue might be the projection of the character's perception of his new reality affected by the awareness of his return back to the past. According to the critic Irving Wardle, repetition is also used in the play *No One Sees The Video* produced after this play[94]; in Sierz's view, repetition in theatre creates a comic effect, to describe an insecure character or to indicate an unsettled emotion.[95]

In terms of structural representation, the play can be read as enacting and investigating at the same time the boundaries of chronological representation. The structure of the play together with the dialogues overcome the line between space and time, where the same locations are revisited in turns and the time links the moment in a sort of circular module. This technique used as a tool to represent the ideology and the message of the play has been used, more as an aesthetic device, by Crimp in his

[92] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 228.
[93] Ibid., 224.
[94] Irving Wardle, *Independent* (Sunday 2 December 1990).
[95] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 113.

adaptation of Chekhov's *Seagull* in 2006[96]. At a more theoretical level the story of this play demonstrates the Brecthian principles of highlighting to the audience the fictional nature of theatre[97].

It is possible to further connect this principle to the idea of history since the outlook on history is an underlying theme of this play. Lawrence uses the term 'fictionalise' when referring to history; this play demonstrates the 'fictional' nature of human possibility and of memory.

This links to the second aspect of this play, subjectivity. Memory is mentioned here in considering the first reading of the play as a journey through the character's imagination, hence is a subjective construction in Bergson's and Freud's terms.[98] Indirectly we can talk of a sort of alienation from Tony's side, who psychologically obsessed with his desire for change isolates himself from the outside world – his colleagues, the people meeting in the pub – and tries to impose on them his vision. It is this sense alienation that leads him to his demise, when he is killed by Nick. Crimp's position differs from Ouspensky's belief in the power of consciousness and intelligence from a mystic point of view and his denial of any ideology of the 'unconscious'. As far as this kind of reading is concerned, it is important to take into account the extract from *Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* as mentioned in the published edition of the play:

> If you go back now, everything will be the same or worse [...] You must understand that chances are limited; no one has unlimited chances. And you never know when you have used the last chance.[99]

The quote intentionally selected by the author and presented with the play suggests that the play is Crimp's personal interpretation of his principles. Going back in time does not actually mean that the future can be changed, actually the opposite can happen, and the future might even be worse. In this regard, the magician prophetically says that people are to some extent responsible for their own life and can influence their own existence by enacting their own consciousness. Crimp denies that control through the enactment of consciousness is possible, as to some extent the character is unable to see through his own consciousness, and unable to follow the way of the 'sly man.'

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[96] Martin Crimp, *Chekhov's 'The Seagull'* (London: Faber and Faber Paperback).
[97] Bertold, Brecht, *Brecht on theatre*, 171.
[98] Bergson (French philosopher of the early 20th century) talks about memory as confusing and emotionally charged, Freud works through memory in treating patients but being aware that memory reflects the patient's subjectivity. See Henri Bergson, *Matter and memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1988); Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through' (Further recommendation on the Techniques), *Standard Edition* 12 (1914): 148.
[99] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 179.

Referring back to Crimp's interview with Sierz, Crimp explains the failures of the character in terms of an external and internal obstacle in the change of his present and future: Heather, rejecting Tony's advances is the external obstacle, refusing his promotion is an internal obstacle, represented by the internal awareness that he himself cannot change.[100] In both cases the character is condemned to his own destiny, as said in the previous part destiny acts as an overwhelming force.

Crimp does not use soliloquies unlike Gao where the character expresses his thoughts. Tony communicates his thoughts in a way that is not totally understood by the others. Tony's use of 'this is not me'[101] suggests that the character is taking distance from himself. It is not him that can make changes –his subjective unconscious is both uncontrollable and hides secrets. Once dead, Tony's colleagues find newspaper cuttings of adverts for estate houses, which uncover a side unknown to them, part of his desire, a sign of his dreams. To some extent, Tony is a dreamer. The word 'dream' is used here to define future aspirations, ambitions obsessed or rather rooted to an ideal of reality, product of an illusion of a better present. Lamine, who describes a state of mind where the dreamer does not seize opportunities, uses also the word 'dream'. Tony tries to confront his destiny yet he fails because in actual fact Tony does not have the ability to carry his dreams through into actions. Tony is not the only one to have dreams, the other characters like Lawrence and Heather are isolated within their own ideals, dreams, trapped within their own subjectivity, and they also fail.

By experiencing the beautiful architecture of stately homes – the same stately homes whose pictures Tony had collected – Heather projects her own dreams and to some extent, her own 'self' onto an external architecture structure. We should not forget that stately homes are large houses in the British countryside, which because of historical interest are open to the public, thus her projection is influenced by her interest in history and her desire to possess a space open to the public as well as reflecting her unconscious desire of being herself 'gazed' at and contemplated. Her ideal of beauty is connected to an idea of 'good' and perfection. By doing so, she makes the understanding and the studying of history a matter of subjective interpretation. Her failure is found in the very subjective nature of her aspirations and dreams.

Lawrence's belief in history has failed him as history itself cannot help him to change the present and future. His failure has a double effect: he finds his retreat in magic where he can get away from rationality, and he has lost his social status by living

[100] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 6.
[101] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 228.

as a homeless person from one launderette to the other. Lawrence is a symptomatic figure representing the past projected onto the present. He looks to change the future, but as he lives himself in the past, he has lost his connection with the present.

In the case of Heather, Lawrence and Tony, history in tune with Foucault's idea of history disconnected from truth[102], fails them due to the subjectivity of their very approach but also to the nature itself of a subjective 'history'.

A further aspect of this play is the relationship between the protagonist and the text, language. In an interview Crimp mentions the relationship of the protagonist with the text as part of the character's existential struggle:

> It was very interesting to see Tony as a powerful figure fighting against destiny. But that certainly means playing against the text.[103]

Like in *The Country* references to language are found in this play, and an analysis of this self-referential language will explain the above quote. The first self-referenced statement adds a positive connotation to language:

> **Tony** We are human beings. And perhaps I am repeating myself, but for human beings everything should be possible. The language we speak tells us that. It tells us that the potential- by which I mean not only what we could be, but also what we might've been – the potential is infinite.[104]

Language demonstrates the full potential of humankind for changing their own destiny. This positive statement about language is related to the positive mood of the character, who feels that can win over his own destiny. The second reference to language is indirectly expressed in the first short story Lamine tells Tony in their meeting[105]. This story like the one about death belongs to the Sufi tradition[106]. He tells the story of the idiot who arrives at a city and goes to sleep in a broken box near Waterloo and then decides to write his own name in chalk on the box for fear that he won't remember his own name once he wakes up. Another man steals the box with the chalk mark. The idiot wakes up and he says to the other man:

> [...] Well, it's perfectably clear who *you* are – but in that case who the fuck am *I*? [107]

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[102] Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of Knowledge*, 205; moreover, in *Madness and Civilazation* he talks of 'history being written by the conqueror', defining the work of historians as simply disguising the truth, where 'monumental history is in itself a parody'. In Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization,* 160-161.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 192.
[105] Ibid., 200-201
[106] Idries Isha, *Tales of the dervishes: teaching stories of the Sufi masters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967).
[107] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 201.

Sufi stories can be interpreted in different ways, for instance the most common use as part of psychological processes for their majority[108]. However, moving away from this function of Sufi stories, one can look at this story in terms of identity and language.

Metaphorically the telling of this story stresses the importance of the use of naming; the attachment of the name or being attached to a name defines one's own identity; having lost this tie the idiot cannot, in fact, recognise his own identity. In the play *The Country* the couple's children lacking their names seem to be perfectly acceptable, reading this referring to the concept of the 'name' by Derrida.

> Thus the name, especially the so-called proper name, is always caught in a chain or a system of differences. It becomes an appellation only to the extent that it may inscribe itself within a figuration [...] Is it not evident that no signifier, whatever its substance and form, has a 'unique and singular reality?' A signifier is from the very beginning the possibility of its own repetition, of its own image or semblance. There is no chance of encountering anywhere the purity of 'reality', 'unicity', 'singularity.'[109]

Naming fails to distinguish one's own uniqueness – us from the 'other'. Within this perspective, while the story describes a need from the part of the character to keep his identity, the end of the story suggests how easy it is to lose one's own name – it is merely a sign written on a box – hence one's own identity, which demonstrates Derrida's concept.

This discourse on identity can be related to another phrase that the protagonist Tony often uses: 'This isn't me', which is not by itself referential to language but might clarify the story and the statement on Tony's fight against language. This statement is used once in the first scene when Tony talks about his own experience of having lost an opportunity. The same statement is repeated once Tony talks to Franky, apologising for rejecting the job promotion[110]. In both cases the statement is said in a situation that implies an opportunity has been missed and the realisation of one's own failing; in the first case, the statement is associated with a situation where the character feels he can succeed; in the second case the statement is said almost to justify his own words and decisions. The statement literally denies one's own identity and more generally is meant to deny Tony's responsibility of his own failure. However, in an even more general sense contradicting Tony's discourse on the infinite human potential, the statement seems to suggest that the lack of rationality, of taking control of one's own decisions

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[108] Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, *Catching the Thread: Sufism, Dreamwork and Jungian Psychology* (Inverness: The Golden Sufi Centre, 1998).
[109] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 89, 91. See also Jacques Derrida, "Saulf le nom," in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995), 85.
[110] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 227.

leads to individual's own failures. Using Lamine's words the loser is, in fact, a blind dreamer who does not wake up to opportunities. In regard to the Sufi story, the phrase 'This is not me' takes away the sense of human identity from the perspective of the loser, being the idiot represented as loser *a priori.*

In terms of the discourse on language, the use of statement 'This isn't me' tells us more about the relationship between the character and language. This statement has been used also earlier in the play when Kate and Nick describe their own condition as actors on stage[111], hence defining their condition as individuals continuously acting a role. Ironically, though, Kate defining herself being an actress in fiction and real life becomes is both gazed at as the character and the gazer as the actress. She talks about her own character in a similar fashion as Gao's 'neutral actor' In this light Tony can also be considered as character, hence as a fictional individual; by using 'this is not me' statement he denies of his own identity as an individual-actor, playing the character of Tony and saying that the individual-actor is actually not a loser. Linked to the idea of language the second use of the statement comes to represent the character losing confidence in his intent, whereby language is failing him. Therefore, in this context the sentence 'This is not me' is the character expressing that it is not actually himself talking.

Another referential statement which is often used by Tony is the expression 'that's an odd choice of words,' which is often employed by characters in response to Tony's statement 'Something I'm quite clearly destined to do', which is repeated in a few parts of the play. These, linked to Tony's statement, highlight Tony's strange use of language but also the peculiarity of his intent, which can be traced back to Crimp's statement at the beginning of this section. Tony is fighting against his destiny as well as fighting against language itself; at the beginning he feels language is an accomplice as he tries to bend language.

The dynamics between Tony and Heather further define Tony's fight with language where, like in *The Country,* the word poetry is used. Tony together with Heather refers to poetry as a sublime use of language:

> **Heather** Or speak, speak as they did …
> **Tony** Like a person of that time … Speak poetry…
> **Heather** Because don't you ever get the feeling the words we use …
> **Tony** We can't express ourselves …
> **Heather** …that the words we use are just the shadow of a language that we've lost. And perhaps if we could speak that language…
> **Tony** I know…

[111] Ibid., 200

Heather Speak poetry ...or dance....[112]

Heather's vision of language is related to her vision of history, similar to her emotional projection onto the stately homes. There is also an underlying almost romantic nostalgia for a lost time and lost language with the bitter awareness that a return to that time and that language is not a possibility. Language is used in her words and the essence of a lost time, of which the present is just a shallow resemblance.

Heather speaks of language as a living entity that changes and is modified throughout time. Time is considered as a modifying agent that also affects language, whose changes are seen as a part of a negative process with an uncertain future. Heather and Tony define poetry as being the sublime example of the past language as well being the form of language connecting them to an idealised dimension, where both characters are closer to happiness. After this dialogue the characters start to dance in a sort of forgetful state. This forgetful state is mostly created by Heather, who believes in an idyllic reality and in the ideal of beauty, which is then in this case broken by the same Tony, who almost rapes her. His attempt to rape her can be even read as a sort of reaction, an attempt to suppress the female character's belief, because this one is different from his own. It is one of the signs that the character, Tony, is losing his fight against destiny and against language. He had not succeeded in expressing himself as he is overwhelmed by Heather's loquacity. In a metaphorical twist, having lost control of language, he can only use actions and violence to affirm his control. Referring to Tony as a fictional creation, Tony becomes an actor at the service of the author's text, which is external to him yet takes control over him.

The second act is just the continuation of a slow unfolding towards his delayed demise. Tony the character is only a puppet acting and enacting his own demise. The audience is already aware that he has failed in his intent and that they expect neither a redemption nor surprise.

Talking about language itself we cannot talk of disintegration of language as language takes over as a fictional means and as a menacing presence almost shaping the character's destiny. Like in Gao's play, language is not described as mere utterance as Tony confides in language and its potential; Lawrence, also, believes in the power of the words and communication: he had published a book that reduced him to poverty. The same language they have confided in condemns the characters. Language is therefore described as an uncontrolled overwhelming force that crushes the characters' dreams

[112] Ibid., 240- 241.

and aspiration. Like in Gao's case, the idea of language is similar to Foucault's idea of a code, rules of the same law –'disciplines'– that enslaves human being.

If we connected this interpretation to the idea of subjectivity, we can argue that Crimp creates a parody of the idea of subjectivity, through the use of repetition, of a complex narrative structure as well as a parody of Oupdesky's belief in human rational potential. Within this context, the play shows how the characters lost in their subjectivity try to challenge their own destiny by changing the course of their life, and as fictional entities they try to challenge their destiny. They end up trapped within their own utopias, their own dreams. The only survivors are Nick and Kate, as anti-hero they manage to survive, thanks to their very apathy, and because they do not trespass the fictional role assigned to them.

4.2.3 Gender Discourse

This play like Gao's explores a male character and therefore the concept of masculinity in its relationship to women within the context of feminism and gender discourse. In the case of this play it is important to look at each character individually from a gender point of view.

This play gives a different perspective from the previous play as it focuses mostly on a male character in a situation of inferiority. In this regard, Sierz argues that in general 'the clichés of social discourse about feminism are questioned, inverted' and in particular about Tony's behaviour towards women that 'the politics of a masculinity in crisis implicitly argue that violence is always an immanent threat'.[113] The clichés of social discourse, the first statement, refers to feminists' attempts to make the female body neutral, which would connect to the failings of feminism as announced in *Attempts On her Life*; the second refers, instead, to the men's resorting to violence in order to respond to the 'immanent' threat of feminism. I would argue that this play is more focused on the latter aspect as will become clear when looking at the gender dynamics.

First of all, it is important to highlight that his desire for Heather pushes him to act and to pursue his ambition, where love and career are connected as the driving forces at the origin of his decision. This aspect of his journey informs us of his need to find a woman and of his issues in relating with women. This makes him a very similar character to Sleepwalker, who does not feel totally at ease with Prostitute. Tony is depicted as a loner living in a small room, too small for him to show to women. After meeting Heather he starts thinking about pursuing love and relationships. It is

[113] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 150-151.

interesting to look at how he associates the size of the room to the impossibility of having a relationship, which implies a sexual and gender connotation. It is interesting to note that Freud associated 'room' with female genital orifice,[114] which would explain his sense of discomfort. Furthermore, in a more psychological sense a small room can be interpreted as almost an inadequate space to contain another, especially female. He also finds his situation at work difficult, where he has to interact closely with women. Hence, the link between the ambition for career improvement and search for love; an improvement in career terms would mean an improvement in personal and emotional terms.

The portrait of Tony at first glance highlights his sense of inadequacy and fragility, which is part of his weakness as a 'male' character. The way Tony relates to the other female characters in the play will clarify his relationship with women. The first encounter with Kate, Nick's girlfriend, depicts him as an assertive individual facing an intelligent woman. He becomes friendlier and he makes her feel at ease. Apart from a brief ironic remark, Tony's confidence is mainly of a linguistic nature; he can control language and he can use his eloquence to make his point. In his meeting with Franky, the situation changes; firstly Franky the HR person is in a powerful position as she is the one who can influence his promotion. This weakens his position in the conversation. His eloquence is not as effective and his statements are brief and almost stuttered at times.

Franky is portrayed as a mother figure, as she seems to look after her employees as her own children; she lets Terry, totally illiterate, work in a position where basic literacy skills are important; she worries about Barbara, who is suicidal and depressed. When she describes what the supervisor position – the one Tony is aiming for – entails, she only defines people according to their personal traits; she describes a sort of assistant-father figure that might assist her in her job. The power she represents, the motherly attitude and the demands coming from the job clash with Tony's renovated sense of individuality, renewed masculinity, which was present in the determination to change the course of his life. His refusal, his indecision can be interpreted as a character who is confronted with both an independent yet motherly figure, which affects his masculinity.

Weakened by this encounter, he faces Heather. The interaction between the two is not atypical; he uses kindness and curiosity to attract her. However, again, he is faced

[114] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 189, 192, 197.

with a stronger female character, who does not appear as independent and overly career-focused as Franky, but her loquacity overwhelms him; he hardly talks in the dialogue. The violence as said earlier is a consequence of Tony's lack of eloquence. The violence is also a response, though, to the desire for repossessing his ancient masculinity, connected to a model of what Benyon calls 'hegemonic masculinity', born on the industrial revolution celebrating physical strength, male camaderie and courage[115] etc. that was perpetuated in different shapes or forms throughout the centuries. Rape is understood by Beynon as the victor's spoil of war.[116]

The act of violence can also be read as a total misunderstanding on his part. When he starts raping her, he says:

> **Tony** You see the mistake I made last time...I frightened you by being weak. I'm sorry.
> **Heather** Just fuck off of me, fuck off...
> **Tony** I respected *you* as a *person* ...
> **Heather** Help me...
> **Tony** What I failed to do last time was that- KEEP STILL- was that I needed to assert myself...
> **Heather** What do you mean last time? What d'you mean?
> **Tony** But this time. Look I'm in control. Ease up, Heather. Relax. Pull this up...
> **Heather** Please. It's a mistake...
> **Tony** I love you. I'm in control...[117]

His statements suggest that he associates his failure of being accepted by Heather with his lack of control, of asserting himself as a man at their first meeting. In his view he is not raping Heather, he is asserting himself as a man and therefore he expects her acceptance. Tony understands love for a woman where a woman needs to be controlled as an *'object'* and with no respect. His conviction is based on an understanding of female sexuality that still requires and demands brutality. The equation love and control becomes the key aspect of the communication.

His misunderstanding derives from confusion over gender roles and sexual practices in the aftermath of feminism. On the one hand, between the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of twenty-first century, there has been a sort of effeminised and emasculated male as result, which has had an impact on the relationships between sexes as commented by Coward.[118]

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[115] John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002), 16.
[116] Ibid., 67.
[117] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 243.
[118] Rosalind Coward, *Sacred Cows*, 56.

On the other hand, the mark of old traditions is still present as women still search for the old macho stereotype, a man that can provide protection, security etc this phenomenon is called new-manism.[119] The 'macho' prototype still excludes, though, both violence and control – women still refuse violence and want independence. This weakens and emasculates even further men like Tony, who is confused between an old and not so old model of their own role. In a desperate search for love he opts to embody the older patriarchal model, with the illusion of finding love and control.

Postfeminists like Coward would argue that emasculation makes men the victims of a new society[120]; on one side, men are comfortable neither in their new nor in their old role, whereas women have learnt to accept themselves and 'natural' weakness and desires. Heather, for instance, accepts her 'biological' need to be a mother and her motherly feelings do not clash with career aspirations. In this sense her vision contrasts Lawrence's political vision that by denying the old categories of women as mother and mistress rejects also their sexuality:

> [...] yes. Shouldn't let herself-historically speaking- be defined in terms of their sexual role i.e. wife, mistress, mother. He says that's degrading. [...] Look, Lawrence, a woman can't turn her back on her sexuality anymore than a man can. She can't become neutral. Because, isn't that neutrally equally degrading? You can't ignore what you biologically are.[121]

In actual terms, admitting her status as a woman is admitting her own identity, as promoted from the second wave of feminism[122]. Heather becomes the stereotype of a new woman accepting herself, empowering the male language – Lawrence's teaching – and elaborates on his teaching, which becomes her own ideology.

Moreover, Heather's freedom and easiness in approaching Tony is a symptom of a woman comfortable with her own sexuality: she uses her loquacity to charm Tony.

Her identification with a big architectural space as a projection of her own mental and emotional space contrasts with the small room Tony lives in. Her aspirations are bigger than Tony's, who, instead, seemingly so much influenced by her starts collecting pictures of stately homes himself. His love for her affects his own freedom and aspirations.

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[119] John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture,* 119.
[120] Rosalind Coward *Sacred Cows,* 57
[121] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 237.
[122] Second wave feminism's origin can be traced back to the emancipation 'wave' of the 60s in the West. "Introduction" in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1997), 3.

In order to understand this vision of gender depiction, we still need to look at other characters. Another parallel is the relationship between Nick and Kate, which reveals the dynamics of their relationship especially in the second act. The defining moment of their relationship is the following after Nick has killed Tony at the end of scene two, act two:

> **Kate** Come on.
> **Nick** Don't patronise me. Don't patronise me. I'm in control.
> **Kate** yes yes yes. All right. Come on.
> **Nick** I am. I'm in control. *(Faint laugh)*
> **Kate** I know. Come on. Move.
> Move now.
> *Nether of them moves. Blackout.*[123]

The above interaction shows how Nick like Tony tries to impose his own masculinity on Kate by rejecting her order to move, which, however, she repeats resolutely as if she had not listened to him. By accepting his statement, Kate gives him some sort of illusion that he is in charge. At the end, neither of them moves as if they were both stuck in their power struggle. The 'lovely couple' as described by Tony shows its own issues and the gender power struggle.

In this light we can interpret Nick's act of violence against Tony as a form of affirming his own masculinity and way to preserve his control over Kate. In his eyes Tony could represent the emasculated man, represents a sort of a danger directed towards Nick's own sense of masculinity and therefore Tony needs to be 'removed' by making use of violence.

The killing itself has two opposite effects; first he kills another man, a potential fellow; secondly, he becomes criminal without solving the issue. In both cases he enacts women's hidden hatred against men by becoming a tool in their hands. Another male character, depicted in his weakness and used by women is Lawrence. He preaches equality for women, denying his patriarchal heritage but he is, then, left alone and poor with no dignity.

Lamine is the only one representing that old patriarchal tradition; he is the one looking after Mrs Devin, victim of her husband's male brutality. As magic is often connected to the idea of power, his use of magic places him in a position of superiority.

In this play Crimp opens a discourse on gender that is more groundbreaking than in the previous play. He represents through this play emasculation of masculinity taking place using a post-feminist dialectic that condemns previous trends of feminism for

[123] Martin Crimp, *Play with Repeats*, 269.

becoming an authoritative force against men, in the same way as the patriarchal discourse against women. This gender representation shows more clearly than Gao's play the protagonist's emasculation sending a strong message about the effects of feminism; on the other hand, Gao's representation is more subtle as Prostitute becomes the 'gazed' and feminine 'gazing' mirror of masculinity insomuch the other characters are the fragmented representation of his subjectivity.

4.3 Comparison

As we have seen in the analysis of Crimp's play, there are many links and similarities between the two plays. Both Gao's and Crimp's plays deal with a male character engaged in a journey of self-discovery at either a conscious or unconscious level and they communicate a similar 'existentialistic negativity'. In comparing the two plays we look mainly at three aspects with the debate on Modernism and Postmodernism: the existential journey of their protagonists, the theatrical representation and some observation on how these plays deal with gender dynamics.

First of all, we need to define the existentialist nature of the two protagonists' journeys in the two plays. Sleepwalker's journey is casual and occurs mainly at an unconscious level; it is casual because his journey is induced by the character's imagination when he has either fallen asleep or has been reading a book on the train. The unconscious dimension is given by his wandering throughout his dreams or imagination.

Tony, instead, intentionally induces his journey, which occurs at the level of 'external' reality throughout the dimension of time and space. In both cases, however, there is an element of magic, which in Gao's play works mainly as a theatrical function and in Crimp's play explains the protagonist's journey back to the past through time.

The negativity that both plays communicate derives from the impossibility of both characters to live up to their morality and to succeed in their intent. In both plays the two main aspects to be considered about their journey are the morality and the 'ideal' of the two protagonists' and the cause of their failure or 'damnation'.

The sense of morality is quite different in the plays; Sleepwalker talks about a general definition of good and bad, whereas Tony's morality, contrasting triviality, is linked to the idea of catching the right opportunity, of being the active maker of his own destiny, which in other words means making use of human potential.

Both Sleepwalker and Tony share a similar ideal, as they both believe that individuals can take control of their own destiny and 'reality'. Sleepwalker takes control

of his 'existence' and aims at isolation from other people and alienation from his instincts, following the Zen model of transcendence. Tony talks about the possibility of changing his own destiny, which is linked to the esoteric belief in the 'higher minds' reaching their true being through the understanding of the forth dimension. In both cases the ideal is dictated by a sense of unreachable spirituality – mostly esoteric in the case of Crimp's play – which translates, though, a material need for pursuing a sort of individualism. In both cases, it is their mistaken sense of individualism that fails them, as both protagonists cannot really reach their 'true self' or in the case of Gao's the highest level of transcendence. They both live on the surface of their 'self' and fail in their intent because the very idea of reaching the 'true self' is an impossible and absurd query. Within Foucault's discourse on freedom and 'disciplines' and Lacan's subjectivity, Gao's play communicates more effectively than Crimp this impossibility by questioning the idea of the 'unconscious' itself: first of all, Sleepwalker's dream is merely the projection of the effects of social, cultural and emotional conditioning from the outside world; secondly, the dark side of the very unconscious – violence, instincts – are a 'poor' reaction to this conditioning and mainly work against the very individual. Crimp shows this impossibility through questioning the idea of personal and universal history as a process of learning from past mistakes. At a spiritual level, in this case it is to notice how Gao embraces Western negativity by denying the possibility of transcendence, like Crimp. Ironically, while rituality and belief in the spiritual have been abandoned by Gao, in Crimp's play the opposite is true. Unlike any other of Crimp's plays, this play embraces the esoteric and magic as reference to the ritual and spiritual, which comes across, however, only as a parody of the spiritual itself.

In both cases their negativity fits the spirit of Postmodernism by Foucault and the difficulty for individuals in reaching their true self. Gao's play is a 'perfect' postructuralist work: the image of the book is gateway of imagination and framework to the narration as well as the fragmentation of the protagonist's unconscious projected onto the other characters, who are also part of his unconscious. Crimp's play, instead, mostly constructs a parody playing with the dimensions of time and space. While to some extent Crimp's play appears to be merely a game of artistic experimentation using repeats of the text itself in a sort of pastiche fashion, it also strongly communicates the sense of mockery for the past and its ideals.

In terms of theatrical representation, there are major differences between the plays. Gao's still continues to create an exciting physical and emotional experience using magic, props, all the space available on stage and making this play like *The Other*

Shore. Crimp's play is still very textual and static in its theatrical representation; Crimp even talks of the protagonist engaged metaphorically in a conflictual relationship with the text itself, which adds a very important function to language as a character in the play.

Gao's theatrical language has matured in this play in comparison to the previous plays; he makes a sophisticated use of the principle of the actor's neutrality or tripartition, which is not applied to all characters but only to Sleepwalker and only at the end to Prostitute. The use of actor's neutrality not only creates a sense of distance between characters and audience or the actors and their characters but also directs the focus of the viewer to the fragmentation of the character's self and the narration. Together with other devices, such as the use of the image of the book and of the door, the metadrama functions as filter to the protagonist's representation and the narration itself, building up different layers of Sleepwalker's personality – his conscious and unconscious sides– as well as narration – the travel in the train, the journey through the unconscious, the conflict-ridden relationships between characters. There are not as many references to the function of the language as in Crimp's plays but here its role becomes integral part to the building of subjectivity. Its function is very similar to that of Crimp's play as it also demonstrates how enslaved human existence and the individual's unconscious are to language, intended as an external set of codes, part of the 'disciplines' imposition from a 'ruling' society.

We can argue, though, that Crimp's play more effectively communicates this idea through the many self-referential statements to language and the use of metadrama. This is despite the fact that the latter is not so innovative as Gao's. At a pure theatrical and artistic level, both plays, however, stress the fictionality of their representation taking to extreme the Brecthian principles of theatre within theatre.

The last aspect to be considered is the gender discussion, which probably sees both plays focus on the construction or de-construction of the masculinity expressing the effects of feminism on the construction of men's role in society and the definition of their sexuality. In both cases there is a representation of emasculation– especially in Crimp's case. His later plays focus, however, more on women: these plays are an expression from male writers of a sense of discomfort facing a cultural and social phenomenon created by the very ideology fighting for sexual and gender equality.

As a whole, both plays can be positively linked to Postmodernism more than other plays are, especially because of a 'fragmented' negative representation of an illusory reality. In the previous chapter of this thesis, it was argued that the writers had

started to create a dimension of their own that could make the question on Modernism and Postmodernism redundant. In the case of these two plays, the two authors are unmistakably creating their own cultural and artistic vision, but the parodic and experimental nature of their plays link them to the cultural Postmodern tradition, as they use the principle of metadrama, the idea of meta-fiction, the game of time and space shifts. Gao's abandoning the idea of a Zen theatre is probably the effect of his 'exile' in Western Europe. In Crimp's case, instead, we should not forget that this play was written before the others analysed in this study. A better definition of their artistic and cultural vision will be possible in the analysis of the last four short plays in this study.

CHAPTER 5

To the limits of experimentation

This chapter presents two plays that mark a turnaround in Gao's theatre, as they do not build up to establish the ideological and artistic values typical of his post-exile plays or so-called Zen theatre, but express his exhaustion with these values. One cannot argue that Gao is resuming elements deriving from his pre-exile theatre, but one can argue that this exhaustion had started in the previous play and is perhaps the result of Gao's questioning the very essence of his artistic values. The plays analysed in this chapter perhaps announce a return to Modernism.

There is a contrast between Gao's plays and the radical experimentation of Crimp's plays, which remain embedded within Postmodern theatre and are more coherent with the playwright's own artistic agenda. The concluding chapter to this thesis analyses two plays by each author: *Weekend Quartet* and *Le Quêteur de la mort* (*The Death Collector*) by Gao and *Whole Blue Sky* and *Fewer Emergencies* by Crimp. The first part of this chapter compares the first of these two plays by each author, and the second part the remaining two.

5.1. *Weekend Quartet* versus *Whole Blue Sky*: abandonment of Zen values in search of a new modernity versus radicalisation of postmodernism

Weekend Quartet, written in 1995, is a semi-realistic play in which the four characters have names and are depicted in a semi-realistic situation. The ritual and spiritual aspects seem to have almost totally vanished, to the extent that Gao seems to have abandoned his project of Zen theatre. Liu Zaifu talks about Gao's abandonment of his Chinese roots[1] by creating characters and situation that are universal[2]. This play concerns a meeting between friends; Laobei, a middle-aged painter, and his partner An, an established writer, invite to their house in the countryside their friend Da, a middle-aged writer, and his new girlfriend, the younger Xixi. The play sees the four characters engaged in a series of dialogues and monologues.

Unlike other Gao plays analysed in this thesis, the characters have names and are defined both socially and naturalistically. The play is not, however, a naturalistic piece in the traditional sense; it still lacks a plot and culminates in the depiction of two

[1] Liu Zaifu *Gao Xingjian lun*, 32

[2] This should be taken in the context that critics like Liu Zaifu saw a clear political stand in Gao's previous plays like for example *The Other Shore*.

couples exchanging their respective partners in a random and playful manner. Moreover, as the title suggests, the structural link between the different scenes is the musical element 'quartet'; the play is divided into four parts and played by four characters, whose interaction and dialogues follow the structure of a musical composition, where changes in mood are more important than changes in plot and the characters' speeches at times use repetitions and rhyming patterns, creating a certain musical ambience. In one of his early essay on *Bus stop* Gao stresses the importance of musicality in theatre.[3] In many ways this play is reminiscent of older plays written before Gao's exile, such as *Bus Stop,* where characters waiting at a bus stop engage in all sorts of dialogue and self-confession, are semi-realistic and are depicted in a semi-realistic situation.

5.1.1 The relationship real/surreal versus ritual/spiritual

The transition from the real to the surreal is a gradual one, which is also connected to the physical elements of the play, the location and setting. It is important to look at the location, the ambience – as conveyed by the characters' words – and how these are linked to the physical aspects, such as the atmospheric agents – the weather and the countryside. In this regard, it is important to note that Gao intended this play to be performed not only on stage but also as a radio play.[4] In comparison with Gao's other plays there are hardly any stage directions, and the physical elements of the settings are conveyed in the characters' speech as is typical of radio plays. Few stage directions appear at the end of the play, when they mostly refer to the characters' movements. For instance, in Quartet Four, the characters in the text are described as shaking their heads and going behind the door, stage directions that would be conveyed with difficulty in a radio play. The sudden change in the use of stage directions described above shows a technical inconsistency, which is probably casual but implies an important effect.

In most of the play, the characters and their environment are seen through their speeches, as though they themselves were telling their story in a self-referential way, as has already been seen in Gao's other plays. Once the stage directions start, when analysing the play, it appears that the characters' actions are increasingly present and become part of the narrative itself. This is an interesting aspect but may be just casual rather than intentional.

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[3] Gao Xingjian " Tan dou shengbu xiju shiyan" *Gao Xingjian xiju yanjiu -Dangdai xijuja yanjiu congshu*

[4] Gao Xingjian, *Zhoumo si chongzuo* (Taibei: Lianhe wenxue chubanshe, 2001), 121. It was performed and aired on the radio in France (France Culture) in 2000 and in Hong Kong (Radio Hong Kong in 2002).

With this consideration in mind, the landscape described through the characters' words and through the settings and their movements forms the process whereby the real turns into the surreal. It is not by chance that the opening line of the play refers to the weather through Laobei's words:

> The afternoon, you're both in the garden, the sunshine is very good, and mixes with the dim light of the setting sun, so she says [...][5]

At the beginning the weather is described as sunny, also in a poetic sense. Moreover, it forms part of an idyllic picture of the play's setting, the garden. The garden defines the situation of the characters Laobei and An, as owners of the location and, to some extent, defines also their social status. It is, in fact, the first place that the guests admire. Later in the play, Laobei adds:

> This is the Garden of Eden on earth; God (Lord on high) isn't the only one who can own a garden.[6]

Laobei's statement could have several connotations. The first is that it stresses the hosts' privileged status in social terms, as living in the countryside near the woods makes them special, individualises them – they are not part of the crowd living in the city. Later on, Da talks of the people in the city as an undistinguished mass trapped in their small accommodation, constantly prisoners of their troubled existence. This brings us to the second connotation, the spiritual nuance of Laobei's definition of their situation as 'godlike'. The countryside, or living in the countryside unaffected by the trouble of the city and its materiality, already places the character closer to God or to transcendence. In this regard, the dichotomy countryside-city as a parallel spiritual-material is quite similar to that of Crimp's play *The Country*, where the countryside is often referred to as a place of peace and spirituality.

However, the first reading of this statement is devoid of any reference to the spiritual – the use of 'godlike' may simply be a hyperbole stressing the characters' wealth. Regarding the literal meaning of the statement, Laobei seems to express amusement and pride at having friends around and presenting them with such a gorgeous view and location. This connotation is a material one, possibly derived from a capitalist point of view, where belongings and property privilege people. It is important to note that this is the first time Gao has used this connotation in one of his post-exile plays, as though he has been influenced by Western values and lifestyle. Relating the statement to the development of the play, Gao might be levelling some criticism at

[5] Ibid., 5.
[6] Ibid., 11.

materialism and individualism, which had started to affect Chinese society too as a consequence of the economic development of the recent years. One should not forget that Gao relentlessly argued against the commodification of art, against materialism and the unethical values of market-based capitalism.[7]

At the beginning of the play, An expresses her gaiety at the thought of the gorgeous weekend that awaits her guests and herself. The characters' apparent gaiety at the opening of the play forms an ironic contrast with the dramatic turns the play takes. The serenity is gradually broken down once the characters start to interact with one other. The message is quite clear: material comfort does not bring happiness or spiritual appeasement.

The characters' internal conflicts, as mapped out by the reference to the weather and the location, are a constant throughout the play. In this sense, in so far as the weather reflects the mood of the characters, its role as a background element creates the play's atmosphere. This is maintained throughout Quartet One, where the characters still repeat that the weather is gorgeous, but a new physical relationship between the characters and the surrounding environment is established. The characters explore the inside of the building, the house belonging to Laobei and An, which also becomes a reflection of the characters' mood and more importantly their thoughts, dreams and desires, as again the physicality of the environment is conveyed via their dialogues and soliloquies. Hence, once inside in the house, this physicality is described by the moments of idyllic depiction, which uses the images of light and darkness. These images resonate of where the physicality if the stings play was also described by the stage directions and images of light and darkness.

In this play, the only tangible material element is the door, which is an isolated element whose location is not well defined. The door is far more than a partition between the rooms of the house; it becomes part of the dreamlike ambience the characters create. In the first instance, we see Laobei and Xixi isolating themselves from the group. Laobei has invited her to see his painting in his studio:

Laobei A door …
Xixi What did you say?
Laobei It's just opened …
Xixi What's opened?
Laobei You say that it is a door …
[…]

Xixi I see …

[7] Gao Xingjian, "Wenxuede liyou," 605.

Laobei Total darkness, you can't distinguish much.
Xixi Shall we turn all the lights on?
Laobei No need, it is an illusion, an image…
Xixi Are you talking to me?
Laobei You say you were thinking aloud.
Xixi Understood.
Laobei You don't need to show that you can understand, just try hard to see clearly.[8]

The door becomes a symbolic element representing the access to Laobei's studio. In a game of words, presumably while Laobei and Xixi are entering the studio, Laobei talks about the painting once the door once it has been opened. In the context of the above depiction of this particular scene, the two characters' statements might not be referring to the painting at all. It could just be a coincidence, with Laobei talking to himself about the scene both characters are performing until Xixi interrupts him and asks him about the unfinished painting.

Laobei At a dim candlelight you cannot even distinguish the back of a woman. You quietly approach her; you wait for her to turn around. […] You put your hand on her shoulder and she turns around towards you. Oh, no, it is a shrunken old man's face. The candle falls onto the ground. You once again sink into darkness and you consider picking up the candlestick. But you only manage to feel the broken pieces of an oil lamp. You think that it is all so real, or is it a dream? […] your legs and feet are ice-cold, as if you had no trousers on. You curve your waist to touch your feet, but suddenly you realise that your legs are artificial.
Xixi Really?
Laobei They looked like plastic. What's so funny?
Xixi She says she didn't laugh. Are you also not real? Just asking.
Laobei You say you're talking about an illusion you had.
Xixi And what about her? Is she an illusion as well? [9]

Given the ambiguity of the scene, we could assume both possibilities but the connotation of the door would remain unchanged. Whether the door is seen as the subject of the painting or as part of this scene talking about total darkness and of Laobei's illusion of approaching a woman by candlelight, the image of the door stresses the fictional dreamlike dimension of the scene, using the usual self-referential function of representation within representation that will be discussed later.

As mentioned above, there is a close connection between the location and the characters' mood, as the weather reflects their mood. The weather changes and amplifies the escalation of the characters' interaction, their conflict-ridden relationship with one another. The first change in the weather occurs in Quartet Two, which depicts

[8] Gao Xingjian, *Zhuomo si chongzuo*, 34.
[9] Ibid., 36-37.

the day after the guests arrive at the house. This change is again conveyed in the characters' words. Xixi and An are looking at a cloud spreading fast, which looks like 'an overgrown camellia.'[10] As the cloud announces rain, its connotation is a negative one in An's words: it is a menacing presence announcing unpleasant events such as pollution and, more naturally, rain. The speed of the spreading cloud is clearly a negative reference to the unpredictable changes and developing turmoil between and within the characters. However, the dialogue between Da and An as they look at the rain still describes the rain as part of the idyllic landscape.[11]

The change also corresponds to the characters' interaction, drifting into a semi-realistic ambience and spiritual reflection on life and death. Xixi cuts her hand washing a teapot, which disturbs the peace of the idyllic weekend. The rain serves mostly to stress the individual internal conflicts of each character that had already been announced by Laobei's words and his dreamlike depiction. All the characters are affected, and there is a drastic change in their moods, as they seem to be a victim of their own hallucinations.

It is important to note their use of reference to physical elements, as this determines the spiritual extent of their internal conflict. This has already started to some extent in Quartet Two but continues in Quartet Three, where the characters seem to gradually succumb more and more to their internal monologues. Like Laobei, in Quartet Two An talks about a dream and uses the image of a shadow, a kind of ghost, which is looking at a tree on fire in the wilderness. Unlike Laobei's, her depiction uses a part of the countryside, a lonely tree, as a strong dramatic element, reminiscent of an inner struggle in relation to the countryside. Earlier in the play, An describes the snow-covered countryside as lonely and remote. This is similar to the female character, the wife, in *The Country*, whose relationship with the countryside is a negative one. It is not very clear why An sees the countryside in such a negative light. At the beginning of the play living in the countryside seems to be her choice so that she can write, but her dream informs us of her unhappiness and discomfort, which is strictly linked to Xixi, who is seen as a threat to her. An refers to Xixi's youth and beauty; when she talks of herself she uses images such as the living dead, a ghost, her reflection, which is alien

[10] Ibid., 48.
[11] Ibid., 50.

even to herself. Natural forces seem to participate in her internal drama, expressed through the image of a ghostlike, shadowy figure.[12]

Up to this point, the surreal element of the play from the depictions of the countryside is conveyed by the characters' projection of their moods onto their depiction of their surroundings.

Da's depiction in Quartet Three plunges the play into a true reflection of the surreal, and therefore of the spiritual, which is achieved by highlighting the natural elements of the countryside within the narrative of his monologue. In this regard, talking about this play, Liu Zaifu defines Gao's theatre as the 'status theatre' (*zhuangtai xi*), meaning theatre if the spiritual status:

> In particular, Gao can change characters' internal status into vivid images, whereby the so-called status is a kind of spiritual status, something that cannot be easily caught but actually exists. [..] Gao manages to bring this invisible status into drama. The status can be hardly described in words but Gao manages to do so by experimenting with words.[13]

To some extent, this status can be traced back to Da's depiction, where the surreal/spiritual element is , however, far more complex than what Liu Zaifu refers to.

His monologue talks about a dream, which describes an actual journey of the mind between materiality and spirituality, in which the dichotomy mentioned above – between city/materiality and countryside/spiritual – is reaffirmed. He talks of a city surrounded by mountains, which appear as desolate as the city. In his dream he experiences a sense of drifting, wandering over the mountains. He can see the city transparently clear for what it is and the elements composing it. The first part of the city he sees is a temple, followed by the bell tower, pavilions, mansions and so on.[14]

He describes a kind of epiphany of spiritual transcendence, which is not totally devoid of emotional involvement; as he experiences a sense of pleasure, while streaming through the clouds. Here, the clouds assume a positive connotation: a kind of renewed sense of freedom. This sense of freedom and pleasure is threatened by the fear he feels whilst still experiencing an attraction to the sight of the city, described as a place of desolation. It is interesting to note that this viewpoint brings the listener or audience closer to the city, so that we can almost see the inhabitants in their houses.

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[12] Ibid., 63.
[13] Liu Zaifu, *Gao Xingjian lun*, 33-34
[14] Ibid., 77.

Gao seemingly uses again the opposition outside/inside mentioned above, with outside meaning positive and inside meaning negative. The internal dimension is first referred to as a place of desire, then of trouble and anxiety, with the inhabitants of the city trapped within their dwellings and cursed by fear. If we link the two images, desire becomes a parallel to reality and anxiety, also linked to a sense of materiality. Later on, the mountain turns into a big elephant, on which Da has to find his balance. This image is reminiscent of the Buddhist monk seeking balance in *Between Life and Death*; if we say that the mountain represents transcendence, Da is describing his experience of trying to find his spirituality amid temptation, desire, materiality and freedom.

The difficulty is so great that his sight is no longer clear and he has to close his eyes. In this regard, it is important to remark that freedom and pleasure in drifting is, however, linked to a sense of emotional materiality and not of spirituality in a transcendental sense. This is confirmed by the image of the character failing to keep his balance.[15] Da is the only character who, in this monologue, makes clear reference to a kind of surreal connection to spirituality. For instance, when Xixi looks at the sky in a similar way to Da she speaks in practical terms, denying the need to see clearly at all.

> **Xixi** [...] The sky is murky and grey, and the clouds are spinning around high above. She knows that if she stands at the edge of the road hitchhiking, a car will stop; a man will be smiling face and will open the car door. Life is so simple; you see through it, and let it run its course.[16]

Her words indicate that she is the most pragmatic and the most cynical of the characters and the only one who seems to be indifferent to the changes in weather taking place throughout the play.

Looking back to the changes in the physical elements described throughout the play, a further change in the weather is described in the stage directions. This signals an increase in the dramatic tension and sense of disaster, which is expressed by An, who sees her house totally flooded with water and expresses a sense of defeat. The house, the building, stands for a security that has been threatened by external agents such as the weather and the location itself, the countryside[17]. This confirms her conflictual relationship with the countryside and the expression of her fears and instability. The increase in tension is briefly interrupted in Quartet Four, when all the characters are seen playing a game, and the image of the door is used but here forms part of a collective experience and the characters' playful interaction.

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[15] Ibid., 78.
[16] Ibid., 82.
[17] Ibid., 87.

Afterwards, Laobei talks of the brightness as reality succumbs to the brightness of snow[18], which covers everything and disorientates him – there is a sense of indifference as he loses his path. The countryside again becomes a menacing place, like in Da's depiction, including through the image of birds and crows and the ultimate image of Laobei sinking in the cold water standing on a cube of ice. Laobei's fears are material concerns about growing old and seeking fame and success, which portrays him as more materialistic than Da. The image of the snow, which has been used in other plays such as *Between Life and Death,* forms part of a metaphorical depiction not of spirituality but of materialistic concerns.

In the end, the weather brings all the characters to a precarious personal reality where the surreal is a projection of their personal experiences, with the exception of Xixi. With regard to the idea of the spiritual, the weather and the setting of the stage create an ambience different from that of Gao's previous plays; despite the poetic connotations attributed to them, the reference to atmospheric agents creates a concrete link with a physical tangible reality. Moreover, as mentioned above, the weather and the physical settings mirror the characters' internal conflicts, which are rooted in material and personal concerns, possibly with some exceptions in the case of Da. His concerns seem to be of a more philosophical nature. The dream he talks about seems to describe a kind of epiphany, which, however, shows, though, great differences from the depiction of the spiritual in previous plays.

First of all, previous plays describe the reaching out to the spiritual as a process, a journey the characters go through as the play develops. In this play, the process is depicted by Da's words in his monologue, delivered in a kind of storytelling fashion; he states that he is talking about a dream, which creates a framework for his narration. Secondly, in terms of storytelling, Da's tale concerns the failure of his search for the spiritual; which is not defined as such, as his tale is presented within the framework of a dream. In this play, it is Da's speech that uses hypotheticality *(jiadingxing)*, as the recollection of his dream exploits a resemblance to reality but is essentially unreal, which determines the surreal nature and the fictionality of his speech. Thirdly, the ritual is disguised as a kind of pagan naturalistic representation where the spirituality is

[18] Ibid., 105-108.

governed by the forces of nature. The elephant could be seen as the only element possibly alluding to a Buddhist ritual.[19]

Looking at the three considerations above, it can be argued that references made to the spiritual and the ritual are rather vague. The character's relationship with the spiritual and the ritual is one of admiration and longing for an unreachable ideal of which he is not totally aware. If one connects the depiction of his monologue to his presence in the rest of the play, Da's torments could also be seen as devoid of existential meaning, his behaviour becoming a matter of aesthetics that defines him as a character.

The condition described here is that of melancholy. In Chinese philosophy as well as literature melancholy was an inevitable part of life, as described in Zhuangzi's "Daozhi" as well as an aesthetic dogma in the Tang Dynasty (618- 907)[20]. Melancholy here implies desire and longing rooted with materiality, which was considered one of the evil in Buddhism[21]. This sense of longing and desire was present in other plays but was easily overcome by the attainment of 'enlightenment' through the gradual dissolution of language. This does not take place in this play as, like Da, the characters remain rooted to their materiality, as seen for example in Laobei, with his desire for fame and concerns over ageing. As a result of this type of representation, the characters become embedded in a Western nihilist morality, which could be read as the effect of Western influence on Chinese culture. This could open a discourse on materiality and individualism in China deriving from a process of economic development and what Raymond Lee calls 'obsessions with purchasing power and demand for consumer goods'.[22]

Another aspect of Da's attitude that confirms a nihilist mood in the play is his reference to the concept of freedom, which is mentioned a few times in Da's speeches. It is described as a heavy burden and adds to his misery:

> You wander between one word and another, between one phrase and another without end. The language could rattle like steel fetters, being a burden on you; now it is as frivolous as this slut here. What does freedom of language mean to you?[23]

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[19] "According to the *Jātakamāla of Ārya Śūra* (fourth century CE) the person historically known as Buddha was born as an elephant during one of his earlier lifetimes. This huge elephant lived alone like an ascetic (a preview of his later life) in a verdant forest far from human habitation." In Carl Olson, *Different paths of Buddhism*, 21.

[20] Qian Zhongshu, "Shi Keyi yuan," *Qizhuji* (1985): 108.

[21] There many terms in Buddhism to describe evil and most of them refer to desire (*attho-* desire, want, need, *mamaṅkāro* - desire, *apekhā-* desire, longing etc.) Shundo Tachibana, *The Ethics of Buddhism* (London: Routeledge, 1992), 73.

[22] Raymond Lee, *The Tao of Representation- Postmodernity, Asia and the West* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1999), 14.

[23] Gao Xingjian, *Zhuomo si chongzuo*, 62-63.

In this sense, the idea of freedom depicted here totally rejects that of Foucault, which has been previously discussed. In Chapter 4 Gao took a stand similar to Foucault's by depicting characters pursuing freedom, as the characters remain to some extent trapped within their own subjectivity. From Da's words it emerges that freedom is achievable but meaningless. Here freedom is meant in the sense of intellectual freedom – freedom to express one's own thoughts and to travel from one country to another, outside national boundaries[24]. In *Nocturnal Wanderer,* instead, freedom was an existential and spiritual condition in a surreal situation.

Freedom, therefore, can be conceived of as a condition of living outside national and intellectual boundaries, as such causing the character to lose his identity, which conflicts with Gao's belief, as explained by Gilbert Fong with reference to Gao's own exile, in freedom as a necessity for the writer to flourish.[25] Da is depicted as living in a limbo between spaces, which is symbolically depicted by his dream about keeping balance on an elephant; this limbo is a place of discomfort. From this point of view, Gao is not totally contradicting the message of *Nocturnal Wanderer*; to some extent Da, like the other characters, is trapped in his subjectivity, thus the personal freedom he refers to is only apparent. However, unlike the characters in *Nocturnal Wanderer*, Da is aware of his existential crisis and directly questions what freedom actually brings to mankind.

This brings us to the second aspect of freedom in this play. Gao, speaking through Da, distances himself from Foucault's language.[26] Da seems to accuse Postmodern man of living a meaningless existence, with language having become a meaningless tool. This can be linked to Laobei's statement about art, itself seen as an illusion:

> **Laobei** Men cannot surpass God can't. Man longs for immortality, so he racks his brain to fabricate this and that illusion, and art is an hallucination that man has fabricated for himself. [...] art is another illusion created by men,.
> **Da** so you have turned to painting women, are you not concerned that also these are illusions too?[27]

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[24] Gilbert Fong speaks of Gao's personal and artistic exile. "Freedom and Marginality: the Life and Art of Gao Xingjian" in *Cold Literature: Selected Writings by Gao Xingjian.* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003).
[25] Gilbert Fong, "Un Esprit Libre à la marge," *L'écriture Romanesque et théâtrale de Gao Xingjian*, ed. Noël Dutrait (Aix-en-Provence: Seuil, 2006), 217.
[26] Cf. Chapter 3 footnote 22
[27] Gao Xingjian, *Zhuomo si chongzuo*, 56 -57.

Their conversation suggests that an artist or writer cannot take the place of God, which corresponds to the humility Gao ascribes to the artist.[28] Moreover, art, like reality, is an illusion, which can be related to the image of the door in Laobei's dialogue with Xixi mentioned above. In particular, in the same dialogue Xixi asks whether or not she is real, which seems to address the philosophical Postmodern question 'does reality exist?' However, insomuch as Da's concerns over the meaninglessness of language implies the existence of a 'meaningful' language, Laobei and Xixi talking about illusion, art and reality pose a modern kind of question: 'what is reality?', Xixi's question implies that, whilst she may not be real, Laobei definitely is.

The Modernism of this vision is closer to Baudrillard's criticism of the Postmodern condition as being dominated by the illusions of signs and representations. According to Gane, Baudrillard believed that a life of illusion would be unbearable, and that there was a need to materialise this world.[29] With Baudrillard, there is no return to a Modernist or realist vision of reality and language, but he has realised the implications of a Postmodernist attitude, where hyperreality totally overwhelms the real and creates illusion. Baudrillard defines the hyperreal as 'the real for its own sake, a fetishism of the lost object of representation, the ecstasy of denegation and its own virtual extermination.[30]

Hyperreality is created by an excess of reinvention of the real, of emulation of the real by the media, which reduces reality to 'simulacra', fragments of its origin:

> Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – it is the map that engenders the territory.[31]

After defining his vision of reality and representation, Baudrillard, according to Raymond Lee, looks for a detachment from Postmodernism and formulates the notion of 'symbolic exchange'. According to Lee, whilst also influenced by Nietzsche, this concept is generally believed to draw on Battaille's notion of 'the accursed share', which in turn comes from Mauss's idea of the gift:

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[28] Gao Xingjian, "Wenxuede liyou," 606
[29] Lee Gane, *Baudrillard Live* (London: Routledge, 1990), 73.
[30] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993), 57.
[31] Ibid., 58.

> The gift is *our* myth, the idealist myth correlative to our materialist myth [...] The primitive symbolic process knows nothing of the gratuity of the gift, it knows only the challenge and the reversibility of exchanges [...] The primitives know [...] *that nothing is without return*, not in a contractual sense, but in the sense that the process of exchange is inevitably reversible.[32]

From this, the symbolic is defined as:

> [...] neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a 'structure', but an act of exchange and a *social relation which puts an end to the real*, which resolves the real, and at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary.[33]

The 'symbolic exchange' refers to economic interaction, advocating a collectivism that would erase the value-creative action and, therefore, the deranged representation of this value,[34] which amounts to the Postmodern condition. The word 'value' is intended not only in economic terms but also as 'excess of meaning', excess of signifiers. The reversibility of the symbolic implies that signs are received and sent back, which creates a cyclical chain erasing the possibility of value. The implication of this concept is that it is the disempowerment of the forces of representation and the dominant discourses – to use Foucault's terms – which create illusion and vacuity. Baudrillard in *Fatal Strategies*[35] speaks of a cosmic, an all-embracing object, a 'pure object with no desire', yet part of the sequential chain to which all actions are subordinated, which could be the solution to the Postmodern condition. This aspect of Baudrillard's ideology seems to be similar to Gao's Zen idea of 'enlightenment'; to some extent, Baudrillard refers to a transcendental essence, which is, however, rooted in an existential materiality of the world. Baudrillard's notion of a pure object is intended to bridge the gap between reality and imagination, reality and surreal, and to some extent it reinstates the objectivity and materiality of a reality. It is important to point out that Baudrillard rejected Modernism and Postmodernism, in the sense of a process of overwhelming capitalism, in favour of a pre-modern, primitive era.[36]

This play by Gao is dealing with similar issues related to a meaningless existence, i.e. the postmodern condition, leading to an unbearable vacuum. However,

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[32] Raymond Lee, *The Tao of Representation*, 43.
[33] Ibid., 45.
[34] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 204.
[35] Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990).
[36] "Baudrillard draws upon the romance of the non-rational to undermine the smugness of modern planners who seemingly believe in the infallibility to reason" Raymond Lee, *The Tao of Representation*, 76.

unlike Baudrillard Gao is not attempting a solution, an alternative, in this play,[37] but is returning to deal with Modernist values rather than venturing into other avenues. This makes his writing more modernistic in a traditional sense than Baudrillard's philosophy. As was actually heralded in *Nocturnal Wanderer*, his belief in the Zen seems to have been abandoned, and cannot be used as an alternative to the disillusionment communicated by Postmodernism. According to Annie Curien, the lack of the spiritual and ritual could be purely accidental, as she stresses that his intentions with this play include the abandonment of logic and the temporal in favour of the musical element[38], which describes this play as mostly being about aesthetic experimentation.[39] This, moreover, corresponds to Gao's idea of language as an instantaneous experience as mentioned in his 'Reason for Literature'.[40] In the light of its approach, this change can be read as a return – perhaps unconscious, yet a return nevertheless – to a secular experimental naturalism and to the personal 'ethical' concerns with which he imbues his essays[41]. This will become clearer when looking at other elements in this play.

5.1.2 Language and subjectivity

In this play, the exploration of subjectivity has a more marginal relevance precisely because the play has lost its randomness. As the characters have realist connotations the roles of the characters give an insight into its self-referentiality and language. Gao chooses to portray characters who are themselves writers, such as An and Da. The play sees An engaged in her intellectual search for a story to write about; the play starts by mentioning her and her passion for writing. The hierarchal differentiation of the characters is created by the definition of writer characters and non-writer characters, which is connected to the idea that the play is about representation, Da and An are deeper characters in so far as they are engaged in their own reflections and are the most self-absorbed, intellectual characters in the play; whilst Laobei's and especially Xixi's insights are more superficial and marginal. Although Laobei is an artist, this role seems to be undiminished by his materialistic interest. This difference in interaction between the two couples depicts An and Da as if they were the narrators of the play, observing the events happening and engaged in their internal monologues on stage,

[37] It is different case in his essay and essays.
[38] Anne Curien, "Solitude et échos vocaux dans l'écriture de Gao Xingjian," 179-180.
[39] Ibid. 180.
[40] Gao Xingjian, "Wenxuede liyou," 605.
[41] Among many concerns we find need to protect his own inegridity, and pessimistic reflection on the possibility of salvation through enlightenment. See respectively Gao Xingjian, "Bali suibi," *Guangchang* (February 1991): 14; and Gao Xingjian, "Guoja shenhua yu geren diankuang," *Mingpao Monthly* (August 1993): 117.

which creates a parallel story to that of Laobei and Xixi, suggesting the idea of fiction within fiction.

As well as from the characters' roles in the play, we can deduce from the characters' internal monologues how subjectivity is depicted in this play. Da and An are both engaged in an internal rather than an external struggle: An's struggle consists of both resentment towards and fear of Xixi and the search for a story to write about, which seems to be secondary. Da is trying to come to terms with his identity and past. Laobei is lost in material concerns. Xixi's expressions of feeling are concise and are mostly rooted in reality: she speaks about her father and her history rather than losing herself in depictions of dreams.

The element of the dream is present, as all the characters talk about a dream except Xixi, which does not necessarily make her the most superficial character, but definitely the one we know least about in terms of internal conflict. The absence of subjectivity, or the masking of her subjectivity, is an important aspect of this character as it suggests the impossibility of knowing one's own subjectivity and the superfluousness of this. She appears the only stable character: she does express some of her concerns about being an object of men's desire, but seems to accept her situation. In terms of language, she is also the one who uses it the least; she employs it only to communicate directly with other characters, whereas the others could be said to use an excess of language. The other characters become almost caricatures of themselves, totally absorbed in their thoughts, and their subjectivity causes them unhappiness.

Therefore, with regards to the other characters, their excess of language is also an excess of subjectivity, where language cannot be understood as a mere stream of unconscious as was the case with some of the characters in previous plays. Here it is framed within the narrative pattern of their monologues as they attempt to rationalise their unconscious, their dreams and their thoughts. There is, however, an internal struggle in their coming to terms with their subjectivity and internal conflict, as they do not seem to find peace, they appear subordinate to their frustrations – especially the writers, who are more in touch with both their emotional and linguistic selves. According to Lacan, language is always a place of subjectivity where the conscious mixes with the unconscious and the symbolic is never totally unaffected by 'imaginary' language[42].

[42] Anthony Elliott, *Social Theory Since Freud: Traversing Social Imaginaries* (London: Routledge, 2004), 37.

Whereas, in the previous plays, language and its disintegration lead to a deconstruction of subjectivity in the attempt to reach the originary self, trapped in their own limbo between unconscious and conscious, the characters never reach the 'originary self'. The fragmentation of language no longer represents a solution in the form of a way to reach the originary self; neither silence nor linguistic fragmentation presents a way to escape the curse of unhappiness. Gao seems to dismiss the idea of the Zen belief in a language transcending all languages or silence itself. Moreover, by presenting Xixi as the only character who remains unaffected, Gao seems to suggest a message opposite to that of his previous plays. The kind of language used by Xixi is aimed at setting up a channel of communication; drawing on Jacobson's definition, the language Xixi mostly uses could be considered either phatic or conative or both.[43] She uses language mostly to interact with the other characters, to react to them or respond to them, and hardly ever in a metalinguistic[44] sense as do the others. The apparent significance of Gao's contrasting Xixi with the others can be interpreted with reference once more to Baudrillard: we can regard language as applying Baudrillard's idea of simulacra, advocating that a centred subjectivity creates virtual space: 'Only the subject desires; only the object seduces.'[45]

The metaphor of the door can further explain the above consideration as it creates what is described as a 'mirror effect', linked to Baudrillard's idea of virtual reality. At one level the image of the door can be interpreted as access to the unconscious. As mentioned above, the door is an ambiguous element; it could symbolise the entrance to a dreamlike dimension and Laobei's subjectivity, his dreams that he shares with Xixi, where Xixi may or may not be a figment of his imagination, part of his illusion. It creates the opposition outside/inside, with the door being the way to access this inside, which here signifies the reality of prohibited desires, intimacy. The use of images such as darkness and light confirms the psychological connotation of the door, which can be traced back to early metaphysic Buddhist idea of consciousness process *citta-vīthi* that describes two types of processes, both using the image of the

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[43] Conative function is all directed towards the addressee (Jacobson divides the factors involved in communication into three categories: the first being the ADDRESSER, the second refers to both CONTEXT/MESSAGE and CONTACT/CODE; the third being the ADDRESSEE) and is equivalent of the expression in the evocative and imperative; the Phatic function is set for contact, ' displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualised formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonguing communication" in Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and poetics," in *Modern criticism and theory: a reader* (3rd ed.), ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 145.

[44] "[...] language has a metalinguistic function when it focuses on the code as opposed to the other components of the speech situation." Deborah Schiffrin, *Discourse Makers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 303.

[45] Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 111.

door as reference: the mind-door process or *manodvāra*, and the five sense-door processes *pañcadvāra.* The elaborate process described in Buddhaghosa's[46] books *Vissudhimagga* and *Atthasālinī* accounts for the process of cognition taking places at 'subsequent stages of the consciousness stream as a function of various mental faculties.[47] This thesis is not the place to go in detail about Buddhist psychological conception but it is interesting to note that many scholars saw a connection between the mind-door process and Freudian idea of the 'eye consciousness.'[48] In the play the door becomes an access point to the darker hidden side of the mind. Light becomes an accomplice of the unconscious in creating illusions, in the same way as art is created by characters speaking out their own desires. In this particular instance, the door, the depiction of light and darkness, would have not had a strong theatrical effect on the radio audience, as they would not have been able to see the staging but would have only been informed of the ambience through the vivid depiction of the characters' words.

Apart from defining the dreamlike dimension, the door serves to define the relationship between the characters, to create boundaries between the reality of the play – the four people spending the weekend in a countryside home – and the subjectivity of the character of Laobei. Laobei shares his desire with Xixi as she passes through the door with him and becomes the object of his dream. An's speech interrupts their dialogue, talking of them going through the door and inappropriately leaving the door slightly open. Her reference to the door adds a different perspective to the scene; it is an outside perspective that informs us of the pair walking through the door, which objectifies the illusion, the dreamlike dimension, and adds a semi-realistic connotation despite still being the projection of another character's subjectivity. In other words, An's statement projects her own unconscious – her resentment – which is a response to Laobei's action of walking through the door with Xixi. In a metaphorical sense, the door can be described as an access point to the characters' intimacy. The door serves to define the interaction of the characters' subjectivities with one another and the spaces surrounding them. This function of the door is confirmed by its use later on in Quartet

[46] He was a famous Indian Buddhist scholar of the 5th century mainly famous for *Vissudhimagga* (*Paths to Purification*). Cf. Bimala Charan Law, *The life and work of Buddhaghosa* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1923).

[47] Noa Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2005), 174.

[48] Padmasiri De Silva and Robert Henry Thouless, *Buddhist and Freudian Psychology* (Singapore: NUS Press, 1992), 23.

Four, when all the characters play a game and the door becomes part of their game, all the characters' unconsciousness and subjectivities are interacting together.

Unlike in the previous plays the door cannot be interpreted as access to the individual's subconscious but to the collective unconscious,[49] which, as expressed by Carl Jung, is 'an omnipresent, unchanging and everywhere identical quality or substrate of the psyche per se',[50] part of the personality/consciousness that connects one person to another, an archetype of human inherited instincts. According to Jung's notion of creativity, it is the poet/artist as a 'collective man' that can shape and bring the collective unconscious to life.[51] The door becomes the symbol/vision as created by Gao/the artist that connects characters to each other's dreams and fears. However, the only flaw in the reading of this depiction is that Jung's notion is nostalgic for a human universality. Even though this notion would fit Gao's approach to literature and its universality[52], the play depicts characters still trapped in their individuality, which is proven by the sense of alienation that An expresses while looking at Laobei and Xixi.

Taking a step beyond the idea of the collective unconscious, the door can be interpreted metaphorically as creating and framing a virtual reality, to use Baudrillard's terms. At another level, drawing on Baudrillard's ideas on photography, the door can be compared to the function of a camera lens. The lens is seen as a filter between reality and the subject, where 'the photographic object is simply the trace left behind by the disappearance of everything else'.[53]

In terms of the representation and fictionality of reality, he adds:

> The photograph is not a image in real time, it is not a virtual image, or a numerical image, ect. It is analogical and it retains the moment of the negative, the suspense of the negative, this slight displacement which aloud the image to exist in its own right, in other words, as something different the real object; in other words an illusion- in other words, as the moment in which the world of the object vanishes into the image, which synthetic images cannot do because they do not longer exist as images [...][54]

Baudrillard talks about 'reciprocal murder' a process whereby a 'transfusion' between the object and the subject takes place:

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[49] The concept of collective unconscious is linked to Jung's belief in the 'systematic observation of the psyche as a whole,' in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Psychological Types* Vol. 6 (Princenton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 966); also refer to C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious v. 9 (The Collected works of C. G. Jung)* (London: Routledge, 1991).
[50] C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: The Archetypes*, 7.
[51] C.G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* trans. by W.S. Dell & C.F. Baynes (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1944), 192-194.
[52] Gao Xingjian, "Wenxuede liyou," 606.
[53] Jean Baudrillard, "The Art of Disappearance," in *Art and Artefact*, ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg (London: Sage, 1997), 28.
[54] Ibid., 29.

> In this act of reciprocal disappearance, we also find a transfusion between object and subject. It is not always a successful transfusion. To succeed, one condition must be met. The Other – the object – must survive this disappearance to create a 'poetic situation of transfer' or a 'transfer of poetic situation.' In such a fatal reciprocity, one perhaps finds the beginning of a solution to the problem of society's so-called 'lack of communicability.'[55]

In linguistic terms, Baudrillard argues that photography, especially the kind that defies interpretation or the formation of further signification, recreates original objectivity, by reducing the distance between the subjective and the objective.

Referring back to the play, in the context of Baudrillard's outlook, in a metaphorical sense, Gao is using the door as a camera lens gazing at the characters as objects in action, immortalising them and framing them. Within this process, the frame that the author uses to observe them and to depict them objectifies the subjective of the characters. In the light of the above considerations, one can argue that in this play the function of language is reinstated as an 'objective' tool carrying 'subjective connotations'. This can be linked to the elaboration on the notion of the 'symbolic exchange' as developed in *The Perfect Crime*[56] by Baudrillard, who talks of a symbolic system, with a different conception of the word 'symbol' from Lacan's in terms of the influence of subjectivity. Unlike Lacan's approach, the symbolic exchange can resist subjectivity as part of a circular mechanism of exchange, which has almost ritualistic connotations:

> Simply, the object is *what escapes the subject* – more we cannot say, since our position is still that of the subject and of rational discourse. At any rate, we cannot rely on the pretext of an insufficient development of the scientific, intellectual or mental apparatus. The apparatus has given all that it can give; it has passed beyond its own definitions of rationality [...] It is the event horizon, as they say in physics, beyond which nothing makes sense and nothing at all may be discovered.[57]

In this sense language, the objective element, can resist the virtualisation, the creation of simulacra, hence resisting the meaninglessness of the postmodern condition.

Another element that can confirm the above hypothesis is the use of the third- and second-person pronouns, which creates a sense of the observer being observed by

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[55] Jean Baudrillard, "Photography, or Light-writing: Literalness of the image," in *Impossible exchange*, (London: Verso 2001), 40.

[56] Jean Baudrillard, *Perfect Crime*. (London: Verso, 1996).

[57] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. (London: Sage, 1993), 54

observing oneself. As has been mentioned before, the actors demystify the characters on stage by creating a further layer projecting an external perspective, which depersonalises the characters. This stresses the play's fictionality but also objectifies its development, hence the characters' subjectivity. In terms of performability, the use of the third- and second-person pronouns has become mostly a matter of style and form. As argued previously in this chapter, the characters' speeches also have the function of narrating and describing the environment of the play itself. This creates a sense of narration. With reference to Baudrillard's idea of the camera lens, there is a sense of a narrative construction whereby a controlling writer orchestrates the subjectivity of the characters. We could argue that Gao is no longer questioning representation and is approaching reality to reflect on the possibility of representation.

In terms of structure, there seems to be logic of construction: the search for writing material shared by both Da and An is an underlying motif that directs the deployment of the play, as is the 'quartet' of the title, which forms the framework of the play. The four characters are like notes linked to a common thread within the structure of the composition. A precise pattern is followed within each scene, or quartet: people speak in one enclosed dialogue after another and we rarely see all four characters talking together. This adds an interesting aspect to the play, which follows the pattern of a musical composition – since music is an abstract artistic form par excellence, this play should emulate its abstract nature. Despite the semi-realist connotations, the play does not lose the abstract quality deriving from its musical structure; instead, there is coherence and cohesion following a pattern that enables the narration to flow better and create a sense of expectation.

In this sense, the language used is that of rationality, of the conscious, in particular of the writer's structuring of the play. There is still a connection whereby actions mirror words, and the enactment of language is more about representation. Language is the tool that provides information on the staging, being empowered in the absence of stage directions; language has regained its narrative function with regard to depicting what happens on stage. There is disintegration of language in Quartet Three, where the characters are seen involved in a game, but it is temporary.

In this sense, Gao follows in Baudrillard's footsteps when talking about the symbolic exchange, where language shows some resistance to subjectivity and to meaninglessness. The connection between Gao and Baudrillard does not lead us to the conclusion that symbolic exchange occurs as part of the narrative of this play and the

use of language, but there is a sense that this play resists randomness by empowering language as a tool for narration. It is difficult to apply Baudrillard's theory to literature, especially because Baudrillard's notions were not always well defined or determined. The important aspect of this connection that should be highlighted is the different function of language in this play in terms of subjectivity. The play becomes about language and a representation whereby the subjectivity of the characters resists fragmentation and silence. This could be interpreted as a new kind of Modernism.

5.1.3 Representation of gender roles

The question of gender relationships is more complex than the other plays, two couples with different agendas interact with each other, where the use of social connotations adds layers of meaning to the gender dynamics within the play. As both male and female gender distinctions are polarised, we can talk of masculinity and femininity in terms of a dichotomous relationship, as was the case in *Dialogue and Rebuttal.*

As far as the relationship between the two couples is concerned, there is a romantic shift whereby Laobei, An's partner, becomes closer to Xixi, Da's new girlfriend. Da stands back and looks indifferent as Xixi grows closer to Laobei, while An expresses resentment about the situation. This resentment is what makes An and Xixi rivals. The representation of femininity is defined by a lack of complicity between two diametrically opposite female characters. An is described as an empowered woman who, as a successful writer, has overshadowed Laobei in negotiating power with her male counterpart. Xixi makes use of her femininity as a young woman to attract older men to her and succeeds in securing some protection by becoming an object of men's attention and desire. She represents a model of femininity whereby physical beauty is the currency of exchange in the negotiation of gender power.[58] We can talk of the representation of two different femininities.

An could represent the idea of the emancipated woman, but because she does not or cannot make use of her physical beauty, or precisely because of her career success, she fails to attract Laobei's attention and keep the relationship together. At the beginning of the play, Laobei expresses bitterness towards An[59], which is probably linked to the fact that An is an independent woman. Laobei's attitude affects An, who does not feel comfortable with her situation; emancipation and independence do not

[58] Samantha Holland, *Alternative Femininities- Body, Age and Identity* (Oxford & New York, 2004), 31.
[59] Gao Xingjian, *Zhuomo si chongzuo*, 13.

make her happy and more confident, suggested by the strong image at the end where she describes her house being flooded. Moreover, her attitude towards the countryside shows a sense of imprisonment, which could be linked either to her relationship with Laobei or, in deeper terms, to her own role as an independent woman. An represents 'emancipated woman' according to the feminine model prescribed by some second-wave feminists from the 1970s to 1980s, but as a Western style feminist she represents someone who Chinese critics disapproved of in the 1980s.

Xixi does not choose emancipation; she consciously prefers to become an object of men's desire. This is metaphorically expressed by her desire to be painted, to see herself through man's eyes:

> I like to watch him paint, to find out what I'd look like on canvas, which is a woman that looks like me but also someone I do not know.[60]

Xixi is fully aware of the power she can have over men, but also that men's vision of women is a distorted one. She defines herself as a blank page men can write on, almost an 'object' of the male gaze, she runs the risk of losing her own identity even of being seen as a 'whore.'

> She does not need flowerily decorated bras; the pairs on her chest arouse and amply turn men on. She wants to say to everybody: look a whore! But like everybody else she says "hello".[61]

There is a certain bitterness and sadness in Xixi's words as she resolves to use her body and youth as currency. However, by saying that she does not like adornments and wants herself to be called a whore, Xixi's choice can be read as a different kind of emancipation, a desire for transgression. In the same monologue, Xixi compares herself to women and differentiates herself from them by asserting a different kind of femininity.

Not only can Xixi be identified as an 'objectified' woman according to a feminist critique of traditional gender roles, she might also correspond to the stereotype of a woman whose use of her body is an act of emancipation insomuch as it is an act of transgression. Despite being a semi-academic account, A. Levy's book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* offers an interesting outlook saying that young Western women seem to be outdoing male chauvinist 'pigs', applauding the 'pornification' of other women and themselves by rejecting the very principles feminists fought for.[62]

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[60]Ibid., 45.
[61] Ibid., 83.
[62]Ariel Levi *Female Chauvinist Pigs: women and The Rise of Raunch Culture* (Pocket Books, 2006).

Another way of looking at the dichotomous representation of femininity in the two characters is to consider the age difference between the two: An is a mature middle-aged woman and Xixi little more than a girl. The polarisation of the old versus the young and attractive stresses not only a difference in generational terms but also, primarily, a difference in physical condition, where youth equates with physical beauty from a male perspective. As we can see from the following quote, women look at themselves through the male perspective as an object of the male gaze:

> **An** The dress suits you, don't you think? Walk around, that's right, pose and show off that figure of yours! Pull up your skirt, show your legs, good! Reveal your tits! Great show the best part of yourself! This is essential. You look a little tart, with no dignity and no scruples.[63]

The above quote from the play describes a paradox, with An looking at Xixi not through her own eyes but through male eyes, thinking about the way a man would look at Xixi. In Quartet Two, talking to Laobei, Da also uses the word 'slut' to describe Xixi. In this sense An's emancipation and independence is undiminished by conforming to a male perspective and by suffering from the male response and indifference to her independence. This term of comparison makes the two characters closer and more similar as it defines both as physical objects of the male stare, unable to escape the constraints of their femininity as constructed within a male discourse.

Besides the difference, the two characters share both a disillusionment with and a longing for men. The last quartet depicts Xixi confessing her disillusionment with love, which expresses a lack of trust in men[64]. By looking at Xixi's words we can deduce that her choice to use her feminine power is dictated mostly by circumstances and is seen as the only way of gaining protection and security. To some extent, she enters into a process of using the power deriving from her feminine physical attractiveness to negotiate with males for protection and security. She chooses older men because they can be protective of her. This process of negotiation occurs within a male-dominated discourse, which still assigns traditional roles to men and women as fragile individuals in need of protection, the so-called ideal of the fairy princess.[65] In terms of the portrayal of femininity, both characters long for male attention, an intrinsic need that two different female stereotypes share.

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[63] Ibid., 225.
[64] Gao Xingjian, *Zhuomo si chongzuo*, 97.
[65] "The fairy princess is the epitome of everything that constitutes 'girly' femininity: passivity, docility, conformity." Samantha Holland, *Alternative Femininities*, 55.

In terms of masculinity, we need to analyse the interaction of the two male characters and their attitude toward the female characters. Looking at Laobei and Da, a similar antithetical attitude to An's and Xixi's can be found also between them. Like An, Da is absorbed in his thoughts, which are less directed towards Xixi than An's are towards Laobei. Laobei not only expresses his internal conflicts but also imposes his masculinity by using his age as a means of seduction. The following scene shows how different Da's and Laobei's attitudes are towards women but also how similar.

> **Laobei** You always thought that you can never possess a woman, right?
> **Da** It's like that, so let it go, this idea.
> **Laobei** Can you really give up? Tell me honestly!
> **Da** You admit that you can't really give it up yourself.[66]

Both characters want to possess women, but think that they have failed to achieve their aim. The meaning of 'possession' is not well defined here; Laobei's desire to possess is metaphorically expressed by his project to paint many types of women, driven by a desire to emulate and create women's images.

When defining the differences they do not represent opposite poles as was the case with An and Xixi. They are both mature middle-aged men who to some extent still want and need to attract younger women like Xixi as an affirmation of their masculinity. Da has chosen to be with Xixi but has completely lost interest in her, overwhelmed by his own thoughts, and Laobei follows in his footsteps by trying to seduce her. In the meantime, his own concerns catch up with him when he reflects upon his age and achievements in a way that is more superficial than Da.

Despite their sense of failure and their discontent, they both succeed in conquering a young girl and exercising their masculinity. Their concerns and internal conflicts are, therefore, a symptom of the lack of satisfaction relationships with women give them and perhaps related to women's disillusionment with men.[67] By linking the two together we can assume that women's loss of confidence in men affects men's perception of themselves, which leads to loneliness and alienation, especially in the case of Da. In the same dialogue as quoted above, Da doubts Laobei's project by saying that, insomuch as art is an illusion, so are women. Laobei agrees with him and admits that it is impossible to paint either women or illusions. This statement can be read as a denial of their power to possess women and, most importantly, as affirming that their idea of femininity, of what woman should be like, is also an impossibility. This describes a condition of masculinity that has lost control of women and cannot deal with the

[66] Gao Xingjian, *Zhuomo si chongzuo*, 57
[67] John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture*, 78.

change; an intrinsic need to reaffirm power and an absolute condition of masculinity, whereby women should, instead, be a 'passive vehicle through which they define themselves' (i.e. absence of femininity).[68]

Before jumping to conclusions, other elements of the depiction of the male characters need to be considered. For instance, concerns about age objectify men in their approach to women, as they start to look at themselves through women's eyes. This is dictated by an intrinsic need to relate to women, to negotiate their power with them. This occurs especially between the male characters and Xixi. It could be argued that this negotiation results in a shift in power, with the male counterpart losing his predominance and needing to compromise with his female counterpart, Xixi. No negotiation between Laobei and An is described in the play. An's independence as a product of her emancipation is a *fait accompli* that has not left room for negotiation. In other words, Laobei has had to accept her emancipation by compromising his own position of dominance, which then leads him to look for another woman and to ignore An. The imposition of an empowered femininity on men also confirms the shift of power in terms of gender roles.

However, there is a sense that by presenting a character like Xixi, this play wants the male counterpart to retain some control over women: An is a loser and, paradoxically, suffers from a similar condition of alienation to the male. Like the two men, An has to strive for male attention, which means that, by refusing to comply with a feminine model, she has lost her role as a woman in the hybrid zone between the masculine and the feminine.

These ambiguities can be explained by looking at the degree to which Gao's vision seems to be influenced by a Chinese attitude towards gender roles. In looking at the model of masculinity created by Gao, it is important to refer to the Confucian model. The Confucian model is defined by the paradigm *wen*, referring to the qualities of refined cultured men, and *wu*, referring to the attributes of physical strength, military authority and skill in martial arts. In Kam Louie speaks at length about this paradigm as having defined Chinese masculinity throughout the centuries:

> This *wen-wu* paradigm is particularly relevant to understanding masculinity because it invokes both the authority of the scholar and that of the soldier. Chinese masculinity [...] can be theorised as comprising both *wen* and *wu* so that a scholar is considered to be no less masculine than a soldier. Indeed, at certain points in history the ideal man would be expected to embody a balance of *wen* and *wu*. At other times only one or

[68] John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture*, 35.See also Mike Donaldson, "What is hegemonic masculinity?" *Theory and Society* 22 No.4 (1993): 643-57.

the other was expected, but importantly *either* was considered acceptably manly.[69]

One important aspect of this model is that men, especially *wu* men, were expected to resist women's charm, with women being considered almost as enemies. In this regard, with particular reference to the *wu* model, Kam Louie talks of 'unrestrained misogyny' developing from this ideal.[70] Restraint from romance is also very important in the case of the *wen* model, with some concessions. The *caizi* ('talented scholars') – the scholars who were not yet *wenren* – could have a relationship with beautiful women, who were considered to enhance their performance in the examination.[71]

According to this view, the relationship between men and women was dictated by a sense of subordination of women to men, which excluded women from the paradigm *wen-wu.*

Referring back to Gao's depiction of masculinity, both Da and Laobei being educated – a writer and a painter, respectively – seems to embody the model of *wenren,* having lost all *wuren* connotations. In particular, in spite of being named *old Bei,* Laobei could be closer to the model of *caizi,* the talented student pursuing a beautiful woman, Xixi, who to some extent is enhancing Laobei's talent and inspiring him to pursue his art. To use Laobei's terms, women are connected to art, a paradigm that, in the light of Confucian ideals, could refer to the functionality of women as 'promoters' of men's talent. In Da's case, his lack of interest in Xixi and women in general can be explained by defining him as already being a *wenren,* and who therefore does not need women any longer.

This consideration is far too simplistic, as it does not explain the sense of powerlessness that both men seem to share when dealing with women. As stated above, the men believe that women, like art, are an illusion that cannot be possessed. This can be explained by drawing attention to Louie's exploration of the change in the *wen-wu* model over time in Chinese culture. Louie deals with male writing in China in the 1980s and, in particular, Zhang Xianliang's three novels *Lühua shu* (*Mimosa,* 1984), *Nan ren yiban shi nuren* (*Half of Man Is Woman,* 1985), and *Xiguan xiwang* (*Getting Used to*

[69] Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11.
[70] Ibid., 30.
[71] Ibid ., 60.

Dying, 1989)[72], which describe the vicissitudes of the intellectual protagonist Zhang Yonglin. Louie describes these novels as an expression of 'the narrators' insecurities, sense of self-importance, impotence and misogyny'.[73] Again, the writer represents women as functional to men's development.

According to Xueping Zhong, Zhang Xianliang, like many writers of *gaige wenxue* ('reform literature'), was responding with misogyny to a process of cultural emasculation that was developed under Mao and perpetuated in the period after the Cultural Revolution.[74] Another writer mentioned in Louie's book is the 'root-seeking' writer Jia Pingwa, whose short story *Renji* (1985)[75] talks about brotherly love destroyed by love for a woman and impotence. This story presents in a more extreme fashion the danger that women's sexual 'charm' represents to men and that sexuality represents to women:

> It would seem that in the patriarchal world described by writers like Jia Pingwa, the loss of virginity/chastity deprives the woman of the only commodity with which she can buy sexual and moral legitimacy. One path open to such women is that used by fox-fairies and prostitutes: sex as a weapon for power over men. But this magical power is always only temporary, while the men are 'bewitched'. The challenge to 'real men' is whether they can resist this charm.[76]

It is within this vision that one could explain Gao's representation of male insecurities and sense of failure and his criticism of Xixi, who misuses her sexuality and is described as a prostitute. In an ambiguous way Hu Yaoheng talks about the presence of sex in Gao's play:

> In his work, sex usually plays an important role for two reasons. First, when the body has been denuded, there is no fear to expose the spirit of the self [..] Secondly, the attitude to sex even affects attitude to life. From this point of view, sex can go easily through to human essence, especially if the person in question is alone.[77]

Sex is here described as a way to freedom but also as threatening to the very human essence.

Another similarity between Gao's play and Jia Pingwa's story is the depiction of woman as *wenren.* Liangliang, a woman who inherits a teaching position from her

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[72] See Zhang Xianliang, "Lühua shu," in *Zhang Xianliang xuanji* Vol. 3, ed. (Yinchuan: Ningxia ren min chubanshe (1985) (161-338); *Nan ren yiban shu nuren* (Bei jing : Zhong guo wen lian); *Xiguan xiwang* (Hong Kong : Ming bao chu ban she, 1989).
[73] Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity,* 68.
[74] Xueping Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 17.
[75] Jia Pingwa, "Renji," *Wenhui yuekan* 10 (1985): 2-12.
[76] Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity,* 90.
[77] Hu Yaoheng *Bainian gengyun de fengshou,* 58.

father, is, like An, depicted as an intellectual and, like An, loses her 'feminine' attribute. According to Louie, the *wen-wu* is applied to women only once they have lost their femininity; once they have lost their gender characteristics.[78]

This would explain An's suffering as a result of being an emancipated woman. This belongs to a view of femininity on the part of Gao and writers from the 1980s that is the product of a patriarchal discourse, where femininity is subordinated to the 'male gaze'; women who lose the male gaze, and therefore men's interest, cannot be defined as women any longer. This condition is well described by Chinese female writers from the 1990s such as Zhang Jie, who in her novella *The Ark* depicts how, by becoming intellectuals, women have lost social respect as women, are treated as outsiders and struggle to affirm themselves.

Both Chinese men's and women's writing from the 1980s and 1990s expresses resentment towards a society in which the change in traditional gender role models has also transformed the perception women and men have of themselves, creating an identity vacuum in both social and cultural terms. Women have lost their sense of femininity and, like men, suffer from alienation. This has led to criticism by both women and men of feminist values that have come from the West and become integrated in the Party-political discourse, as Xueping Zhong states.[79]

Within this context, in describing women such as An, Gao does not criticise emancipation itself but the kind of emancipation that feminism and Chinese feminism has created, which is even criticised by Chinese women and feminists. In her paper about Li Xiaojiang, founder of the Women's Museum and controversial feminist, Lisa Rofel describes how new feminists in China reject both Western models in their fight against the state power.[80]

This play seems to reflect these cultural and social issues.

Another element needs to be analysed in order to complete the picture of the representation of gender roles. With regard to the use of language, unlike *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, all the male and female counterparts in this play with the exception of Xixi use language equally, as they are engaged in voicing their subjectivity. Xixi makes the choice not to voice her feelings, and by doing so avoids being represented as a frail woman or a victim yet enters the process of negotiation with the men, unlike Girl in

[78] Ibid., 105.
[79] Xueping Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged*, 20.
[80] Lisa Rofel, "Museum as Women's Space: Displays of Gender in Post-Mao China," in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 118.

Dialogue and Rebuttal and Woman in *Between Life and Death*, where both are described as victims of male domination. First, she uses language only in her interaction with other characters and thus retains some sort of mystery, which is part of her seduction and preserves her own subjectivity. Secondly, she does not need to express her unhappiness, a discontentment with a reality with which she is already disillusioned and which she accepts. An, on the other hand, despite being emancipated, uses language in a way similar to Da, using it to voice her own subjectivity, but fails in her attempt to solve her internal conflicts. This seemingly confirms the idea that Gao is criticising feminism and women's emancipation.

However, by comparing him to Crimp's *Play with Repeats* one can argue that Gao, like Crimp, objectifies female characters to show that to some extent feminism has failed. On the one hand, Gao is representing the failure of feminism to liberate women totally from a male-dominated discourse insomuch as the new generation of women, like Xixi, turns to their advantage the very tools that a male-dominated social discourse uses to dominate and oppress women. On the other hand, he is describing how a feminist discourse of emancipation has an impact on men themselves, their masculinity having become decadent to the extent that they also feel alienated from their role as men in a desperate attempt to retain that very power.

In comparison with his previous plays, the gender representation provides a more negative outlook on the masculine/feminine dichotomy especially because this play is actually a representation of a societal gendered role, where there is no place for the 'originary' self.

The semi-realism of this play does not deconstruct gender, but actually represents how gender is constructed in a dialectical social context, as though Gao has returned to reflect upon the constraints presented by society, and rejects the possibility of the non-gendered self. Also in this case as with the aspects of the play previously looked at, we can talk of a Modernist approach, yet one strictly connected to the remnants of Gao's Chinese background, which affect his attitude towards gender discrimination. When Gao wrote this play, he had already been in France for a few years. By then Gao must have felt the effect of a Western lifestyle and contemporary culture, and might have developed some disillusionment with possibilities for change and philosophical enlightenment.

5.1.4 Martin Crimp: *Whole Blue Sky*

The comparison of *Whole Blue Sky* with Gao's play is justified on formal grounds. Similarly to Gao's, Crimp's play totally lacks stage directions and the story is merely carried through the voices of the characters/actors.

The play is shorter than Gao's; it was performed as part of a trilogy including *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies*, written prior to this one. *Whole Blue Sky* was written to complement the other two plays, making the trilogy an acceptable length for the stage.[81] As with *Weekend Quartet*, *Whole Blue Sky* starts off being a very abstract play but ends up setting the characters' speech or the narrative within a realistic context, where realism cannot be understood as naturalism but as a reference to the semi-realistic situations.

The play presents three voices performed by three actors on stage. The actors talk in a playful manner about a woman and her story, from getting pregnant to her inevitable marriage, and about her son, Bobby. The narration is not linear, as Crimp uses the three voices/actors as tools to build the character, a woman who, as in *Attempts on Her Life*, is talked about but never present in the play as a speaking and acting character.

For the sake of this analysis of the play, and within the context of the comparison, this part of the chapter looks at the message and style of the play, the use of language versus representation, and the gender issues as the play's underlying motif.

5.1.5 The main theme of the play

The message of the play is negative: the character is represented as a victim of her own middle-class material values believing in an empty ideal of family. Family, marriage, together with possessing a big house, a big car and money represent happiness. This reading of the play summarises the cynicism that this play seems to convey, which makes it similar to Gao's *Weekend Quartet.* Like Gao's characters imprisoned in their own castles of material happiness, the voices describe the bleak situation of a woman who, forced into marriage by circumstances, has lost her individuality and freedom, whilst undoubtedly surrounded by the comfort of a wealthy lifestyle. It is interesting to look at the definition of happiness ironically discussed by the three voices:

1 What picture?
2 The picture we were talking about: the picture of happiness.

[81] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*,.68.

1 *(smiles)* Oh that: the picture of happiness. You mean the picture of the boat: the two of them on the boat.
3 The boat? No. Not two of them on the boat, three of them in the pet shop, three of them buying the pet. What boat?[82]

In Gao's play, happiness was linked to the possession of a country house and was projected onto external elements such the weather. In a similar vein, happiness here is, based on material possessions and the fulfilment of social expectations, which also includes marriage and family, as Lyn Gardner suggests

> Crimp's grim tales are even more terrifying because they are grounded so precisely in middle class affluence where the veneer of civilisation hides the hollowness and rage within, where happiness is sacrificed for a nice handmade table, truth for easy lies and we lock our children up when the real horror is really within.[83]

Marriage and family are not part of the characters' lives in Gao's play, where it could be argued that it is the lack of a stable and family-oriented attitude that creates their unhappiness. They switch partners with ease and no moral or ethical questions are raised – especially in the case of Xixi and Laobei – which the play implies inflicts suffering, especially on An.

On the surface, in both plays it is a loveless relationship, a lack of emotional commitment at the heart of the characters. At a deeper level, in Crimp's play it is a lack of freedom of the female character, whereas it is a lack of spirituality in the case of Gao's characters. Crimp's narrated character has lost the ability to choose, as she fell pregnant and became trapped in a marriage. The character's situation can be read as a social imprisonment as by accident the character has to conform to social 'disciplines', like family, marriage etc. In this sense, unlike in *Weekend Quartet*, the idea of freedom is still linked to Foucault's criticism of social constraints, rather than the idea of an excess of freedom leading to an existential meaninglessness.

As far as spirituality is concerned, as has been the case in his other plays, Crimp, unlike Gao, does not champion spirituality: his characters are grounded in their material and secular dimension. The character's only escapism is in her passion for books, which is of an intellectual and not a spiritual nature. As far as the relationship between real and surreal is concerned, the only element in the play that comes close to the surreal dimension of Gao's play is the theatrical representation of the play itself, the use of three voices creating the character. This is true especially at the end of the play,

[82] Martin Crimp, "Whole Blue Sky," in *Fewer Emergencies* (London: Faber& Faber, 2005), 12.
[83] Lyn Gardner, *Guardian* (15 September 2005).

where the three voices introduce the absent character of the son, Bobby, who becomes almost a ghost-like figure and talks about a voice in his head. This creates a sense of disbelief about the nature of the female character and her life, stressing its fictionality.

5.1.6 Representation and subjectivity

The elements of the representation bring us to the second point of this analysis. The three voices create the narrative of the play; as in Gao's play the musical reference and the play's division create its frame of representation. In Crimp's case, the dialogic pattern adds an abstract connotation to the play, especially his use of voices in depicting an 'absent' character or characters never appearing on stage, which defies audience's expectations by presenting a storytelling in progress rather than characters acting on stage. Crimp seems in actual fact to present three voices trying to agree on what story to talk about, or rather questioning themselves while developing the story itself.

Looking at the beginning of the plays, they both start by referring to the process of writing, similarly to Gao's play where An intends to write a play and Laobei suggests alternatives for the play. In Crimp's case the reference to the process of writing is subtler, as the voices never mention the writing and storytelling processes explicitly. In Crimp's play, the only self-referential element is the character's own interest in reading books. To some extent, especially at the beginning, both plays seem to focus on the question of representation by using alternative ways of building up the narration.

Crimp's case is definitely more extreme, as the voices/actors are stripped of any personal connotation and are mere narrative tools, indeed voices or actors creating the narration in a similar way to *Attempts on Her Life*, where the characters on stage were storytellers playing themselves as actors. In these two plays more than in previous plays, owing mainly to their simplicity, we see the differences between Gao's and Crimp's use of actors. One could undeniably argue that Crimp's use of actors is one-dimensional rather than the traditional two-dimensional actor–character connection, whereas Gao's is three-dimensional. Crimp presents actors merely as storytellers, lacking personal involvement, whereas Gao's tripartition involves the actors at all levels: as actors, the characters/actors' inner self and as characters on stage. Crimp presents actors only as neutral elements of the narration, or according to Angel-Perez, they are reduced to mere 'énonciateurs.', within the process of spectralisation that was talked about in Chapter two about *Attempt on Her Life.*[84] As for the difference between the two playwrights, one can argue that Crimp has taken to its extreme the Brechtian

[84] Élisabeth Angel-Perez, *Voyage au bout du possible*, 206.

use of depersonalisation[85] by reducing the theatre experience to an experience of the 'voice' and its absence, whereas Gao's theatrical experience could be defined as the experience of the 'presence', of depersonalisation through the fragmentation of a 'presence'. As seen in the analysis of Gao's play, even though *Weekend Quartet* was meant to be a radio play and by definition should have made use only of the actors' voices and speech, towards the end of the play Gao's script still presents some minimal stage directions.

In these terms, going back to a more detailed analysis of Crimp's play and perhaps ignoring just for a moment Angel-Perez's definitions, the question of representation is concerned with the writing or storytelling process. In this regard, a statement by Aleks Sierz hints at the playwright's intention in this play:

> In *Whole Blue Sky*, Crimp plays with the audience's expectations about how much a writer knows about their own character.[86]

At one level Sierz's statement is reminiscent of the question as to the 'reliability' of the narrator and of the unreliable narrator'.[87] However, one can further argue that this play presents in an ironic way the question the writer faces: 'what's worth talking about or writing about?' This is almost a Postmodern parody of the process of narration itself and the reliability of the author/writer. In this regard, Sierz defines Crimp's construction of this play as a kind of collection of ideas from a brainstorming session, and compares its randomness to a splurge of uncontrolled streams of consciousness.[88]

As was the case in Gao's play, the randomness of this play is only superficial, as there is a sense that the writer retains some control in orchestrating the voices, and there is an underlying message that Crimp seems to convey. In Lyn Gardner's review, a sense of social criticism runs though this play despite its apparent randomness and abstractness. She describes all the plays in this trilogy as representing the 'hollowness and the ugliness of the middle class.'[89] The strong social connotation and social criticism is an underlying motif of the play in so far as it shows how stereotypes are constructed, as part of socially predominant discourses. These are constantly referred to in the process of defining the individual, as though there were no alternative discourses. This can be read once again through Foucault's idea of 'predominant discourses', whose

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[85] Bertold Brecht, *On theatre*, 166.
[86] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 69.
[87] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 88.
[88] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 22.
[89] Lyn Gardner, *Guardian* 15 September 2005.

role is 'to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality'[90].

For instance, when the voices are looking for a story worth telling they choose to imagine the character – the woman character – as becoming pregnant, automatically associating the character's womanhood with pregnancy and the role of child-bearer. Moreover, referring back to the idea of happiness as a social construct, this play shows a post-Marxist criticism of contemporary society, reminiscent of Baudrillard ideas[91] which was marginal to Gao. Happiness is merely a picture built within a puritanical and capitalist discourse; a kind of simulacrum, to use Baudrillard's terms. In this sense, in the question 'what shall we write about?', or rather 'what is worth writing about?', the word 'worth' is not an individual choice but is dictated by predominant discourses, which devalue the writing process. The story stops being a free artistic expression and becomes an emulation of discourse processes, which are dictated by social constructs. In an extreme Postmodern fashion, Crimp is describing not only the fictional process but also what lies behind it and the reality of the power mechanism within capitalism. One can assume that Crimp not only criticises the control of discourse as part of the social mechanism of control, but also shows how hyperreality is constructed, and how art and media construct this reality. This is achieved through the character of Bobby, who is presented as the woman's child halfway through the play, is distressed by a voice:

> 2 He's saying no to Bobby: it's a voice.
> 3 A voice? In the room?
> 2 In his head: he's saying it's a voice in his head.
> [...]
> 2 He's saying no to thoughts. He knows what thoughts are, but this is a voice. He says the voice does not like him. He wants you to come.
> 1 Of course the voice likes him. What does he mean?
> 2 He wants you to come. He wants you to sit with him.[92]

The voice in Bobby's head can be seen as the fourth voice introduced in the play, which is the voice Bobby hears and also the way he connects to his mother. The fourth voice is confused with a 'private song' that the female non-present character seems to recollect.[93]

The voice becomes the subject of the narration as well as the object of the narration, of Bobby's imagination and of speech by the other narrating voices. It is the

[90] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 209.
[91] Mark Lilla, ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994).
[92] Martin Crimp, "Whole Blue Sky," 16-17.
[93] Ibid.,19

subject when it participates in the narration and the object when it is talked about in the narration:

> 1 Says who: not tonight and not ever again.
> 2 Says who? Says Mummy.
> 1 Says what?
> 3 Says Mummy.
> 1 *(smiles)* Not says Mummy, Sweetheart, not says Mummy: says the voice.[94]

The ambiguity in the above sentence is conveyed by the confusion as to who is saying what; it could be Bobby or his mother speaking or Bobby's internal voice. Two hypotheses or suggestions are possible. First, the voices are used only to describe and represent the confusion of the characters'/actors' confusion and lack of control over the narrating, which stresses its fictionality. Secondly, this voice as an active part of the narration could indicate that the play is not talking about the mother/female non-present character but Bobby, as Sierz explains it. In this twist the observers, and therefore the originators of the narration, become the observed.

The confusion between observer and observed dismantles the omnipotence of the author, suggesting in a Barthesian post-structuralist fashion that the author is dead and cannot control his own narration.[95] This conclusion ultimately sees the characters who are not present almost taking over the discourse of the narrators. Following the latter hypothesis, the question is whether or not the fourth voice, Bobby's, is a reliable one, or the result of the very randomness that has been ascribed to this play. Within this context the question of subjectivity and its representation can still be addressed. To paraphrase Sierz on this play and the other plays in the trilogy, Crimp is writing as though transcribing the voices in a person's head. Sierz says that the play 'subverts the idea of the voice in Bobby's brain'.[96] This statement should be read in connection with the last play of the trilogy, where Bobby reappears as the postman's son.

In Lacanian terms the confusion, the nature of the voice itself and the identity and role of Bobby can be defined as representing the language of imaginary. The voice, Bobby's, cannot talk to his mother because Bobby is at a pre-linguistic stage. His mother tries to reconcile the voice with rationality and the 'linguistic' or symbolic. The confusion of the last few lines of the above quotation could be an attempt to dismantle the rationality of the mother, as the pre-linguistic unconscious wants to prevail. A

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[94] Ibid., 20.
[95] Seán Burke, *The death and return of the author: criticism and subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 124.
[96] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 69.

sexual connotation in what Bobby defines as a 'private song' can even be suggested, which would explain why Bobby's mother wants to prevent him from telling the 'song' to strangers as it is indeed private. The private song could be read in a sexual key, as it could symbolise particular behaviours that Bobby as a child, unaware of his own sexuality, might not find inappropriate but are inappropriate to adults.

Crimp fragments the subjectivity and mechanism of narration of the play. In the trilogy, there is a sense that Crimp is experimenting with different levels in a more sophisticated and almost poetic way, talking to the subjective of the audience in a way reminiscent of Gao's previous plays. Connected to the process of constructing hyperreality, the representation of subjectivity is very much embedded in a Postmodern discourse dominated by floating simulacra.

5.1.7 Gender

The character, the object of the play, suggests a very strong message about gender discrimination against women. This underlying motif of the play is stronger than in Gao's play; although, unlike in Gao's play, by depicting only a woman who is discriminated against and victimised, he does not deal with masculinity. The character of the woman is trapped in a marriage that she could have avoided. However, Crimp shows that the character is unable to make the decision to leave her partner because she does not want to cause him pain. In order to avoid his unhappiness, she becomes trapped in a situation that causes her herself to be unhappy. Then, pregnancy stops her from looking for alternative avenues in her life towards freedom. Pregnancy and motherhood are described as undermining the woman to a position of inferiority, which fits with a feminist discourse as promoted by De Beauvoir's anti-biological essentialism,[97] which refusing womanhood as a biological condition also rejected the processes of childbirth, pregnancy, etc. Expressing contempt similar to De Beauvoir, Crimp seems to show the failure of the impact of feminism on social conditions as well as at a personal level.

Within this perspective, Crimps seems to condemn the woman for not making any choices even before the pregnancy. The relationship between men and women is signalled by fear and a sense of obligation, and marriage is definitely an imprisonment. Echoing ideas highlighted in *The Country,* this attitude seems again to correspond to a 'womanist' outlook on gender relationships, which generally blames men for reducing

[97] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London:Vintage, 1997).

women to submission and compliancy. One needs to assess whether this is the case by looking at the underlying dynamics of the play.

The underlying sense of criticism is directed towards women and their lack of resolution. In this sense Crimp seems to criticise the failure of feminism as he shows that the absent character's lack of resolution stops women from being empowered by language. In linguistic terms, this is proved by the fact that the female figure has not been given a name, whereas the male figure – her son – has been given the name of Bobby. One should not ignore that according to a traditional feminist perspective, 'naming' was considered as one of the ways men exercised their power:

> Men have the power of naming, a great and sublime power. The power of naming enables men to define experience, to articulate boundaries and values, to designate to each thing its real qualities, to determine the perception itself.[98]

Therefore, unlike the female characters in *The Country,* the absent character does not own language. The female figure in the play is described as compelled to sing a song to Bobby, who symbolically exercises male ownership over women. At the end of the play, it is, then, the voice/song – intended here as a personified element – that speaks the last words in the play and talks about the female figure.

Crimp shares a criticism of the failure of feminism with Gao but, unlike Gao, does not show the negotiating process between masculine and feminine and the effect of feminist discourse on the male counterpart. Crimp only shows the effect of male counterparts on women. Crimp seems to suggest, then, that the failure of feminism has not only marginalized women but has allowed the power of male discourse to resist equality between the sexes. This is not only the result of a womanist approach but belongs to a vision, which is also shared by French male sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In his book *Masculine Domination*, he describes the menacing power of male domination. He talks of symbolic violence:

> Symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling.[99]

His attitude is similar to the one that Crimp seems to adopt in this play. The criticism that Crimp seems to direct towards feminism is also embraced by post-

[98] Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: men possessing women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), 17.
[99] Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 15.

feminist scholars such as Hoff Sommers, who condemns feminism for perpetuating a model of feminine victimisation in spite of the social and cultural gains of women in last twenty years. In her book *Who stole feminism?* she believes that:

> A surprising number of clever and powerful feminists share the conviction that American women still live in a patriarchy where men collectively keep women down. It is customary for these feminists to assemble to exchange stories and to talk about 'anger issues' that vex them.[100]

Her assumptions stress that feminism has failed in its intent to liberate women as it still confines them to marginality. Furthermore, she believes that another major failure of feminism – of what she calls 'gender feminism' – is that it has borrowed approaches and concepts from other ideologies, such as psychoanalysis, linguistic etc. and has mostly been engaged in highly intellectual debates. Unlike Crimp, she talks of failure as connected to the elitism and intellectualism of feminism's very own ideology.[101] Her argument[102] on a damaging victimization of women's situation can be used to read Crimp's last play as reproducing this counter-productive intellectualism and showing its failures.

However, another way to look at Crimp's plays, is from a masculine point of view, which would assess Crimp's championing for feminism and dealing with its ideas as products of an 'emasculated' male perspective. By confirming the fears and concerns of some feminists and highlighting its failings in such an extreme fashion, the writer seems to have internalised concerns with women's equality and gender issues to the extent that Crimp's attitude has become totally embedded within the feminist discourse and trapped within it. His representation of gender relationships is the expression of an atavist sense of guilt for the wrongdoing of mankind by submitting his voice to that of feminism. A sense of guilt and fragmentation of masculinity is linked to the process of changes within the society of the three last decades[103] and are direct effects of unchanging and discriminating 'womanism'[104]-rather than feminism, which does not account for the success of women's emancipation yet perpetuates conflict between the sexes.

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[100] Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 19.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Faludi talks, instead, of a backlash against women's careerism of the 80s and the negative influence of postfemist scepticism towards feminist values. see Susan Faludi *Backlash : the undeclared war against women* (London : Vintage, 1993)
[103] John Beynon *Masculinities and Culture*, 15-16.
[104] Cf. Chapter 3 footnote 90.

This can be proven by re-interpreting the function of the absent figure. Since the female figure of this play, like in *Attempts to her life* does not appear on stage, it becomes a sort of omnipresent figure dominating the story, guiding the narrating discourse exactly for the force of its absence. This process of the writer's emasculation as part of the play's message is an extreme reading of this play, where the writer's discourse is considered also as part of the social mechanism of power and knowledge as described by Foucault.[105] The constant questioning of feminism's very own ideological values is also typical of recent feminism derived from the end of 90s, identifiable with some trends of post-feminism and others from Third Wave feminism. These last two as the 'expression of a stage in the constant evolutionary movement of feminism', are described to encompass other movements such as post-structuralism, post-colonialism etc, that are anti-foundationalist, anti-existentialistic movements.[106] Those by definition refuse to formulate and impose one ideological perspective on another and tend to account for the pluralism and the fragmented condition of contemporary global culture.

Seen from this point of view, there is a lack of awareness on the part of Crimp, unlike Gao, of the effect of gender role changes on men. Gao's awareness derives mostly from his background. The Chinese gender debate describes an attachment to tradition versus an overwhelming wave of changes, which has led intellectuals to reflect upon both masculinity and femininity. In the West, on the other hand, while masculinity studies have emerged,[107] some feminists themselves like Faludi have already talked about a backlash against feminism[108] and others have already responded by expressing the need for a more global, multicultural feminism.[109] The sociological aspect of this consideration presents other complex social and cultural aspects, but this is not the time or place to deal with them in depth.

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[105] Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater (London: Routledge, 1996), 339-360.

[106] Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, cultural theory and cultural forms* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

[107] Some of the latest titles are: Fidelma Ashe, *The New Politics of Masculinity: Men, power and resistance.* (London: Routledge, 2007); B. Benwell ed. *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines* (New York: Blackwell, 2004); Stephen Ducat, *The Wimp Factor: Gender gaps, holy wars, and the politics of anxious masculinity* (Uckfield: Beacon Press, 2004); Hearn, Jeff, and Keith Pringle, ed., *European Perspectives on Men and Masculinities: National and Transnational Approaches* (New York: Palgrave, 2006); Tarrant, Shira. ed. *Men Speak Out: Views on gender, sex, and power* (London: Routledge, 2007). It is interesting to note that Susan Faludi herself in her second book *The Betrayal of the American Man* has joined the discourse of masculimity in its defence. Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1999).

[108] Cf. Susan Faludi, *Backlash.*

[109] "[...] multicultural feminism emphasizes not simply the *range* of culturally distinct gendered and sexualized subjects, but also the *contradictions* within this range, always in hopes of forging alternative epistemologies and imaginative alliances," in Ellah Shohat, "Introduction," in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ellah Shohat (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1999), 2.

5.2 The Death Collector

The Death Collector is Gao's latest play, originally written in French. The play was commissioned by the French Ministry of Culture in 2000. It was performed for first as part of a festival at the *Studio de la Comédie Française*(2001), then in Marseilles under his direction(2003), and then the same year by La Compagnie de l'Âme Son as part of the 'Year of Gao Xingjian' in Marseilles.

This play deals with concerns about death, old age and art. The play indicates that the author accomplishes a kind of closure in both artistic and philosophical terms. These are similar themes to Gao's previous plays except for gender – the dichotomy between femininity and masculinity – which is totally absent in this play.

The play presents two anonymous characters, Parleur A and Parleur B, with Parleur B seeming to be the alter ego and the shadow of Parleur A. Parleur A has been trapped in a museum on his way to the train station and is engaged in an internal philosophical quest addressing questions about existence, old age and art. The dynamics of the play develop the contrast between the two characters on stage, with Parleur A trying to hang on to life despite its meaninglessness and Parleur B, expressing absolute negativity and trying to persuade him to accept and surrender to it.

As the title – *The Death Collector* – suggests, this play is a quest for death, and it ends with the character hanging himself.. In theatrical terms the author presents the play's development through the interchange of two characters' monologues, which occasionally turn into brief dialogic exchanges. This part of the chapter mainly looks at the relationship between death and spirituality, and at the theatrical representation with reference to the idea of subjectivity.

5.2.1 Death and spirituality

Death represents the means and the end of this play. The journey that the play describes is the path towards 'intentional' death, where death comes to represent a solution to a miserable life. Insomuch as plays such as *Between Life and Death* were about the dichotomous relationship between life and death, this play deals with death rejecting life as a possibility. It is within this framework that the spiritual and the ritual are dealt with in this play.

We need to look at the journey and what death means in spiritual terms, also in comparison with previous plays. The journey implies a reflection on life, the existence of God and art. Despite the abstract nature of the play, its setting – a night in a museum

– presents Parleur A as being very old and Parleur B as being extremely old. Therefore, if we consider Parleur A and Parleur B as one character, the character is presented in a particular period of his life, old age, described by the term '*saloperie*' ('rubbish').[110]

Apprehension about old age is a theme we had already found in *Weekend Quartet,* as it was the main concern of the character Laobei. In this play the character's concerns are akin to Laobei's: being forgotten, growing old. However, for the character of this play, becoming part of the museum exhibition does not appear to be a better option:

> You will end up like a fly stuck on a glass, you will become a dried-out exemplar, and your skeleton will complete their collection.[111]

He ironically continues that he will be the first human exemplar to be exhibited in a museum, which will attract media attention and fame while his body is analysed and dissected.[112] From the ironic tone one can understand that fame and immortality are unimportant to him, unlike Laobei. The image of the character's body becoming an *objet d'art* implies a level of alienation of the character from himself. The artist feels little connection with his art, as art has a life of its own. Gao deals with a representation of art and the artist that has a resonance of the Barthesian idea of the death of the author.

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. [...] The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. [...] Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humors, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.[113]

By referring to Barthes' idea of writing as a combination of other texts by other writers, one could argue that, through the character Parleur A, Gao conveys the powerlessness of the author/artist to own and hang on to his body of work. The link

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[110] Gao Xingjian, *Le Quêteur de la mort suivi de "L'Autre rive et La Neige en août"* (Paris: Seiul, 2004), 41.
[111] Ibid., 15.
[112] Ibid., 16-17.
[113] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, music, text* essays (London: Fontana, 1977), 146-47.

with the concept of art becomes clear as Parleur A starts talking specifically about art, which will be dealt with later on in this chapter.

The reflection on old age draws on other themes: memory, forgetfulness and the past. These themes are connected by a sense of denial of the past, denial of experience through memory and denial of the significance of these two. Parleur B says clearly that plunging down into the past is like drinking poison.[114] This negative attitude towards the past derives from the acknowledgment that time erases moments of joy in life and that life is an ever-changing flux of events. Memory, the recalling of past events, becomes painful as it takes one back to those forever-lost moments. Moreover, if we extend the metaphor to the museum, the past is metaphorically represented as part of the museum, which comes as an imprisonment of the past, with the past becoming part of a negative set of values. The state of being trapped in the museum is an analogy of the existential condition. An old man is lost in his solitude and identifies himself with the museum, emblematic of the collection of the past, which is also as forgotten and meaningless. The past keeps the museum and the man alive, and makes both immortal, but they are also trapped in art as its own place of worship, which makes immortality hollow and meaningless.

The comparison with Da in *Weekend Quartet* comes naturally, as both characters suffer from the effects of living a meaningless existence, defined as a Postmodern condition. However, there are major differences between the two plays. First, the vision that Gao presents in this play is far darker than the one in *Weekend Quartet.* Secondly, the condition that Da talks about is a cultural understanding of the world around him, and a consequence of the freedom given to him by a society that allows intellectuals to speak, to travel across national boundaries. In this play, the character does not talk about a meaningless existence, as the word he uses is *misérable.* The misery of life is explained by Parleur A as deriving from insatiable human nature, wishing to satisfy its own desires against other people's, which would lead to mutual self-destruction.[115] Parleur B explains Parleur A's situation of being trapped in the museum as being a consequence of a journey he had undertaken in order to meet someone.[116] Unable to meet this person, he has found himself in the museum. Parleur B's explanation implies the idea of a missed opportunity, of the missed possibility of a meeting, but also questions the motivation behind the trip. His condition suggests that any action in life, ambition itself, is destined to fail, because the opportunity is always two steps ahead

[114] Gao Xingjian, *Le Quêteur de la mort*, 33.
[115] Ibid., 32.
[116] Ibid., 39.

and does not wait once the opportunity has been missed. Consequently, if we follow Parleur B's statement through, the significance of the trip itself becomes meaningless, whereby actions suffer from the passing of time, and are obliterated as a result of it. As far as the concept of freedom is concerned, freedom becomes a positive value, in the sense of 'peace – *vie sans soucis* – appeasement', the end to the never-ending search to realise ambitions, to satisfy desires – a state which could also be interpreted as death.[117]

This vision of death as a solution to misery brings us back to the discussion on the spiritual as the appeasement of desire, or no-desire, which resonates of Buddhist enlightenment teaching. In this play, there is a realisation that life is coming to an end and that religious or spiritual belief does not bring consolation because 'God is dead'. In the face of an imminent end with no prospect of salvation, memory and the past lose their worth too. It is important to note that in 'Reason For Literature', Gao blames humankind of having killed God, as human beings have taken his place as 'demiurges'. In particular, Gao talks of the artist as the person who has killed God[118]. The spiritual, in the sense of a religious dimension, seems to originate from a lack of belief in either Western or Buddhist faiths when he briefly refers to both Bodhisattva and Jesus. The characters express a complete denial of salvation and of the spiritual, with no possibility of transcendence. Within this vision, death becomes nothingness and imposes nothingness on men.

The realisation of such a conviction, its nihilism, is far from being *a fait accompli* in the play, as it is part of the representation developing through the dynamics of the play, the interaction between the two characters. In the dialogic shaping of the play, Parleur A and Parleur B take two different stances. Parleur A advocates a *carpe diem* vision of life:

> [...] Without regrets or remorse, get rid of anything that could make you depressed or weak! Live the moment, pursue whatever you want and whatever you can![119]

This vision seems to embody ancient Greek philosophical ideas, specifically the Epicurean (Epicurus 341-271 BC), which advocated a vision of life that obliterates any concerns about death: 'God presents no fears, death no cause for alarm; it is ease to procure what is good; it is easy also to endure what is evil.'[120]From this point of view,

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[117] Ibid., 42.
[118] Gao Xingjian, *Le Quêteur de la mort.*
[119] Ibid., 34.
[120] This is taken from the *Tetrapharmakos* (the four-part cure). Keimpe Algra *et al.*, ed., *Cambridge history to Hellenistic philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 643.

Parleur A is referring to death as a kind of consolation to demystify his imminent destiny and the nihilism that fatalism brings.

On the other hand, Parleur B talks with negativity and sarcasm about life, humanity and 'being alive':

> **Parleur B** What is left is only a sense of propriety. The same sense of propriety that brought you back to life. This is the way that your body makes you aware of its own frailty and vulnerability. Then, you feel more alive, closer to your very human essence; don't mention your personality, or your identity, even if you are not sure you possess one. It is the way you feel more yourself, isn't it?[121]

Parleur B criticises the attitude of living for the moment by stating that the very fact of being alive leads to the awareness of one's own vulnerability, mortality. Later on, it is Parleur A who talks about 'suicide'. It is interesting to note how the character distinguishes between two verbs to describe the act of inflicting one's own death:

> You don't commit suicide; you murder yourself. The difference is that suicide results in abandoning oneself to total despair, whereas one's own murder is an act of clairvoyance, it is to hold death in your own hands and analyse it with clarity.[122]

Suicide referred to by the verb *se tuer* is actually used to mean looking life in the face. Suicide referred to by the verb *suicider* is an act made out of despair, whereas murder, killing oneself, is a conscious realisation of life. This announces the end of the play, where Parleur A is described as killing himself, as though Parleur B had persuaded him.

As far as the spiritual is concerned, in the previous play, Da was described as experiencing a kind of spiritual enlightenment, which provided the character with some consolation. In this play, such consolation is totally denied. This play seems to end Gao's attachment to Zen and spirituality by the total absence of a ritual element, and by the portrayal of the character's opting for a 'live for the moment' philosophy and ultimately choosing death. Death is therefore confirmed as a choice, an existential choice.

Death is almost a reflection of a Western atheist approach to faith and life, where death is the ultimate end. The echo of Nietzsche's idea can be traced back to the concept of God's death, in Parleur A's words above about suicide. For instance, the

[121] Ibid., 36.
[122] Ibid., 42.

concept of God's death[123] implies empowerment, resulting in humankind taking back control, regaining power from the God religion has so much abused: 'we must become gods ourselves'.[124] Nietzsche finds in the Buddhist principle of nirvana,[125] the ideal of *Übermensch.*[126] As a substitute for God's death. Like Oupsensky, Nietzsche conceives the idea of eternal return[127]. Gao, on the other hand, expresses the impossibility of both regaining that power, and that of eternal return. If Gao had applied this principle to the play, the character would have been presented as coming back to life and starting all over again. However, as Nietzsche suggests and similarly to Crimp's *Play With Repeats,* in the eternal repetition of events the course of action does not change, and therefore the character would still find himself trapped in his misery.

In this sense, Gao seems more inclined to adopt the nihilism of *Thus Spake Zarathustra.* Applying the ideas expressed by Nietzsche already mentioned in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Parleur A and Parleur B would represent the Dionysian spirit, which in the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy predominates in the artistic but always implies pain and the 'tragic':

> The tragic cannot be honestly deduced from the essence of art as it is commonly understood in terms of the single category of appearance (*Shein*) and of beauty; it is only on the basis of the spirit of music that we can understand the joy experienced in the annihilation of the individual for ot is only the individual examples of such an annihilation that the eternal phenomenon (*Phänomen*) of Dionysian art is made clear to us, *the principium individationis*, the eternal life beyond all phenomena (*Erscheinung*) and in spite of all annihilation.[128]

His bleak depiction means that Gao is writing a drama fully embedded in a Dionysian tradition, which leads us to the relationship art-God discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Looking at the dialogic development of the play and the dialectical relationship between the two characters discussing life and death, it could be also argued that this play unfolds in the form of dialogic chanting aimed at enlightenment. However, from a Buddhist religious perspective or from any religious perspective, by letting Parleur A kill himself, the secular as much as the spiritual becomes meaningless, because the

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[123] Frederick Nietzsche, "*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Prologue 3," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, 256.
[124] Ibid., 260.
[125] Frederick Nietzsche, "On the genealogy of morality- first essay" (1887), 397; "The anti-Christ: Curse on Christianity" (1888), in *The Nietzsche Reader*, 488.
[126] "The Overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the Overman shall be the meaning of the earth.[...] Behold, I teach you the Overman: he is the lighting, he is this madness (*ein Übergang und ein Untergang*)" in FrederickNietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra - Prologue 3," 256-257.
[127] Cf. Chapter 4.
[128] FrederickNietzsche "The Birth of Tragedy" (1872), in *The Nietzsche Reader*, 76.

spiritual itself can only exist linked to its very opposite. An individual reaches transcendence only working through the secular[129]and Gao is describing a vision where the lack of both secular and spiritual leads to despair.

This vision follows the discontent that Gao had expressed in the previous play about the Postmodern and Modern condition. In terms of the Postmodern condition, the Dionysian attitude of the character Parleur A can be interpreted as a rejection and disbelief in rationality, whereas Parleur B expresses a decadent Nietzschean condition that is typically Modern. Both understandings of life lead to individualism and alienation, which in 'Reason for Literature' Gao harshly criticised in the aftermath of Nietzsche's idea of the superman. There is a resonance of a Beckettian vision, as portrayed in plays such as *Endgame*[130]:

> Even to the concentration camp victims, existentialism had attributed the freedom either inwardly to accept or reject the inflicted martyrdom. *Endgame* destroys such illusions. The individual as a historical category, as the result of the capitalist process of alienation and as a defiant protest against it, has itself become openly transitory.[131]

Talking about Beckett's *Endgame,* Adorno stresses the alienation, caused by overpowering capitalism, which is similar to the alienation felt by the two characters in *The Death Collector*. Before reaching a hasty conclusion, one should debate on the connection alienation, capitalism and Modernism as part of a philosophical undertaking of discussing the relationship between art and truth.

In this regard, one can talk about 'aesthetic alienation'[132], a philosophical concept of art being alienated from truth and disjointed from it, a concept that goes hand in hand with the modernist *art pour 'l'art* principle. In the case of Adorno, like these two plays, however, it is the political contingency that makes the difference, embedded within a Modernist epistemological hence Modernist discourse: Adorno's belief in philosophy as an expression of 'its own non-neutrality, its own ethics and politics' whereby art and truth need to express a political resonance, because the art and truth

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[129] This is especially but not only true in the case of Huineng's belief that suffering and passions are themselves enlightenment *(ji fanao shi puti)* Youru Wang, *Linguistic strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism: the other way of speaking* (New York, NY: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 69. Also Cf. Chapter 3 footnote 20.

[130] *Endgame* is a play about Hamm, a blind master in a wheelchair and Clov, his servant who can never sit down.

[131] Theodor W. Adorno and Michael T. Jones, "Trying to Understand Endgame," *New German Critique*, No. 26, Critical Theory and Modernity (Spring - Summer, 1982): 119-150.

[132] Jay M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art – Aesthetic alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 135.

divide was politically motivated, in defence of an emerging capitalism[133]. Within this perspective, alienation is both an artistic and a philosophical conception borne out of modernist aesthetic and political concerns about the relation between art and truth, the individual and capitalism.

Therefore, one could argue that both Beckett's and Gao's plays embody a Modernist vision directly related to an individual and capitalist dichotomy. Parleur A and Parleur B are closer to the anxiety of modern man as described by a Modernist thinker such as Adorno himself.[134] If Gao was expressing criticism of the Postmodern condition in the previous play, here he is showing the effect of the Modernist condition and expressing his sense of disillusionment with humankind and its failure to pursue any form of spiritual, religious or otherwise, whether Christian or Buddhist.

5.2.2 Self-referentiality and subjectivity

Self-referentiality is an important element of the part of this play where the character reflects upon art, part of the character's quest to define the parallel between art-creation and God. Within this parallel Parleur A reflects upon his role as a performer – as a creator himself. This part of the chapter looks at the perspective both on art in its parallel with the spiritual and on the role of the two characters, which relates to the question of subjectivity.

The first statement regarding art and its status levels bitter criticism at the revolution of art, the new artistic trends that have rejected the past to create something new and have made art an object of consumerism. The museum is given negative connotations; it is not a place of worship but a place of the consumption of artistic objects. The character imagines himself as an object of consumerism, like any other piece of art. This type of art is soon forgotten insomuch as it is soon consumed, which explains why the characters regard the museum displaying this type of art as a desolate place of forgetfulness. This could be interpreted as addressing criticism directed towards contemporary art and therefore Postmodernism. According to intellectuals like Jameson, by eliminating the boundaries between art and pop culture the logic of Postmodernism is related to the emergence of capitalist consumerism[135]; if we consider the type of art the characters refer to as that of a pop almost 'fast-food' type of art, the discourse of anti-Postmodernism can be applied here.

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[133] Ibid., 11.
[134] Refer to Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004).
[135] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and consumer society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic* ed. H. Foster (WA: Bay Press, 1983), 113.

The second most important connotation given to art by the character is the idea of the artist as a 'demiurge'. The artist has murdered God and has taken his place as demiurge and creator.[136] The revolution of art is therefore portrayed as the Romantic idea of art and literature. The eighteenth century Romantics reinvented Plato's idea of the demiurge:

> The tradition of thought which was most congenial to the notion of the artist as creator sprang initially [...] from two main sources, both classical. The first was Neoplatonic, and resulted from a fusion of an analogy of the artist as Plato's Demiurge, or divine craftsman, with an amended version of his account of the poet as one 'possessed', such that inspiration was now held to confer upon the artist a divine grace in execution and composition which was beyond the normal rules of art.[137]

This idea of art also has a resonance of Nietzsche's nihilism/Romanticism as briefly mentioned earlier on. The link with Nietzsche's approach can be found in Parleur A's statement following the discussion about suicide:

> It is you who takes control of death. Before death takes you by surprise, you make arrangements for such nonsense; you stage it as if it was a performance, or rather a farce. Suicide is above all tragic; your own murder ought to be funny and amusing.[138]

Parleur A's statement seems to correspond perfectly to Nietzsche's vision in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* where life is described as creating a 'tragic' show and its greatness is in its tragic drama. Death, being the most tragic of life's events, is also the greatest moment to exhibit in front of an audience. Parleur A embodies the Dionysian artistic spirit, whereas the audience he calls upon embodies the Apollonian:[139] a logical rational drive looking at an irrational depiction. From this perspective, a very important conclusion can be drawn. The artist, in his extreme attempt to stage the greatest of all moments, is destined to die. With regard to this, towards the end of the play Parleur A talks of the risk of the artist killing himself.

The link between death and art is better explained by the artist's issues related to creativity and the use of language, which is considered repetitive and devoid of meaning. The vacuity of the artist's demiurgic activity, the meaninglessness, is part of the destiny of the artist as creator. It is the vision of the artist compelled to write, to re-create this meaningless. It is a vision of the artist without a centre, without spiritual guidance, who can only exploit the meaninglessness of utterances and language. The

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[136] Gao Xingjian, *Le Quêteur de la mort*, 19.
[137] Tim Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 27.
[138] Gao Xingjian, *Le Quêteur de la mort*, 42.
[139] See Chapter 1 footnote 78.

only value that remains is that of death, as it offers the possibility to create the greatest moment of drama. This nihilism rejects a Romantic approach and turns into a modernist decadent view of art, which ultimately intermingles with the idea of Postmodern pop art. In terms of the spiritual, in this sense Gao is conveying a moral message. Gao expresses some criticism of and uneasiness with a decadent Modernist ideology, which has extreme consequences in Postmodern art as expressed in Barthes' 'death of the author' theory.

This play makes use of self-referentiality and split personality to convey these ideas. Self-referential statements are present throughout the play and are articulated by the character, who reflects upon his role. The character defines himself as an observed object and expresses his fear of being dissected. Gao deals with a viewer-based idea of art, where the art itself and the artist are the victims of a subjective external eye. As was the case in *Weekend Quartet* we can refer to Baudrillard's idea of the camera lens as the only objective element within the process of communication. With reference to Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality, artist and art become part of a virtual reality. In specific terms, the character talks about himself as a performer, acknowledges the presence of the audience and places himself in a dialectic relationship, where the artist/character is the 'observed' victim as well as the creator within an artificial reality. The viewer or audience are also part of this virtual reality, through a channel of artificial communication. We stress the word 'artificial', as it is a reality merely created and constructed by this very interaction.

In terms of subjectivity, Gao uses the idea of split personality as advocated by Freud and later by Lacan:

> Lacan goes on to expand Freud's concept of the split self into an even more elaborate and divided concept: the I, the moi, the other [...] and the Other. [...] In short, the self, as Lacan perceives it, is divided between four aspects, permutations and "doublings" (note Garrison also used the word "double" to explain the totemic identity) of the conscious and the unconscious, each complexly compounded by the influence of two oppositionary categories: the "I am" of existence, which is separate from the "I am" of meaning; [...] and the "Imaginary" and the "Symbolic".[140]

This idea suggests that identity is the product of multifaceted elements. However, Gao's use of split personality to distinguish two aspects is similar to Freud's

[140] Shoshana Felman *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of the Insight, Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*. (Cambridge/Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 45.

idea of conscious and unconscious, which places Gao's play closer to a modernistic vision. The interaction of the two characters seems to be part of a structured installation.

In terms of subjectivity we need to consider that the two characters are actually two sides of one person, to the extent that we can argue that this play is the enactment of split personality, in a less sophisticated way than in previous plays. Split personality has been used quite extensively in random abstract ways that enact the fragmentation of subjectivity in its varied perspectives. The use of two characters suggests that the author aims to focus attention on the relationship between the conscious and unconscious as formulated by Freud, or to represent two sides of the unconscious.

The use of 'I' and 'you' is still employed, creating several voices on stage. This is only partially true. We can still talk about three layers, or tripartition, as the 'I' and 'you' represent two layers but we can see the actors' neutrality disappear as the internal monologues and interactions intensify. The play only completely develops through the intermixing of the two monologues, where the dialogue between the two characters is not enacted on stage even though they seem to be talking to each other. As in *Weekend Quartet*, the internal monologue opens a window into the character's internal thoughts in such a way that subjectivity is only apparently deconstructed and investigated. Using Baudrillard's idea of symbolic exchange, the two characters are considered two facets of one person immersed within a virtual reality. This suggests a link with Postmodernism, while Modernist tools are used.

5.2.3 Martin Crimp's *Fewer Emergencies*

Similar to Gao's play, this play by Crimp is about a foretold death. It is the death of Bobby, a figure who has already been mentioned in *Whole Blue Sky* as the son of the non-present female character. This play is formally very similar to *Whole Blue Sky*; it is an abstract piece with three voices/actors on stage narrating events in a dialogic pattern. This section compares this play with Gao's, looking at the theme of death and the theatrical experience itself in connection with the representation of subjectivity.

5.2.4 Death and the spiritual

Like most of Crimp's plays, this play differs from Gao's in terms of the spiritual or ritual, which are totally absent, and themes like death are presented as part of a philosophical debate. The dialogic pattern of the play serves to describe a philosophical

and theatrical journey leading to death. The play metaphorically describes a journey down a river in a boat.

The play starts with the repetition of the statements 'Things are looking up,' 'things are definitely improving.'[141] The positivism of this statement embraces a global condition, as the three voices mention different countries and their 'peaceful' situations. In terms of philosophical attitude, similarities with the attitude expressed by Parleur B can be found. The Epicurean nature of this statement lies in its tense, which refers to a present situation.[142] The repetitive pattern of this statement informs the audience of its ironic meaning, by suggesting a sense of fragility, of precariousness, while the journey of the play introduces us gradually to the opposite situation, making this play a tragedy. Another statement describes that this journey takes place at 'the rim of the world'.[143] This phrase 'the rim of the world' highlights a sense of fatalism, the end of this journey, and precludes the possibility of life beyond this point by announcing the approach of a tragic moment. The tone of this phrase announces an existential condition that is still far from the spiritual of Gao's play, as this play focuses on a material existence.

This is confirmed by the depiction of the character Bobby as surrounded by several objects, having locked himself in his room. There is a striking contrast between the freedom expressed by the depiction of the boat travelling down the river and the claustrophobic depiction of Bobby's state of being trapped. Bobby's situation echoes Parleur A's, who was also trapped within an enclosed environment. In both cases their imprisonment seems to be voluntarily. Bobby is locked up in his room surrounded by familiar objects in a desperate attempt to protect himself from the dangers of the external world. The play, therefore, conveys the contrast between inside and outside; with outside connected to the idea of freedom but also of perdition (the boat ends at the rim of the world), and inside connected to the idea of protection but also of imprisonment. Both dimensions connect the people involved – either the unspecified 'they' or Bobby – to 'death' or metaphorically to 'perdition'. It is within this perspective that Bobby is described as shooting himself. The outside/inside contrast is poetically conveyed by the unspecified 'they' attempting to reach out for Bobby, and once no answer is heard from his room, one understands that Bobby is finally dead.

With reference to the two actions 'suicide' and 'self-murder' as described in Gao's play, we are not sure as to whether Bobby's shooting belongs to either one or the other, whether it is dictated by despair or a decision to 'hold life in hands'. The

[141] Martin Crimp, "Fewer Emergencies," 42-43.
[142] Cf. footnote 115.
[143] Martin Crimp, "Fewer Emergencies," 43.

depiction suggests that Bobby's might be indeed an act of suicide, motivated by the irrational fear of the outside world. Bobby's death mostly appears unmotivated, a random act of masochistic violence, possibly meant for tragic effect. In this sense, Crimp's use of death embodies Nietzsche's idea of tragedy, the staging of dramatic events, of which death is the most sublime of all. In this regard, Aleks Sierz explains that the play emulates the media coverage of violent events, as though Crimp were using news headlines to create a dramatic event.[144]

This could be interpreted as following the Postmodern tradition, which uses parody to revisit and reread society. According to Hutcheon, Postmodern parody is normally used to revisit the past, confront the present with the past, and question the power of representation;[145] in this case parody is used to confront life and death and their representation. This confrontation is depicted by the contrast inside/outside and the representation of an extremely dramatic event. The parody works by imitating the style of media coverage or the conventions used in filmic displays of violence. Even though the imitation is not perfectly clear, we could argue that Crimp is reproducing the sensational tone of news reports. In terms of representation, as in the previous play the narrative is constructed according to the mechanism by which stories and facts are told and narrated.

In terms of the content of the play, the parodic element reveals a moral message that condemns the sensationalising of violence, such as by the media in our society. As in Gao's play there is condemnation of the materialism, the lack of any kind of values except material ones, which leads Bobby to kill himself. Unlike Gao's play, the character does not have the opportunity to reflect upon his condition; his act is a perpetuation of violence as conditioned by the media and by society.

5.2.5 Subjectivity and representation

This section deals with subjectivity and its representation, in a similar way to that in the previous play *Whole Blue Sky.* Three voices/actors carry out the narration in a more abstract way than in the previous play. As a result, it is very difficult to identify whether or not subjectivity is actually represented.

The unspecified 'they' and Bobby are the non-present characters, of which very little is known. We recognise the character Bobby from the previous play and can presume that he has grown up and is a teenager. Apart from this association Bobby can

[144]Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp,* 68.
[145]Linda Hutcheon, *The poetics of postmodernism*, 90

be considered to be as anonymous as 'they', and 'their' connection to Bobby is also rather unclear; we only assume that, at one moment in the play, 'they' try to reach out for Bobby and fail, and 'they' are the actors themselves taking part in the story they are narrating as emotionally involved participants.

In terms of subjectivity, Sierz argues that this play is about the dissection of Bobby's brain as in *Whole Blue Sky*, as though Crimp were investigating the character's subjectivity – which is not the case, as will be demonstrated. In this regard, one could argue that the narrators/actors/participants are creating the story and that therefore Bobby is the product of their subjectivity. Nevertheless, the impossibility of their reaching him, of avoiding his death, also brings to mind Bobby's independence from them; he is just a silenced character whose subjectivity cannot be expressed. The character's silence suggests that the exploration of subjectivity and its investigation is not possible, as it is embedded in the language itself that builds up the narration – which corresponds to Lacan's ideology. This is an important difference between Gao's play and Crimp's; while Gao uses Freud's idea of split personality to explore the character's subjectivity to some extent, Crimp, applying Lacan's ideas, completely dismisses and silences the characters as true victims/objects of the narration and of this artificial, constructed reality – to use Baudrillard's terms.

The narration resembles the journey of a camera, zooming in and out of the situation while the events are unfolding, and by doing so it shows how the virtual reality is constructed. The journey of the camera/narration starts off depicting the outside, the boat travelling down the river; zooming out to refer to situations in different countries and then zooming in to Bobby's bedroom without completely gaining access to it. In this sense, the actors are part of the camera crew and the writer is the director – both are eyes looking through the camera lens at the objects: Bobby and 'they'. However, these boundaries are not so well defined, as was mentioned earlier on: 'they' could also be the actors themselves participating in the story, and the actors themselves the objects of the audience's gaze, a reference to Baudrillard's concept of transfusion between the subject and the object would indicate that this play is attempting to create a representation/narration that defies interpretation. The representation, and the characters stripped bare of any connotations and reduced to signifiers, could be compared to the kind of photography Baudrillard talks about that 'speaks for itself'[146] – for instance object composition – and cannot or should not be interpreted, a process which enables

[146] Jean Baudrillard, "Photography, or Light-writing: Literalness of the image," In *Impossible exchange*, (London: Verso 2001), 145.

the transfusion from subject to audience, subject to author and Bobby as an object to 'they'. The actors would then serve as the camera lens, as objective mediators, forming part of this communication, zooming in and out of the narration. However, an objection to such a hypothesis would be that the action of zooming in and out is selective of the reality or fictionality it represents, thus it is the result of an intentional act, which by definition is subjective.

Another element to consider is that, unlike Gao's play, there are no self-referential statements in this play, which means that the play avoids addressing questions concerning the process of narration itself. As a result, the interaction between the actors runs more smoothly without the interruptions of the actors' questioning the narration or looking for a story to tell. Therefore, in this sense this play is less about narration and more about the enactment of the development of the narration and its deconstruction as a narrative process.[147] At the same time, the abstract tone of the play alienates the audience in a Brechtian fashion, as though they were looking at the narration reduced to its bones, slowly being composed into an amorphous skeleton, using Angel-Perez's terms. The Postmodernism of this play undoubtedly lies in this enactment, but it is also very important to stress that the minimalism of the play and its abstractedness are symptomatic of Crimp's artistic vision going beyond Postmodernism. Crimp appears to push the boundaries of Postmodern narration by reducing it to its skeleton.

5.3 Concluding remarks

As was stated at the beginning of this chapter, *Weekend Quartet* and *The Death Collector* seem to mark a U-turn in Gao's theatre[148], and the loss of its roots in Zen theatre. On the other hand, Crimp's play continues to experiment and further develop the core values of his own theatre. However, it is interesting that, if we look at productions and writing after these plays, we can note a 'stalling' in artistic terms in both cases.

Gao has not written any more plays since *The Death Collector,* and Crimp has written *Cruel and Tender* (2005), a modern version of Sophocles' tragedy *The*

[147] Deconstruction is also a term in narratology based on the idea that 'narrative is a stable structure [..] towards the view that narratives were narratological inventions construable in almost infinite number of ways" Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan , 1998), 3.
[148] The only exception to this could be *Snow in August* which is, however, a celebration of the ritual and marks a return to "Mythological/Ritual plays."

Trachiniae, or *The Women of Trachis*, in an attempt to use a classical play to deal with current issues, like the war on terror, chemical warfare etc. Most recently (April 2008) his new *The City* was staged at the Royal Court. This play can be linked to *The Country* in terms of both content and form, but fails to bring new elements to his theatre. The reasons for this artistic stalling could be various and should be assessed against what future scripts of theirs will show.

For the purposes of this thesis, we need to look at these plays as though they were neither the last nor the first of the playwrights' careers, especially as, in the case of Crimp, we have not analysed his plays chronologically. As far as the debate on Postmodernism and Modernism is concerned, we can definitely draw a parallel. Gao's shifting between the two poles has radically turned into a criticism in terms of content and in artistic terms. In *Weekend Quartet* Gao follows Baudrillard's footsteps in criticising the Postmodern condition as a way of seeing the world – a fragmented flux of signifiers and subjectivities with no centre and no moral values, where even freedom is a curse, the product of this society's enslaving humankind to perennial meaninglessness. In *The Death Collector* Gao seems to criticise Modernism by conveying its decadence, where the word 'decadence' can be associated with the existential crisis as expressed in this play.

The word 'criticise' is used inappropriately; even in 'Reason for Literature' Gao does not level direct criticism at Modernism and Postmodernism. 'Criticism' is used here to define the spirit of these plays, the sense of discomfort, of annoyance perhaps, with society and culture in general. If we find discomfort or criticism in his previous plays, this is mostly connected to the Buddhist spiritual values, the originary self. In the present plays, this has changed, he has detached himself from these, which are regarded in a nostalgic way – like Da in his dream/nightmare.

In artistic terms, his style and language is random and inconsistent: tripartition and hypotheticality are not effective as they seem to be a matter of style, of repetition of patterns, and it is not clear whether they are entirely necessary. In both plays, there is a return to narration and representation as opposed to fragmentation and abstraction.

The opposite can be said of Crimp's theatre, with some exceptions. As stated above, Crimp continues to inhabit Postmodernism. In this sense he continues to show the mechanism for the construction of fictionality or hyperreality. These two plays follow in the footsteps of *Attempts on Her Life*, and are the best examples of Crimp's playing with signifiers. He even seems to take a step further and his sardonic language

conveys a sense of tiredness, of imminent defeat. By reducing his theatre to mere voices, storytelling and showing the extreme consequences of violence, perhaps Crimp, like Baudrillard or Gao, senses that within Postmodern theatre the very existence of theatre is endangered. At the 'rim of the world' there is nowhere further to go; at the rim of Postmodernism, overtaking and transforming modernist representation, the act of performing itself becomes meaningless – which is essentially a Modernist attitude, as Postmodernism would argue that meaninglessness or the expression of meaninglessness is what culture and art is about.

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Conclusion: after modernism and postmodernism what next?

At a theoretical level, the thesis has attempted to prove Calinescu's idea of continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism through the dramatic work of the two playwrights by examining their texts. Moreover, going further than Calinescu's approach, this thesis has looked at Lyotard's definition of Modernism and Postmodernism, which also proves the continuity between the two. Expanding on both Calinescu and Lyotard's definitions, I defined Postmodernism as carrying through a process of dislocations, of challenging and deconstructing cultural, social and linguistic certainties that the pre-modern period, i.e. Realism and Enlightenment had formulated and developed. Modernism has been defined to have already started to question cultural, social and linguistic certainties by showing their internal contradictions. I would argue that, while Modernism is focused on an epistemological quest looking at the different facets of these certainties and showing their underlying ambiguities, Postmodernism brings this quest to a closure by assuming an ontological outlook that disintegrates, 'deconstructs' etc these certainties.

This definition led me to take into account ideas and concepts as formulated by philosophers such as Derrida, Lacan, Baudrillard, Nietzsche etc. who contributed directly or indirectly to the development of Modern and Postmodern ideologies. The second chapter that looked at the Gao's *Between Life and Death* and Crimp's *Attempts on her life* takes into account Lacan's idea of originary self in the case of Gao's play and Derrida's idea of 'simulation'. In the third chapter (Gao's *Diaologue and Rebuttal*, Crimp's *The Country*), some references are made to Baudrillard, Nietzsche, Freud and Lacan's ideas, whereas the focus is on the use of literary devices and in the case of Crimp's play. In the fourth chapter, in both Crimp's *Play with Repeats* and Gao's *Nocturnal wanderer* references are made to Nietzsche's ideas, while in the case of Gao's play Foucault's ideas are taken into account In the last chapter, further references are made to Nietzsche, Baudrillard among others.

In particular, when analysing Gao and Crimp's plays, this thesis focused on their philosophical underpinning as related to the above definition between Modenism and Postmodernism, and the following can be said about each set of plays. By referring to an 'enlightened reality' *Between Life and Death* is engaged in an epistemological quest that still looks at dichotomy real and spiritual, where even its reference to a Lacan's idea of 'originary self' is used in a epistemological sense, assuming a gateway to the

chaos of fragmentation. In *Attempts on her life*, the fragmented depiction of the absent character and of the theatrical experience seems to ask the Postmodern ontological question 'is there a reality?'

In Chapter Three, in Gao's *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, the belief in an 'enlightened' reality is overshadowed by the madness and violence of the play, which leads to the fragmentation of the two characters on stage in a Postmodern fashion. Crimp's play, instead, responds to an epistemological question: 'What is reality? Is it the world of the country, of pastoral and idyllic reality? Or that of the city? In Chapter Four, both Gao's and Crimp's plays deal with a male character engaged in a journey of self-discovery that is invalidated by its own process of 'deconstructing' the premises of their journey and the characters themselves. The last chapter is by far the most complex and difficult to define. In *Weekend Quartet* Gao follows Baudrillard's footsteps in criticising the Postmodern condition as a way of seeing the world – a fragmented flux of signifiers and subjectivities with no centre and no moral values. In *The Death Collector* Gao seems to criticise Modernism by conveying its decadence, but creates a play that is essentially nihilist and Modernist in its essence. Crimp's plays, instead, in the last chapters follow the footsteps of *Attempts on Her Life*, and plays with signifiers in a Postmodern fashion.

However, assigning each play to either Modernism and Postmodernism is limiting and reductive and does not represent the findings that the analysis of the plays bring about. In fact, by accounting for aspects intrinsic to their works it is far more difficult to define whether each work exclusively belongs to either category. First of all, this thesis has gone into details by dissecting the plays according to two aspects: the question of spiritual/ritual and the representation/exploration of subjectivity connected to self-referentiality and the function of language.

In relation to spiritual/ritual dichotomy, Gao's plays explore the tension between ritual and spiritual in connection to the Zen ideology of enlightened reality; whereas in Crimp's case both terms are used in a wider sense as they refer to symbolism of the described actions and existential quest of the characters. As said above, Gao's play uses yet surpasses the mere rituality of his earlier plays and focuses on the exploration of the Zen ideology, whose philosophical underpinning seems to reject postmodern disbelief in certainties. However, this changes throughout Gao's plays and leads to almost a definite abandonment of the Zen. In the case of Crimp, the ritual/spiritual are present through their very absence. With the exception of *Play with Repeats* that deals with the ritual and to some extent the spiritual with reference to the magic and the esoteric, Crimp's plays almost show the chaos and decadence of a condition that lacks a

'spiritual' belief and where the ritual is reduced to mere repetition of meaningless actions. This is true especially in *The Country*, where the countryside is idealised yet embodies the very emptiness of the characters' actions that are repeated and combined almost in a ritualistic manner. This particular outlook suggests that Crimp's plays as embracing postmodern ontological negativity.

With regards to the representation/exploration of subjectivity connected to self-referentiality and the function of language, each play reflects on the use of its very medium, language (Derrida, Brecht in reference to theatrical language, etc.) and through language looks at characters' subjectivity as a social construct (Foucault, Braudillard) and as related to the dichotomy conscious and unconscious (Freud, Lacan). In this respect, the plays shift between total fragmentation of both language and subjectivity in a postmodern fashion to a modern questioning of the facets composing them. In addition to these two aspects, the representation of gender dynamics has been fundamental to fully understanding the plays, which at times question and at other deconstruct gender relationship and identity by referring to either feminist or postfeminst ideas. These are partially born from the ideological debate as induced by Modernism and Postmodernism.

The fundamental outcome of looking at these three main aspects is that modern aspects coexist with postmodern elements, which proves Calinescu's argument. For instance, we can state firmly that both Gao's and Crimp's *Between Life and Death* and *Attempts on Her Life* are a hybrid of Postmodern and Modern elements. Whereas Gao's *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, developing from the Modernist elements of *Between Life and Death*, becomes a Postmodern play; *The Country* intermixes both postmodern elements, typical of magic realism and a modern philosophical outlook in terms of theatrical representation and construction of subjectivity. On the other hand, Gao's *Nocturnal Wanderer* and Crimp's *Plays with Repeats* can be positively linked to Postmodernism more than their other plays, particularly through the 'fragmented' negative representation of an illusory reality. Gao's is a 'perfect' postructuralist work, while Crimp's mostly constructs a parody playing with the dimension of time and space. On a purely theatrical and artistic level, however, both plays stress the fictionality of their representation, taking to an extreme the Brechtian principles of theatre within theatre.

Their hybridism cannot only be interpreted as symptom of a continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism but perhaps a symptom that using Postmodernism or

Modernism as categories to read literature is obsolete insofar writers like Gao and Crimp intentionally or unintentionally escapes this kind of categorization. Moreover, both Gao and Crimp declared to some extent or the other no link to either category.

In his speech to the Stockholm academy Gao rejects any 'ism', anachronistically champions for a pre-modern universal kind of literature and criticize Nietzsche's nihilism. Crimp rejects the idea that communication is impossible or impaired by a subjective use of language and speaks of an excess of language. References to the philosophers mentioned also make it problematic to define boundaries between the two movements. Derrida and Baudrillard are believed to belong to Postmodernism but have rejected such a label; in particular, Baudrillard has attempted to find a resolution to the Postmodern condition as described in chapter five. Moreover, Derrida or Foucault's ideologies could never have been possible without Nietzsche's modern nihilism that had led to questioning rationality and traditional dualist metaphysics.

One might question the value of this study, the worth of defining whether this or that author belongs to both or either cultural trend. However, this study has gone further than that. First of all, especially in the case of Crimp's work, this thesis is the first academic systematic and comprehensive analysis of his plays. One could also argue that in the case of Gao's work, this is a more detailed analysis of his plays, especially of the most recent ones. Moreover, the investigation of gender representations and dynamic within the cultural context of Modernism/ Postmodernism is quite an unusual one and its benefits lie in making the discourse on gender not an isolated endeavour but one that is strictly connected to the contemporary cultural debate. Secondly, this thesis also demonstrated the development of these authors' work from a search for new dramatic avenues to the exhaustion of this very experimentalism. This is true especially of Gao's work, whose latest plays returned to a sort of nihilistic Modernism that ironically link Gao to his most loathed philosopher Nietzsche.

Most importantly this thesis highlighted a connection between Eastern and Western Literature in a new and fresh comparative perspective that looks for similarities where they seem to be less obvious and by not merely applying a Western perspective on a non-Western author but trying to reverse the process, by looking at a Western author through the eyes of a non-Western one. The comparison proved that movements like Modernism and Postmodernism are not isolated but are global cultural movements with important literary resonances.

In particular this last consideration brings us to the main value of this thesis that examines the continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism. The comparative approach bridged the works of authors coming from two different cultures and with different backgrounds. The success of this task demonstrates that one cannot study literary works in isolation within national boundaries and a revival of 'risky' comparative studies is possible and necessary in British institutions and I daresay European institutions. I do not use the word 'risky' lightly but within the current context of the British and European comparative landscape where the comparative approach is mostly employed in the reading of European literatures.

With regard to Gao's work and career, one could also argue that the comparison between his and other Western works is an easy one because Gao lives and writes in Europe and no longer in the East. However, as has been stressed in this thesis, his theatre is embedded within the Chinese tradition and philosophy that one cannot read his work without making references to his Chinese roots. Gao is the epitome of a transnational intellectual – this is the term that Quah Sy Ren uses in his book – where the term transnationalism stands for writing across national, and in this case continental, boundaries. Gao is not, however, an isolated case; there are others belonging to the diffusion of literary works as part of a global market.

This opens up to a field in Europe that revives comparative studies in line with those from the United States and from Hong Kong, whose most prominent scholar in the study of Chinese Literature in comparative perspective is Zhong Longxi. This thesis, in fact, addresses the need for further study between works from different continents that could draw a picture of global cultural and literary trends. For instance, with regards to representation of gender studies and feminism it would be interesting to look in more detail at the representation of gender roles in contemporary works by both male and female authors from both the West and the East and how they influence one another. In fact, China opening to the West has important cultural consequences not only of an economic nature but also of a cultural one: China is not only exporting products and goods to the West but with these, also cultural values and trends. Moreover, it would be interesting to assess in a more pragmatic and sociological perspective the response of Western audiences and readership to new or more established works coming from China. This kind of study would break the scholarly tradition of mainly looking at how Western works are adapted in the East.

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