



Fire from Heaven

Introduction from the Editor

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In the mid-1990s almost out of nowhere, a play shook the United Kingdom's discourse on public patronage for the arts. That play was Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995). A play about trauma, and atrocity, influenced by the Bosnian war. Critics at the time reacted furiously, the concept of the events of that war being replicated to England was treated as obscene and even "hysterical".¹ It became a lightning rod for criticism of freedom of expression by the conservative right. According to Steve Waters, it was perceived as an affront that attacked the very "codes of legibility and value" of British Theatre.²

I began my research career by examining this issue through the lens of what Roland Barthes describes as 'semioclasm'. In this concept meaning is quite literally broken. Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater describe it as a 'subversion of meaning from within'.³ For a hardened semiotician like myself, that idea was intoxicating. It demonstrated a moment in which art could remake meaning in the world, could collapse epistemological certainty and open society to new ideas, and could allow things to fall apart at the level of representation.

Kane's *oeuvre* and its challenge to aesthetics and meaning-making asked its audience to come to terms with their own radical alterity, and moreover to experience themselves as other. To abuse a quote from another of Kane's characters from *Cleansed*, the purpose of the dramaturgy and the performance of this type of semioclastic moment was for the audience to feel it, "Here. Inside. Here. And when [we] don't feel it, it's pointless."⁴ To me in the early years of this century, this seemed a solution to the Gordian knot in critical theory, its unsettling lack of systematic solutions and the disturbing notion of Michel Foucault's that the subject, the individual, is an effect of discourse. Now in 2026 I look back at my optimism around

1. Kim Solga, "Blasted's Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible," *Modern Drama* 50, no. 3 (2007): 346–374, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2007.0062>
2. Steve Waters, "Sarah Kane: From Terror to Trauma," in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880–2005*, ed. Mary Luckhurst (London: Blackwell, 2006), 371–382, at 381.
3. Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater, eds., *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), 362.
4. Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), 150.

the power of the breakdown of meaning and I weep.

Back in the 1990s the notion of civil war or conflict within the West was a faraway concept. The ideas of an EU without the UK, or of a resurgent almost fully fascist popular right, or war without end, were fanciful and nightmarish left-wing “delusions”. Well, in 2026 with near 25 years of continuous war (including Iraq, Afghanistan, Georgia, Syria, Libya, Sudan, Ukraine, Palestine, and Iran), after a global banking collapse, a global pandemic and lockdown, Brexit, and the rise of the openly racist, antisemitic, populist right in America and Europe, I feel justified in saying that sadly that nightmare was no delusion, it was prescience.

Yeats’s rough beast pregnant in the western world order has been born again. And the technocratic centre cannot hold. Populism’s new challenge to freedom, democracy and art is not just censorship, but a full epistemological crisis, what political science calls, with a perversely benign turn of phrase, post-truth. What we as scholars, as citizens and as students now encounter is not merely an erosion of reliability of information, but an Orwellian doublethink where the authenticity of images and text is forever questionable; where artists, designers, programmers and writers find their labour and livelihoods threatened by automation; where human creativity is under-valued by systems and structures that cannot recognise its worth; where information proliferates while ignorance dominates; where a collective trend sees the replacement of sincerity with glibness, and the sublime with the banal. Herbert Marcuse, as far back as the 1960s warned of this tendency in western discourse, he called it “a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom.” More than six decades later the darkness drops again. But as we approach midsummer solstice it behoves us to remember that even darkness is a cyclical thing, a seasonal thing. It is our duty to treasure Prometheus’s gift and tend the flame. The work presented here, creative, critical, reflective and practice-based, captures the essence of that fire. The spark of curiosity, the light of imagination, the heat of argument.

This is the first issue of the IADT Journal of Research and Creativity, I am happy to say its content reflects an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary remit. Dr Jessica Foley’s “Data Sonnets” is a risographic zine that combines poetry and imagery, created by researchers on the Building City Dashboards project at Maynooth University. Steven Nestor’s “A Study of Photographic Works on the Ancient World by Herbert List and Joel Sternfeld via the writings of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida” explores how the past is recorded in photography through a philosophical lens. Lisa D’Arcy’s “Gender Equality in the Irish Construction Industry” examines challenges of attracting, retaining, and promoting women in the construction industry while evaluating key initiatives by leading organizations and the Irish government to advance gender equality for all workers. And “This Same World: Naive Impressions from an Expanded View of Our Environs” is a conversation between Clyde Doyle and Peter Evers about their explorations with specialist

cameras adapted to capture more of the non-visible spectrum and how access to other ways of seeing impacts our understanding of the world around us.

Alongside these pieces, the issue also showcases work from students across a range of levels. Aimee Maguire's "The Bilingual Advantage" outlines a study regarding bilingualism and attention control, and Natasha Coran's *Do awe-inspiring VR environments impact creativity?* probes the intersection of virtual reality and creativity, in order to demonstrate feasible forms of research with a dedicated research lab and technical support. Paulina Rekasiute's work, "The Pursuit of Happiness in Academia: Motivational Foundations of Student Well-Being" and Regina Rochford's "Academic Motivation and Self-Esteem in Irish Undergraduates: a Mixed-Methods Approach" explores motivation and student welfare. The issue also features creative and visual work including Dr Yaqoub BouAynaya's photograph, *Stop the Genocide*, art by Dawn Dwyer, Eoin Kelly's poem, 'Kingaroy Peanut Company', and Elizabeth Wayson's *Coda Hauntings: An AI Ghost Story*.

These submissions range across the spheres of psychology, photography, linguistics, equality, poetry, and virtual reality, and explore meaning-making systems at a time when the interpretation, construction and analysis of them could not be more crucial. Whether they investigate perception or the boundaries between reality, representation, and the imagination, the papers and practice herein shine a light on the ever-present past, and look towards the edge of the visible. To where perception can be expanded with technology. To the relationship of language and cognition. To the connections between self-esteem, motivation, and educational attainment. And to the ghostly presence of artificial intelligence.

In this age of post-truth and populism, scholarship is crucial. Where the semioclasms of Kane's theatre electrified me, I confess that confronted by it in politics and society for the last decade or more had left me paralyzed. It seemed as if I heard W.B. Yeats lamenting that the "best lack all conviction, while the worst | Are full of passionate intensity."⁵ I felt like I was sleepwalking, lost in *anomie* and paralyzed by the shame that collectively not only did we allow the irrational and the intolerant to rise again, but to overwhelm us. This era and its mechanisms of control are however not impervious to critique or to challenge. So perhaps now as we head towards the 2030s it is not meaning-breaking that we need, but new meanings, new visions, and a new beginning. New forms to address new orders and new realities. New codes of value and new ways of seeing.

The feeling that Kane demanded, the awareness, is what post-truth tries to erase every single day. She set *Cleansed* in a university campus operating as a prison

5. W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 10th ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2018), 2040–41, at 2040, lines 7–8.

and eradication camp,⁶ where the very institutions of knowledge, learning and experimentation had been perverted. We owe it to ourselves and each other as scholars and educators to guard against that mutation. And instead to stand where the horizon meets the impossible, to search for revelation, and reach towards the dawn, in hope that we might steal fire from heaven.

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6. Graham Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 87.