



Jolene Armstrong

CRUEL

Sarah Kane's Postmodern Traumatics

BRITANNIA

Peter Lang

Cruel Britannia: Sarah Kane's Postmodern Traumatrics examines four plays by British playwright Sarah Kane (1971–1999), all written between 1995 and 1999 within the context of the “Cool Britannia,” or “In-Yer-Face” London theatre movement of the 1990s. Kane’s plays were notorious for their shocking productions and challenging and offensive subject matter. This book analyzes her plays as products of a long history of theatrical convention and experimentation, rather than trend. I read Kane’s plays through an optic of trauma theory, and link the trauma to postmodern experience as defined by war, interpersonal violence, repetitive memory, and sex as medium of violence. Kane’s plays’ unrelenting violence and graphic depictions of violent sex suggest a relationship with theories and practices such as Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, and Kroker and Cook’s theory of the postmodern as sign of excremental culture and an inherently abject state of being. Through a play by play analysis I conclude that Kane’s work suggests that violence and trauma are endemic to postmodern life, and are ultimately apocalyptic due to their culmination in Kane’s final play, the suicide text of 4:48 Psychosis.

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For Remy and Savianna, someday.

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Introduction: Kane in her cultural context

Sometime around 1995 a “new wave” of theatre took hold in Britain. This theatrical trend coincided with a larger cultural, economic and political movement in Great Britain. In November 1996, *Newsweek* featured an article entitled “London Reigns,” in which the trendiness of London is detailed, thereby announcing the birth of “Cool Britannia” as a means of marketing to North America a renovated British culture. At the heart of London’s aforementioned presentation to the world as “the coolest city on the planet,” lays an economic motive and assertion: “The British economy has seen three years of sustained economic growth. And since the Thatcher revolution, the City has consolidated its position as a centre of international finance,” (*Newsweek* 11.4.96) the article’s authors announce. The authors also observe that, at the same time as Britain was experiencing a supposed economic boom, “the gap between rich and poor [was] widening” (34–5). It is precisely this contradiction between economic affluence, which can be tracked in the paper trail of booming London finances, and the ever-increasing number of people living at or below poverty, that I argue, following Sierz and others, becomes the catalyst responsible for the “new wave” of “In-Yer-Face”. Interestingly, this new affluent period in Britain in the 1990s is also “an era of cuts in arts subsidies” (Sierz *In-Yer-Face* 39). Such funding cuts would presumably hamstring fringe theatres and playwriting cooperatives that emphasize new and experimental work and are dependent upon government grants for successful operation and cultivation of new playwrights and directors. However, as Sierz points out, “what mattered more was the cultural climate” (39). Sierz cites Ian Rickson, Artistic Director at the Royal Court in 1998, as saying that “the writers who grew up under the Thatcher regime experienced two things: they were disempowered and simultaneously empowered. On the one hand, the state was strengthened at the expense of the individual; on the other, the only way of achieving anything was to do it yourself” (39). The general sentiment at the time seems to indicate that the new “DIY theatre culture” is the result of the post-Thatcher climate, which as Rickson says,

“provided both a climate of anger and the motivation to do something about it,” (Sierz 39) spawning a trend that expressed a more “privatised dissent” than the “left-wing” plays of the seventies and eighties (39), meaning, that the generation of playwrights who were coming of age in this post-Thatcher era, were not dependent on funding for producing their work, and they were angrier and more motivated than their predecessors to use theatre as a voice of protest or even as a way to chronicle the experiences of living in this era.

These new playwrights sought innovative spaces for performance, worked collaboratively and resisted traditional pressures to present their theatre in a conventional manner. Further, while the left wing political plays of the seventies and eighties presented political critiques and often forwarded an alternative politic within their plays, the new wave of theatre in the nineties did not necessarily offer political critique, but rather opposition and dissent to present circumstances. It would be difficult to generalize the alternative politic forwarded by this group of plays, since most do not easily align themselves with a particular political movement, opting rather to present opposition, resistance and protest, usually in the form of an ‘in-yer-face’ format, rather than forward solutions.

The appearance of Kane’s plays and the correlation between theatre and economy provide a cultural opportunity for an investigation of Kane’s postmodernity in the context of Jameson’s theory that posits postmodernism as an expression of late capitalist/post-industrialist culture. According to Jameson, one of the hallmarks of postmodernism is that “aesthetic production today has become integrated into a commodity production generally” and consequently such a market demands aesthetic innovation and experimentation (316). The result of risky experimentation, paradoxically, is that artists are increasingly more dependent upon support through foundations and grants in order to produce art. The underbelly of this supposed cultivation of genuinely new art resides in the unwritten dictum that art then conforms to the demands of the granting and funding institutions, severely limiting what kind of art will be produced rather than providing an environment in which artists might produce according to their own aesthetic rhythms and evolution. Furthermore, as Jameson reminds the reader,

this whole global, yet American postmodern culture is the internal and super-structural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror. (316)¹

The significance and surprise of Kane's art as publicly funded product is that rather than portraying the themes and stories that appeal to a capitalistic audience, it depicts society as a psychological, figural and literal gore-fest of excessive behaviour. The plays perform a charged postmodern parody of the late capitalist culture which has funded the creation of plays. It might be surmised at this point that the "In-Yer-Face" character of this type of theatre is not simply a general backlash against cultural norms, but a calculated assault directed toward the artistic tastes of a capitalist, consumer-driven palate.

The terms 'Cool Britannia' and "In-Yer-Face" theatre tend to be used interchangeably by theatre critics to describe a mood of theatre in Britain in the 1990s. Aleks Sierz broadly defines "In-Yer-Face" theatre as,

any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or what should be shown onstage (*In-Yer-Face* 4).

The question immediately arises, then, of how "In-Yer-Face" theatre, with its graphic representations of sex and sexual violence differs from other genres, such as pornography, for instance. Arguably, the difference is not so much in its representation, since much of the "In-Yer-Face" theatre depicts various sexual activities, but in its uses. Brian McNair furthers the arguments made by John Ellis, Maurice Peckham, and Bette Gordan that pornography contains a variety of "codes and conventions," that are "imbued with theoretical and semiotic complexity" (90). Furthermore, McNair argues that heterosexual pornography

1 Although Jameson is speaking specifically about an American context, the process that he describes feels equally applicable to other global and financial superpowers such as the United Kingdom.

is used by men primarily as an instructional device that both instructs and confirms predominant notions of masculinity, thereby creating and continuing social realities; McNair concludes this argument, in a general way, by stating that the uses of pornography are many and varied (90–106). Arguably, “In-Yer-Face” theatre is used by playwrights as a vehicle for depicting and challenging social realities; audience use may vary from those who attend live theatre in order to seek a specific socially enlightening theatrical experience to those who are more simply avid theatre-goers.

As Sierz observes, *The New Oxford English Dictionary* (1998) describes “In-Yer-Face” as something that is “aggressive,” “provocative,” and “impossible to ignore or avoid,” noting also that the *Collins English Dictionary* adds the word “confrontational” to the definition. Graham Saunders adds the term “new brutalism” to the list of descriptors for the term “In-Yer-Face,” which itself has been aptly appropriated from “American sports journalism during the mid-seventies” (Sierz *In-Yer-Face* 4) to describe this period in theatrical history. Saunders, like Sierz, traces the seeds of the movement of provocative theatre much farther back than the 1990s, to writers such as Osborne and his 1956 play *Look Back in Anger*, and Bond’s 1964 play *Saved*. Both Sierz and Saunders agree that it is tempting to position Kane’s *Blasted* as the first notable incarnation in the most recent trend in this type of theatrical provocation. However, Saunders posits the 1994 production of Judith Upton’s *Ashes and Sand* as providing, “signs of what was to come from this new group of writers” (4).

I believe, along with Sierz and others, that membership within the Cool Britannia “movement” was more or less mandatory for playwrights producing new or controversial theatre at this time, meaning that if one wanted to be taken seriously as a new writer, one had to write in this mode and be prepared for the critical flack and adulation that accompanied taking these sorts of theatrical risks. As Sierz observes,

in-yer-face theatre is less a school or a movement than a series of networks, in which individuals such as Nielson, Ravenhill and Kane formed temporary milieus. Perhaps the best metaphor for in-yer-face writing is that of an arena, an imaginary place that can be visited or passed through, a spot where a writer can grow up, or where they can return to after other adventures. A few writers have taken possession of this space; others have passed by quickly. But the developments in this

arena meant that new writing at the start of the millennium was characterized by a variety of dissonant voices and by the breakdown of many of the old divisions that were part of our traditional idea of British theatre: subsidized/commercial; fringe/mainstream; theatre/film; high/low. (*In-Yer-Face* 249).

Notably, the articles I have reviewed indicate that these plays immediately attracted much attention at home and abroad for their disturbing content. As David Edgar, playwright and postgraduate instructor of playwriting at Birmingham University, points out there is an inherent cultural danger in the current economic boom, especially as it has been hijacked to promote mainstream tourism to Britain. According to Edgar, the cultural danger can be found in the burst of confrontational tactics as “element of fashion—this leads some people to think that last year the in thing was smack, and this year it’s sodomy. This can lead to a dangerous mannerism” (Sierz “In-Yer-Face” 327). Sierz concurs with the danger of trendyism by adding that despite the diversity of new writing since 1956 (which he calls, “Year Zero of post-war British Theatre” (236)), there was still a detectable “element of fashion: one year, theatres would receive dozens of plays about heroin; the next there would be a heap of gangster stories. But despite such copycat dramas, the nineties saw a great liberation of the imagination of British dramatists” (236–7). Yet allowing this aspect of liberation, heroin chic and heroin lifestyle as portrayed in the film version of *Trainspotting* may represent Edgar’s case in point about dangerous mannerisms. In *Trainspotting*, in particular in the film version, but also in the book itself, the heroin fuelled lifestyle is glamorized as something approaching a phase that teenagers and young adults must pass through. Even truly tragic consequences such as a dead baby and infection with HIV are only cartoonishly serious, and certainly the social ills of such serious drug addiction are explored only for their comic or entertainment value. Because of the importance of reading Kane in relation to her cultural scene of the 1900s, I will offer a brief comparison of *Blasted* to Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* in Chapter Two.

Kane, however, is far more radical than many of her contemporaries, and her work has not, despite superficial accusations to the contrary, contributed to any such imitative fads. In fact, her theatre serves to de-glamorize the empty trend in which there appears the conflation of sex and violence, party drugs and social destruction. Her work

challenges violence as a lifestyle in general by presenting these realities in their stark and grotesque manner. Overall Kane's work, while avoiding being moralistic, does in fact offer a moral critique of modern ills, while avoiding presenting easy solutions to the social/cultural issues that Kane sees as problematic – excessive consumerism, chronic violence, sexual violence and exploitation in general to name but a few.

Kane expressed her fears of her work being pushed into convenient and coincidental categories in a 1999 interview quoted by Saunders:

Blasted was considered to be the beginning of a movement called 'New Brutalism'. Someone said to a Scottish playwright that you couldn't call his work 'New Writing' because the play wasn't brutal enough. That is exactly the problem with movements, because they are exclusive rather than inclusive.... It is just a media label to refer to some things that might happen in a particular play. Actually it's not very helpful. When people come to see *Crave*, they will be surprised; or they will find that the label doesn't apply. I do not consider myself a New Brutalist. (8)

Still, it is useful to name this period in order to identify this resurgence of theatre that stood apart from mainstream entertainment, a sudden resurgence positing theatre as a social force at a time when arts funding cuts saw independent theatre venues hovering dangerously close to extinction. In my assessment, these "New Brutalist" writers, the "Brit-Pack," the "In-Yer-Face" *enfants terrible*, militated against the optimistic view of the state of affairs in Britain, as portrayed by articles such as the *Newsweek* article cited above, by depicting British society as being in unacknowledged "disarray" (5).

One criticism often levelled at the "new wave" of playwrights is that for them, as for postmodern art in general, "politics is not in the foreground" (Sierz "In-Yer-Face" 327).² Similarly, Sierz cites other unnamed sources that level the accusation that "most new work is superficial in its writing, ghettoized in its presentation... Contemporary plays flatter their audiences rather than engaging with them, and talk to their own 'tribes' rather than to a general constituency" (327). This cultural self-awareness distinguishes the "new wave" of theatre from earlier "state of the nation" plays, such as John Osborne's *The Entertainer*

2 Here I am referring to critics of postmodernism that assert that the postmodern is nothing but a wildly eclectic irrationalism that expresses cultures as having lost all sense of value. See Jürgen Habermas's *Legitimation Crisis*.

and *Look Back in Anger*, plays by Harold Pinter, such as *The Party*, John Whiting's *Saint's Day*, for instance, while this "new wave" of playwrights also offer political theatre, a type of state of the nation play that is both similar and different from its venerable predecessors mentioned above. I would argue that this awareness of social fragmentation is precisely what makes these plays finally so political. For a playwright such as Kane, the British population is not the homogenous mass posited by the rhetoric and politics of Empire, espoused by magazines and other cultural productions that are myopic in the scope of their audience and representation. Even as the term "post-war" frequently describes Kane's (and others') position in British theatre, that the term is still used, fifty years after the fact, is disturbing, and yet somehow necessary in order to capture or to continue as singular organizing memory the particular experience of that nation. At the same time the supposedly encompassing term effectively serves to marginalize the variety of experience and origin that now composes the faces of the British population. This current generation has no first-hand experience of the Second World War. Accordingly, these new playwrights are intensely focussed upon the plight of the individual within a composite society, one complicated by the postmodern production of images and identities. In spite of the plays' emphasis on individual experience in the world, I am arguing that Kane's plays are far more political than has been recognized by either popular media or scholars. In portraying "a social milieu that's in crisis," (327) her plays bring the political to an individual experience, dramatizing the political as lived experience. As well, the fact that there was such an influx of new writing in the 1990s during such economically challenging times in the British arts, offers an alternative viewpoint to the types of economies that seems only to value, to quote the title of Kane's contemporary Mark Ravenhill's signature play, "Shopping and Fucking."

In its radical individualism, and extreme nihilism, I see Kane's writing as standing apart from this "movement." Her theatre is a brand of dystopian postmodernism and as such, conveys the death of society. The portrayal of this death emerges in her later plays as also including the death of the notion of the individual within society, as evidenced by Kane's abandonment of concrete character identities in *Crave* and *4:48 Psychosis*. I place Kane's work within a paradigm of dystopian drama

because her plays fulfil the requirement that dystopian literature, “offers a militant criticism of specific aberrations in our own present social-political system by pointing out their potentially monstrous consequences in the future” (Gottlieb 13).³ In addition, Kane’s dystopian view of the present and the immediate future echoes Dragan Klaić’s theory in *The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama*:

dystopian imagination in drama... foresee[s] not only a gloomy future but an end of time as well. A version of the future, imagined as much worse than the present, is out-matched by a prediction of a future denied, terminated, closed—with an end to humanity and the entire living world. (11)

The concept of “an end to humanity” is variously evident in Kane’s earlier work, literally in *Blasted* and *Phaedra’s Love*, and poignantly so in her later work in which individuals contemplate and enact suicide as the literal end of their humanity and life.

Kane’s work is incisively political in other ways. Coinciding with the dystopian postmodernism of Kane’s work is the prevalent display in her plays of the desire to transgress traditional social norms. Her enactment of transgression in its various forms creates decentred subjects, loosened from the security of ethics, interiority, and subjectivity. These characters’ acts of transgression allow my initial interpretive approach based on Dollimore’s subversion/containment problematic in which the subordinate and dominant sectors of a society frequently exist within a “complex, often violent, sometimes murderous dialectic” (21). However, despite the inherent desire of subordinate members of society to transgress, and the various ways in which this transgression might be enacted, Dollimore concurs with earlier theorists that such acts of transgression, far from acting against, or in opposition to, the spoken and tacit social laws are in fact the result of what Dollimore sees as the perverse dynamic. This tension “denotes certain instabilities and contradictions within dominant structures which exist by virtue of exactly what those structures simultaneously contain and exclude”

3 Arguably, a dystopian vision of the universe is ultimately also a form of utopia. Dystopian drama “involves utopian ambitions while describing their total collapse” (Klaić 3). Kane’s Hippolytus character exemplifies this notion in his final line of *Phaedra’s Love*: “If only there could have been more moments like this” (103), as he dies and proceeds to be eaten by vultures.

(33).⁴ The implication of this theory in respect to Kane's plays is that, despite her attempts both to represent escape from repressive forces through the inscription of perverse desires in her characters' own acts and to invert the forces that inflict oppression upon them, her characters remain either victims of dominant ideology, or become re-inscribed within it. When one views her entire oeuvre, one can see that for Kane, suicide becomes the only, albeit controversial, successful escape from oppressive forces, and is the only true transgression against dominant, homogenous cultural norms.

The most prevalent way Kane constructs her characters' attempts to oppose dominant prescriptions is through the problematic of gender. According to Dollimore, one form of gender resistance to dominant ideology is "sexual dissidence" (21). Sexual dissidence most pointedly appears in Kane's plays in the character of Hippolytus and the disembodied voices of *Crave*. Even the concept of disembodiment in *Crave* becomes a form of sexual dissidence in that the represented body and mind are presented as separate yearning, desiring and craving entities. The mind, or seat of being from which these voices relate their traumatic experiences, generally stems in *Crave* from a sexual experience that has posed certain difficulties for the characters due to the transgressive nature of the experience. There is no previous point of reference from which these dramatic entities of voice and body might understand their own acts, or the experience of another's act. Furthermore, rather than finding release and relief from the oppressive forces that they rebel against, many of the characters are quickly – sometimes subtly, sometimes brutally – reinscribed within the boundaries of the dominant discourse. For example, in *Crave*, Kane's complex characterizations spend much of the play disentangling their traumatic experiences by defying society's preference that such experiences be swept under the carpet,

4 While Dollimore's theory is mainly concerned with homosexual experience, Dollimore recognizes that the theory, the subversion containment problematic, and the perverse dynamic can also apply to other groups with interests that run counter to dominant discourses, including race, groups defined by gender and sexuality in general. Additionally, Dollimore draws upon Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature* in which Williams asserts that "the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture" (Dollimore 83).

while also sometimes inflicting traumas (usually of a sexual nature) on others. One character notably, shockingly begs, “Rape me” (199). The expression is a desire for an act of transgression against a banal and unsatisfying existence, but rape is a gender weapon, frequently used to violently enforce sexual norms such as heterosexuality, thereby the desire for transgression actually is a reinscription of the norm rather than a ritualistic escape. While attempts to transgress are likely to result in containment within the dominant hegemonic prescription, Dollimore insists that this is not necessarily failure. In Kane, one example of such a compromised liberation is found in *Phaedra’s Love*, in the character of Hippolytus. While Hippolytus manages to escape his prescribed destiny as King and therefore keeper of hegemonic values and nation, his escape comes in the form of public humiliation and violent bodily mutilation. His final words in the play, “If there could have been more moments like this,” suggest that he welcomes this escape from his prescriptive future, even if that escape is in the form of violent death. As Dollimore says, “resistance from the margins seems doomed to replicate internally the strategies, structures, and even the values of the dominant. Unless, that is, resistance is otherwise, and derives in part from the inevitable incompleteness and surplus of control itself” (81). I will test Dollimore’s observations throughout my study of Kane’s work.

Kane’s work is partly characterized by the frustration of the realization that it is not enough simply to subvert the binary of the dominant/subordinate. Kane’s innate sense of the limitations of inversion lead to attempts to pervert the dominant, send it askew, create a crisis, and observe the result. Dollimore has identified this difference between simply subverting the dynamic as opposed to “overturning” in the Derridean sense of subversion as a “necessary stage in [the dominant’s] displacement” (65).⁵ While Kane’s characters struggle with freeing themselves from society’s expectations and pressures they also struggle

5 Here, I am referring to Dollimore’s citation of Derrida’s observation: “I strongly and repeatedly insist on the necessity of the phase of reversal, which people have perhaps too swiftly attempted to discredit.... To neglect this phase of reversal is to forget that the structure of the opposition is one of conflict and subordination and this to pass too swiftly, without gaining any purchase against the former opposition, to a neutralization which in practice leaves things in their former state and deprives one of any way of intervening effectively” (65).

to find alternative options to these expectations for gender behaviour, sexuality and definitions of success and happiness.

Kane's plays question political and ethical norms, presenting themes that repeatedly surface like a recurring nightmare: the destabilizing nature of transgressive sexuality, the social role of violence, the ethics of suicide, the increasing frequency of repetitive memory as postmodern experience, and its attendant results of trauma and social alienation. I intend to demonstrate that, within a paradigm of postmodern trauma, Kane's plays seek to portray contemporary concerns with public and private violence. In particular the analysis of such category crises interrogates sexual violence, war, memory and the ways in which those elements collide to intensify the traumatic experience of the urban postmodern scene. Her oeuvre thus stands as an elaborate study of a society in crisis, not unlike earlier theatrical social studies of society in crisis, for instance John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*. But unlike these artists, Kane's sense of society in crisis is sustained and becomes increasingly complicated over the span of her work, moving from the bleak scenarios of *Blasted* (an oblique critique of the Bosnian crisis), the concentration camp atmosphere of *Cleansed*, and finally to the stream of consciousness writing in *4:48 Psychosis*. Her presentation of the world is bleak and hopeless, yet in her plays' persistence and commitment to telling a story, of exposing certain truths, and of demystifying that which we believe can only happen to others, Kane always maintained that there is the hope of redemption, rather than sheer and purposeless nihilism – this hope is difficult for readers and audience members to find in her work. At the very least, I read in her work a desire for release from a cycle of violence perpetuated and maintained by current cultural and economic structures and assumptions, power structures and gender relations. Disturbingly, in Kane's later work, one attainment of release is arguably through suicide, which calls to mind the circular trap that Dollimore describes in *Sexual Dissidence*. That Kane's oeuvre culminates in dramatic (*4:48 Psychosis*) and personal suicide (she committed suicide on 20 February 1999) provocatively suggests that as a transgressive artist Kane arrived at a point in her intellectual and artistic development in which she faced the possibility that “subversion and transgression are not merely defeated by law, but actually produced by

law in a complex process of (re)legitimation” (Dollimore 81), and that the “dominant culture...at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture” (Williams qtd in Dollimore 83). I believe that within Kane’s plays there can be detected the playwright’s own growing fear that despite her extraordinary efforts to theatrically expose, deconstruct, transgress, resist and subvert oppressive societal norms, her work may be ultimately reinscribed within the very dominant discourse from which she wished to dis-articulate. None of her characters attains freedom from the societal restrictions imposed upon them. The only way out for most of her characters is through violent self-destruction, or violently imposed death. I would still insist, however, that through her acts of writing plays – a publicly performed writing – Kane nonetheless attempted a ceaseless negotiation for the glimmer of a counter-culture and a self-grasping toward awareness and liberation.

When I declare that Kane’s works are postmodern, I am broadly referring to a tendency in Kane’s plays to foreground ontological questions of existence, according to, for example, Brian McHale’s theory of the postmodern in *Postmodernist Fiction*. According to McHale’s paradigm, postmodern literature poses ontological questions for its readers such as: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (10). I am furthermore reading Kane’s ontological concerns as an extension of existential anxiety over death, suffering, responsibility and alienation. I use the word “postmodern” to signify the deconstruction of the concept of unified identity and the delegitimation of prevalent and conventional concepts such as nation, monarchy, religion, sexuality and gender. I understand and present postmodernist concerns in Kane’s plays as a continuation and elaboration of post-war modernism’s uncertainty with being, manifesting in her plays as a hyper-awareness, and anxiety about the precariousness of being and living within an unpredictable world.

Kane’s plays demonstrate postmodern affinities according to other theorists too, such as Arthur Kroker and David Cook’s theory of the postmodern as excremental culture in *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (1989). Of particular relevance through Kane’s oeuvre are the concepts of “panic”, as over-riding mood and mode of response to life and world, and their re-assessment of Nietzsche’s nihilism and the cancelled self, which argues for