**Sarah Kane and *Blasted*: The Arcade Game?**

In 1995, the Sarah Kane play *Blasted* debuted at the Royal Court. The play was infamously met with histrionic reviews, with many critics appalled (even outraged) by its violent action, which involves a rape in a Leeds hotel room that, without warning, is blown apart by a mortar shell, as the city deteriorates into a warzone. For some, the violence of *Blasted* aligned Kane with a new trend in British theatre, variously described as the Theatre of Urban Ennui and Smack and Sodomy Theatre, though perhaps the most lasting descriptor has been ‘in-yer-face theatre’, as provided by Aleks Sierz.[[1]](#endnote-1) This ascription has been contested by other Kane scholars. Graham Saunders has shown that *Blasted* draws on a variety of influences and intertexts, from *Oedipus: The King* to *King Lear* and *The Wasteland*, which places Kane in a more obviously canonical Western theatrical and literary tradition.[[2]](#endnote-2) My own work on the play has also concentrated on its appropriation of *King Lear* and the scene at Dover ‘cliff’; *Blasted*, as I read it, can be understood to belong to a tradition of post-Auschwitz, Catastrophist dramaturgy that works itself through appropriations of *King Lear*.[[3]](#endnote-3) My research on the relationship between *Blasted* and its Shakespearean intertext was, however, recently interrupted with a startling find from the world of popular culture.

While looking at images of the original production of *Blasted* via Google, I stumbled across an image I initially took to be a parody front-cover for the play, perhaps made by students studying Kane. The image is of a scantily-clad young blonde woman, who seems shocked (but also perhaps impressed) by a hyper-masculine, muscular soldier, who leans out of a window. The roof of the building collapses around the pair, with bricks falling to the floor, while, in the cavity left behind, the title ‘Blasted’ appears. So far, so *Blasted* – or at least a misogynistic, action-hero parody version of *Blasted*. The collapsing roof obviously parallels the bomb-blast which tears open the hotel room where the play is set, which leaves a ‘*large hole*’ in the wall from which dust and debris falls; the hyper-masculine soldier recalls the anonymous Soldier (the Soldier also carries ‘*a sniper’s rifle*’) who makes his way into the room after the blast, where he rapes Ian before killing himself; and the blonde woman (who, despite the absence of obvious characterization in the cartoon, appears to be far younger than the soldier) can be seen as a more obviously sexualized version of Cate, whose rape by her older former boyfriend Ian exposes the violent basis of the sexual fantasies that typically characterize patriarchal culture.[[4]](#endnote-4) The appearance of the figures at a window also recalls Scene Two of *Blasted*, where Cate, looking out of the hotel room window, suddenly and unexpectedly announces that there is ‘a war on’ (33) in the centre of Leeds.

Intrigued, I followed the search result, only to find that the play *Blasted* shares its name with a 1988 arcade game released by the (now defunct) Bally Midway company.[[5]](#endnote-5)

*Blasted* is a shoot ’em up set in ‘Scrapheap City’, a ruined city that has been overrun by rebelling cyborgs, who are in open revolt against humanity – a revolt eagerly covered, in the world of the game, by a newspaper called ‘The Daily Poop’. The game is a first-person shooter where the player uses a sniper rifle to shoot cyborgs through the windows of sieged apartment-complexes, while avoiding human casualties – though these only incur a loss of ‘energy’ (too much energy-loss results in a Game Over). This use of a sniper rifle allows for a split-screen presentation, a widescreen view that gives a vantage on the whole building being ‘cleared’ of the cyborgs and a simultaneous telescopic view through the scope of the sniper rifle – a view that allows the player to see in to the interior of the buildings being occupied. The image I had originally found, and mistaken for a spoof front-cover, is from the side of the arcade cabinet unit – though I still maintain it could be used as a parody front-cover for the play.

There is, as far as I am aware, no evidence to indicate that Kane, despite her obvious fascination with popular culture, played arcade games or was directly familiar with the 1988 *Blasted* (though the game was released in the UK through the London-based Electro-Coin distribution company, where it was advertised as being ‘Hot from America!’). There are, however, some uncanny visual and thematic parallels between the *Blasteds* that warrant attention.

Undoubtedly, the most striking image from the game is that which adorns the left-side of the cabinet-unit. The ‘missing’ figure is Ian – the alcoholic and terminally-ill former boyfriend of Cate. Yet the hyper-masculinized soldier arguably speaks to the ‘hard’, masculine self-image Ian cultivates, which he counterpoises to ‘scum’ ‘queers’ (19) (he also refers himself as an undercover agent (29) – though his precise involvement with the secret services is not clearly established in the play). The newspaper that covers the cyborg insurrection in the 1988 *Blasted* – ‘The Daily Poop’ – more directly parallels Ian: as a tabloid journalist, Ian specializes in providing salaciously presented stories of rape and murder for the gutter press (‘Shootings and rapes and kids getting fiddled by queer priests and schoolteachers’ (48)) and is frequently scatological when talking about his life and work: ‘who gives a shit?’ (48). There is another image from the play that also might recall Ian. Between stages, the game gives the command to ‘Get out there and BLAST a few heads’. I could not help but think of the final image of *Blasted*, where Ian is buried up to his neck, only his own blasted head visible.

Other parallels abound: the name ‘Scrapheap City’ reflects the transformation of Leeds into a ruinous warzone – though whether the city has been renamed ‘Scrapheap City’ after the cyborg revolt, or whether, in an unfortunate case of nominative determinism, it always had the name, is unclear. The split-screen presentation of the game similarly resonates with the play. Not unlike the ‘close-up’ and ‘widescreen’ perspectives of the game, the play involves the simultaneous perception of the intimate/personal and the political/ public, the relation between a rape in a hotel room in Leeds and the ravages of the Bosnian war, a TV report on which famously inspired some of the action of *Blasted*.[[6]](#endnote-6) The threat of ‘friendly-fire’ in the game similarly parallels the militarization of civilian space (the hotel) in the play.

Even the rebelling cyborgs resurface in the play. Ian is presented in *Blasted* as concerned with the threat of an invasive alien ‘Other’ – namely the ‘Wogs’ and ‘Pakis’ he thinks are ‘taking over’ (4) Britain (‘Our town now’, the Soldier says to Ian (39)). Ian is happy to be served by those he deems beneath him, but he also fears an insurgency. This is also the story (such as it is) of the 1988 *Blasted*: a previously servile class of robots has risen up and taken over Scrapheap City, taking previous, human masters captive in the process. ‘We must destroy all CYBORGS before they destroy us!’ rails the Mayor of ‘Scrapheap City’, as reported by ‘The Daily Poop' – a verdict that shadows Ian and his unrepentantly racist nationalism. More speculatively, the cyborgs may be understood to resurface in the technological, industrial-military culture that informs the world of the play more widely. ‘Send a bomber over Elland Road’, states Ian, as he declaims against those he thinks should be destroyed in the name of ‘British’ culture – a programme he relates to the mass, industrialized slaughter of the Holocaust: ‘Hitler was wrong about the Jews who have they hurt?’ (19).

The parallels between the *Blasteds* raise some interesting questions, even if Kane was not directly familiar with the game. What does the correspondence between the play and the game adumbrate about *Blasted* and its relationship with 1980s and 1990s popular visual culture? How far is *Blasted* in dialogue with forms of game and arcade culture from the time? Might the play be tapping into and subverting a popular cultural imaginary drawn from the arcade? What do the correspondences between the texts say about the interactivity, and complicity, involved in representations of (particularly urban) violence in games and in theatre? These are questions I hope to address in the future and that I hope may inspire other researchers working on a play that has itself become canonical, perhaps even too familiar.

1. Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Graham Saunders, ‘“Out Vile Jelly”: Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2004), pp. 69-78. Saunders cites Mark Ravenhill and his description of Kane as ‘a contemporary writer with a classical sensibility’ (p. 78). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. My work on *King Lear* and Catastrophism also includes the plays of Edward Bond, Howard Barker and David Rudkin. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2005), p. 39 and p. 36. All references to *Blasted* are to the *Complete Plays* edition, and page references for subsequent quotes given in the main body of text. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For more information on the game and images see ‘The International Arcade Museum’ online at <https://www.arcade-museum.com/game_detail.php?game_id=7144>. See also ‘Gaming History’ online at <https://www.arcade-history.com/?n=blasted-model-0f09&page=detail&id=273>. Videos of the game can also be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWopN_QOAks> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDg1PXc2SLE>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Graham Saunders, *'Love Me Or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 38-39.

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I would like to thank Chris Megson for encouraging me to pursue the connection between these *Blasteds*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)