

Last Girl Standing: on Zinnie Harris's War Plays

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Zinnie Harris's war trilogy *Midwinter* (2004), *Solstice* (2005) and *Fall* (2008) was not written in the order the plays are meant to be perceived in: Harris wrote *Midwinter* first, then *Solstice*, which is set 10 years before the action of *Midwinter*. She wrote *Fall* last, and it also provides the close of the cycle, but could well lead back to *Solstice* again. *Midwinter* is the centre piece. It is set during the fragile peace between one outbreak of fighting and the next in an endless war. 'I'm not sure that they're all necessarily about the same war, or even set in the same country', Harris says about her war trilogy '[...] what links them is the idea that war has cycles like the seasons, from the tiny events that spark conflict, to the awful, horrendous loss of life' (qtd. in Innes 2008).

I came across Harris's work while I was researching plays about war. I was looking at plays from the last 15-20 years and how they correlate with the changing face of war during that time, drawing from recent war theory and sociological studies on societies engaged in war. When I spoke about my research, there had been one recurrent observation after my talks: many of these plays end with a female character emerging as a survivor of sorts at the end of the play. And several times, it was pointed out to me that these female characters seem to echo a horror movie trope, particularly, a trope from the so-called slasher subgenre: the Final Girl, the one who survives the slaughter and 'lives to tell the tale'. One of the most famous representatives of the Final Girl in horror films is Jamie Lee Curtis in John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). Another iconic image is the closing shot of Caroline

Williams in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986). This article considers an approximation to the Final Girl in Harris's war plays.

The trilogy and the stand-alone *The Wheel* (2011) have two common denominators: they depict a state of perpetual warfare, and they all feature a version of the Final Girl. Exemplary for a number of recent plays on war, Harris's plays portray a very contemporary kind of warfare, tying in with contemporary war theory as developed by Mary Kaldor and Herfried Münkler. This article will briefly discuss the portrayal of this present-day form of conflict in the plays and will explore this particular female figure as a character with a long tradition.

It has been suggested that instead of progressing into a peaceful future, we have slipped back in time into the nightmare of perpetual and indeterminate state of war. War, it seems, is no longer the exceptional state, but 'the primary organising principle of society'. The development of potentially indeterminate war seems to be engrained in the decline of the nation state – and with it, the decline of armed conflicts between nation states. What follows is emergence of a global empire, within which rages a global civil war (Hardt and Negri, 2006, p.3). Arguing that the 'isolated space and time of war in the limited conflict between sovereign states has declined [and] war seems to have seeped back and flooded the entire social field', Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri agree with Giorgio Agamben's statement that the state of exception has become the rule and now determines both foreign relations and homeland security in most states (p.7). War seems to have become 'a *permanent social relation*' (p.12, emphasis in the original).

Over the past twenty years, a number of political theorists have discussed the possibility of a new form of war, the so-called 'New Wars'. It is a term coined by

political scientist Mary Kaldor to describe the development of a new type of organised violence emerging during the last decades of the twentieth century as 'one aspect of the current form of globalisation' (2006, p.1). Characteristic for the New Wars is a blurring of the distinctions between war, organised crime and large-scale human rights violations on the one hand and between military, paramilitary and civilian actors on the other (p.2). The modes of asymmetric warfare, risk transfer wars, guerrilla warfare and terrorism are more prevalent than fighting between clearly established state actors (p.15).

Ethnic-cultural tension and increasingly also religious conviction play an important role in contemporary wars, as do strong nationalist movements. This construction of new sectarian identities undermines the sense of a shared political community, allowing for mass murder, genocide, and deportation, and this could be considered the purpose of these wars, as their goals are often not of a geo-political or ideological nature but about identity politics, about 'the claim to power on the basis of a particular identity' (p.80-91). An escalation of long-term violence between clearly established groups of actors is the actual root of war, resulting from an 'ideology of antagonism' which is replicated again and again – as war is able to recreate memory – often completely dissociated from any other conflict (p.15).

This is the point at which Harris's *Solstice* sets in. It portrays a small community sliding into the first skirmishes with the neighbours that will lead to full-scale civil war. As the older generation starts to cut ties with the other side, the younger generation engages in retaliatory violence. The simmering conflict in *Solstice* finally escalates, the first refugee camp is erected and will become a permanent residence for the inhabitants, and a detention centre becomes the site of a murder. The

last scene shows two characters watching the war descend upon their community from a vantage point, predicting what the New War theorists have described as an entangled net of belligerents on an international scale.

Skipping for the moment the trilogy's middle play, *Midwinter*, we see the circle come to a close in *Fall* (2008), set right after a civil war, as the newly peaceful society tries to cling to its readmission into the international community by re-establishing certain economic connections with other countries. The play is concerned with the question of reconciliation, with the crimes of an old regime and the move forward into an era of peace. Portraying a country struggling to perform well on the international stage while running a war tribunal, it shows how the line between justice and revenge blurs and finally fades; by the end of the play, the capital is experiencing new riots and it is insinuated the war might break out again.

Changes in the modes of funding a war are an essential reason for why the New Wars may stretch over decades, as the financing has become an important element in the actual fighting, unlike in classical conflicts between states (Münkler, 2005, p.1). As it is almost impossible to disentangle the various individual motives and causes for war, there is often no prospect of lasting peace: increasingly, 'para-state players' rather than states are involved, and they often 'use military force essentially for self-preservation', not to bring the war to an end (p.8). If this is the prerogative of all parties involved in the war, then it could, sufficient funding provided, theoretically last forever, often not even identifiable as war any more, as the actual fighting seems to be suspended (p.12-13).

This is the scene on which *Midwinter* opens, conceived as the middle part of the trilogy, but written first. The trilogy is, incidentally, arranged in a remarkable

way: like the middle panel of a triptych painting, the hearth scene with a nuclear family at the centre is flanked by two panels depicting narratives of the beginnings of violence and war, both of which will lead back to the centre piece.

The play begins with a woman, Maud, feeding on a dead horse. She is approached by an old man and his mute grandson, who have been lured to her by the smell of the meat.

Leonard: We smelled the meat.

Maud: Don't move.

Leonard *takes a step forward.*

Leonard: Couldn't smell anything else for miles. Half the city will be following us. ...

A noise in the bushes makes them both start.

Maud *holds up the stone again.*

Maud: Who is there?

Leonard: It'll be half the town. They'll have smelled it, I told you. ...

Maud *(to the bushes)* Don't move. I'm armed.

Leonard: It won't make a difference. They are starving. They'll storm you. (Harris, 2004, p. 3-10)

In the thirteen scenes, sides and causes for the war are not even mentioned; a nameless major conflict controls the characters' lives: we first see them starved and craving for food as they meet over the carcass of the dead horse one has found and

defends fiercely against the others. Hunger and sickness are constant themes in Harris's play, depicting the exhausted and starved regions described by various theorists in their analysis of the specific economy of the New Wars and their long-term impact on the exhausted and devastated regions in question.

Maud, who has lost her own child, swaps the boy for the meat. Throughout the first few scenes, we witness the creeping dehumanisation of people who have lived through deprivation: Maud appears almost feral in the beginning, ready to murder anyone who comes too close to the carcass of the horse that she claims is hers. The child seems to live purely on instinct, violently licking the blood from Maud's arms as she feeds him the horse meat, drinking as much water as he can, hugging too strongly, still unable to speak at the age of 8. War gains a 'social reality of its own', set apart from the 'civil' reality under peaceful conditions. War's reality enforces its unique forms of social relations, drawing everybody 'into the specific logic of life under violence' and leaving only three forms of possible existence under the conditions of civil war: soldier, deserter and civilian (Münkler p. 15). Yet there are few signs of actual warfare.

Reacting to the act of war, the characters have internalised the mechanics of the New Wars, the fragmentation, the changing loyalties, and the decentralisation. *Midwinter's* child has become so accustomed to the constant drifting, the search for food and other means of survival that he behaves like an animal when presented with food and water. The soldiers' war trauma has manifested in the form of a mysterious parasite that is fighting them from the inside and will ultimately result in blindness. Maud most literally internalises the war. Unable to overcome the loss and deprivation, she ravenously consumes a dead horse, reminiscent of the four horsemen of the

apocalypse – pestilence, war, famine and death – thus making war a part of herself, and alluding to the generation of a trauma in the Freudian sense.

In the last scene, news arrive that the war has started again – even without the soldiers that have, after all, gone blind.

Leonard: The war is starting again.

Pause.

That is what they are saying.

Maud: It's a joke.

Leonard: No joke. ...

I thought it was a rumour, so I went up to a town official and asked him ...

He said he wished it were. There were tears in his eyes. It's a new war, he said.

Pause.

You talk about jokes, well, he told me one. And he wasn't a funny man. But this one, funny things. How can it be? I said to him, this new war, how can we go to war? ... The soldiers are all sick, they have this parasite. ...

And do you know what he said to me then?

This next war won't need soldiers.

Pause.

That is the punchline, by the way. This next war won't need soldiers. (Harris, 2004, p. 75-76)

This idea of a new war fought without soldiers hints at the findings of the New War theorists: that war is fought 'for war's sake'.

To return to my initial claim – what do they have in common, the Final Girl in the slasher film and Maud in Harris's *Midwinter*? The trope of the Final Girl describes the character who survives the slaughter and 'lives to tell the tale', who acts as the 'investigating consciousness' in the films, and who has, since the mid-1970s, been almost exclusively female (Clover, 1992, p.35). So named by Carol J. Clover, she is 'the one who first grasps, however dimly, the past and present danger, the one who looks death in the face' and becomes a survivor (p.39). The film trope displays a few standard characteristics such as being intelligent and resourceful, while sexually rather inactive. The Final Girl will outgrow its role as the outsider in the group and become the survivor. The figure shifts between traditionally gendered roles, most notably from victim to hero, and Clover argues it is a shift towards the masculine. The girl comes out, in the end, as something else than feminine, as an androgynous character.

The film trope finds its parallel in several of the New War plays. One well-known example would be Joan from Caryl Churchill's 2000 play *Far Away*, who, at the end of the play, decides to break free from the rules of war by stepping right into the water (Churchill, 2000, p.44); another the formerly stuttering, victimised Cate from Sarah Kane's *Blasted* from 1995, who, after having survived the horrors of war outside, brings back food to the bombed-out hotel room and provides for her former tormentor Ian, chiding him: 'You can't give up. ... It's weak' (Kane, 2001 p.55).

'She is abject terror personified,' Clover writes of the Final Girl, 'she alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued [...] or to kill him herself' (p.35). In aligning the figure with the notion of the abject, it conceptually approaches the idea of the outcast: facing the horror, but thus contaminated by it, the Final Girl becomes the *homo sacer*.

In the development of his theory of the *homo sacer*, Agamben derives from Aristotle two Greek terms for the state of living, *zoē* for the simple fact of living common to all living beings, animals, men and god alike, and *bios*, for 'the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group', a life that has a certain quality to it (Agamben, 1998, p.1). *Bios* means to be a citizen of a *polis*, to be able to participate in the shaping of society, in the cultural and political life of the community – it means to have what is denoted by 'the good life'. Therefore, if a person is cast out of their community, stripped of their civil rights and their social and legal status, they become the Roman *homo sacer* (Agamben, 2005, p.8). They are left in a state of bare life, the *zoē*, the contact with which is taboo. Linked to the Roman *sacer*, 'taboo' in the Freudian sense is that which is sacred, both consecrated and impure, uniting the maleficent and the beneficent (Freud, 1974, p.311), calling forth a reaction of either awe or horror and revulsion, as well as a terror of physical or mental contact, for fear of contamination (p.218-19).

The Final Girl from the slasher movies may have survived the slaughter-fest and be able to return from the Terrible Place, but she is tainted – at least for the time of her ordeal. She is reduced to a state of bare life, sometimes 'barely alive' and, even though she has escaped the killer, she is not, and will not ever be again, free from the horror she encountered. Equally, the female figure emerging at the end of many of the

New War plays is 'the one who got away' in some ways – but she has not necessarily left the Terrible Place: the war still rages on, in line with the findings of various war theorists, who have identified contemporary warfare as often perpetual and sustained for its own sake. In most of the contemporary plays on war, the female character at one point disengages with the war, unable to leave the Terrible Place, to keep the analogy, but unwilling to play by its rules any more.

This may play out in various ways. In *Fall*, the role is filled for a long time by Kate Griselle, the widow of a war criminal, who becomes a national icon when she volunteers to listen to tapes of evidence of war crimes and subsequently to decide on whether the culprits should be executed. It turns out Kate did live with the monster and is the Final Girl, if you will, of the war, the one who 'lived to tell the tale'. She cannot live with her knowledge and her guilt, though – the Final Girl survives the horror, but is never free of it – and so Kate does not survive this play. The one who got away in this play turns out to be Kiki, the unlikely wife of the Prime Minister. 'It's like I've been asleep for years,' she says in horror, as she watches the country descend into violent riots once more, 'what has happened. I need to start to open my eyes' (Harris, 2008, p.138). When she does, the horror seeps in, and Kiki has to exile herself from the *polis*.

'Classical wars ended with a legal act which assured people that they could adjust their social and economic behaviour to conditions of peace', Münkler states, whereas the majority of the New Wars cease 'when the overwhelming majority of people behave as if there were peace, and have the capacity over time to compel the minority to behave in that way too' (p.13). Small groups therefore hold the power to define whether peace remains or not. At the end of *Midwinter*, Maud simply refuses to

acknowledge the re-emergence of the war zone by eliminating the elements of war from her life. She consciously breaks the cycle of violence that is alluded to in the seasonal motif of the trilogy:

Maud: In this house, whatever happens out there, in this house
... Peacetime. That's all I know.

Pause.

It's peacetime here, you understand. There is no more of this,
not here. Not just as Sirin is learning to talk. No, not now. We
are in a different land to out there. They're in one season, but
we are in another.

You understand? In the four walls of the garden ...

It's gone. ... That is it. It's over, do you understand me? There
is no war. ... Peacetime. (Harris, 2004, 76-77)

Although the scenarios of life in a perpetual state of war suggest stagnation, leaving little or no room for character development, several of the New War plays nevertheless portray a character ascending from the fragmented state of bare life to something resembling a life with purpose again, the stage of *bios*. Harris explains she wanted to demonstrate how people have to 'reforge' their identity after a war in order to leave it behind. The deep hatred and the prejudices prone to people with a background of war are very difficult to shift (Harris in Burnett 2004). Maud, who is trying to create a hearth, a domestic set-up, has to sacrifice a lot to maintain it. By assuming her sister's identity and taking her childhood friend's son as her own, she has

formed a new identity and found a way to allow peace to happen – but it is clear that the war still goes on; she just refuses to engage.

Leaving the trilogy, in Harris's *The Wheel* (2011), people's hopes and fears settle on a young girl, who, mute like Mother Courage's daughter Katrin, is like a counter-part to the Unknown Soldier. This play essentially makes the same point about the perpetual warfare and the nature of war as does the trilogy, but it does so within the scope of a single, epic play. Starting in Northern Spain in the late nineteenth century, the scene opens on Beatriz preparing her home for her sister's wedding. But the country has entered the war against France, and the place is taken over by soldiers. One soldier is banished from the regiment, his daughter left behind, and in the attempt to return the girl to its father Beatriz embarks on an epic journey through the war-scapes of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Together they haunt Modernity's and Post-Modernity's wars, completely dislocated in time and space and citing other plays (and the different wars) with props: the wheel of the title initially refers to a wheel-barrow on the farm, which Beatriz decides not to bring on her journey, but which nevertheless evokes Mother Courage's cart. Of course, the wheel also signifies the perpetual war: Beatriz and the Girl cross the lines in the First World War, hear of trains going to the camps in the Second World War, encounter a woman speaking of the Vietnam War and find themselves in the midst of it shortly after. In the contemporary Iraqi desert, Beatriz recognises her sister and her fiancé in a pile of bodies. They come alive and the scene reverts to the foiled wedding in Spain. Upon realising she is about to embark on her journey once more, Beatriz tries to ensure a different outcome, as the wheel of war keeps turning endlessly.

This play also demonstrates how the Final Girl in the New War plays, though frequently the one to bring about the possibility of change, may also become the anathema. Throughout the play, it becomes more and more apparent that there is something about the Girl that cannot be explained away by her simply being traumatised by the events:

[Madame] looks into her eyes. The Girl breaks out of her grasp and picks up the Boy.

Madame: Her eyes are empty.

Beatriz: We're going.

Madame: She's like a statue, a painting, one of those creepy ones whose eyes, now wait a minute, I know I haven't played by the rules, but she – tell her not to curse me....

I'll do anything, just get her to take her black prayer away. (Harris, 2011, p.73)

During the episode set in the Second World War, the first accusations against the Girl are brought forth, but only during the Vietnam War episode does it become more apparent that there might be something 'off' with her. By the time their journey brings them to the recent war in Iraq, the Girl has revealed itself as an uncanny source of conflict, apparently capable of performing miracles, but also of luring people into bringing about their own demise. The Girl seems to have become not only tainted by, but fused with the war somehow; contaminated like the *homo sacer*. If most Final Girls may be perceived as the embodiment of a scar of the war they have survived, this Girl here is a walking, festering wound.

The versions of the Final Girl we encounter in these plays diverge from how Clover defines the figure, as her work functions alongside strict gender binaries, but Harris's female characters do not necessarily take on traditionally masculine-described roles or subvert their gender-ascribed role. This relates to the fact that the opponent in the slasher films is a gendered person, but not in the plays; the war remains genderless, though it is fought primarily by men. There is of course an element of male aggression to warfare that is being criticised here, but again, the war machine as a force field operates within structures that are not necessarily confined to gender boundaries. What we can say is this: the female characters have agency in these plays, whereas the male characters do not; the male characters are caught up inside the war machine.

A cinematic archetype who proved durable enough to go through adaptation after adaptation over the years until she emerges on the stage of recent war plays, the Final Girl seems to have stepped out of one genre and medium into another, leaving her story of origin and many of her generic character traits behind, but bringing her most primal role with her: to survive the Terrible Place and defy it by walking away from it. She has evolved: the plays seem to allow for a more 'sophisticated' Final Girl, the next step, after having become the killer – as has happened to her in the slasher films – is to decide not to become the killer, to become something else. While the male characters often become the violent principle itself, the female characters, traditionally cast as representing what has to be defended – the home, the heart – become the last thing that stands in the way of the war machine.

It would be quite easy to make the leap to the cliché of women being nurturers and carers, to conclude that war is a masculine enterprise, that a feminist international

politics would eliminate war from the face of the world. I am quite reluctant to go down that particular path as I am more concerned with the difference between the Final Girl in a slasher movie on screen and the Final Girl left on the stage of a war play: how do we respond to the character when we are in the same room with her, when the Terrible Place from which she has escaped is not a nightmare fantasy anymore, but a war which we know is happening, for which we know we are somehow responsible, of which we are guilty.

The final girl in the war plays is an aberration, not of the war plays, but of the state of war, a defiance of the odds. Whereas in the horror films from the 1970s and 1980s, the gaze follows the girl, often objectifies her, in these plays, the girl has claimed the gaze as her own, and she looks right at us, across the stage, the war raging behind her, and she challenges us not to see her.

There are, of course, two Final Girls in *The Wheel*. Reluctant to take on responsibility at first, Beatriz ends up dragging and carrying the Girl through over a hundred years of war in order to reunite her with her father, and even though she fears she may fail again, she agrees to do it again at the close of the play. Throughout her ordeal, she plays down her actions, but she refuses to go down:

Jacques: I need something to hold on to.

I need a little miracle.

Beatriz: There's no miracle here.

Jacques: You walked right across the wire

And you're still standing. (Harris, 2011, p.80-91)

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