

The Theatre of Disruption and Reconstruction

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Although the concerns of this Symposium center around Latin American theatre, my study does not refer either exclusively nor specifically to it alone, since I believe that, especially in contemporary literature and art, similar tendencies are at work on a broad, cross-national and cross-continental scale. This does not mean to say, of course, that I deny the existence of a peculiar national stamp on many works; it is, rather, that I accept, even more so, the general interchangeability of human concerns and ills.

The time table for the appearance of specific types of theatre varies from country to country, but the experiments first carried out in Europe and, to a lesser degree, in the United States, did eventually reach Latin America and ultimately connect its dramatists to major Western dramatic theory and trends. Any attempt to classify the various forms that plays about disruption may take leads us into myriad difficulties, mainly because there is an overlapping of structural and thematic concerns, and often, a confluence of devices which are utilized by dramatists whose philosophic bases may seem to be—at least at the onset—quite opposed to each other. However, we can loosely group the kind of theatre that looks to the disorder of modern life and makes it the focus of much of its plays under a few broad headings. Symbolism and dream techniques overlapping those of surrealism on the one hand, and those of expressionism on the other, were the main thrusts during the first three decades of this century.¹

In the 1940's and 1950's, existentialism and the theatre of the absurd were the key terms. From the 1960's on, however, there has been such a fermentation and explosion that, once again, a single classification does not suffice. We have seen happenings, street theatre, guerrilla theatre, political theatre, Environment theatre, theatre of cruelty, poor theatre, living theatre, and confrontation theatre. The pronouncements and theories of Piscator, Artaud, Humphrey and Weidman, among others, were all exposed on the stage of the 60's.² Perhaps the term "radical" could cover all of these sub-types, or, perhaps, the term "open stage" might suffice to cover part of what these forms have in common.

What is clear, though, is that in the Theatre of Disruption, in that theatre which is fascinated by the disruptive elements of the world and very self-conscious of them, we are face to face with an anti-mimetic view of art. This perspective, however, did not spring full-blown from the head of Zeus, but rather came into being as a reaction to Naturalism and, by extension, to Realism. Even as early as the 1880's, Strindberg's naturalistic plays were hardly the objective studies of heredity and environment that Zola had demanded. Two of Strindberg's later plays were directly influential on the Theatre of Disruption: *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), and *The Dream Play* (1902). His use of choral groups in *The Dream Play*, with their frankly theatrical impact, anticipated the use of such groups in later expressionistic plays and many epic plays.

We can see that, even during Naturalism, there were writers who opposed the scientific, rational view of the world, and who attempted to evoke a world beyond the visible through the symbols of man's alienation—masks, harlequins, tramps, and clowns—as well as through dreams and shifting levels of reality.

In Latin America we see several examples of the latter. Celestino Gorostiza's 1934 play, *Ser y no ser*, has its protagonist fall asleep at the end of the first act, the second act being a projection of his dream; the siren, Alga, in Conrado Nalé-Roxlo's play, *La cola de la sirena*, is conjured up in a dream by Patricio; Villaurrutia's early one-act play, *Parece mentira*, operates on a dual level of reality with the appearances of the three women who are one and the same person; and Rolando Steiner's protagonist in *Judit*, the first play of his *Trilogía de matrimonio*, dreams up the heroine of the title and subsequently kills her—in his dream—while in "real" life he is strangling his wife; and, of course, Egon Wolff's *Los invasores* places all the action up to the final scene on a dream level, or on the level of psychic projection, if you will.

This reaction to a realistic, "mimetic" representation of the world was not merely a generational quarrel, a mere change in sensibilities—although it most certainly can be seen as such in its first moments. It also marked a change in system, in world view, and in the depiction of man's complex, psychic structure, which has its beginnings on a pre-conscious level, that level which is prior to mental reflection and which, finally, works its way up to the level of rational, communicative consciousness.

We can recognize in Latin American literature, both in the novel and in the theatre, certain types of consciousness operative through either a narrator or through characters who reflect their particular and peculiar perception of reality, their world view. The mythic consciousness conceives and perceives the world as a sacred cosmos in which the individual or the group participates with no attempt at, or need of, theoretical reflection or conceptualizations (Demetrio Aguilera Malta's *El tigre*, for example).

The religious consciousness conceives the world as the work of God, but one in which the forces of evil vie with good for supremacy, and one in which man must strive to recapture a lost innocence and to reestablish the proper role of man within the larger scope of the creation. All through Vicente Leñero's work, for example, we can identify moments of moral and spiritual crisis in the differ-

ent protagonists' lives which lead them to question the basic issues of morality, good, evil, the existence of God, and his relationship to man.

The ethical-moral consciousness resides basically on a reflexive level and orders its world in accordance with certain norms of conduct which permit it to distinguish between correct, true, good, proper behavior, and incorrect, false, bad or improper behavior, in a effort to postulate a mode of comportment which aspires towards achieving positive goals and values in human existence. This consciousness manifests itself often in epic drama, among others, which, in spite of its borrowing from the Theatre of Disruption, is basically a type of reconstructive theatre.

And most prominently, the existential consciousness relates man to himself rather than to external factors and opens up to him the possibility of electing an "authentic" mode of being or an "inauthentic" mode. This fundamental possibility of a choice of being is the defining trait of an existential existence. One may choose inauthenticity—be dominated by social conventions and prejudices, and ignore—or perhaps forget—his "real" self. Or, one may choose authenticity, come to grips with himself, or at least attempt to do so. The authentic existence, however, takes place in a region of great solitude, far from the "they say" and the "they do" of social conventions, and produces neither joy nor pleasure, but rather pain, introspection, loneliness, and anguish.

In drama, as in life, this "authentic existence" places man in *situaciones límites* in which he, from the depths of his "aloneness," must confront himself and acquire a consciousness, a realization of his fragile, precarious situation in the world, which can ultimately lead only to one place: death. From this realization comes our anguished, *angst*-ridden ironic heroes whose progressive alienation, anomie and disassociation lead to psychic disturbance and feelings of helplessness—or to a feeling of constricted horizons and lowered expectations. In other *situaciones límites*, such as a war, revolutions or persecutions, one may acquire a clear conscience of Self and extend oneself beyond immediate danger to a broader, deeper view of reality.

One other type of existential consciousness that can be found is that which occurs in a kind of innocent state, prior to any consciousness of good or evil, and which can, and often does, occur in the midst of misery and helplessness, as a manifestation of man's primal and vital instinct. In Guillermo Gentile's *Hablemos a calzón quitado*, the innocent Juan is an example of this latter type.

Coupled with, and frequently pitted against, "authentic" types, we can also find many "inauthentic" types: e.g., the masses who are the most prey to the "they say," "they do" syndrome; the mediocre type, mentally incapable of any auto-questioning and content within his *status quo*; the conformist who perceives social conventions and prejudices as good and necessary and who lives quite satisfied in his inauthenticity; and, finally, the "good man" who really believes in the pseudovalues of an inauthentic existence.

The diverse ways of dealing with authentic vs. inauthentic existence is what, basically, much of the Theatre of Disruption is all about. The Theatre of the Absurd, of course, rejected any sense of commitment, finding no values worthy of one. It reflected the confusion and chaos of the human condition through the

techniques of interruption, discontinuity, incongruity, incoherency, senseless logic—or un-logic—and repetition.

But, are they so different? The existentialists wrote carefully constructed plays that drew the conclusion that the world has no dependable order, while the absurdists expressed this disorder in the very form of their writing. So, even such apparently diverse approaches as those of the various types of Theatre of Disruption all still try to depict what happens to man and society when disorder rather than order is the mainspring of existence.

In the multitude of samples of disruptive theatre in Latin America with its desire to politicize, criticize, protest, and revolutionize the *status quo* and breakdown the eventual conventionalization of all forms of art—even the most revolutionary—we see a mixture and often, a hodge-podge, of techniques, themes, and levels of quality. Well-written plays such as Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La pasión según Antígona Pérez*, Jorge Díaz's *Topografía de un desnudo*, Griselda Gambaro's *El campo*, among many others, although highly critical and politically oriented works, still fall into a more conventional pattern than some more "radical" dramatists would like. The call among them is for collective creations, "spontaneous" plays or productions, "happenings" with a purpose, theatrical experiences which, as they tear down the fourth wall, seek to activate a political and social awareness in a hitherto unconscious public. Unfortunately, although this is truly "live" theatre, documentation is scarce, texts often non-existent, and opportunity for viewing productions limited. The efforts of these groups do seem, however, to point to a post-disruptive or reconstructive view, as do some of the works of producing dramatists.

What might this view be? Of course, there was, and still is Epic Theatre, but it is not an outgrowth of Theatre of Disruption, *per se*, for, in spite of all its borrowings from the symbolists, the expressionists, and even the existentialists, it basically always sought, and seeks, to piece fragments together to present a "real" picture of the world in which we live. Though a hybrid, it shares the constructive, objective purpose of realism, and hies back to an ethical-moral consciousness.

It seems to me that, as several critics have pointed out, a theatre of reconstruction might be a synthesis of many points of view, a synthesis which reflects what contemporary man sees in the pluralism of realities that surround him. It might be one which employs the theatre of the absurd in order to free us from a false worship of the material; one which looks to the existentialists in order to remind us of the primacy of the human mind, but which, at the same time, takes the creative values of the mind and applies them to the outside world, not permitting them to bog down on the purely theoretical, philosophical level; one which uses tragedy to confront the absurdist's view of society with a recognition of a deeper order; and one which takes advantage of comedy, to remind us that, perhaps, an adequate dose of anarchy might function as a safety valve that could, if not guarantee then, at least, permit the existence and the endurance of some sort of an ordered world.³

In the Theatre of Reconstruction there is, I believe, a plea for sanity and purpose on the existential level, but without its sense of crippling *angst*; a desire

for a resurgence of an ethical-moral consciousness, but without the rigidity and narrow perception of the variables in human behavior and its often patent didactic thrust; an awareness of both the religious and mythic consciousness that places man's acts within the broader perspective of some kind of spiritual reality.

The hero still is an ironic figure, but not as victimized or hapless, or hopeless—lacking in hope, that is—as before. He struggles to achieve a harmony with the higher levels of order and meaning (which means ultimately, a harmony with his own self) which leads him to the attainment of both an independent self and a sustaining relationship to that which is timeless. He looks toward his life and society with some sense of purpose and control . . . even if he doesn't understand it, and even, perhaps, if he realizes that whatever answers there may be are most probably out of his reach anyway.

Faced with the terrifying and overwhelming complexity of contemporary life, many dramatists set out, in grave moral earnestness, to destroy society. The problem is, as comedy has always shown, that society is not an organized conspiracy, but rather an anarchic, unpredictable and flexible set of patterns of human relationships. In this heterogeneous, complicated structure, any equilibrium that might be attained will not be as secure as is "days of yore," however, and our world view most likely will be tempered by skepticism and some cynicism. Still, love as a symbol of life, of positive commitment, can be seen as a reconstructive element, as is man's need to endure, which wins out over despair. For, as Tom Stoppard's hero, George, says in *Jumpers*, without a quest, man is ". . . naked, an Adam in a treeless, leafless and fruitless present without a past."

If we subscribe to the theory that there is a pendular swing in literary sensibilities (as, most likely, in other areas), then it would seem that the Theatre of Disruption has pretty much run its course and we are moving towards a syncretism in dramatic theory and practice, and what I, at least, believe to be the initial stage of a new sensibility and even, perhaps, of a new consciousness.

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Notes

1. George and Portia Kernodle, *Invitation to the Theatre* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 174.

2. Erwin Piscator, the left-wing German director, in the 20's used multi-media effects in his productions with miniature settings moving by on a treadmill, screens on which were projected movies and stills, satiric cartoon sketches and slogans, ironic facts and other bits of information, all scrims which blurred the playing area and heightened a sense of irreality. Decades before the "poor theatre" of Jerzy Grotowski, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman created a theatre stripped to its essentials, with bare stages only relieved by drapes, blocks and abstract shapes. And, of course, Antonin Artaud, in the 30's, called for, in his *The Theatre and Its Double*, a return to a theatre of intensity, of primitive rituals, of cruelty, incantation and dream.

3. Some examples of reconstructive theatre in American and British dramatists would include Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which although almost four decades old (1942), is a synthesis of disruptive and reconstructive views; and Tom Stoppard whose *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers* are marvelous explorations of the primacy of the creative power of the mind, the absurdity of the human condition, and the need for a quest.