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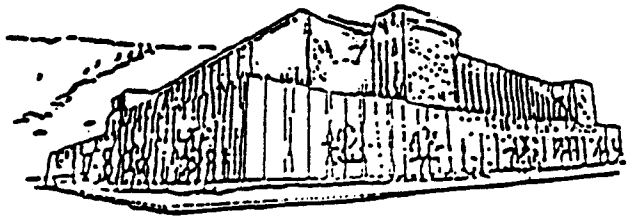
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**ANTONIN ARTAUD: THE ESSENCE OF REVOLT**

**by Kathleen C. Irwin**

**B.A. University of Montana, 1991**

**presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements**

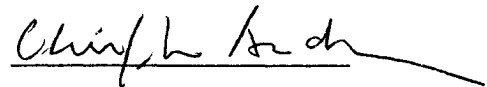
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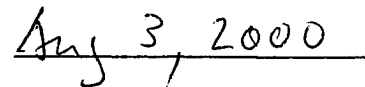
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Examining the vision of poet and theatrical theoretician Antonin Artaud in his collection of essays Le Théâtre et son double

and

Supporting the thesis of a link between Artaud's poetic genius, his theories about culture and language and his mental illness

and

Showing the application of Artaud's vision in his Theater of Cruelty project

Director: Christopher Anderson

The theme of revolt is at the heart of Artaud's life and work. Artaud's primary goal was to liberate the power of human thought and the energies of human existence and passion.

Artaud saw the theatrical stage as the site of the reactivation and the deployment of the forces of life through the art of the *mise en scène*. Artaud never wavered in his rejection of the accepted norms of classical, modern and contemporary theater. His essays on theater and culture attack what he perceived as a tyrannical western ideology that imposed its dominant cultural and aesthetic structures and a supremacy of the text on all other aspects of the theatrical production. His production as a writer both about and of theater, his poetry and his essays, as well as his exploration of other cultures reveal his lifelong dedication to the creation of a new form of theatrical expression through a modern revival of the ancient art of theater. His study of the Balinese theater and his journey to Mexico to immerse himself in the culture of the Tarahumara Indians were motivated by this project.

Artaud's theories about theater and culture are expressed primarily in his collection of articles and essays, Le Théâtre et son double. His vision of a Theater of Cruelty was showcased in his play Les Cenci.

Linked to Artaud's vision of true theater that might produce a metaphysical transformation of culture was his personal struggle against a mental illness that prevented him from experiencing spiritual wholeness. Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société provides evidence to support this premise.

The forced compliance of the mental patient mirrors the repression of all members of society by the structures that function to engender conformity to social norms. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari explore the development and the imposition of repressive social structures in the modern capitalistic system in L'Anti-Oedipe. Artaud's struggle to define himself independently from the artificial structure of family relationships imposed by the Oedipal interpretation is highlighted in their book. Deleuze and Guattari give additional evidence that Artaud's illness and his artistic vision were interconnected.

## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE

Theater and its double 7

CHAPTER TWO

Sources of Genius and Madness 33

CHAPTER THREE

The Theater of Cruelty 61

CONCLUSION 102

WORKS CONSULTED 106

## **Introduction**

### **The three revolts of Antonin Artaud.**

The theme of revolt is at the heart of Artaud's life and work. In his writing on theatrical production (including film) as well as his participation in it as an actor and a director of theatrical troupes, he never wavered in his rejection of the accepted norms of classical, modern and contemporary theater. His essays on theater and culture attack what he perceived as a tyrannical western ideology that imposed its dominant cultural and aesthetic structures and a supremacy of the text on all other aspects of the theatrical production. His production as a writer both about and of theater, his poetry and his essays, as well as his exploration of other cultures reveal his lifelong dedication to the creation of a new form of theatrical expression through a modern revival of the ancient art of theater. His particular conception of theater is one that emphasizes the power of gesture, movement, signs, the word as magical hieroglyph and all other possible tools of the theatrical scene. Such tools allow, he thought, the forces of life and what he perceived as true culture to resume an overt role in the structuring of reality. In Artaud's vision, this could be achieved onstage through the action of the



play and the staging, resulting in the spiritual transformation of spectators and actors alike.

The world he sought to transform existed both on stage and off, both in his exterior experiences and in his interior reality. Artaud's primary goal was to liberate the power of human thought and the energies of human existence and passion.

In examining his theories for an 'active theater', I see the essential action as an excavation at the roots of humanity with the goal of releasing the essential forces of nature, particularly those which modern culture seeks to contain and even obliterate, such as fear, chaos, incest, magic, and madness.

Artaud saw the theatrical stage as the site of the reactivation and the deployment of the forces of life through the art of the '*mise en scène*'. He dedicated his life to the development of a theatrical production that, instead of presenting a representation of reality through text and psychological script, sought to release the magical forces of the word as a tool of incantation.

His study of the Balinese theater and his journey to Mexico to immerse himself in the culture of the Tarahumara Indians were motivated by this project. He saw in the former the application of a theatrical art that

acts on the spectator through the craft of staging and in the latter a culture that existed in a state of spiritual exaltation in direct connection to what he repeatedly described as the magical, or metaphysical forces of life.

Critics who interpret Artaud's revolt through his theories about theater alone fall short of the truth of Artaud's rebellion. He envisaged a revolution of culture and a spiritual unification through the release of powers of thought that, in his view, had been enslaved by the restrictions of a culture that was afraid of its own shadows. If the double of theater was life, the double of life was found in those shadows whose transformative powers did not cease to exist simply because our culture ignored them.

Linked to Artaud's assertion that the rise of the supremacy of the text in modern theater signaled the demise of true theater, and his resistance to the restrictions of western culture on human expression, was a third area of revolt in the arena of the self. Artaud fought against what he experienced as the insurrection of his own mind against his being. His personal struggle was both a revolt against a mental illness that prevented him from experiencing spiritual wholeness and against the symbolic and cultural systems which he experienced as barriers to self expression. He defined his mental disfunction as the inability to unify his thoughts and his essential

self with the symbolic. He could not define himself as a subject through language and its symbolic systems.

Yet today our understanding of how he conceptualized an alternative mode of expression is limited to the written word. His theories about theater and culture are expressed primarily in his collection of articles and essays, Le Théâtre et son double. His vision of a Theater of Cruelty was showcased in his play Les Cenci. This play, which closed in 1935 after only 17 shows, was unsuccessful in raising the funds or the interest to allow him to continue his project.

Artaud's genius was linked to his madness in that his mental illness provided one source of his vision. The acuity of his perception and the intensity of his revolt were due in part to his own struggle with mental illness, as well as the harsh lessons learned from the restrictions society placed on him. Artaud sought to revolutionize a culture that he saw as bewitched by the repressive dominance of a symbolic system cut off from the forces and things it represents. His resistance to modern cultural values and aesthetics took place in all areas of his life and was tragically restrained with a violence that equaled, if it did not surpass, that of the revolt.

The harsh backlash of society against both Artaud's artistic genius and his mental instability instructed him further in how the tyranny of the

dominant discourse permeated all aspects of culture. The period of internment in asylums between 1937 and 1946 was a battle of self defense for his liberty and very existence. After the failure of Les Cenci, he had abandoned the theater for the stage of real life, where he experienced in the raw the Theater of Cruelty.

Artaud survived the asylum because of or despite the fact that he never stopped resisting the discourses of power and repression. The forced compliance of the mental patient mirrors the repression of all members of society by the structures that function to engender conformity to social norms. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari explore the development and the imposition of such structures in the modern capitalistic system in their book L'Anti-Oedipe. The Oedipal interpretation of family and social structure at the basis of Freudian and Lacanian theory is the primary target of their critique of restrictive cultural systems. The frequent references in L'Anti-Oedipe to Artaud's personal, artistic and cultural revolt highlight the poet's struggle to define himself independently from the artificial structure of family relationships imposed on the individual and on society by the Oedipal interpretation. I will point out some of the parallels between the Anti-Oedipe critique and Artaud's rebellion against the definition of the parameters of self by a family structure that also bows to the tyranny of the

symbolic. Additionally, Deleuze and Guattari give evidence that Artaud's personal struggle for self, his revolt against culture and his artistic revolt are intertwined in his life and creative production.

Artaud's rejection of the predominant norms of modern theater is paired with a revolt against the repressive discourse of culture. Both are voiced in the dissenting cry of the (always essentially isolated) *révolté*. In the first chapter I will explore Artaud's theories about theater and culture as described in Le Théâtre et son double. In Chapter two I will examine the connections between Artaud's genius and his mental illness and to show how Artaud's intellectual force was linked to his spiritual condition. Finally, in the third chapter, I will consider Artaud's theatrical principles and techniques within the framework of a theater whose stagecraft would have an organically transformative effect on the participants. I will then examine their application in his Theater of Cruelty project. Through the examination of reviews of his major productions, I hope to convey a sense of both the intensity of Artaud's vision and the controversy surrounding his legacy.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THEATER AND ITS DOUBLE

#### **Theater and life--life and culture.**

In the world of Antonin Artaud, theater is not separate from life. Herein lies the essential meaning of the title of his collection of essays on theater and culture, Théâtre et son double. For Artaud, life is the mirror of theater, just as the creative forces of theater ‘double’ the transformative powers of life.

Life inexorably works its powers on the living, just as in ‘true’ theater, (as in Artaud’s vision for a Theater of Cruelty) the action of metaphysical powers invoked by the art and the craft of the play’s direction must transform the spectator. Artaud uses the term ‘cruelty’ to describe the inescapable forces of both life and theater. Cruelty resides in the necessity that motivates all action. Artaud illustrates this energy poetically, yet also literally, with the image of the plague. The plague is an irrepressible force of life that is both destructive and transformative, purifying and terrible. Like life (and theater) it ends in either healing transformation or death (“Le Théâtre et la peste”, 46).

For Artaud, in the same way that the metaphysical, active forces of theater and life were a reflection of one another, life and authentic culture were one and the same. When natural powers were unrestricted in working their transformative magic, then authentic culture emerged. When through the application of the staging craft the fearsome forces of life are unleashed on the spectator, true theater is taking place. Artaud rejects what he sees as false forms of both culture and theater, resulting from the perversion of life forces. True culture retreats, divided from nature by the imposition of an illusory representational culture, and eventually perishes. An imposter theater replaces the 'active theater' through subjugation of the '*mise en scène*' to the text. Just as our essential selves are not a manifestation of the structures that control social reality, in the same way the active force of true theater is not evoked by the scripts that are read on stage.

### **The symbolic split.**

Artaud thought that true theater and culture were linked by the metaphysical forces of life. The split between human intellectual experience and the knowledge of those forces results in both false culture and theater, which are reduced realities in a universe of potentially infinite experiences. The double of the schizophrenic cultural split between nature

and intellect is mirrored in Artaud's experience of self. Alain Virmaux observes this connection between the artist's theories and the artist's life when he states in Antonin Artaud et le théâtre .

On commence à pressentir que le théâtre, pour Artaud, c'est assurément beaucoup plus que le théâtre...Peut-être le théâtre n'est-il pas la seule clé qui permette d'accéder à son univers mental; du moins la tiendra-t-on pour une clé décisive (16).

In the same way that Artaud fought against the reductive split in art and in culture, he struggled vehemently against what he experienced as his inability to unite self and thought into a subjective whole. Through all his forms of production Artaud sought a way to ease his suffering at his inability to express thought and a solution to the insurmountable problem of the defining of self (Paule Thévenin, preface, Théâtre et son double ). His failure to access a whole self through language and his efforts to liberate the power of his own thoughts from within a system of aesthetic norms aimed at reducing natural potential found expression in an extensive critique of that culture. The essential element of this critique was that western civilization itself was schizophrenic. It validated perception based on an intellect that was divided from its spiritual and metaphysical intelligences and thus refused its entirety. It crushed those who sought the knowledge to liberate their own shadow powers. Artaud thought that the



cure for such a culture lay in what could be described as a true shock therapy, administered through a living theater, an idea which he pursued in his Theater of Cruelty.

Artaud described the potentially fatal split between life and culture in western civilization, and indeed his own struggle with his inability to ever fully unite thought and word:

Si le signe de l'époque est la confusion, je vois à la base de cette confusion une rupture entre les choses, et les paroles, les idées, les signes qui en sont la représentation (Théâtre et son double, 12).

The split between things, and the words, ideas and signs that represent them, in Artaud's view, created a rupture between the spiritual and the material. This division created an inability to access the forces of thought through the things that surround us--those things that life creates, and that we create. Thought was subjugated to the symbolic system itself, and its power was reduced to its intellectual manifestation --the idea. This theme of the relationship between thought and word was a central preoccupation in Artaud's life and work, through his experience of culture, theater and self/madness. For Artaud, thoughts were things. They had a force which like the plague could not be denied. When restricted, or not directed or acknowledged, this force erupted in unexpected and often unwanted ways.

## **The signs of exaltation**

The indications of a schizophrenic culture may be seen in the civilization that idolizes cultural production and immortalizes the authors of this production. Such a civilization develops from a culture held hostage to the specularizing gaze and from the imprisonment of poetic forces in static symbols that are no longer capable of evoking the force behind their signs. Artaud identified as art this freezing of true culture in false representations.

Artaud stated that in authentic cultures, there was no art; that is, there were no purely aesthetic forms of representation since signs always served as access points to the powers they represented. Art in western cultures could no longer give access to our gods who were petrified as statues in pantheons. In contrast, the function of totems in 'primitive' cultures was to activate cultural hieroglyphs and release the powers of nature, or the divine. These were active cultures, not possessing or not interested in the aspects of western culture that encased the metaphysical power of thought--the key to cultural exaltation--in the steel trap of intellect:

C'est une infection de l'humain qui nous gâte des idées qui auraient dû demeurer divines; car loin de croire le surnaturel, le divin inventé par l'homme je pense que c'est l'intervention millénaire de l'homme qui a fini par nous corrompre le divin

( “Le Théâtre et la culture”, 13).

Artaud also identified these authentic cultures as magic cultures since they have direct access to the forces of poetry, magic, and divine life.

Words as the touchstones of culture have the magical quality of incantation.

The cultures that possess the knowledge of words and things as objects of power, rather than false illusions,<sup>1</sup> are worlds ‘in which stone comes alive

because it has been struck in the necessary way’ (“Le Théâtre et la culture,

7). They are cultures in organic connection with the forces of nature, and

thus they are vitally awakened to life:

...le monde des civilisés organiques, je veux dire dont les organes vitaux aussi sortent de leur repos, ce monde humain entre en nous, il participe à la danse des dieux, sans se retourner ni regarder en arrière, sous peine de devenir, comme nous-mêmes, des statues effritées de sel ( “Le Théâtre et la culture”, 16).

His fascination with the Balinese theater is keyed to the idea of a theater capable of awakening the gods through nature. This is a theater ‘capable of reintroducing on stage a hint of the great metaphysical fear that forms the basis of all ancient theater’ (“La mise en scene et la métaphysique”, 65).

Artaud's exploration of the Tarumahara culture in Mexico was a quest to find an authentic culture that used these signs in everyday life, in a living theater of cruelty. He saw in the rites of the Mexican cultures the principles that might provide a model for a theater based on the direct necessity of life, one that could release the human sensibility from its subjugation to the intellect.

Ce qui importe, c'est que, par des moyens sûrs, la sensibilité soit mise en état de perception plus approfondie et plus fine, et c'est là l'objet de la magie et des rites ( "Le Théâtre de la cruauté", 141).

### **Afraid of our own shadow(s)**

The double of the age of reason is the age of fear. The double of illumination is shadow. The double of science is (black) magic. The title Theater and its Double, in addition to suggesting the connection between the potential force of theater and the undeniable forces of life, evokes the image of the shadow as a doubling form. These hidden forces are the shadow of western culture which reveres positivism and reason. Artaud's shadow reality doubled the rational, material one and revealed itself only cautiously to avoid being reduced to the negative half of a binary cultural

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<sup>1</sup> These he distinguishes from 'true' illusions, or dreams. See "Le Théâtre de

perspective. Artaud stated that the double of theater, the revolutionary force of life, was dangerous to cartesian thought processes because it was undefinable within that framework and resistant to such rational analysis. It was:

...dangereuse et typique, où les Principes, comme les dauphins, quand ils ont montré leur tête s'empresstent de rentrer dans l'obscurité des eaux ( "Le Théâtre alchimique", 74).

According to Artaud, western culture sought the clarity of rational ideas above all other knowledge and thereby pushed the true force of these ideas into hiding under the direct glare of man's reason. The disease that afflicted western culture and civilization was terrible in its symptoms and ultimately fatal in its effects since it divorced life from existence. Yet the cause of the illness was the victim itself. Culture was dying because it had cut itself off from all the forces of life, from a metaphysical awareness of what it meant to be alive. The occidental world had in fact reduced life to culture, 'reduced to nothing but the inert copy' of its former self ("Le Théâtre alchimique", 74). Artaud wrote about the reduction of pre-Renaissance theater from a space for the transmission of metaphysical truths to 'a purely descriptive theater that recounts psychology' ("En finir avec les chefs-d'oeuvre", 119). Artaud also described western theater as one which

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la cruauté, 141

had the characteristic of habitually ‘reducing the unknown to the known, that is to say, to the commonplace and ordinary’ ( “En finir avec les chefs-d’oeuvre’, 119). Artaud’s situating of the end of the age of magic for European culture at the beginning of the age of classicism was reinforced when he described the characteristic of modern theater to which he most vigorously objected, the attempt to clarify the essence of the idea through rational thought and language:

Et en opposition avec cette façon de voir, façon qui me paraît à moi tout occidentale ou plutôt latine, c’est-à-dire butée...On va me demander sans doute de préciser ce qu’il y a de latin dans cette façon de voir opposée à la mienne. Ce qu’il y a de latin, c’est ce besoin de se servir des mots pour exprimer des idées qui soient claires. Car pour moi les idées claires sont au théâtre *comme partout ailleurs*, des idées mortes et terminées (“La mise en scène et la métaphysique, 61, italics mine).

In Artaud’s view, our culture was intensely afraid of ‘a life unfolding entirely under the sign of true magic’ (“Le Théâtre et la culture”, 14). (Yet that we fill our eyes with the simulacra of magic on the silver screen perhaps attests to a deeper desire). This fear, and the desire to abolish fear itself from our lives, resulted in a rejection of the dark, the shadow of the light, the illumination of the positivist modern culture. Western man was thus reduced to the clarity of his own reason.

## Philosopher's gold

It was the *occult* forces of life that Artaud wanted to manipulate on stage to effect a transformation of all participants, without attempting to define the mysteries in the positivist light of psychological/scientific analysis. He developed this aim in his essay “Le Théâtre alchimique.”

Artaud's goal was a metaphysical connection between mind and matter, and he sought the tools for a transformation in the occult craft of alchemy and in a theater of signs. The ancient practitioners of these arts could manipulate the third element, the transformative energy necessary to create the ‘philosophical gold’ of spiritualized matter. Artaud's vision was of a craft of the *mise en scène* that might manipulate the occult forces of life on stage in the manner of the alchemical masters. Because of this literal interpretation, it would be false to call alchemy a mere metaphor for his vision of theater

The premise of the alchemical transformation resulting in spiritualized matter resounds in his vision of an ‘active theater’ that was to be the Theater of Cruelty. His vision was of ‘definitive and transcendent aspect of alchemical theater’ that would contain ‘the spiritual means to decant and transfuse matter, to evoke the burning and decisive transfusion of matter by spirit’ (“Le Théâtre alchimique”, 79).

Helmar Schramm gives a description of the nature of alchemy in his article “The open book of alchemy in/on the mute language of theatre” that explains the metaphysical transformation that was the goal of the alchemists.

In 1677, in La Rochelle, a book was published which stands out remarkably in the labyrinth of alchemist literature. All the different stages of alchemical practices are described in it, as are the most indispensable materials and instruments and the processes for refining substances. The peculiar procedure for manufacturing gold is described in detail--with reference to the gods (Jupiter, Saturn, Venus and Mercury), to the powers of nature and, not least, to the transformation that is to take place in the alchemist himself during the working process. This complexity can be explained by the fact that the ‘real alchemists’ are not concerned simply with the refining of metal. As the ‘art of seeking for gold’, the ‘art of creation’, as the ‘hermetic-chemical art of the adepts’, alchemy sharply distinguishes itself from the ‘gold-cooking addiction’ which was widespread until well into the eighteenth century. Alchemy sought a ‘philosophical gold’. All laboratory experiments were part of a practical philosophizing which circled around the cosmological interaction of microcosm and macrocosm (3-4).

This description highlights the aspects of alchemy that Artaud saw as representative of the true theatrical process: powers of nature evoked; transformation of all participants; metaphysical unity achieved.

Like the term ‘alchemy’, ‘philosophical gold’ should also not be mistaken for a metaphor. It should rather be interpreted literally in its implications for the transformative powers of both alchemy and the theater



envisaged. Artaud viewed these arts as economies which allowed the free circulation between the spiritual, metaphysical and material realities.

In the elements of motion and movement in concrete space of the alchemical process, Schramm points out another parallel between theater and the occult sciences, that of the importance of the physical art of staging. Alchemical transformation required an intimate knowledge of the signs and motions that would be combined to put into effect the creation of (meta)physical gold. Schramm quotes an anonymous writer from 1704.

The art of governing the alchemical fire of the conversion of metals too was oriented by this principle of motion. “The lowly chemists boil water [...] in fire, but the hermetic philosophers boil fire in water”, is a brief, but paradoxically elegant description of this central process whose manifold references to the theatricality inherent in human behavior merit closer observation (5).

The contrast between the older occult craft of alchemy and the modern physical science of chemistry was centered in the idea that the Ages of Enlightenment and Reason signaled a turning point away from the spirituality of human thought. With the development of modern science, the realms of the scientific and the spiritual became strictly divided, and superstition and myth were eliminated. As Schramm points out, with this development, reason purified the mind of its shadows. Artaud described a new age of clarity situated at the beginning of the Renaissance as the historical moment when the full potential of life was reduced by this

purification. The resulting loss of perception heightens the aspect of irony which permeates our “age of clarity” Artaud thought that western culture was ‘slipping toward suicide’ (“Le théâtre et la peste”, 47).

According to Schramm, along with the goal of metaphysical transformation of matter, and the power of motion in physical space in the alchemical process, another parallel between Artaud’s true theater and the alchemical arts is that the occult nature of alchemy did not survive the advent of the printed word. The mysterious, alchemical formulas of signs, incantations and decantations lost their force when explicated on the printed page:

Artaud explicitly bases [his] alternative theatre model on an enigmatic ancient science, whose fate was sealed by the light of the Enlightenment (3)...With the invention of printing, alchemy as an oral culture found itself at a crucial turning point. In a way, it is only now that the Open Book of Alchemy comes into existence. But from the beginning, this book was in sharp conflict with the reading culture of the printed word. And this conflict, emerging in the sixteenth century, escalated increasingly until the demise of classical alchemy in the eighteenth century...it is precisely this irreconcilable conflict between the alchemist cosmos and the Gutenberg Galaxy that leads to that theatrical principle of alchemy whose trace is to be found in Artaud’s manifestos (5).

Artaud saw the subjugation of the art of staging to the written text as fatal to the true purpose of theater. For Artaud, this was another aspect of European culture, illuminated by the light of reason, that caused the disappearance of true theater

Schramm affirms the scope of Artaud's cultural revolt as follows:

Nor was Artaud concerned with the alchemy of the market place and the golden gallows upon which the alchemist frauds ended, clothed in tinsel shrouds. The allusion in Artaud's manifestos refer to the principle of alchemy which led to its confrontation with writing culture. Linked to this paradigm, however, are standards of rationality according to which western progress in general orients itself, and whose institutionalized self-evidence has to be questioned now. Artaud's search for a theatre which is other can be understood as a radical critique which goes far beyond questions of art (7).

As culture was purified by the modern science of chemistry, the mysteries of the dark sciences were rendered inaccessible. Schramm states that the "dark poetic surplus in alchemy...was systematically censored" (7). Thus the possibility of a 'bodily and poetic transformation' was lost (7). Artaud, poet, revolutionary and anarchist, always called for the necessity of resisting such a reduction:

...rejeter les limitations habituelles de l'homme et des pouvoirs de l'homme, et à rendre infinies les frontières de ce qu'on appelle la réalité ("Le théâtre et la culture", 19).

## **Poetry**

Artaud described the loss of poetry in culture in the following way: 'la poésie qui n'est plus en nous et que nous ne parvenons plus à trouver dans les choses.' Clearly Artaud was not describing the written form that maintained its dominant position in contemporary theater, but rather the loss

of a force. Poetic energy was not dependent on the written form. Artaud affirmed this distinction in “Le Théâtre et la culture”

On peut brûler la bibliothèque d’Alexandrie. Au-dessus et en dehors des papyrus, il y a des forces: on nous enlèvera pour quelque temps la faculté de retrouver ces forces, on ne supprimera pas leur énergie (15).

In “En finir avec les chefs d’oeuvre”, Artaud attacked both modern ignorance of the ‘thinking energy, the vital force’ of poetry, and the veneration of the written text (121). Underneath the poetic form there is a poetic force which we have denied (121). He quotes René Guénon in “La Mise en scene et la métaphysique” to describe this deliberate ignorance: “notre façon antipoétique et tronquée de considérer les principes (en dehors de l’état spirituel énergétique et massif qui leur correspond)”(66). Yet the massive bottom of spiritual energy ignored as we lived on the tip of the iceberg, in the intellect, made itself known:

la poésie qui n’est plus en nous et que nous ne parvenons plus à retrouver dans les choses ressort, tout à coup, par le mauvais côté des choses, et jamais on n’aura vu tant de crimes, dont la bizarrerie gratuite ne s’explique que par notre impuissance à posséder la vie (13).

One purpose for Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty would be to reclaim the forces of poetry that otherwise ran rampant with inexplicable violence through society.

...une sorte d'atroce poésie qui s'exprime par des actes bizarres où les alterations du fait de vivre démontrent que l'intensité de la vie est intacte, et qu'il suffirait de la mieux diriger ("Le Théâtre et la culture", 14).

### **The poetic anarchy of the plague and of other natural disasters.**

Artaud contended that, as a culture, our vulnerability to the violence of the forces of life was due to our refusal of life in its entirety. Outwardly we had achieved a distance from life through a pursuit of progress and modernization and the cultural discourses based on the dominance of science and the supremacy of reason over other forms of knowledge; inwardly such distancing was made possible by a collective fear of unconscious desires. Western culture had purified, in the true puritanical sense, what was dark in culture. But for Artaud the cost of choking off the natural life force was great:

On peut dire maintenant que toute vraie liberté est noire et se confond inmanquablement avec la liberté du sexe qui est noire elle aussi sans que l'on sache très bien pourquoi. Car il y a longtemps que L'Éros platonicien, le sens génésique, la liberté de la vie, a disparu sous le revêtement sombre de la *Libido* que l'on identifie avec tout ce qu'il y a de sale, d'abject, d'infamant dans le fait de vivre, de se précipiter avec une vigueur naturelle et impure, avec une force toujours renouvelée vers la vie ("Le théâtre et la peste", 45).

Clearly Artaud wished to free himself from the disprobatory judgement of his culture. In his reference to the psychoanalytic term libido, he showed his understanding of the cultural order that defined good and bad, healthy and insane. The voice of reason was familiar to Artaud, who was marked as operating outside the boundaries of reason. Derrida identifies that voice in “Cogito et histoire de la folie” as the enforcer of social order:

...le langage de la raison, qui est celui de l'Ordre (c'est-à-dire à la fois du système de l'objectivité ou de la rationalité universelle, dont la psychiatrie veut être l'expression... (56).

If Artaud sought liberty instead of order, and truth instead of reason, his sources were in the ancient knowledge of the natural truths, and his chosen site of resistance was not located in the realm of reason, but in the place of all possibility, unlimited by either the symbolic or the imaginary orders, the Real. Helga Finter asserts that Artaud places his Theater of Cruelty in the realm of the Real (4-5). For Artaud, the image of the plague expressed the potential violence of the relentless push to liberate all truths from the confines of reason. Nature would necessarily revolt against the repressive forces of false culture, seeking an ‘absolute’ state of liberty:

Et quand nous nous croyons arrivés au paroxysme de l'horreur, du sang, des lois bafouées, de la poésie enfin que sacre la révolte, nous sommes obligés d'aller encore plus loin dans un vertige que

rien ne peut arrêter ( “Le Théâtre et la peste”, 42).

Artaud used the term “cruelty” to describe true theater as well as life, showing the absolute necessity for both to break from all limitations. The connection between poetry and revolt is also clear. The anarchic forces of poetry would always tend toward a state of chaos, the breakup of conventional form.

For Artaud, expressing what is impossible because ‘not definitely locatable’ (Finter, 5) clearly meant absolute freedom, both from the repressive forces of the social order and also from his own state of suffering. What is unimaginable, impossible and not locatable about the human psyche is the Real. Artaud operated in the realm of the impossible in that he sought to unite the symbolic with the Real and find the unity of his essential self. Artaud’s writings clearly express the importance of ritual cultures and the teachings of the ancient myths in opening human sensibility to metaphysical truths of the universe in this process of transformation and sublimation.

### **From violent beginnings...**

Western culture gives much (hypocritical) attention to opposing violence, yet paradoxically, by battling chaos and evil, we deny life. Artaud

described such opposition as the suicide of culture. Most difficult was to accept death not as a finality but as another door. The collective unconscious of western culture is obsessed with death and violence. It is easy to spot such preoccupation from the selection on the movie marquee. Perhaps this obsession with destruction on film is a result of a culture that rejects the truths of nature, yet retains the subconscious knowledge of a lost equilibrium. Artaud explained that the preoccupation with the telling of all aspects of the tale, both light and dark, has been with us since the beginning, or at least since the beginning of the great Myths.

Et c'est ainsi que tous les grands Myths sont noirs et qu'on ne peut imaginer hors d'une atmosphère de carnage, de torture, de sang versé, toutes les magnifiques Fables qui racontent aux foules le premier partage sexuel et le premier carnage d'essences qui apparaissent dans la création ("Le théâtre et la peste", 45).

Artaud referred to the Orphic and Eleusinian Mysteries to illustrate the natural cycles of destruction and creation. The violence and cruelty central to these stories were for Artaud representative of the essential cruelty of nature. The Orphic Mysteries were the secret religious rites in worship of Dionysus based on myth of Dionysus Zagreus. In the myth, Zagreus, son of Zeus and Persephone, was devoured by the Titans to please Hera, sister and wife of Zeus. Zeus destroyed the Titans by lightning, and



from their ashes sprang the race of men, making man part evil (Titan) and part divine (Zagreus). Zeus swallowed Zagreus' heart and from it was born the new Dionysus Zagreus. The Eleusinian Mysteries were rites that enacted the principal religious mysteries of ancient Greece, which dealt with the legends of Demeter, Persephone, and Dionysus, and symbolized the turning of the seasons, with the decay of winter and the renewal of spring, and assured a happy afterlife to those who were initiates.

In reference to the Eleusinian Mysteries, Artaud stated.

On nous apprend que les Mystères d'Éleusis se bornaient à mettre en scène un certain nombre de vérités morales. Je crois plutôt qu'ils devaient mettre en scène des projections et des précipitations de conflits, des luttes indescriptibles de principes, prises sous cet angle vertigineux et glissant où toute vérité se perd en réalisant la fusion inextricable et unique de l'abstrait et du concret, et je pense que par des musiques d'instruments et des notes, des combinaisons de couleurs et de formes dont nous avons perdu jusqu'à l'idée, ils devaient, d'une part: combler cette nostalgie de la beauté pure dont Platon a bien dû trouver au moins une fois en ce monde la réalisation complète, sonore, ruisselante et dépouillée, et d'autre part: résoudre par des conjonctions inimaginables et étranges pour nos cerveaux d'hommes encore éveillés, résoudre ou même annihiler tous les conflits produits par l'antagonisme de la matière et de l'esprit, de l'idée et de la forme, du concret et de l'abstrait, et fondre toutes les apparences en une expression unique qui devait être pareille à l'or spiritualisé ( "Le Théâtre alchimique", 79-80).

The archetypal signs in these myths act on the human psyche to release a profound knowledge of life. The bringing to consciousness of this

knowledge has a transformative power that is ultimately (r)evolutionary. The conflicts resolved are moral only in the sense that for Artaud, morality was a metaphysical state of cosmic unity. These were the essential conflicts in human nature resulting from the separation between spirituality and materiality. For Artaud, western culture had neither the rites nor the teachings to convey the mysterious truths of the universe, nor to attain the unity of mind, spirit and matter that for Artaud was the essence of platonic beauty.

### **The great reduction, or “Antonin Artaud, diet guru?”**

Perhaps the most important term in Artaud’s analysis of the malady of western culture is ‘reductive.’ In his writings he showed many aspects of a process whose result is the loss of life in culture. Western culture had reduced knowledge to intellectual reason, annihilated the magical, the spiritual, and the divine through scientific classification, closed down the portals to the forces of life by worshipping representations, flooded the dark and fecund spaces of the psyche with the light of reason. According to Artaud the restraint of unlimited possibility by controlled reality had reduced chaos to order. Moreover, by seeking to put down anarchy, modern culture had destroyed poetry. The dark forces of life, like sexuality,

evil, the unknown, had been redefined in moral value systems as that which should be repressed. Furthermore, the loss of true culture (life) had its corollary in the loss of its double, theater. The ancient art of theater whose masters knew the incantatory power of the word and used it to bring about metaphysical transformation of all participants has been replaced by a psychological theater with an audience of voyeuristic spectators.

The primacy of the script over all other aspects in the Western theatrical production is a symptom of cultural reduction. This is a theater whose importance was focused entirely on the elucidation of the character

... [il] ne s'agit plus dans la vie que de savoir si nous baisons bien, si nous ferons la guerre ou si nous serons assez lâches pour faire la paix, comment nous nous accommodons de nos petites angoisses morales, et si nous prendrons conscience de nos "complexes" (ceci dit en langage savant) ou bien si nos "complexes" nous étoufferont ("La mise en scène et la métaphysique", 62).

Such a critique was clearly aimed at the prominent artistic and scientific figures of his time. There was a sweeping dismissal of the playwrights such as Jean Giraudoux who wrote about the political conflicts of contemporary society. Artaud was infuriated by what he viewed as the preoccupation with the petty psycho-social encounters of humanity that formed the basis for the artistic expression of his time. He rejected as well

the psychological terminology that had become fixed in everyday language (a reflection of the far reaching influence Sigmund Freud has had on modern cultural thought). For Artaud, the positivist culture seemed purposefully blinded to alternative manifestations of knowledge, and fascistic in its attempt to eliminate them.

At the start of the essay, “La mise en scène et la métaphysique”, Artaud described the primitive painting “Lotte’s Daughters” by the 16th century Dutch painter Lucas van Leyden. Artaud evaluated the painting as if it were a theatrical production of what he would call true theater. As with the ancient myths, the images of the painting opened the mind to the ‘religious and the metaphysical’ (49). He applauded the intensity of the transformational effect on the viewer and the minimal emphasis on social issues in the themes of the painting. Artaud had the same goal for a new theater that could distance itself from the concerns of the ego. Modern theater and the structures of social order it reflected were unequivocally worthless:

...cet état de choses dans lequel nous vivons, et qui est à détruire, à détruire avec application et méchanceté, sur tous les plans et à tous les degrés où il gêne le *libre exercice de la pensée* ’(71).

Artaud's purpose for total revolution had always been absolute liberty of thought. As may be expected, in pursuing this goal, the creator of the Theater of Cruelty did not shy away from the violence of his emotions:

Or je dis que l'état social actuel est inique et bon à détruire.  
Si c'est le fait du théâtre de s'en préoccuper, c'est encore plus  
celui de la mitraille (62).

Again, it is clear that Artaud's revolution was not one of a merely artistic focus, the reform of contemporary theater. His purpose for such a reform was the realization of his personal revolutionary goals. He attempted to tear down the cultural scaffolding that supported an unjust system. The weapon of destruction and the creative cure were both to be found in the liberation of the forces of the true theater he envisioned. The tools were to be found in renewing the ancient art of stage direction. The result was to be the liberation of the anarchic power of poetry and the forces of life.

I will end this chapter on Le Théâtre et son double with an idea that Artaud introduced in the preface of his collection of essays. It is that Western culture has succeeded in reducing spiritual hunger to the merely physical. With the cultural focus on the fulfillment of material needs, the individual sensibility is no longer capable of the heroic attitude necessary to achieve spiritual exaltation. The goal of much cultural production is to

reduce the psychic tension produced by the unknown. Moreover, the role of the seeker or the hero is relegated to the sports figure, or the cinema star in the total hypnosis of an entire culture by a simulacrum of the heroic.

Artaud urged us to put down our forks, push ourselves away from the table, resist the temptation to appease the spiritual tension on the material plane:

Nous avons surtout besoin de vivre et de croire à ce qui nous fait vivre et que quelque chose nous fait vivre, -- et ce qui sort du dedans mystérieux de nous-même, ne doit pas perpétuellement revenir sur nous-même dans un souci grossièrement digestif (“Le Théâtre et la culture”, 11).

Furthermore, the heroic attitude necessary for spiritual and metaphysical transformation was based in the recognition as a culture that hunger on the physical plane had its double in a spiritual necessity:

Je veux dire que s’il nous importe à tous de manger tout de suite, il nous importe encore plus de ne pas gaspiller dans l’unique souci de manger tout de suite notre simple force d’avoir faim (“Le théâtre et la culture”, 12).

Through the heroic stance, Artaud envisioned a path to the exaltation of the spirit, comparable to the religious exaltation of one who devotes oneself to god. He thought human sensibility should be redirected to seek a crisis point instead of avoiding it. In that way we might become alive to the

fullest extent intended by our nature. For Artaud, theater was the space with the potential for recreating and releasing the forces that would exalt the human mind and spirit.

Clearly, he was asking a lot. He wanted us to accept theater like we should accept the plague: as a 'superior evil' that would purge false culture and lead us to cultural transformation from a state of 'asphyxiating inertia of matter' ("Le Théâtre et la peste, 21). He offered this cure in the form of his manifesto for a 'Théâtre de la cruauté'

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **SOURCES of GENIUS and MADNESS**

Parallel to Artaud's struggle against a culture that seemed to him part of a vast conspiracy to repress the essence of life is his spiritual battle to be liberated from the limitations of existence and self. His artistic genius is a reflection of both these preoccupations. In this chapter I will examine the link between Artaud's spiritual condition and his artistic vision.

Artaud's correspondance with Jacques Rivière and then his association with the surrealist group in the early stages of his career expose a growing passion for an end to cultural limitations on individuality and expression. His dedication to the liberation of knowledge reveals an important aspect of his personal struggle to access thought and self through language.

Artaud's search for a metaphysically whole self and the need to dismantle the cultural structures that repress it are revealed through his poetic images and references that address body, family, sexuality, god and religion. He returns repeatedly to these themes in his poetry and essays, and in his post-asylum performances on stage and radio.



The connection between the vision of genius and the goals of the Theater of Cruelty to awaken and transform human sensibility is apparent in his defense of Van Gogh in Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société. Here he also addresses directly the question of a personally and societally repressed self. At times he speaks about Van Gogh with such admiration and compassion that he appears to be describing his own experience. He refers repeatedly to the special lucidity of those gifted with genius and then speaks about himself in close conjunction. He expresses his admiration for Van Gogh's ability to portray, through the depiction of the most banal of scenes, the raging forces of life. We know that he, too, sensed these forces and sought the key for their release through his own work.

Artaud's personal experiences as a psychiatric patient as well as his examination of those of Van Gogh and other artists led to his view that the psychiatrist perpetuates the repressive structures of society which seek to control the creative force of the genius.

In l'Anti-Oedipe, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari show how the nature of the schizophrenic corresponds to natural production as a process and not as a product. Neither are bound by the limitations on behavior and thought found in the capitalist system's control of production. Their analysis shows another way of seeing how Artaud's condition was integral

to the process of his own artistic production, which was much more a process than a product, to the frustration of some literary critics and would-be acolytes.

The recurring themes of Artaud's life are: escape from the cultural prison that society attempts to impose on the unique state of lucidity that is genius, escape from an identity defined by body and family, search for the essence of being and life. His fierce desire to survive was inseparable from his passion to access the transformative qualities of life and its double, theater.

### **A man surpasses himself**

Artaud's motivation to understand his own limitations and move beyond them is evident in the famous Correspondance avec Jacques Rivière, thirteen letters exchanged in 1924 between Artaud and the then director of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Artaud initiated the communication in response to a notice of rejection by Rivière of the poetry the young writer had submitted to the celebrated journal.

In the letters, Artaud hoped to explain to Rivière his perception that his very thoughts were beyond him, unrecoverable in a self, leaving him

without a way to anchor his existence or to achieve the metaphysical whole he sought through poetic expression (Gouhier, 13).

That Rivière advised Artaud to refine his poetic style and expressive technique reveals a limited comprehension of Artaud's intent. The general public would later show the same incomprehension of Artaud's experience and vision.

More than just arguing that his poetry had a right to exist, Artaud was attempting to explain his reality, as a writer whose thoughts resisted being translated from the 'spiritual' realm into the symbolic. Significant is his lack of interest in the suggestion that he should apply himself to improving his skill in written expression. This seems to be an early indication of a determination to validate and pursue his own reality beyond established artistic and cultural norms.

Thus, even as Artaud wrote about the impossibility of expressing or even keeping thought, the stage was being set to transform one individual's drama into an encompassing theory about art and culture. As the search to retain escaping thought in symbolic code gave way to a quest for transformation through the invisible and immaterial forces of life, Artaud envisioned a new form of theater.

Artaud's involvement in the surrealist group from 1925-1927 revealed a conviction that all sources of knowledge, such as the experiences of the mentally ill, and the mysteries of the unconscious, had value in the human experience. He held in violent contempt the Occidental structures of society and culture that deigned to judge and limit alternative realities. He wrote in 1925 in the name of the surrealists:

Nous n'admettons pas qu'on entrave la libre développement d'un délire, aussi légitime, aussi logique, que toute autre succession d'idées ou d'actes humains ( Dulozoi, 103).

That his revolutionary principles by definition exceeded the limits of society was already clear at the stage when he quit the surrealist group in 1927, accusing them of what he viewed as their capitulation to the controlling social systems. He considered their affiliation with the communist cause a concession which meant the end to true revolution, and a conformism that he rejected at every step from that moment on. Artaud consistently rejected and exceeded culturally imposed artistic limitations in the theatrical phase between 1927 and 1935 with the Théâtre Alfred Jarry and the Theater of Cruelty. Moreover, his projects always surpassed the financial limitations required by his backers.

Yet, after the financial failure of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry in 1930, then the Cenci and the Theater of Cruelty project in 1935, Artaud appears to

have set another internal trajectory that eventually would lead to an ultimate expression outside the previously set boundaries of self.

Breton locates this change as occurring after Artaud's journey to Mexico and during his subsequent pilgrimage to Ireland in 1937. According to Breton, Artaud had "passed over to the other side" (Durozoi, 42). Not only did there not seem to be room in the world for Artaud and his ideas, but neither did there seem any longer to be space for Artaud 'l'homme de théâtre' in himself. The conflicts of society and self, thought and expression seemed in Artaud's mind to have come to an explosive head. Yet even as those around him perceived what was happening as a mental breakdown, Artaud only became more convinced that the cause of imbalance, both cultural and spiritual, was located outside of the self:

Le Monde est à bout [...] toutes les formes de la Vie sont tuées [...] la seule issue est d'achever l'abolition des formes... Nous nous sommes absolument trompés, nous nous sommes trompés sur tout. Je ne vois rien qui ne soit altéré et c'est pourquoi j'ai renoncé à tout afin de retrouver ma lumière natale et que Ma Vie puisse ressusciter...*tout* aujourd'hui emprisonne la Vie. La conclusion est facile et fatale (Durozoi, 41, from a letter to Breton in July, 1937).

His apocalyptic warning about life echoes what his fate was to be for the next nine years: he was interned in mental institutions, and when finally released, died two years later at the age of 51.

In 1946, Artaud was released from Ivry under the condition that his friends assure the financial means for his survival and find a living situation that would meet his medical needs. To raise funds, a reading of his works and an auction were organized. Artaud's reaction to the reading was to feel misinterpreted in his vision, even by his closest friends.

With the purpose of explaining himself and exposing his principles through an authentic reading of his texts, Artaud gave a conference in 1947 at the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier. Brau describes Artaud's performance as follows:

Artaud parle, invective et rugit plus de deux heures. Enfin, sa voix se brise, pathétique, achèvement d'un cri dans le silence qu'André Gide rompt en montant sur la scène pour l'étreindre. Plus tard, au lendemain de sa mort, il écrira une des plus belles pages sur Artaud. "...Jamais encore il ne m'avait paru plus admirable. De son être matériel, plus rien ne subsistait que d'expressif. ...tout en lui racontait l'abominable détresse humaine, une sorte de damnation sans recours, sans échappement possible que dans un lyrisme forcené dont ne parvenaient au public que des éclats orduriers, imprécatoires et blasphématoires" (235).

Those who participated in what was to be one of Artaud's final performances were witness to the end of a long trajectory of revolt culminating in the apparent dissolving of all boundaries between the identities of man, artist and mental patient. Jacques Audiberti, who

attended Artaud's performance, summed up Artaud's lifetime of personal and artistic struggle in one line: "C'était le cri de l'homme excédé par lui-même" (Brau, 236). Physically, socially, culturally, psychologically, artistically and ideologically, Artaud tried to push to the breaking point any limits on personal or creative expression. He was fighting to feel spiritually and intellectually whole through the same process by which he sought to create an organic theater unlimited by the restrictions of written language.

When, after the Vieux Colombier performance, Audiberti described Artaud's exceeding himself, he seems to be describing Artaud's very goal--to break out of the limiting identities imposed by a self-perpetuating and self-interested society, and to attempt through this transformation of self to influence a profound cultural change. Brau suggests that the abrupt change in Artaud during the Vieux Colombier conference was intentional. Artaud afterwards said that he realized during the performance that an action more real, terrible even, was needed to transform the moment. Turning to a living theater of cruelty was his response.

Artaud revealed his belief that such a theater might bring about a metaphysical action that would unite the concrete and the abstract by taking place on both planes with his statement that the intensity would need to have the force of bombs being detonated (Brau, 235). He used this same

image to describe the intensity he experienced in Van Gogh's work, which he felt could, like true theater, release the forces of nature and shatter the false forms of culture:

Non, Van Gogh n'était pas fou, mais ses peintures étaient des feux grégeois, des bombes atomiques, dont l'angle de vision, à côté de toutes les autres peintures qui sévissaient à cette époque, eût été capable de déranger gravement le conformisme larvaire de la bourgeoisie second Empire et des sbires de Thiers, de Gambetta, de Félix Faure, comme ceux de Napoléon III.

Car ce n'est pas un certain conformisme de moeurs que la peinture de Van Gogh attaque, mais celui même des institutions. Et même la nature extérieure, avec ses climats, ses marées et ses tempêtes d'équinoxe, ne peut pas, après le passage de Van Gogh sur terre, garder la même gravitation (Van Gogh et la suicidé de la société, 14).

Artaud wanted to affect his audience in such a way, with himself as both the detonator and the bomb. At the performance at the Vieux Colombier the spectators were witness to the process of an individual exploding into myth and of theater surpassing itself to become real life.

### **Van Gogh, the 'Grand' Oeuvre' and the great conspiracy**

Artaud's impassioned and often furious defense of Van Gogh in Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société followed the 1947 exhibition of the painter's last works, and a doctor's brutal evaluation of Van Gogh's mental



instability in an article that was to be highly influential in forming contemporary perceptions of the painter's illness (Oeuvres Complètes T.XIII, 302).

Artaud gave compassionate and poetic commentaries about Van Gogh's art and his 'superior lucidity' which he felt gave the painter an ability which he describes as follows: 'voir plus loin, infiniment et dangereusement plus loin que le réel immédiat et apparent des faits' (34). Much is revealed about Artaud's own experience in a society where he felt it was dangerous to have a vision and the need to reveal it. Artaud had both, the vision and the need, and what is particularly striking about his defense of Van Gogh is his absolute conviction that he and others like him were the sane ones. Through Artaud's identification with Van Gogh, we learn much about his own struggle to find a spiritual identity in a repressive culture.

He spoke of the characteristics of such a culture and of the difficulty it posed for those who had to struggle to maintain their difference and locate their spiritual selves:

Celui de la prédominance de la chair sur l'esprit,  
ou du corps sur la chair, ou de l'esprit sur l'un  
et l'autre.

Et où est dans ce délire la place du moi humain? (20)

Artaud was steadfast in the defense of his own perceptions of the nature of genius and of a cultural conspiracy. And yet he never denied that he was struggling for health, struggling to survive. Most importantly, he clearly stated that this struggle was directly linked to his creative production, and is in fact a characteristic of genius:

Nul n'a jamais écrit ou peint, sculpté, modelé,  
construit, inventé, que pour sortir en fait de  
l'enfer (38).

This 'hell' was interior as well as exterior. It was the never ending struggle to define self, and the perpetual revolution against culture's false representation of the self.

One aspect of this false representation is the label of paranoia. Artaud rejected the definition of paranoia as a symptom of delusion. He viewed paranoia as a true perception of a malevolent societal will that cast spells on the marginal members of his kind, visionaries and geniuses. He turned the psychological diagnosis around, linking his illness to the different reality of the mad and the brilliant:

C'est la pente des hautes natures, toujours d'un  
cran au-dessus du réel, de tout expliquer par la  
mauvaise conscience,  
de croire que rien jamais n'est dû au hasard  
et que tout ce qui arrive de mal arrive par l'effet  
d'une mauvaise volonté consciente, intelligente et  
concertée.  
Ce que les psychiatres ne croient jamais.

Ce que les génies croient toujours (35).

In Artaud's view, not only then were spirits of genius more sensitive to the subtle energies of life, but they were also more perceptive of the conspiratorial nature of social systems. This belief was clearly linked to the theories about life and culture that he laid out in Le Théâtre et son double, and in particular in "Le Théâtre et la peste" In Artaud's view, it was impossible to contain the forces of life. The bad faith of humanity stemmed from the refusal to express life in its entirety and the attempt to keep the dark forces of life contained.

Thus, when Artaud explained that when he was ill, he was under a spell, it is worthy to suggest that the normative labeling of certain behaviors as 'abnormal' or 'insane' was indeed a sort of spell that society casts on people to delineate aesthetic and cultural norms and keep them under control.

Just as he was consistent in believing that an essential characteristic of (his) genius was an uncommon sensitivity to knowledge obscured by repressive culture, he was adamant that society deliberately contained those forces through the control its members:

*C'est pourquoi je suis depuis huit ans interné, et que j'ai été mis en camisole, empoisonné, et endormi à l'électricité, c'est pour avoir voulu trouver la matière fondamentale de l'âme*

(Durozoi, 102).

Artaud wrote bitterly about the conspiracy that an unjust humanity carries out in retaliation and vengeance against individuals of genius who seek to be true to themselves rather than to the social body:

Van Gogh n'est pas mort d'un état de délire propre,

mais d'avoir été corporellement le champ d'un problème autour duquel, depuis les origines, se débat l'esprit inique de cette humanité.

Celui de la prédominance de la chair sur l'esprit, ou du corps sur la chair, ou de l'esprit sur l'un et l'autre.

Et où dans ce délire la place du moi humain?

Van Gogh chercha le sien pendant toute sa vie avec une énergie et une détermination étranges, et il ne s'est pas suicidé dans un coup de folie, dans la transe de n'y pas parvenir,

mais au contraire il venait d'y parvenir et de découvrir ce qu'il était et qui il était, lorsque la conscience générale de la société, pour le punir de s'être arraché à elle,

le suicida (31).

For Artaud, Van Gogh was a martyr in the name of others who suffered because of the truths they were driven to reveal. He did not believe that anyone was naturally inclined toward suicide. Rather, he believed that it was the bad faith of people who denied the needs of those graced with the sensitivity of genius that drove people to the act. For him, unquestionably,

suicide was not an individual effort, but the conspiratorial effort of a vengeful society

Despite what outward appearances might indicate to the contrary, Artaud was not suicidal. Although his theatrical projects were rarely remunerative financially, and his extreme behaviors (travel to Mexico in search of the peyote eating culture of the Tarahumaras, and to Ireland with little more than the clothing on his back) put his life at risk, he had a very practical side. When he abandoned the cinema as a medium for his own artistic vision during the early 30s he continued acting in films in order to make a living and finance his theatrical projects. In his correspondance with backers and publishers he made certain the financial agreements were clearly stated and carried out. However, Artaud, like Van Gogh, was a soul driven to find the essence of self. Like the painter, he was ‘determined not to betray himself’ (38). Artaud, perhaps like no other, understood the risks of this “terrible necessity” of being true to himself. His quest resulted in nine years internment. His death from rectal cancer two years later undoubtedly was undetected due to poor medical treatment in the asylum.

Artaud saw psychiatrists, not surprisingly, as society’s principle weapon against the spirit of genius:

...il est crapuleusement impossible d’être psychiatre sans être en même temps marqué au coin de la plus

indiscutable folie: celle de ne pouvoir lutter contre ce vieux réflexe atavique de la tourbe et qui fait, de tout homme de science pris à la tourbe, une sorte d'ennemi-né et inné de tout génie (31).

Susan Sontag stated that Artaud hated psychiatrists because he misunderstood them (Hubert). Artaud saw them as part of a larger evil, and a symptom of the deliberate blindness of society to alternative realities. In light of Artaud's extensive association with the profession, one might suggest that Artaud knew psychiatrists only too well.

Gilles Deleuze reinforces Artaud's perception that through ignorance or deliberate ill will, psychiatrists are harmful to the genius spirit. He refers to Foucault's evaluation of psychiatry, in his argument that the artificially imposed Oedipal structure creates a self-perpetuating cycle of infinite cure:

Foucault disait que la psychanalyse est restée sourde aux voix de la déraison. En effet, elle névrotise tout; et par cette névrotisation elle ne contribue pas seulement à produire le névrosé à cure interminable, elle contribue aussi à reproduire le psychotique comme celui qui résiste à l'oedipianisation. Mais une approche directe de la schizophrénie, elle la manque complètement. Elle ne manque pas moins la nature inconsciente de la sexualité: par idéalisme, par idéalisme familiale et théâtrale (Pourparlers , 29).

For Artaud the cure surely must have seemed interminable, yet despite the horror of that lost (and last) decade of his life, that his drive for

life was irrepressible is revealed with ironical black humor in the following description of his daily visits with Docteur Fourdière at the Ivry clinic:

J'ai passé neuf ans moi-même dans un asile d'aliénés et je n'ai jamais eu l'obsession du suicide, mais je sais que chaque conversation avec un psychiatre, le matin, à l'heure de la visite, me donnait l'envie de me pendre, sentant que je ne pourrais pas l'égorger (37).

Deleuze and Guattari have referred to psychoanalysts as the official voice of a society whose basic structure and nature is based on curbing the uncoded flow of the forces of nature, of which the free-flowing energy of the schizophrenic is one.

The genius and the enforcer of societal reason are natural adversaries because the genius seeks to release the forces of the infinite, while the social order must control the infinite at all costs (represented by the unconscious, incest, the unrestricted flow of desire/production, etc.) in the name of reason. The cordoning off of a space defined as 'madness' from the territory of reason becomes itself a way of giving meaning to reason through the limiting of other realities. Artaud writes in Van Gogh:

La médecine est née du mal, si elle n'est pas née de la maladie, et si elle a, au contraire, provoqué et créé de toutes pièces la maladie pour se donner une raison d'être; mais la psychiatrie est née de la tourbe populacière des êtres qui ont voulu conserver le mal à la source de la maladie et qui ont ainsi extirpé de leur propre néant une espèce de garde

suisse pour saquer à sa base l'élan de rébellion  
revendicatrice qui est à l'origine du génie (32).

For Artaud, psychiatry created no cure, but instead perpetuated the cycle of illness. Because of this, Artaud thought that psychiatrists were the true madmen. Artaud always emphasized infinite possibility rather than infinite debt. He names with Van Gogh, Gérard de Nerval, Baudelaire, Edgar Allen Poe and Lautréamont as artists labeled mad who were damaged rather than cured by society (60).

In Artaud's view psychiatrists were the most insidious of the enforcers of the social code of reduction, since the sensitivity of the genius left him unprotected in the face of the 'cure':

Ce sont là de ces douces conversations de psychiatre bonhomme qui n'ont l'air de rien, mais laissent sur le coeur comme la trace d'une petite langue noire, la petite langue noire anodine d'une salamandre empoisonnée.

Et il n'en faut pas plus quelquefois pour amener un génie à se suicider (37).

Van Gogh's story is in certain ways clearly Artaud's story, and the way Artaud interpreted it, intertwining his response to the painter's experience with his own, indicates a deep compassion and understanding of the artist as a victim of a culture which values the product over the individual.



While much of the article is dedicated to exposing the social conspiracy of which Van Gogh was victim, and the susceptibility of the nature of genius to the 'déferlements massifs de haine' of that society, Artaud's personal and artistic response to the painter's work affirms his own theories about the transformational and apocalyptic potential of art. His goals for his new theater are revealed in his admiration for Van Gogh's paintings:

Car il n'y a pas de famine, d'épidémie, d'explosion de volcan, de tremblement de terre, de guerre, qui rebrousse les monades de l'air, qui torde le cou à la figure torve de fama fatum, le destin névrotique des choses, comme une peinture de Van Gogh, -- sortie au jour,... (Van Gogh le Suicidé de la Société, 27).

The drive to surpass all limits set by identity and culture and to abolish the modern aesthetic of form can be seen in Artaud's self image of a new body rising from the shattered pieces of the old.

...vous verrez mon corps actuel voler en éclats et se ramasser sous dix mille aspects notoires un corps neuf où vous ne pourrez plus jamais m'oublier (Théâtre de la cruauté , 1947, 118).

Artaud expressed the transformation of form and the rejection of restrictive literary convention and repressive social structure with poetic imagery. Let us now examine the images of his quest for the essence rather than a fixed form of poetry.

## **The shattering of body and the breakup of form**

Artaud's focus on poetic essence over form contributed to the elusive aspect of his theories. The passion apparent in his vision explains in part his continuing influence on contemporary theater. However, the lack of definite technique combined with his limited production have led to controversy over Artaud's place in theater, here expressed both by Brau and Grotowsky:

Un de paradoxes, et non le moindre, de l'oeuvre d'Antonin Artaud, c'est le hiatus entre l'influence qu'il exerce sur le théâtre contemporain et son activité théâtrale qui se résume en définitive à une longue succession d'échecs et d'entreprises velléitaires. Pour Grotowsky, qui lui doit beaucoup, Artaud est "un grand poète du théâtre et non de la littérature dramatique. Il n'a laissé aucune méthode, aucune technique correcte. Il a laissé des visions et des métaphores" (Brau, 89).

A critical perspective of Artaud's production can be upheld with evidence from both his written legacy and his lack of success on the stage. However, it is important to add that, in step with the theory of life and theater that Artaud was proposing, a transparent explication of the functioning of the transformative energy of the theater of cruelty was basically impossible. For Artaud it was an occult art whose principles always evade intellectual exposure. His profound goal was to invoke the hidden element of magic responsible for igniting the forces of life, and

thereby transforming the spectator, the actor and ultimately culture as well. This *is* Artaud's poetic legacy--not to describe explicitly but to create the necessary conditions for life to appear. It is not the form but the essence that he sought to recreate.

Artaud spoke about abolishing the aesthetic of form. To base an aesthetic on form, for Artaud, was to restrict the possibilities of forceful poetic expression. He constantly sought a means of release from the repressive structures of psychological theater which for him served only to reiterate the petty interests of humanity through the supremacy of the text and perpetuate the drama of a culture which to him represented death. Artaud's rejection of form rebelled against the structures of society that repressed the metaphysical self. Such societal structures define sexuality, identity through family, and cultural and material production, as well the normative boundaries for behavior.

One revealing set of poetic images positing the boundaries of self within the social body are those that define a different sort of body, a 'body without organs.' Organs represent the self-interested nature of culture, with its members plugged into the system, suckling the material, in a closed-circuit system of self-perpetuating desire.

Deleuze and Guattari interpret Artaud's 'body without organs' as an image that illustrates the way that the free 'flow of energy' is tied up/ tied down in a capitalist system of production.

Les machines désirantes nous font un organisme; mais au sein de cette production, dans sa production même, le corps souffre d'être ainsi organisé, de ne pas avoir une autre organisation, ou pas d'organisation du tout.

Le corps plein sans organes est l'improductif, le stérile, l'inengendré, l'inconsommable. Antonin Artaud l'a découvert, là où il était, sans forme et sans figure.

Le corps sans organes est l'improductif; est pourtant il est produit à sa place et à son heure dans la synthèse connective, comme l'identité du produire et du produit (la table schizophrénique est un corps sans organes.)

Il n'est surtout pas une projection; rien à voir avec le corps propre, ou avec une image du corps. C'est le corps sans image.

Le corps plein sans organes est de l'anti-production, ( l'Anti-Oedipe, 14-15).

The process of controlling the natural flow of schizophrenic energy is ultimately the act of its destruction. Artaud speaks out against the overvaluing of the product in a gross disregard of the vibrational, metaphysical essence of creative energy. He viewed genius as plucked and ravaged by a materialistic society blind to the spiritual. In Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu Artaud attacks the system of American capitalist

production and the war machine vehemently, one of the main reasons his radio broadcast was cancelled by the producers before it could be broadcast.

Artaud's condemnation of obsessive materialistic desire extended to family, religion and god as corrupt organs of the social body, as well as sexuality, or more accurately libido. For Artaud, modern psychological thought had transformed 'the liberty of sexuality', one of the dark, essential, necessary forces of life, into an impure drive mapped and controlled by the scientific mind (Le Théâtre et son double, 44). All these structures reduce the necessary drive of the life force to materialistic desire, reducing also the possibility for spiritual exaltation.

### **Let it flow...**

In l'Anti-Oedipe. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie and Pourparlers, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari analyse the development of capitalist domination of modern social structures. They use the image of the unbound or uncontained nature of the schizophrenic as a contrast to the capitalist system which functions by blocking and controlling production. They equate the flux of natural forces with the schizophrenic's experience. The schizophrenic body without organs is free flowing, a free agent and outside

of the limitations of production. The schizophrenic experience is a process of nature:

Nous ne prétendons pas fixer un pôle naturaliste de la schizophrénie. Ce que la schizophrénie vit spécifiquement, génériquement, ce n'est pas du tout un pôle spécifique de la nature, mais la nature comme processus de production (l'Anti-Oedipe, 9).

The writings of Antonin Artaud are representative of an unrestricted schizophrenic flow, and are used to support several of Deleuze and Guattari's analyses. Artaud wrote consistently about the forces of nature that could not be contained without highly disruptive consequences. In his poetic imagery, Artaud shattered the image of the body where it connected with the self-interested societal machine(plugging in at the organs), to release an unforgettable pure flow of energy, connected only at the metaphysical source of exaltation. The individual had surpassed his physical identity, to encounter a metaphysical state.

Another important connection between Artaud's writings and the analyses of Deleuze and Guattari is the rejection of societally imposed filial structures that control identity. In Artaud le Môme and Ci-Gît Artaud attacked the family structure as an obscene connection to the societal body using sordid descriptions of bodily functions and in the image of mother-

father-god repressing the individual. Artaud rejected the binding of the individual in a structure of never ending payment and production, resulting in the self sacrificed to the familial and hence social, identity. He affirms in

Ci-Gît:

Je ne crois à ni père  
ni mère,

ja na pas  
a papa-mama,...  
(99).

Deleuze and Guattari use Artaud's rejection of an identity based on the Oedipal triangle to illustrate their refutation of the modern psychoanalytical interpretation of social and cultural structure and family relations. They attack the Oedipal structure as an artificially imposed restriction on the flow of desire. They redefine the Oedipal structure as a system of infinite debt in capitalist production. Here Deleuze and Guattari describe the self-perpetuating systems of capitalism and the Oedipal structure:

Ce que la psychanalyse appelle résolution ou dissolution d'Oedipe, c'est tout à fait comique, c'est précisément l'opération de la dette infinie, l'analyse interminable, la contagion d'Oedipe, sa transmission du père aux enfants. C'est fou ce qu'on a pu dire de bêtises au nom d'Oedipe, et d'abord sur l'enfant (Pourparlers, 29).

Similarly, Artaud viewed family as one of the corrupt systems reproducing false culture, just as he saw psychoanalysts as recreating disease rather than cure.

We know that Artaud experienced an inability to access and retain the essence of his thoughts, ‘the intense pre-personal flow’ of his metaphysical self. His desire to tear down the literary and social structures that both represented and reproduced the barrier resulted from this experience. Apocalyptic transformation was the only way to release the forces of life repressed by social coding. In Deleuzian terms, Artaud called to ‘let the flow pass, under the social codes that want to channel and block them’ (Pourparlers,32).

As for the triangular Oedipal structure,<sup>1</sup> Deleuze and Guattari point out the same tendency:

Quant à l’Oedipe, c’est encore une manière de coder l’incodable, de codifier ce qui se dérobe aux codes, ou de déplacer le désir et son objet, de les piéger (L’Anti-Oedipe, 204).

This apparatus functions to trap the unconscious in code, reduce the terrain of the uncodable which for Artaud represented infinite possibility

‘familial ou analytique, Oedipe est fondamentalement un

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<sup>1</sup> Important to note that the triangular image of relationship between the father, mother and child recalls the shape of the top of the cross which for Artaud was a physical symbol of restriction of the flow of energy. For reference to this shape and the alternate, flow-inducing shape of the arc, see “Tutuguri, le rite du soleil noir” in Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu.



appareil de répression sur les machines désirantes, et nullement une formation de l'inconscient lui-même' (Pourparlers, 28).

By creating normative poles of behavior, and marginalizing what falls outside of this range, society actually creates the space called 'madness' We are instructed in this by Artaud's writings about the genius of Van Gogh and his criticism of the psychoanalytic cure, and by Deleuze and Guattari in their analyses of the schizophrenic state. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the schizophrenic, like nature, is already outside these societally imposed channels of control, and suffers for it. In reference to Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société, they state in l'Anti-Oedipe:

Du fond de sa souffrance et de sa gloire,  
il a le droit de dénoncer ce que la société  
fait du psychotique en train de décoder les  
flux de désir (160).

Artaud's defense of Van Gogh's genius reveals much about the sources of both Artaud's own suffering and his creative vision.

Artaud writes that the motivation for his writing is to escape his own personal hell, which I have interpreted as that of a self divided from its spiritual essence, and therefore never is whole. We see in his personal malady the corollary for a cultural sickness.

For Artaud, the malady was the loss of poetry. It was the devaluing of life by the empty symbol, form divided from essence. The totality of his revolt can be seen on all levels, personal, artistic, and cultural, as he struggled against the impossibility of self, against cultural repression of expression, against the supremacy of the script in the theatrical production.

He described poetically a theatrical cure for a dying culture. In the spiraling nature of his work, he returned to the source of his inspiration, his own suffering, and thus discovered the means for his personal cure.

Artistically, the tragedy is that he was unable to complete his project. Yet one must recognize how the artist was inseparable from the man and his experience; that the process was an end in itself. On his manic journeys into the ancient and violent landscape of the Tarahumaras and to Ireland he took the show on the road, so to speak. Undeniably, these trips in the midst of delirium were also a manifestation of the symptoms of his illness. Yet they also can be seen as the realization of his project of the Theater of Cruelty by means of his own flesh experience. The man had become his theater.

His search for the organic essence of theater echoed a search for self and true culture. What for society was paranoid, schizophrenic, offensive, or mad was for Artaud the process of the development of his driving conviction, the staging of the terrible necessity of his own nature. In other

words, for Artaud, as in nature, all action has its origin in the inescapable purpose of self expression.

For Artaud, the gift or curse of genius was to be able to perceive an essence of life and its repression in modern culture. The result was an unavoidable mission to liberate those forces. The necessity of life demanded it, and the form of the liberation was to be the Theater of Cruelty.

Le théâtre de la cruauté  
n'est pas un symbole d'un vide absent,  
d'une épouvantable incapacité de se réaliser dans  
sa vie d'homme.  
Il est l'affirmation  
d'une terrible et d'ailleurs inéluctable nécessité  
(Le Théâtre de la cruauté, 1947, 110).

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE THEATER of CRUELTY**

In Chapter Two, I referred to Jerzy Grotowski's description of Artaud as the 'grand poète de théâtre' who despite the impact he continues to have on contemporary theater, left few concrete traces of his genius. Grotowski evaluates this legacy thus: "Il n'a laissé aucune méthode, aucune technique correcte. Il a laissé des visions et des métaphores" (Brau, 89). This final chapter is a response to that assertion, and an attempt to document the main aspects of the theater project for which he is most well known, "Le Théâtre de la cruauté" I will do this by addressing the following questions:

- What are the main principles of the Theater of Cruelty?
- What are the stated aims of the Theater of Cruelty?
- What are the influences which inform its principles and technique?
- What is the technique for a Theater of Cruelty?
- What are examples of the application of this technique in Artaud's work?
- What are the indications of evolution in the Theater of Cruelty after the years of internment?
- What explanation can be found for the lack of detail in the technique of the Theater of Cruelty?

The sections of this chapter are divided in response to these questions.

## What are the primary principles of the Theater of Cruelty ?

Principle One: The true language of theater is one of concrete space and movement, not of written word.

Les possibilités de réalisation du théâtre appartiennent tout entières au domaine de la *mise en scène*, considérée comme un langage dans l'espace et en mouvement (Le Théâtre et son double , 68).

Thus, for Artaud theater, being an autonomous art form and not linked with literature, does not share the language of literature.

In Le théâtre et son double Artaud describes the malady of the modern age as resulting from the split between between things and the signs that represent them. This split is the dislocation of the magical and the poetic forces of life from their signs, which have consequently lost their ancient function of incantation. The written word rules supreme over other language, a domination which is linked to the dominance of the scientific, rational discourse over other expressions of knowledge. In modern theater, the same hierarchy reigns, with the text subjugating what Artaud calls the real language of theater, the physical manifestation of the 'absolute gesture' of pure theater, a language of physical space which portrays 'thoughts as if in their original state' through the craft of staging, the *mise en scène*. (Le Théâtre et son double , 94-96).

Principle Two: The expression of art for purely aesthetic purposes is a gratuitous action.

The Theater of Cruelty proposes the return of theater to its original purpose, in order to effect a permanent and profound change in its participants. Modern theater had lost this magical force. Artaud envisioned an 'active theater' that, using the communicative power of the language of concrete space, was effectual in stimulating deep levels of consciousness or sensibility that had been denied in the language of words.

Principle Three: 'Everything that acts is a cruelty' (Double, 132). This principle reiterates Artaud's usage of the word 'cruelty' in his theatrical vision. In nature action comes about from necessity. Through an 'active' theater, 'that awakens us nerves and heart', (Double, 132) Artaud was ready to submit both himself and the participant (both audience members and actors alike) to his experiment of theater as the tool of transcendent and exalted creation. One can understand from the very name of the project that for Artaud the process of awakening others' sensibilities to long-obscured potential would not be a comfortable experience.

Principle Four: Theater should stir in the spectators a 'hint of this great metaphysical fear that is at the heart of all ancient theater' (Le Théâtre et son double , 65).

Such a fear was inspired by the ancient dramas inherent in nature, such as the everpresent potential for chaos. Artaud thought it important to awaken this fear in order to connect the deep self with nature. In nature, the spiritual and the material are joined. Through the action of stagecraft on both the body and the sensibility, Artaud sought to build a 'spiritual architecture' that would be a virtual metaphysical manifestation of that state of physical and spiritual unity.

Principle Five: To achieve this metaphysical action the organism must be touched on all material and spiritual levels, in its entirety.

Artaud thought that the spiritual could be accessed through the body. Therefore, a combination of effects on the senses were required to stimulate both body and mind. In addition, just as all sensory levels were to be touched, all points in space were to be filled or examined. Thus the spiritual architecture would be constructed both in the participant and in the physical space that surrounded him. Patterns of thought and the concrete things that initiate them could be traced through the human senses. Not only would the physical body be shaken, but the spiritual consciousness would be awakened as well, with signs and symbols that produced a physical reaction, as in an incantation. Such elements of physical language would 'in a

physical way reveal to us some of the most secret perceptions of the spirit' (Double, 93).

Principle Six: The staging director would be the true author of the theatrical production.

With the intuitive direction of the elements of the sensory and symbolic language the staging director would create the necessary environment for the spiritual transformation. For Artaud, theater had poetic action because of the nature of the stage where no moment of creation could ever be repeated exactly the same way. In this way theater doubled life. Artaud asserted that 'written poetry has value once and then should be destroyed' ("Pour en finir avec les chefs-d'oeuvre", 121). The force of poetry is not contained in its form, but underlies form. The staging director must therefore reveal and use this underlying poetic force.

Principle Seven. The final principle is that the language of theatrical space was to be reinvented for modern times, with a vocabulary of signs that matched modern drama and psychic necessity.

### **What are the aims of the Theater of Cruelty?**

First Aim: One of Artaud's essential goals was to reconnect with poetry.



For Artaud, the anarchic nature of poetry was the force that would renew life and overturn the forms of a dying culture. In his view poetry was created and experienced on a vibrational level, not in the fixed expression of the word. Underlying words, which may be organized into the form called “poetry”, there existed the true force of poetry, trapped in the fixed form. On stage, through a ‘consecutive’ or ‘connective’ poetry of successive and overlapping signs and sensory techniques, a poetry of space could be achieved, and its transformational, transcendent, metaphysical force could be released.

...tirer les conséquences poétiques extrêmes des moyens de réalisation c’est en faire la métaphysique... (Double, 68).

Second Aim: Shatter conventional form.

Artaud wished to release a poetic ‘epidemic’ on stage that would effect the ‘immense liquidation’ of form and thereby release the forces of nature that have been repressed by humanity, and open up the conscience to the intelligence of all ‘perverse possibilities’ of the soul. Psychic and sensory disassociation and dissonance were primary tools for this action.

Third Aim: Reenact ancient conflicts and dramas of nature, that are in essence divine, not human.

The purpose of the re-enactment of primal dramas was to allow the awareness of a buried knowledge of a greater reality to resurface, physically

represented in nature. Artaud perceived that the gratuitous entertainments of modern, occidental culture had numbed humanity to this knowledge. He saw that people avoided the hard truths of life and the essential cruelty that went hand in hand with living, rather than merely existing. Yet Artaud maintained nevertheless that people were filled with curiosity about the true dramas of life, such as those portrayed in the ancient Myths:

La terrorisante apparition du Mal qui dans les Mystères d'Éleusis était donnée dans sa forme pure, et était vraiment révélée, répond au temps noir de certaines tragédies antiques que tout vrai théâtre doit retrouver (Double, 44).

Fourth Aim: Transform the participant.

Through a methodical, 'mathematical' application of symbols evoking the ancient dramas, Artaud wanted to transform the attitude of the audience into one of heroic participation. The knowledge accessed at a deeper level of sensibility might force the participant to transcend preoccupations with the self, and open the way for the exaltation of the soul and a spiritual transformation. This is what Artaud called the 'Grande Oeuvre', a theatrical corollary to the alchemical transformation of base metal into gold. This type of theater would invite the participant to participate actively in his or her destiny:

...à prendre en face du destin une attitude héroïque

et supérieure qu' [il] n'aurai[t] jamais eue sans cela  
(Double, 45).

Once again, the staging director would manipulate the secret and magical arts of the language in space that might bring about the transformation of the spectator's desire to be entertained into an heroic consciousness. The director would thus 'shatter the repose of the senses', and let in all 'perverse possibilities' of life ("Le Théâtre de la cruauté,137).

### **What are the influences which informed the creation of the Theater of Cruelty?**

The most profound source of inspiration for Artaud's Theater of Cruelty was that of eastern theater, especially Balinese theater. He also cites primitive and ritualistic ceremony, religious and mystical theater, ancient tragedy, and Elisabethan drama as sources of influence.

Artaud turned to the conventions of Oriental theater to remedy the loss of poetry from western theater and culture. In Artaud's estimation, Oriental theater succeeded in releasing the anarchic, active forces of nature and of poetry through the complex, symbolic and communicative art of staging. A language of non-verbal signs dominates eastern theater, such as gestures and sensory effects that evoke natural images of ancient and divine

dramas. The effectual quality of this theater depends on an intuitive understanding of correspondances that reveal the essential cruelty ( or conflicts) always at play in life. Oriental theatrical art manifests the metaphysical fear at the root of all ancient theater. Always, action must invoke fear, sometimes with the sense of surprise, other times with the sense of danger, to reach and release the forces of the repressed realities of nature, or the nonhuman, in order to reawaken a sensibilities numbed on a physical, spiritual and psychic level. The language of this action is physical and sensory, yet also intellectual, without dependence on the word to convey concepts. Artaud was fascinated with the oriental craft of staging:

Le Théâtre Balinais nous en propose une réalisation stupéfiante en ce sens qu'elle supprime toute possibilité de recours aux mots pour l'élucidation des thèmes des plus abstraits (Double, 94).

The language of Balinese theater is integral to Artaud's vision of theatrical space:

...un langage de gestes faits pour évoluer dans l'espace et qui ne peuvent avoir de sens en dehors de lui (Double, 94).

The precision the signs and gestures developed over millenia is important since it both precludes improvisation, which Artaud condemns as reflective of the preoccupation with the ego of western, or psychological theater, and indicates a formula with an intended effect, the transformation

of mind, spirit or essence. There is a spontaneity in the combustion of the action, but this latter requires the necessary procedures and catalysts to explode. Instead of projecting an improvised style, the ritualistic use of signs developed since ancient times to reveal a knowledge of natural forces lends to the theatrical play the solemnity of 'a sacred rite' (Double, 89).

Artaud observed in the Theater of Bali dance, song and pantomime that produced a trance-like state of hallucination and fear in the audience. The characters, who were typed personalities, were dramatic yet familiar, coming from a different dimension of reality as if they were ghosts of the persons the spectators expected. Thus the actors do not portray individual personalities, but rather archetypal characteristics.

Gestures become signs, and actors become symbols, or living hieroglyphs. States of mind were exposed through gesture, not words, movements reduced to their most efficient essence. Artaud associated such techniques with his ideal of pure theater:

En somme les Balinais réalisent, avec la plus extrême rigueur, l'idée du théâtre pur, où tout, conception comme réalisation, ne vaut, n'a d'existence que par son degré d'objectivation *sur la scène* (Double, 82).

Artaud used the term “objective” to refer to the degree of effectiveness of stagecraft, an art which he viewed as autonomous rather than a branch of literature because its creativity was manifested on the stage.

The element of surprise related to fear can be brought about by a staging director who directs the language of the stage in a ‘complicated abundance’ of all its elements. a strange juxtaposition of modulations of voice, abrupt attitudes, musical phrases, puppet-like dances, cries, and naturalistic costuming meant to shock (Double , 82).

One can imagine the disturbing emotions produced by the figures of the actors, who move with deliberately inhuman movements as if manipulated by an invisible puppeteer. In addition, the sounds produced in a way not associated with everyday communication, with a *vibratory* quality at the back of the throat, or at shrill levels, might evoke the sensations of a dream or nightmare. Such effectual qualities of stagecraft were directly related to Artaud’s concept of a ‘poetry in space’ The term poetry refers to the active force of the technique, the vibration produced on a level of knowledge not processed by reason. For Artaud, poetic force was at the heart of Balinese theater.

**What is the technique for a Theater of Cruelty?**

The action of this theater, that which would make it effective, is the stimulation of human sensibility through the body. Artaud wished to create a metaphysical connection between spirit and matter. Such a transformation would operate on a vibratory level, and in that sense the value of the staging effect can be measured in terms of its vibratory quality. What is fascinating about this idea is that vibrations could be said to be located in a space that is somehow moving *between* the spiritual and the material, a poetic space in motion that becomes the metaphysical link between the concrete and the abstract.

Another way of looking at this vibratory force is to consider the energy created when surprising poetic imagery allows us to see the ordinary in an extraordinary light. Artaud felt that poetic associations awaken a knowledge that is not supported by reason, but rather by a spiritual or even a mystical awareness. Artaud was fascinated with Balinese theater which used such incongruous combinations of sensations, movements, signs and images to create dissonances and disassociations which had the effect of shocking the audience into a physical, emotional and possibly spiritual participation in the theatrical action. He attempted to adapt these techniques to western sensibility in his Theater of Cruelty.

To manifest a ‘metaphysic of poetry’, the magical action of unification, in the theatrical space, Artaud intended that the elements of his ‘language in space’ should touch the spectator on as many levels of consciousness and sensibility as possible. Theater is the privileged space for this type of action since it is a physical space, and can therefore reach the spectator physically, through the body. Artaud likened the effect of such a physical space to the experience of the snake being charmed by the snake charmer’s music and motions:

Si la musique agit sur les serpents ce n’est pas par les notions spirituelles qu’elle leur apporte, mais parce que les serpents sont longs, qu’ils s’enroulent longuement sur la terre, que leur corps touche à la terre par sa presque totalité; et les *vibrations* musicales qui se communiquent à la terre l’atteignent comme un massage très subtil et très long; eh bien, je propose d’en agir avec les spectateurs comme avec les serpents qu’on charme et de les faire revenir par l’organisme jusqu’aux plus subtiles notions (emphasis mine, “En finir avec les chefs-d’oeuvre”, 126).

Artaud intended the participant in the Theater of Cruelty to be ‘assailed’ physically by all types of sensory input, in combination with ‘mysterious signs’ representing fabulous realities repressed by western culture (Double, 93). This purposeful, carefully orchestrated chaos of signs and sensations, by passing through the physical, bypasses verbal language. The actors thus become three-dimensional hieroglyphs who represent cosmic notions in their movements, costuming and attitudes. They were



meant to produce a physical reaction, stirring what Artaud called the 'intellect of the senses'

Conventional forms thus were shattered by combining staging effects, such as the mixture of certain colors with certain forms, and natural images purposely associated with certain sounds, and the disconcertingly jerky movements of the mannequin-like actors, accompanied by startling cries.

Artaud was taken with the 'expressive play' of the Balinese theater: the rolling of eyes, the expression of the lips, muscular twitching, rolling of head on shoulders as if on mechanical rollers, and the combined effect of the association of music or a tone with these movements, as well as yelps, tremblings and cadences of the heel (Double, 84). Artaud was already known for 'the most extreme gestures' both on stage and off with varying degrees of success. Some of the more vitriolic criticisms of Les Cenci were directed toward his personal acting style, which included physical distortions disconcerting to the western eye.

The mechanized movements of the actor, in combination with an unexpected 'intense liberation of signs, held back at first, and then suddenly flung into the air' (Double, 93), of these 'gestures pushed to the limit' (Double, 40), are intended to fill the participant with a sense of chaos and of the 'essential drama of life' (Double, 77).

The exuberance of natural imagery is intended to provoke the same sensations, and to push the audience's psyche further in sensing the non-human order of the universe. Nature is revealed in its chaotic splendor through the staging effects of 'this sonorous rain of an immense forest' (Double , 87) and the 'effervescence of painted rhythms' (94).

Artaud thought that experiencing a virtual state of controlled chaos led to the realization that despite the threat of complete physical and psychic anarchy, the universe holds together without human, i.e. rational intervention. Moreover, the assailing of the senses on all levels 'teaches us the metaphysical identity of the concrete and of the abstract' (Double , 91). Through natural images that evoke the fear of the non-human with their 'godlike themes' that 'seem to come from the primitive junctures of Nature that a doubling Spirit favors', the spectator could be guided to the awareness of the presence of a 'superior life' (92). One expected human response to such a realization is, of course, fear. Artaud sought to evoke such metaphysical fear in his Theater of Cruelty. He used imagery to evoke emotions of fear and astonishment at the immense power of the universe.

Another element used to evoke emotion is the physical space of the stage. Artaud's goal was to make the physical space speak a concrete

language. Artaud thought that geometric lines of planned movement would make the participant aware of all of the space. The dancing actors were to give both a sense of extreme order and of pending chaos with their movements. Artaud wanted his actors to reach an equilibrium with the body that threatened to fall the way of nature, anarchy, and chaos. Artaud's notes for the staging of Les Cenci contain intricate stage directions for the exact movements of the actors. For Artaud, the geometry of movement had the potential of a spatial language. For this reason, Artaud admired the control of space in the painting "Les Filles de Loth" by Lucas van den Leyden. In his commentary on the painting, we can see his intention to manipulate visual signs:

Il semble que le peintre ait eu connaissance de certains secrets concernant l'harmonie linéaire, et des moyens de la faire agir directement sur le cerveau, comme un réactif physique (Double, 53).

An example of a shape that produces complex mental and emotional imagery would be the labyrinth. The memory of the shape in ancient myth evokes the emotion of the characters when faced with the invisible terror of the minotaur, while on the visual plane the complicated lines in space produce a feeling of confusion, as if in a dreamworld, and a consequent sense of loss of control. This sensation leads back to a questioning of who or what is in control.

In the Theater of Cruelty, the stage director directs the act of creation. By combining effects in a carefully scripted sequence, Artaud hoped to produce what he called the 'connective poetry' of the stage. Vital to the success of the play was the director's poetic intuition.

Finally, to maximize the effect of a 'performance that addresses the whole organism', Artaud proposed a 'total spectacle' where the theatrical space was no longer divided between separate areas for the spectator and for the action of the performance. He described a theatrical space, in which the spectator was seated in the center, and was assailed from all sides by the staging effects and the action of the play in a sort of 'turning performance'. The acting would take place at the four cardinal points of the room. The spectator thus would be surrounded, and penetrated from all sides by significant combinations of gestures, sounds and music, movement and dance, signs, lights and colors. In addition, there would be galleries which circled the space on a higher level, allowing action to take place in all possible points of space, a physical reminder of possible alternative realities.

**What are examples of the application of this technique in Artaud's work?--Les Cenci.**

Les Cenci was to be a demonstration project for the Theater of Cruelty to attract the backers Artaud needed to continue his theater company. Naturally, he hoped for a success. The play, a tragedy in four acts adapted from Shelley and Stendhal, premiered at the Théâtre des Folies-Wagram on May 6th, 1935, with Artaud playing the evil patriarch Cenci. The *mise en scène* was a collaboration between Artaud, the painter Balthus (décor) and the musician Roger Desormière (music and sound effects).

Artaud did not receive the backing nor the public acclaim he had hoped for. Instead, Les Cenci was the final production of the Theater of Cruelty, which ended as a company when the play closed after only 17 performances. Artaud attributed the play's commercial failure in part to the various concessions he was forced to make to demands by backers. He had to modify many technical aspects, and therefore did not have free rein to realize his vision as put forth in Le Théâtre et son double. Another restriction was underfunding.

One important modification was that Artaud was obliged to use pre-recorded sound, which he felt greatly reduced its *vibrational* force. However, by placing loudspeakers in each corner of the hall, he maintains that at least the spectator was auditorily immersed.

Tout comme dans le Théâtre de la Cruauté, le spectateur se trouvera, dans *Les Cenci*, au centre d'un réseau de vibrations sonores; (Oeuvres complètes tome V, 46).

A more pressing question is why Artaud chose to put on a production whose drama seemingly was centered in a written script. For those who were waiting for a demonstration of his theories Artaud's Les Cenci was not an accurate representation of his vision. Gouhier suggests that another play, for which Artaud had written the scenario for the staging but never produced, La Conquête du Mexique would have been a better vehicle for the 'total spectacle' that Artaud hoped to implement (111). This play, written only as staging notes and not as a script, was intended for a theatrical space conforming to his vision. However, it also ambitiously demanded an acting crew of 300 and thus could not feasibly be produced. Artaud undoubtedly had no choice but to promote a project that appealed more to backers unwilling to fund a too costly or too radical production.

However, Artaud thought Les Cenci was nevertheless a viable choice since the script took a subordinate role to the staging:

Les gestes et les mouvements y ont autant d'importance que le texte; et celui-ci a été établi pour servir de réactif au reste. Et je crois que ce sera la première fois, tout au moins ici en France, que l'on aura affaire à un texte de théâtre écrit en fonction d'une mise en scène dont les modalités sont sorties toutes concrètes et toutes vives de l'imagination de l'auteur (Oeuvres complètes tome V, 46).

Artaud also points out two other aspects of the stage direction that he felt successfully carried out his technique for the Theater of Cruelty. One was the use of the mannequins to mirror human characters, and become symbolic of images and emotions of non-verbal human sensibility:

Tout ce qui est reproches, rancœurs, remords, angoisses, revendications, les mannequins seront là pour le formuler et on verra d'un bout à l'autre de la pièce tout un langage de gestes et de signes où les inquiétudes de l'époque se rassemblent dans une sorte de violente manifestation (Oeuvres complètes tome V, 46).

Another aspect of his production that remained particularly true to his original vision was the enactment of dramas of mythical proportions, those that required heroic attitudes of the participants:

Nous ne sommes pas encore chez les Dieux, mais nous sommes presque chez les héros, tels que les entendaient les Antiques. Et, en tout cas, il y a, dans les personnages des *Cenci*, ce côté exalté, légendaire (Oeuvres complètes tome V, 46).

Thus, despite Artaud's reservations that Les Cenci could fully illustrate his theories, he nevertheless felt that the play showcased many of his ideas for an 'active theater'.

In the following section, I will explore some of the themes of the play as illustrations of Artaud's theory

In Les Cenci, the inexplicable cruelty of a father toward his children, in the form of psychological and physical torture, murder, and incest were the first blows that the audience sustained in facing the cruel truths of a theater that doubles life. Additionally, both perpetrator and the victim suggested a repressed repentance and hidden desire. The characters of the patriarch and the representatives of the Church exposed the corruption of authority to reveal a core of moral senselessness. Through these characters, Artaud portrayed morality as a repressive cultural construct rather than a natural one. In attempting to bring ancient myths concretely to life on stage, Artaud wished to transport the spectators to the time when those myths were created, to a space in the human psyche before the light of rational knowledge divided human consciousness into opposing states of reason and natural instinct.

Virmaux notes the importance of incest to emphasize the cruelty of natural law, which, separated from social or human law, becomes a testimony to the uncontrollable forces that direct life as 'an absolute evil' He also suggest that since the notion of incest challenges and overflows the limitations of social law, it represents the transcendant or metaphysical. In the sense of rejecting society's social and moral values, incest is a form of absolute revolt (56).



With these themes, Artaud hoped to guide the spectator to a psychic space where knowledge was unified in the spiritual and the corporeal, as in a state of nature. This state is embodied in Cenci who was driven to express his nature, as Pierre Jean Jouve states, by ‘the fatality of instinct’ (Virmaux, 307).

The forces that drive Cenci are as irrepressible as the cruel truths of nature, and the play exposes the dark corners of his soul step by step. His nature is his destiny. He in fact embodies the unbridled chaos of nature itself. Additionally, he represents the heroic stance, since he takes his destiny into his own hands through direct action.

...il m’arrive plus d’une fois en rêve de m’identifier avec le destin. C’est là l’explication de mes vices, et de cette pente naturelle de haine où mes proches sont ceux qui me gênent le plus. Je me crois et je suis une force de la nature. Pour moi, il n’y a ni vie, ni mort, ni dieu, ni inceste, ni repentir, ni crime. J’obéis à ma loi qui ne me donne pas le vertige; et tant pis pour qui est happé et qui sombre dans le gouffre que je suis devenu.

Je cherche et je fais le mal par destination et par principe. Je ne saurais résister aux forces qui brûlent de se ruer en moi (153).

Cenci’s dream of his nature and his destiny recalls the dream the count of Sardinia had in “Le théâtre et la peste”. The dream showed the count a plague that threatened his domaine and communicated to him the power of his conscious will. For Artaud a dream was not an illusion but

another reality. The same dreamworld forces imposed themselves on individual destiny with Béatrice's dream of her own rape in Les Cenci. The dreamworld, like the space of true theater, apparently liberated the forces of nature.

Through Cenci, Artaud portrayed the clash between the feudal world and the emerging modern world, between the dark millenia of natural history and the young, promising world of reason. Cynical Camillo, the pope's legate, describes a modern world ready to trade its freedom for peace:

...nous sommes las des batailles. Le monde est faible: il aspire à la paix (Tome IV, 152).

Cenci's sinister reply reflects Artaud's warning about a modern culture that has relinquished its own destiny to the morality of the age of reason .

Je fêterai cette amnistie générale dans une orgie où vous serez tous conviés. chefs de noblesse et du sacerdoce, une grande orgie des temps de mollesse, où les vices du vieux comte Cenci vous montreront ce que veut dire la paix (Tome IV, 152).

In this play, the modern world is corrupt, hypocritical, self-serving, and ready to chose modernity and the imposed peace of social structure over the darkness of its history.

The themes portraying the natural force of the universe were reinforced by the staging effects:

J'ai imposé à ma tragédie le mouvement de la nature, cette espèce de gravitation qui meut les plantes, et les êtres comme des plantes, et qu'on retrouve fixée dans les bouleversements volcaniques du sol (Oeuvres Complètes tome V, 46).

The image of the circle is central to the Theater of Cruelty. It represents the inexorable dance of life and death in nature. We have already noted the importance of the circle in Artaud's 'turning performance' in which the action envelops the spectator. Virmaux points out that the circle or the wheel has been present in Artaud's work since the beginning. It has been used in the spatial geometry of the stage and is recurrent in the actors' movements. The circle is important as well in operations of magic and incantations (Virmaux, 58).

A spectacular use of the wheel in Les Cenci is Beatrice's torture scene while she waits to be executed for the murder of her father. She was to be suspended by her hair from the wheel as it advanced onto the stage, accompanied by piteous cries and creaks from the wheel. The original plan was much more radical than the more stable compromise reached (not harmoniously) between the actress and the director. Artaud was hoping to make her suffering as life-like as possible.

Artaud's notes for the staging also include detailed choreography for the actors. These reveal the same circular imagery:

Les convives décrivent des cercles, quelques-uns assez rapides, d'autres plus lents. Parmi ces derniers, D. suit les évolutions d'un nain en s'arrêtant de temps en temps, puis soudain pousse un cri (Virmaux, 281).

The scene gives the impression of a circus of madmen, circling mindlessly in the torment of anguish and fear. The circular shapes that might otherwise represent the magical nature of the cosmos, have their power broken by the symbol of the broken arch which counteracts the unifying force of the circle (imagery observed opening night by Pierre Jean Jouve, described in Virmaux, 308). This same opposition of the circular arch and the disruptive force of the linear cross can be seen later in 1947 in Tutuguri, le rite du soleil noir in the text for the radio broadcast Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu.

Another aspect of note in the staging is the mechanized movements of the two assassins who Beatrice hired to murder her father. In these machine-like actions Artaud intended to show the weakness of humanity in face of a 'superior life', a cosmic will too powerful to be repressed by human will. Beatrice enchants the assassins to prepare them for their murderous task. Does she, in her 'savagery' (Virmaux, 308) represent these

natural forces and the superior will that directs them? The assassins' mechanized movements are as disturbing as their mindless grimaces. For Artaud, the mannequins, here the assassins, have the role of doubling rational thought with unconscious knowledge:

[Ils] seront là pour faire dire aux héros de la pièce ce qui les gêne et que la parole humaine est incapable d'exprimer (Oeuvres Complètes, tome V, 46).

On a deep level of consciousness, what is disturbing the characters is the realization of the 'absolute evil' of the universe. For Artaud, in theater as in life, good is an exception, while evil or cruelty is a constant.

As Pierre Jean Jouve affirms in his article, "Les Cenci d'Antonin Artaud" (entire text reproduced in Virmaux, 306), both Cenci and his daughter represent 'the anarchy of evil' and 'sacrilege'. He also gives his impression that the spectator was drawn into a strange alliance with the mad patriarch, who 'contains enough sobbing pain and defiance to connect us to his torture' (306). Thus, the aspects of Cenci's character are not to be judged as reprehensible, but inseparable from his nature, just as nature is without a moral sense of good or bad. According to Jouve, Artaud played Cenci as 'this furious blasphemer of God and an atheist in the manner of de Sade...under the sign of *paranoia*...' (306).

In other descriptions of the staging as he observed it on opening night, Jouve states that in the 'eternal immutable dramas', such as 'a young girl raped by her father, whom she kills, does not acknowledge her own guilt, but whom society puts to death', the spectator might recognize 'an awful or painful or sensitive Face that is our own, which upon considering has a thousand times caused us to secretly moan' (Virmaux, 306-307). This would have been the experience Artaud hoped for in the audience, so that they would be drawn into the play as if it played out their own lives. Jouve's impression of Artaud interpreting Cenci was that it was at least in part his performance that drew the audience into the action of the Theater of Cruelty:

Ce théâtre n'est pas fait pour plaire: Artaud joue constamment contre la salle, et gagne.' .. 'La tension la plus âpre [trouble] et parfois [blesse] le spectateur (Virmaux, 307).

In other comments on the acting and on the physical aspects of the set, Jouve says that the play offered 'these heavy resonances; the fabric of sentiment; these baroque poses that the Romantics were the last to dare employ' (307). His reference to the Romantics recalls another theatrical influence for Artaud. He describes the set that Balthus built as a 'gigantic prison-palace' with 'scaffolding like a giant ladder and a round column, against the sky, that raised the Cenci palace to a frightening height' (307).

From this description one can see that Artaud was indeed filling the theatrical space. The monstrous scale raised above the audience was symbolic of a superior or cosmic will, and evocative of the home of the gods. Other symbols evident were: ‘the red curtains, hanging, like “rags of iron”, or clots of stiffened blood, the arches broken and interrupted in space’ (307). Balthus aimed to create a visual dissonance with color combinations and ‘certain ruptures of form’ in the staging. The costumes stood out in vivid contrast against the impressive backdrop with its ‘dead material of the stone, the stairways...the wheels and the cords’ (307). For Jouve as for Artaud, the staging played no secondary role to the script in this presentation.

..la mise en scène d’Antonin Artaud anime continûment cet espace de façon créatrice: nous sommes ici en travail constant (Virmaux,308).

Here one perceives the extensive attention given to the planning and construction of the set, the transmission of the images and symbols, and, ultimately, the intensity of their effect on the spectator. Jouve states that the combined staging effects all revealed to the spectator that ‘space with time form an *affective* reality’ (Virmaux, 308). Pulling the participant further into this reality were the ‘emphatic and somber acting of Artaud himself...the incandescent beauty and the childlike, savage acting of Iya

Abdy' (Virmaux, 308). Jouve mentions the simplicity and the force, the symbolic quality of the italianate set, as well as its 'interior' quality. By this he meant that the action on the stage became indistinguishable from the effect on the spectator's sensibility.

In another testimony, Roger Blin showed himself to be a less captive spectator. He mentioned the shabbiness of the theater, and stated that the most interesting aspect of the play were the Balthus' decor and Roger Désormière's music and sound effects. He observed that Balthus knew the symbolism of colors and form, and that Désormière knew the communicative value of sound. Blin discussed Artaud's *intended* stage effect, giving the impression of a certain distance, as if he himself were not terribly affected by the technique. Blin thought the play might have been better received in a 'country where people attend and are crazy about theater, and that country is not France' (Virmaux, 318). Artaud, whose primary goal was to change the course of contemporary theater, perhaps had been overly optimistic about the effect his theatrical vision could have had on a culture which long ago had abandoned the practice of 'true theater'

**What are the indications of evolution in the vision of the Theater of Cruelty after the years of internment?**



Virmaux suggests that when Artaud stopped directing the theater company and began his travels in Mexico and Ireland, theater and real life had become indistinguishable from each other. Artaud had become inseparable from his vision. He had already exploded the boundaries of artistic expression permitted within western culture and thus begun to search for other cultures more deeply rooted in a metaphysical connection with the universe. But by 1937, he was interned in the first of a succession of asylums, an experience that would test his personal metaphysical ties with the cosmos for nine years. Incredibly, in 1946, Antonin Artaud, the poet and theoretician of theater, was resurrected. He died only two years after his release from the asylum, but his writing during that time gives evidence that Artaud's vision of a new type of theater was still evolving, yet also that he continued in his personal struggle with self expression.

In Préambule written in August 1946 as the preface to his collected works then being negotiated with Gallimard, Artaud revealed his suffering during the preceding decade:

Moi poète j'entends des voix qui ne sont plus du monde des idées.  
Car là où je suis il n'y a plus à penser

and later:

Le théâtre c'est l'échafaud, la potence, les tranchées, le four  
crématoire ou l'asile des aliénés.  
La cruauté: les corps massacrés.

Vitupérer *dans* la poche noire qui un jour m'a guéri de penser  
(Oeuvres complètes, tome I, 10-11).

Here, one can see two indications of a change in Artaud's vision. First he emphasizes the aural in his reference to the voices, (repeated elsewhere in this text). This anticipates the direction he was to take with the radio broadcast project the following year. Second, thought, as either a process or an essence, is now removed from experience. Previously during the Les Cenci period, Artaud's goal had been to liberate thought from fixed form, yet the essence called 'pensée' still existed.

On the other hand, there are other clues in this text that indicate a continuation of the principles of Artaud's original vision. He criticized gratuitous forms of art which carry no active, transformative force:

..si j'enfonce un mot violent comme un clou je veux qu'il suppure dans la phrase comme une ecchymose à cent trous. On ne reproche pas à un écrivain un mot obscène parce qu'obscène, on le lui reproche s'il est gratuit, je veux dire plat et sans gris-gris  
(Oeuvres complètes, tome I, 9).

For Artaud, the violence of poetic force was of value only to the extent that it brought about real change. He alluded also to the "necessity" of action in the process of creation, and to his own struggle for a poetic identity:

Il y a des imbéciles qui se croient des êtres, êtres par innéité.  
Moi je suis celui qui pour être doit fouetter son innéité.

What was innate had to be reworked, for it represented fixed form and with it the notion that only certain states could be admissible, that others would be repressed.

Finally, he made reference again to an apparent movement toward the aural, as the mode for conveying his creative force: 'C'est pour les analphabètes que j'écris' (10). The illiterate who had no contact with the written word could still feel the force of poetry through the voice.

André Gide wrote, in 1948 just after Artaud's death, a testimony of the reading/performance Artaud gave in 1947 at the Vieux-Colombier theater. What is striking about Gide's observations is the impression he had that the Theater of Cruelty project lived on, embodied in the author himself:

...de son être matériel, plus rien ne subsistait que d'expressif...son visage consumé par la flamme intérieure, ses mains de qui se noie, soit tendues vers un insaisissable secours, soit tordues dans l'angoisse,  
...tout en lui racontant l'abominable détresse humaine...Et certes l'on retrouvait ici l'acteur merveilleux que cet artiste pouvait devenir . mais c'est son personnage même qu'il offrait qu public,...où transparaissait une authenticité totale (Virmaux, 310).

Artaud, in his madness, seemed to have undergone a process of purification, of distillation to his very essence. Clearly, the public, many of whom had come to ridicule Artaud, was struck by his energy. For Gide, the whole room seemed to be transported out of an exteriorized role of spectator, to an

interior position in the performance, becoming participants in the Theater of Cruelty before them:

La raison battait en retraite; non point seulement la sienne, mais celle de toute l'assemblée, de nous tous, spectateurs de ce drame atroce, réduits aux rôles de comparses malévoles, de jeanfoutres et de paltoquets. Oh! non, plus personne, dans l'assistance, n'avait envie de rire; et même, Artaud nous avait enlevé l'envie de rire pour longtemps. Il nous avait contraints à son jeu tragique de révolte contre tout ce qui, admis par nous, demeurait pour lui, plus pur, inadmissible...l'on se sentait honteux de reprendre place en un monde où le confort est formé de compromission (Gide's article in Virmaux, 310).

The purified essence of Antonin Artaud had dropped like a bomb among the audience thrust into an awareness of the "perverse possibility" of their being. The final phase of the Theater of Cruelty had begun.

Helga Finter affirms that Artaud's performance was a manifestation of the Theater of Cruelty in an evolved form:

What some, André Breton included, saw as the unbearable exhibition of a mental patient was for Artaud the unprecedented attempt at exploding the boundaries of a theatrical event (Finter, 5).

Finter states that Artaud failed in his attempt to 'make the causes of suffering audible through the reality of that suffering', since the spectator was unable to reconcile the portrayal of the Real, that which is undefinable, unimaginable, unlocatable, in the context of the stage, which is a space dominated by the symbolic representation of life:

[i]n the context of the symbolic contract implicit in a lecture on a theater stage, the irruption of the Real in the form of sickness, suffering, and insanity was perceived as sensational exhibitionism and histrionics (Finter, 5).

She states that Artaud's failure led him to experiment with the radio broadcast of Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu as a way of 'articulating the Real with voice and words.'

Paule Thévenin, one of the people closest to Artaud in the last two years of his life stated that the banned radio broadcast Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu was to be the first true representation of the Theater of Cruelty (Gouhier, 129).

In looking at this radio performance piece as the one major production that Artaud attempted after Les Cenci, there are immediate contrasts with the play that had seemed destined in 1935 to be the sole representation of his vision.

First, that Artaud used the radio as the medium for his message in the 1947 performance seems to be a reversal of Artaud's conviction that the audience must be immersed directly and physical in the vibrations of sound with no technological filter for the intended trance-like effect to take place. It seems that Artaud was interested in the potential for reaching as large an audience as possible.

Second, the performance *space* is radically changed--that is, all the imagery must now take place in the minds and the imaginations of the audience, without the visual effects of movement or 'living hieroglyphs' in association with the sounds to convey the notions and act on the participant. The 'network of sound' in which the audience was immersed for Les Cenci was to be the sole active force.

However, in the aspects of surrounding the audience with sound and impacting a great number of people with his theater the use of radio conformed to his vision. He had always seen 'the masses' as the intended audience for The Theater of Cruelty. His interest in the Mysteries of medieval religious theater and the Elizabethan drama confirm this aim. His intention all along had been to transform radically not just the individual, but culture itself.

The radio broadcast was a failure in certain crucial ways, not dissimilar to the failure of Les Cenci. First, in being restricted by limitations imposed by society, the broadcast, like the play, failed to portray accurately the scope of Artaud's vision. Also, it was generally not received positively. But unlike Les Cenci, it is clear that Artaud himself did not view the radio broadcast as being a success 'in the absolute' as he had the play. After hearing that audiences in a privately arranged broadcast in

Washington D.C. had not been favorably impressed, Artaud returned to a previously held view that the use of technology imposed a filter that diminished the intended effect of the Theater of Cruelty vision.

Là où est la *machine*  
c'est toujours le gouffre et le néant,  
il y a une interposition technique qui déforme et  
annihile ce que l'on a fait...  
c'est pourquoi je ne toucherai plus jamais à la  
Radio.. (Oeuvres complètes tome 13, 146).

In this same letter to Paule Thévenin on February 24, 1948, just eight days before his death, Artaud succinctly reaffirmed his commitment to all the basic principles of his original vision of an active theater that found its transformational effect in the immersion of the participant in the cruel necessity of natural force:

[je] me consacrerai désormais  
exclusivement  
au théâtre  
tel que je le conçois,  
un théâtre de sang,  
un théâtre qui à chaque représentation aura fait  
gagner  
*corporellement*  
quelque chose  
aussi bien à celui qui joue qu'à celui qui vient voir  
jouer,  
d'ailleurs  
on ne joue pas,  
on agit.  
Le théâtre c'est en réalité la *genèse* de la création.  
Cela se fera.

(Oeuvres complètes tome 13, 146).

**What explanation can be found for the lack of detail in the descriptions of a technique for the Theater of Cruelty?**

Sur ce principe (of a concrete language in space) nous envisageons de donner un spectacle où ces moyens d'action directe soient utilisés dans leur totalité;...dont la qualité et les surprenants alliages font partie d'*une technique qui ne doit pas être divulguée* (Le Théâtre et son double, 135, emphasis mine).

Artaud addresses the reasons for his lack of clarity sometimes in very direct terms, but more often in obscure, poetic images.

The first reason Artaud deliberately obscured the descriptions of technique for a Theater of Cruelty was the practical one of ownership of ideas. Antonin Artaud had two contradictory sides to his character that were undeniably in evidence throughout his career. On the one hand, he was passionately uncompromising about his principles, and he expressed this stance often in dramatic, blunt language and behavior. On the other hand, he understood the competitiveness of theater. Because of the practical demands of survival, he saw the necessity of protecting himself from the risk of plagiarism, and refused to give certain details about his technique, particularly before the production.



Another important reason for the elusiveness in the descriptions of the technique is based on a principle of his vision: that mystery is an essential element of poetry, and that exposing thought in the language of clear ideas destroys its poetic force. This ties closely his vision to the concept of alchemy. It also confirms the idea that fixed form destroys poetic force. Artaud's style is occult, and has its roots in both his essentialist vision and his struggle for self expression through language:

Tout vrai sentiment est en réalité intraduisible.  
L'exprimer c'est le trahir. Mais le traduire c'est le  
*dissimuler*. L'expression vraie cache ce qu'elle manifeste...

Tout sentiment puissant provoque en nous l'idée du vide. Et le langage clair qui empêche ce vide, empêche aussi la poésie d'apparaître dans la pensée.

C'est ainsi que la vraie beauté ne nous frappe jamais directement (Le Théâtre et son double , 110, emphasis Artaud's).

A third explanation for Artaud's elusiveness has to do with the spontaneous moment of creation. The creator of true theater is the staging director, who uses an intuitive perception to release the forces that bring about his creation. The author of the theatrical creation is not the author of a written script, a fixed form which can be repeated and preserved, but rather creates in the performance. The theater whose language is that of a 'poetry in space' (Double, 56) has no meaning as written expression. Thus, the

creative action of the director and the actors, as well as the set, are dependent on intuitive intelligence. The moment of creation, a spontaneous result of the combination of many effects, is unique and never to be repeated the same way again. Artaud described this unique, vibrational moment as a form of alchemy:

L'opération théâtrale de faire de l'or, par l'immensité des conflits qu'elle provoque, par le nombre prodigieux de forces qu'elle jette l'une contre l'autre et qu'elle émeut, par cet appel à une sorte de rebrassement essentiel débordant de conséquences et surchargé de spiritualité, évoque finalement à l'esprit une pureté absolue et abstraite, après laquelle il n'y a pas rien, et que l'on pourrait concevoir comme une note unique, une sorte de note limite, happée au vol et qui serait comme *la partie organique d'une indescriptible vibration* ("Le théâtre alchimique" in Le théâtre et son double, 78, emphasis mine).

Through the action of theater, Artaud sought to meld the spiritual and the material and produce 'the organic manifestation of an indescribable vibration.' Artaud would call this a virtual state because it is a space which contains the true force of theater, yet has no resolution in the real world. The assassin on stage reproduces the affective force of death through his acting, but kills no one.

The elements of time and space are apparent in the concept of vibration. A vibration exists in both space and time, and could be said to be a space in time. Through his repeated use of the term vibration in his

theories Artaud emphasizes a process of theater rather than a product. As in alchemy, the product is a manifestation of a spiritual accession, or action. The value of the gold produced lies in its proof of a metaphysical union, rather than in its material value.

To expect concrete guidelines of this aspect of Artaud's vision, the intuitive perception of a *moment* in space and time where 'the unique and inextricable fusion of the abstract and the concrete' (Double, 79) would take place seems an impossible demand. And yet the concept of a metaphysical transformation through the action of theater is essential to his vision.

Artaud himself described the difficulty in giving objective examples of such a creative transformation in "La mise en scène et la métaphysique":

Donner des exemples objectifs de cette poésie consécutive aux diverses façons que peuvent avoir un geste, une sonorité, une intonation de s'appuyer avec plus ou moins d'insistance sur telle ou telle partie de l'espace, à tel ou tel moment, me paraît aussi difficile que de communiquer avec des mots le sentiment de la qualité particulière d'un son ou du degré et de la qualité d'une douleur physique. Cela dépend de la réalisation et ne peut se déterminer que sur la scène (Double, 69).

Perhaps the most basic reason for the lack of guidelines for a theatrical technique is that Artaud had not completed the experiment before he was committed to an asylum in 1937, nor had he finished either the

distillation of a 'pure theater' or the concrete language for his Theater of Cruelty project when he died in March, 1948.

Antonin Artaud was still in the process of researching and inventing the elements of the language of a transformational theater when he wrote the 'Préambule' for his collected works in 1947.

Je suis un génital inné, à y regarder de près cela veut dire que je ne me suis jamais réalisé.

Artaud's struggle for self expression resounds strongly in these words which portray his experience as one of never coming fully into being. It is clear that for Artaud as a creative artist, essence had to be experienced through creative expression to realize its full potential.

## CONCLUSION

For Antonin Artaud, western culture was committing suicide through the misguided notion that man is godlike because he is greater than nature rather than divine because he is inseparable from it. Artaud viewed modern man as striving to create life from ideas, rather than accepting that the inverse is true. Most perverse for Artaud was that man sought to repress the primal knowledge of the metaphysical connection between the spiritual and the material, and reject the cruelty of life as a vital creativity. For Artaud, the loss of this awareness meant existence without meaning, meant the difference between voyeuristic spectatorship and heroic participation in the theater of life.

Two aspects of Artaud's life stand out because of their intensity and because they seem at odds with what some readers perceive as an inherent nihilism in his work. These are his optimism in humanity and his passion for life. The first assertion seems to contradict his consistent rejection of society. It is true that in his writing Artaud violently rejected the social and ideological structures that support modern culture--nuclear family, science and technology, capitalism, and art. Yet he saw as an essential part of humanness an irrepressible need to return to a state of deeper sensibility and awareness of self in connection with the universe. He believed that people

are dying to live again, to be inspired by the ancient truths of life rather than entertained by the numbing simulacra of modern culture. This belief reflected his own passion for life and for a return to ancient theater.

Yet coupled with the sometimes surprising optimism and desire for life was an undeniable despair. Artaud's artistic genius sprang in part from a deep well of individual torment that both linked him to humanity's struggle for liberation as well as separated him repeatedly from unity with self and other. His search for metaphysical transformation in theater clearly has its roots in this struggle.

Like his life and theories, Artaud's legacy invites controversy. His passion and poetic force inspired many, contemporaries as well as successive generations, yet his theories have been sometimes interpreted in ways that are arguably not what Artaud intended. Rarely, for instance, have theater projects claiming to be inspired by the Theater of Cruelty incorporated what were the most essential aspects, such as the primacy of the staging effects over the script, or the integration of the audience in the performance space. Additionally, determining exactly what his legacy was proves controversial, since his theories are abstract and were rarely manifested concretely. Finally, one could argue that Artaud's experiment was never concluded, that the transformation of the spiritual and the

concrete never achieved, that metaphysical gold never struck. However, the fact that these questions are still debated today attests to Artaud's continuing influence on the search for the essence of theater.

Artaud wrote a post-scriptum for Le théâtre de la cruauté, which was meant to be part of the radio broadcast Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu in 1947:

### **POST-SCRIPTUM**

**Qui suis-je?  
D'où je viens?  
Je suis Antonin Artaud  
et que je le dise  
comme je sais le dire  
immédiatement  
vous verrez mon corps actuel  
voler en éclats  
et se ramasser  
sous dix mille aspects  
notoires  
un corps neuf  
où vous ne pourrez  
plus jamais  
m'oublier  
(Oeuvres Complètes, tome 13, 118).**

His words indicate that the search for a fixed form for a Theater of Cruelty will be in vain. Yet his wish to be remembered has been fulfilled. It is clear that his view of the notorious constellation of the always 'new body' continues to influence the world of contemporary theater. The

evidence is on the radio waves (interview with Léopold Dedar Senghor, FranceCulture, April 2000), the internet pages (check World Wide Web for Antonin Artaud websites) and the theater stages (Théâtre de Saône et Loire, March 2000): more than fifty years after his death, he is alive worldwide as the power of his vision still influences not only dramatic theory, but political and philosophical thought. The legacy of the uniqueness and passion of his vision, not yet to be forgotten, continues into the third millenium.



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