

Theater of cruelty essay

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Aristotle in his "Poetics" says that tragedy must contain the quality of mimesis or imitation: Art must mimic life.

This primary requirement has been interpreted several ways over the history of drama. One can take it to mean that mimesis lies in faithfully reproducing a character's every look, gesture and twitch, to make one's costumes and props meticulously true to the era in which a play is set. It can also go beyond the imitation of physical forms and move to the realm of emotional authenticity. For Antonin Artaud, the theater's "double" was life - and it was a "double" not merely in its efforts to reproduce situations that could presumably happen in real homes and real streets to real people, but also in the sense that the theatre, like life, had in it the ability to contain "metaphysics, plague, cruelty, the pool of energies which constitute Myths, which man no longer embodies..." That is, one could go beyond drawing-room scenes, indeed, one should go beyond drawing-room scenes or conventional, comfortable "great romances" and evoke from the audience a more visceral reaction. Artaud advocated a "Theater of Cruelty" - that is, a theatre that would mean a "union of thought, gesture and action reconstructed" that would rely not merely on language but draw upon the other resources available to the stage which were not as readily available for poetry, or fiction.

He believed that words were unequal to the expression of certain feelings - indeed, he felt that "all true feeling is in reality untranslatable." Thus, it is fitting that art go beyond what the classicist call "leading forth the soul," and try - in the case of theatre through sound and gesture - to make people feel. By feeling also, Artaud was not drawing from a Romantic

framework. He subscribed to Surrealist aesthetics, which movement, although indebted to Romanticism, ultimately tried to unify the interior and the exterior reality of Man.

According to the Surrealists, man tends to privilege the exterior reality - that is, the material reality, over the interior one. This disjunct is supposed to cause him pain, because it leaves the half of his existence subject to restraint. Man's interior, his subconscious, is supposed to be capable of making extraordinary connections and imaginative leaps, which results in startling revelations when exposed to unusual juxtapositions of images. In poetry this would translate into Andre Breton's wife "with feet of initials" and "rings of keys," and in painting with Dali's flying horses harnessed to skyborne ships, or melting clocks as in "The Persistence of Memory." The point was not to slavishly recapture or recreate something that resembled the stuff of dreams. The act of making the artwork itself was a process akin to dreaming, which was why the Surrealists practiced techniques which relied heavily on randomness and serendipity, such as writing poetry by cutting words out of a newspaper and drawing them out of a hat, or automatic writing.

The purpose was not to create an artefact that would be contemplated with ease and intellectual distance, with the viewer admiring proportion or cleverness of meter and rhyme. What they were after, was to generate an experience.

In "The Theater and its Double" Artaud professes to admire Balinese theatre, which, while dealing in themes which he describes as "vague, abstract and extremely general" nevertheless exhibits genius in the way it employs stagecraft. There is nothing spontaneous or

improvisational in Balinese theatre. While in the West, value is given to the actor's ability to improvise, to fuse his independent intellect and his cumulative understanding of life and human nature to bring authenticity to his depiction, or even interpretation, of a character within certain delineations set by the playwright, the Balinese exhibited "mechanically rolling eyes, pouting lips and muscular spasms all producing methodically calculated effects" that supported a certain "spiritual architecture." In addition to stylized movements, the sound of rustlings, squeaking and hollow drums, and even the actors dressed in robes that defied the natural architecture of the human body, combined to create a kind of fear and awe in the audience - fear, which is the most primitive of human emotions and inextricably linked to the thought, the memory, the precognition of death which presumably haunts man as it does the lower animals. The Theater of Cruelty then, meant to be "cruel" in the event that the audience member would react not just with his mind, not on the level of intellect, but at the level of his bowels. Indeed, when man says that in the modern era he is so enlightened as to no longer be cruel, what he means is that he so seldom puts himself or others in situations where he is in mortal fear of death, where he quivers like a hare, where he must fight or flee.

Instead, he has "humane" institutions that make sure he never starves, that no one can arrest him for heresy and break him on the wheel, that his voice will more or less be heard in his community and that any Herculean task is made easier with the help of collectivisation or machines. Thus, what Artaud with his Surrealist aesthetics sought, was an arena where man could still be terrified such that he would be able to feel again, and feel truly, far from the

numbing comforts of modern life. If it meant that art, the theatre, would have to present phantoms, blood and gore, unnatural squeaks and screams, that it would have to bring its audience face-to-face with the grotesque, then so be it. Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and its Double*. Calder and Boyers, 1970. http://www.surrealists.co.uk/surrealist_manifesto.php
<http://homepages.tesco.net/~theatre/tezzaland/webstuff/ArtaudPres.html>