

# The role of the modern spectator theatre essay



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Society considers art as a reflection of what is happening in the world, as well as the different types of personalities that people portray. Consequently, society expects that the modern spectator go beyond merely sharing the artist's experiences to interpret for him or herself the meaning of these. The cathartic role of the modern spectator has thus been reduced, as he or she is no longer the passive participant, seated in a theater hall or cinema, merely watching a piece of art. Instead, he or she has been made to take up an active role of learning from the works of art, in order to create change for him or her and the society as a whole. The discussion includes what is meant by the cathartic role of the modern spectator, how it has diminished in the new form of theater, and whether it is possible for him or her to reclaim it.

1 Eva Berczeller. " The Aesthetic Feeling and Aristotle's Catharsis Theory." The Journal of Psychology 65, (1967): 261-71.

2 Esta Powell. Catharsis in psychology and beyond: a historic overview. Accessed 13 January 2011 <http://primal-page.com/cathar.htm>

Schultz and Schultz's definition of catharsis considers it as a psychic process where unconscious thoughts and feelings are made conscious, therefore, allowing the individual to express himself in manner that can be understood.

3. Similarly, Szczeklik considers catharsis from as a technique by which an individual lets go of his emotions which are related to unpleasant experiences in the past. 4

Aristotle considered catharsis as the process by which spectators set themselves free from the emotions that a piece of art triggers in them, such that they obtain relief and a sense of inner peace. In other words, experiencing catharsis had moral and ethical implications because it helped to moderate passions and strong emotions, therefore restoring the balance in one's life. The pleasure of releasing one's emotions resulted in a relief from disturbances such as pity and fear. He saw catharsis as aiming at creating a nice and gratifying feeling of relief to the spectator. Evidently, the word catharsis takes on different meanings in different fields of knowledge, but what these definitions have in common are the aspects of cleansing or purging, releasing of emotions brought about by a person's experiences.

Esta Powell affirms this by saying that, catharsis takes different forms but its essence remains the same, since it is a release from some burden (either physical or mental) and brings healing through its purging effect. 5

Consequently, the underlying notion of purging that has made scholars acknowledge catharsis as a healing, cleansing, and transforming experience, a technique that can be used to bring about a therapeutic change.

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3 Esta Powell. Catharsis in psychology and beyond: a historic overview,  
Accessed 13 January 2011 <http://primal-page.com/cathar.htm>

4 Andrzej Szczeklik. Catharsis: on the art of medicine. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005

5 Duane Schultz and Sydney Schultz A history of modern psychology.  
Belmont, ca: Wadsworth/Thompson. 2004.

In the sphere of theater, catharsis is used to refer to any discharge of emotions; in this case, an audience releases his or her emotions while watching a drama in any suitable method and channel. The spectator therefore has a role to play in theater, in that; he or she is deemed to express the emotions aroused by theatric activities.

How does catharsis occur in theatre? According to Esta Powell, artists use different strategies to trigger strong emotional displays in their audiences. Many artists use the effect of surprise and unexpectedness to bring about catharsis. For example, in the Greek tragedy “Oedipus rex,” Oedipus experiences catharsis when he feels culpable of murdering his father, marrying his mother, who later commits suicide and the loneliness he feels as a result. 7

Scheff believes that human beings strive to engage in activities that will enable them free themselves from hurtful emotional experiences, and therefore obtain a sense of calm. He gives the example of a spectator who cries about a character who dies in a play. This, he notes, is simply a

reawakening of feelings of loss in the viewer's life and he or she is reliving unresolved personal experiences. He explains this by saying that theater provides for the audience a safe distance from personal experiences. This is because the social environment of a theater lessens the effect of emotions arising from unpleasant events, as the audience believes that an individual is sympathizing with a play character and not with himself. 9

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7 Esta Powell. Catharsis in psychology and beyond: a historic overview, accessed 13 January 2011 <http://primal-page.com/cathar.htm>

8 Andrzej Szczeklik, Catharsis: on the art of medicine. Chicago: (The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

9 Thomas Scheff Catharsis in healing, ritual, and drama. Lincoln, ne: ( iuniverse.com, 2001).

However, the cathartic role of the spectator has diminished due to modernism. The two major personalities, who have opposed the norms of traditional theater and called for a revolution in its practices, are Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud. Tuirenn Hurstfield notes that theater artists Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud were both frustrated by the traditional theaters' illusions of imitating reality. In retaliation, they advocated for change. Artaud, feeling the idea of theatre had been lost, moved towards his theatre of cruelty while Brecht, refuting the drama of his time as still following Aristotle's idea of catharsis, moved towards a non-Aristotelian mode of theater. 10 In what he calls a new form of theater, that is, epic

theater. Brecht argues that the spectator is no longer just an observer, but also an actor.

Brecht distinguishes this situation from that of what he calls dramatic theatre, or in other words, Aristotle's view of theatre, where the spectator is merely an observer, sharing the experience of the actor. He considers catharsis as a way of bringing about greater social change. Pericles Lewis affirms this by saying that Brecht's idea of epic theater appealed to reason rather than the expression of emotions and sought to turn the spectator into an observer, who stands aside, separates himself from the action of the play, and studies it. In this respect, what Brecht was doing was to stand against a dominant tradition in theater, which aimed to have the spectator involved in and sharing the experience of the play. In addition, Brecht was against identification or sympathy between the spectators and the actors, which was characteristic of Aristotle's idea of catharsis.

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10 Hurstfield Tuirenn, Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud's revolutionary theatre practices, last modified Aug 28, 2008, <http://www.suite101.com/content/bertolt-brecht-antonin-artaud-a66380>

11 Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to modernism* Cambridge: (Cambridge Press, 2007). 193- 194.

Pericles Lewis notes that Brecht advocates for a separation between the spectator and the action of the play as well as its characters, so that he is able to reflect on his theatric experience in a rational manner, void of the influence of emotions. In other words, Brecht maintained that the spectator's

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experience should not stop with the emotional reaction that the play elicits, but should cause a distanced reflection based on that emotional reaction. 12

In conclusion, it appears then, that the modern spectator cannot reclaim his or her cathartic role, since scholars place more emphasis on what moral lessons the theatric activities can offer him or her, other than the emotional relief. This is difficult for the modern spectator because we are not only rational but also emotional beings. Creating a balance between the two aspects of human existence puts the modern spectator in a dilemma, as he cannot ignore the feelings that a theatric spectacle elicits in him. At the same time, he has to reflect on the didactic intentions of the artist or the creator of the play. The modern spectator has to see beyond the feelings he has of the action as well as the characters in the play, and consider the social or political action that he is supposed to take because of his emotional reaction. In other words, the sentiments that any piece of art elicits in the spectator should serve as motivation for him to implement the lessons learnt. They should assist him in bringing about the so desired social and political changes in our world today; otherwise, art will have failed in its ultimate role.

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12 Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to modernism* Cambridge: (Cambridge University Press, 2007). 191.