



The Theatre and Cruelty

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May, 1958), pp. 75-77

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1124955>

Accessed: 23/07/2012 02:02

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*The Theatre and Cruelty**

By ANTONIN ARTAUD

A concept of the theatre has been lost. And in direct proportion to the manner in which the theatre limits itself only to allowing us to penetrate into the intimacy of some puppet or to transforming the spectator into a Peeping Tom, it is to be expected that the elite will turn away from it and the crowds will go to the movies, the music halls, or the circuses, in search of violent satisfactions which at least have no false pretenses.

After the wear and tear to which our ensibilities have been subjected, it is certain that, before all, we have need of a theatre that will awaken us: heart and nerves.

The misdeeds of the psychological theatre since Racine have made us unaccustomed to that violent and immediate action which the theatre must possess. Then come the movies to assassinate us with shadows, which, when filtered through a machine, no longer are able to reach our senses. For ten years they have kept us in a state of ineffectual torpor, in which all our faculties seemed to have been dulled.

The agonizing and catastrophic period in which we live makes us sense the urgent need for a theatre which will not be left behind by the events of the day, and which will have within us deep resonance and which will dominate the unstability of the times we live in.

Our long familiarity with theatre as a form of distraction has led us to forget the idea of a serious theatre, a theatre which will shove aside our representations, and breathe into us the burning magnetism of images and finally will act upon us in such a way that there will take place within us a therapy of the soul whose effects will not be forgotten.

All action is cruelty. It is with this idea of action pushed to its extreme limit that the theatre will renew itself.

Penetrated by the idea that the crowd thinks first with its senses, and that it is absurd to attempt as the ordinary psychological play does, to address itself to the understanding, the Theatre of Cruelty proposes to have recourse to mass effects; to seek in the agitated behavior of significant mass grouping thrown one against the other in convulsive action a little of that poetry which is found in popular

*Translated by James O. Morgan from *Le Théâtre et son Double*, Paris, 1938. With permission of Librairie Gallimard.

festivals and in crowds on those days, now too rare, when the people take to the streets.

All that is to be found in love, in crime, in war, in madness the theatre must return to us if it is to become essential again.

Day-to-day love, personal ambition, banal squabbling have no value except in an interaction with that form of terrifying Lyricism that is to be found in Myths to which large collectivities have given their belief.

That is why we shall try to concentrate around famous persons, atrocious crimes, or superhuman devotions, a spectacle which, without having recourse to the expired images of old Myths, will be capable of extracting the forces which are at work in these Myths.

In a word, we believe that there is in what is called poetry, living forces, and that the presentation of a crime in the requisite theatrical manner is more powerful for the mind than that crime realized in life.

We wish to make of the theatre a reality in which one is able to believe, and which contains for the heart and senses that sort of concrete sting or bite which accompanies all real sensations. Just as our dreams will act upon us and reality will act upon our dreams, we think that one will be able to make the images of thought identical with a dream, that will be effective only if it is hurled forth with the necessary violence. The public will believe in the dreams of the theatre only in so far as they are taken truly to be dreams and not as carbon copies of reality; only so far as they permit the public to liberate within them that magic liberty of dreams which can be recognized only when steeped in terror and cruelty.

Whence this summons to cruelty and terror, which must be on a vast scale, whose breadth will sound the depths of our entire vitality, and put us face to face with all our possibilities.

It is in order to capture the feelings of the audience from all sides that we favor a revolving spectacle, which in place of making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds without possible communication, will burst forth suddenly in sight and sound over the entire mass of spectators.

Beyond this, leaving the realm of the analyzable and passionate sentiments, we count on making the actor's lyricism manifest in external forms; and by this means to bring back the whole of nature into the theatre as we want to realize it.

Howsoever vast this program seems, it does not surpass the theatre which seems to us to be identified with the forces of ancient magic.

Practically speaking, we wish to resuscitate an idea of the total spectacle, by means of which the theatre will take back from the movies, the music hall, the circus and from life itself, that which has always in actuality belonged to it. This separation between the theatre of analysis and the plastic world seems to us stupid. One

cannot separate body and mind, the senses and intellect, and above all, in a domain where the repeated fatigue of organs, needs sudden shocks to revive our comprehension.

On one side, then, we have the massing and arranging of a spectacle which will address itself to the total organism; on the other side, an intensive organization of objects, gestures, signals and signs utilized in a new spirit. The minor role given to the intellect will lead to a rigorous compression of the text; the large role given to the poetic emotions demands certain concrete signs. Words have little to say to the mind; space arrangements and objects do speak; new images speak, even those made with words. But a thundering space of images, gorged with sounds, also speaks, if one from time to time is able to present certain suitable arrangements of space furnished with silence and immobility.

On this principle, we envisage offering a spectacle where these means of direct action will be utilized in their totality. That is, a spectacle that does not fear to go as far as is necessary in the exploration of our nervous sensibilities with rhythms, sounds, words, resonances, and warblings whose quality and surprising combinations are part of a technique whose secret is not to be divulged.

To further clarify my point, the images in certain paintings of Grunewald and Hieronymus Bosch tell us what a theatrical spectacle might be—whereby in the mind of a saint, the objects of external nature come to appear as a temptations.

It is here, in this spectacle of a temptation, where life has all to lose and the spirit all to gain, that the theatre will again find its true significance.

We have elsewhere given a program which should allow us by means of a purified stage direction to organize such spectacles around historical or cosmic themes known to all.

And we insist that the first spectacle of the Theatre of Cruelty revolve about the preoccupations of masses, which are more pressing and more disquieting than those of an individual.

The question now is whether here in Paris, before the impending cataclysms we can find sufficient means, financial and otherwise, to permit such a theatre to live, and it will live—for it is the future; or whether a little real life blood is immediately necessary, to manifest this cruelty.

(1933)

Translated by JAMES O. MORGAN