Cadences of Cruelty: Artaud’s Discursive Performance

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This spectacle is more than we can assimilate, assailing us with a superabundance of impressions, each richer than the next, but in a language to which it seems we no longer have the key; and this kind of irritation created by the impossibility of finding the thread and tracking the beast down—the impossibility of putting one's ear closer to the instrument in order to hear better—is one charm the more to the credit of this spectacle.

—Artaud 1958

In the Zohar, the story of Rabbi Simeon who burns like fire is as immediate as fire itself.

—Artaud 1958

Conceived in the fiery workings of a sickened mind and riddled with paradox, Antonin Artaud's conceptualization of a theatre of cruelty seems virtually impossible to achieve onstage. And yet the writings that detail this "impossible" theatre proved tremendously influential in the 1960s, and critical interest in Artaud has not diminished since but actually seems to be growing (Finter 1997, 18). What could explain the appeal of critical works that are all but defined by contradiction and fraught with erroneous statements? The answer lies in Artaud's powers of artistic creation. Artaud was equally comfortable writing plays and poetry as he was theorizing about drama, and his vision of a theatre of cruelty was not elaborated in a straightforward, prescriptive manner but in a complex, dramatic voice. As a result his essays have a dual existence—as explanations of Artaud's theatre and as performative events in their own right. In this bifurcated capacity Artaud's works serve to forward his theoretical agenda through the discursive execution of the strategies of the theatre of cruelty that they were written to describe. Thus, although the creation of a full-fledged theatre of cruelty is unlikely, its vitality, Artaud's essays, can be felt as a viable option.

Only in such a dramatic discursive form from "On the Balinese Theater," with its deictical objective. Otherwise, its meaning is not necessary. To begin with, we know that language and customs of the Balinese are more than the next, and similarly, the fact that their performances conform to our understanding of what "we no longer have the key," because the semiotic system of the theatre of cruelty is more likely projected on the perceptive spectator.

However, Artaud never intended his readers to simply explain or convey but to irri
tate and assault the reader. In this manner Artaud creates the spect
tacular site of the theatre of cruelty.

Accordingly, the dubious aspects of Artaud’s work appear in the world of images designed to create in his essay. Like Artaud watch
to read his essay and are "irritated and irritated to understand the force of this foreign "tracking the beast down," but all these impressions—impressions overwhelmingly present to the assimilated. Furthermore, these impulses to which we “no longer have the key” create a greater world to which we should listen.

This greater world, Artaud suggests, is not a realm of artificial amusement, of an evening's play.
Artistic expression, of an evening’s passing which is the characteristic thing that makes nothing do with entertainment, the notion of music, the balance. In a separate way, the balance of the writer is an essential part of the music. In a separate way, the balance of the writer is an essential part of the music. This separate way, the balance of the writer is an essential part of the music.

We should aspire to be one with which we have lost a greater world to which we should aspire both in our art and in our life, to some degree, if not. In this manner, Art should be a separate way, the balance of the writer is an essential part of the music. This separate way, the balance of the writer is an essential part of the music. This separate way, the balance of the writer is an essential part of the music.
of our theater. The Balinese productions take shape at the very heart of matter, life, reality” (1988, 60).

Artaud’s appreciation for the Balinese theatre is unmediated; he finds it superior to the Occidental theatre in every way. However, since we know that Artaud had little understanding of Balinese society or performance, this disposition necessarily tells us more about his own society’s theatre than that of the Other on which he lavishes so much praise. Therefore, rather than demonstrating an unmediated appreciation for the Balinese theatre, Artaud instead succeeds primarily in highlighting his unmediated disgust for the Occidental theatre. He states that the Balinese actors “make an exact quantity of specific gestures, of well-tried mime at a given point, and above all in the prevailing spiritual tone, the deep and subtle study that has presided at the elaboration of these plays of expression, these powerful signs which give us the impression that their power has not weakened during thousands of years” (1988, 35). Although Artaud records his dissatisfaction with Occidental, psychological acting throughout his essays, here he brings it to life, highlighting its weaknesses by detailing the success of its opposite. The Balinese theatre deals in gestures that have retained their power for thousands of years, whereas the Occidental theatre is effete, having long ago lost its power to communicate. Similarly, where the Balinese theatre is noted for its spiritual tone, the Occidental theatre dissatisfies because of its adherence to a banal realism.

But Artaud accomplishes far more in his essay “On the Balinese Theater” than merely chastising the Parisian theatre. He recreates the Balinese theatre as he saw it. However, as James Elkins explains, even “objective” descriptions are permeated, soaked, with ... unspoken, unthought desires” (1986, 33). To Artaud the Balinese theatre constituted the essential Other he had been seeking with all of his creative endeavors but had not been able to find. In the cryptic performance of the Balinese theatre that he saw at the Colonial Exposition in the summer of 1931, Artaud found a creative space that he could fill with his own generative desires. As a result, “On the Balinese Theater” is a distinctively Artaudian creation. Nevertheless, it maintains a tight connection with the Balinese theatre by claiming to describe it. By being associated with an actual performance, Artaud’s essay gains a legitimacy that wholly theoretical examinations of the theatre inevitably lack. Artaud’s discussion may seem vague, overwhelming, and literally incredible; but it is also, in a manner, undeniable and can be validated simply by situating it on a specific date and at a particular time, the date and place of the original performance. Artaud preemptively refutes any suggestion that this theatre is unachievable by stating that “of this idea of pure theater, which is merely theoretical in the Occident and to which no one has ever attempted to give th...” (1988, 61).

Because “On the Balinese Theatre” (i.e., a “product” of his mind), it contains in a moment of self-reflection in the theatre to the subjectivity of the work. While the stage space and gesture on a metaphorical level, Artaud interjects his own insight into the way they appear to us” (1988, 61). The subjective viewer seems not only to be immersed in ostensibly universal messages of the plays, but a possible explanation for Artaud’s dramatic mental torment was so acute as to seem to engulf the world except through the darkness” (1988). Another explanation, however, hints at a writing strategy on the reader’s part.

By referring to himself in the first person, Artaud is inviting the reader alongside him in viewing this play, however, is Artaud’s. Since play and simultaneously creating the theatre, Artaud has assumed a powerful authorial role in constructing a new theatre. This is the importance of the director in Artaud’s theatre.

One of the most significant changes Artaud’s theatre was to shift the focus from the playwright to the director. From this end he advocated a theatre that 1988, 61.1 were one, a text that would provide the director with the unifying force of the performance. Instead, the unifying force would be derived from the director, to whom would be ceded all power to both the playwright and the scene. From the director’s perspective, actors would be responsible for realizing his vision in Artaud’s theatre would be a creative, dynamic process. We consider this one concrete example of the interplay of performance of Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, was due in part to the unwillingness of the audience unmediated by the intervention of the director, required to produce a play in the theatre.

1Artaud once complained that the failure of his theatre of cruelty, was due in part to the unwillingness of the audience to control (Costich 1978, 49).
According to the document, to which director’s performance is most influenced by the context of the production, we consider the performance of an actor. The performance of an actor is influenced by factors such as the setting, lighting, and director’s style. The director is responsible for establishing the overall tone of the production, and the actor must be able to adapt to the director’s vision. The director’s decisions affect the actor’s performance, and the actor must be able to convey the director’s vision through their performance. Therefore, it is important for the director to establish clear expectations for the actor’s performance. The concept of a new theatre is introduced, which emphasizes the importance of the director in the production process. The director is responsible for creating the conditions under which the actors perform. A writer’s reference to a director’s performance in a production can be found in the context of such a theatre. According to the director’s performance, the actor’s contribution to the production is significant. The director’s decisions affect the actor’s performance, and the actor must be able to adapt to the director’s vision.
Naturally, in writing about a "pure" performance such as that which he found in the Balinese theatre, Artaud encounters no such problems: "The Balinese have realized, with the utmost rigor, the idea of pure theater, where everything, conception and realization alike, has value, has existence only in proportion to its degree of objectification on the stage. They victoriously demonstrate the absolute preponderance of the director (metteur en scène) whose creative power eliminates words" (1958, 33–34). Like the director who has absolute preponderance in the Balinese theatre, Artaud is the author who has absolute preponderance over the text. In his discursive performance, Artaud is able to go beyond merely attempting to control the actions of actors; through writing he tries to directly influence his audience by creating the action directly in their minds.

Ironically, Artaud achieves this authority and power in essays that frequently assert the inadequacy of words. Indeed, in this essay and throughout The Theater and Its Double Artaud actively repudiates spoken language for its inability to affect an audience; he seeks a theatre with the creative power to "eliminate words." Without the hindrance of speech, he argues, theatre would be able to use images, gestures, and sound to transcend the intellectual and impact an audience at the visceral level. Naturally, this is difficult to accomplish in an essay, where words provide the only means of communicating with one's audience.

But Artaud surmounts the inadequacy of language by using words for more than their ordinary semantic designation in order to provide his audience with the experience that he finds superior to speech. Utilizing unusual combinations of rarely connected concepts without concern for contradiction, Artaud manipulates language in an attempt to transcend its limitations. In Bakhtinian terms Artaud thoroughly employs the dialogic potential of language by separating the words from their familiar contexts and forcing the reader to engage the words (Bakhtin 1981, 277). Once words (or in this case, a monologic voice) have been removed from a performance, one begins to speak in an ancient language that is not limited by the stagnancy (overrepetition) typical of the Occidental world. In this manner Artaud is not trying to create, but rather to liberate, a theatre of gestures. His essay thus tries to sweep away the dead aspects of theatre and recreate its vital experience for his audience again for the first time:

What is in fact curious about all these gestures, these angular and abruptly abandoned attitudes, these syncopated modulations formed at the back of the throat, these musical phrases that break off short, these flights of elytra, these rustlings of branches, these sounds of hollow drums, these robot squeakings, these dances of animated manikins, is this: that through the labyrinth of their gestures, attitudes, and modulations, a constant awareness of the sense of a new physical language, in which every word, every gesture, is liberated. (1958, 54)

Reading this quotation affords little insight into what Artaud saw when he watched the Balinese performance. He speaks of "impressions of various sounds and movements", which are inexplicably juxtaposed. We start with the body's voice, which Artaud abandons in favor of others. Next, we are introduced to a new set of the throat, a place normally reserved for speech, where there are bits of music, but these are not words. Finally, we encounter a series of sounds and movements: branches, sounds of hollow drums, animated manikins—that are all alien to the Western theatre. As we attempt to combine such disparate images into a single experience (as Artaud assumes that the Balinese does), we begin to experience, in our mind, a theatre of cruelty.

Artaud carries this experience over to his theoretical agenda by adding a meta-theatrical layer to his argument. This is done by instructing his readers to be overwhelmed, not by Artaud's words, but by a "new theatre of movement" that "these spiritual signs have a precise and intuitive meaning, but with enough violence to overcome the logical discursive language." (1958, 54). He urges his readers that they have not lost their experience because they cannot reiterate the message, but rather because the language of Artaud's essay is much greater than the words themselves.

Once Artaud has brought the Balinese theatre to the West in his words of his essay and expounded on the concept of the liberation of its audience, he begins to question the ability of either different words or different concepts to achieve the same event. Artaud once again artfully employs language to only partially understand: "One of the most powerful signs which give us the impression a sign has been weakened during thousands of years is the redundancy of the sign. But this redundancy of signs is the ultimate and all in the prevailing spiritual phenomenon that has presided at the elaboration of the theatre of movement. It is the most powerful signs which give us the impression of a sign that is weakened during thousands of years. It is the function of the sign".
the impression of those other words, totally unrelated to the subject at hand, which the reader may have in mind. The mere act of reading a text, even without the reader's active engagement, can be an experience that influences the reader's perception and understanding of the text.

Moreover, the act of reading a text can evoke emotions and memories in the reader, which can further influence their perception and understanding. The reader's personal experiences and beliefs can also shape their interpretation of the text, leading to a unique and subjective reading experience.

In conclusion, reading is not only an act of acquiring information but also a dynamic process that involves the reader's active engagement and interpretation of the text. The act of reading is a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and personal factors that contribute to the reader's overall experience and understanding of the text.
theatre has, in Artaud’s seemingly repetitive description, been made abundantly clear; the superiority of gesture as communicative agent has been noted; and, finally, the timelessness of gesture has been discussed.

If all of these features have been addressed already, what purpose does it serve to repeat them? The question is moot because Artaud does not, in fact, repeat himself. In changing words or the sentence structures in which they are used, Artaud succeeds not only in addressing the material again but in addressing the material afresh. Through his recursive writing technique, Artaud is able to assault his readers rigorously and continuously, giving them “a superabundance of impressions,” all related to a single experience. Furthermore, Artaud does not merely repeat his ideas in different words but effectually alters the form and forcefulness with which he asserts them. In this manner Artaud’s essay reads like music, with rising and falling cadences. Thus, when we read “On the Balinese Theater,” we are struck by impressions that are hard and soft, fast and slow, concrete and abstract. At one point we read an almost analytical explanation of the multiplicity of senses that are intertwined in the Balinese performance: “And the most commanding penetrations join sight to sounds, intellect to sensibility, the gesture of a character to the evocation of a plant’s movement across the scream of an instrument” (1958, 55). The same general idea, repeated several paragraphs later, sounds quite different: “This dazzling ensemble full of explosions, flights, secret streams, detours in every direction of both external and internal perception, composes a sovereign idea of the theater” (1958, 59). Rising and falling, swelling and shrinking, Artaud’s explanation of the Balinese theatre is a rich elliptical performance that works on the sensibilities of his readers by challenging their ordinary method of engaging a text.

And yet despite the fact that Artaud repeatedly addresses the same performance using different wording and varied styles, we never gain a more concrete understanding of the Balinese performance. Sometimes Artaud acknowledges this aspect of his explanation: “the themes are vague, abstract, extremely general. They are given life only by the fertility and intricacy of all the artifices of the stage” (1958, 54). At other times, however, Artaud suggests that there is a complete world of signs just beyond our reach to which we should be privy and must aspire to understand. “These howls, these rolling eyes,” he states, “this continuous abstraction, these noises of branches, noises of the cutting and rolling of wood, all within the immense area of widely diffused sounds digorged from any sources, combine to overwhelm the mind, to crystallize as a new and, I dare say, concrete conception of the abstract” (1958, 64). It is impossible for a reader to understand this concrete con-

ception of the abstract, but in the only place in the world, the last, directly affecting the organism and, sensuality like the one in which we are sensuality by physical means it cannot wi
At some level, the balance of our lives can transform ideas into things. By reinserting the mind, we can experience a transformation of the idea. When we reposition our thinking, the balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift. The balance of our ideas can shift.
did not want to communicate with his audience verbally; instead, he wanted to shock its spirit through a physical experience in the theatre. He believed that this was not only possible but had already been accomplished by the Orientals: “But by an altogether Oriental means of expression, this objective and concrete language of the theater can fascinate and ensnare the organs. It flows into the sensibility” (91).

The necessity, for Artaud, of direct physical connection between the actors and the audience explains his eventual loathing for movies, which, he says, murder us with their “second-hand reproductions which, filtered through machines, cannot unite with our sensibility” (1958, 84). Out of this desire for direct contact comes Artaud’s most comprehensible and specific prescription for the theatre of cruelty: that the audience in his theatre must sit on mobile chairs in the middle of a nondescript room with four walls with the action taking place all around them. Additionally, there must be a central location, ostensibly located in the midst of the audience (Artaud is not very clear on this point), where climaxes in the action can take place (96–97). Artaud’s reason for designing his theatre to conform to these parameters is self-evident. He wanted to affect his audience directly by bringing it into close contact with the actors, who would be “swarming over each other like bees” (97). By so doing he anticipated that the performance would engulf everyone present in a shared experience of life: “the action will unfold, will extend its trajectory from level to level, point to point; paroxysms will suddenly burst forth, will flare up like fires in different spots” (97).

Throughout Artaud’s writings we find the impulse to explode with energy, an impulse driven by his desire to break free of the confines Artaud felt in the world around him. His most sophisticated development of this concept is found in “The Theater and the Plague.” Although this essay was the last one written for *The Theater and Its Double*, it appears first in the book, arguably because it foregrounds Artaud’s desire to engage his audience physically and to directly impact their lives.

In “The Theater and the Plague” Artaud argues for an understanding of plague that is essentially positive. The plague, he says, is not merely a destroyer of civilization; it is also a rejuvenator. Once a society has developed to the point that its mores are ossified into unquestioned laws, it is essentially dead. Citizens of such a society live their lives in a daze, quietly and obediently following rules that prevent them from ever having an immediate, unmediated experience with their world. Releasing people from the rules that bind them requires a tremendous force. When plague strikes, this release is effected: “Once the plague is established in a city, the regular forms collapse” (1958, 23).

The fact that this newfound freedom may result in hideous acts (theft, murder, rape, etc.) by people freed of the constraints of normal society is not a matter for Artaud. He sees the plague as an agent of liberation, releasing the subjects “from the necessities of the social order.” Artaud is more interested in the potential for positive outcomes. He finds the plague an opportunity for “a radical reorganization of body and spirit” (1958, 24).

But Artaud does not argue for the “plague” as a liberating force that will decimate society and leave behind a new, more honest experience life. He does not advocate chaos and destruction; far from it. He prefers the idea of a liberation that will occur through an experience that is capable of restoring mankind to health. It is this way the plague can: “Likewise, we see clearly the difference between what is and what is not, between right and wrong, and what already exists in materializing us all our dominant conflicts and attain a new health” (1958, 24).

Although the essay includes numerous examples and metaphors to support his theories, the essay itself is quite clear and straightforward. Unwilling to write a treatise on the plague, Artaud never provides us with the means by which the plague spreads. As a result, the finest example we have of a plague is the “performance” that occurs on reading the essay itself. It is the course of “The Theater and the Plague” that makes us experience the nature of a liberating plague. The essay itself is the plague on the body in such detail that we actually experience the pain and death that plague brings to the body. The body is overwhelmed by the essay, his head begins to boil. . . . His crazed, mingled, seem to be flooding through
stomach seems as if it were trying to gush out between his teeth . . . aberration of his mind, beating in hurried strokes like his heart, which grows intense, heavy, loud; his eyes, first inflamed, then glazed . . . his swollen gasping tongue . . . " (19). Touch, thought, internal organs, sight, taste, all are engaged by the sickness. In this way Artaud does not merely discuss the plague that can liberate people from false pretensions but attempts to embody it for the liberation of his readers.

Despite the evocative power of the language of his essays, Artaud was not content to merely write about theatre, and he continued to hope until the end of his life that he might realize his theories onstage. The power of theatre to directly engage an audience was too much for Artaud to ignore, even after his one attempt at creating a theatre of cruelty proved largely unsuccessful. In the last extant document from Artaud, a letter to Paule Thvenin, Artaud writes that "from now on I will devote myself exclusively to the theater as I conceive it, a theater of blood, a theater which with each performance will have done something bodily to the one who performs as well as to the one who comes to see others perform" (Artaud 1976, 58). Ironically, despite Artaud’s devotion to the theatre and his unswerving belief in its expressive power, it is his discursive performances, contained in his essays, that seem to best capture and reflect his theories of a theatre of cruelty.

Works Cited


Part III: Methods
Performance
“A Most Magnificent Collection"
Philadelphia Federal Procession
Mark E.

THROUGHOUT THE EARLY 1930S Philadelphians turned out in droves to celebrate the series of Federal Processions. These events were grand displays of commercial, manufactur- ing, and representational local history combined elements of holiday festivities and civic celebration. Among the many innovations of the 1930s was the fact that they were staged all over the state, serving as a turning point in the development of a new cultural identity. The processions, after all, had never been especially historical.

2 There had been some common holidays, such as Labor Day, but they served a more rarefied role. In the late 19th century, state fairs and English folk festivals were the dominant holidays in the culture, with annual observances tied to vest cycles. All these, furthermore, had their origins in the late 19th century.
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