

A Cruel Sound: Part 1, Antonin Artaud's sonic iconography **Kristian Derek Ball**

Where does one start in thinking about Antonin Artaud's ideas on the functionality of Sound for the Theatre? Shall I rant and rave incoherently for a while? If I were in a drunken stupor or opium binge should I then determine that by just the action of intoxicated, mandible mumblings, I am negating his point of the decimation of language as a medium for "real" communication? In the spirit of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Artaud's problems with language are very valid and correct being that: All communication is *miscommunication*. Is it not a valid question to then assume that Artaud's answer is to invent a language? Trying not only to invent a physical language, but also to infer that even gesticulation is something that can hold universal meaning is definitely *méconnaissance* in term. As an example, Artaud's rebellion against words as a communicative device for the theatre were indeed an interesting cry for help in that he himself relied on words, being a poet, to express himself. However, Artaud's conviction with theatre was so pure and so calculated that he looked down upon the superficial overtones as to expect more from the viewer. As William Burroughs would have essentially suggested; Language is the virus that consumes the living, and through the penetration of the text it is this consumption of the mind that is excreted to the masses for re-consumption. Through this statement of Burroughs, one could then surmise that Artaud's theory operates with respect to the same conclusion. Words as the chief device for communication is not what is intended for the world of Artaudian Theatrical expression.

Brought on by the influence of the Oriental culture, and specifically from his encounter with Balinese Theatre, Artaud was very concerned about the usage of the idea of Duality with regard for the expression of the body. He was interested in bringing together the likeness of the physical with the metaphysical by demanding that the audience of his ideal theatre would be confronted with the sensation of terror to snap one into the "reality" of pain and suffering. For only through this discomfort and sensory overload will one discover their own horror and confront that horror with honesty and commitment. For Artaud there was a profound element of communication between performer and observer of the performance that was most effective in its primal form. He felt that by exposing the weaknesses of the audience through shock, one would become changed for the good of the flesh. In other words, his theatre would be the exposure of the true nature of human communication in the form of gesture, movement and sound.

If I believe neither in Evil nor in Good, if I feel such a strong inclination to destroy, if there is nothing in the order of principles to which I can reasonably accede, the underlying reason is in my flesh.

- Antonin Artaud -*Manifesto in Clear Language*- (excerpt)

Let us take into consideration the above quote and its signification with the principals of interest to Artaud. To excavate his fascination with the Duality and its relationship with the Double, one must first understand what is meant by the

Artaud's recognition of the existence of the Duality. The subject in question, namely morality, is an interesting decisive factor of his relationship with the Theatre as well as it serves the purpose of High Art. His objectification with the idea of the Duality is directly correlated with the Double in that the latter is a result of the former. The merging of the concept of Duality with his explanation of the Double could be an attempt to castrate the idea of the mediated experience; the mediated experience being that which acts as a simulacrum of the actual experience consisting of the bourgeois notion of Theatre. His complaint of the falsity of populace Theatre seems to be routed with a disgust of Religion in general, in that the notion of order and hierarchy are present in Classical Theatre.

The opportunity for Artaud to gauge his own contempt for the Occidental became known after his enlightenment with Balinese Theatreⁱ. Finally a chance for him to experience a culture that does not necessarily recognize the idea of the Duality as being a separate and opposing force, but rather two incorporative factors of the same thing. Within Artaud's experiencing of the Balinese Theatre, he postulates that his idea of the "True" Theatre is analogous in that he proposes one of gesture and movementⁱⁱ.

Contrary though to his previous astute research techniques, he blatantly disregarded the nature of the localized milieu of Balinese Theatre. Even from the examination of his writings it has been documented that he had very little knowledge of both Oriental culture as well as the specifics of Bali itself. The fact remains that he only saw one or two shows during the entire visit of the Balinese dancers provided by the Dutch Pavilion at the Colonial Exhibition in 1931. But we cannot fault Artaud in any true sense of his research being too localized. It is obvious that he already had no contempt for Occidental culture from the beginning. He was interested mainly in changing the empirical culture to a culture that would again recognize the mysticism involved in his newly found interest. One can just as well assume, moreover that an emphasis on *the idea of Mythology as the only available muse left to induce meaning in a culture*, was his true inspiration for both the *Theatre of Cruelty* as well as the development of *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*.

It is also important to understand that the incorporation of androgyny (e.g. the character of Heliogabalus) within the figure of the Double is contiguously planted as a means for Artaud to eliminate the idea of the Dichotomy that has been the cornerstone of the existence of Western Thought. To understand his direction towards the elimination of the dichotomy through the incorporation of the Other, we must understand that Artaud was trying to extend the nature of language through form. In other words, he claimed that the application of the hieroglyph was crucial in that one can use dance and gesture better to embody a True Theatre rather than through the usage of words. Theorist Nicola Savarese explains:

Artaud's vision distorted the meaning of a tradition and a culture of which he was essentially ignorant: the Balinese performances represented for Artaud something very different from what they actually were, but something nevertheless necessary to him. He saw through the Balinese performance's

*exotic patina and intuited its spirituality because he perceived the severity of its action, bare and linear physical action, stretched to the absolute. The Balinese hieroglyphs became the epiphany of theatre tout court, the impact of Artaud's extraneous vision took on all the characteristics of an enlightenment.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Artaud's conviction with the iconographic representation of the Balinese Theatre continued to fuel his ideas on how theatre should be portrayed, even though he really was not completely competent in his description nor did he understand the indigenous meaning of the culture that enacted it. One must only be able to assume that he was calling these dance and theatrical phenomena as a means for inspiration and not any sort of representation.

In formulating his specific ideas of the Theatre of Cruelty, it seems that investigating the certain properties of sound were of specific interest to Artaud, namely, anything abrasive and shocking. His treatment of sound for theatre was very influential for the relationship that contemporary artists have with their experimentation in electronics and noise/music. The attack of the sonic frequency on the body is where the artist can have total domination of the senses. The sound artist is able to both inflict physical and mental torture, violence, and murder directly and indirectly on the victim without any visible results. Through the vision of Artaud, the artist is able to use horror and terror as an effective device to bring together the elements of the theatre and create a cohesive production, as well as a production that is easily reproducible. The physical body is spared by sound only after death. Much to Artaud's representation of the Plague, sound becomes the key delivery device for the raising and lowering of the senses, to bring into question the physical with the metaphysical and to engage and then synchronize the conscious with the unconscious.

Taking into account Artaud's needs with respect to the relationship between some of the contemporary ideas concerning noise/music, one can possibly understand the importance of how visceral the timbre along with the volume can be. In a precognitive sense, the new soundscape in general is what Artaud demands of sound as an effective delivery device:

These will be used as objects, as part of the set. Moreover they need to act deeply and direct on our sensibility through the senses, and from the point of view of sound they invite research into utterly unusual sound properties and vibrations which present-day musical instruments do not possess, urging us to use ancient or forgotten instruments or to invent new ones. Apart from music, research is also needed into instruments and appliances based on refining and new alloys which can reach a new scale in the octave and produce an unbearably piercing sound or noise.^{iv}

It is interest that Artaud was taking into consideration the same issues with the effect that sound has on the listener. One can observe the similar perspective of the experimentation with other devices that are able to heighten the full bandwidth of perception of sound. Artaud clearly was not interested in the mediocre with respect to discovering how one can respond to aural simulation.

Sound was the cerebral gel that keeps Artaud's theatre a cohesive attempt to attain the shock value that was needed.

Artaud was not alone in thinking about the effects of sound not only for the purpose of keeping one in tune with the importance of communication without words. His theory that encompassed the usage of sound was not unlike any of his artistic predecessors. When one considers a contemporary perspective, one can then take into account the history of the Surrealist's movement and how it brings to mind the conceptual movement of Art during the dawn of the twentieth century that contained both the Dadaists and the Italian Futurists. 1913 marks the year of Luigi Russolo's manifesto *The Art of the Noises*, where he formally exclaims the incorporation of the integration of worldly noises into contemporary music:

Russolo exclaims: "...we find more enjoyment in the combination of the noises of trams, backfiring motors, carriages, and bawling crowds, than in rehearsing, for example the *Eroica* or the *Pastoral*."^v

In thinking about this framework for a new theatre, it seems possible then that Artaud drew upon these interesting new Futurist revelations of sound to incorporate them into his own postulations, and like the Futurists, and leaving no sound unheard he wanted to increase the palette of the audience to the point of exhaustion. Not only is this theatre an experiment in true sensual perception exploration, but also potentially an act of consciousness expansion.

Artaud was secure with words as one form of expression but not words as a means to touch the infinite. Hence, the word becomes an enemy of expression through the delivery of the body. It is this enemy that Artaud poses a by opposing it with sound. Sound as a medium to aid in the application of cruelty to the victims of the audience. Considering then that Artaud's chief concern was to not only revolutionize how one thinks about theatre, but also to pursue the metamorphoses of being, one should take into the account the ability to change their own perspective of Theatre. The incorporative factor within Artaud's theory is the driving force behind his attempt to abolish the idea of the Duality, hence the ability to constantly consider the universal rather than the conventional as a means to counteract the homogeneity of thought. The Double would then be contained within its opposite, consequently canceling out the *Other* as a formable adversary. Understand then that the importance of his attempt to transform the viewer mentally into a radically changed being is at the forefront of his intentions.

Works Referenced

- Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and Its Double*. Grove Press Inc., New York, 1958.
- Savarese, Nicola. *TDR: The Drama Review* 45.3 (2001) 51-77
- Stoppelman, Gabriella. *Artaud for Beginners*. Writers and Readers Inc. New York, 2000.
- Weiss, Allan. *Experimental Sound and Radio*. MIT Press. 2001.

ENDNOTES

¹ “His energetic inclination toward Otherness was fueled instead by a complete rejection of Occidental civilization and by a state of constant revolt...” Savarese

ⁱⁱ Artaud p. 70, “It must be said that the domination of the theatre is not psychological but plastic and physical...”

ⁱⁱⁱ Savarese, Nicola. *TDR: The Drama Review* 45.3 (2001) 51-77

^{iv} Artaud p.95, *The Theatre and It's Double*

^v Russolo, Luigi. *The Art of the Noises*