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‘Crisis’ as the Epistemology of European Experimental Theatre: Re-viewing Antonin Artaud’s
The Theatre and Its Double

Abstract

Theatre as an art form in Europe has been founded on Aristotelian principle of fundamental ‘conflict’ as the root of all dramatic actions which constitutes the essence/soul of drama/theatre. The European theatre in twentieth century entered a new era where it attained a complete divorce from dramatic literature and claimed an independent and autonomous status as an art form. Theorists and directors in their respective modes of performance reject the existing dramatic tradition. It evolved with a poetics of its own thus creating a structure of independent categories and terms of analysis. The term Experimental Theatre consolidates different modes of theatre i.e. Brechtian theatre, Theatre of Cruelty, Theatre of the Absurd, Poor theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed etc. into a single identity. This evolution of theatre as an independent art form in Europe seems to be a result of a new theatrical aesthetics that has been structured on a principle of ‘metaphysical crisis’ which constitutes the nucleus of all theatrical performances.

Key Words: Cruelty, Mise en scene, Plague, Alchemy, Crisis, Metaphysics etc.

In the beginning of his discourse Antonin Artaud observed the existing cultural crisis at the root of European intellectual tradition. He is considered as a pioneer of this evolution of European theatre who in his most celebrated theoretical treatise *The Theatre and Its Double* explores a metaphysical ‘crisis’, ‘cruelty’, ‘violence’, ‘destruction’ at the root of all theatrical activity which creates shadows of life. To bring out the epistemology of the ‘metaphysical crisis’ which forms the core of the performance, he established three famous analogies between theatre and plague, alchemy and painting respectively. He compares

theatre with plague both represents a 'total crisis' after which nothing remains except death and extreme purification. To him, "it is a supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction". Artaud employs 'crisis' as a tool to gauge the deepest roots of theatre art. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to explore the essence of theatre in the form a 'metaphysical crisis' which lies at the root of all theatrical performances. The paper focuses on the nature of the 'crisis' that forms the epistemology of experimental theatre.

Theatre as an art form in Europe has been founded on Aristotelian principle of fundamental 'conflict' as the root of all dramatic actions which constitutes the essence/soul of drama/theatre. The European theatre in twentieth century entered a new era where it attained a complete divorce from dramatic literature and claimed an independent and autonomous status as an art form. Theorists and directors in their respective modes of performance reject the existing dramatic tradition. It evolved with a poetics of its own thus creating a structure of independent categories and terms of analysis. The term Experimental Theatre consolidates different modes of theatre i.e. Brechtian theatre, Theatre of Cruelty, Theatre of the Absurd, Poor theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed etc. into a single identity. This evolution of theatre as an independent art form in Europe seems to be a result of a new theatrical aesthetics that has been structured on a principle of 'metaphysical crisis' which constitutes the nucleus of all theatrical performances.

The Theatre and Its Double is Artaud's profoundest theoretical statement on the art of Theatre. Artaud digs at the roots of European/Occidental idea of theatre which is conceptualized by Aristotle in his theoretical treatise *Poetics*. Artaud begins his theoretical discourse on the art of theatre with a general criticism of contemporary idea of European culture. He observes an intellectual confusion at the roots of contemporary culture due to a rupture between things and words. His reflection upon this condition concludes that this cultural crisis is a result of the existing philosophical understanding of language in Europe where it is perceived as a mode of representation of reality. He finds it the most potent hindrance in communicating the true nature of the phenomenon. At this state of affairs, he finds the existing philosophical systems of European tradition inadequately formulated as they do not support life directly. To him, the intellectual legacy of Europe or 'knowledge' seems helpless because it does not form a part of being. He proposes an idea of 'culture-in-action'. It is not something external to us but forms an essential organ of our whole being. It

is something internally connected to us which guides all our actions ranging from base to sublime. Even the distinction between the terms like 'culture' and 'civilization' is artificial to him because both of them signify an identical function. He further maintains that this existing culture has infused such an absurd faculty in human beings where they choose to perceive their acts in an imagined form instead of impelled by their force. And this propensity is a human one. He considers it as a kind of infection which contaminates/destroy the divine element of human soul. It pushes us away from life. The idea of culture, which he proposes, is basically a protest against the idea of culture that is distinct from life. It is dichotomous with life. It opposes the futile restrictions inflicted upon the sense of culture and diminishing it to the level of an unimaginable pantheon inculcating idolatry.

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Artaud explores a strangely possible metaphysical analogy between theatre and plague. His account of the contagious disease is not historical or biological but a metaphysical one. He witnesses certain apparently inexplicable dimensions of the disease; its incongruity, mysteries, characteristics and traits and in these, he claims, exist its metaphysical truth. He goes on to describe and reflect on what he calls the mental physiognomy of the disease, a physiognomy whose laws cannot be scientifically specified. The disease affects only those organs of the body where the will-power, consciousness and intelligence exist. Like plague, theatre strikes the being unexpectedly and communicates through perturbing its processes by creating ruptures in the imaginative. And in such a state of existence, the theatre

is born. Artaud writes, “The Theatre, i.e., an immediate gratuitousness provoking acts without use or profit” (24). He further states, “The condition of the victim of the disease who dies without physical destruction, with all the stigmata of an abstract epidemic is identical with an actor entirely penetrated by emotions that do not correspond to his real condition. Everything in the physical aspect of the actor, as in that of the victim of the plague, shows that life has reacted to the paroxysm, and yet nothing has happened” (Artaud 25).

Artaud recognizes that the theatre, like plague, is delirious and communicative. Its similitude with plague is not because it influences important organs and perturbs them in a similar way. It is, as he states, “A social disaster so far-reaching, an organic disorder so mysterious - this overflow of vices, this total exorcism which presses and impels the soul to its utmost – all indicate the presence of a state which is nevertheless characterized by extreme strength and in which all powers of nature are freshly discovered at the moment when something essential is going to be accomplished” (27). Plague functions through a quiescent disorder and instantly transforms it into a paramount gesticulation. Similarly, theatre also operates on gestures and gesticulation of body and drags them to the farthest limit. The magnitude of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty is expressed by Martin Esslin, who describes it as a force that would “swoop down upon a crowd of spectators with all the awesome horror of the plague...with all its shattering impact, creating a complete upheaval, physical, mental, and moral, among the population it struck” (76). It employs the concept of hieroglyphs and archetypes which operate on the body. It rehabilitates our quiescent disorders and all their forces known as archetypes or symbols. “For there can be theatre only from the moment when the impossible really begins and when the poetry which occurs on the stage sustains and superheats the realized symbols”, Artaud asserts (29). Artaudian theatre truly, destabilizes the repose; release the latent unconscious and a virtual revolt permeate the whole being, thereby, producing a spirit that is both difficult and heroic. Like plague, theatre is an inexorable call to the deep psychic forces that strike the being through an illustration of the genesis of its conflicts. Like the epidemic, theatre is the externalization of a dormant or unconscious ferocity through which all the recalcitrant possibilities of human mind are manifested. It is the success of unconscious forces that are fostered by a faculty even more intense until vanished. “It releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark it is not the fault of the plague or the theatre but of life”, he concludes (Artaud 31).

Artaud's discussion on theatre and plague ends with his observations that theatre is a conflict or catastrophe, like plague, which is settled through death or cure. It is the supreme equipoise which cannot be attained without cataclysm. Hence, plague and theatre are seen as metaphysically same. Artaud's ability as a visionary of theatre lies in the fact that by going deep down into the spiritual physiognomy of the disease, he was able to touch the metaphysical roots of theatre. The analogy between plague and theatre enables him to conceptualize the soul of the art of theatre.

Further, in his text *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud's discourse brings his central aesthetic concept *mise en scene* to the fore. He analyses a masterpiece of painting entitled 'Daughters of Lot' by Lucas van den Leyden using his theory of *mise en scene* which can be roughly understood as the language of performance. He observes that the painter has certain secrets of linear harmony that strike the mind instantly, like a physical agent. The painting carries the ideas which are metaphysical. It is like the externalization of the spirit of nature which is reflected through a powerful intellectual harmony. He brings the uselessness and impotence of speech to the fore through this painting. Artaud claims, "I say in any case that this painting is what the theatre should be, if it knew how to speak the language that belongs to it" (37). Here, Artaud comes to his idea of 'theatrical language' which is specifically in contrast to the language in general.

Through his discussion, Artaud demonstrates one of the major limitations of Occidental theatre that is its entire dependence on script. In Occidental theatre, language/dialogue dominates the mode representation. Occidental theatre does not see theatre beyond dialogue/language. In Europe, theatre is taken as merely an aide to the history of the spoken language. Artaud remarks, "I say that the stage is a concrete physical place which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak" (37). He further remarks:

I say that this concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of speech, has first to satisfy the senses, that there is a poetry of senses as there is a poetry of language, and that this concrete physical language to which I refer is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thought it expresses are beyond the reach of spoken language. (37)

The analogy between painting and theatre helps Artaud in realizing the specific language of theatre which he conceptualizes and reaches to inner cores of theatre through it. He brings the

limitation of language (language in general) as a tool of communication to the fore. And this conception of language, Artaud maintains, is responsible for the petrified idea of culture in Europe. And from his general criticism of the existing conception of language, Artaud comes to his idea of true theatre which functions through a concrete physical language of stage.

Artaud is against the psychological tendencies of theatre as he finds it essentially inimical to its character or nature. To him, theatre is not meant to analyze character or to reveal a man's thoughts etc. and even the particular physical language in which it is carried, is not competent enough to do this like the verbal language. On the other hand, Occidental theatre, from the very beginning, is monopolized by this psychological character or nature. He remarks, "The contemporary theatre is decadent because it has lost the feeling on the one hand for seriousness on the other for laughter; because it has broken away from gravity, from effects that are immediate and painful – in a word from danger" (42). It is separated from the spirit of profound turmoil which is at the genesis of all poetry. He further remarks, "True poetry is, willy nilly, metaphysical and it is just its metaphysical bearing, I should say, the intensity of its metaphysical effect, that comprises its essential worth" (44).

Further, as a part of his discussion, he brings forth an analogy between theatre and Alchemy. He even goes to the extent of calling it as 'alchemical theatre' because both of the processes share an enigmatic identity of essence. Both of them operate at spiritual and imaginary level with the same process of a deepest principle in which the physical world transforms all matter into gold. Both of them are tacit or virtual arts without having any 'end' or reality within themselves. On the basis of his observation of all the principles and processes of alchemy, he constructs a vision of true theatre that is very close to Oriental theatre. For him, theatre like alchemy is the spiritual double of the operation which functions on deepest reality which is not primarily moral or human. It refers to those natural unconscious processes where human mind with all its instruments/tools of rationality and reasoning dare to touch upon. Theatre which resembles to alchemy in its processes is the only art that can create metaphysics of this reality. Describing the essence of true theatre through alchemy, Artaud states:

The theatrical operation of making gold, by immensity of the conflicts it provokes, by the prodigious number of forces it throws against one another and rouses, by this appeal to a sort of redistillation brimming with consequences and surcharged with spirituality, ultimately evokes in the spirit an absolute and abstract purity beyond

which there can be nothing, and which can be conceived as a unique sound, defining note, caught on the wing, the organic part of an indescribable vibration. (52)

Occidental theatre utilizes speech to communicate psychological conflicts of life. This theatre has a moral interest. But Artaud discovers that these conflicts do not need a theatrical stage to be resolved. The Artaudian theatre does not operate on psychological level but on physical. That is why, he conceptualizes a special and spatial language of theatre. He adds, "All true feeling is in reality untranslatable. To express it is to betray it. But to translate it is to dissimulate it. True expression hides what it makes manifest. It sets the mind in opposition to the real void of nature by creating in reaction, a kind of fullness in thought" (71). He further explains, "That is why an image, an allegory, a figure that masks what it would reveal has more significance for the spirit than the lucidities of speech and its analytics" (71). Here, the idea is not to suppress the speech in theatre but to change its role because theatre is created to manifest the way various emotions conflict and clash with one another.

Through his conception of theatre, Artaud constructs an anatomy of spatial knowledge of signs or images and sources of inducing them. He considers theatre as the only art that directly affects the being. This art discards psychology, reconsiders the extraordinary, manifests natural conflicts, natural and subtle powers, and projects itself primarily as an extraordinary power of redirection. He needs theatre to stir nerves and heart. "Artaud's aim was to take the theatre out of the context of mere entertainment and into that of education, or rather initiation into a higher spiritual reality" (Goodall 67). He perceives, "Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theatre must be rebuilt"(85). Further, he states, "We cannot go on prostituting the idea of theatre whose only value is in its excruciating, magical relation to reality and danger" (89). This theatre through its physical aspects requires expression in space. It allows mystical means of art and speech to be employed organically and altogether. What Artaud wants to establish is that theatre cannot operate on its peculiar forces of action till it is provided its language. Hence, Artaud suggests that it is essential to devise a unique language of gesture to liberate theatre from the dominance of the script. And this language has the possibility for vigorous expression in space as opposed to the expressive possibility of spoken language. This concrete physical language is organized into veritable hieroglyphs by employing symbolism in relation to all organs.

In order to liberate it from ‘human interest’, Artaudian theatre creates a metaphysics of speech, gesture and expression. This objective and concrete language of theatre spellbinds and enmeshes the body. It glides into the sensibility. It extends the voice. It ultimately frees itself from the intellectual domination of language by communicating the sense of a new and latent intellectuality which constitutes the gestures and symbols. This language of theatre uses human nervous magnetism to transgress the ordinary limits of arts and speech, for realizing, a kind of total creation. Daniel Meyer-Dinkgrafe remarks, “Artaud reformulated the principle of a physical language which he discovered in Balinese theatre in the context of his own views on culture” (Meyer 2).

Artaud observes the element of cruelty at the root of the concrete physical language of theatre. He states, “Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theatre is not possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds”(94). In one of his letters written on 15 Sept. 1931 to Mr. M.B.C., Artaud talked about the language of theatre and *mise en scene*. Here he mentions that if the theatre is considered as written script which is dominated by the text then *mise en scene* as an art will become acquiescent and minor. And the situation remains same until the text is substituted by *mise en scene*. The director works with *mise en scene*, which constitutes the theatrical part of the performance, to show the theatre’s feasibility of production. The autonomy of theatre as an art is discerned when it differs from text, language, drama etc. Further Artaud states, “It has not been definitively proved that the language of words is the best possible language. And it seems that on the stage, which is above all a space to fill and a place where something happens, the language of words may give way before a language of signs whose objective aspect is the one that has the most immediate impact upon us” (107). In this way, *mise en scene* attains a kind of intellectual ability through gestures to become properly a communicative language. Robert Brustein points out that “the language in the theatre of Artaud is not used for communicating social or psychological concepts, but it is used for its emotional colouring and incantatory tone” (372). He condemns the European tradition for being incapable of giving a proper interpretation or evaluation to Aeschylus, Sophocles and Shakespeare. It may be the result of the loss of the sense of their theatre’s physics. Artaud proposes that it is through this concrete gesture or *mise en scene* that the deep humanism of their theatre can be restored.

The existence of Artaudian theatre lies in a specific mathematical way of utilizing the theatrical space. It resides in a conflagration of human emotions and experiences at a given

point, creating states that are conveyed in concrete gesticulation. The concrete gestures make us to neglect the necessity of speech. Artaud writes here, "In a word, the theatre must become a sort of experimental demonstration of the profound unity of the concrete and the abstract" (108). A culture of gestures exists at side of culture of words. Theatre is the most dynamic and methodical site for immense analogical upheavals where ideas are held in space at some point in their transformation into the abstract. The culmination of theatre connects us to 'becoming' and reveals the transmutation of ideas into things. Artaud concludes here, "It seems also that it was with just such an intention that the theatre was created, to include man and his appetites only to the degree that he is magnetically confronted his destiny. Not to submit to it but to measure himself against it" (109).

The essay XI of his book *The Theatre and its Double*, Artaud admits that the Theatre of Cruelty is created to modify theatre in such an art form where an intense and spasmodic conception of life is perceived. And it is in this intense precipitation of all the theatrical operatives that the underlying cruelty of it be understood. The cruelty which Artaud talks of is identified with extreme moral purity which reflects the essence of life. He discusses the peculiar themes and subjects of his theatre of cruelty. This theatre deals with some of the rudimentary feelings of human beings in their crude form without any cultural or civilized contamination. Artaud believes that the true worth and propensity of theatre lies in the externalization of those rudimentary and fundamental feelings and emotions of human life which unfortunately, the Occidental theatre lacks. The subjects and themes which constitute such kind of extreme passionate states will be cosmic and universal in nature without any culture-specific identity and liable to be interpreted with the parameters drawn from the most ancient knowledge traditions of the world which have survived through the test of time. The theatre of cruelty does not characterize the man with a fragmentary sense of life without having the faculty of seeing it as a composite whole. This psychological and social man is a victim of his own cultural forms which take him away from his natural self that makes him an essential part of the creation. This theatre renounces human being in such compartmentalized (social, political, cultural, civilized etc.) forms to address itself to a total man whose basic and simple activities communicate the cosmic or natural forces of creation at work.

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