Artaud’s
Theatre of Cruelty
Introduction

- During the early 1930s, the French dramatist and actor Antonin Artaud put forth a theory for a Surrealist theatre called the Theatre of Cruelty.

- Based on ritual and fantasy, this form of theatre launches an attack on the spectators' subconscious in an attempt to release deep-rooted fears and anxieties that are normally suppressed, forcing people to view themselves and their natures without the shield of civilisation.
Theatre of **Cruelty** usually minimizes the text by emphasising screams, inarticulate cries, and symbolic gestures.

In order to shock the audience and thus evoke the necessary response, the extremes of human nature (often madness and perversion) are graphically portrayed on stage.
Antonin Artaud
Sept. 4, 1896 - March 4, 1948
French dramatist, poet, actor, and theoretician of the Surrealist movement who attempted to replace the “bourgeois” classical theatre with his “theatre of cruelty,” a primitive ceremonial experience intended to liberate the human subconscious and reveal man to himself.
Early Years

- Artaud’s infancy was a difficult one and influenced him a lot.
- At the age of four, Antonin had a severe attack of meningitis. The virus gave Antonin a nervous, irritable temperament throughout adolescence.
- He also suffered from neuralgia, stammering and severe bouts of depression.
- As a teenager, he was stabbed in the back by a pimp for apparently no reason, similar to the experience of his fellow surrealist playwright Samuel Beckett.
He was institutionalised by his parents in a sanatorium for five years, during which time he read the works of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Poe.

In May 1919 he was prescribed opium, which opened the way to a life-long addiction to this drugs and others as well.
In 1920, Artaud moved to Paris and tried to publish some of his poems. He sent his Surrealist poetry L'Ombilic des limbes (1925; “Umbilical Limbo”) and Le Pèse-nerfs (1925; Nerve Scales) to the influential critic Jacques Rivière, thus beginning their long correspondence.
• He studies acting in Paris and made his debut in Aurélien Lugné-Poë's Dadaist-Surrealist Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

• Expelled from the Surrealist movement when he co-founded Theatre Alfred Jarry with Roger Vitrac. (they ran this theatre together for two years, from 1926-1928).

• He produced and directed original works, as well as pieces by Claude [Claudel] and Strindberg [Strindberg]
Artaud also developed a passion for cinema
He wrote the script for the first Surrealist film, The Seashell and the Clergyman, directed by Germaine Dulac.
The film is about a clergyman who, obsessed with a general’s woman, has strange visions of death and lust, struggling against his own eroticism.
Artaud was reputedly unhappy with Dulac's realisation of his scenario, and it's true that the story's anti-clericalism is somewhat undermined by the director's determined visual lyricism.
• At the film's premier, writer Antonin Artaud, who was obviously not pleased by what director Germain Dulac did to his screenplay, shouted at the screen insulting her as a cow.

• The British Board of Film Censors banned this film in the UK in 1927, saying, "This film is so obscure as to have no apparent meaning. If there is a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable."
Artaud also acted in several movies.

He played Marat in Abel Gance's film Napoléon (1927) and appeared as a friar in Carl Dreyer's classic film La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (1928).
In 1935, Artaud staged The Cinci, his adaptation of the texts by Shelley and Stendhal.

Le Cenci was destined by Artaud to establish a closer contact between actors and spectators than the normal theatre could ever realise.

In this production mechanical devices were used to create a visible and audible frenzy: strident and dissonant sound effects, whirling stage sets, the effects of storms by means of light, unusual speech effects.

The production was a failure.
In 1938, Artaud published “The Theatre and Its Double”, the most important of his works. This book contained the two manifestos of the Theatre of Cruelty, essential texts in understanding his artistic project.

In his book The Theatre and Its Double, Artaud expressed his admiration for Eastern forms of theatre, particularly the Balinese.
Influence of the Balinese theatre

- At the Colonial Exposition of 1931, where he saw the Balinese theatre, he was struck by the tremendous difference between those plays and our traditional Western play. A dramatic presentation should be an act of initiation during which the spectator will be awed and even terrified--and to such a degree that he will lose control of his reason.

- "All true feeling is in reality untranslatable. To express it is to betray it. But to translate it is to dissimulate it."
- The fact that words are not the essential features in Balinese theatre appealed strongly to Artaud; he who had always had such difficulties formulating ideas by means of them and who described his struggles in this domain so pathetically.

- Artaud was absolutely convinced that words are just incapable of expressing certain attitudes and feelings, and that these can be revealed only through gestures or sounds, symbolically felt.
Although Artaud was usually condemnatory of Christianity, he defined the goal of the theatre in spiritual terms. Its "sacred" goal, he claimed, is to communicate delirium whereby the spectators will experience trances and inspiration.

A true play, according to Artaud's concept, will disturb in the spectator his tranquillity of mind and his senses, and it will liberate his subconscious.

The method Artaud proposes by which this will be brought about is to associate the theatre with danger and cruelty. "This will bring the demons to the surface," he says.
• Words spoken on the stage will then have the power they possess in dreams. Language will become an incantation
• Action will remain the centre of the play, but its purpose is to reveal the presence of extraordinary forces in man. The metteur-en-scène becomes a kind of magician, a holy man, in a sense, because he calls to life themes that are not purely human
"The theatre must make itself the equal of life --- not an individual life, that individual aspect of life in which CHARACTERS triumph, but the sort of liberated life which sweeps away human individuality and in which man is only a reflection. The true purpose of the theatre is to create Myths, to express life in its immense, universal aspects, and from that life to extract images in which we find pleasure in discovering ourselves."
• The real objective of the theatre for Artaud is the translation of life into its universal immense form, the form that will extract from life images in which we would have pleasure in being. This is what he means by the word "double" (Le Théâtre et son double).

• The theatre is not a direct copy of reality; it is of another kind of dangerous reality where the principles of life are always just disappearing from beyond our vision.

• He compares these principles to dolphins, who as soon as they show their heads above the surface plunge down into the depths. This reality is beyond man, with his habits and character. It is inhuman. If the theatre is able to lead the spectator back into his world of dreams and primitive instincts, he will find himself "in a world that is bloodthirsty and inhuman" (sanguinaire et inhumain).
Artaud has acknowledged that in this conception of the theatre, he is calling upon an elementary magical idea used by modern psychoanalysis wherein the patient is cured by making him take an exterior attitude of the very state that he should recover or discover. A play that contains the repressed forces of man will liberate him from them. By plastic graphic means, the stage production will appeal to the spectators, and will even bewitch them and induce them into a kind of trance.
Final Years

- Artaud was committed to a psychiatric hospital from 1937 to 1946
- During his stay at the asylum, Artaud's behaviour was characterised by delusions, auditory hallucinations, glossolalia and violent tantrums. He underwent a myriad of bizarre treatments for this behaviour including coma-inducing insulin therapy and electroshock therapy
Antonin Artaud's final work was a radiophonic creation entitled "To Have Done With The Judgment Of God."

The work was recorded in the studios of the French Radio at the end of 1947 and scheduled to be broadcast at 10:45 PM on February 2, 1948, but the broadcast was cancelled at the last minute by the director of French Radio, Vladimir Porche.

Artaud died a little over a month later, profoundly disappointed over the rejection of the work.

It was not broadcast over the airwaves until thirty years later.
In the actual text of "To Have Done With The Judgment Of God" America is denounced as a baby factory war-mongering machine.

Bloody and apocalyptic death rituals are described. Shit is vividly exalted as evidence of life and mortality. Questions about consciousness and knowledge are pursued and answered with more unanswerable questions.

It all dead-ends in a scene in which God itself turns up on an autopsy table as a dissected organ taken from the defective corpse of mankind.

In the recording all this would have been interspersed with shrieks, screams, grunts, and an extensive vocabulary of nonsense words-
Artaud and Brook

- Artaud and his Theatre of Cruelty did not achieve popularity during his lifetime.
- Artaud became known and applauded for the first time after Brook’s experiment in the 1960’s.
- Brook, assisted by Charles Marowitz selected a group of 12 actors and organised a 5-days long production. Their work was presented under the name of “Theatre of Cruelty” and employed some of Artaud’s theories.
- One of Brooks productions, “Marat/Sade”, was one of the most successful and influential productions of the ’60s.
Trivia

- Artaud believed that sexual activity, including masturbation, was harmful to the creative process and should be avoided if one hoped to achieve purity in one's art.
The Museum of Modern Art (NYC) had a showing of his drawings and paintings, composed while he was a patient in a mental institution, where he was encouraged to draw and paint as part of his therapy. [1996]
Who am I?
Where do I come from?
I am Antonin Artaud
and if I say it
as I know how to say it
immediately
you will see my present body
fly into pieces
and under ten thousand
notorious aspects
a new body
will be assembled
in which you will never again
be able
to forget me.
In January 1948, Artaud was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. He died shortly afterwards on March 4, 1948. Artaud died alone in his pavilion, seated at the foot of his bed, holding his shoe. It was suspected that he died from a lethal dose of the drug chloral, although whether or not he was aware of its lethality is unknown.

He didn't want any church burial but his family decided to do it against his will. Only actress Maria Casarès and a few other friends tried to oppose.
“The truth of life lies in the impulsiveness of matter. The mind of man has been poisoned by concepts. Do not ask him to be content, ask him only to be calm, to believe that he has found his place. But only the madman is really calm.”
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