

Antonin Artaud: A Prophetic Delirium

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French artist Antonin Artaud is remembered by most as the intense looking monk, Massieu, in the Carl Th. Dreyer movie ‘La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc’. But Artaud was more than an actor. Antonin Artaud was a playwright, a poet, and a critic. He was addicted to various kinds of opiates for most of his life, and spent long periods of time being treated for mental illness in sanatoriums. In France he is regarded as one of the most peculiar and challenging cultural icons of the twentieth century, and his mental illness, as well as his relationship with drugs, is in large part considered inextricable from his work as an artist. Artaud himself insisted that his delirium was relevant and true, and he saw heroin in particular as a fully legitimate means to alleviate the pain he felt inside him and his disgust with a French society which, as he saw it, had taken on the character of a Potemkin village.

But who was this insane and amazingly intense artist? Artaud was born in 1896 in Marseille, and already as a four-year-old he was struck by meningitis. The disease started a lifelong series of treatments which sent Artaud through numerous sanatoriums, until eventually he died from cancer in 1948. Artaud developed a nervous and depressive personality already from childhood, which shaped his mental illness and drove him as an artist. Opiates in the form of Morphine entered his life in 1919, when a doctor attempted to help him with the use of the drug Laudanum. From then on, Artaud would often describe morphine, heroin and opium as measures that made it possible for him to deal with reality and ‘find some peace.’ As he claims in a letter from 1943, only substantial quantities of heroin could drive out the demons of his mind and sustain his mental wellbeing.

In 1920, Artaud set out on his career as a poet and joined the surrealist movement. His early writings revolved around a personal torment and a problem that became a recurrent theme for the rest of his artistic life: the

feeling – as he states in a poem about Francis of Assisi – of someone ‘who always walks beside his own path’: Artaud felt the existence of a more intense reality than the one he was able to describe in words or participate in as part of his life in bourgeois French society. He shared with the surrealists a strong contempt for the moral sensibilities of the bourgeoisie, which he saw as limiting access to the real potential of human beings. Nevertheless, he quickly left their movement when it took a political turn and attached itself to Marxism. For Artaud the problem was not political – it was cultural. It was a covering up of reality, which art should seek to tear away or break through.

One means to achieve this Artaud found as a movie actor. He took part in a series of silent movies aiming to express the inner life of the personalities he enacted through movement and gesture. He continued to develop this intense method of acting in theatre, which was to become the most significant arena for his artistic expression and the art form he would influence most dramatically. Artaud described his mission for his engagement with theatre as the creation of a ‘Theatre of Cruelty’. He aimed to create a theatre art which did more than discuss, comment on, or represent reality. Theatre, in his mind, should itself be creating reality. Theatre was to attack the audience’s senses and perception of reality, and through its performances act as a gateway to a more real experience of reality. The ‘cruelty’ Artaud sought was a performance capable of tearing away our perceptions of the world and their comfort, in order to substitute them with a more raw experience of reality. Artaud dreamt of a theatre that would give the audience an experience of creation itself, and this was no small project. It entailed changes to the space of theatre, changes to the method of acting and instruction, and – importantly – the introduction of a number of technical effects.

Anaïs Nin, who shared Artaud’s therapist and was a close friend of his, describes in her book *Incest* very tellingly how, during a debate on the Black Death, Artaud decided that the audience learned nothing from hearing about the plague, but had to experience it. He stood up, and began enacting the Black Death by twisting and turning his body and screaming, with the result that the entire audience except for his own close friends left the debate. Nin herself, however, was enormously fascinated by Artaud and his direct attempts at transcending the representational quality of reality, and she would in later life become an ardent advocate of the importance of Artaud as an artist and against the interpretation of him as just mentally sick.

A magical attack on the organism

The 'cruel' experience of reality that Artaud sought further brought him into contact with other art forms and cultures foreign to the French. He travelled to Mexico, where he was drawn to the raw style in post-revolutionary modern art. He felt that Mexican society was closer to the earth and the 'real creation', and he was deeply fascinated by the religion of the indigenous people. In a poem written before his journey he imagined being invited on a 'travel to the land of talking blood', and once in Mexico he threw himself into experiments with the psychoactive drug Peyote and participated in shamanistic rituals with the indigenous Tarahumara people. Home from Mexico he set up art exhibits with Mexican artists, encouraging people to be inspired by the Mexican culture and to seek out and reconnect with esoteric traditions in European civilisation.

Artaud described this proposed movement as a return to a tradition where man was in an egoless union with nature and earth, and where magic ruled. For Artaud himself the supernatural and the divine came to play a central role throughout the remainder of his life. His rebellion against the tamed reality of bourgeois French society was increasingly framed by a spirituality that more and more bordered on insanity. From 1937 until shortly before his death in 1948 –interestingly, after giving up the use of heroin during his Mexico travels (he resumed the habit again later) – he spend most of his time in sanatoriums, in which he received, among other treatments, electroshock therapy. Nevertheless, he continued writing letters, and the many remaining letters from this period give a fascinating insight into his delirium while questioning, through their astonishing literary quality, the very model of humanity, the individual, and reality that the treatment he was undergoing was built around.

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Towards the end of his life, in 1946 and 1947, Artaud temporarily returned to some sort of prominence in French society and was given the opportunity to produce the radio theatre performance which today stands as his artistic testament, 'To Have Done with the Judgment of God'. The play, which consisted of manic speeches and terrifying noises made by Artaud, was an attempt at portraying for the listeners how humanity was entrapped in a perception of the individual as consistent and rational, and in particular how a false idea of the consistent and whole physical body supported this individual. 'For you can tie me up if you wish, but there is nothing more useless than an organ', Artaud states.

Artaud felt the human was a poor construction and in need of a fully reconstructed anatomy. He saw the concept of organs and the whole idea of the body as an organism as wrong. The idea that each organ in the body has its function and partakes in a sensible system aimed at upholding human life and a productive participation in human society in Artaud's mind completely shot down the potential of the body, and subjected it to a demand for meaningfulness and utility, which to him was unnatural and painful.

Artaud's radio performance was an attack on the established idea of the human, and the method and language used in the performance was both perverse and hysterical. The show was stopped and not aired for another thirty years. The broadcast of 'To Have Done with the Judgment of God' coincided with growing recognition of Artaud as a cultural personality both in France and – in the wake of the youth rebellion's increased interest in psychoactive substances, alternative spirituality and the anti-psychiatry movement – across the Western world.

A phenomenology of suffering

Antonin Artaud was, in the words of Susan Sontag, engaged in a phenomenology of suffering. He constantly described and investigated the feeling of pain that cut through his life. It was a feeling of permanent distance between an amazing inner life of sensations, feelings and intuitions, and his ability to express it in language and social life. He made the investigation of this distance and the attempt to overcome it the project of his life as well as his art. In so doing, Artaud was of his time as well as ahead of it. He was one among many in Paris between the wars seeking to transcend the borders between art and lived life, but the degree to which his art was an attack on lived life was unique. Artaud was deeply frustrated with the make-up of reality and with the assumptions and perceptions that seemed to control his and others' experience of it. His attempt at transgressing both the norms and culture of French bourgeoisie, and the whole idea of his own individuality and consistency, was in this sense a radical one.

Artaud saw himself in a constant process of becoming – he changed his name several times through his life – and his radical confrontation with identity is today regarded as the most visionary aspect of his life's work. Artaud's art and life – and his attack on the organ as the organising concept for the human body and his radical resistance to the idea of identity – is seen today as a sort of prophetic delirium, anticipating the writing of so-called post-structural French philosophers. Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and others investigated from the 1960's and

onwards how our idea of ourselves as responsible subjects with consistent identities is constructed in ways that ultimately limits freedom.

As the quotation above illustrates, Artaud intuitively refused to be subjected to the utility of his organs. He did not want his body subjected to a consistent meaning and purpose, as the concept of the organism prescribes. Instead he saw it as constantly being defined by numerous relations to other people, divine powers, technologies or substances, all bringing forth conditions and experiences in him. This image of the body is to a surprising degree similar to contemporary – and especially feminist – ideas of the self and the body, but also to contemporary medicinal approaches. Whether or not this makes Artaud a kind of prophet is hard to say. Can we learn from or draw on his insane portraits of these issues today? His life's work is perhaps too attached to his own tortured existence for it to be directly applicable to contemporary situations. Perhaps one will have to suffice with being inspired and constantly having our ideas of humanity and societies shaken by his wild writing. Likewise, one can ask whether Artaud's use of drugs in his battle to reconcile himself with the world is an argument for the usefulness of drugs. Antonin Artaud embodied the fact that, when discussing drugs, one is always discussing the relation between the drug user and the drug. Heroin in particular was to him an important extension of his body and a defence against the 'diabolic' regime he felt himself attacked by. Perhaps heroin was the tool he used to control and manoeuvre in the sea of impulses he struggled under, and a way to soothe the suffering so central to his life experience. As Susan Sontag writes, the truth and dynamic that drove Artaud's artistic being did not originate from the drugs. Artaud did not expand his consciousness with the help of drugs, he calmed it.

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RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING: Antonin Artaud: *Selected Writings*, edited and introduced by Susan Sontag. Berkeley. University of California Press. 1988.