

CHAPTER TWO

THE DISMEMBERED BODY IN ANTONIN ARTAUD'S SURREALIST PLAYS

THOMAS CROMBEZ

In two of his surrealist plays, Antonin Artaud inserted a scene where human limbs rain down on the stage. The beginning of *Le Jet de sang* (The Spurt of Blood, 1925) features a young couple pathetically declaring their love for one another, when suddenly a hurricane bursts, two stars collide, and “a series of legs of living flesh fall down, together with feet, hands, heads of hair, masks, colonnades, portals, temples, and distilling flasks”¹ (Artaud 1976a, 71). In a later scenario prepared for the Theatre of Cruelty project, *La Conquête du Mexique* (The Conquest of Mexico, 1933), the volley of human limbs is echoed almost verbatim.

Human limbs, cuirasses, heads, and bellies fall down from all levels of the stage set, like a hailstorm that bombards the earth with supernatural explosions.² (Artaud 1979, 23)

These literal and, according to the theatrical conventions of the day, almost unstageable instances of “dismemberment in drama” point to a distinctive characteristic of Artaud’s work. He seemed to strive for a purely mental drama, to be staged for the enjoyment of the mind’s eye. The distinctly appropriative method he employed to write his mental play-texts may be labeled, borrowing an expression from Alfred Jarry studies, as “the systematically wrong style” (Jarry 1972, 1158). This expression has already proven its worth as the most concise term for Jarry’s linguistically grotesque plays, composed of Shakespearean drama, vulgar talk, heraldic language, archaisms, and corny schoolboy humor.

The first part of my essay considers why the standard poststructuralist interpretation of Artaud’s œuvre is unable to provide a strictly literal reading of the human body parts that litter the stage. Due to the problematic reception immediately following his death in 1948,

poststructuralist thinkers have dominated the analysis of Artaud studies since the sixties. The impetus of their readings commands a symbolic interpretation of the dismemberment scenes.

I would like to propose an alternative interpretation that is based on the historical context framing Artaud's work of the interwar period, i.e., the poetical and political debates of the early surrealist movement. Artaud's outspoken preference for a "révolution de l'esprit" above the disciplined efforts of the French Communist Party was not well received by André Breton, leader of the surrealist movement. Neither did they agree on the importance of the performing arts. A third and previously neglected cause of their misunderstanding derives from Breton's disapproval of all technical matters concerning literature. I will briefly examine how this agrees with Breton's views on revolutionary art.

The contrasting views of Breton and Artaud on what is at stake in literature will further serve to highlight the peculiarities of Artaud's mental drama. This interpretation would be impossible following the poststructuralist scheme, and proves the use of a more literal reading of the dismemberment scenes. In the conclusion, it will be shown how Artaud's method, the "systematically wrong style," may be described as a form of literary and theatrical cleptomania.

The Artaud Myth

Today's predominant image of Artaud is that of an artist obsessed with radical self-presence, for whom no form of representation (theatrical, literary, or otherwise) could adequately provide testimony of his inner self. The problematic of loss and presence of self was stressed by a generation of Artaud scholars writing between 1965 and 1980, who have since been identified as "poststructuralists": Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari.³ As Deleuze and Guattari eminently held, Artaud was that man who had "produced himself as a free man" (qtd. in Goodall 1994, 217).

It is not as if the poststructuralist intellectuals "discovered" Artaud in 1965. On the contrary, it was not insufficient but rather excessive public exposure that damaged Artaud's initial reputation. According to Bonacina, a true "explosion of the Artaud myth" took place that precluded any sustained effort at a rational and coherent reading of his work (Bonacina 1984, 128, 131). Various factors were responsible for the Artaud myth. First, the artist's exceptionally visible and eccentric behavior in Paris during the last two years of his life. His public appearances were often marked by delusions and obscene language (Prevel 1974). Among the

most prominent events were the excruciating performance at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, entitled *Histoire Vécue D'ARTAUD-MOMO* (3 Jan. 1947), and the violent polemics of February 1948 surrounding his radio play *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, which was censored by the very radio station that had commissioned the production (Artaud 1974, 65-118; Bonacina 1984, 111-119).

Leading so obviously the life of a “poète maudit,” it came as no surprise that his name also started to figure in the tabloid newspapers. Even worse was the so-called “Artaud affair.” Immediately after his death, Artaud’s family claimed, some of his manuscripts were stolen by friends and acquaintances of the artist. In order to defend the intellectual legacy, his sister, Marie-Ange Malausséna, announced the formation of the Society of the Friends of Antonin Artaud. The accused “friends” reacted vehemently by denouncing the many years of internment that Artaud had suffered unaided by his family. They claimed it was only through the efforts of his “real friends,” such as Arthur Adamov, Marthe Robert, Jean Paulhan, and others, that the artist had eventually been released in 1945.

The Artaud affair had long and enduring consequences for the availability of the writer’s work. Due to a publication ban issued by the family, the first volume of the *Œuvres complètes* could only appear in 1956, despite the fact that the contract with Gallimard had already been signed by Artaud himself in 1948. On the other hand, the Artaud and Malausséna family members had little means to counteract the limited edition booklets and literary journals that disseminated individual texts, letters, and poems.⁴

During the 1950s, consequently, the illustrious writer Artaud was represented by only a handful of hard to find publications. Less than 2000 copies of his seminal work *Le Théâtre et son Double* (The Theatre and Its Double, 1938) were in circulation. Other essays and books from the fertile interbellum period had become virtually untraceable. Some of the postwar writings were available, albeit in limited editions. More importantly, these books, such as the *Lettres de Rodez* (1946) or *Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société* (Van Gogh, the Suicide by Society, 1947) constituted the most chaotic and scabrous texts of his œuvre.

It may be concluded that the critical reception of Artaud’s œuvre in the years following his death was severely obstructed by the disreputable image he had cultivated himself, which was intensified after his death by the tabloid press and the arguments concerning his literary estate. The limited availability of his writings that resulted from the Artaud affair only helped to sustain this unfavorable situation.

The Poststructuralist Artaud

The poststructuralist scholars were the first to overcome the obstacles mentioned above, and to treat Artaud's writings in a collective and systematic way. Their studies were significantly advanced by the publication of the *Œuvres complètes*. The first five volumes, collecting most of the interwar writings and letters, appeared more or less simultaneously with the prominent poststructuralist essays on Artaud. Moreover, the editor of the *Œuvres complètes*, Paule Thévenin, was closely befriended by the authors who published on Artaud in such landmark journals as *Tel Quel* and *Critique*.⁵

The poststructuralist output culminated in a 1972 symposium on Artaud and Georges Bataille, organised at Cerisy. By that time, numerous important essays had been published. "La pensée émet des signes" by Sollers (Thinking Emets Signs, 1964), together with Derrida's well-known articles on Artaud, "La parole soufflée" (1965) and "Le théâtre de la cruauté et la clôture de la représentation" (The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation, 1966), introduced the new and philosophically inclined method of reading Artaud.

Others followed suit, specifically Gilles Deleuze's "Le schizophrène et le mot" (The Schizophrenic and the Word, 1968, reappearing as "Du schizophrène et de la petite fille" in *Logique du sens*), and "Le sujet en procès" by Julia Kristeva (The Subject-in-Process, 1973). Michel Foucault, too, gave Artaud an honored place in the concluding pages of *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (A History of Madness in the Age of Reason, 1972). Finally, Artaud's "corps sans organes" (body without organs) featured prominently in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's two-volume *Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (1972 and 1980).

Generally speaking, the commentators from the poststructuralist generation stressed the value of Artaud as a philosophical figure, not a theatrical innovator. An oft repeated truism held that Artaud had strived for an "impossible theatre," making the failure of his various theatre projects into a philosophical necessity.⁶

Artaud's own life, by consequence, took the place of the Theatre of Cruelty's central performance. Already in 1974 it was recognized that critics desired to see the eccentricity of his theatrical theories reflected "in the tragical biography of their prophet" (Plocher 1974, 12).

Next to the oversight of the writer's theatrical career, and the resulting prominence of his life, a second characteristic of the poststructuralist writings on Artaud is that they uncritically adopt his own terminology, such as "magic," "incantation," "hieroglyph," or "metaphysics." This may

easily lead to conceptual ambiguities. Artaud's theories are phrased in a strongly poetical language that betrays an acute awareness of modernity's disenchanted life-world, but, at the same time, is obsessed with reviving the supernatural. His profoundly atheist religiosity (if we may call it so) obviously presents great problems to scholarship. It is questionable, for example, if a valid theory of the theatre may be constructed on the basis of Artaud's problematical vocabulary. Surprisingly enough even contemporary studies keep using Artaud's own terms to describe his endeavors (Fischer-Lichte 1997, 55; Graver 2000, 48-55). Indeed, as Christopher Innes wrote, "almost everywhere he is accepted on his own valuation" (Innes 1993, 61).

The two general tendencies of prevailing Artaud scholarship combine into the well-known image of his "radical" theory of performance. Resisting every literary or theatrical urge to express and, consequently, betray himself, the theorist Artaud is also supposed to be the sole possible performer of his ideal artistic event, described in one memorable passage as "being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames" (Artaud 1978, 14).

Reprinted in his influential *L'Écriture et la Différence* (Writing and Difference, 1967), Derrida's famous essays helped to provide the philosophical and psychological underpinnings for this image of Artaud. Basing himself on the writer's elaborate descriptions of his psychic disorder, which seems to have been of a dissociative nature, the French philosopher surmised that Artaud's voice was de facto "stolen" from him, or rather, continually "soufflée" or prompted. The very moment that the words came out of his mouth or pen he could not recognize them as his own any longer. There was a "thieving god" that filched every word from his lips and spoke it in his stead. Accordingly, "self-performance" became the central problem for Artaud, which he sought to solve through theatre projects that were inherently "impossible," and eventually led to the outrageous and pathological performances such as the lecture on "Le Théâtre et la Peste" (The Theatre and the Plague) at the Sorbonne in April 1933, in which he vividly impersonated a plague victim. Another much quoted example is the postwar event at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, mentioned above.

Applying the widely accepted view of Derrida to Artaud's surrealist plays, the rain of human limbs may well be read in a symbolic or metaphorical way. It would thus represent an instance of literal dismemberment that stands for a broader state of mental dismemberment and fragmentation. When the hail is coming down the young man from *Le Jet de sang* exclaims, "Heaven has gone mad." This may be read as an

index of the impossibility for the dramatist to guarantee the mere physical integrity of his creation. It looks as if Artaud's dramatic conception is so outlandish that it needs a world of theatrically impossible events, in order to adequately express itself. Extreme surrealist imagery is employed to suggest the menace of a mentally unbalanced state. This seems to accord well with Artaud's own theatrical intentions. *La Conquête du Mexique* explicitly strove to translate the inner states of the Aztec emperor Montezuma and, to a lesser intent, of the conquistador Hernán Cortés, into the external language of the stage:

Montezuma himself seems cut in two, he is split in two selves; there are some surfaces of him in half-darkness, others are flooded with light; multiple hands emerge from his robes, with faces painted on his body to express the numerous instances he became aware of the situation—but from within Montezuma's consciousness all questions posed pour into the crowd.⁷ (Artaud 1979, 22)

I would like to demonstrate below that the metaphorical interpretation of Artaud's human hailstorms does not theoretically exhaust these outlandish stage directions. The dismemberment scenes illustrate a technique that is richer than the mere dramatization of his dissociated states of mind. An alternative reading may be to choose a more literal approach, starting from the sheer theatrical preposterousness of what Artaud wrote. The volleys of human limbs required a stage that was, at least at the time of writing, a technical impossibility. The only theatre they could possibly apply to was the written page itself and the reader's imagination, or, the playhouse of the mind's eye.

Mental Drama

It was not a specifically surrealist pursuit to re-conceptualize drama as a spectacle for the mind's eye. Already, it had been on the agenda of the symbolist writers at the end of the 19th century, such as Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel and Stéphane Mallarmé (Finter 1990). The motto of Mallarmé's *Igitur ou La folie d'Elbehnon* (*Igitur, or the Folly of Elbehnon*, 1876) clearly proclaimed their poetical principle: "This Tale is addressed to the reader's intelligence, which stages things, itself"⁸ (Sonnenfeld 1977, 159).

Clearly inspired by the symbolist example—his first theatrical venture was called the Théâtre Alfred Jarry—Artaud embraced the technique of mental drama, which can be found in all stages of his œuvre. It is especially present in the early surrealist volumes, such as *L'Ombilic des*

limbes (1925), *Le Pèse-Nerfs* (1925/1927) and *L'Art et la Mort* (1929). Jane Goodall has pointed out that the technique is also fundamental to the diaries written at the end of his career, in particular the *Cahiers de Rodez* (Goodall 1994, 175). In this essay, I will concentrate on the early texts, to which both *Le Jet de sang* and *La Conquête du Mexique* belong.

Artaud's mental dramas stand out from symbolist creations such as Jarry's *Ubu roi* (1896) or Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910) by two conspicuous attributes. First, they seem to be strongly determined by Artaud's impressions of paintings by his surrealist friends, such as André Masson or Jean de Bosschère (see, for example, the explicit references in Artaud 1976a, 60-62, 146-150). Artaud himself states that his procedure for writing a text begins by mounting a kind of mental canvas: "At the four corners of the mind, the universe attaches its forms" (Artaud 1976b, 68).

In the theatre of the mind, any psychic phenomenon may be translated into an abstract form or a material object, and vice versa. Artaud's method therefore seems closely related to the surrealist principle par excellence: that of *absolute metaphoricity*, or, in the words of Georges Bataille, "every thing that one looks at is the parody of something else"⁹ (Bataille 1970, 81). An example from *L'Ombilic des limbes* may illustrate this:

There is a vertigo of which the rotation has trouble to disengage itself from the dark, a voracious descent that merges into a sort of night.

And as if to give its full meaning to this vertigo, this circling hunger, a mouth now stretches out, and opens up a little, and it seems to be aimed at joining the four horizons. A mouth as a stamp of life, to label the darkness and the descent, to grant a shining end to the vertigo that drains everything downwards.¹⁰ (Artaud 1976a, 147)

Inspired by the abstract paintings of surrealism, Artaud produced a dramaturgy of the mind, where experience and emotion could effortlessly be transmuted into form and flesh. However, these unique texts are not only inspired by what he personally lived, translated through the observations of surrealist paintings. They are also shaped by existing literary works, which he parodied or partially appropriated. *Le Jet de sang*, for example, was the candid travesty of a recently published play by Armand Salacrou, entitled *La Boule de verre* (The Crystal Ball, 1924). Its title, moreover, could well be the expression first used by Paul Claudel to describe Arthur Rimbaud's poetry, and which was quoted by Artaud in a very early note (Artaud 1976a, 281). In another mental drama from *L'Ombilic des limbes*, "Paul les Oiseaux ou la Place de l'Amour" (Paul the

Birds, or the Place of Love), the main character was imported straight from Marcel Schwob's *Les Vies imaginaires* (Imaginary Lives, 1894).

A draft version of "Paul les Oiseaux" provides Artaud's definition of mental plays: "I have witnessed this as a theatrical drama, but one that occurred purely in the mind"¹¹ (1976b, 12). These special literary creations made it possible to steal a canvas from another writer's work, and then to plaster it with inappropriate references from one's own life. Artaud first introduces the Renaissance painter Paolo Uccello, then suddenly writes:

The problem at hand has already preoccupied the mind of Antonin Artaud, but Antonin Artaud has no need for problems, he's already sorely fucked up by his own thoughts, for example, because he met himself, yesterday, and discovered that he's a bad actor, at the cinema, in *Surcouf* [a 1924 film by Luitz-Morat figuring Artaud], without that worm Little Paul coming to eat his tongue from within him.¹² (1976a, 55)

Bongiorno states that, for Artaud, it was impossible to write except "in the margins of, against, or analogously to another writing" (Bongiorno 2005, 60, 56; cf. Goodall 1994, 175). Indeed, from the beginning of his career, he engaged in numerous translations and adaptations. The Théâtre Alfred Jarry staged no plays of Artaud (although he had written some by that time), but instead opted for Roger Vitrac, Paul Claudel, and August Strindberg. During the 1930s, he adapted a gothic novel, *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis (1796), and used Roman source texts to compose a "historical novel" called *Héliogabale ou l'Anarchiste couronné* (Heliogabalus, or the Crowned Anarchist, 1934). His only full-length drama, *Les Cenci* (1935), is strongly inspired by the eponymous play of P.B. Shelley (*The Cenci*, 1819), and by Stendhal's version of the story in his *Chroniques italiennes* (1837).

Taking together the two characteristics of mental drama—the conflation of mental, emotional, and material phenomena (absolute metaphoricity); and the appropriation of other literary texts—it may be concluded that the genre is best defined by its very distortions and incongruities. Rather than to consider the rain of human limbs as a strict image of its author's mental decomposition, this scene can also be read as a prime example of the definition that Breton gave of surrealist imagery, namely, to testify of "the highest possible degree of arbitrariness" (Breton 1988, 338).

The Contestations of Surrealism

In November 1926, following his efforts to found a new theatre company with Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron (the Théâtre Alfred Jarry), Artaud was expelled from the surrealist movement. Theatre and cinema were considered to be overtly commercial enterprises by Breton, Louis Aragon, and the other surrealists who would shortly join the French Communist Party. Compared to the limited financial efforts required to publish books or produce paintings, the performing arts demanded an elaborate production system, and the more or less reliable enthusiasm of a paying audience.¹³

The dismissal must have come as a shock to Artaud. Certainly, he would have been aware of the differences that separated him from Breton. Artaud did not disavow the performing arts, as, for example, Breton and Aragon had done after their Dadaist theatrical experiments. Neither did he share their new-found ardor for organised revolution. Although Artaud had been chiefly responsible for one of the most militant surrealist tracts, the *Déclaration du 27 janvier 1925*, he fundamentally held that the most important revolution had to take place on the spiritual plane. As he would vigorously assert after reading the accusations against him in the pamphlet *Au grand jour* (In full daylight, 1927): “Bombs need to be thrown, but they need to be thrown at the root of the majority of present-day habits of thought” (Artaud 1971, 25; cf. 1976b, 68).

Still, Artaud had been a valued contributor to the surrealist movement. In 1925, he had taken over the direction of the Bureau of Surrealist Research. Many of his articles had appeared in the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste*, and he had published such eminently surrealist books as *L'Ombilic des limbes*, *La Pèse-Nerfs*, and *L'Art et la Mort*. The vicious tone of *Au grand jour*, as well as of Artaud's responses (the postscriptum to his “Manifesto for an Abortive Theatre,” quoted above, and a leaflet entitled *A la grande nuit*), suggest that the conflict ran even deeper than politics and the performing arts.

In the following I will advance that an additional cause of their misunderstanding derives from Breton's disapproval of all technical matters concerning literature (i.e., concerning style or narration).

The above cited criterion of surrealist poetics as “the highest degree of arbitrariness,” typified the strategy of the historical avant-garde. It aimed to destabilize the existing loci of art, or the conventions and institutions employed to experience, discuss, and trade works of art (Bürger 1974, 77; Berghaus 2005, 15-16). The systematic use of arbitrariness, or

“wrongness,” would lead to what Breton called the demoralization of society.

Strangely enough, it was precisely Artaud and Vitrac’s new theatrical venture, the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, that exemplified the surrealist sabotage plan. Their productions overthrew traditional opinions on casting, acting, and scenography; they misappropriated existing dramatic texts; and their manifestoes ridiculed the opinions, and the very occupation, of theatre critics (Crombez 2005).

The Paradox of the Audience

Breton’s reflections on surrealist poetics, to which I will now turn, seem to be riddled with contradictions. On the one hand, surrealism was not merely a philosophically inspired movement in the arts, but introduced a number of truly innovative artistic procedures. It brought randomness into play to access a subconscious level of creation through automatic writing, dreams, or nonsense dialogues. However, on the other hand, Breton refused to acknowledge these methods as constitutive of the surrealist movement. “I hasten to add that the future surrealist *techniques* do not interest me,” he noted in the 1924 *Manifeste du surréalisme* (Breton 1988, 344).

The disregard for artistic techniques derived from Breton’s essentialist conception of surrealism and of the psychic phenomena it valued. Madness, according to the First Manifesto, is not a series of socially unapproved ideas and actions, but the radical claim to liberate one’s imagination, which may incidentally imply maladjusted behavior (312-313). Consequently, such tools as automatic writing are not special techniques to address the subconscious, but rather aim at a total absence of technique. Surrealist “literature” is meant to be essentially anti-literary, in order to display “the *real* functioning of thought” (327-328). There is no surrealist poetics, and to compose one would purport to attack the very meaning of surrealism.

That the mainstream surrealists expressed no interest to examine their own methods may also be phrased in a more positive way. It marks the surrealist approach to writing as radically democratic. Breton clearly stated in the First Manifesto that he demanded automatic writing to be “available to all” (338). Surrealist techniques were conceived as the privileged instruments (although without any permanent value) for a global research project into humanity’s subconscious.

If Breton was right, the logical consequence would be for surrealist artworks to become increasingly popular, which effectively happened. At

the start of the *Second manifeste du surréalisme* (1928) he was glad to note that his contemporaries fancied to surround themselves with surrealist art. He even believed it justified to state that they had entrusted surrealism to “overturn the human way of feeling” (803).

The very confirmation of Breton’s radically democratic theory of writing brings to light the deeply paradoxical nature of his undertaking. The primary subject of the Second Manifesto had been to delineate surrealism’s research project from its many possible deviations, including the “*isolated* pursuit of the stupid literary adventure,” for which Breton reproached Artaud (789, 806, 815, 928).

The critical and public success of Breton’s own books, such as *Nadja* (1928), demonstrated that a strict delineation was impossible. The marginal position of surrealism, which made possible its radical-democratic stance, was threatened by its very public esteem.

Breton’s initial reaction to the paradox of the audience seems to have been one of panic, as the editors of his *Œuvres complètes* suggest (1521). Shortly after *Nadja*’s astonishing success, which was repeatedly reprinted in the year of its publication, he assumed a resolutely hostile attitude in the Second Manifesto, and demanded “the profound and veritable occultation of surrealism” (821). The measure was meant to shield the surrealist research project from its possible abuses by the literary business. Else it would degenerate into a mere stylistic novelty. But how to “overturn the human way of feeling” without significant public recognition? How did occultation accord with making automatic writing “available to all” ?

Demoralization

Breton never succeeded in connecting his disdain for poetics to the paradox of the audience, of which he was certainly painfully aware. In 1933 he had been invited to speak at the prize-giving ceremony of the Proletarian Literature Contest organised by *L’Humanité*. As an orthodox marxist, having read Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* (1924), Breton realised that “proletarian literature” was an essentially false designation. The “dictature of the proletariat” would only temporarily hold power, so it was not supposed to erect any institutions other than temporary ones.

Nor is this Revolution building solid houses, but instead, it makes removals, concentrations and barracks. The character of the temporary and of the barrack lies on all its institutions. (Trotsky 1924, ch. 2)

Again, the paradox of the audience forces Breton into an uncomfortable situation. Although he cannot fully agree with the label of “proletarian literature,” neither would he like to refuse the invitation by *L’Humanité*, which would further endanger the fragile position of the surrealists in the French Communist Party. As a result, Breton’s speech is fraught with contradictions, simultaneously praising and criticizing the concept of a proletarian literature (Breton 1992, 334).

Against the background of Breton’s continued struggle with the audience’s paradox, it is even more strange to observe that a certain poetical interest does exist in Breton’s work, although one has to look for it in the nooks and crannies of his writings. The concept of “demoralization” may serve to group the subversive literary methods suggested here and there (Breton 1988, 322, 1152). For example, a footnote to the Second Manifesto proposes to corrupt the realistic novel from the inside. One could describe a hostage scene “using the vocabulary of fatigue,” or a thunderstorm “in a *gay* manner” (810). The surrealist leader even devises a general formula for this kind of subversions: “Language can and must be liberated from its servitude”¹⁴ (Breton 1992, 276).

The Systematically Wrong Style

Breton’s wavering, and his questionable dismissal of the eminent subversive Artaud, are explained by the audience paradox. It forms the crux of the problematical relationship between avant-garde politics and poetics. Breton could not tolerate that the philosophical and spiritual mission of surrealism be made subservient to the question of its technique or audience. Still, the philosophical aims of the movement, and the political impetus that derived from them, required maximum public exposure.

Surrealism never found a satisfying answer to the question of how the general public was to be approached. It even appears that the movement’s representatives did not hit upon an adequate formulation of the problem. Most importantly, Breton failed to see that the essentialist approach to surrealism, disregarding all questions of literary technique, formed the basis of his troubled political stance.

Artaud, on the other hand, virtually impersonated the demoralization project. His disruptive efforts with the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, aimed at the contemporary stage, may be combined with the “wrongness” of his written dramas, to compose a portrait of the artist as the perfect saboteur.

The method of Artaud can be described as a form of literary and theatrical kleptomania. The shows of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry misused the existing conventions of the stage. Acting and diction styles were deliberately mixed up. A play barred from the stage by its own author, namely, Paul Claudel's *Partage de Midi* (Break of Noon, 1906), was produced by Artaud in a completely inappropriate manner (Crombez 2005). His mental dramas were based on existing literary works, which were parodied or at least misappropriated.

I have already noted above that surrealism in general, and Artaud's first theatrical project in particular, was heavily influenced by such symbolist poets as Mallarmé, Roussel, and, most significantly, Jarry. The plays that were written during the 1920s by Artaud and by Roger Vitrac, the co-founder of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry—notably *Le Jet de sang* and *Les Mystères de l'Amour*—clearly show the influence of Jarry. The principle that informs his writing was labeled by Michel Arrivé as “the systematically wrong style.” In a short play from *L'Amour en visites* (The Visits of Love, 1898), entitled “Au Paradis,” Jarry had fused such disparate elements as the setting of the Thousand and One Nights, European medieval history, vulgar language, archaisms, corny schoolboy humour, and symbolist neologisms into a remarkably smooth entity. No trace was left of the fusion or montage process itself, resulting in a most unique and bewildering language.

Conclusion

Jarry's quotational dramaturgy was the basis of the dream-like quality of his work. Artaud had more ambitious aims, and wished to employ “wrongness” as a poetical principle that would have effects on a truly societal scale. Looking back on the surrealist movement in a Mexican lecture from 1936, it is precisely the term “demoralization” that he borrows from Breton to describe its objectives.

[T]he secret of surrealism is that it attacks things in their secret. [...] The idea is to breach the real, to delude the senses, to demoralize if possible the appearances [...]. From its obstinate massacre surrealism always tenaciously manages to gain something.¹⁵ (Artaud 1980b, 143-144)

Facing the same poetical-political problem as the other surrealists, Artaud was not fooled by the paradox of the audience. That did not mean he resolved it with some astute avant-garde “masterstroke.” But his continued efforts to challenge the predominant artistic conventions in public, showed

far more consistency than the surrealist leader's equivocal course of action.

Artaud was constant in striving for absolute inconstancy. His remarkable response to paradox was to embody it. To cite just one distinct example, the program for the Theatre of Cruelty's first season also includes a well-known play from the dramatic canon, although Artaud had loudly proclaimed on the foregoing pages of his manifesto that he despised the psychological and text-based tradition of the contemporary stage. He was not unaware of the contradiction. Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1837), he insists, will be produced by the Theatre of Cruelty "in the spirit of reaction against our own principles" (Artaud 1978, 96).

To interpret Artaud's hailstorms of human limbs in a literal, instead of a strictly metaphorical way, we need to see that his work constituted the most thorough application of surrealist principles such as subversion and demoralization. Frequently, his projects turned into self-sabotage. The mental dramas are miniature forms of anti-theatre. Their absolute metaphoricity (the conflation of mental, emotional, and material phenomena), together with the appropriation of other literary texts, define the genre as "systematically wrong." Style, authorship, autobiography, and utter fiction are drawn into the maelstrom of its heterogeneous text.

In conclusion, "self-performance," the pre-eminent criterion to evaluate Artaud according to the poststructuralist school, can also be understood in an alternative way. As the mental dramas prove, Artaud succeeded in fusing alien literary materials with his own psychic case-history. Self-performance can be read as refashioning the self, by appropriating alien selves *within* one's own condition. All are welded together in one and the same place: the motley, wrong, and unreal text of the appropriator. When heaven goes mad, the sentences fall apart into human limbs.

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Notes

¹ Virtually all translations from Artaud are my own. "[U]ne série de jambes de chair vivante qui tombent avec des pieds, des mains, des chevelures, des masques, des colonnades, des portiques, des temples, des alambics [...]."

² "[D]e tous les étages de la scène, des membres, des cuirasses, des têtes, des ventres tombent comme de la grêle dont le bombardement touche la terre avec de surnaturelles explosions."

³ See Goodall 1994, 217-220; Scheer 2003, 2; Bonacina 1984, 200; Artaud 2004, 1771; Mattheus and Pichler 2002, 5-7.

⁴ For bibliographical overviews, see Mattheus 2002, 522-532; Bonacina 1984, 139-140.

⁵ Some important essays were dedicated to Thévenin, such as Derrida's "Le théâtre de la cruauté et la clôture de la représentation" (The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation, 1966), and Sollers' "La pensée émet des signes" (Thinking Emits Signs, 1964).

⁶ E.g., Derrida 1967, 364; Sollers 1968, 92; Virmaux 1977, 52-54; Sontag 1980, 17; Scheer 2003, 1-2.

⁷ "Montézuma lui-même semble tranché en deux, se dédouble; avec des pans de lui-même à demi éclairés; à d'autres aveuglant de lumière; avec de multiple mains qui sortent de ses robes, avec des regards peints sur son corps comme une prise multiple de conscience, mais de l'intérieur de la conscience de Montézuma toutes les questions posées passent dans la foule."

⁸ "Ce Conte s'adresse à l'Intelligence du lecteur qui met les choses en scène, elle-même."

⁹ "[C]haque chose qu'on regarde est la parodie d'une autre [...]."

¹⁰ "Il y a un vertige dont le tournoiement a peine à se dégager des ténèbres, une descente vorace qui s'absorbe dans une sorte de nuit.

Et comme pour donner tout son sens à ce vertige, à cette faim tournante, voici qu'une bouche s'étend, et s'entr'ouvre, qui semble avoir pour but de rejoindre les quatre horizons. Une bouche comme un cachet de vie pour apostiller les ténèbres et la chute, donner une issue rayonnante au vertige qui draine tout vers le bas."

¹¹ "J'ai vu ceci comme un drame de théâtre mais qui se passerait uniquement dans l'esprit."

¹² "Il s'agit d'un problème qui s'est posé à l'esprit d'Antonin Artaud, mais Antonin Artaud n'a pas besoin de problème, il est déjà assez emmerdé par sa propre pensée, et entre autres faits de s'être rencontré en lui-même, et découvert mauvais acteur, par exemple, hier, au cinéma, dans *Surcouf*, sans encore que cette larve de Petit Paul vienne manger sa langue en lui."

¹³ See Béhar 1967, 24-30, 228-229. In the case of an avant-garde theatre such as the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, a considerable amount of extra funding from aristocratic patrons was required. They happened to be the same benefactors who paid high prices for surrealist manuscripts (Benaïm 2001, 201).

¹⁴ "Le langage peut et doit être arraché à son servage."

¹⁵ "Car le secret du Surréalisme est qu'il attaque les choses dans leur secret. [...] L'idée est de briser le réel, d'égarer les sens, de démoraliser si possible les apparences [...]. De son massacre obstiné le Surréalisme s'acharne à tirer toujours quelque chose."