What Brecht did for theater [sic] was to heighten the spectator’s participation, but in an intellectual way, whereas Artaud had specifically rejected intellectual approaches in favour of theatre as “a means of inducing trances” (James Monaco). Discuss.

Rachel King

Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht held conflicting views over the relative importance of the intellect and of emotion in theatrical experience. Both practitioners revolutionised theatre by their prioritisation of ‘the spectator’s participation’, but their demands for actor/spectator interaction are widely divergent in terms of aim, technique and justification.

In the Theatre of Cruelty, ‘dramas of surreal and violent spectacle’ embody Artaud’s belief that ‘the very essence of life (creation and the struggle to survive) is “cruel” and beyond redemption’. Repeated, violent assaults on the audience’s senses are used to induce a trance-like state in the spectator comparable to that experienced in a dream or religious ritual and ensure that they are engaged with the performance on a pre-verbal, subconscious level. Artaud believed that the Theatre of Cruelty’s ‘full-scale invocation of cruelty and terror’ would have a profound effect upon each individual, ‘testing [their] entire vitality’ and ‘confronting [them] with all [their] potential’.

Conversely, the aim of Brecht’s theatre is not to show the audience the inexorable truths of their existence, but to show that man ‘is alterable and able to alter’. Brecht’s appropriation and development of Piscator’s ‘epic theatre’ in reaction against traditional Aristotelian dramatic forms of theatre involves techniques to prevent the spectator’s emotional identification with the characters and to ensure that the spectator ‘stands outside, studies’; that is, remains objective to the performance. The spectator observes how the ‘political, economic, and social environment’ determines the characters’ actions and is shown ‘the means by which those onerous conditions could be done away with’. In this essay, I will examine the methods proposed by Artaud and by Brecht in their theoretical writings concerning how theatre should ‘heighten the spectator’s participation’, look at their attempts to implicate these theories in performance.

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4 Artaud, ‘Theatre and Cruelty’ in Claude Schumacher, Brian Singleton eds., Artaud on Theatre (London: Methuen, 2001), p.121; all further quotations from Artaud’s theoretical writings will be taken from this volume.
5 ibid, p.121.
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in *The Cenci* and in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and consider how subsequent theatre practitioners have used the theories to inform later productions of the two plays.

Artaud’s assertion that he ‘cannot conceive of any work of art as having a separate existence from life itself’ is illustrative of the way in which he seeks to align the perspectives of the audience with that of the actors; that is, to create a theatre in which ‘audiences…identify with the show breath by breath and beat by beat’. Artaud argues that the ‘kind of rhetorical acting then fashionable at the Comédie Française’ existed ‘under the exclusive dictatorship of words’, inducing an ‘intellectual stupour’ in which the senses are neglected. Artaud’s rejection of ‘intellectual approaches’ can therefore be considered a rejection of the idea that ‘dialogue - something written and spoken’ - can be applied to the theatre. He identifies a need for a ‘physical language, aimed at the senses and independent of speech’ which consists of ‘music, dance, plastic art, mimicry, mime, gesture, voice inflection, architecture, lighting and décor’. The implementation of these techniques is fundamental to the Theatre of Cruelty, which is required not to ‘narrate or present cruelty’, but to ‘actually transmit[s] it’. Through a combination of ‘powerful acting, transgressive subject matter, innovative and daring *mise en scène*,’ he hoped to ‘shock, horrify and ultimately purge the audience members of their psychic and spiritual maladies’. One way in which the intimate relationship between the actors and the audience is achieved is by the abandonment of ‘the architecture of present-day theatres’ in favour of an ‘undivided locale without any partitions of any kind’. A sketch drawn by Artaud of the set for *The Cenci* appears to show how his theories could be implemented in performance, with the actors’ use of the ‘overhead galleries [which] run right around the circumference of the room’ (see Appendix 1). His intention is that the audience’s physical position at the centre of the action will directly implicate the spectator in the performance and reinforce ‘the illusion of theatre’. Whilst *The Cenci* was performed for the first time in 1935 at the proscenium arch, Théâtre des Folies-Wagram (see Appendix 2), the venue of a more recent production adapted and directed by John Jahnke (Hotel Savant) in February 2008 took place at the Ohio Theatre in New York. Although it is no longer unusual for the actors to share the stage with the audience, the 2008 production did not follow Artaud’s instruction to have the audience ‘seated below, in the middle, on swivelling chairs’. Instead, the set at the Ohio Theatre consisted of ‘a maze, full of twisting, low-walled paths that actors must navigate in every scene’ (See Appendix 3). Although the traditional audience/spectator boundaries were broken down by the actors’ diving ‘under the audience for many of their exits’, the actual

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1 Artaud on Theatre, p.xxii.
4 Artaud, ‘“Mise en Scène” and Metaphysics’ in Artaud on Theatre, p.105.
5 Artaud, ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ in Artaud on Theatre, p.120.
6 Artaud, ‘“Mise en Scène” and Metaphysics’ in Artaud on Theatre, p.103.
7 Ibid, p.103.
8 Ibid, p.104.
9 “Antonin Artaud”, *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*.
17 Ibid.
action of the play took place within the walls of the maze which would create a physical barrier between the actor and spectator, distinctly separating them from the performance and thus being antithetical to Artaud’s aesthetic.

Artaud’s encounter with Balinese dancers at the Colonial Exposition in Paris in 1931\(^2\) engendered his belief in the ability of a physical theatre to provide ‘a trance-inducing initiation into an experience in which the elemental and essential nature of humankind could be explored’.\(^2\) His interpretation of certain aspects of Eastern performance such as dance, mime and gesture as ritualistic and as indicative of society’s ‘deep metaphysical awareness, if not comprehension, of the human condition’\(^3\) renders them perfectly suited to his aspirations for a new theatre which frees human beings from their repressive, intellectual inhibitions. Artaud argues that the state of (sub)consciousness occupied in dreams and in rituals is the optimum state for a spectator because it is the state in which ‘the purity of our immediate responses’\(^4\) can be rediscovered and internalized by the senses. Conversely, Brecht’s experience of Chinese theatre and exposure to the work of the Chinese actor Mei Lan Fang in Moscow in 1935 shaped the development of his ideas on Epic Theatre in reaction against the ‘cathartic experience of emotional fulfilment’\(^5\) favoured by Aristotelian drama. Whereas Artaud interpreted the ‘dance, singing, mime and music’ in Balinese performance as hieroglyphic signs which communicate ‘an exact meaning that only strikes one intuitively’,\(^6\) and thus evokes an internal reaction within the spectator, Brecht argues that the ‘many symbols’ used in Chinese performance actually prevent the spectator ‘from feeling his way into the characters’\(^7\) by their creation of a critical distance between the actor and the spectator.

The spectator’s critical distance is the direct result of the ‘Verfremdungseffekt’, or ‘alienation effect’.\(^8\) Brook defines alienation as ‘a call to halt…cutting, interrupting, holding something up to the light, making us look again’.\(^9\) In Epic Theatre, the alienation effect is achieved through devices such as montage, direct-address, music and fragmented structure, features which draw attention to the illusory nature of performance, disallow a passive acceptance of the play and discourage the audience from cultivating an empathetic response. Brecht is concerned that every aspect of the performance should encourage a conscious, intellectual approach in the audience. The stage itself is required to narrate: images and words are projected onto ‘large screens’ to evoke ‘other events occurring at the same time in other places’, to document or contradict ‘statements by characters’ and to project ‘tangible, concrete statistics to abstract discussions’.\(^10\) The spectator’s participation is thus heightened in an ‘intellectual way’: they collate the information with which they are presented and to ‘come to grips with things’\(^11\) on a conscious level. Brecht explains that the actor too should demonstrate an appropriate emotional distance from the character they are playing so that they ‘appear strange and even surprising to the audience’\(^12\). Like the Chinese actor, the Epic actor is not immersed in the character; they are in ‘no trance’ and ‘can be interrupted at any moment’.\(^13\) By ‘merely quoting the

\(^{28}\) Artaud on Theatre, p.xv.
\(^{30}\) Artaud on Theatre, p.xxix.
\(^{31}\) Artaud, ‘The Evolution of Set Design’ in Artaud on Theatre, p.14
\(^{33}\) Artaud, ‘On the Balinese Theatre’ in Artaud on Theatre, p.98.
\(^{36}\) Peter Brook, The Empty Space (New York: Touchstone, 1968) p.87.
\(^{40}\) Brecht, ‘On Chinese Acting’ in Brecht Sourcebook, p.17.
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character, the actor increases the critical distance and is able to present the gestus; the ‘social heart’ of an action. Gestic acting heightens spectator participation since it allows a situation to be presented ‘dialectically for discussion and judgement’. The ‘complicated and contradictory’ gestus of an action is achieved by the actor’s presentation of different alternatives to the decisions ultimately taken by the character to the audience, thereby enacting the potential for change. Brecht comments on Courage’s payment for the burial of Kattrin in the final scene of Mother Courage and Her Children as portrayed by Helene Weigel in the Berliner Ensemble’s production (1950):

She fished a few coins out of her leather bad, put one back and gave the peasants the rest.

Here, social and economic meaning intrude upon Courage’s moment of grief, preventing the spectator from losing their objectivity in empathy for the grieving mother. The action shows that even motherhood is ‘embedded in economics’: she is ‘a good businesswoman’ despite her grief. In The Performance Group’s production of Mother Courage in 1975, Richard Schechner’s direction emphasises the gestus of the final moments of the scene. Instead of just covering the dead girl with a tarpaulin, Courage ‘strips her daughter down to her underwear so that she can sell the clothes’. Schechner’s addition is consistent with Brecht’s intention that the spectator should not feel sympathetic towards Courage. They should be astonished that they live in a world where profit is to be made from war and death and leave the theatre determined to make changes towards a world in which economic inequality does not condition a mother’s reaction to her child’s death.

Artaud’s adaptation of Shelley’s 1819 verse drama and Stendhal’s 1837 novella is based on the story of the ‘sixteenth-century Italian nobleman Count Francesc Cenci, a tyrant who plots the murder of his two sons, and beats, confines and rapes his daughter Beatrice’. Since Artaud asserts in The Theatre and Its Double that canonical writers ‘may speak nobly, but in a manner that no longer suits these times’, his appropriation of an established literary text necessitates a transformation of form. His exaggeration of the sadistic and pathological elements of the play to a point of violence is consistent with the Theatre of Cruelty’s aim to ‘drain [the ethical and social] abscesses’ of the receiving audience, and involves the implementation of performance techniques influenced by his experience of Balinese theatre. The influence of Balinese performance upon the development of his aesthetic extends to its use of sound: the hypnotic ‘rhythms of the gamelan ensemble’. His stated intention that the audience ‘will find themselves in the centre of a network of sound vibrations’ in The Cenci is symptomatic of the his belief that sounds should assume a

41 Ibid, p.15.
45 Eddershaw, p.16.
48 Brecht, Mother Courage and Her Children in Collected Plays: Five, p.186.
50 Curtin, p.251.
51 Artaud, ‘No More Masterpieces’ in Artaud on Theatre, p.132.
53 Artaud, Theatre and the Plague’ in Artaud on Theatre, p.130.
54 Artaud, ‘The Cenci’ in Artaud on Theatre, p.163.
greater importance in performance; that is, that they should ‘interact dynamically’\(^{55}\) with the plot and that their physical force should be felt by the audience. In the first staging of *The Cenci* in 1935 at the Théâtre des Folies-Wagram in Paris,\(^{56}\) ‘loudspeakers’ were placed at ‘four cardinal points of the auditorium’\(^{57}\) to distribute the ‘sensational musical and sonorous elements’\(^{58}\) amongst the audience. The spectator’s proximity to the source of the sounds serves to heighten participation in that the sounds become part of the audience’s own reality. Artaud collaborated with Roger Désormière to record a musical score consisting of ‘twenty-four…predominantly percussive’ sound cues which ‘did not merely support the action but motivated it obliquely’\(^{59}\). The descriptions of the sound effects within the play text record their intended effects:

*The bells can be heard; their tone has become sepulchral. An extraordinary calm descends upon the scene. Something like the sound of a viola vibrates very lightly and very high up. BEATRICE sits down in a chair and waits. CENCI approaches her gently. His attitude is completely transformed; it radiates a sort of serene emotion. BEATRICE looks at him and it seems that her own misgivings too have suddenly vanished.*\(^{60}\)

Here, the abstracted sounds of the bells and the viola form part of the ‘omnipresent network of sound vibrations that Cenci activates in the world of the play’ and are illustrative of the ‘mysterious powers and affective force of Cenci’.\(^{61}\) The sound of the bells and of the viola projected from speakers placed amongst the audience ‘act[s] deeply and directly on our sensibility through the senses’\(^{62}\) to transmit the ‘extraordinary calm’ and ‘serene emotion’ to the spectator. The spectator’s physical experience of the sounds that Beatrice ‘hears and imagines’\(^{63}\) increases their empathy with the character and encourages their emotional participation in the performance.

In direct contrast to Artaud, Brecht uses music and songs to interrupt the action of the play, increasing the alienation effect and preventing emotional identification with the characters. The music should be gestic, able to ‘convey or underscore the social relationships between the characters’.\(^{64}\) Bloom notes that when *Mother Courage* was first performed ‘with Paul Buckhard’s music in 1941 at the Schauspielhaus Zurich, Switzerland’, the audience ‘identified with the protagonist and began to feel pity toward her as an individual’\(^{65}\). Brecht explains that this is an undesirable response, for if the audience identifies with Courage in ‘The Song of the Great Capitulation’, it will ‘increase the spectator’s own tendencies to resignation and capitulation’ rather than putting him ‘in a position to feel the beauty and attraction of a social problem’.\(^{66}\) In his own direction of *Mother Courage* in 1949 in Berlin, Brecht collaborated with Paul Dessau as part of his (failed) effort to address the audience’s attitude towards Courage. Dessau writes that the music ‘does not illustrate the text, though it may comment on it’,\(^{67}\) presenting a ‘dialectic between the actor/song and

55 Curtin, p.254.
56 *Artaud on Theatre*, p.xix.
59 Curtin, pp.254, 251.
61 Curtin, p.251.
63 Curtin, p.252.
64 Eddershaw, p.15.
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accompaniment/comment'. In The Performance Group’s production of Mother Courage,
Schechner’s concern to keep the puns and directness of the songs in his re-translation of the
lyrics meant that he had to ‘give up the rhyme’ of the original German text, perhaps making
the music more successful in Epic terms since rhyme could contribute to a trance-inducing
rhythm. However, in Schechner’s production, Alexandra Ivanoff, the musical director, states
that her aim was to integrate the music ‘totally in character development or situational
development…into the reality of the environment’. This use of music is antagonistic to
Brecht’s aim that music should interrupt, alienate, and provide ‘independent contributions
made at suitable points in the play’ to promote the spectator’s intellectual participation.

What both Brecht and Artaud ‘did’ for theatre was to open up the possibilities for the
audience’s experience of theatre. Whereas Brecht involved the audience in the formation of a
rational, intellectual criticism of established ideologies in his plays and aimed to effect
change within society, Artaud’s theatre called for the individual spectator’s metaphysical
understanding of human nature. The limited success of Artaud’s 1935 production of The Cenci and his failure to fully realise the Theatre of Cruelty has been attributed to the fact that
his ‘sense of the ideal often exceeds his sense of what is practical’. Whereas Brecht wrote
modelbooks explaining exactly how to implement his theories in his plays, Artaud ‘left
visions and metaphors’. Furthermore, Artaud, unlike Brecht, did not state a belief that it was
‘the theatre’s business to entertain people’. Accordingly, Artaud’s influence has been more
abstract and less pervasive than Brecht’s. Brecht’s influence remains in his theories, and the
Berliner Ensemble’s adherence to his modelbooks ensures that their productions of his plays
remain unchanged. However, an increase in funding for theatre and advancements in
technology and actor training have brought about a reconsideration of Artaud’s theories by
later theatre practitioners, most explicitly by Peter Brook in his ‘Theatre of Cruelty Season’ at
the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1964, and more recently in the emergence of In-Yer-Face theatre. Brook comments that ‘Artaud applied is Artaud betrayed…because it is always just a
portion of his thought that is exploited’. The same could be said of Brecht - Schechner’s
direction of Mother Courage did not entirely correspond to Brecht’s direction. However, the
fact that both Artaud and Brecht cherry picked aspects of Eastern performance to support
their opposing theories on spectator participation is indicative of how commonplace and
productive such exploitation can be to theatrical innovation.

68 Ibid.
69 Ryan, p.83.
70 Ibid.
72 Roose-Evans, P.90.
74 Brecht on Theatre, p.180.
75 Brook, p.64.
Bibliography


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Appendix 1

Appendix 2

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Appendix 3