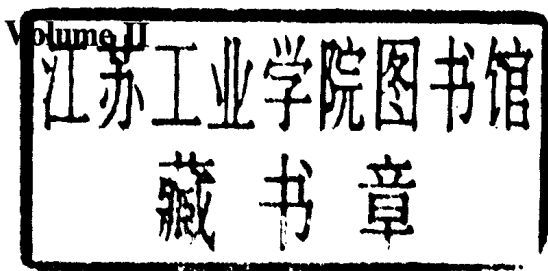


PERFORMANCE

Critical Concepts in Literary
and Cultural Studies

Edited by Philip Auslander



 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2003
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

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Typeset in Times by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-25511-2 (Set)
ISBN 0-415-25513-9 (Volume II)

Publisher's Note

References within each chapter are as they appear in the
original complete work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reprint their material:

The University of Chicago Press for permission to reprint Jacques Derrida, "The theater of cruelty and the closure of representation", in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 232–250. © 1978 by The University of Chicago.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cambridge University Press and the estate of Raymond Williams for permission to reprint Raymond Williams, "Drama in a dramatised society". (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 1–21.

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Part 1

REPRESENTATION

THE THEATER OF CRUELTY AND THE CLOSURE OF REPRESENTATION

Jacques Derrida

Source: Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 232–250.

Unique fois au monde, parce qu'en raison d'un événement toujours
que j'expliquerai, il n'est pas de Présent, non—un présent n'existe pas.
(Mallarmé, *Quant au livre*)

. . . as for my forces,
they are only a supplement,
the supplement of an actual state,
it is that there has never been an origin.

(Artaud, 6 June 1947)

“. . . Dance / and consequently the theater / have not yet begun to exist.” This is what one reads in one of Antonin Artaud’s last writings (*Le théâtre de la cruauté*, in 84, 1948). And in the same text, a little earlier, the theater of cruelty is defined as “the affirmation / of a terrible / and, moreover, implacable necessity.” Artaud, therefore, does not call for destruction, for a new manifestation of negativity. Despite everything that it must ravage in its wake, “the theater of cruelty / is not the symbol of an absent void.” It *affirms*, it produces affirmation itself in its full and necessary rigor. But also in its most hidden sense, the sense most often buried, most often diverted from itself: “implacable” as it is, this affirmation has “not yet begun to exist.”

It is still to be born. Now a necessary affirmation can be born only by being reborn to itself. For Artaud, the future of the theater—thus, the future in general—is opened only by the anaphora which dates from the eve prior to birth. Theatricality must traverse and restore “existence” and “flesh” in each of their aspects. Thus, whatever can be said of the body can be said of the theater. As we know, Artaud lived the morrow of a dispossession: his proper

body, the property and propriety of his body, had been stolen from him at birth by the thieving god who was born in order "to pass himself off / as me."¹ Rebirth doubtless occurs through—Artaud recalls this often—a kind of reeducation of the organs. But this reeducation permits the access to a life before birth and after death ("... through dying / I have finally achieved real immortality," p. 110), and not to a death before birth and after life. This is what distinguishes the affirmation of cruelty from romantic negativity; the difference is slight and yet decisive. Lichtenberger: "I cannot rid myself of this idea that I was *dead* before I was born, and that through death I will return to this very state. . . . To die and to be reborn with the memory of one's former existence is called fainting; to awaken with other organs which must first be reeducated is called birth." For Artaud, the primary concern is not to die in dying, not to let the thieving god divest him of his life. "And I believe that there is always someone else, at the extreme moment of death, to strip us of our own lives" (*AA*, p. 162).

Similarly, Western theater has been separated from the force of its essence, removed from its *affirmative* essence, its *vis affirmativa*. And this dispossession occurred from the origin on, is the very movement of origin, of birth as death.

This is why a "place" is "left on all the stages of stillborn theater" ("Le théâtre et l'anatomie," in *La rue*, July 1946). The theater is born in its own disappearance, and the offspring of this movement has a name: man. The theater of cruelty is to be born by separating death from birth and by erasing the name of man. The theater has always been made to do that for which it was not made: "The last word on man has not been said. . . . The theater was never made to describe man and what he does. . . . *Et le théâtre est ce patin dégingandé, qui musique de troncs par barbes métalliques de barbelés nous maintient en état de guerre contre l'homme qui nous corsetait.* . . . Man is quite ill in Aeschylus, but still thinks of himself somewhat as a god and does not want to enter the membrane, and in Euripides, finally, he splashes about in the membrane, forgetting where and when he was a god" (*ibid.*).

Indeed, the eve of the origin of this declining, decadent, and negative Western theater must be reawakened and reconstituted in order to revive the implacable necessity of affirmation on its Eastern horizon. This is the implacable necessity of an as yet inexistent stage, certainly, but the affirmation is not to be elaborated *tomorrow*, in some "new theater." Its implacable necessity operates as a permanent force. Cruelty is always at work. The void, the place that is empty and waiting for this theater which has not yet "begun to exist," thus measures only the strange distance which separates us from implacable necessity, from the *present* (or rather the contemporary, *active*) work of affirmation. Within the space of the unique opening of this distance, the stage of cruelty rears its enigma for us. And it is into this opening that we wish to enter here.

If throughout the world today—and so many examples bear witness to this in the most striking fashion—all theatrical audacity declares its fidelity to Artaud (correctly or incorrectly, but with increasing insistency), then the

question of the theater of cruelty, of its present inexistence and its implacable necessity, has the value of a *historic* question. A historic question not because it could be inscribed within what is called the history of theater, not because it would be epoch-making within the becoming of theatrical forms, or because it would occupy a position within the succession of models of theatrical representation. This question is historic in an absolute and radical sense. It announces the limit of representation.

The theater of cruelty is not a *representation*. It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable. Life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation, "I have therefore said 'cruelty' as I might have said 'life'" (*TD*, p. 114). This life carries man along with it, but is not primarily the life of man. The latter is only a representation of life, and such is the limit—the humanist limit—of the metaphysics of classical theater. "The theater as we practice it can therefore be reproached with a terrible lack of imagination. The theater 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" (*TD*, p. 116).

Is not the most naïve form of representation *mimesis*? Like Nietzsche—and the affinities do not end there—Artaud wants to have done with the *imitative* concept of art, with the Aristotelean aesthetics² in which the metaphysics of Western art comes into its own. "Art is not the imitation of life, but life is the imitation of a transcendental principle which art puts us into communication with once again" (*OC* 4: 310).

Theatrical art should be the primordial and privileged site of this destruction of imitation: more than any other art, it has been marked by the labor of total representation in which the affirmation of life lets itself be doubled and emptied by negation. This representation, whose structure is imprinted not only on the art, but on the entire culture of the West (its religions, philosophies, politics), therefore designates more than just a particular type of theatrical construction. This is why the question put to us today by far exceeds the bounds of theatrical technology. Such is Artaud's most obstinate affirmation: technical or teatrological reflection is not to be treated marginally. The decline of the theater doubtless begins with the possibility of such a dissociation. This can be emphasized without weakening the importance or interest of teatrological problems, or of the revolutions which may occur within the limits of teatrological problems, or of the revolutions which may occur within the limits of theatrical technique. But Artaud's intention indicates these limits. For as long as these technical and intratheatrical revolutions do not penetrate the very foundations of Western theater, they will belong to the history and to the stage that Antonin Artaud wanted to explode.

What does it mean to break this structure of belonging? Is it possible to do so? Under what conditions can a theater today legitimately invoke Artaud's name? It is only a fact that so many directors wish to be acknowledged as Artaud's heirs, that is (as has been written), his "illegitimate sons." The

question of justification and legality must also be raised. With what criteria can such a claim be recognized as unfounded? Under what conditions could an authentic “theater of cruelty” “begin to exist”? These simultaneously technical and “metaphysical” questions (metaphysical in the sense understood by Artaud), arise spontaneously from the reading of all the texts in *The Theater and Its Double*, for these texts are more *solicitations* than a sum of precepts, more a system of critiques *shaking the entirety* of Occidental history than a treatise on theatrical practice.

The theater of cruelty expulses God from the stage. It does not put a new atheist discourse on stage, or give atheism a platform, or give over theatrical space to a philosophizing logic that would once more, to our greater lassitude, proclaim the death of God. The theatrical practice of cruelty, in its action and structure, inhabits or rather *produces* a nontheological space.

The stage is theological for as long as it is dominated by speech, by a will to speech, by the layout of a primary logos which does not belong to the theatrical site and governs it from a distance. The stage is theological for as long as its structure, following the entirety of tradition, comports the following elements: an author-creator who, absent and from afar, is armed with a text and keeps watch over, assembles, regulates the time or the meaning of representation, letting this latter *represent* him as concerns what is called the content of his thoughts, his intentions, his ideas. He lets representation represent him through representatives, directors or actors, enslaved interpreters who represent characters who, primarily through what they say, more or less directly represent the thought of the “creator.” Interpretive slaves who faithfully execute the providential designs of the “master.” Who moreover—and this is the ironic rule of the representative structure which organizes all these relationships—creates nothing, has only the illusion of having created, because he only transcribes and makes available for reading a text whose nature is itself necessarily representative; and this representative text maintains with what is called the “real” (the existing real, the “reality” about which Artaud said, in the “Avertissement” to *Le moine*, that it is an “excrement of the mind”) an imitative and reproductive relationship. Finally, the theological stage comports a passive, seated public, a public of spectators, of consumers, of “enjoyers”—as Nietzsche and Artaud both say—attending a production that lacks true volume or depth, a production that is level, offered to their voyeuristic scrutiny. (In the theater of cruelty, pure visibility is not exposed to voyeurism.) This general structure in which each agency is linked to all the others by representation, in which the irrepresentability of the living present is dissimulated or dissolved, suppressed or deported within the infinite chain of representations—this structure has never been modified. All revolutions have maintained it intact, and most often have tended to protect or restore it. And it is the phonetic text, speech, transmitted discourse—eventually transmitted by the prompter whose hole is the hidden but

indispensable center of representative structure—which ensures the movement of representation. Whatever their importance, all the pictorial, musical and even gesticular forms introduced into Western theater can only, in the best of cases, illustrate, accompany, serve, or decorate a text, a verbal fabric, a logos which *is said* in the beginning. “If then, the author is the man who arranges the language of speech and the director is his slave, there is merely a question of words. There is here a confusion over terms, stemming from the fact that, for us, and according to the sense generally attributed to the word *director*, this man is merely an artisan, an adapter, a kind of translator eternally devoted to making a dramatic work pass from one language into another; this confusion will be possible and the director will be forced to play second fiddle to the author only so long as there is a tacit agreement that the language of words is superior to others and that the theater admits none other than this one language” (*TD*, p. 119). This does not imply, of course, that to be faithful to Artaud it suffices to give a great deal of importance and responsibility to the “director” while maintaining the classical structure.

By virtue of the word (or rather the unity of the word and the concept, as we will say later—and this specification will be important) and beneath the theological ascendancy both of the “verb [which] is the measure of our impotency” (*OC* 4: 277) and of our fear, it is indeed the stage which finds itself threatened throughout the Western tradition. The Occident—and such is the energy of its essence—has worked only for the erasure of the stage. For a stage which does nothing but illustrate a discourse is no longer entirely a stage. Its relation to speech is its malady, and “we repeat that the epoch is sick” (*OC* 4: 280). To reconstitute the stage, finally to put on stage and to overthrow the tyranny of the text is thus one and the same gesture. “The triumph of pure *mise en scène*” (*OC* 4: 305).

This classical forgetting of the stage is then confused with the history of theater and with all of Western culture; indeed, it even guaranteed their unfolding. And yet, despite this “forgetting,” the theater and its arts have lived richly for over twenty-five centuries: an experience of mutations and perturbations which cannot be set aside, despite the peaceful and impassive immobility of the fundamental structures. Thus, in question is not only a forgetting or a simple surface concealment. A certain stage has maintained with the “forgotten,” but, in truth, violently erased, stage a secret communication, a certain relationship of *betrayal*, if to betray is at once to denature through infidelity, but also to let oneself be evinced despite oneself, and to manifest the foundation of force. This explains why classical theater, in Artaud’s eyes, is not simply the absence, negation, or forgetting of theater, is not a nontheater: it is a mark of cancellation that lets what it covers be read; and it is corruption also, a “perversion,” a *seduction*, the margin of an aberration whose meaning and measure are visible only beyond birth, at the eve of theatrical representation, at the origin of tragedy. Or, for example, in the realm of the “Orphic Mysteries which subjugated Plato,” or the “Mysteries

of Eleusis” stripped of the interpretations with which they have been covered, or the “pure beauty of which Plato, at least once in this world, must have found the complete, sonorous, streaming naked realization” (*TD*, p. 52). Artaud is indeed speaking of perversion and not of forgetting, for example, in this letter to Benjamin Crémieux:

The theater, an independent and autonomous art, must, in order to *revive or simply to live*, realize what differentiates it from text, pure speech, literature, and all other fixed and written means. We can perfectly well continue to conceive of a theater based upon the authority of the text, and on a text more and more wordy, diffuse, and boring, to which the esthetics of the stage would be subject. But this conception of theater, which consists of having people sit on a certain number of straight-backed or overstuffed chairs placed in a row and tell each other stories, however marvelous, is, if not the absolute negation of theater—which does not absolutely require movement in order to be what it should—certainly its *perversion*.

[*TD*, p. 106; *my italics*]

Released from the text and the author-god, *mise en scène* would be returned to its creative and founding freedom. The director and the participants (who would no longer be actors *or* spectators) would cease to be the instruments and organs of representation. Is this to say that Artaud would have refused the name *representation* for the theater of cruelty? No, provided that we clarify the difficult and equivocal meaning of this notion. Here, we would have to be able to play upon all the German words that we indistinctly translate with the unique word representation. The stage, certainly, *will no longer represent*, since it will not operate as an addition, as the sensory illustration of a text already written, thought, or lived outside the stage, which the stage would then only repeat but whose fabric it would not constitute. The stage will no longer operate as the repetition of a *present*, will no longer *re-present* a present that would exist elsewhere and prior to it, a present that would exist elsewhere and prior to it, a present whose plenitude would be older than it, absent from it, and rightfully capable of doing without it: the being-present-to-itself of the absolute Logos, the living present of God. Nor will the stage be a representation, if representation means the surface of a spectacle displayed for spectators. It will not even offer the presentation of a present, if present signifies that which is maintained *in front* of me. Cruel representation must permeate me. And nonrepresentation is, thus, original representation, if representation signifies, also, the unfolding of a volume, a multidimensional milieu, an experience which produces its own space. *Spacing* [*es-pacement*], that is to say, the production of a space that no speech could condense or comprehend (since speech primarily presupposes this spacing), thereby appeals to a time that is no longer that of so-called phonic linearity, appeals to