



CIHA2012
N Ü R N B E R G

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Die Herausforderung des Objekts

33rd Congress of the International Committee
of the History of Art
33. Internationaler Kunsthistoriker-Kongress
Nürnberg, 15.-20. Juli 2012

Congress Proceedings – Part 1

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Antonin Artaud's »Cinema of Cruelty« and the Impossible Search for the Authentic Medium

A Lesson for the Digital Age

Any attempt to investigate Antonin Artaud's¹ contribution to cinema, and in particular his vision of »cinema of cruelty,« always seem to come up against two important obstacles. The first obstacle is the context in which one should locate Artaud's relationship with cinema. It is impossible to develop a fair understanding of Artaud's work without taking into account his multiple roles as art theorist, poet, screenwriter, play writer for the theatre and the radio, actor and director, which altogether render this investigation rather complex and multi-layered. The second obstacle originates from Artaud's health problems (depression, schizophrenia and drug addictions), which make it hard to draw a clear line between his personal odyssey and the principles of his artistic production. Those challenges have been addressed by various scholars and film theorists, who have attempted to overcome the two aforementioned obstacles in order to create a more »unified« image about Artaud as a personality and as an artist. This article does not aspire to follow this trajectory. Instead, it focuses on putting Artaud's theoretical work to the test of film practice, through three well-known examples, which reflect both his personal vision and his diverse legacy.

Artaud, as a surrealist, embraced the new medium of cinema with the confidence that it could become the privileged agent of the effort to change the world: »There is in cinema something unforeseen and mysterious which one does not find in other arts.«² he writes in 1927. Artaud believed strongly that the spontaneous and almost despotic qualities of cinema's moving images were far more than a new, more effective way to tell stories. The associations of those images, the collision of forms, objects and movements, the surprising juxtapositions and marvellous metamorphoses generated by cinema could, for Artaud, dredge up an inner world, exposing the psyche to a whole series of new stimuli. In his essay »Cinema and Reality« he writes: »Cinema exalts matter and reveals it to us in its profound spirituality, in its relations with the spirit from which it has emerged.«³

»Cinema of cruelty« is theoretically grounded on that power of cinema to directly address the unconscious and through that the spectator's total existence. Artaud believed that cinema could provoke a violent reordering of perceptions if it espoused an aesthetic of shock, »a shock designed for the eyes.« By pushing the audience through »terror of the supernatural and supranatural to emotional and mental limits,«⁴ cinema could deconstruct reality and approach the most primitive side of human spirit, »the primitive arrangements of things.« Artaud's principal was to attack the audience's senses by »forcing« them to experience a synesthetic language, based on a »chaotic« series of images and sequences using elements of menace, the grotesque, the ugly and pain. Those radical visual structures would bring the spectators out of their desensitization and »oblige« them to confront themselves, by confronting their inner urges, fears and hopes. The end result of this process would be the transformation of the spectator and his/her liberation from a state of social and moral passivity.

At the heart of Artaud's effort to achieve this transformation lies the quest for a unique cinematic language that would overcome the constructs of verbal language and representation. According to Artaud, reality is repressed by the system of symbolization imposed by verbal language: »Break through language to touch life,«⁵ he said.

For him, verbal language was a surface language, a language which created »a world of sure signs, of a strong symbolic order.«⁶ Instead, Artaud was aiming for a cinema incapable of a verbal translation, in order to communicate directly with the brain. This would be possible thanks to cinema's capacity to produce meaning through a succession of images that create their own sense without the need of any articulation. As Derrida argues, Artaud's rupture with verbal language is an attempt to »reconnect with and deploy the states prior to the subject's symbolic orientation in the world, before the attribution of form, the art anterior to art.«⁷ Consequently, in this world of no symbolization, »an unpurifiable phobos (terror) becomes the signifier for an absence of signifiers;«⁸ a phobos capable of changing profoundly those who experience it.

The above principles constitute the general theoretical context of »cinema of cruelty;« however, it is in film practice that one can examine and evaluate in depth its strengths and possible failures. Before moving to the examination of specific cases, it is essential to underline the fact that Artaud's concept of »cinema of cruelty« stands far from the pretty »obvious« interpretations of cruelty and violence encountered in horror or splatter films and their relative genres. Artaud's ambition was to create a cinema that would be detached in process from what we could call today the normative fiction and documentary film. This was an attempt to lend to cinema's images an authentic directness, never achieved before by any other medium.

Although Artaud had written 15 screenplays, the only one ever made into film was »The Seashell and the Clergyman« (»La Coquille et le Clergyman«), which was directed by Germain Dulac in 1927. The film »narrated« the sexual and psychological torment of a clergyman through a series of illogical, or even hallucinatory images that flew before the clergyman's eyes. However, after the film's completion Artaud was highly dissatisfied with Dulac's work, as he believed it did not realize his vision about cinema. An extensive bibliography has investigated the reasons behind the debate between Artaud and Dulac and its implications. Their examination is out of this article's aims and possibilities; however, I would like to underline an undeniable contribution of the film: the privileged use of the subjective shot. As Naomi Greene observes, »The Seashell and the Clergyman« is the first film ever to present all its images through the eyes of a single character (the clergyman).⁹ For Artaud and Dulac this choice was a way to abolish »objective« reality and create a cinema that could express »the things of the thought.« The clergyman's psychic/mental states would – ideally – not constitute a narrative seeking to mediate reality, but, rather, a violation of continuity that could bring the viewer in touch with reality's origins. The pursuit of this result exclusively through a series of subjective shots was an attempt by Artaud to expose the unavoidable connection between the deconstruction of character and violence.¹⁰ It was a choice that affected profoundly the later work surrealist filmmakers, like Luis Buñuel (»Un chien andalu,« 1929), and underlined the conceptual and ideological implications of technical aspects in a technology-driven medium like cinema.

In considering, however, the impact of Artaud's theories on film practice beyond the surrealist context, one can actually discover some very diverse examples. One of those cases is the work of

Anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch. An examination of one of Rouch's most interesting films, »The human pyramid« (»La pyramide humaine,« 1959), brings to light important affinities with many of the principles of »cinema of cruelty.« In this film, Rouch explores the relations between white French and black African students in the leaving class of the Lycee d'Abidjam, which are characterized by racism, prejudice, or even hate. The main event in the film is the arrival of a new white girl who begins to date an African and then the director closely follows some of the consequences. Apart from filming the reality of the students' lives, Rouch creates a number of situations in which he gives them the opportunity to improvise, adopting a cinematic meta-language which blurs the borders between fiction and reality. However, in the case of this »direct cinema,« »fiction no longer pre-exists before the shooting, but is truly its product.«¹¹ It is a cinema that produces a paradox mixture of spontaneity and discipline, an idea very relevant to Artaud. Part of that mixture is also the non-linear and multi-layered concept of time followed in the film, since its storyline has, in effect, no specific beginning or ending. Rouch's choices comprise a means to achieve a flexibility and transparency of form through which content can communicate directly with the audience and advance them towards knowledge. Rouch achieves a rare flexibility of form through the negation of classic continuity, in an attempt to illuminate the relations between the French and the African students and forcefully challenge the cultural assumptions of his film's viewers, as a result.

Many of the previously analyzed affinities with Artaud's »cinema of cruelty« can be found, in a more contemporary context, in Lars von Trier's »The Idiots« (1998). The film follows the lives of a group of perfectly intelligent young people who, however, pretend to be mentally retarded. Their goal is to shock, annoy, anger and ridicule the public with their politically incorrect and socially offensive behaviors. Through those acts of »mental disorder,« the »idiots« challenge people's tolerance and reveal their hypocrisy. Trier creates a binary system using the »idiots« and »normal« people in order to demolish bourgeois conventions and the dominant cultural structures. »The Idiots« question our perception of the truth, exploring the way it is socially constructed and the way it is lost in the name of a fake civility. The jokes in the film attempt to liberate people from stereotypes and exert a serious psychological impact by doubting the very basis of humanity: intelligence. Notably, seventy years before Trier's film, Artaud wrote in his »Manifesto in a Clear language:« »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.«¹²

Attempting, then, to condense the impact of Artaud's theories in film practice, the plausible question arises of whether the previously reviewed examples constitute in absolute terms what Artaud characterized as »cinema of cruelty« or not. Quite evidently, the answer should be negative. In the case of »The Seashell and the Clergyman,« Artaud himself rejected the film, claiming that Dulac stayed »on the surface of consciousness,« serving a cinema far more poetic than the cinema that he envisioned. In the other two cases and despite the analysed affinities, it is obvious that the use of narrative, representation and verbal language, regardless of their innovative character, locate both films out of the borders of »cinema of cruelty.«

But, how can we relate this »failure« of »cinema of cruelty« to the art of the Digital Age? What kind of lessons can it give us? Interestingly, with the example of the »Idiots« we stop in 1998, namely, at a time when the Internet existed, but the average person had only began to become familiar with it and its various possibilities. Facebook, Twitter and the rest the social media currently available

did not exist, as well as platforms like Youtube and Vimeo and technologies like Wi-Fi, 3G and 4G networks: in essence, what defines the present time. Those »tools« are used today by artists, in various forms/formats and to various extents. I would not like to refer here simply to Digital or New Media Art, but, rather, I would like to allude to artworks that in some form involve a live-feed process through the mediation of the computer. Hopefully, this might constitute a way to push the boundaries of our relationship with the new forms of art even further.

What is important to notice about the nature of this new kind of art, is not simply the fact the artwork passes from real physical space to cyber-space, but, rather, the fact that we experience the formation a binary: in essence one can visualize this binary as two computers, with one computer representing the artist and the other representing the user/audience. And the two of them are connected »directly,« similarly to the famous »Simple Net Art Diagram« by MTAA (1997, fig. 1).¹³ In his seminal essay »The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An evolving thesis, 1991–1995),« artist and author Douglas Davis attempts to update Walter Benjamin's legacy at a critical moment for both new media and art. Davis asserts that through Digital Art we reach a point where »everyone finally talks to everyone«¹⁴ and this is a moment when the inner self is liberated. As a result, new stimuli can be born for the audience and such stimuli are mediated through a direct mode of artistic production very reminiscent of Artaud's vision. In this way, according to Douglas, Virtual Reality can actually become a Realer Reality, in which the fictions of the »master« and the »copy« have no meaning anymore.¹⁵ In other words, the rise of directness entails the fall of the »aura.« Yet, this would not have been possible without realizing the depth of the basic structures of computer-generated art and exploiting their potential.

The artworks realized through the computer always use some form or concept of a protocol. In general, by protocols we mean the conventions, rules and standards that govern the relationships formed within networks, by directing the flows of information. Notably, protocols deployed through new media technologies function without relying on hierarchical, pyramidal and centralized structures of organization, which are the most common structures that human culture has produced. In other words, the networks of such protocols are distributed. In distributed networks, information can travel any path freely, for there are no central points that circumscribe power, as it happens, for example, in centralized or decentralized networks. Therefore, the main focus is placed not on the concept of power, but on that of control. The subjects of protocols are, thus, interconnected, but at the same time, autonomous, as they depend neither on their source, nor on their destination: they can origin from anywhere and they can result to anywhere within the network. Moreover, because of their organization,

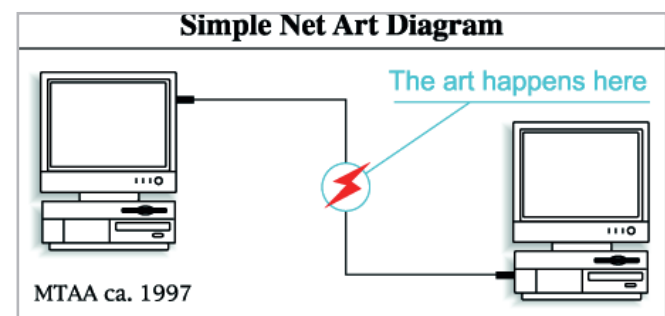


Fig. 1 MTAA, Simple Net Art Diagram, 1997

distributed networks are flexible, reconfigurable and dynamic, able to accommodate change. Accordingly, they can embody the concept of individuation, for each part of the network can be mutated so that it facilitates the members of the system to achieve their own individual goals. Nevertheless, this embodiment is realized without disrupting the rest of the system and the multiplicity of its functional capabilities. Consequently, the topologies engendered by such protocological controls can successfully contain several coexistent and often incompatible subjects. Therefore, the flexibility of form and the mixture of spontaneity and discipline that were analyzed as part of Artaud's work and legacy, both appear to return back to the core of today's art.

The members of the audience are called to co-author the language of the new art by choosing different paths through which information will flow. Different results can be produced according to the extent of the audience's engagement in this mode of creation. The dematerialized artistic object can take on many forms and protocols exist to allow the audience to navigate through those options, which in some cases may be unlimited. In effect, what is in work here is a kind of meta-language, through which primal elements of art are broken apart and, then, rearranged.¹⁶ A »primal arrangement of things« as Artaud might have put it. Therefore, one could claim that the image of the new art looks a bit like an empty frame, or an empty canvas, on which each one of us can paint a unique work. This theorization might seem simplistic, but in reality it suggests that digital media undermine not only the »aura« of the original, but the very concept of originality, since everything can be now individualized. As Davis asserts in »The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction,« we can now produce a »post-original original,«¹⁷ Namely, an original that is so subjective, so personal, that any attempt to claim for authority attached to it is meaningless. So, rather than simply being an empty frame, the image of the new media artwork becomes a kind of mirror. The singular artistic object of the past becomes the distributed artistic object of the present and, as a consequence, the universality of aesthetic criteria can come under question. Not only can we look at each artwork in a different way, but, also, we can make each artwork look the way we want; and this, of course, might threaten the established aesthetic conventions.

However, aesthetic conventions are not the only principles potentially coming under attack here. The demolition of the »aura« is above all a demolition of hierarchy. It is a way to fight homogeneity, produce non-linear concepts, violate continuity or, even, History; in other words, a way to question the dominant perception of truth and »refute the conviction that the world mind is one mind.«¹⁸ This is very much a political perspective, which suggests that we might live in an interconnected world, but we can claim for autonomy as well, by making the connections that we envision and by combining the right »paths.« Therefore, from the effort to build a new aesthetic »open-

ness« for our Digital Age, we reach a stage of being able to politicize such capabilities. »Let anarchy thrive« was the invitation made by Douglas Davis in his 1995 seminal essay.¹⁹ From the early stages of realizing this potential, New Media artists adopted a variety of means that can serve modes of utopian social being: from multimodal collaboration to mass public participation and from open software to hacktivism, the germs of a new political thought seem to abound in the art of the Digital Age. The tools provided by new technologies can today penetrate all aspects of global social living and promote such practices as catalysts for socioeconomic change. Many New Media artworks blur the borders between »use« and »exchange« values, while they often defy the economic aspect of intellectual property. At the same time, they can foster the online democratization of art and by employing social media they can mobilize audiences that go beyond the »art world.« In short, they demonstrate the potential to influence the way political action occurs and the way such action impacts the lives of people in real, physical space.

But, do those possibilities entail that through the combination of the computer and networks an authentically plural and total artistic medium has finally been produced? (or, even, a total »non-medium?«) Have today's artists found a form of art that will manage to change the world as Artaud once believed about cinema? The history of »cinema of cruelty« might provide a few hints about the answers to such questions. For Artaud, cinema proved, in the end, to be a medium unable to penetrate the surface of things. In effect, the spectacular images of cinema had seduced him. »Cinema of cruelty« remained a »surface« language and an idealized spectacle; in short, a chimera. In effect, the essence of Artaud's effort was located within the area of metaphysics and it is because of this fact that his vision for an authentic medium proved impossible to be fulfilled.

But, does this same danger of »seduction« exist today, in the case of new media? The fact that many artworks might be as playful as video games, the fact that they might even look like a game on Nintendo Wii or Xbox Kinect, surely makes them feel familiar and able to affect real physical space, but this does not necessarily entail a true artistic impact. In other words, we have reached a point where, hopefully, we can realize that it is not only the medium (and its »aura« or non-»aura«) that is the most important element; it is predominantly the content of art that can make the difference that Artaud envisioned. At least, that is what history has proven so far. Nevertheless, at the same time, this does not diminish in any way the ongoing digital and online transformation of the medium, which could make artistic content more formally flexible, more widely accessible and, in the end, more powerful than ever before in the history of art. It is up to a new generation of artists to explore and push these capacities to their limits. The path chosen by Artaud might have proven untraversable; yet, the reaching of the destination remains for artists as significant as almost a century ago.

Notes

- 1 Born in 1896 in Marseille. Died in 1948 in Paris.
- 2 Antonin Artaud: Les œuvres complètes. Paris 1976, vol. 3, pp. 65–66.
- 3 Artaud 1976 (note 2), p. 24.
- 4 Will Rockett: Devouring Whirlwind. New York 1988, p. 88.
- 5 Antonin Artaud: Le Théâtre et son double. Paris 1964, p. 17.
- 6 Jean Baudrillard: Simulations (= Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents series). Transl. by Paul Foss. New York 1983, p. 84.
- 7 Jacques Derrida: From To unsense the subjectile. In: Antonin Artaud: a critical reader. Ed. by Edward Scheer. London 2004, p. 125.
- 8 Helga Finter: Antonin Artaud and the impossible theatre: the legacy of the theory of cruelty. In: Antonin Artaud 2004 (note 7), p. 51.
- 9 Naomi Greene: Artaud and Film: A Reconsideration. In: Cinema Journal, 23, 1984, n. 4, p. 34.
- 10 Antonin Artaud 2004 (note 7), p. 105.

- 11 Michel Marie: Direct. In: Anthropology-Reality-Cinema: The films of Jean Rouch. Ed. by Mick Eaton. London 1979, p. 38.
- 12 Antonin Artaud. Selected Writings. Ed. by Susan Sontag. Berkeley 1988, p. 109.
- 13 MTA Website, URL: http://www.mtaa.net/mtaaRR/off-line_art/snad.html.
- 14 Douglas Davis: The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An evolving thesis, 1991–1995). In: Leonardo, 28, 1995, n. 5, p. 385.
- 15 Davis 1995 (note 14), p. 381.
- 16 Davis 1995 (note 14), p. 383.
- 17 Davis 1995 (note 14), p. 383.
- 18 Davis 1995 (note 14), p. 384.
- 19 Davis 1995 (note 14), p. 385.

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