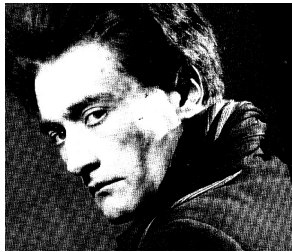


Towards an Understanding of Antonin Artaud's Film Theory: *The Seashell and the Clergyman*

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I. Artaud's Theory of Film and Art



Artaud is described by author and lecturer Lee Jamieson as the “lost prophet of (modern) cinema,” an avant-garde artist of supreme importance whose prophetic vision of film ushered in the new wave of French experimental (Surreal) cinema in the 1920s. Artaud’s theory of cinema grew from his “theatrical” philosophy (published in *The Theatre and its Double*), which focused on the untapped potential of live drama to interrupt the passive experience of the spectator by eliciting her hidden, repressed fears and desires. Through radically inventive techniques of staging, lighting, and sound design, facilitated by what Artaud termed “cruelty,” he sought to liberate the creative and dangerous forces of the subconscious, promoting a unique aesthetic environment in which the theatergoer became an active participant in the creative experience.

It is possible to approach Artaud’s film theory through the analysis of a film that many have dubbed the first “Surreal film,” Germaine Dulac’s *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1927), for which Artaud wrote the screen treatment. However, before examining the film, Artaud’s basic aesthetic theory will be presented. As stated, Artaud’s film theory emerges from his philosophy of theater, “The Theatre of Cruelty.” Derrida explains what this meant for Artaud in terms of the radical presentation of his artistic ideas:

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.¹

This notion carries over into Artaud’s many proposed filmic projects, his conception of a new cinema of art was first and foremost opposed to representation in the form of *realism* in film. Artaud envisioned film as the medium and means by which to overcome the oppressive influence of narrative film, with its strict ties to literature and symbolic language and logic, which Artaud believed inhibited the spectator’s aesthetic consciousness, a “spiritual-bodily” consciousness that brought the spectator back to the primordial (now lost) experience of life’s chaotic and violent nature. As Lee Jamieson states, Artaud believed that all art (and cinema) “embodies and intensifies the underlying brutalities of life to recreate the thrill of experience.”²

Artaud’s aesthetics of film was directed to the end of shattering the entranced gaze of the spectator, a gaze that peers out from the conscious mind-set that has been engendered in great part by the genre of cinematic realism. Narrative film styles work to seamlessly suture the subject within the overall text of the film by incorporating images, situations, and portrayals that mimic “real life” experiences. From the perspective of *structuralism*, reading a film as a text composed of a system of signs organized and expressed through various codes, representational film focuses specifically on codes, rules, and conventions that re-present reality, e. g., the editing, lighting, acting, *mise-en-scene/shot*, narrative structure, indeed the entire apparatus of

cinema, employ codes designed explicitly for the purpose of recreating and promoting the experience of reality.

Narrative film, as a hybrid of theater and literature, recreates and promotes the type of reality, or materiality, that Artaud believed was responsible for the atrophy of the artistic spirit in the age of modernity. Much like Nietzsche, Artaud believed that the rise of technology and the rapidly expanding civilization was creating a secular environment in which crass materialism ruled the day. With the rise of science and the intellectual “death of religion,” the modern world was cultivating a barren, positivistic landscape devoid of the authentic sense of human spirituality. Artaud’s brand of cinema would mark a return to and a retrieval of the human’s long forgotten instinctual ways of being by breaking through the material world (and its double, the cinema of realism), puncturing “the human skin of things; the derm of reality.” Cinema was the means by which the new, modern artist “exalts matter and makes it appear to us in its profound spirituality, in its relationship with the mind from which it emerges.”³



How does cinema facilitate the modern artist’s communion with her original spiritual nature and mind through which she gives form to the physical world? In response to this query I look to Artaud’s concept of the “artefact,” or the work of art as a produced material object. According to Artaud, when the artist produces the work, the power of the original ideas and emotions inspiring the work is lost. The work is a pale, anemic re-presentation of the original thought, which is forever lost to the spectator, for the art object cannot contain or communicate the spiritual-sensual immediacy of the artist in its objective, material instantiation. We encounter this understanding of the “artefact,” which is quite common in philosophical circles, in Derrida and Nietzsche. Both thinkers are in agreement with Artaud that the completed art object always represents the “mummified ruins” of the passionate, emotional lived experience of the artist.

Thus, Artaud’s new cinema attempted to retain the power and primacy of the creative, aesthetic thought process by avoiding the direct re-presentation of material reality in his films. He sought to implement a method for producing film (as artefact), which simultaneously retained the energy and primacy of the original thought processes. As Lee Jamieson argues, Artaud’s cinema functions on the boundaries between materialism and spirituality, the conscious and subconscious, fiction and reality, and the aesthetic process and the formal (material) artefact. The type of cinema envisioned by Artaud relates to *post-structuralism*, and beyond, it engenders the active undermining of filmic structure by philosophizing the disruption of the text by throwing signs, codes, and the entire system of signification, into a state of disarray. Artaud wanted to break the hold of narrative film on the spectator’s gaze and consciousness through a brand of cinema that would preserve the emotionality, passion, and spirituality of the creative process within the artefact, the completed film. As critic Sandy Flitterman-Lewis writes, Artaud wanted his films:

to create the impact of the dream instead of simply reproducing its irrationality. For him, then, the representation of a ‘dream state,’ in which the spectator’s involvement was one of active participation, was the primary aim of his scenario [for *The Seashell and the Clergyman*].⁴

This marked for Artaud a return to a primordial moment that precedes symbols and the grammar of formal language.⁵ His cinema was concerned most specifically with the original

source of the symbol, the primordial state in which image, thought, gesture, sound, sense, and emotion have not yet emerged in a definitive, symbolic form of linguistic expression, have not yet taken shape within a tightly ordered logical grammar, or language, of the “narrative” film.

II. The Analysis of *The Seashell and the Clergyman*

Artaud imagined that his scenario for the 1927 film, *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (directed by Germaine Dulac) was capable of capturing and communicating the “unconscious source of [artistic] thought.” To say that Artaud was disenchanted with Dulac’s final version of the film is an understatement. His chief complaint was that film ultimately betrayed his philosophy of cinema, because in translating the screenplay to film Dulac re-presented Artaud’s primal imagery by subjugating them to a narrative structure by incorporating a variety of realist film techniques. According to Artaud, the film degenerated into direct presentation (re-presentation) of a dream, in terms of the “logic of the dream,” destroying the film’s potential to mean or point beyond the common consciousness associated with realism, or narrative film.



As author A. L. Reese states, the film is undoubtedly a psychodrama, an Oedipal clash between an old man, a young priest, and a woman, who is simultaneously the feminine object of “desire” as well as the immaterial spiritual “essence” of desire, and beyond, the general drive Freudian psychology associates with *libido*.⁶ However, such a strict Freudian interpretation of “libido” appears to betray Artaud’s radical conception of this fundamental sexual drive. For it appears as an all-encompassing pervasive force that drives the film, and is perhaps better conceived in terms of Jungian psychology, and further, in terms of Nietzsche’s philosophy, namely, *libido* as “will-to-power,” i. e., the ineffable, chaotic, and mysterious life-force that shapes and sustains the material world, the metaphysical life-force that is sublimated, repressed, channeled, and displaced, but forever resists our attempts to overcome or master it.

The film unfolds as a dream-sequence, in the form of a highly disjointed narrative. However, this is not a dream that entrances or enraptures the spectator. Rather, it is akin to a nightmare, which disturbs and shocks the spectator out of her complacency by incorporating a multiplicity of grotesque and frightening elements (e.g., avant-garde cinema techniques, bizarre scenarios, ingenious and fantastic editing effects, and haunting characterizations), which work to dislodge the mind from a passive viewing. Dulac includes a complex array of symbols, symbols which cannot be fully decoded or comprehended, and she allows the language of the subconscious to speak through them. She chooses images multi-level meanings and overlays these within the context of shifting and changing tableaux: At once she transports the viewer to the sunny countryside, the bustling city, the interior of a large church, a ballroom, as the scene for an orgiastic ritual, and an eerie, abandoned warehouse with a door slightly ajar, lit perfectly to accentuate the heavy shadows. This shot opens the film, setting a macabre tone for the spectator’s mysterious and frightening journey to follow, taunting the spectator with the

following challenge, “Enter, if you dare.”

The film’s text is interwoven with symbols of an occult and alchemical nature, e.g., the primal elements are present throughout: fire, water, air, and earth, along with what might represent the fifth, and most important element, *quintessence*, the essence, or substance, upon



which everything else depends for its existence. Dulac shows the priest in the beginning of the film pouring a dark, mysterious liquid from a large oyster shell into the alchemist’s vessel, which he drops onto the floor. The scene reveals that he is smashing in succession a host of glass receptacles filled with black liquid. It appears as if the vessels contain the essence of the life-force, the dark night of his soul, which he is attempting to purge from his being. However, unlike the alchemist’s “great work,” he will never reach a state of synthesis, where opposites are destroyed, and from this destruction, a new and perfected state of being emerges. Couched in terms of psychology, a state in which one’s neuroses are overcome, and a change in one’s psychic constitution is accomplished. This force, however, can neither be cast off nor repressed by way of the mind’s various defense mechanisms, and this is clear toward the film’s end when the priest drinks down this essence, he seems to acknowledge that this essence indeed permeates and sustains his entire existence. As Jamieson rightly concludes, within these scenes Dulac is playing on a double meaning of the term essence, “describing both ‘distilled liquid’ and ‘life force’.”⁷

To reiterate, Artaud thought avant-garde cinema should disrupt the signs and codes of commercial, narrative cinema. As Lee Jamieson states, by way of Dulac’s inventive cinematic techniques and treatment of Artaud’s screenplay, she successfully produced a:

complex, multi-layered film, so semantically unstable that images dissolve into one another both visually and “semantically,” truly investing the film’s ability to act upon the subconscious.⁸

In this subconscious world of the dream that is *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, the nocturnal world of occult symbolism, or pre-symbolic energy, the experience of material reality defies all logic and rationality, the images and scenes encountered change in a drastic and inexplicable manner, what the spectator encounters cannot be rationally comprehended: Time is no longer unfolding as linear phenomenon; space is no longer calculable by the laws of the physical sciences. For example, Dulac incorporates a host of special effects and unique editing techniques, incorporating the extensive use of dissolves and superimposition, in which she melts one or more images together. In one scene, we encounter the character of the old man in general’s uniform defies the laws of physics. He is seen hovering above the ground, clinging to walls, and swinging awkwardly from the rafters. In another scene, through the use of superimposed imagery, Dulac shows the priest, driven by the desire for the woman, crawling from the floor of the church through the busy city streets. His body appears grotesquely deformed, and he pulls himself along using only his arms, while his twisted legs are dragging behind, crushed and mangled by the apparent weight of his immense metaphysical burden.

Overall, Artaud appears to be specifically concerned with the portrayal of the metaphysical, subterranean desire, or essence, that has been repressed by the forces of organized religion. Thus, the Catholic priest becomes the embodiment of this failed and unnatural attempt to remain chaste and pure, to protect and preserve by means of repression what is wrongly perceived as our “normal” state of psychological/moral well-being, as if it is somehow possible

to harness successfully this primordial force. Although it is the case that repressed drives often find symbolic fulfilment in dreams, it is also the case that in *The Seashell and the Clergyman* the impetus of this drive is so monstrously overwhelming that it shatters all psychic barriers, or the ramparts of logic and rationality, which seek to hold it captive below the surface of consciousness. However, Artaud is not suggesting that organized religion is alone in seeking to morally repress our primal instincts, beyond this, he suggests that the entirety of modern Western culture is so inclined.

In many scenes Dulac shows the priest licentiously glaring at the elusive woman, not only does the priest desire the woman for his physical pleasure, for she is the unadulterated sexual object of his desire, he also seeks to sadistically enslave and control her as the object of his psychological desire. This notion is expressed through Dulac's editing, most specifically in the scene where the priest attempts to strangle the woman. Through superimposition, we witness his hands clutching violently at her translucent, alabaster neck. If he is unable to "consummate" the relationship in either way described above, he is undoubtedly hellishly intent on taking her life, snuffing out the object, and thus the desire itself. As the priest's desire becomes more volatile, the tone of the film becomes increasingly violent and aggressive. For example, under the priest's jealous rage, the general's head splits into fragments, cleaved through the artifice of Dulac's masterful editing. Toward the film's climax, as the priest continues his advances toward the woman, her shape begins to drastically change, "her body is seen to distort, stretch, and deform [. . .] images of corporeality are presented as untrustworthy in the film, liable to alter in response to intense emotional states."⁹ She appears to be controlled by the force of the priest's desire, which is something far beyond the particular embodiment of the priest. In short, material reality is responding to "immaterial" emotional states, subconscious desires, namely, the *will-to-power*, the very opposite of the way things work in everyday reality.



III. Concluding Remarks:

With his screen scenario for *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, Artaud attempted to introduce the spectator, through their active participation on the subconscious level, to the frightening and unpredictable world of the dream. He did this by finding a concrete technique of transferring the raw power of creative thought, through the images of film, without relying on the techniques of cinematic realism or reducing the mysteries of existence to some materialist metaphysics. He believed cinema was the supreme means by which to access the pre-symbolic, pre-linguistic grounds of reality. In the following quote, Artaud speaks about the (as yet) untapped power of film:

In cinema I have always distinguished a quality peculiar to the secret movement and matter of images. The cinema has an unexpected and mysterious side which we find in no other form of art.¹⁰

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3. -----, *Antonin Artaud: From Theory to Practice*, (Greenwich: UK, 2007).
4. Fliiterman-Lewis, Sandy, "The Image and the Spark: Dulac and Artaud Reviewed," *Dada and Surreal Film*, ed. Rodolf Kuenzli (Willis Locker and Owens: New York, 1987).
5. Kristeva, Julia, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans., T. Gora (Columbia University Press: New York, 1984). In the philosophy of Julia Kristeva we find just such a notion of a "pre-linguistic" realm of chaotic, primordial communication, and she distinguishes this "pre-verbal functional state" from the (later) symbolic operations that depend on language as a tightly ordered system of signs. Her basic claim is that this more primordial, irrational, chaotic realm of expression, "the semiotic," is repressed, to the detriment of the individual's aesthetic development, by the "logical" language of science, which operates out of the modality of the symbolic.
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