

## The Study of Spurt of Blood in the lens of The Theatre of Cruelty

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper explains Antonin Artaud's Spurt of Blood in the lens of The Theatre of Cruelty. Antonin Artaud is one of the most famous writers in the history of theatre. Antonin Artaud is considered to be the main contributor to the ideologies of Theatre of Cruelty in the early twentieth century as a reaction to the generic and ordinary ways in which theatre was created. In Antonin Artaud's A Spurt of Blood examines subjects that may appear frightening to the general public such as blasphemy against God and the idea of innocence being reversed to lust, or love to depravity, or security to terror.*

### **Keywords:**

*Theatre of Cruelty; violence; surrealism*

## I. Introduction

The Theatre of Cruelty was born when Antonin Artaud, who briefly followed surrealism, merged Breton's theories with the dramatic gestures of Balinese dance. The traditional theatre of the time, which was aimed at the upper crust, attempted to imitate real life. Artaud and others, like as Bertolt Brecht, intended to create theatre for the public, something that would revolutionize the way people saw theatre. However, while Brecht recognized societal difficulties, Artaud argued that man's troubles emanated from his psyche. The Theatre of Cruelty, which emerged in the late 1930s, utilized a Surrealist approach to develop its own violent and ritualized theatre theory. In his book 'The Theatre and Its Double,' Artaud initially presented this concept. He felt that 'man was savage under the skin,' but that if people were confronted with the ferocity behind their aspirations, they could be pushed to transcend their primitive instincts. Through psychological shock, the idea was to make the audience more aware of their innate feelings. When audiences saw Artaud's plays, they were taken aback; individuals were frequently sick! After nearly a decade in psychiatric facilities, Artaud died in 1948, but his theories influenced playwrights far into the 1960s (Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double 107).

The Dadaist movement inspired Surrealism which began in Paris in 1920. It was also influenced by Sigmund Freud's beliefs on dreams and the unconscious as well as their desire to create a jumbled sense of reality. Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty was intended to be a departure from typical western theatrical methods and was influenced by surrealism. Artaud writes in his book Theatre and Its Double "An idea of the theatre has been lost, and as long as the theatre is limited to showing us personal episodes from the lives of a few puppets, it's no surprise that the elite abandon it and the general populace seeks violent gratification in the cinema, the music hall, or the circus." (Artaud 64) Antonin Artaud states in his second manifesto "The

Theatre of Cruelty will choose themes and subjects related to the restlessness and unrest of our times". (Artaud 81)

Artaud wrote his first dramatic text *Spurt of Blood* in 1925. *Spurt of Blood* reflects the ritualized physicality of the Balinese dance performance that Artaud admired, with its violent and extreme condensation of scenic components. Despite the fact that the playwright did not live to see it produced, it remains an antecedent of Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty."

## II. Research Method

Theatre of Cruelty, coined by Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), a French actor, dramatist, and theorist, was perhaps the most radical opposition to realism. Artaud argued for a change away from realistic, text-based theatre in his book *The Theatre and Its Double*, calling for "spectacles" that were primal and poetic, using a "unique language half-way between gesture and idea" to attack the audience's senses. Artaud also argued that a "spectator, positioned in the center of the action, is enveloped and physically impacted by it." While Artaud's theories were compelling—and his work influenced major theatre artists such as director Peter Brook and playwrights Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet *Spurt of Blood* contains the following stage direction:

Two stars collide, and from them come a series of living flesh legs with feet, hands, scalps, masks, colonnades, porticos, temples, alembics, falling more and more slowly, as if in a vacuum: then three scorpions one after the other, and finally a frog and a beetle that come to rest with desperate, nauseating slowness. (2)

While this is unquestionably a rejection of realism, it's impossible to imagine how this could be performed in a practical, theatrical manner. Despite this, Artaud's rejection of the prevalent aesthetic style and advocacy for a more visceral, spectacular theatre made him one of the twentieth century's most important theoreticians. In his book *Antonin Artaud*, David Shafer describes one of Artaud's experiences. Artaud was scheduled to give a lecture on the "sublime works of art produced during the epidemic as a result of humankind's search of immortality. (Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* 109)

No sooner had Artaud's ideas connected with his audience than he began to act out dying by plague. He was enacting his own death, his own crucifixion. Puzzled at first by his performance, the crowd began to laugh; and then hiss; and then leave, slamming the door to punctuate their disapproval. Artaud walked up to Nin... and told her that he wanted to awaken the audience from its lassitude, but that "They do not realize they are dead." (Shafer 117).

### Characteristics of the Theatre of Cruelty

Artaud did not imply harsh or mean when he used the word cruelty. Instead, he was implying that the performers were responsible for showing the audience something they didn't want to witness. The actors had to be brutally honest and ruthless with and to themselves in this manner. To do this, the players had to use techniques that were substantially different from those used in traditional theatre. The action on stage was more essential than the text. Instead of utilizing words, Artaud's theatre intended to convey a sense of agony, misery, and evil through gestures, noises, and symbols. The screams, sobs, and other noises used in the Theatre of Cruelty were supposed to shock the audience and force them to confront their concerns. The performers' gestures were symbolic rather than natural, similar to the Balinese dance. In reality, because the Theatre of Cruelty dealt with dark universal notions like madness and depravity, vivid depictions of such things were frequently seen on stage. (Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* 105)

### III. Results and Discussion

*Spurt of Blood* is an eight-page text written in 1925. The play is not only brief, but it also appears to place impossible expectations on anyone attempting to stage it. A young couple is pathetically declaring their love for one another at the start of *Spurt of Blood*, when suddenly a hurricane strikes, 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" (Artaud *The Spurt of Blood* 71). According to Deleuze and Guattari, Artaud was the guy who "created himself as a free man" (qtd. in Goodall 1994, 217).

Artaud's first use of dialogue attributed to specific characters, as well as stage instructions, was *Spurt of Blood*. According to Artaud:

There is a noise as if an immense wheel were turning and moving in the air. A hurricane separates them. At the same time, two stars are seen colliding and from the fall a series of legs of living flesh with feet, hands, scalps, masks, colonnades, porticos, temples, alembics, falling more and more slowly, as if falling in a vacuum: then three scorpions one after another and finally a frog and a beetle which come to rest with desperate slowness, nauseating slowness. (83)

He imagines the true theatre as a "plague" the actual theatre, an all-consuming, degenerative illness with the power and obligation to sweep away Man's shattered structures. Artaud argues in his article states that:

In the theater as in the plague there is something both victorious and vengeful: we are aware that the spontaneous conflagration which the plague lights wherever it passes is nothing else than an immense liquidation. (121)

He describes the theatre/plague as a "revelation," "a call to forces," a theatre that "drains abscesses," a theatre that "causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world," and, above all, a theatre that is a "formidable call to the forces that impel the mind by example to the source of its conflicts" and "which is resolved [only] Finally, he envisions a theatre with the devastating power of a nuclear weapon and the horror of a loaded rifle. This is his rallying cry. From these lofty ideals, Artaud proposes his "Theatre of Cruelty," a road to take that, presumably, leads to "death or cure." (Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* 106) Here Artaud explains that:

the Theatre of Cruelty has been created to "restore to the theater a passionate and convulsive conception of life...which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so," and he goes on to say that cruelty can "be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid" (Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* 122).

*Spurt of Blood* was originally conceived of as a parody of an Armand Salacrou play. *Spurt of Blood* comes close to bridging the gap between Surrealism and Artaud's never-completed Theatre of Cruelty. *Spurt of Blood* was an early declaration of independence of the Theatre of Cruelty from Surrealism, as it was written while still in the throes of Breton's Surrealism and opened while still in the throes of Surrealism. (Kimberly 39)

*Spurt of Blood* also juggles overabundant description with linguistic incompetence. The theatre's objectives Cruelty is meant to arouse the senses and express existence in a way that isn't sensible. This aim can be attained in *Spurt of Blood* through synesthesia, which causes physical agony when wearing spectacles. Even if they envision and see completely different imagery, both

audiences reading the script and those seeing a production might experience the emotive mood. In an ideal world, shows would be able to express both the icon and the affect in the script, engaging with the audience on a cognitive, emotional, and sensory level; nevertheless, the difficult stage direction forces artists to compromise concrete meaning in favor of affect. Individual audience members may experience "anxiety," "irritation," or even "nausea" as a result of *Spurt of Blood's* umbrella effect of "discomfort." (Kimberly 40)

In her book *Artaud and His Doubles*, Kimberly Jannarone argues, the scorpion swarm of [SPURT] OF BLOOD resembles nothing so much as the plague raging through Europe in Artaud's imagination, spawning a dangerous new universe as it annihilates the old. Artaud's images of comprehensive devastation, of new life equated with torment, come hard on the heels of World War I, whose aftermath left much of Western Europe feeling that the new world just arrived had originated in horror was very clearly heading back into it. (32)

Even if this rational interpretation of the scorpion swarm as a representation of the horrors of World War I and the spawning of World War II is far from final, it has the potential to act as a "nodal point" in *Spurt of Blood's* "affective economy" for those audience members with historical chops. Symbolic meanings can contribute to an emotive environment without literally expressing it. While the sight of blood may make one audience member sick or humiliated in the face of nudity, another may equate a stage littered with dead bodies with trench warfare. The connotation of war, which is still associated with discomfort, has now become part of the circulating affect and contributes to the environment. The emotive atmosphere, on the other hand, determines any symbolic meaning obtained by the audience. (Kimberly 33)

*Spurt of Blood's* absurdity is undeniable: after all, Artaud never directed a play. This challenge, on the other hand, should be accepted on a regular basis, not as a test of technical competence, but as a quest for the spiritual, the unseen, the nonverbal, or even the impossible that governs human experience. By avoiding a literal, semiotic interpretation of the play, we are able to see the play in a different light. The Theatre of Cruelty must be lived, not just read or seen, and a living theatre, according to Artaud, must transcend the "surface of fact" and speak with humanity's "fragile, fluctuating center." When the fundamental purpose of theatre is to influence and be influenced by its audience, the impossible becomes necessary. (Kimberly 50)

*Spurt of Blood* is a tempestuous meditation on love, death, and humanity's predicaments condensed into a few mind-boggling pages. A simple and beautiful juxtaposition lies at the heart of the play: idealized love versus agents of dominant social forces. Artaud sees the social order as apocalyptic, and loves as a futile endeavor. Similarly, 'love' is coded as a model of extended egotism in its most common usage. However, 'love' viewed as 'selflessness' an unconditional, non-acquisitive concept for life in its whole is likely to be isolated, if not mocked, by the self-centered modern mentality. Nonetheless, man's freedom and the affirmation of life in general are based on one's ability to love unconditionally. (Kimberly 80)

This particular idea runs throughout Theatre of Cruelty's production: a deteriorating universe of bizarre characters, prickling with pretense or misery. The performance takes the form of a demanding self-discovery journey, with experiences echoing from one character to the next and provoking fierce conflicts. The entire effect is similar to a slow-motion horror cabinet or an endless death throe. The *Spurt of Blood* has evolved into a sad love story as well as a brief history of modern love, told through hallucinogenic pictures that arise from one another like dreams. A ferocious short narrative is made up of disturbing dreamscapes (...) murky and hazy, like the fear Artaud must have felt. Tableaux evolve around the themes of untruth and reality,

dread and denial, love and cruelty, life and death, using movement, sound, light, songs, and music. With its jagged vocabulary and direct narrative approach, *The Spurt of Blood* both frustrates and intrigues. And Artaud is a difficult man to apprehend. The gravity of his beliefs and texts about the interplay between darkness and light, greed and innocence, devotion and loathing, death and being, and death and being, however, comes through loud and clear in this presentation. (Shafer 105)

The monotonous and desperate cruelty that the actors act out against one other on stage has a certain allure. Playing avant-garde chamber music that is both challenging and exacting. An examination of emotions in a dark, open area; an experiment in visual dramaturgy and repeated rituals. The effect is mesmerizing, yet the progression is slow (Kimberly 99). The tableaux have a surreal feel to them, and the actors give their all to their parts. When reading Artaud's surrealist plays via Derrida's lens, the rain of human limbs can be interpreted in a symbolic or metaphorical fashion. As a result, it would reflect a corporeal amputation that is representative of a greater state of mental dismemberment and fragmentation. When hail starts to fall, a young man from *Le Jet de Sing* says, "Heaven has lost its mind." (1) This can be interpreted as an indication of the dramatist's inability to ensure the physical integrity of his work.

#### IV. Conclusion

*Spurt of Blood's* furious surrealism and raw physicality profoundly broadened and redefined the frontiers of theatre in the second half of the twentieth century, in addition to affording a view into the mind of a theatrical genius and verified lunatic. *Spurt of Blood* is the true climax of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, not only because of its unique use of lighting's power to dematerialize stage action and disorient the audience, but also because it is the true culmination of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Artaud shook audiences out of their complacency by thrusting them into the middle of the action and pushing them to participate with the work on an instinctual, sensual level. He reimagined theatre as a place of exorcism, not retreat. *Spurt of Blood* forces the audience to acknowledge the dramatic and long-lasting influence of Artaud's essential observations on the role and function of theatre in society.

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