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# Aesthetic Intentions of the *Ritual Scene* in the *Theatre of Cruelty* program by Antonin Artaud during the 1930s

## Естетичні інтенції «Ритуальної сцени» у програмі «Театру жорстокості» Антонена Арто 1930-х років

**Abstract.** The aim of the study is to mark the aesthetic intentions of the *Ritual Scene* in Antonin Artaud's directing practice of the 1930s and the basic concepts of *The Theatre of Cruelty* program, outlined in his book *The Theatre and its Double* (1938). The methodology of the study combines the elements of the historical-cultural, historical-reconstructive, and structural-analytics methods. Scientific novelty of the study is in proposing a new systematization of the creative activity of the French avant-garde artist; also proposed is the view on the program of *The Theatre of Cruelty*, nontraditional for the contemporary Ukrainian art studies. Antonin Artaud's individuality and his creative activity remain in the focus of attention of Ukrainian scholars since the 1990s and up to the present day. At the same time, English and French theatrical studies have a long ongoing tradition of studying Artaud's legacy. Thus, it is time to give a new meaning to the artistic theory and practice of the 1930s, taking into account new opinions of researchers on this topic.

**Keywords:** Antonin Artaud, Ritual Stage, Theatre of Cruelty, theatrical vanguard, surrealism.

**Problem statement.** Antonin Artaud's (1896–1948) artistic career and theoretical legacy became the objects of attention of the Ukrainian theatrical art researchers and practices back during the late 1980s. However, they have not been studied deeply so far. Among a number of publications of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we would like to highlight one by Anatoly Bakanursky focusing on the aspects of Artaud's personality ("Theatre of Cruelty" in *Theatre & Drama Vocabulary of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*; Kyiv, 2009); introduction and comments to the Artaud's texts by Anatoly Bakanursky in the reader-guide *Art studies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*; Kherson, 2017) [2; 3]; an article by Nelli Kornienko ("Kurbas—Artaud: meeting—mismeeting (to the problem of the image and the sign)"; Vitebsk, 2014) [11]; a chapter "Antonin Artaud's Theatre" in *Mise en Scene. Ideas. Concepts. Directions* (Kyiv, 2017) by Alexander Klekovkin [10]. Nevertheless, approaches offered by these authors were usually limited to more or less complex analysis *The Theatre of Cruelty* theory and corresponding ideas of the French artist and to defining their impact on the global stage art of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, English and French researchers of culture,

literature, and theatre made one step forward—characterizing Artaud's *Theatre* as a complex phenomenon, determining the context and shaping the 20<sup>th</sup> century European theatre. For example, Eugenio Barba, the most famous Italian theatrical experimentalist, founder of the *Theatrical Anthropology International School*, had such understanding of Artaud's works.

**Aim of the study** is to give a new meaning to the artist's theoretical and practical works of the 1930s, taking into account new opinions of the researchers on this topic. The study focuses on a period between 1932 and 1935, between the first *The Theatre of Cruelty* manifest and the premiere of *The Cenci*, which was based on works by Percy Bysshe Shelley and Stendhal. Historical-cultural method allowed to correct the periodization of the artist's career since 1920. Applying performance reconstruction methodology made it possible to present the last show of the French avant-garde artist in Folly-Wagram Paris music hall in its general features.

**Presentation of the main research material.** "A. Artaud represents the most obvious example of this return to the roots of the theatrical *event*. Rejecting bourgeois theatre based

on language, mechanical repetition and profitability, he revises the unchangeable order of ritual and ceremony; in fact, he only focuses and expresses (like a shaman) a deep aspiration of theatre preoccupied with its roots,” that is how Patrice Pavis, a famous theatrologist, determined the Artaud’s mature esthetics [13, p. 496]. However, before Artaud formulated *The Ritual Scene* concepts and practically tested some of its positions, he had passed through some phases, marked with different stylistic preferences.

Thus, at the end of 1920 Artaud published some notes on the *L’Oeuvre* theatre performances and in February, 1921 played a tiny speechless role there, in the *Sganarelle’s Doubts* by H. de Regnier. According to the publications of the time, his esthetic preferences coincided with the symbolistic beliefs of A. M. Lugne-Poe, founder of the *L’Oeuvre* theatre. “Ibsen, Strindberg, Maeterlinck did an invaluable service. No *Dovecote*, which played an interim role, had left, no Introduction to the *Cromwell*, no dada manifests. Ibsen, Strindberg, Maeterlinck stayed, returning to us permanently, just as Christ was returning in Eucharist mystery”, stated young artist in one of his notices [quoted in: 12, p. 9].

The following year, Firmin Gemier, one of the most outstanding actors of the time, assisted in Artaud’ joining the Charles Dullin’s theatrical troupe. He played Anselm in *A Miser* by Moliere, Mauritanian king Galvan in *Mariano and Galvan* by O. Arnaut, Sottyne in the *Divorce* by G. F. Regnard, Basilio in the *Life is a Dream* by P. Calderon, Tiresias in J. Cocteau’s *Antigone* after Sophocles. Moreover, in *Atelier* Artaud for the first time showed his scenography skills—he created stage design as an artist in *Mariano and Galvan* by O. Arnaut, *The Olives* by L. de Rueda, *Life is a Dream* by P. Calderon.

Since April 1923, fans of Artaud’s acting skills could see him on a stage of the Champs-Élysées Comedy Theatre, headed by another *Cartel* member George Pitoeff. Among his roles were Prompter in *The Six personages in Search of an Author* by L. Pirandello, clown Jackson in *That who get slaps* by L. Andreev, Robot in K. Capek’s *RUR*.

This phase of Artaud’s career could be defined as a transition. During the next nine years, he will be linked to the French avant-garde art, in particular—to surrealism. First, he participated in the *Methuselah* show based on the sur-drama by Ivan Goll. At the premiere, he got to know Andre Breton, and soon entered the editorial office of the surrealistic magazine *Literature*. In 1925, he performed in Jacques Copeau’s *Old Dovecote* based on the Louis Aragon’s surrealistic play *To the Wall*.

Artaud’s film career started in parallel to the theatre one. In 1924, he acted in Rene Clair’ Dadaistic grotesque *The Interact*, in 1926, played Marat in Abel Hans’ *Napoleon*, in 1928, he played Monk in Karl Dreier’ *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. In 1927, Artaud wrote a script for *The Seashell and the Clergyman*—his first and the only one, which would be filmed later. Actually, Germaine Dulac was the first director, who fulfilled the surrealistic principles into the movie. However, Artaud disapproved the film, which was presented in 1928. Together with a surrealistic poet Robert Desnos

he raised a scandal at the premiere and accused Dulac in distorting his idea. According to Artaud, Dulac denied his participation in the film editing and combined the episodes randomly on her own. Vadim Maksimov assumes that in fact the artist gave up, as the artistic potential of cinema did not meet his aspirations for the overwhelming impact on the audience [12, p. 19].

In 1926, in order to reach the same goal with the theatre spectators, Artaud, supported by Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron, founded his own theatrical company—Alfred Jarry Theatre, named after the author of a tragifarce *King Ubu*, which was performed in 1896 in the *L’Oeuvre* theatre. Thus, Artaud emphasized the spiritual connection of his project to the theatrical ideas of Alfred Jarry, whom the surrealists considered their forerunner. As his predecessors usually did, Artaud accompanied foundation of a new group by publishing a manifesto in *Le Nouvelle Revue Française* on November 1, 1926. He clarified that he broke up with all traditional forms of the French culture and dedicated his stage initiative to the surrealistic ideas and principles. However, he and Vitrac soon were excluded from the Breton group due to the political disagreement with its leader, who unequivocally joined the communist party. In retort, in 1927 Artaud published another manifesto, titled *In Total Darkness, or The Surrealist Bluff*, where he named his former allies the “revolutionists of a toilet paper”, who instead of the “national spiritual revival” were engaged in the “social material adjustment,” and stated death of surrealism.

The new theatre did not have its own premises, so its founders rented different stages to present their surrealistic etudes. The opening night (June 1, 1927) included three pieces. First was a “lyrical play, where the conflict between the theatre and the cinema was unmasked humorously”—a musical joke *Burnt Belly, or The Mad Mother* by Artaud. The second was an “ironic play, physically staging the misgivings, dual isolation eroticism and criminal thoughts lurking in the minds of lovers”—*The Mysteries of Love* by Vitrac. The third was *Gigogne*, a provocative play by Max Robur (pen name of Robert Aron). As a part of the second show (January, 28 1928), the troupe played a third act of the *Distribution at Noon* by Claudel. Afterwards, Artaud and Vitrac, as if forgetting their recent aversion to the politically loaded art, demonstrated a censored *Mother* movie by Vsevolod Pudovkin, which, by the way, impressed some spectators and critics much more than the show [9, p. 197]. On June 2, 1928, *A Dream Play* by August Strindberg was presented to the audience. Artaud considered this play fully consistent with a surrealistic direction of the Alfred Jarry Theatre [5, p. 349].

Performing activity of the group ended with the *Victor, or Power to the Children* by Vitrac who wrote the play specifically for this theatre. It was a performance where each cue of the main character ended in a burp. Artaud’s shows were not at all successful and during both seasons the troupe survived only relying on the sponsors’ support. However, such complete flop happened for the first time. Mark Darnau, who played Victor, recalled: “The rehearsals gave a wonderful

experience. Artaud worked with the actors brilliantly. And Vitrac stayed with us for almost a month. Then we went onto the Champs-Élysées Comedy Theatre stage and there was no laughing matter for us: screams and abuse even before raising the curtain and rotten eggs from the first minutes. It was impossible to go on in such conditions and we took off the show” [quoted in: 6, p. 91].

Artaud planned to perform *The Catastrophe* (*The Trafalgar Strike*) by Vitrac and *The Ghost Sonata* by Strindberg. Both intentions remained unfulfilled, maybe because by the end of the 1920s the surrealist theatre did not seem so much appealing to Artaud anymore. His articles of the period (“The Theatre and the Plague”, “Metaphysics and the The Mise en Scene,” “An Alchemical Theatre” etc.), later collected in *The Theatre and its Double*, also testified the change of his ideological and artistic priorities. *The Theatre of Cruelty* (*First Manifesto*) published in *Le Nouvelle Revue Française* on October 1, 1932, captured artist’s transition to the other artistic standpoint.

Under the new concept, theatre was meant to present not reality, but the sense of magic and rituals. Its main direction changed from literary to directorial dimension. The director was responsible for interpreting the text of the piece and for the acting, thus becoming the only *host* of the performance. The scenic language was to be based not on language, but on music, facial expressions, dance and pantomime.

Besides the traditional one, the *Theatre of Cruelty* would use systematized movement, pose, gesture language, and the *speech* of the flashes of the light and imitations of the sound. It will turn the word into the mantras, using the vibrations of the human voice, and beat crazy rhythms. On stage, both the personages and the items were to create “hieroglyphs, used in the different plans, accessible to the human perception.” During the act, the audience would be impacted by screams, moans, trickery, beauty of the ritual costumes, magic items, masks, mannequins, and sudden changes of lighting, physical impact of light, which causes the warmth or the frost [1, p. 180–188].

A *doll actor* or a *puppet* without individuality and initiative was just a perfect performer for the Theatre of Cruelty. However, one should have been physically developed and capable of reproducing the complicated combinations of the fixed signs, gestures and sayings. In fact, Artaud had not left more or less complete program of the actor’s required training, except for the *triad of breath* principle, defined in his essay *A Sensitive Athleticism* [1, p. 220–229].

In the new theatrical concept, there was no place for the traditional premises and usual scenery. Artaud was ready to wait for the special facilities, similar to the churches or the Upper Tibetan temples, to be built. Until then, he agreed to use barns or canopies, as there was no border between the stage and the hall. Also, he suggested abandoning the scenery and instead making the acting costume more expressive. Thus, the spectator, visiting the *Theatre of Cruelty* performance, got into the thick of the stage events and inevitably participated in them.

According to Martin Esslin, “theatre, as Artaud saw it in *The Theatre and its Double*, is essentially a sense and a mythological base of the religious ritual, that is to say theatre was determined as a community of humans, who tried to set up a contact with the deep sources of their existence, implicit power of the physical feelings, which lied outside the limits of their everyday existence. Theatre lets them to relive all the reality of these feelings, not engaging them in the irreversible life situations, where someone can still survive this destructive power. Turning on again at full strength the emotional life, the whole gamut of the human suffering and the joys of many human beings, theatre is able to deeply change their attitude to the life and its institutions, their way of thinking, their complete conscious and thus changes the world and society” [8, p. 71]. British scientist is generally right, but one must keep in mind that, above all, Artaud was going to introduce the viewer “his own dreams and daydreams, where his craving for crimes, erotic nightmares, atrocities and chimeras, unrealistic ideas about life and the world, even urge for cannibalism would break out just not in a peaceful illusory sense, but from the depth of his own being.” He did this “to root in our minds the idea of eternal conflict and spasm, when life is stopped every minute” [1, p. 186].

These statements contradict Vadim Maksimov’s thought that awareness of the repressed cruelty and its discharge during the performance in Artaud’s theatre open up the possibilities of the real life [12, p. 21]. Paul Goodman took a more convenient position: Artaud could offer the spectators only to run away from the world for a while. Afterwards they still have to come back, having lost their fitness for reality [quoted in: 14, p. 143].

In 1933, Artaud tried to use the *Theatre of Cruelty* art technologies, performing his own play *The Conquest of Mexico* and Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. In February 1935, he wrote *The Cenci*, a tragedy in four acts based on Stendhal and Shelley: he took the “documentary of the history” from the *Italian chronicles* by Stendhal and “the depth of the problem’s formulation, complicity of the personalities and emotional pungency of the acting” from the eponymous poem by Shelley [12, p. 26]. However, unlike these writers, who interpreted the 16<sup>th</sup>-century historical plot in their own way, Artaud reflected on the many faces of evil and saw in Beatrice Cenci “one of the most impressive victims of vile intrigues and low passions” [4, p. 151]. Artaud seemed interested in describing the bloody crimes, violence, incest, tortures, and punishment.

According to the performance program, Artaud’s intention was to capture the audience with the “truly tragic experiences” [14, p. 143]. To achieve this, Balthazar Klossovski, a young artist, however, well-known in the avant-garde circles, located on the round stage of the music-hall “Folly-Wagram” several scenery modules, the silhouette of which resembled the medieval Italian palazzo. Using spot lighting, directing light of different colors to the decoration, according to the main emotion of each episode, Artaud achieved persistent effect of the *curved space*, corresponding to the visual idiom of the *twisted human consciousness*.

Coloristic symbolic counted for much in the women fictitious costume, also created by Balthus: green meant perdition, yellow—violent death. The artist dressed men in flesh-colored leotards, closely covered with drawings of muscles and joints, and blood vessels, etc. It seemed that people were skinned. Old Cenci (played by Artaud), always in black, was the central symbol or the main color sign of the costume's composition.

Jean-Luis Barrault and Roger Blin assisted Artaud in his work on the performance. The three of them, generously using the stage effects, came up with a series of the very original mise-en-scenes, forming the complicated light and scale, where Roger Desormiere's original music that came from every corner of the hall was combined with the church bells, rhythmic stomp of the crowd, measured gusts of the wind and rumble of the surf, the metronome beats and the organ sounds. Beatrice's (Iya Abdy) torture episode was accomplished by the monotonous hum of the machines. Four amplifiers were installed in the corners of the stage to create a stereo effect [12, p. 27].

However, the actor's manner of presenting the character had to correspond to the *Ritual Theatre* concept. Actors' movements, similar to the ballet pas, artists groups' shifts at especially slow pace and frequent repetition of the rhythmic movement in circle were supposed to immerse the spectators in a state close to somnambulistic. Beatrice's humming speech, contrasting to the speech of the other characters, should have contributed to this condition. Nevertheless, in general it was difficult for actors' voices to complete with the sound effects, recorded on phonogram [8, p. 76]. The director also used in the performance "the tricks, preciously borrowed from the 1910<sup>th</sup> and 1920<sup>th</sup> German expressionist theatre": actors, whose behavior was sometimes characterized by the sudden and fierce gestures and stylized mimics, co-acted on stage with the huge mannequins [14, p. 142].

The performance that aimed to present the *Ritual theatre* concept to the French theatrical community and to the audience had flopped. The first reason was a mismatch between the chamber story and a large music-hall space. Second—an unexpressive playing of the first actress: Iya Abdy's Valkyrie's appearance fitted for the role, but her Beatrice looked anemic, and besides this the actress shocked the viewers with her bad enunciation and Russian accent. Playing Count Cenci, Artaud seemed too emotionally naked, which discorded with a manner of the other performers [12, p. 27].

According to Martin Esslin, *The Cenci* was a "bright and destroying example of the tension between Artaud's theoretical ideas and his need to seek and find a modus vivendi with the existing theatre". In other words, "he had to take an unexperienced actress because she gave him access to money, use a building that was inconsistent with his ideas, and perform a play, though his own, but far from his ideal of theatre, which existed out of limits of the traditional text and ordinary structures of classical tragedy, representing the movement of a large number of performers in an open space" [8, p. 81].

*The Cenci* was the last Artaud's performance. After that, in between stays in psychiatric hospitals, he studied magic rituals, Kabbalah and early Christian teachings, searching for his artistic ideal and trying to find the ways to implement the formulated system of the *Ritual Theatre* in the "pure life forms" [12, p. 28].

**Conclusions.** Antonin Artaud's personality and his creative activity were remaining in the focus of Ukrainian theatre studies since the 1990s. However, these differently formatted appeals to the French vanguard artist's legacy either exaggerated or downplayed its impact on the European cultural advance from the 1960s. In other words, in one cases Artaud's noteworthy works were limited to viewing him solely within surrealism, in others—he was considered almost a pioneer of the entire second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century experimental theatre. The more balanced look at the *Theatre of Cruelty* program, manifested in 1932 and partially implemented in *The Cenci* in 1935, highlighted the intentions to reform the scene technologically, that nevertheless reflected the vanguard spirit and spirit of surrealism. Thus, in our opinion, the comparative analysis of *The Ritual theatre* main positions should start with researching the similar aspirations of Alexander Tairov in the *Moscow Chamber Theatre* during the 1920s and 1930s, of Les Kurbas in the *Beresil'*, Leon Shiller in the *Lviv Big City Theatre*, and Volodymyr Blavatsky in *Zahrava Theatre*. Non-mimetic artistic meaning of the *Ritual theatre* and the outright anti-bourgeois character of its artistic product also reverberated in the post-vanguard era of the early 1960s. Since then, it is symbolizing the rejection of verbal domination and rationalism by contemporary theatre (Jean Genet, Sam Shepard), restoration of the social role of drama (Jacques Derrida) and of the scenic social activity (Judith Malina and Julian Beck, Joseph Chaikin), integrity of experiment (Peter Brook, Charles Marovitz, Richard Formen), just like the formation of the performance art (Chris Burden, Nam June Paik, Joseph Beuys).

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**Владимирова Н. В., Гринишина М. О.**

**Естетичні інтенції «Ритуальної сцени» у програмі «Театру жорстокості» Антонена Арто 1930-х років**

**Анотація.** Виявлено естетичні інтенції ритуального кону у сценічній практиці Антонена Арто 1930-х років та у концептуальних положеннях програми крютотичного театру, оприлюднені у книзі «Театр та його двійник» (1938). Методологію дослідження склали комбінація історико-культурного, історико-реконструктивного та структурно-аналітичного методів. Наукова новизна дослідження полягає у пропозиції нової систематизації творчих надбань французького авангардиста та у нетрадиційному для сучасного українського театрознавства погляді на програму крютотичного театру. Постать і творча діяльність Антонена Арто від 1990-х і дотепер перебувають у колі уваги вітчизняних науковців. Водночас не згасав інтерес до них англо- та франкомовного театрознавства. Тож нині настав час переосмислити теоретичні постулати та режисерську практику митця 1930-х, враховуючи наукові надбання світової науки про театр.

*Ключові слова:* творчість Антонена Арто, ритуальний кін, крютотичний театр, театральний авангард, сюрреалізм.

**Владимирова Н. В., Гринишина М. А.**

**Эстетические интенции «Ритуальной сцены» в программе «Театра жестокости» Антонена Арто 1930-х годов**

**Аннотация.** Выявлены интенции «ритуальной сцены» в сценической практике Антонена Арто 1930-х годов и в концептуальных положениях программы «крютотического театра», обнародованной в книге «Театр и его двойник» (1938). Методологию исследования составила комбинация историко-культурного, историко-реконструктивного и структурно-аналитического методов. Научная новизна исследования состоит в предложении новой систематизации творческих достижений французского авангардиста и в нетрадиционном для современного украинского театроведения взгляде на программу «крютотического театра». Фигура и творчество Антонена Арто с 1990-х годов остаются предметом изучения отечественных ученых. В то же самое время не угасал интерес к ним со стороны англо- и франкоязычного театроведения. Поэтому пришло время переосмыслить теоретические постулаты и режиссерскую практику художника 1930-х годов, учитывая достижения мировой науки о театре в этом вопросе.

*Ключевые слова:* творчество Антонена Арто, ритуальный театр, крютотический театр, театральный авангард, сюрреализм.

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