

A Play of the Double

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Abstract: Taking into account that, in Antonin Artaud's vision, theatre, in order to be revived, has to enter a *play of the double*, the present paper aims at discussing, succinctly, the notion of the Artaudian *double*, putting high emphasis on dream. So, theatre is dream, plague, cruelty, alchemical operation, ritual, exorcism, experiment. The *link between the physical and the spiritual*, in Artaudian metaphors, involves a transfer / transport of the actor and spectator from the lower levels of understanding to higher levels or from the lower energies of the body to subtle energies. When referring to the *plague*, Christopher Innes calls it a *tired metaphor*; moreover, he finds that Artaudian metaphors seem to be confusing or to generate confusion in the actor or spectator. Nonetheless, Artaud's metaphors are revelatory, metaphysical, not asking for a horizontal, rational understanding, but for a vertical, speculative understanding.

Keywords: double, dream, unconscious, metaphor, transfer

A scenic discourse, either based on reason, addressing cerebrality, or based on emotions, addressing affectivity, is transmitted so as to have an impact on the spectator, treated as a unique living entity, who through a *metaphorical thinking* (re)creates the performance. Any type of spectacular creation involves metaphorical aspects, moreover, according to Lucian Blaga, "unlike the substance of real things in the sensitive world, the substance of creations does not possess a meaning and purpose by itself: here the substance always takes the place of something else; here the substance is a precipitate, involving a transfer and conjugation of terms belonging to different regions or domains. Substance thereby acquires a *metaphorical aspect*"¹. From Jerzy Grotowski's perspective, theatre performance is *a vehicle that transports spectators through a fictional world in order to produce changes in their consciousness*: "The performance is like a big elevator of which the actor is

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¹ Blaga, Lucian, *Trilogia culturii*, Bucureşti, Humanitas, 2011, pp. 348-349

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the operator. The spectators are in this elevator, the performance transports them from one form of event to another”². Extrapolating, we notice that, in fact, also from Blaga’s perspective, we are dealing with *a performance/play that contains in its substrate a metaphor that is itself a vehicle that transports the reader/spectator from a surface level of understanding to deep levels of understanding*: “The word metaphor comes from the Greek *metapherein* (meta-phero) which means ‘to convey’. Latin authors in the Middle Ages and later translated the term as transport; today we would say ‘transfer’”³. We identify, in the theatre performance, both *plasticizing metaphors* that “occur within language by approaching one fact to another, more or less similar, both facts being in the domain of the world, imagined, lived or thought. The proximity between facts or the transfer of terms from one to the other is meant exclusively for the purpose of plasticizing one of them”⁴ and *revelatory metaphors* that “try in a way to reveal a ‘mystery’ by means that the concrete world, the sensible experience and the imaginary world put at our disposal”⁵. In this respect, in theatre, on the one hand, the director, in conceiving the performance, makes use of a metaphorical, allusive language, marked by ambiguity, which opens the performance to a universality of understanding, on the other hand, the spectator, who always has the impression that a performance addresses him directly and exclusively, recreates, through various associations and a series of *emotional and intellectual reactions*, the scenic fiction: “What is represented on stage is not the manifestation of another reality that is not represented, and therefore not figurative - it is as much the reality of the observer who projects himself into it as of the director who outlines it through the stage location and the presence of actors. To represent or *figure* the stage is to use a rhetorical figure to make the transition from one element - tangible space - to another, imagined space, what is beyond the stage, and dramatic space. Two figures are appropriate for this transition:

2 Grotowski, Jerzy, *From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle* in Thomas Richards, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 124

3 Blaga, Lucian, op. cit., pp. 349-350

4 Ibidem

5 Ibidem, p. 354

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metaphor and metonymy”⁶. Patrice Pavis notes the presence of the metaphorical language in the spectacular creations rooted in poetry, dream, unconscious, in the dramaturgy under the sign of existential senselessness: “From surrealist research into automatic writing, the absurd inherited the ability to sublimate in a paradoxical form the ‘writing’ of the dream, the subconscious and the mind, and to discover stage metaphors to represent this inner landscape”⁷. Thus, certain dramatic texts or performances are treated as *stage writing / transposition of dreams*⁸.

Antonin Artaud, in his existential-theatrical searches, investigates, with fervour, the unconscious dimension of the individual’s life. We note that, in this regard, it is pursued an analysis of the unconscious manifesting itself, with predilection, in the dream state. Silviu Purcărete’s performance based on Artaud’s play *The Cenci*, which premiered at the “Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre in Iași in 2022, admirably reveals the idea that *life itself seems to be a dream about a dream* or an attempt to return to the *pre-logical consciousness*, to the purity of primordial actions. Artaud anticipates Jerzy Grotowski’s research centred on identifying the primary sources latent in the individual’s *actual body*: “According to phylogenetic law, the psychic structure must, like the anatomical, show traces of the earlier stages of evolution it has passed through. This is in fact so in the case of the unconscious, for in dreams and mental disturbances psychic products come to the surface which show all the traits of primitive levels of development, not only in their form but also in their content and meaning, so that we might easily take them for fragments of esoteric doctrines”⁹. Concerned with the resuscitation of the actor and spectator, Artaud visualizes theatre as a laboratory, where blood is considered a *vehicle of life*. In the opinion of Sutil, “His short play *A Spurt of Blood*, and his unfinished scenarios *The Philosopher’s Stone* and *The Conquest of Mexico*

6 Pavis, Patrice, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, translated by Christine Shantz, foreword by Marvin Carlson, Toronto and Buffalo, University of Toronto Press, 1998, p. 361

7 Ibidem, p. 2

8 Ibidem

9 C.G. Jung, *Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, translated by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 111

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are perhaps the clearest indications of Artaud's fascination with blood as a catalyst for a supremely energised and transfusional performance. At a less philosophical level, the aim of Artaudian theatre was also to provide a new bloodstream that would revitalise a degenerated and debilitated Western culture"¹⁰. But Artaud does not leave us as a legacy concrete ways of changing the human being. Through *dream, plague, cruelty, alchemy, ritual*, through symbol and metaphor, he suggests the necessity of destruction and rebirth of the individual who leads a lukewarm life, whose senses are dulled, his *living links* with the past broken, being *neither fully animal nor fully human* (Grotowski).

In the theatre, which has the dream as its narrative source, the conscious is felt as an obstacle to experiencing the *scenic bios* as a *total act*. Theatre, ideally, aims for the spectator to become disturbed by what happens in the scenic fiction, in order to enter into relationship with it, either through identification / empathy, a state in which an emotional transfer can occur, or through alienation, a state in which revelation can occur. As "A very important source for knowledge of the unconscious contents is provided by dreams, since these are direct products of the activity of the unconscious"¹¹, it is considered both staging and dramaturgical recreating of dreams, myths, archetypes, rituals. In this respect, as Innes notes, Artaud "has made a decisive contribution to the major current in modern theatre, where archetypes from myth, or dream shapes from racial memory, replace the classical hero figure; where the recognition affirms a comparable spiritual potential rooted in the blood, in the context of a pitiless world and against an evil civilization; and where what corresponds to catharsis is the total involvement of spectators in a dramatic action, with its therapeutic aim of liberating the natural man—instinctive, subconscious, cruel—from perverting social repressions"¹². Both dreaming while we sleep and daydreaming are ways to access the body's genetic memory necessary in the process of retrieving and reliving the

10 Sutil, Nicolas Salazar, "Antonin Artaud's 'decisive transfusion': From theatre to mathematics", *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 14 (4), 2010, pp. 119-124, pp. 3-4

11 C.G. Jung, 1971, op. cit., p. 81

12 Innes, Christopher, *Avant Garde Theatre 1892-1992*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 91

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primitive existential data buried beneath the pile of modern and current behavioural, mental and social patterns.

Thus, investigating the unconscious through dreams becomes a *sine qua non* condition for expanding knowledge at the conscious level, liberating the primitive state of the individual, rediscovering *authenticity / existential given*, and, moreover, in theatre, with Artaud, “the focus on dreams and the primitive levels of the psyche becomes extended to include savage roots and primitive culture”¹³. Undoubtedly, the waking state as the duration in which the individual acts consciously and sleep as the duration in which the individual breaks the connection with the outside leaving room for the manifestation of the dream through which he/she can (re)see/(re)live both the most recent and the most distant personal and collective memories, emphasize the idea that, after all, the individual is subject to an existential double, on the one hand, the conscience, on the other hand, the unconscious. From this perspective, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook share the same preoccupations with the contents of the unconscious manifested in dreams and rituals treated as means of studying and transforming the actor’s/spectator’s *mind-body*. Theatre, like the dream, has the ability to transfer the individual from the reality as such to a fictional reality. Just as there is a logic of dreams, there is a logic of remembering. Or, as Henri Bergson notes, “In true sleep - in sleep that involves our whole being - remembrances are first and foremost in the warp and woof of our dreams. But we often fail to recognize them. They may be very old remembrances of which we are oblivious during the waking state-remembrances drawn from the darkest depths of our past. They may be (and often are) memory images of which we are but vaguely, almost unconsciously aware during the waking state. Or again, they may be fragments of shattered remembrances which we have collected piecemeal and woven haphazardly into an unrecognizable and incoherent fabric”¹⁴. Undoubtedly, once an event has been consummated, it has come out of the womb of the present, it can no longer be remembered accurately. The present moment is replaced by another present moment that changes the content of the already replaced moment. The same pattern is

13 Ibidem, p. 66

14 Bergson, Henri, *The World of Dreams*, translated from the French by Wade Baskin, New York: Philosophical Library, 1958, pp. 34-35

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observable in dream: “But the dream? It generally cannot be related at all. If anyone relates a dream, has he any guarantee that he has told it correctly, and not changed it during the telling, or invented an addition which was forced by the indefiniteness of his recollection?”¹⁵. An authentic way of communication belonging to both theatre and dreams remains to be through archetypes, symbols and metaphors.

The Artaudian scripts like *most dreams leave us with the same impression of strangeness*¹⁶. After all, Artaud, preoccupied with the inner geography of the individual freed from the trap of rational thinking, in his scenarios, seeks to transpose, in visual and sound metaphors, the unconscious forces, the memories of the *mythical ancestor* and the personal memories, as “Behind the remembrances associated with our employment and revealed through it, however, are others, thousands of others, stored away in the depths of the memory, down beneath the stage lighted by consciousness. Yes, I believe indeed that all our past life is there, preserved in its most intimate details, that we never forget anything, and that everything which we have felt, perceived, thought and willed since the first stirrings of our consciousness lives on indestructibly. But the remembrances preserved in the darkest depths are like invisible phantoms”¹⁷. The actor, from Artaud’s perspective, should be on the edge of the existential abyss, where the unreality of reality cannot be expressed in words, but only in pure sounds, in an attempt to regain thus “the pure physicality of sound, its visceral qualities”¹⁸. Asserting its capacity of healing both the individual and the collective, the Artaudian theatre presents itself as a theatre of *excess* for the materialization of which director and actor have the task of (re)discovering primary sounds, dreamlike images. In fact, “Artaud believes metaphysics and spirituality, which are central qualities of

15 Freud, Sigmund, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, edited and published by PDF BooksWorld, p. 70

16 Ibidem, p. 75

17 Bergson, Henri, 1958, op. cit., pp. 37-38

18 Roesner, David, *Musicality in Theatre: Music as Model, Method, Metaphor in Theatre-Making*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 108

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his idea of a ‘pure theatre’, are pre-linguistic and sensual phenomena”¹⁹. Fundamental existential states such as birth, procreation, disease, death, crucial situations such as war, natural catastrophe, epidemic, are poured both dramaturgically and scenically in a metaphorical language. These states and situations that are under the sign of *crisis* “understood as a turning point, a deviation from the natural course of life”²⁰ may involve excessive suffering that induces in the individual the necessity for change. Thus, Artaud proposes an integral recovering/reconstruction of the human being that can only take place within a process of destruction and rebirth. In this respect, Victor Corti observes that we are dealing with a *fundamental reconstruction in thought*, for Artaud “called for destruction of our present social thought patterns and social judgement and their replacement by the unformulated, the intuitive, by individual creation”²¹. The disease is considered a necessary stage for the manifestation of the physical, psychical and mental imbalance transporting the individual/community to the edge that separates certainty from uncertainty, life from death, the visible from the invisible. Disease, like theatre, generates a state of crisis, which leads to the cancellation of the discourse of reason, the shattering of behavioural patterns, immersion in the unconscious, revelation of metaphorical, archetypal and symbolic meanings. Undoubtedly, Artaud “believed liberation of the subconscious and full realisation of the nature of cruelty would enable us to know ourselves”²². This knowledge becomes possible through dreams woven from image-metaphors.

The Philosopher’s Stone seems to be a dream about “eroticism, cruelty, thirst for blood, violence, obsession with horror, dissolution of moral values,

19 Ibidem

20 Teampău, Radu, “Matrix of Crisis”, *Values of Ancient Greek Theatre Across Space & Time: Cultural Heritage and Memory*, editor Alexia Papakosta, Athens, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2022, pp. 280-285, p. 280

21 Corti, Victor, *Introduction in Antonin Artaud: Collected Works*, Volume One, translated by Victor Corti, London, Calder and Boyars, 1968, p. 9

22 Ibidem, p. 14

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social hypocrisy, lies, false witnesses, sadism, perversity”²³, about the hidden face of the individual’s life. It is about the primitive, instinctual face, transmitted from generation to generation, throughout the epochs marked by the necessity to form a moral consciousness, from the *mythical ancestor* to the *actual individual*. It is about the *reptilian brain*: “This is the *brain stem*, an upward growth of the spinal cord and the most primitive part of the brain, which we share with all vertebrate creatures and which has remained remarkably unchanged throughout the myriads of years of evolution. [...] The reptilian brain is not only concerned with control of movement, but also with the storage and control of what is called ‘instinctive behaviour’”²⁴. Artaud’s dream-like scenario reveals to us the world as a bloody laboratory where the Doctor, in search of the elixir of life, conducts experiments. According to Sutil, “the alchemical spectacle Artaud speaks about in *The Theatre and Its Double* would be the violent injection of a metaphysical substance into the bloodstream of actors and spectators”²⁵. Doctor Pale and Isabelle, or Adam and Eve, who ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, banished from paradise, came to live in a house of cruelty, a space-time of an ancestral horror, of a bad dream: “My dreams are mostly a liquid. I am immersed in sorts of nauseous waters where blood-red films toss and turn. I never rise up to the level of certain impressions, whether in my dreams or in real life. I am never settled in the continuity of my life. My dreams are offered no escape, no refuge or guide. Truly the rankness of severed limbs”²⁶. We may be dealing with a dream of Artaud or a dream of the characters or a dream of the spectator or of all, a common dream; everyone dreams that the whole world is an operating room where the God-Doctor dismembers human bodies precisely to discover the elixir of immortality. These *symbolic operations* reveal the bivalent nature of human behaviour. Moreover, in *The Philosopher’s Stone* we are even discovering a double character: “Seen from the front, this character is dumb,

23 Artaud, Antonin, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, translated by Alastair Hamilton, London, Calder & Boyars, 1972, p. 38

24 Turner, Victor, *The Anthropology of Performance*, Preface by Richard Schechner, New York, PAJ Publications, 1988, p. 160

25 Sutil, Nicolas Salazar, 2010, op. cit., pp. 3-4

26 Artaud, Antonin, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, translated by Victor Corti, London, Calder & Boyars, 1968, p. 159

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as the result of an experiment. But in himself, this character is two-sided: one side, a sort of bandy-legged monster, a hunchback, squinting, one-eyed cripple, who trembles in all his limbs as he walks; the other, Harlequin, a fine lad who straightens up from time to time and throws out his chest when Dr Pale is not looking”²⁷. It follows that, in fact, searches in theatre are under the sign of the experiment which, in Artaudian thought, reveals an existence of the double. Moreover, in the history of theatre, one can observe the existence of a series of theatrical doubles, such as text and subtext, score and subscore, appearance and essence, observable reality and fiction, display and concealment, state of awakening and dreaming, visible and invisible. In Artaudian theatre, the challenge is to render scenically the fluid substance of dreams, of images that no longer respect the cause-effect relationship and are chained in an oneiric logic, in which everything becomes possible or nothing is impossible, in which the limit of bearability of the human condition is transcended.

The director who comes closest to Artaud’s vision of theatre rooted in dreams and poetry is, undoubtedly, Robert Wilson. Putting into practice, as Arthur Holmberg observes, *ten strategies to interrogate language*, namely, *the language of silence or the creation of silent structures, the disjunction or dissociation of theatrical codes, discontinuity, the play of meaning, the collapse of dialogue, decontextualization, reductio ad absurdum, jamming, dissolving it into sound, ritualization*²⁸, manages to render the strangeness, the unreality of the images of which dreams are composed. His spectacular creation presents itself as “a visual and aural collage, in which staged events, sometimes employing hundreds of people, live animals, endless props and costumes, a plethora of lighting effects and verbal or musical sounds produce a seemingly unrelated series of images—scenes that float before one’s eyes like dreams”²⁹. In his vision of theatre, Wilson starts from reflections on the psychic life of the individual, studies both sign language and autism,

27 Artaud, Antonin, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, translated by Victor Corti, London, Calder & Boyars, 1971, p. 75

28 Holmberg, Arthur, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 48

29 Gruen, John, “Is It a Play? An Opera? No, It’s a Wilson”, *The New York Times*, March 16, 1975, accessed 10.03. 2024

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“translates the drama of the soul into visual metaphors”³⁰, reflects on the necessity of the individual to enter the dream state and aims *to open the audience to ‘interior impressions’*³¹. These dream states also seem to be moments of introspection or meditation that function as therapeutic acts.

We note, in conclusion, that a theatre aiming at experiencing the *virality* of primordial human actions, at being an essential means of establishing, in depth, possible connections between *sensations and memories*, can be conceived only in a physical and spiritual space-time inhabited by the freedom of metaphorical thinking.

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30 Holmberg, Arthur, 2004, op. cit., p. 28

31 Innes, Christopher, 1993, op. cit., pp. 201-202

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