

ANTONIN ARTAUD AND THE GROTESQUE

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ABSTRACT

Grotesque performatives (or ways of performing grotesquely) have not been the object of close study in neither general studies of the grotesque nor in Performance Studies. My doctoral study (in progress)² centres around an inquiry into practice of gestural and vocal hybridity and excess in embodied performance. Non-compatible hybridity – where two or more things sit together unfit and in contrast – contributes to the grotesque, as does excess. In this article, I test the presence and extent of hybridity and excess as constitutive qualities of the grotesque in Artaud's own embodied performance, in his theorizing, and in the theatricality of some of his scenarios and realized works. For Artaud the grotesque is an aesthetic corollary rather than a systematic method.

Keywords: Artaud, Antonin; Excess; Grotesque; Hybridity.

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RESUMO

A performatividade do grotesco – ou maneiras de performar grotescamente – não foram objeto de um estudo minucioso nem nos estudos gerais acerca do Grotesco nem nos estudos da Performance. Meu estudo de doutorado (em andamento) gira em torno de uma investigação através da prática de hibrididade gestual e vocal e do excesso em performance. O hibridismo incompatível – onde duas ou mais coisas não se encaixam bem e contrastam – contribui para o grotesco, assim como o excesso. Neste artigo, eu testo a presença e a extensão do hibridismo e do excesso como qualidades constitutivas do grotesco na própria presença corporificada de Artaud, em sua teorização e na teatralidade de alguns de seus cenários e trabalhos realizados. Para Artaud, o grotesco é um corolário estético, e não um método sistemático.

Palavras-chave: Artaud, Antonin; Excesso; Grotesco; Hibridiz.

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Introduction

Antonin Artaud contemplated and wrote about theatre more than he practised it. Those who think about his theatre and his ideas about it may conclude that the grotesque has a strong and frequent presence. In my own practice research and as a working actor, I am developing what I term *a grotesque performative* in which I apply random and excessive mixing to my body with *tool actions* having varying qualities. My review of earlier work on grotesque performance has included the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, Vsevelod Meyerhold, and Antonin Artaud. Although the grotesque occasionally appears both in the tangible performance work and in the scenarios of Artaud, I argue that, properly understood, the grotesque does have some presence in his work, but that his thought is neither one which constructs the grotesque with any consistency nor articulates it as a concept. It is certainly present in performances by devotee-practitioners who came later³, and their approaches may have been or continue to be ones which makes various assumptions about the force and strength of the grotesque in his thought and practice. It is also likely that such practitioners may have produced true grotesques despite the difficulty of interpreting this trope in Artaud's writing and practice.

I propose that the main features of the performative grotesque are the incompatible hybrid (HARPHAM, 1982) and the excessive (EDWARDS & GRAULAND, 2013), both of which are accessible to embodiment and action. One can imagine or readily bring to mind things that are grotesque solely because of their excess, such as house-high giant peaches or massive luxury cruise liners. Used together or as individual qualities, the grotesquerie which results from hybridity and/or excess is often subject to prevailing social norms or culture for its validation as a concept or affect. The term *grotesque* in Artaud's writing is rare, and *hybrid* and its cognates possibly non-existent. The terms *excess* and *excessive* occur occasionally in his writing, as does more often the synonym *extreme*. Excess, and also hybridity to a lesser extent, are discernible in a few of his performances and stage productions, in some scenarios, and in experiments for vocality outside of theatre, in private performance and in radio. In Artaud, the grotesque equates more evidently and more often with excess, rather than with excess accompanying hybridity, since he is more concerned with essences, as I will explain.

Timothy Wiles (1980, p.127) argues that because Artaud is primarily concerned with the essence of the event, his theory of theatre is reductive.



*To make theatre is to generate a force field; to be an actor is to 'brutalise' forms: '...mais derrière ces formes et par leur destruction il rejoint ce qui survit aux formes et produit leur continuation' ("But behind these forms and through their destruction he joins with something that survives forms and produces their continuation."*⁴ (ARTAUD, Preface to *Le Théâtre et son double*. OC IV, 1974, p.13).

Artaud seems to imply that what survives forms is the essences of their forms. The actioning that produces forms is pushed through, as it were, to essences. This view of effort in form-shaping accords closely with a kind of metaphysics, of an idea behind the action. In this sense, Artaud's desire for performance is Platonic. It is reasonable to deduce that in the actor the act of brutalizing is a moment or string of moments of fashioning of hybrids through actorly tools like gesture, body-shape, voice, inner-pulsing, change, fusion, split, push, and battle with each other. To become hybrid is to perform with the movement of brutalizing force. Furthermore, Artaud seems to want to go beyond this *to something*, which continues beyond the moments of performance. This is like *affect*. Is affect for Artaud the sign of essence? The intensity of Artaud's thinking and an understanding of himself as a momentary hybrid battling to find or hold on to his essence might intrigue and excite as the composing and decomposing ontology of a phenomenological investigation. However, it remains idealistic. It is neither easy nor comfortable to readily accept such ideality, if only for the reason that Artaud is constantly involved as a theorist in "a systematic abreaction of any formulation, 'not tolerating the very thing it is so clearly expressing', as Bataille noted" (SCHEER 2000, p.267). With these criticisms in mind, I will survey his use of the term *grotesque*, his use of excess and hybridity, including in his own performances, and interrogate a few examples of performativity of the grotesque, hybridity and excess in some of his scenarios and tangible productions for theatre and radio.

Specific mentions of the term 'grotesque'.

La Pierre philosopale (1961, p.103) contains the only performative use of *grotesque* in Artaud's four unrealized plans for production. A doctor in his operating room is "quite stretched in a grotesque movement of scientific curiosity, like a giraffe or a heron, in an exaggerated thrusting forward of his chin." This description is of the grotesque as a distortion, an excess movement which makes a hybrid out of the animal and the human. The other mention is in a scenario of the second Act of Roger Vitrac's *Le coup de Trafalgar* (1931), where Artaud prefers not to have corridor sounds which are "ridiculously scant and grotesque" (ARTAUD, OC. II. 1961, p.148).



Excess

Examples of the dominance of excess in Artaud's thinking can be found in several of his scenarios. Excess predominates, for instance, in his plan for *La Pierre philosophe*. The set is enormous: a niche in a black chassis "occupies almost the height of the theatre" (p.99). There is "a table with great massive feet with a high wooden chair." A "violently lit" curtain with a cut in the middle reveals "a great red light" and the operating theatre, which the light bathes with excessive effect. When Harlequin, a voluntary subject for Doctor's experiments, arrives, Isabelle, the Doctor's wife, has a dream in which Harlequin appears to her; however, she is separated from him "by the high wall of unreality in the middle of which she believes she sees him" (p.100). The persistence of Harlequin and Isabelle's enacted desire to have sex, the "violent eroticism" (p.104) which proceeds while the Doctor hacks him apart, lies at the extreme end of human endeavour. In the lovemaking in the scene, time collapses in the excessive acceleration of the gestation period to an instant, at the end of which Isabelle and Harlequin pull the new-born child out from underneath her dress.

Artaud's scenario *Il n'y a plus de Firmament* (1931) is about the world coming to an end, as experienced in a big city. It is rich and visionary, with a novelistic tone. There are announcements, anxious voices in the street, noises of all kinds. There is excess in the size of these elements, as one might see in a blockbuster film. Large crowds⁵ and groups of people arrive, run off, scatter, swirl. The cause of the turmoil is announced on loudspeakers: "LA SCIENCE BOULEVERSÉE" – or "SCIENCE OVERTURNED" (ARTAUD, OC II, 1961, p. 102). The general noise grows, as does the crowd, and "the ruddy light of a forest of torches covers the scene" (Ibid., p.117), bringing to mind the fear-filled gathering of the people in the forest searching for Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelley's work. Then, "there enters a woman with a huge stomach on whose sides two men play drumsticks alternately" (Ibid., p.118).

Hideous and deformed figures glide past...the heads become bigger and more menacing...Bodies without heads, with enormous arms and fists like battering rams...and in the middle of this scene...enters The Great Sniffer...he has an enormous nose resting on his right fist. (Ibid. p.109).

The Rabelaisian flavours of the scene are marked, and there is a similarity to the Giant Santa which features in Macey's Christmas parade, and to the streaming



crowds in the grotesque, penultimate scenes of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Marguerita* in its excess, hybridity, evil and phantasmagoria.

Hybridity and excess in Artaud's own performance in the theatre

Opinions on Artaud's skill as an actor in twenty stage productions range widely. His performances on stage and in film have been examined in Mark Rose's doctoral research (1983). In summary, his assessment of Artaud's performances in film is largely positive. It is to his stage performances that Rose makes some less enthusiastic responses.

Artaud discovered the work of Meyerhold: "we have to reckon with the dynamic and plastic necessity of movement [in] Meyerhold" (ARTAUD, *CW* III, 1972, p.73). However, Jean Hort, a fellow actor, tells of Artaud being labelled "the barbed wire actor":

Whenever Artaud had to move, he stretched his muscles, he arched his body and his pale physiognomy give [sic] place to a hard face with fiery eyes; in this manner he would advance, manipulating his arms and legs and tracing crazy arabesques in the air. (HORT, 1960, p.77)

Hort (p.56) points up "inflexibility" and "lack of versatility" as characteristic of this style of acting. In contrast, at rehearsal of *Huon de Bordeaux* by Alexandre Arnoux in 1923, Artaud, playing King Charlemagne, crawled up to the throne on all fours in a perhaps excessive burst of hybridising himself with an animal. This episodic faery drama had a strong plastic element (KNOWLES, 1967, p. 25); Rose (1983) deduces that Artaud wanted to apply some of the animal movements he had been playing with in Dullin's classes.

In 1923, Artaud played the small role of an old Chinese man in *Le Club des Canards Mandarins* by Henri Duvernois, directed by Komisarjevsky. Henri Bidou's review (ROSE, 1983, pp. 62-63) praised Artaud's cameo in which, sitting on a pedestal, he presented sculpturally a "grotesque ape-like figure", a kind of *maggot*, which is a small grotesque figure of Chinese or Japanese style or workmanship. The reviewer remarks upon both costuming and make-up for ageing, which contribute to the grotesque in this instance. It appears that Artaud was aware of the gestural externals of role, not simply those of costume and make-up. Rose (1983, p.70) suggests that in *Liliom* and *Mandarins* we get glimpses into some roots of his attachment to the execution of the concept of hieroglyphics, to which he often referred in his writings; and in his playing of the role of the robot Marius in Karel



Tchapek's *R.U.R.: Rossum's universal robots* (Komisarjevsky, 1924 apud ROSE, 1983, p.6), there is implicitly the sense that he performed in some hybrid fashion.

Artaud's final stage performance was as the evil, incestuous Count Cenci in *Les Cenci* in 1935. Artaud directed the play. Rose (1983, p.234) observes from production photographs that "the actors' facial and gestural expressions are larger, stronger and sharper than those usually seen in real life."⁶ The reviewer Strowski "was left exhausted by the paroxysmic energy levels of the actors which contributed to 'the violent and lyrical methods of expression'" (1935, p.239), and, in Rose's interpretation of the review (1935, p.242), Artaud was himself "immoderate and unrestrained". In the opinion of Pierre Audiat (a *Paris Soir* reviewer), "when Artaud was not playing in an entranced 'detached manner', he was guilty of performing 'with absurd violence, his eyes bewildered, and his passion scarcely pretended.'" (apud ROSE, 1983, pp.242-243). Rose reports the observation of Robert Desnos' wife that Artaud "played his role differently each night", and he seemed to reserve to himself alone the right to work improvisationally (1983, p.246). According to Colette, he sometimes performed with "fustian melodrama" (ROSE, 1983, p. 243). Overall, Artaud's performances reflect an eclecticism which included moments of hybridity or excess, with excess more frequent, rather than any consistent commitment to the presentation of grotesquerie through some hybrid combination of gesture or vocality. An interesting side-note to this production is that Artaud inventively used the excessive sounds of a musical instrument, the *martenot*. He also wanted to import and rig up real bells from Russia, bells which would ring and loudly bong above the stage.

Hybridity and excess in plays directed by Antonin Artaud

Artaud directed all six plays of the Alfred Jarry Theatre in various theatres between 1927 and 1929, making a combined total of 8 performances, of which three were matinees; by any measure, this is a small directorial output. I shall refer here to only three of the plays he directed.

The first for the programme (VIRMAUX, 1970, p.224), was Vitrac's *Les mystères de l'amour*, a dream play in the minds of two lovers, composed of surreal tableaux. The play includes "explosive language and gesture that revitalizes human attitudes by releasing them from habit and stereotyped courtesy" (CARDULLO & KNOFF, 2001, n/p), a type of excess, as indicated in the text. There is a suggestion of hybridity when "Vitrac juxtaposes unlike elements throughout the play." The scenes include "elaborately staged scenes [tableaux] filled with impossibly grotesque events, objects, and characters." A lopped head in a bed. The head of the male lover, alive, sits itself on top of a wardrobe to view a conversation at the dinner table.



Vitrac's script called for the excesses of "slapstick, clownish brutality and gymnastics" (Rose, 1983, p.109), amongst which imagination might provide some supposition of hybridity and a suggestion of Commedia. The performers created "a vividly moving *mis-en-scène*" (Ibid., p.110), and there was "frequent whirling about" (ibid., p.111). In a letter to actor Raymond Rouleau, Artaud presents a rare affirmation and imagistic memory of a grotesque style of playing, including both hybridity and excess, when he recalls how Rouleau "cavorted, clowned and emoted in a 'stylized way, leaping with arms outstretched' and giving the impression of a 'fantastic and inhuman' being" (ARTAUD, *CW* III, 1972, p.193).

Le Songe, Strindberg's dream-play, had two matinee performances. Artaud's intention was to present "the false amid the real" (ARTAUD, *CW* II, p. 69). It was fragmentary, with unrelated characters (ROSE, 1983, p.116). There is some hybridity to be seen in reviewer Pierre Bresson's description (June 4, 1928) of "Balachova as the goddess [who] made 'robot-like' gestures revealing the character's powerlessness" (apud ROSE, 1983, p.117); and of what actor Raymond Rouleau (Ibid. p. 21) sums up as "a mixture of exaggerated emotional gestures and movements" wherein he recalls "twisting his body convulsively" (apud ROSE, 1983, p.118). In this play, Artaud tried to convey consciousness through material means, in a magical way: "a text on stage is always pathetic. So I embellish it with...contortions" (ARTAUD, *CW* III, 1972, p.111). It appears that in this work he tried to do it with natural performance combined with excesses of the type Rouleau has described.

Victor ou Les Enfants au Pouvoir (1928), a well-made play written by Vitrac, and probably Artaud's most successful as director, tells the story of 9 year old Victor Paumelle, who grows to an excessive height of six feet seven inches during his birthday celebration, only to be outdone by a potted palm which reaches to the ceiling (ROSE, 1983, p. 124). Victor shows a wisdom, a "precocious intelligence" (BÉHAR, 1967, p. 263), far beyond his years, as the guests gather to celebrate at a table almost completely covered by a huge cake with nine 3ft high candles. Rose draws attention to Artaud's and Vitrac's caricature through "satire, gross characterisations and exaggerated gesture and action" in the play (ROSE, 1983, p. 122). For example, "Lannay's⁷ body position is angular and stylized; bent sideways from the waist, her head, neck and shoulders are horizontal" (Ibid., p. 124), as she reads a newspaper held by her husband Charles—an excessive shaping: a piece of angle-iron comes to mind. Furthermore, a very wealthy visitor, Ida Mortemarte, farts frequently, to the point where the audience eventually stops laughing: it is a serious, extreme affliction. Derek F. Connors (1994, p.597) comments that her situation is "even more grotesque than it would be if the difference between the sublimity of her appearance and the obscenity of her infirmity were less pronounced."

Sellin (1968, p. 70) points to "the extremely grotesque exteriorization of Victor's monumental intelligence and the adults' lack of comprehension of it"—the



parents are 'made monstrous' in their neutrality in contrast to Victor's 'precocious brilliance'. Victor's perception goes beyond, exceeds, what is present in the room. The surrealistic images in his speech are hybrid; the speech is life forcing links of essences: "... the forests part. Ten million hands link with the birds. Each trajectory is a bow. Each room music." (BÉHAR, 1967, p.262)

Victor, having exposed the affair his father Charles Paumelle is having with Thérèse Magneau, becomes ill with stomach troubles. He dies with grotesque speed, with the excess of "convulsive and violent movements" (ROSE, 1983, p.122), such that it causes his parents to suicide.

Hanspeter Plocher draws attention also to the linguistic features in Vitrac's text, the material for vocality, in the "cutting up and arranging of an existing text" (1981, pp. 23-25 and pp.40-41); puns and speeches which draw attention to the form of language rather than its meaning... (Ibid., pp.12-13, p.51), "words are invented" (Ibid. pp.19, 73). What Plocher (1981) observes is the verbal grafting and re-grafting that is the arranging process, and which I term 'hybridity'. Although this composition is the work of Vitrac, which Artaud takes up collaboratively, it should be recalled that Artaud himself took up this type of hybridising of words in his vocal experiment for radio, but only after he had abandoned the theatre.

Hybridity and Excess in Cries

Hybridity and excess is a characteristic of Artaud's plan (unrealized) for *Il n'y a plus de firmament*. "Cries in the street. Different kinds of voices. An infernal noise. When a noise rises up, other noises jump various levels into the background" (ARTAUD, OC II, 1961, p. 108). Here different cries and voices contribute hybridly to the manufacture of noise. It is excessive in its hellishness. Cries "cut across" these voices (1961, p. 108). A contributing element to the hybridity arises in the cutting across, differentiating itself in the process, constructing and reinforcing the hybrid product. "But soon, following a rhythm which we will find on the floor, voices, noises, cries become bizarrely uncharacteristic" (1961, p. 109). Here Artaud seeks to shift the tone of the hybrid, an indication of his quest to find its essential emotion and affect. "Cries, yelps, stamping arise in a corner" (*Ibid.*, p. 113). Yelps, I assert, throw the performer into a *mimesis* of non-human animality, joining the human hybridly and excessively, and incompatibly, with the imagined, enacted animal. "The doctor's reply is taken away [*emportée* Fr.] in the turbulence of voices and cries" (*Ibid.*, p.114). A marginal note which conveys an image of excess and hybridity in cry-like sounds of vigorous liveliness, appears in the manuscript towards the end of *Firmament*: "At times, the voices of the learned ones in a corner whistle like jays on



telegraph wires, and others caw like crows, others moo like cattle or huff like hippopotamuses in a cave” (*Ibid.*, p.124).

I have referred above to Artaud’s rare use of *grotesque* when he says he wishes to avoid “cries in the corridor [which are] ridiculously scant and grotesque” in his scenario for Roger Vitrac’s *Le coup de Trafalgar*. Such voices stand on their own and are consequently expressions of caricature: they appear ridiculous and comic. However, Artaud implicitly seeks a compatible joining, an hybridity with voices in the street, which would attain a natural rather than a grotesque playing. They are not incompatible essences, which frequently make the grotesque in attempts to conjoin. This example suggests that hybridity in itself, with excess absent, does not necessarily produce the grotesque. I have suggested that discerning what Artaud himself perceived or felt as being excessive is an easier task than deducing hybridity. Artaud appears to have adapted the level or degree of hybridity or excess, including the absence of either of these characteristics, according to the particular project he was envisioning. It seems reasonable to conclude that Artaud is not clear about what constitutes the vocal grotesque, nor was he particularly attracted to the concept.

Body Specificity: targeted not brut

In *Un Athlétisme Affectif*, Artaud asserts that “all emotion has organic bases” (ARTAUD, 1964, p. 206), and by connecting with the organs as “points of localisation” (*Ibid.*, p.204), the actor will make possible the rediscovery of a theatre that is poetic, magic, and sacred. He characterises the contemporary actor as “merely a crude empirical, a bonesetter whom a badly diffused instinct guides” (*Ibid.*, p. 197). He proposes that, with the use of breath, the actor can connect with the organs: “the secret is to exacerbate these supports as if stripping musculature bare to view” (*Ibid.*, p. 206). Referring to the 380 points of connection that one can find in acupuncture (*Ibid.*, p. 205), he comments, thankfully, that human affective outlets are far less, implying that they should be not so difficult to activate. In this process of blue-printing performance, Artaud is requiring the actor to engage in distinct actions, with parts of the body and with connections to emotions that are technically managed. He prefers a precision like that of the acupuncturist rather than a technically *brut* manipulation of flesh in the grabbing and mixing of entities – Emotions, sounds, gestures. I have been inclining to the view that *brut* manipulation belongs more to a grotesque performative, and less to Artaud’s desire for connection or correspondence of body part to specific emotion. One is left to wonder how the latter approach would manifest itself in performance. What emotion issues from that specific bane of footballers, the anterior cruciate ligament? Felt pain expressed in a grimace, regret at missing the next three matches? Perhaps—and how could a



witness see that expression as grotesque? Furthermore, which comes first? Is it the idea, the emotion or the body part? When one reads across his writings, the answer is not clear, and perhaps it does not matter in the end.

However, in *Un athlétisme affectif*, having thus proposed a clearly physical technique for performance, he writes perfunctorily: “The rest is achieved by cries” (*Ibid.*, p. 205). The cry is exceptional in his idea for manufacturing it. Does it belong to the idea-emotion-body matrix, or is it something else? He does not say. He discusses the cry – A kind of overflowing excess, however, in a companion piece, *Le théâtre de Séraphin* (ARTAUD, 1958). He proposes a poetic approach to the cry of which there are different types: masculine, neuter, and feminine, and its manufacture follows a rhythm. The actor falls into an underground without fear (because it is a dream), he says, in order to give birth to the image of a war cry. Then comes the feminine cry:

The Feminine is booming and terrible, like the barking of a fabled hound, thickset like cavernous columns, compact like the air which ages the gigantic vaults of the underground (ARTAUD, 1958, p. 222).

There is excess in the similes of the poetry and the conception of the cry as an expression of an army; and also in Artaud’s emphasis on distinct entities—breath, parts of the body, force, emptiness, caverns, columns— rather than mixtures of non-compatible entities, the hybrid. The implication is that Artaud is fundamentally (and often paradoxically) an anti-metaphysician, for whom ‘the body would simultaneously be the origin of all force and a hieroglyphic sign’ (WEISS, 2000, p.111).

Hybridity and Excess in Glossolalia.

Artaud privately performed glossolalia with vocal and physical acts and included it in his writings both during his time in asylums and after he had abandoned concrete theatrical projects, notably in his radio project *Pour en avoir finir avec le jugement de Dieu*. Weiss’s definition accords with Artaud’s vocal play:

Glossolalia is a type of speech or babble characteristic of certain discourses of infants, poets, schizophrenics, mediums, charismatics. It is the manifestation of language at the level of its pure materiality, the realm of pure sound, where there obtains a total disjunction of signifier and signified. As such, the relation between the sound and meaning breaks down through the glossolalic utterance; it is the image of language inscribed in its excess, at the threshold of nonsense. (WEISS, 1992, p.281)



Glossolalia is not only excessive, in the sense that it departs markedly from *normal* speech, but it also occasionally suggests hybrid signifiers because of the creation of sounds which in combination present an entity not totally unfamiliar, but meaningless.

Here is an example of Artaud's glossolalia:

ratara ratara ratara
atara tatara rana

otara otara katara
otara ratara kana

ortura ortura konara
kokona kokona koma

kurbura kurbura kurbura
kurbata kurbata keyna

pest anti pestantum putara
pest anti pestantum putra
(THÉVENIN, 1993, p.65)

Weiss (1989, p. 118) points out that in glossolalia there is, linguistically, first, “only a pure random articulation of the sound sequence”; second, “no defined limits within the enunciatory field” and, third, “similarity now becomes a function of contiguity, of the instantiation of homophony”, that is, of pure sound. For Artaud, the organic base of emotion is, therefore, immediate and not representational but presentational. The glossolalia is the emotion. Furthermore, “glossolalia presents passion” (WEISS, 1989, p.117), and “approaches the ideal of a private language” (Ibid., p.119), used to banish the “fear of being totally possessed” (Ibid., p.118), an excessive fear of being invaded— “haunted by vampires” as Artaud has expressed it above—then being hybridised, and thus taken over. In the example above, Artaud would likely have applied a performative aspect to shape the text, scanning it— as he often did with glossolalic text, striking a block of wood next to the hearth with a knife or hammer, as Thévenin (1993, p.64) recalls. The text becomes more than a nonsensical world salad. Artaud (called this vocal performance *essais de langage* (language trials), as he explains:

You can only read them by scanning, in a rhythm that the reader herself must find in order to understand and to think; but that is only valuable when it springs from a blow; there is no point in going syllable by syllable; as it is written here it doesn't say anything and is nothing more than ash; in order for it to be able to live as written it needs another element... (ARTAUD, OC IX, 1974, p. 172)⁸

In *Les Cenci* (1934), Artaud showed that he was alive to scansion, and used cadence in his *mis en scène* in the storm scene (SELLIN, 1968, p.119):



The storm rages more and more fiercely and, mingled with the wind, one hears voices which pronounce Cenci's name, first on one prolonged, sharp note, then like the pendulum of a clock: CENCI, CENCI, CENCI, CENCI. (ARTAUD, OC IV, 1964, p.244)

According to Audiart his negative observation that Artaud was “cutting up his delivery with a monotonic choppiness”, confirms that the actor was aware of scansion, just as he was in his plan for *The Philosopher's Stone*: “A brief pause after: *je viens* – long pause after: *de moi* – still longer pause reinforced by the stopping of gestures on: *phale*.”⁹

Roman Jakobson points out that in making an utterance “if someone addresses us in a language with which we are unfamiliar, the very first question we must ask is: What is the meaning of this utterance?” (1978, p. 27) Some of Artaud's glossolalia are subject to limited rationality; they throw up associative building blocks to make images; for example, roots of his Greek and Turkish mother tongues can be discerned in some utterances, in this opening stanza:

radar
tabul ça bizar
radar tabul
ça ta ruled
ala bizar
radar ta bulde
ala putar

(ARTAUD, OC XXVI, 1994, p.10)

A reader or hearer can bring extant knowledge to the utterance. An off-the-cuff interpretation/translation might be:

The radar
Tabouli that's at the bazaar
Radar tabouli
That's rough
At the bazaar
Radar to build
But to think about

An explanation: ‘radar’, could be ‘tabouli’ (or a tabla drum?); ‘rulde’ sounds like rude, so ‘rough’; ‘ale’ is ‘but’ in Polish, but could be ‘Allah’ (Islamic Turkey), or could



be French, as in “Je voyage à la montagne”; “putare” (*to think* It.) or “putana” (*prostitute* It.)

A second speculative run at the same might render:

The radio
the tabla that's bizarre
the radio is a tabla
that rolls around
Allah is bizarre
radio that building
to the prostitute

Regardless of the inescapable associations that words throw into the mind, glossolalia does not admit discourse which is, by definition, rational. The glossolalic piece by Artaud, in the example above, is book-ended by his affirmation of the lack of spirit in men and his need “to make things with what I blow [breathe] and not with what I know because I never know anything” (ARTAUD, OC XXVI, 1994, p.11). Artaud’s recommendation that there should be speed in glossolalic delivery suggests that he did not want to linger upon the mental associations but sought viscerality in the saying, so that he could be “in life” (“*en vie*” – ARTAUD, 1994, p.10), unlike the twisted spirit of men. It becomes more difficult to find associations in most of his later glossolalia; for instance:

and M^r Ung
ah'g ba
gepar
ta
biter bita
biner biça
sanía
voa
tomar
sung'pa

(ARTAUD, OC XXVI, 1994, 32)

In this sample, the vocality approaches complete musication. The context of the surrounding prose is a diatribe against doctors, “specialists of death” (*Ibid.*, p.33) who conduct “a sombre manual esoteric alchemy where cadavers and death have the first place” (*Ibid.*, p.32). Apart from “**sanía**” (sanitary, healthy) and “**tomar**” (toma),



there is scant material to imply that the text is inviting us to imagine mischievous medical intervention. To peg such associations, as I have demonstrated above, is perhaps to strain too much for meaning. Left with almost no meaning, the auditor or spectator is still left with a voice or a sounding body in its musication – a quivering flesh which has an indefinable identity, sexless but other and unknown, an *It*, but not perhaps in the manner of Wolfgang Kayser's *Es* (1957): “an alien, inhuman spirit that takes possession of things” (JENNINGS, 1963, p.57). In Artaud, this different kind of *Es* vibrates its presence to cause awareness and affect, viscerally, in the recipient. It is likely that Artaud himself would not tolerate Kayser's *Es*, since Artaud abhors such invasions of his being; it is not *true* in his terms. According to Stephen Barber (1994, p.110), Artaud puts glossolalia “in the place of what he views as the social language of representation, with its malicious urge to fix and define” (*Ibid.*, p.102). Through the scream and glossolalia, he seeks radical transformation in a drive towards some essence: “The act I'm talking about aims for the true organic and physical transformation of the human body” (ARTAUD, 1947, P. 110). Barber finds that “Artaud must reduce language and reduce corporeal matter to an extreme essence” (1994, p.103). One must ask if “extreme” is a superfluous epithet, or if it amounts to the superlative presence of mere flesh, an incision into flesh, a skinning alive, an exposure from butchery— an awareness at the boundary of metaphor, a stripped-down, lean excess. Artaud sees in the work of collaborator Vitrac “a marvellous vital surgery” (BÉHAR, 1980, p.205). Such an act stands alone, “separates itself out from the confusion of phenomena”. Barber observes in Artaud's drawings which include image, text and, or [written] glossolalia, that “the glossolalia...are expelled from the body and are situated between language and the image” (p.86). One may infer hybridity from this arrangement. However, Artaud's drawing can serve as a visual explanation of glossolalia as an essence. It is as if Artaud is saying, “Here is the glossolalia on this page. It comes from the image and the text, but supersedes it, destroying hybridity, and rests as pure as fire within me.” Linguistically, Artaud's written or spoken and heard glossolalia have no meaning apart from this obsession with himself in his pain, in his Theatre of Cruelty. In terms of situating Artaud's awareness of spoken sound, it bears some resemblance to the approach which arose in the period in the late Nineteenth Century; according to Roman Jakobson:

linguistics became dominated by the most naïve form of sensualist empiricism, focusing directly and exclusively on sensations. As one would expect the intelligible aspect of language, its signifying aspect, the world of meanings, was lost sight of, was obscured by its sensuous, perceptible aspect, by the substantial, material aspect of sound (1978, p.4).



Sound became the means of Artaud's "ferocious, endless confrontation of language with image" in order to create what he called "a language of the body" (BARBER¹⁰, 1994, p.86). It seems that the phrase arose from a paradigm where images generated text which, in turn, he used to attack images violently. Artaud physically attacked his drawings in order to "bypass the mental process." It is difficult to say that Artaud's glossolalia are grotesque, although they are unusual, because of his commitment to essences.

Conclusion

In his life, his plans for performance (scenarios), his performances in theatre and his directed performances, and in vocality, Artaud engaged somewhat ambivalently with hybridity and excess, often with an accompanying contradictory attitude, with the presentation of polar opposites: hybridity and anti-hybridity, excess and simple essence, the natural and the highly exaggerated, the threat of the falling apart and the desire to unite. All of these behaviours and viewpoints expressed his constant abreaction, his heightened living of life, a means to hold on to his love of talk and of companions, and his condemnation of the word in theatre. His contributions to the grotesque are uneven, with a weak commitment to the grotesque as a concept. I argue that despite his rare use of the term and his lack of a stated intention to explore or deploy the grotesque in expression, his work was shot through with it and it did play a significant role in the achievement of his stated intentions albeit secondarily as an aesthetic corollary rather than a systematic method.

To so conclude is not intended as a statement of weakness or insufficiency in Artaud. Humankind is overflowing with unrealized thoughts, which might find their way into expressive practices; we cannot do everything. However, Artaud's important contribution is that his thought and engagement with the occasional hybrid, and his frequent engagement with excess, have encouraged creators of theatre to bring their own desires, their own pain, to the intensity of work in their own *theatres of cruelty*, in which they may sometimes create the grotesque.



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Notes:

³ For example, *The Ugly Duckling*, directed by Lars Oyno, 2006 (Contemporary Arts Media DVD, 2011), performed by the *Grusombetens Theater*.

⁴ All translations from French into English in these excerpts are my own.

⁵ Kimberly Jannarone (2012, p. 112 n.33) mentions Artaud's visit in 1930 to Berlin where he saw the work of Reinhardt and Piscator and their work with large numbers of participants.

⁶ I do not agree with Rose (1983) on this point. There is a range of expressions across these photographs, and they are as likely posed as they are captured moments during performance.

⁷ Elizabeth Lannay played Victor's mother, Emilie Paumelle.

⁸ We may only guess that the other "element" may be the contextual aspects that Weiss has referred to here, since Artaud goes on to say that "it is in this book which has been lost." It is also not clear to which edition of OC Thévenin (1993) is referring.

⁹ "I am coming (*Je viens*) to have the philosopher's (*philosophale*) stone pulled from me (*de moi*)."

¹⁰ Barber has paraphrased an introduction which Artaud wrote at the end of January 1948 for a proposed volume, to be entitled "50 Drawings to Assassinate Magic".

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