

THEATRE AND THE METAPHYSICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN OKPOKAM'S *NGUN*: CALIBRATING ARTAUD'S THEATRE OF CRUELTY AND HEIDEGGER'S NOTION OF BEING

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to correlate the search for self and knowledge in Okpokam *Ngun* with Antonin Artaud's articulated idea of a philosophical theatre calibrating it with Martin Heidegger's critique of consciousness. Artaud's vision of the 'Theatre of Cruelty' provides an inquiry into consciousness in that he saw theatre as a way of uncovering Being. He stressed a radical return to experience in artistic practice. For him, this was also the overcoming of metaphysical thinking. While for Heidegger consciousness is not even the right word for human existence and experience of the world. He asserts that the task of philosophy is to investigate the meaning of Being. Thus suggesting an alternative methodology to the scientific model of understanding consciousness, a methodology founded in experience. Okpokam concedes to Artaud and Heidegger's notion by presenting in *Ngun* a comprehensive re-examination of the journey to self though played out in the confines of man's imitation of life. *Ngun* projects a theatre that creates a metaphysics of gesture, and expression, in order to rescue it from its servitude to psychology and human interest; all these done with some kind of real metaphysical inclination, an appeal to certain unhabitual ideas, which by their very nature cannot be limited or even formally depicted.

Keywords: Theatre, Cruelty, Consciousness, Metaphysics, Being.

INTRODUCTION

Antonin Artaud employed the word 'cruelty' in the sense of an appetite for life, a cosmic rigor, an implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of a living whirlwind that devours the darkness; it is the consequence of an act. He adds that "everything that acts is a cruelty and it is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theatre must be rebuilt" (85).

Pronko posits that gifted actors find by instinct how to tap and radiate certain powers; but they would be astonished if it were revealed that these powers, which have their material trajectory by and *in the organs*, actually exist, for they never realized that these sources of energy actually exist in their own

bodies, in their organs. Thus theatre has a lot more to offer than mere movements in a physical space though as Artaud puts it "an idea of the theatre has been lost. And as long as the theatre limits itself to showing intimate scenes from the lives of a few puppets, transforming the public into Peeping Toms,... it is certain that we need above all a theatre that wakes us up: nerves and heart" (84). He adds: "without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theatre is not possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds" (99). And Jannarone concedes that Psychology, which works relentlessly to reduce the unknown to the known, to the quotidian and the ordinary, is the cause of the theatre's abasement and its fearful loss of energy, which has finally reached its lowest point.

Heidegger claims that *Dasein* (Being-there, the human subject) is maintained by a radical continuity with the world in which it exists. Because human subjects are absorbed in the world of practical activity, projects, tasks, and equipment they tend to misrecognise themselves as just another thing in the environment (79). Heidegger thought that the historical understanding of the word 'Being' had thus been rooted in a dualistic, metaphysical conception of consciousness separated from the world (41). In other words, consciousness has been mistaken as a 'thing' like other entities in the world. In line with this, *Ngun* portrays the belief in a fluid materiality of the soul which is presented as being indispensable to the actor's craft. The play defines life as not being limited to what we know it to be from the surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating centre which forms never reach.

Also, *Ngun* exemplifies Artaud's assertion of self and consciousness which stresses that

to make metaphysics out of a spoken language is to make the language express what it does not ordinarily express. It is to make use of it in a new, exceptional and unaccustomed fashion; to reveal its possibilities for producing physical shock; to deal with intonations in an absolutely concrete manner, restoring their power to shatter as well as to really manifest something and finally, to consider language as *Incantation*" (*Pronko* 15).

Artaud maintains that, Being is incarnated not through empty words and metaphors, but through forces and impulses—through cruelty. He adds that the true purpose of the theatre is to create Myths, to express life in its immense universal aspect, and from that life to extract images in which we find pleasure in discovering ourselves.

THEATRE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

In bringing the notion of consciousness to life in the theatre, the mechanisms of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty are necessary players. Theatre of cruelty is a style of theatre in which, through cruelty, the audience is made to experience the truth they do not wish to see. The purpose of Theatre of

Cruelty is to make the audience feel as uncomfortable and shocked as possible, therefore giving the viewers a unique and unforgettable experience.

For Artaud, consciousness is 'cruelty'—the term that he saw succinct summation of his vision for theatre and art. But, the term was not meant in the sense of blood, gore and pain—though these may well be particular manifestations of the idea. Cruelty is anything that displays itself as an implacable necessity. There are forces in the world that are beyond our control and the theatre is a place where we can release those forces to alter life itself. Artaud claims that "there is no differentiation between art and life—indeed 'life' is synonymous with cruelty, the plague, painting and metaphysics, alchemy and other metaphors he uses to describe the power that theatre needs to harness in its transformation of the world - including consciousness" (Singleton 21-2). He further asserts; "moreover when we say the word life, we understand this is not life recognised by externals, by facts but the kind of frail moving source forms never attain" (Sontag 7): Artaud's conception of consciousness is not something that can be scientifically uncovered; it is rather a powerful and insatiable impulse that needs to be found and released through theatre (Baars 59).

Artaud believed that theatre should represent the actuality of everyday life, and should therefore affect the audience as much as possible. The purpose of theatre of cruelty is to assault the audience's senses; to shock an already desensitised audience, into confronting themselves, their way of life, and the meaning and mystery of all existence. Thus, extensive range of lights, sounds and brutal images are used. Artaud opposed prostituting the idea of theatre whose only value he says 'is in its excruciating, magical relation to reality and danger" (Artaud 89). He adds that the question of the theatre ought to arouse general attention, the implication being that theatre, through its physical aspect, since it requires expression in space, allows the magical means of art and speech to be exercised organically and altogether, like renewed exorcism. This is to say: instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theatre to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought.

Artaud propelled then, for the theatre to create a metaphysic of speech, gesture and expression, in order to recue it from its servitude to psychology and human interest. But all this, he says can be of no use "unless behind such an effort there is some kind of real metaphysical inclination, an appeal to certain unhabitual ideas, which by their very nature cannot be limited or even formally depicted" (Artaud 90). As Bentley infers, "these ideas which touch on Creation, Becoming, and Chaos, are all of a cosmic order and furnish a primary notion of a domain from which the theatre is now entirely alien; they are able to create a kind of passionate equation between Man, Society, Nature, and Objects" (56).

Heidegger on the other hand, claimed that Being is not encountered primarily in the subject-object relationship of knowing but rather in practical activity. Only in our dealings with the world can anything like understanding

arise. And to wipe away the erroneous dualistic conceptions of the past, Heidegger introduced a new term—*Dasein*—to stand in for consciousness, life and the human being. Heidegger's compound term 'Being-in-the-world', which is an indispensable characteristic of *Dasein*, emphasises the fundamental unity between what is called the self, the world and time. Worldhood is essential to the conditions for the possibility of all experience and consciousness (78). For Heidegger, the problem with metaphysics is that "it fails to recognise the fundamental characteristics of Being ultimately because it does not return to the things themselves" as its starting point (Husserl 70). This is the key failing of the history of ontology. Heidegger suggests a radical return to experience in order to understand the unique kind of Being-in-the-world that *Dasein* has. He criticises the term 'consciousness' as metaphysical (which he used as a term to denote deficiency). All approaches that fail to come to terms with Being also misunderstand the nature of *Dasein*. This is not because a biological or psychological understanding of the body is not without its use and application, but because any such explanation falls short of what *Dasein* most fundamentally is (Heidegger 71).

Dasein is not simply an object that can be placed under the microscope and dissected to reveal its Being. It is not even a 'thing' present at hand that can be observed. In fact, it is not even enough to consider *Dasein* in its physical context. The second and important revisionary claim of Heidegger is that *Dasein's* Being is always temporal—it is thrown through time. *Dasein* is not only present actuality. More than that, it is possibility. *Dasein* is its possible ways of being. Heidegger claims that the debate between realism and idealism is mistaken in its premise (244): it is not that there is no external world independent of human experience. For Heidegger, the question is misguided in the first place. All human experience of 'being there' is necessarily from an embodied perspective—all human activity is involved in the world and cannot be thought of as separate from that world and from within time; this is the perspective from which the play *Ngun* is presented. The summations of all forces are seen as not been separate but combined to defined human existence.

ARTAUD AND HEIDEGGER ON THE NOTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Einstein's observation that describing a symphony in terms of wave pressures fails to understand it, ties in closely to both Heidegger's phenomenology of *Dasein* and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. All three reject the thought that consciousness can be apprehended simply by describing it in scientific terms; it can be understood only by returning to 'the experience of being aware' itself. As with the practice of philosophy, such a heightened awareness of consciousness is found in performance.

The firm conviction that consciousness can be returned to itself through performance is key to Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* and his famous conception of 'The Theatre of Cruelty'. Pre-empting any poststructuralist critique of linguistic dualism, Artaud sought to demolish words and the things for which

they stand. He wanted to overcome the dominance of literature in the study of drama because he saw literature and the written word as alienating and ossified compared to the living, breathing world of performance. As expressed by Scheer, it is no mistake then that Artaud has been appropriated as a corner-stone thinker in performance studies, in spite of the sanity or even possibility of his hopes for theatre (33). Artaud felt that his true self had been stolen at birth due to the eternally changing and unfolding nature of time, yet he felt that the theatre could provide a totality and unity to life that has been otherwise been lost. In this sense, the Theatre of Cruelty is an attempt at overcoming of the conception of consciousness as an internal representation of the external world. This denunciation of dualism—a division between mind and matter, word and sign—is firmly based in the field of metaphysics.

Both Heidegger and Artaud sought to overcome the idea of consciousness as a fragmented thing separated from the world. Artaud wanted to return a sense of Being through the potency and force of theatre. Heidegger wanted to uncover Being—the experience of *Dasein* as intimately entwined with the world. In this sense, one might well interpret Artaud's vision for the theatre as a practical investigation of Being. Both called for a radical return to experience—the phenomenological catch-cry “to the things themselves” (Husserl 55). Ultimately, both Heidegger and Artaud attempt apprehending Being and their respective explorations of ‘fundamental ontology’ in philosophy and theatre have inspired appreciation in engaging the problem of Being.

In her introduction to Artaud's *Selected Works* Susan Sontag, points out that the relationship between theatre and consciousness is dynamic, mutable and changing. She suggests that “not only does consciousness resemble a theatre but, as Artaud constructs it, theatre resembles consciousness, and therefore lends itself to being turned into a theatre-laboratory in which to conduct research in changing consciousness” (xxxvii). This is precisely the argument here. Artaud wishes theatre to return to material experience in order to force Being out into the open. This uncovering of Being is not merely carried out by abstract contemplation, but through bodily processes which he saw as the pure possibility of performance. These philosophical and phenomenological bases of his work are hard to overlook. Sontag, for instance, describes Artaud's writing as a “phenomenology of suffering” (Sontag xx). She goes on to consider his conception of theatre that “will serve consciousness by naming and directing shadows and destroying false shadows to prepare the way for a new generation of shadows, around which will assemble the true spectacle of life” (Sontag xxxv).

In everyday life, Being was something that forever escaped his grasp and expression in words for Artaud. His understanding of reality seems very much to have been influenced by the Platonic distrust of appearances and the deception of our senses which are nothing more than shadows cast on the cave wall. For Heidegger, Artaud's view would most certainly be convicted as metaphysical in that he sees his own self as separated from the world. Artaud thinks that his true

being was stolen from himself at birth and he had since been deprived of his real existence by an evil god:

there is something which destroys my thought; something which does not prevent me from being what I might be, but which leaves me, so to speak, in suspension. Something furtive which robs me of the words that I have found, which reduces my mental tension, which is gradually destroying in its substance the body of my thought, which is even robbing me of those idioms which one expresses the most inseparable, the most localized, the most living inflections of thought. I shall not go on. I do not need to describe my state (Sontag 35).

Nevertheless, Artaud wanted to go past the traditional understanding of Being as a stable substance or form and explore the possibility that it could be uncovered in the theatre space through experience itself. Theatre for Artaud is not about words separated from experience, but words that are founded in the experience of Being. In this sense, his project is the task of 'staging consciousness' and can overcome the charge of 'metaphysics' because he sees theatre as 'true' Being, rather than the traditional understanding of Being as static and atemporal.

THE METAPHYSICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN *NGUN*

The concept of metaphysics and rediscovering of self is central in Okpokam's *Ngun*. Okpokam maintains that power of control over self and surrounding does not emerge directly from talent, smartness and positions but power has two faces; though these 'twins' have a common source – the centre energy. He illustrated with what could be obtainable at the community or village level and reiterate that at that level, the chief's power is the sum total of all powers – human or non-human – within the community. This he described as being possible because the chief during initiation was enabled to win or draw into his fold all the positive powers that could enable him rule his people. "Such power had to be both physical and spiritual if he hoped to survive the unending pull between the two essential poles in nature: the *Sung-me* - or disintegrating pole and the *Ba-meh* - the uniting pole" (Okpokam ii).

Ngun infer that since all power – whether for evil or good – is born of a benevolent source, why can't all power be used positively to rediscover self, attained man's desired level of consciousness and eliminate all the disasters and limitations imposed by man and nature? This would enable man and non-human natures partake of the abundance of nature fully, for the benefit of all. As expressed by *Ngun*:

...I too have the gift of the inside eye. But unlike you, I have no blood in my teeth. With my own hands, I lifted the light-pot to the level of my eyes... and the very source of light itself and the innocent forest bodies will bear testimony. No man's meat or offering have I eaten. No sacrifice of goat or cow. My sacrifice is how

much help I give my fellow creatures. How many sores healed; how many captives freed with the sweat of my brow (Okpokam 44).

As illustrated, *Ngun* portrays power play between perceived evil and recognised good. Man's quest for knowledge beyond self thus associating with elements and forces that relate with the rediscovering of self; dealing with the 'gift of the inside eye' and the association of the 'seeing ones'. The play centres on Ngun who sets out on a quest for search of self and knowledge; acquiring full understanding of human consciousness and power. Something he says he cannot achieve while in the four walls of his father's palace. The language of the play gives clear delineation to what pertains to the bodied form and what belongs or is controlled by forces beyond physical embodiments. It recognises the place of these forces in decisions human make sometimes but cannot understand why. It discusses the force of the inner self, the being in every individual that propels decisions we make, actions we project but yet find it difficult to explain. This could be exemplified in the scene where Anaetim could not understand why she presented Ngun as her husband to be instead of Mgebebe whom she's been known with. She explained: "Mother, you expect me to know what happened that evening at the play-ground? Even now as I look back, I find it cloudy like a dream...I do not know how to explain this" (Okpokam 40).

The characters in the play are mixed human, spirits that travel out their bodied forms and other creatures that defies human definition characteristically. An insight to the implication of human anger is also established; the defiling nature of outburst. As expressed by Nang: "Tari, I smell anger. That is one thing we forbid in our mountain home...And now you try to pollute our chaste air with your anger smell" (Okpokam 20). Okpokam seeks an intervention in unveiling the metaphysical elements in the theatre of human agony and cruelty, undertaking a comprehensive re-examination of the journey to self though played out in the confines of man's imitation of life. The play *Ngun* departs from the sphere of analysable passions, as it makes use of the actor's lyrics qualities to manifest external forces, and by this means to cause the whole of nature to re-enter the theatre in its restored form. The play uncovers the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought; seeing and perceiving as well as transcendent of human thoughts.

Okpokam's *Ngun* speculates Artaud's theatre of cruelty by projecting a theatre that creates a metaphysics of gesture, and expression, in order to rescue it from its servitude to psychology and human interest; all these done with some kind of real metaphysical inclination, an appeal to certain unhabitual ideas, which by their very nature cannot be limited or even formally depicted.

CONCLUSION

The assertion presented here is not that theatre can discover the totality of what consciousness is. The stage does not offer a definitive laboratory for understanding the physical and neurological bases for consciousness. Theatre

does, however, approach the meaning of consciousness in so far as both spectators and performers become attuned to their own conscious states and place them under scrutiny in so far as they are meaningful. Furthermore, the theatre is precisely a place for making meaning from experiences whilst giving value, pleasure, insight and potential transformation to our everyday lives. In such a process, we (humans) come to see ourselves not as 'things' but as beings with unique qualities of Being and existence. This also happens to be the task of phenomenology.

The upshot of Artaud's proposition is that theatre poses an important way of investigating consciousness not through abstract philosophical contemplation, but through concrete experiences in a special mode of practical activity—performance—in which we encounter a heightened awareness of Being. Furthermore, the viewing and creating of performance does not fall into the trap of understanding the 'self' as separate from 'the world' because it is based in experience itself. So rather than construct a scientific model to explain consciousness, theatre can allow consciousness to show itself from itself. In this way, the stage has the capacity to overcome the dualistic metaphysics inherent in the history of philosophy.

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