

RITUAL AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Introduction

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Since the heyday of the post-war avant-garde has passed, the vocabulary of ritualism has entered into mainstream theatre. Is it a coincidence that two European directors, who were once considered part of the avant-garde, have recently penetrated the ‘citadels’ of traditional theatre, and moreover did so with ritualistic productions in a pseudo-medieval garb? In the summer of 2001, Jan Fabre was invited to let the dancer-knights of *Je suis sang* mount the stage in the imposing fortress of the Palais des Papes at Avignon. In November 2005, Hermann Nitsch brought the blindfolded, crucified and naked actors of his *Orgies Mysteries Theatre* into the Burgtheater, the very stronghold of the Austrian bourgeois establishment he had fought for decades.

Has ritualistic art degraded into kitsch, as the armoured knights and sacrificial virgins of Fabre and Nitsch suggest? Or has the ritualist vocabulary now simply become an integral part of the rich, ‘postdramatic’ theatrical language that contemporary artists can employ?

Indeed, many directors are integrating elements from the ritualistic ‘tradition’ into their work. By opting for a physical acting style influenced by performance and body art, for a visual dramaturgy, and for a strongly symbolical, often dream-like scenographic compositions—instead of textual dramaturgy and realistic acting and scenography—a coherent body of theatrical work has established itself since the 1980s. Hans-Thies Lehmann adequately described it in his seminal work *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999). Directors such as Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor, Einar Schlee, Klaus Michaël Grüber, Jan Fabre, Romeo Castellucci, Christoph Marthaler, and Jan Lauwers have re-established the relevance of a certain ‘ritualistic quality’ of theatrical art. In these productions, the performers’ bodies, actions and words are immersed in a rarefied atmosphere that feels related to the very medium of religious ritual.

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the avant-gardes introduced the relevance of ritual to modern art. Before we may gauge the precise value of today’s ritualism, the *ritualistic ‘tradition’ of the avant-garde* therefore deserves our attention.

The interest for rituals at the end of the nineteenth century is motivated by the fundamental crisis that European culture confronts. While the basic concepts of modernity—such as perception, representation, and subjectivity—are devaluated, the recourse to pagan motives and ritualistic practices seem to promise a forgotten holistic approach. Whether they take the form of ancient tradition or exotic folklore, rituals seem to provide a fascinating outlook on something beyond the logos of the modern bourgeois individual. Therefore it is hardly surprising that Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie* from 1871 draws an image of redemption by linking the Greek cult of Dionysus to the music of Richard Wagner. One can take Nietzsche's text as the initial spark of a discourse that emphasizes that not only the arts, but also culture in general, have to recover their transgressive potential by taking up their ritualistic roots.

With James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), Arnold van Gennep's *Les Rites de passage* (1909), and Emile Durkheim's *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), rituals are also at the centre of the upcoming discipline of ethnology. As much as the scientific view on rituals produced a variety of definitions, the artistic avant-garde never seemed to have a clear concept of ritual, but instead takes the term as some kind of 'discursive void'—an open source for imaginations, materials, and practices. As well as increasingly rhythmic dance-movements (such as in Igor Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* from 1913) there appeared repetitive patterns of sound or language (for example, in the dadaist performances) and a specific kind of costumes, light effects, and set design which were part of the artistic re-ritualization.

Although many prominent artists of the historical avant-garde were highly fascinated by the artistic potential of rituals (amongst which Oskar Kokoschka, Oskar Schlemmer, the Futurist theatre designers, and many artists from Surrealism) it is Antonin Artaud who has become known as the pre-eminent advocate of ritual. For Artaud, a 'physical' language for the theatre, inspired by Eastern forms of performance such as the Cambodian and Balinese dance theatre, would be able to rediscover the therapeutical efficacy of theatrical events, and by doing so remedy the grave crisis of modernity made evident in the wake of the First World War.

In the first essay Thomas Crombez examines how Artaud's preconceptions have shaped the conceptions of ritual that were developed mainly after the Second World War. For many post-war intellectuals and artists, 'Artaud'—or rather, the emblematic image of the insane and suffering Artaud—became paradigmatic for a new conception of theatre and counterculture. Post-war society in Europe and the

US was highly in need of figures like Artaud, who symbolized the most extreme and subversive attitude in regard to social structure and conventional art. As is evidenced by the many re-editions and translations of his writings from the fifties onwards, Artaud became a contemporary during the first decades after the Second World War. This cultural ‘need’ has profoundly influenced our contemporary idea of ritualism in the theatre. However, Crombez also tries to show what *other* conceptions of ritual have been possible since the First World War, but were not successful in establishing themselves.

Two subsequent articles further explore the ritualistic heritage of Artaud. Günter Berghaus undertakes a practice-based re-examination of Artaud’s outstanding surrealist play *Le Jet de sang* (1925), and finds his ritualistic interest expressed through a whole range of exasperating theatrical innovations. Luk Van den Dries shows how the obvious ‘ritualistic’ interpretation of Jan Fabre’s work in the light of Artaud may be avoided. He rather tries to chart the other meeting points between the oeuvre of Fabre and that of Artaud: the tops of pain, personal cruelty, the affective athleticism of performers, and the search for an alternative stage language of signs and icons.

We return to a more historically oriented analysis of ritualism with the article of Barbara Gronau on the ‘secular rituals’ of post-war performance artist Joseph Beuys. Still, Beuys’ work simultaneously demonstrates a strong fascination with the properly religious content of ritual. It is no accident that his ‘secular rituals’ were full of references to iconical gestures and rites from the Christian tradition. What the essays collected here most clearly show, is that the fascination with the social potential of rituals was nearly always connected to a certain ‘religious’ tendency—even if the relation of these artists to established religion was often problematic.

This collection of essays closes with a contemporary case study of precisely this anthropological and religious problematic. Mario Bührmann and Heiner Remmert study the writings and recent performances of the Austrian *Aktionskünstler* Hermann Nitsch, asking if ritualism has indeed, after a long and fruitful career throughout twentieth century theatre, degraded into kitsch.

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