

Romanticism and Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty
A Comparison of Two Counter-Cultural Movements

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As Darwin believed, adaptation is the key to survival. A society's desires and needs are in a constant state of flux and, consequently, adaptations must be made to social and cultural practices to complement these changing attitudes. The greatest catalyst to begin the process of societal reform is an innovative idea that goes against the established norms. Once this innovative idea diffuses throughout a society and is passionately regarded by enough people, a truly impacting change begins to occur, and a counter-cultural movement is born. Two counter-cultural movements that spurred social and cultural change are Romanticism and Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Each of these movements used artistic means to reform traditional social ideals and to add emotion to the rigid aesthetic ideals that were present in society.

The Romantics sought to negate societal conventions primarily through their unconventional literature. Before Romanticism the reigning ideology was that of Classicism. Classicism is characterized by a strict adherence to formality, and minimizes the importance of individual emotional expression (Michelli). During the French Revolution, which signaled the end of a period of great upheaval, individuals began to question the ideals of Classicism. Furthermore, the Revolution triggered a momentum for social change, which formed the environment of the Romantic era. The Romantics sought to challenge Classical ideals with their own distinct concepts of the individual within society. It was mainly through literature, especially poetry, that the Romantics expressed their desire for "liberty, equality and fraternity" for and between individuals. Their will to overthrow tyranny led the Romantics to fight for "the rights and dignity of the individual" (Schwartz). Antonin Delacroix, one of the great painters of the Romantic era, in his painting *Liberty Leading the*



People (Delacroix), vividly portrays this battle for liberty. Those who possessed the Romantic mentality mainly rebelled for liberation from the capitalism established by the bourgeoisie. This capitalist system inflated the gap between social classes, and while some people were living overindulgently, others were struggling at subsistence levels. The Romantics desired an equalization of social classes, and a more egalitarian social system.

The Romantics desired freedom from the conventions that had been established by Classicism, and from the monotonous, rigid proletariat lifestyle of emerging bourgeois capitalism. They longed for freedom from the “established order of things - against precise rules, laws, dogmas, and formulas that characterized Classicism” (Schwartz). William Wordsworth, one of the greatly influential literary figures of Romanticism, “announced his break with known habits of association [within his writing]...awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom” (Damrosch). This philosophy of defiance of the conventional, and the desire for change was prominent not only in the literary works of the movement, but within the mentality of all who believed in the ideals of Romanticism.

Similar to the Romantics, Antonin Artaud also challenged established conventions with his Theater of Cruelty. Artaud aspired to create a theater that rebelled against “bourgeois conformism” (Artaud, 76). He believed that such conformity to societal norms only leads to subconscious confusion of aesthetic mentalities (Artaud, 76). Artaud, like the Romantics saw a need to break away from the tediousness and monotony of daily life. He believed that his theater proposed “something to get us out of our marasmus, instead of continuing to complain about it, and the boredom, inertia and stupidity of everything.” (Artaud, 83). According to this quotation, Artaud evidently believed that direct action against social conformity was needed to invoke change. Just as the Romantics believed that their predominant art form, poetry, was capable of

perpetuating social change, Artaud also believed in the power of art, in his case theater, and its ability to induce change within society and individual mentalities. Furthermore, Artaud realized that the unpredictability and spontaneity of his theatrical style was a greatly needed subconscious awakening.

Just as the Romantics fought for liberty, Artaud also demanded freedom from traditional societal thought in his Theatre of Cruelty. Artaud was convinced that individuals within society are prevented from conceiving things in new ways because of their reverence and respect for masterpieces from the past (Artaud, 75). Holding onto tradition does not allow society to move forward. Artaud believed that the dominant social powers, with their hegemonic influences, prevent individuals from living as they are meant to: “Artaud repudiated all literature written to be performed, ...and civilization itself. For Artaud, civilization only corrupts the essence of humanity: humankind was ferocious, hungry, and afraid, and all cultural conventions deluded us into thinking otherwise” (Rivera). Artaud rejected traditional thoughts since traditions are artificial ideals established by those holding the most influence within society. He did, however, encourage humanity to go against society and view itself in all its primitiveness, since in a primitive state, things are not affected by social influence. As primitive beings, people can liberate the emotions that society prefers remain oppressed (Rivera). This echoes the desire of Romantics to escape traditional notions of representation, but at the same time return to a state of childhood and innocence untainted by societal pressures. In both of these views, it is important to realize the difference between traditional ideals that have been tainted by society, and primitive, innocent ideals, untouched by superficial notions.

The Romantics and Artaud had similar desires for reforming society, and they also shared similar concepts for aesthetic reform. Both movements felt that the aesthetic ideals in place were far too rigid and lacked emotional intensity. The Romantic aesthetic standards were defiant toward the aesthetic formality of Classicism and the Enlightenment, as described by Chambers when he states:

Romanticism...Its roots lay in the eighteenth-century reaction against Enlightenment and the Classical forms and crisp rationality associated with it. Romantic painters emphasized vibrant color and swirling lines more than perfect proportion and control; Romantic novelists favored vivid, personal description and singular settings over balanced sentences and lucid prose; Romantic musicians broke conventional rules of form and harmony. Thus certain themes emerge on feeling, emotion, and direct experience more than on universality and logic" (Chambers, 795-796)

Unlike Classicism, which demanded symmetry, logic, subdued colour tones, conventional use of elements, and objective subject matter, the Romantic aesthetic valued the exact opposite; asymmetry, spontaneity, bright, vivid colours, unconventional manipulation of elements,



subjectivity and pure emotional representation. The Romantic artist William Blake represented this authentic emotion well within his *Figure Drawing (Serigraph)*. The lines are spontaneous, and executed with an urgent fervor. The subject itself conveys authentic passionate emotions of grief, pain and

anxiety. The Romantics possessed a deep appreciation of nature (Piocch) since it encompasses all that the Romantics held in high regard: irrationality, mystery, spirituality, purity, and naivete.

Furthermore, the Romantic aesthetic focused on “enchanted dreams and inspired visions...superstitions and spells, delusions and nightmares...sensations of demonic possession” (Damrosch). These were all of interest to the Romantics, because they implied the presence of a subconscious, a spirit, and a powerful imagination within the human mind.

Antonin Artaud’s aesthetic ideals were greatly comparable to those of the Romantics. Artaud based his Theater of Cruelty on the idea that reality is the double of theater. In this sense, actors on the stage are not acting at all, but are feeling true emotion, and are showing authentic spontaneous impulses. He created “a theater which, abandoning psychology, stages natural conflicts, natural and subtle forces, and presents itself first of all as an exceptional power of redirection. A theatre that induces trance” (Artaud, 83). Like the Romantics, he sought to find the primitive, unspoiled, pure emotions within people. Theatre that does not allow actors to act upon impulse is simply depicting “falsehood and illusion...art for art’s sake, with art on one side and life on the other” (Artaud, 77). For Artaud, the theatre is life, and not merely a mirror of it. Since he, like the Romantics, wanted life to be spontaneous, authentic, primitive, and wild, he lived these emotions out on the stage. Primarily, Artaud portrayed emotions of pain, agony and madness, and did this through random screaming and incomprehensible mutters. He felt that these emotions are present in everyone, but are suppressed because of a fear of exposing them for the rest of the world to see. In his writing, Artaud expressed his belief that people are suppressing emotion and, therefore, not partaking in the full experience of life:

“I want to give them the experience itself,

The plague itself,

So they will be terrified,

And awaken.
 I want to awaken them.
 Because they do not realize they are dead.
 Their death is total, like deafness and blindness.
 This is agony I portrayed.
 Mine yes,
 And everyone who is alive”
 (Lewis)



Artaud visually depicted this state of suppressed madness in his *Self-Portrait*. The comparison between the unfettered strokes, and depiction of dark emotion between this self portrait, and the *Figure Drawing (Serigraph)* by William Blake, further convey the similar ideals between Theatre of Cruelty and Romanticism.

An important component of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty was its irreproducibility. Just as off the stage, no singular moment in life can be reproduced: “an expression does not have the same value twice...all words, once spoken, are dead and function only at the moment they are uttered” (Artaud, 75). The Romantics held a parallel belief that imagination creates “individual variation, subjective filterings” (Damrosch). Evidently, Artaud and the Romantics believed that a genuine expression can never be repeated twice; therefore, a true expression cannot be repeated twice by an actor, and cannot even be interpreted the same way between two people, since everyone holds an utterly distinct subjective filter within their subconscious. This concept was revolutionary since theater before Artaud was based on the idea of rehearsal and duplication.

It is evident that Romanticism and Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty both used artistic means, whether literature in Romanticism, or theater with Artaud, to generate reform during their respective time periods. Both movements counteracted the controlling social ideals of the bourgeois, and the unemotional and rigid aesthetic ideals that were present in society. The Romantics and Artaud emphasized "passions and inner struggles...creative spirit [over] strict adherence to formal rules and traditional procedures; an emphasis upon imagination as a gateway to transcendent experience and spiritual truth" (Pioch). It is because of avant-garde thinkers like the Romantics and Artaud, that society is able to undergo change. As long as people persist in challenging conventions, and questioning the society in which they live, humanity will continue to renew itself with the dawning of many new extraordinary and influential movements.

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