

## The Theatre of Posthuman Immunity\*

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In 'The Theater and the Plague', Antonin Artaud builds a parallel between the 'contagious delirium' that spread through cities ravaged by the plague and the 'immense liquidation' and 'total exorcism' enacted by the theatre. With both 'true theatre' and plague proceeding, in Artaud's view, 'from excess to excess and vindication to vindication' both the artistic form and the infectious disease pertain to the domain of 'revelation' in that the two allow the theretofore invisible depths of bodies – individual and social – to erupt into visibility, disintegrating their unity through a collective drainage of abscesses, an 'endless vertigo' that '[impels] men to see themselves as they are' (Artaud 1958).

Written in 1934, Artaud's essay was symptomatic of the medical and cultural shifts that had been unfolding since the late 1800s with Ilya Mechnikov's discovery of innate immunity, Louis Pasteur's groundbreaking work on Germ Theory and vaccination, and Robert Koch's pioneering research on bacteria. As Stanton Garner points out, notwithstanding the longer history of associations being made between theatre and disease as two symptoms of sin, both modern theatre and the new discipline of microbiology appeared to 'foreground similar issues: the interaction of the human organism with its environment, the relationship of inside and outside, the nature of visibility and somatic disclosure, and the definition of individual and social pathology' (2006: 2). Conceiving both the plague and the theatre as disruptions of the apparent order of the body, whether physiological or moral, for Artaud (1958) the excessive theatre of disease and the disease of excessive theatre performed a liquefaction of the unitary bourgeois body, breaching through its boundaries and revealing it as porous and formless. Just like the plague which sent people into delirium as 'poisonous, thick, bloody streams (color of agony and opium)' burst out of the blisters on their bodies, so did his theatre of cruelty send spectators into a state of ontological vertigo as it offered as spectacle a violation of the boundaries of the modern body – a public exorcism of unity, order and autonomy that sent the body on a path to 'spiritual freedom' (1958: 23), that '[revealed] to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force' (ibid. 32). In Artaud's theatre, just like in the plague, both human senses and human flesh were at stake (Artaud 1976: 156-157).

Artaud's vision of a negative ethics for the theatre, a transgressive ethics calling for a shattering of the regulative boundaries of the self – the boundaries that turn bodies into self-regulating organisms – is one that is also encountered throughout the history of the 20th-century avant-gardes and their attempts to undo bourgeois culture and the latter's biopolitical production of the modern autonomous subject. However, just as the avant-gardes were trying to break away from liberal forms of subjectivity, the militaristic discourses of immunity gained new impetus in the 1940s, when Frank M. Burnet and Frank Fenner introduced the notion of 'self-markers', defined as components that cells must have 'which allow "recognition" of their "self" character' (Burnet and Fenner 1953: 126).

Through the self-marker hypothesis, subsequent works in immunology came to embody a paradigm of defence against foreign invasion triggered by a process of self/non-self discrimination. It was thanks to Burnet and Fenner's work, as well as later works by Burnet (1962; 1970a; 1970b) and others, that immunological research conducted during the Cold War years reinforced its earlier militaristic rhetoric in order to affirm the primacy of biological identity and to posit that bodily integrity is achieved and maintained through the surveillance, identification and rejection of all foreign bodies. Despite Artaud's embrace of the plague as a metaphor for a transgressive anti-

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humanist theatre that undid the atomised modern subject, immunology, from its emergence in the 1800s to its Cold War developments, retorted with what Ed Cohen called the ‘scientific and defensive apotheosis’ of the modern body, affirming life as a ‘ceaseless problem of boundary maintenance’ (2009: 8). Where Artaud called for a collapse of the body-organism into the body-flesh, immunology affirmed the impermeability and impenetrability of the human body as *conditio sine qua non* for a life.

The creation, administration, and eventual naturalisation of the autonomous, self-regulating human body by the biopolitical apparatuses of modern science was accompanied – not accidentally – by the emergence of the contemporary neoliberal subject, owner and arbiter of its own destiny, as the basic unit of social life. It is no coincidence that scientific discourses, humanist ideals, and capitalism all converged in the contemporary neoliberal privatisation of experience that turned the individual into the foundational principle of all mainstream political projects, both left and right.

However, as we keep on being interpellated to *find* ourselves, to *be* ourselves, to *look after* ourselves, to realise *our* potential, and to claim back the territories to which *we* purportedly belong, the machinery of identification and ideal recognition keeps on being interrupted, delaying the gratification of self-reassurance that we are nonetheless still compelled to pursue, leading us to inhabit the constellation of neoliberal affects that Lauren Berlant termed ‘cruel optimism’ (2011). Then, when it comes to theatre, as Alan Read noted when likening Giorgio Agamben’s ‘anthropological machine’ to the performative apparatus of the stage, the humanist tradition of theatre which Artaud infected with the plague, has also consistently failed to deliver on its didactic promise of summoning the ‘human’ (2009). Instead, what it has singlehandedly delivered has always been the anxiety of ‘*homo performans*’ to become exposed as a precarious life, as “‘a life” that is separated and excluded from itself” (Read 2009: 81–101). Such an anxiety contributed, according to Read, to theatre’s current role as ‘the last human venue’ – a theatre with ‘a vivid send of its *ending*’ (272) that finds itself having to always ‘begin again’ (275).

Simultaneously, the field of immunology has also, in recent years, undergone a shift away from its earlier privileging of a clear-cut self/non-self discrimination and towards a paradigm of immunotolerance. Following what Alfred Tauber calls the “‘ecological sensibility” of contemporary biology’, the body is no longer understood to be a discrete and closed unit but is instead being approached as an ecosystem (2000: 244). According to such an ecological turn in studies of immunity, ‘borders are guarded but demarcations are not rigid, neither in time nor functions’. Instead, thanks to its ‘active tolerance of “foreign” substances and microorganisms’, the porosity of the boundaries of the body and, therefore, of the biological self, is highlighted and put in the service of the organism understood as an evolving community formation (Tauber 2017: 164). By focusing on the ways in which biological organisms maintain themselves not through a radical closure to everything that is not-self but through constant dynamic exchanges of – and negotiations with – foreign substances and bodies that cross into it from the outside, the body is now found to be ‘heterogeneous, partially comprising exogenous entities’ in such a ways that it is ‘constructed by its environment, as well as it in turn constructs it’ (Pradeau 2012: 269).

Consider, for instance, Art Orienté Objet’s performance *Que Le Cheval Vive en Moi* [*May the Horse Live in Me*], presented at Galerija Kapelica in Ljubljana in 2011. Art Orienté Objet’s Benoît Mangin and Marion Laval-Jeantet have made a career investigating the grey areas at the heart of the modern divides of self and non-self, human and nonhuman. For their Ljubljana performance, the duo highlighted the tolerance and porosity of human borders by staging a performance in which said ontological boundaries were deliberately violated by having Mangin inoculate Laval-Jeantet with horse plasma which included forty different kinds of horse immunoglobulins and other proteins. Following the inoculation, which, as expected, triggered a strong but – importantly – not life-threatening inflammatory process, Mangin took out some of Laval-Jeantet’s blood and freeze-

dried it in Petri dishes that were then displayed as the first ever materialisation of centaur blood. Despite the fact that the horse blood had to be filtered down to plasma and have all actual horse cells removed in order to prevent Laval-Jeantet from suffering potential life-threatening immune responses like haemolysis (destruction of all her blood cells), shock or cardiac arrest as a result of interspecies tissue incompatibility, as theatre the performance still succeeded in calling the human into question by highlighting how permeable and tolerating of foreign others our bodies really are.

The porosity of the self and its tolerance to – and even incorporation of – the non-self gain a whole other dimension in the contemporary context of HIV infection and management. Today, for those of us with access to state-of-the-art medical care, our survival is a textbook example of how the discrete, autonomous, and closed subject promised by modernity, made manifest in the vision of the body as a closed system, and established as neoliberalism's foundational axiom remains, in fact, a multitude. Our bodies are one of many examples of the heterogenous material substrate sustaining what Paul Preciado calls the 'toxic-pornographic subjectivities' of contemporary society, whereby subjectivity emerges at/as the intersection of the body with a variety of material and semiotic prosthesis – virus, bacteria, prescription drugs, recreational drugs, discourse, objects of desire, media landscapes, etc. – that cut across and plug into our bodies (2008, 2013). As Bruno Latour famously argued, whilst the ideology of modernity promised emancipation through purification of the human and its culture, it still failed to halt a 'proliferation of hybrids' (1993: 1-12). As a result, as Alan Read argued in relation to theatre, the human as such – just like Beckett's Godot – kept on failing to appear (2009: 86).

What then for theatre and performance, if the borders we thought separated the human from its others and the self from the non-self have emerged as highly-congested bridges rather than impenetrable walls? I would rather not align myself too quickly with positions that have claimed for theatre and performance an inherently politically-progressive role, as if performance itself were also not the paradigm of contemporary capitalism (McKenzie 2001). However, at a time when the age-old rhetorics of taking back control, of building walls, of closing borders, and of lifting the liberty of the individual to the status of absolute and inalienable right – to the detriment of all ontological uncertainty, of productive negative affects, and of the ethical value of undoing oneself in the name of an other – theatre and performance should continue to embrace their intoxicating power and send both the human and the self into the delirious ontological vertigo Artaud so passionately called for, one which might – just might – turn hesitation and unknowing into a space of possibility from which new futures may emerge.

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