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Artaud's Civil War: 'Theatre and the Plague' in the Time of Covid-19

This article examines Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre and the Plague' in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic and through the Ancient Greek term *stasis*, which describes a civil war between domestic and public spaces. Once initiated, it was believed that this conflict would spread from household to household like a contagion; city states thus implemented draconian measures in the name of preventing *stasis*. Giorgio Agamben argues that such measures were embedded in subsequent theories of the state, fuelling ever more oppressive policies throughout history. Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' energizes a force comparable to this *stasis*, both in terms of its latency and its contagiousness, activating dormant conflicts in the individual that are expressed through networks of infection and create frontiers of shared resistance to institutional authority. 'Theatre and the Plague', read through the lens of *stasis*, can thus offer valuable contributions to current debates around biopolitics, particularly those seeking collective forms of agency during and beyond the current pandemic.

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IT IS 23 FEBRUARY 2021, around 7.50 p.m. Owing to a nationwide spike in Covid-19 cases over the Christmas period, the UK has been in strict lockdown for six weeks. I close my bedroom door, climb into bed and put on my headphones. Across Europe and North America at this moment, I am aware that around twenty other participants are doing the same. A recording of a woman's voice, brisk and efficient, confirms that the app is working. She tells me to lie still, with my arms by my sides and my eyes closed. After a moment, there is the sound of hammering at my bedroom door and a man's voice is shouting for me to let him in. I do not get up but stay in bed with my eyes shut, just as instructed. He gains access anyway and paces the floor. He is disoriented, possibly drunk. We share the same space but inhabit different rooms; his has a table where mine has none, his has bare floorboards where mine has a carpet. He lies next to me and tells me of a figure that would come to his room each night and drain his body of

blood. As he speaks, I hear something slip into my bed. The springs creak at one side and then another as I hear – and my brain tells me that I *feel* – something position itself above me. There is a breath, a pause, then a puncturing noise at my neck and the sound of fluid spraying over the sheets. This creature, whatever it is, feeds industriously upon me as I lie still.

After the attack is over, the intruder confesses that as a child, he believed in the resurrection and life everlasting, but never questioned what the latter might mean. Perhaps, he says, eternal life means living as one of the damned. He tells me that I too am being offered eternal life if I will only consent to open the door. Once again there is a hammering from outside as something attempts to gain entrance. The man says that it is fine for me to take time to weigh my options and leaves in the confidence that one day I *will* answer the door, and that he will be waiting.

Lying in bed and listening to this performance of *Eternal* by the theatre company

Darkfield, I was conscious of an odd doubling to my experience. I was alone, isolated, scared, and in the depths of a winter lockdown that had compressed my life to precisely those baleful conditions. But at the same time, the voice was not speaking *only* to me; the creature was not puncturing *only* my neck. At each new invocation of fear, I thought of the twenty or so spectators simultaneously experiencing this performance. The structure of address exceeded my limited perspective and connected it to the terrified imaginings of multiple others. In one respect this was perhaps unremarkable since horror frequently stages a dialogue between personal and public reaction. But on that night in February 2021, there was something giddily strange about the intimate sharing of fear amongst people who were physically isolated. My fear was an active production of myself, and, crucially, I was not alone in making this gesture. So often in lockdown the world had felt desolate and sutured, but here was a genuine moment of contact.

That realization, perhaps unforgivably simple, provides the point of departure for this article, which examines Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre and the Plague' in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Artaud's essay calls for a theatre that spreads through its participants' minds like a contagion, a quality that was strikingly present in that performance of Darkfield's lockdown show. Rather than reassert a carnivalesque, topsyturvy plague that destroys society's barriers, however, this article intends only to follow the ways in which Artaud's essay advocates the release of 'outward events, political conflicts, natural disasters, revolutionary order and wartime chaos . . . into the audience's sensitivity with the strength of an epidemic'.¹ Although this experience must always be at the level of the individual – as the bed-bound spectator of *Eternal* is painfully aware – that epidemic functions at the level of the collective. By stressing connections between the 'latent disorders' of disparate subjects, then, there is a possibility for Artaud's ideas to make a productive contribution to debates around biopolitics that have been energized by Covid-19.

Plague-Speech

As is well known, Artaud's essay begins with a nightmare. One night, 'about the end of April or the beginning of May 1720', the Sardinian Viceroy dreamed that a plague had come to his state.² A detailed account is given: the man saw 'the subversion of all morality, a total psychological breakdown, heard his lacerated, utterly routed bodily fluids murmur within him in a giddy wasting away of matter, growing heavy and then gradually becoming transformed into carbon'.³ When he awoke, Artaud claims that the Viceroy was spooked into preventing an approaching ship from docking at Caligari. The ship proceeded on its way and docked at Marseilles instead, where its plague-infected cargo initiated an epidemic. Reading the prophetic significance of this dream, Artaud suggests that 'a substantial though subtle communication was established between the plague and himself [the Viceroy]'.⁴ This was a speaking plague; plague-speech. It was not speech that occurred through contact or proximity, as would normally be expected in the transmission of a disease, but, as Artaud proposes, 'the idea of the disease as a kind of psychic entity, not carried by a virus'.⁵ From here, he proceeds to a grotesque anatomizing of the plague victim's body, itemizing with gusto the ravages wrought by disease upon flesh and organ. He broadens his scope to the city, whose order demolished by plague turns inwards and tears itself apart. In this chaos, he triumphantly concludes, 'theatre asserts itself'. He describes such theatre as the 'gratuitous urgency with which [people] are driven to perform useless acts to no present advantage'.⁶

Albert Bermel cautions that Artaud's prose, 'like the theatre he wanted to bring to birth, is itself a kind of experience that speaks to the unconscious and the senses, not to common sense'.⁷ Artaud talks about the plague as a disease that is *not* carried by a virus, although medical science demolishes this as nonsense. But amidst the proliferation of misinformation, conspiracy theory, and rage that have accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic, Artaud hardly seems insensible in proposing a psychic

element to plague. Plague does speak; over the last few years its strange tongues have been amplified to a global level. It has been present in manic, desolate, and exhausted voices, conspiratorial tones, and in those desperate to regain a sense of normality. It could be heard in both the reduction of life to empty statistics and the wittering of barstool philosophy that outlasted the closure of the bars.

For Bermel, the 'experience that speaks to the senses' takes the form of a 'delirium', which, like theatre, is 'communicative'; an 'immense liquidation', when the sickness and its aftermath wantonly destroy; and a time of 'extremity', which, again like theatre, calls for exaggerated gestures that will release unsuspected passions, including repressed and forbidden sexual desires.⁸ All of which sounds thrilling, of course, and some studies of Artaud in the time of Covid-19 seem to find this frenzy relevant to our context. For example, in their presentation 'Disquietudes: Pandemic, Crisis, Necropolitics, Artaud', Luciana da Costa Dias *et. al.* claim that 'the plague brings down the masks, showing more than ever the injustices of our society, as Artaud told us'.⁹ Maxime Philippe, in 'Artaud's Plague Theatre: Catharsis as Performance', talks about how the 'epidemic ushers society into a carnivalesque period'.¹⁰ But this topsy-turvy excessiveness seems quite foreign to the constricted lockdowns of 2020–21 in which, as Bill Marx pointed out in his recent study of Artaud, the 'forces of inertia are entrenched and very powerful'.¹¹ The view from inside the lockdowns suggested that plague wrecks more by enervation than energy – the world standing still as it falls apart. Rather than writing off Artaud's manic projections as immaterial to the Covid-19 pandemic, though, an alternative perspective is offered by Heidi Liedke and Monika Pietrzak-Franger in their 'Viral Theatre', which takes Artaud's idea of the 'virality of emotions', where sensation is transmitted between subjects, and uses it to suggest a kind of theatre that can only exist in the isolation and disruption of a lockdown.¹² 'Viral theatre', as the authors conceive it, is produced under three conditions: 'first, the fact that both performers and spectators are in a state of disruption,

second, the willingness to engage/expectations on the part of spectators, and, third, the use of communication technologies such as Zoom.'¹³

These factors, combined, create a network for the distribution of affect congruent with my experience of Darkfield's *Eternal*. And what is particularly notable is that Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger do not describe Artaud's plague as an en-masse revolutionary manifestation. Instead, they focus on the relationships between individuals during periods of separation and isolation, finding latency in the shared (or 'viral') quality of emotions under these conditions. If any form of mobilization occurs, then under this logic it must be through private, articulated, individual responses that express a collective sentiment. Such a reading of Artaud's plague is closely aligned with *stasis*.

'Long Ago Hides Now'

The Ancient Greek origins of *stasis* see the turning of the *oikos* (house) against the *polis* (state), in an insurgency of the private against the public, sparking violence through the collapsing boundaries. Although this process constitutes a revolt, Hannah Arendt argues that it is not reducible to modern theories of revolution, since antiquity 'was well acquainted with political change, and the violence that went with change, but neither of them appeared to it to bring about something new'.¹⁴ Contemporary views of revolution are often proposed to initiate, or at least energize, a new political reality. The civic strife signified by *stasis* is closer to our modern conception of civil war – a far less exciting prospect. Where revolutions may be romantically framed as a struggle to overthrow oppression, civil wars merely herald destruction. Worse still, Arendt points to the cyclical quality of *stasis*, to a violence that returns to the *polis* in perpetuity; it is destruction without end. This is why *stasis*, as a condition of perpetual civil war, might offer a productive lens for viewing Artaud's work. While Artaud sometimes calls for a 'drastic purification' or a 'draining off of societal abscesses', actually his vision of plague is one that always reproduces itself in response to

what he calls 'the world's lies, meanness, and even two-facedness'.¹⁵ It is not an event designed to forge a new reality, but a parasitic force in constant opposition to *this* one.

In her analysis of *stasis* in Ancient Greece, Nicole Loraux describes a conflict arising from within the *polis* that 'cuts the city in two'.¹⁶ Loraux sees the *oikos* in terms of a battleground, importantly a battleground of women. She observes that women's equivalent to the beautiful death afforded men by combat was death in childbirth – the bed transposing and mirroring the site of conflict. Warfare, which was beautiful and staged in defence of the *polis*, was the province of men. But 'bad warfare', warfare waged from within the *polis* upon itself, in which 'anything is possible and everything is permitted' (words that could have come straight from Artaud), was a place where women could fight.¹⁷ Loraux cites historical accounts of women in various urban conflicts employing improvised weaponry against their enemies. 'When civil war rages, women erupt, often in a group, into the breach that has been opened in the fine totality. They fight on the rooftops in the service of a faction, throwing stones and tiles at the opposition.'¹⁸ She observes that the Greek imagination saw these women fighting, thus seceding from their domestic roles, as 'a threat to the unity of the *polis*', a 'secession' which 'is an equivalent to *stasis*', and, significantly, that 'epidemic is a metaphor for it'.¹⁹

The secession of women from domesticity and the opening out of the *oikos* unravel society's fabric; 'bad' warfare, which spreads like plague, is the consequence. This balancing of the *oikos* and *polis* was delicate and could at any moment foment into catastrophe, so *stasis* was forever existent within the life of the *polis*. It is interesting to note that the epidemic serving as the metaphor for *stasis* was home-grown, created in and by the city rather than by some external body. Central to Loraux's model, of course, is the misogynist confinement and persecution of women woven into the fabric of these societies. This injustice acted as an accelerant upon the sedition latent in individual subjects. As Loraux puts it, 'the moment that civil order breaks down, women arise'.²⁰ *Stasis*, like the onset of plague boils, is

symptomatic of a deeper disorder, and its latency takes the form of a powder-keg ready to erupt and spread through individuals at a moment's notice.

The above formulation is a very Artaudian conceit: plague emanating through the constrictions and oppressions of our politics of cohabitation. This is why Artaud expresses gleeful support for plague, since, for him, plague works as a corrective. To 'speak plague' is to mutiny, manifesting the disorder that oppresses you and attacking the chains of your confinement. This speech employs an avowedly non-representative language that destroys itself by being performed through 'archetypal symbols which act like sudden silences, fermatas, heart stops, adrenalin calls, incendiary images surging into our abruptly woken minds. It restores all our dormant conflicts and their powers.'²¹ That 'dormant conflict' is where Artaud's cruelty traverses *stasis*, with the ever possible toppling of the *oikos* into the street, and the looming shadow of civil war.

The very idea of a representative language would be anathema here; language must be a poison which, 'when injected into the body of a society, destroys it'.²² It was this thought that intrigued the young Jacques Derrida, who turned Artaud inside out to try to discover the possibility of such a non-representative language. In the end, Derrida was forced to conclude that 'to think the closure of representation is thus to think the cruel powers of death and play which permit presence to be born to itself, and pleasurably to consume itself through the representation in which it eludes itself in deferral'.²³ In other words, there is an endless tension between 'presence', the coming-into-being of an unrepeatable existence, and representation, the way in which that existence becomes known to itself. Artaud conjures up in his poisonous language an act that disrupts that playing space – speech that makes speaking impossible and which, by spreading, brings the unrepresentable into existence. An example of this, thinking back to Loraux, are the shouts that multiply in advance of a riot, manifesting an enraged reality that, crucially, was always there in the first place. In a move that anticipates the fluidity of deconstruction,

Artaud does not propose this existence as a new and preferred reality. Rather, he is forever in opposition, believing human endeavour incapable of escaping the traps of its institutions. The nearest he gets to a resolution is, again borrowing from antiquity, an engagement with tragedy, in which he says that theatre may grant people strength to take a 'nobler, more heroic stand in the face of destiny'.²⁴

But even here, Artaud is not talking about a tragic form that offers a chance to rebuild society through sacrifice, which is the hope that such commentators as Terry Eagleton find in the plays of the Ancient Greeks.²⁵ As Jane Goodall writes, the 'metaphor of a sacrificial crisis has a remarkable correlation with the ideas presented in "Theatre and the Plague"' but restoring order in the wake of this crisis is 'alien to Artaud's way of thinking'.²⁶ She suggests that Artaud prefers the Senecan tragedies and their Jacobean descendants 'because they use shock tactics to crack the mould of pragmatic understanding and wrench the preoccupations of the audience away from their moorings in psychological or sociological matters'.²⁷ Artaud expresses this influence most clearly in the single piece of theatre analysis in 'Theatre and the Plague': a discussion of John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, where he contrasts an actor with a murderer: 'The murderer's anger has accomplished an act and is released, losing contact with the power that inspired but will no longer sustain it. It assumed a form, while the actor's fury, which denies itself by being detached, is rooted in the universal.'²⁸ Loraux echoes this perpetual conflict of Artaud's theatre, reasoning that the 'bygone and always menacing' mythic history of the tragedies both 'exalts the city and confronts it with its most vital problems'.²⁹ She defines these 'vital problems' as the unending conflict between three interrelated bodies:

The affair will play out between three terms: *stasis*, city, family. To enumerate the familial figures of the city invites us to a combinatory where it is sometimes the family that induces war against the city, sometimes the *stasis* installed in the city that destroys the family, sometimes the city as family that

pushes back against *stasis*. Three terms of which one must always be menaced by the other two, linked together by a necessary relationship, of alliance or affinity.³⁰

This is the model of Sartre's hell: no two can find peace in the company of a third. Thus, because all must exist in concert, conflict is inevitable. Loraux, like Artaud, finds the city oppressive in its attempts to control the family (or the populace) to prevent civil war. And, again like Artaud, she sees theatre as a means of fighting against that oppression. The tragic poets of Ancient Greece may have had to 'push discord back into the mythical past the better to offer its representation to the Athenians of the present', but it was also up to their audiences 'to know how to guess that long ago hides now'.³¹ Artaud's project may, in a certain light, be seen as the energizing of that knowledge, an attempt to drag theatrical conflict out of myth and back on to the streets, which is where it has been all along.

Anti-Apocalypse

In 2015, Giorgio Agamben published a slim volume responding to what he saw as the conspicuous absence of a modern theory of civil war. Rather than attempt to fill this gap, his book attends to two historical junctures that form 'the two faces . . . of a single political paradigm', namely, that civil war is a 'necessary' force in modern theories of the state, and, therefore, its exclusion has become a necessary component of those theories.³² His first juncture is Ancient Greece, where he employs Loraux's research to demonstrate the historical latency of *stasis*. For the second, he turns to seventeenth-century England, in a discussion of the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. In a somewhat eccentric move, he dedicates the bulk of this discussion to the illustrated titlepage of the first edition of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. This image, which depicts the mythical Green Dragon, made up of tiny interlinked human bodies, is described as the 'populace dissolved into the sovereign', towering over an empty city.³³ Agamben argues that this image shows that, for Hobbes, the multitude 'has no political significance'; it 'must

disappear for the State to exist' and is thus 'the unpolitical element upon whose exclusion the city is founded'.³⁴

In other words, the illustration at the front of Hobbes's book shows the violent suppression of the populace by the city – the '*stasis* installed in the city that destroys the family', according to Loraux's equation. This is how, according to Agamben, Hobbes's philosophy attempts to consolidate political power, that is, by dissolving the populace into the sovereign and thus depriving the people of their rebellious potential.³⁵ But Agamben immediately undermines his own reading, saying that the populace *are* represented in the image outside of the sovereign, if only indirectly. Zeroing in on two tiny figures in the foreground, he makes the following observation:

We have evoked the curious presence, in the empty city, of the armed guards and of the two characters whose identity it is now time to reveal. Francesca Falk has drawn attention to the fact that the two figures standing near the cathedral are wearing the characteristic beaked mask of plague doctors [and] stresses the political (or biopolitical) significance that the doctors acquired during an epidemic. . . . Like the mass of plague victims, the unrepresentable multitude can be represented only through the guards who monitor its obedience and the doctors who treat it. It dwells in the city, but only as the object of the duties and concerns of those who exercise the sovereignty.³⁶

In Hobbes's model not only do the people not exist either as physical or political beings, but their inferred representation is somehow synonymous with plague, which *itself* does not exist, except in the manner by which it is ostensibly controlled. The view that Hobbes offers of the sovereign body that seeks to maintain the populace is top-down. From here, the plague is a threat to order, like the latent civil war of Ancient Greece. Artaud, thirteen years after the publication of 'Theatre and the Plague', would make almost exactly the same argument. But as one of the unrepresentable infected, having spent much of his life in psychiatric institutions where he was imprisoned, starved, and subjected to agonizing courses of experimental ECT, he took a more critical view than Hobbes. In 1946, after his final incarceration and two years before he

died, he wrote the following lines in a piece called 'Alienation and Black Magic':

If there had been no doctors
there would have been no patients,
no skeletons of the diseased
dead to butcher and flay,
for it is through doctors and not through
patients that society began.³⁷

Only those in control may grant themselves permission to exist. It is for this reason that Goodall sees Artaud as having 'nothing to lose in making the gesture of abandonment, occupying the forbidden territory. Pitched into the abject sublime of *ego absconditus*, he assaults the fortress of rational, egocentric consciousness from which he is outcast'.³⁸ The 'fortress of rational, egocentric consciousness' is built to house the plague and by doing so, of course, it creates the plague. This conclusion is not controversial when viewed through the lens of *stasis*, where plague is a manifestation of social inequalities that unbalance the relationship between *oikos* and *polis*, spilling violence out on to the streets. For Hobbes, it seems that the *polis* is itself the 'fortress of rational, egocentric consciousness', which is why, as Agamben points out, both the people and the plague are unrepresentable within it.

What is curious, though, is that Agamben observes a shift away from the cyclical *stasis* of antiquity into an eschatological *telos* from Hobbes's early modern thinking onwards: 'By its nature, the Leviathan State, which must ensure the "safety" and "contentments of life" of its subjects, is also what precipitates the end of time.'³⁹ Hobbes's political philosophy keeps step with Christian eschatology in which all activity is bent to the service of the coming into being of the Kingdom of God. Agamben seems amused by the unwitting foundation of modern theories of the state upon this apocalyptic belief structure, and concludes: 'It is certain that the political philosophy of modernity will not be able to emerge out of its contradictions except by becoming aware of its theological roots.'⁴⁰

Artaud's attacks on the *polis* appear to be in concert with these roots, their strength and fervour echoing the *stasis* of Ancient Greece. But, in a notable twist, this puts Artaud on to

the opposing side of the apocalypse. By waging permanent war upon the 'fortress of rational, egocentric consciousness', he resists absolutely the allure of the utopian *telos*, returning endlessly to the mire where the oppressions and constrictions of society hold sway. This is also Maria Ristani's conclusion in her survey of the historical connections between theatre and the epidemic. Rather than express the endless conflict of Artaud's theatre in terms of a civil war, she opts for a less pugilistic discourse, describing theatre and the plague as 'partners in ambivalence; disastrous and apocalyptic, delirious yet communicative, they ravage and build anew.'⁴¹ Artaud would probably take exception to most of this, since his is avowedly *not* a theatre of communication or reconstruction. But he is not on the side of destruction, either, since he affirms society by waging permanent war upon it.

Coercive Power and Conspiracy Theory

It is necessary now to address the controversy surrounding Agamben's own position on the Covid-19 pandemic. In a series of blog posts between 2020 and 2021, eventually published together as a book, he criticized governmental responses and called into question the very existence of the pandemic, claiming for instance that, 'Once terrorism ceased to exist as a cause for measures of exception, the invention of an epidemic offers the ideal pretext for widening them beyond all known limits.'⁴² Lecturers who agreed to teach our classes online were described as the 'perfect equivalent of university teachers who in 1931 swore allegiance to the Fascist regime'.⁴³ Further, he claimed that those who refused the Covid vaccinations were being turned into bearers of a 'virtual yellow star'.⁴⁴ These comments were born from his work on the 'state of exception', an influential theory developed by the fascist philosopher Carl Schmitt, in which emergency situations permit the suspension of law and grant extraordinary powers to state institutions and the sovereign.

The extremity, irresponsibility, and increasing absurdity of Agamben's writings prompted widespread criticism. Adam Kotsko, one of

Agamben's English translators, offered some defence by pointing to the influence of Nazi Germany on Agamben's thought, where the Nazis were able to legitimize their atrocities using the 'state of exception'. Thus, 'the supposedly "normal" operations of our legal institutions always carry with them the threat of turning, suddenly and without warning, into a new concentration camp'.⁴⁵ However, Kotsko concludes that 'any political thinker who can't see the ways that Western structures of power victimize us through our very freedom is missing a great deal – in fact, nearly everything', and that Agamben is 'failing to live up to his own insights'.⁴⁶

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there were many horrific spectacles of politicians using 'liberty' to justify anti-lockdown measures that resulted in huge numbers of preventable deaths. One of the most grotesquely iconic was the then President of the United States, Donald Trump, telling his electorate to ignore his own government's medical advice and instead to drink or inject bleach.⁴⁷ In that vacuous address, Trump perfectly demonstrated the libertarian right's transformation of 'freedom' into a death cult – and Agamben's position on Covid has aligned him with these views. Moreover, the organic development of Agamben's pre-pandemic thought to his current position fatally undermines his broader project. Benjamin Bratton believes that this was inevitable, since Agamben's model of biopolitics is characterized by a 'self-regarding *protagonism* for which "I" am the piloting agent of moral outcomes'.⁴⁸ By such logic, the rights of the self eclipse any top-down state directives, even if those directives support such rights of the other as compulsory public mask-wearing during the pandemic of an airborne virus. Bratton calls for an adaptation of biopolitical theory away from Agamben's individualism, one capable of 'inclusion, care, transformation, and prevention'.⁴⁹ I made the same argument in my book *Precarious Spectatorship*, where I argued that the state of exception isolates the individual for the benefit of state actors, since 'if "we" retained a sense of our common imperilment, there is a chance that we might . . . pursue a communitarian response that spoke to a collective need

of safety and wellbeing from which we *did not exclude one another*'.⁵⁰ By pursuing individual liberty above and beyond any sense of the collective, Agamben finds himself on the side of ultra-right-wing politicians and conspiracy theorists, the kinds of authoritarian figures that his philosophy was designed to oppose.

Although considerable, the above caveat does not delegitimize Agamben's reading of Hobbes, which is useful for demonstrating the ways that *stasis* is embedded in modern theories of the state and turned against the populace. However, as Samuel Clowes Huneke points out, Agamben's subsequent 'inability to differentiate between justified and abusive instances of coercive power' renders his work inadequate for our current moment, and perhaps, as Martin Paul Eve exasperatedly suggests, it is now 'time we dropped Agamben'.⁵¹

Stasis and Covid-19

For the most part, this article has restricted itself to certain theoretical parallels between Artaud's plague and *stasis* that have become more sharply visible in the light of the current pandemic. The case of Agamben, however, returns the argument to the matter of collective engagement, which was touched upon earlier through the nascent term 'viral theatre'. The conditions of this term – a theatre performed to spectators who are in a state of disruption, who participate willingly, and who communicate at a distance – would seem able to contribute, in some way, to Bratton's call for a more inclusive development of biopolitical theory. And in fact the groundwork for this, in Artaud studies, has been laid by Sam Weber in his essay 'The Greatest Thing of All', where he puzzles over the function of the 'virtual' in 'Theatre and the Plague':

The 'gratuitousness' of the theatrical act, then, is inseparable from the rule of law, which it must presuppose in order to violate, although Artaud always understood the violation to be, paradoxically, prior to any inviolate identity. It must presuppose therefore organized, delimited spaces: those of domesticity, of propriety, but also of the *polis* – the city, the state, the nation, and, indeed, the cosmos. At the same time, however, the expropriating effects of theatre are and must remain *virtual*.⁵²

For Weber, the theatre is 'inseparable from a virtuality that is irreducible not just to actuality but to *any other form of appropriability*'.⁵³ It violates any space in which it is produced (Weber is careful to note that the theatre of cruelty is designed to be performed 'in barns and hangars, rather than in established "theatres"') but remains apart from these spaces in order to affirm the existence of that which is outside of them.⁵⁴ This is why the 'viral theatre' of *Eternal* had such a powerful effect, invading a locked-down space with a fantasy that connected multiple spectators through a shared fear of something beyond the locked-down environment, a fear that was confirmed in a conversation between participants during a video-conferencing seminar the following day. Throughout the lockdowns of 2020–21 there were several occasions when a similar process occurred on a much larger scale, where domestic spaces were invaded by virtual performances of real-world events whose consequences tipped the internal struggles of the *oikos* out on to the streets. This analysis will restrict itself to two examples: the public demonstrations of grief and rage caused by the murders of George Floyd in the United States and Sarah Everard in Britain.

Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, was arrested in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, for buying cigarettes with a counterfeit twenty-dollar note. A white arresting officer, Derek Chauvin, knelt on Floyd's neck until he suffocated Floyd to death. Video taken at the scene by onlookers on their camera phones went viral and triggered worldwide protests, under the organizing hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, against police brutality and racial injustice.⁵⁵ In a landmark case, Chauvin was convicted of Floyd's murder and sentenced to 22½ years' imprisonment on 25 June 2021.⁵⁶ Part of the protests involved widespread toppling of statues to people who had profited from slavery, a trend that Rick Mitchell, in his pandemic study of Artaud, called 'contagious'.⁵⁷ For Mitchell, the irrational and affective strategies of the theatre of cruelty can lend force to representations of real-world events such as Floyd's murder, which confound a linear, 'rational' response because they fuse granular

occurrences with vast historical discourses.⁵⁸ This instrumentalization opposes Artaud's own ambitions for his theatre, but, Mitchell suggests, offers a potential tool for reconciling the helplessness of the individual against the endless states of emergency in which we live.⁵⁹ Specifically for these purposes, the affect of the videos that were shared energized a network of frustration and rage, which rapidly – in the manner of a contagion – mobilized collective and public resistance against the *polis*.

Public unrest was also stirred by the killing of Sarah Everard, a 33-year-old British woman who was abducted by an off-duty police officer, Wayne Couzens, on the evening of 3 March 2021. Couzens, it was later concluded, 'used his warrant card and handcuffs' to get Everard into his car and then abducted, raped, and murdered her.⁶⁰ This crime sparked nationwide protest, most visibly in a public vigil held on Clapham Common in London on 13 March 2021, during which predominantly women attendees were tackled to the ground and arrested by police officers and charged with breaching the Covid-19 restrictions against public assembly that were in place at the time.⁶¹ These arrests were well documented, with photographs of masked women pushed to the ground by multiple (and mostly male) police officers becoming instantly iconic. The distribution of these photographs prompted further protests in the wake of these arrests, and the High Court eventually ruled that the Metropolitan Police had acted unlawfully, that their actions 'had a chilling effect on the claimants [vigil attendees] in relation to the exercise of their Article 10 and 11 rights'.⁶²

The murders of Floyd and Everard, and the subsequent mobilization of people in collective protest and revolt, spoke to long-entrenched institutional persecution of certain categories of people. The significance of both murders, it should be observed, is that, at one level, they maintained the state's normal function. Floyd and Everard were killed by police officers, and the police brought further violence against those who protested their deaths. Whilst the murders were not a direct consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, their

aftershocks were channelled through the isolation, fear, and frustration into which that pandemic had forced huge swathes of the population. The protests and civic unrest that followed in the wake of the murders were thus, to return to Artaud, spoken in the language of the plague. It should be noted that the protesters were not allied with the anti-state conspiracy theorists and authoritarians in whose company Agamben found himself. To paraphrase Clowes Huneke, the protesters were capable of differentiating between justified and abusive instances of coercive power.⁶³ Their resistance was collective, an expression of inclusivity with the Other against state forces that continually subject large sections of their domestic citizenries to violence.

This is perhaps why Artaud's iconoclasm stands out during the Covid-19 pandemic. His fury at the oppressive activities of state institutions is designed to stage a dialogue between the individual and the collective, energizing a commonality between subjects in the form of a contagion that we carry in our thoughts. All of us, all the time.

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