

## *Chapter 1*

The first chapter

## 1.1 SECTION

### Paragraph## Question 1.

One of the most crucial perspectives of this course is the complex relation between theory (critical theory, theory of culture) and theater. The approaches and discourses that are developed (by most of the authors we have read) usually try to combine a more or less strong critique of the European theoretical tradition (especially of the hyperbolic status of the subject, the insistence on rationality, on science, on representation, the repression of the body/the physical/materiality etc.) in which 'theatricality' seems to have been repressed, with the attempt to develop a new kind of theoretical discourse or actually: another way of writing that would account for this theatricality. Give a critical account of this tension between theory and theater in at least 3 texts.

## 1.2 THREE STAGES:

1. Nietzsche – beginning of the end, premonition of the consequences of the scientific mind: “imminence du malheur qui sommeil au sein de la culture théorique trouble de plus en plus l’homme moderne”;

At this time Nietzsche still believes in the spirit of tragedy (Wagner); struggle between the theoretical mind and tragic conception of the world. Socrates, dialectic hero, optimism of science, victory of dialectic over darkness, illusion of science – possession of being by knowledge, typical tendency of scientific mind to characterize, already obvious in Sophocles, theater as peinture de caractère; victory of appearance, Apollo = eternity of appearance. In opposition, Dionysus: dark side, generating cause, life, beyond appearance and behind the principles of individuation, music as idea of eternal life; in Dionysian art “nature speaks her own true voice without disguise”. “Resolution of this struggle would be Socrates practising music...”

Modernity is age of theoretical man, signifies decline of life, “natural cruelty of things”. “the Socratic culture can only hold the scepter of its infallibility with trembling hands”.

2. Artaud – when life feels in a situation of radical/violent loss – historical and metaphysical characteristic of western man (article: ‘Universal Basis of Culture’ from Mexico). Western culture: one that never coincided with life. Aim of saving man by bringing him back to life by means of theatre. Calls for change of civilization. Not so much a discourse on crisis of western man, because a crisis is to be resolved; but fundamental error, civilization took wrong path. Theater must be space for rupture and transformation to be experimented and acted. A new idea of man (total man), not a new humanism but beyond humanism. Esp., new idea of culture, not a Pantheon but a protest against a culture separated from life. Culture must be “un moyen raffiné de comprendre et exercer la vie.” Search in non-western, non-contemporary cultures (Mexico, Balinese theater...) Mexique – vieux fond métaphysique très poétique, idea of man in possession of natural forces that “breathe with the life of the world”.

Therefore theater must bring man back to a poetic state, through physical means put the mind on the right path. So, theater must create its own pure physical language made of signs and

not words (utilisés dans leur sens incantatoire); cruel because it is life ("true spectacle of life"); must have direct and strong action on man, so it is true action, communicates pure strong forces. Connects with reality of imagination and dreams: the "verso" of the the mind. "So obscure facets of the spirit are revealed in real material projection" (Sontag). Myth. Renews old conflict, in gestures. Show archetypes rather than individual psychology. Archetypal reality is dangerous.

'Pour en finir des chef-d'oeuvres': criticism of psychology, cryptic psychological theater, theater as mirror for audience, makes audience into a voyeur. In the end, people yearn for mystery, so must search, under the written poetry, for poetry itself. Anarchical power of poetry.

Go beyond closed, egotistical, personal art. "We are not free, the sky can still fall on our heads, and the job of theater is to teach us that."

3. Beckett – after the catastrophe, when the end of the world is taken as a matter of course (Adorno). Deconstruction of traditional aesthetic categories attached to a metaphysical meaning, explosion of this metaphysical meaning, explosion of the individual. Adorno: "Beckett's dramaturgy abandons the ontological tendency of existentialism and the position of the absolute subject." Individual experience's narrowness and contingency – "the prison of individuation is revealed as a prison, a mere semblance". Proclaims the bankruptcy of the spirit. Thought transformed into material of 2nd degree. Parody of forms, parody of philosophy. Identification of subject and philosophy. Misery of participants in Endgame is the misery of philosophy – Adorno. Drama itself perishes along with subjectivity. "Post-mortem examination of dramaturgy." Art can only depict solipsism, the stage becomes image of self reflection. What remains of subject, mind and thought, in the face of permanent catastrophe.

And then Brecht. The optimist in the story. Socratic dramatist (Benjamin) (the optimism of marxism). Start of alternative history of European drama. Philosophical theater, as Artaud was metaphysical theater/consolation. Epic theater calls for a critical attitude as much for the author as for the "productively" disposed spectator. Actor adopts the attitude of a man who wanders, a man who lets himself be amazed and create astonishment in his audience (philosophical attitude par excellence) (Brecht). Close to lehrestück...

Epic suggests possibility that history might have been different. Fundamental contingency and inconsistency. The untragic hero, wise man, thinking man, interruption: the basis of his technique; gesture is its raw material. Gesture of showing. Story is still heart of theatrical performance.

“The wise man is the perfect empty stage on which the contradiction of our society is acted out... the stage becomes a public platform. ... Epic theater is not meant to develop action but to represent conditions, to uncover them by means of *verfremdung* (alienation, defamiliarization).

### Bibliography

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Bertolt Brecht, ‘A Short Organum for the Theater’

Walter Benjamin, ‘Understanding Brecht’

Theodor Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand Endgame’