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Absurd Language in the Theatre and Arts in the 20th Century

The truly modern artist is aware of abstraction in an emotion of beauty

Piet Mondrian

Whatever I do, and do machine like, is because it's what I want to do

Andy Warhol

Both the Theatre of the Absurd and Pop Art are genuine artistic references of the second half of the 20th century, particularly in 50s, 60s and early 70s, a period usually identified under the general label of Postmodernism. In its diverse use of aesthetic codes and particular language systems, postmodernist art aims at bringing forward a reappraisal of a number of traditional values that had long been taken for granted as true representations of the world, of life itself, of society and people, of politics and religions, of culture and art. If 'post' means that something was left behind, overtaken, in anyway surpassed, reappraisal means, however, that what was left behind needs to be reflected upon once again and sort of questioned from a new standpoint: 'What was the former setting from where all our now-condition seems to proceed?'; 'What we call new is it really "new" or is it just a refashioning of the "old"? If so, what did we change and what did we reshape? If not, where is the cleavage, where did we break up with the old?' Obviously, all these questions are not mutually exclusive but they all tend to complement each other as they point to a complex pattern of ruptures and continuities in the yet somehow blurred turning from Modernism to Postmodernism. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Postmodernism 'grew' from Modernism, taking the risk of a highly ideological semantic charge when the generational, vitalist metaphor is used.

My point in this essay is not to focus exhaustively on this general issue but to concentrate on how absurdity took place and acquired an indisputable meaning in the post-modernist contexts of art, most particularly in the theatre and painting. Language, in its broad semiotic understanding, is once again the double means and end to represent everything including absurdity, both adequate and hopelessly deceptive, at the dead end of all established senses and meanings.

Perhaps I should start by recalling that a most determining feature of modernist art – the example appears to be more obvious in the plastic arts – is that artworks no longer submit to models, no longer imitate nature, but try to present the fact that there is something that exists and cannot be presented; in other words, instead of imitating, art wants to actualise *a* reality, *a* figure, which potentially exists in language. The reception expected from the social community is not one of recognition and understanding of that precise artwork but mainly one of rejection due to its incomprehension. Back in the final years of the 19th century, in the early hints of the artistic revolution that was about to set the pattern for a modernist sense of art and culture in the first decades of the 20th century, Cézanne wrote in his correspondence that a painter only painted ‘for a very few people’. Exactly the same kind of elitist feeling can be apprehended in modernist literature and criticism. The painting of ‘little sensations’ – ‘colouristic sensations’, to use Cézanne’s phraseology, represents the whole pictorial existence of objects, taken for their own sake and utterly independent of their ‘history’, their ‘subjectivity’, their contextual environment of line, space or light. To look at an object plus its surroundings is the classical way of ordinary perception. The artist, however, has to look at it through an interior process of ‘ascesis’, free from his habitual sensorial or mental prejudices, in a dual state of surprise and doubt, so as *to render visible* to others *what* made him *see*, to uncover what was invisible in normal perception, not to reproduce what was already visible (Lyotard, 1993: 252-3). The same theoretical approach to artistic perception and representational processes can be traced in the Russian Formalism, specially in Shklowsky, when he distinguishes between creative ‘vision’ and reproductive ‘recognition’. Looking much further back into the proto-Romanticism of William Blake, himself a poet and a painter, an engraver and exquisite colourist, one reads a very similar concept of creative imagination which will develop fully in poets like Coleridge and Keats, as well as in Victorian poets like Hopkins and Robert Browning – if we are but to mention a very limited choice of names. In modernist art and literature this kind of procedure is often associated with the rendering visible or readable the very essence of abstraction: that which simply ‘happens’, and therefore ‘is’, but escapes form and plasticity in its conventional meaning.

Barnet B. Newman, an Abstract Expressionist painter from New York between the late 40s and 60s, declares that he and his contemporaries were making ‘cathedrals’ out of their own feelings, in a statement that captures the profound and underlying theme of authenticity and sincerity running throughout a great deal of modernist art. However far from the classical concept of authenticity, with its intimate links to imitation of both physical and human nature, the modernist idea of authenticity is in tune with the most traditional ideals of worth and value which ultimately trace the limits between art and non-art. The new frontiers are now to be exposed, not so much in terms of the moral and social purposefulness of the aesthetic values, but rather in terms of an idealised autonomy of the artwork. No matter authenticity comes from the artist’s aesthetic and religious experience, or from his insight into the very nature of man and things within the complex mutations of modern world, modern society and modern technology, the important thing is that it is there to define the same elevating intentions and effects of art as its proper meaning. Paul Crowther refers to a ‘legitimising discourse’ of art in Western culture which, ‘since the Renaissance at least, [has been its] *raison d’*

être'. Stressing the particular case of the visual arts, Crowther puts the problem in terms of a certain 'logic' of modernity that could only be looked for 'in the loose sense of a *radical transformation of the existing legitimising discourse of art*.' The meaning of 'logic' in this context should not be associated with the idea of 'necessary' progression but is rather to be taken in the larger scope of references involving art's complex responses to historical and social changes (Crowther, 1990: 237ss). The point here to stress, however, is that in modernist art former ethical and aesthetic elevating sentiments, as well as religious and political ideals, have undergone substantially different readings which have produced a thorough transformation of all 'legitimate' concepts and codes of expression and therefore have started to break up with modernity itself.

The growth of Modernism into Postmodernism, or the turning from Modernism to Postmodernism, can somehow be located in the shifting features presented in the 1950s, 60s and 70s by the innovating languages both of literature – as is here the case of absurdism in drama and theatre – and the plastic arts: *e. g.*, Pop Art, Minimal and Conceptual Art.¹ In as much as they are different, these historical avant-garde movements also have some basic assumptions in common. They all tend to negate the autonomous status of art and thereby not to accept the disjunction of art and the praxis of life as well as the individual nature of artistic production and reception. Whereas in precedent aestheticism and subsequent modernist traditions, art somehow made a point to be socially functionless, or at least detached, in avant-garde currents works of art are no longer valued for their own sake, but are taken as *manifestations*, where the 'principle of the sublation of art in the praxis of life' is the utmost condition valued (Bürger, 1993: 237-243). Art reception is deeply affected by the strong shock these so to say manifestations inflict on the public, thereby destroying many of their most important and stable expectations.

A dimension of deconstruction is present, in as much as art's pretensions to elevation or improvement are called into question and very often shifted to the level of the humorous. Which sorts of feelings are aroused when this questioning or humorous shift comes to expression can vary enormously from artist to artist, from writer to writer. Nevertheless, an all pervading sense of hedonism and irony can be read in postmodern art productions, more emphatically in the plastic arts, linked to the artists' affective responses to technological changes and possibilities, to radical and Utopian political ideals, to a certain playful attraction to mass-production and market laws, to an ultimate view of society as a pragmatic consumer of art's industrial products. On the literary field, Allan Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) was greatly influential upon the younger generations in items concerning sexual freedom and feminine emancipation, while great mass behaviour movements were undoubtedly influenced by the Beatniks in the 50s, followed by the Hippies in the 60s and 70s.²

Whereas Absurd Theatre has no definite popular appeal in its way of deconstructing reality and using its scattered pieces to provoke a number of mixed feelings that

¹ Only Pop Art will be at issue at the moment, however close it may be to Minimal and Conceptual Art in terms of 20th century postmodern artistic trends. While Pop Art insists on the collapsing distinction between art and life, for Minimal Art or *Arte Povera* the minimum conditions of an artwork are its being a mere object whereas for Conceptual Art to embody a concept is what counts to produce an artwork.

² See also Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1958).

tie human existence to the very core of its hopelessness and ultimate absurdity, Pop Art presents a deliberate 'popular' message. It deconstructs reality by using and abusing it like a never ending supply of formulas, *kitsch* ideograms that aim at producing social and economical stereotypes, perishable images and myths that have become the world's everyday references. The fancy Hollywood culture with all its related cults to movie and television stars, its inevitable association to Pop music and Pop stars that move around in extravagant limousines and wear 'the fashion' in clothes and accessories, the great appeal of sophisticated video clips and commercials, the boom of canned and fast food etc, all this is Pop in the broadest sense of the word – actually, as broad as it was meant to be. By contrast, Absurd Drama and Theatre remained somehow limited to the scope of interests of an intellectual elite, the same that evolved from former modernist and surrealist literary traditions and continued to write and buy literature, to go to the theatre as well as to art exhibitions, so as to be aware of what was coming up as novelty. There are obvious exceptions in the way some absurd plays like Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Embers* and sketches from *That Time* and *Footfalls*, for instance, were actually written for radio and broadcast by radio,³ while *Ghost Trio* and *...but the clouds...*, as well as *Not I* were shown on television (Spring 1977); Beckett also ventured into the cinema with *Film* (New York 1964, starring Buster Keaton), although his was just a once and for all attempt.

On the whole, however, Absurd Drama and Theatre counted on the firm basis of an organised literary language system, though deconstructed, abused, perverted, but still poetically admitted. Absurd Drama is definitely literature; Absurd Theatre is definitely a performing art, not exactly a Pop 'Happening'. On the other hand, what Pop artists had in common was certainly not a fully developed and organised language system, ready to communicate experience, but a very sensitive code of response to the prevailing atmosphere of society, especially in the greatest urban centres, cut off from all traditional ideals of natural purity and nature's superimposing model. Pop artists became a sort of modern shamans in the way they brought together fashion, democracy and industry – the machine in their desire for 'the new', 'the mass', the money and the self-gratification of leisure and pleasure. Fashions came and went at a greater speed and therefore accelerated all process of replacement, which obviously urged a greater productivity and competitiveness in industry. 'The reason I'm painting this way is because I want to be a machine', Warhol once said and concluded, 'I think it would be terrific if everybody was alike' (*apud* Stangos *et al.*, 1985: 232). Artworks become functions, performances, rather than 'things' or unique objects like they used to be in past generations; they are disposable like objects in Op and Kinetic art. They are made to be transient, popular, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, gimmicky, glamorous and 'Big Business', as Richard Hamilton liked to put it (Hamilton, 1970).

Ironically, however, postmodern art and artists may attempt seriously to deconstruct all legitimacy of former ethical and esthetical art procedures but all this attempt ends up by its ultimate submission to the 'legitimising discourse' – to use Crowther's expres-

³ The first two titles – a monologue and a play – were written specially for the BBC and the two dramatic sketches, from the volume *End and Odds*, were broadcast on Radio 3 on the very day of the author's seventieth birthday in 1976, accompanying the whole set of plays mounted for the season at the Royal Court Theatre also in Beckett's honour.

sion – of the market and economic policies and strategies. And this is where exactly critical Postmodernism recognises its own limits. Art objects have an internal critical intent which will immediately be assimilated by market forces so as to be in turn redistributed to a whole consumers' society in the form of a *style*.

II.

Historically, as we trace the foundations of Postmodern literature and arts in general, we find out that the whole sense of absurdity, humorous criticism, demoralisation, radical surprise and disruption that characterises its most paradigmatic works seems to emerge out of the chaos left by World War II. It is therefore a clear emergence and consequence of certain economical and political conditions of life in Western post-war societies and is usually assumed as a rebellious outcry against all establishment, all meanings of pain, suffering, poverty and death, all assumptions of man as a rational being, all metaphors of divinity, of metaphysics, of intelligibility and order. Above all, new paradigms in art and culture were also created by a newly acquired sense of peace and well being in society by means of political and economical stability, a sociological phenomenon that helped to bring forward a new enhanced value for the meaning of words like 'people' and 'popular'.

Existentialism, mostly in Sartre's and Camus's interpretations, expanded a cynical and ineradicable view of man lost in an alien universe where no human truth was meaningful, no values were to be found, no heroism, no altruism, no dignity, were praised, and where anguish and defeat were the only expectations possible. Most prominently, absurdity comes as the sole way out, the reverse significance of lost hopes, their positive rebirth, as it pronounces irrationality as a sound voice against nothingness.

In its own terms, perhaps because it was meant to be disruptive of most traditional frontiers between art and common real life, Pop Art became a palpable sign of this urge. Whether in USA or Britain, it succeeded in grounding its values and attitudes on the very paradox of duality: on the one hand, 'pop' provides an arrogant, provocative attitude that stands for all alternative thinking, be it political and social, or coming as it may from an ethical understanding of human behaviour and relationships; on the other hand, however, 'pop' also condescends quite happily with the urge to enter a great flourishing art business, as already mentioned above. Quite significantly, not only Coca-Cola or Campbell's Soup and Warhol are joined up or cross-references of publicity and Pop Art, but also Marilyn's stylised portrait and Warhol come up as a deliberate 'pop' remix of photography, machine reproduction and painting, cartoon stories and Lichtenstein as 'pop' ironies of literature and the traditional art of drawing, *The Beatles's* LP covers and Peter Blake or *Velvet Underground* LP covers and Warhol as typical examples of the close association of 'popular' music, 'popular' art and 'popular' audiences, meaning mass consumers.

Also in historical terms, two quick reminders should be brought to light at this point. The first has to do with linguistic or rather semiotic changes occurred in 19th century British literary traditions, the second relates absurdism to important 20th century art currents. First: nonsense literature in the midst of the most reliable and sensible Victorian morality and Imperial grandeur is a disruptive sign within the system of language itself which announces further linguistic and poetical changes while pointing

the finger, quite cynically, to an underlying state of hypocrisy, exhaustion and hollowness in human relations and social codes, in political creeds and religious beliefs. Both Carroll and Lear, though in quite different measures, also relate image to language codes in the way they 'play' with accepted literary and poetic conventions. Second: absurdity is never too far from early 20th century movements like Expressionism and Surrealism, both included in an all embracing assumption of Modernism. Joyce and Kafka are unsurpassable references to trace a literary support of postmodernist absurd writings, and so are names like Miró, Magritte and Dali as major predecessors of all future works of postmodernist plastic arts. A remark has to be made on an early 20th century European current like Dada which proclaimed itself as anti-art and was reinvented later on by Pop artists as a new concept of aesthetics. In USA a special reference has to be made to the famous Ash Can School, in a similar – though not identical – anti-art position as Dada back in Europe. When Marcel Duchamp presented in New York his famous ready-mades, like the *Bottlerack* (1914) and the *Urinal* (1917) or even others less prominent now such as a 'hatrack' and a 'snowshovel', he meant to shock and challenge the art public with obvious objects of radical aesthetic contempt.⁴ He explained that the choice of those objects was 'never dictated by an aesthetic delectation', that rather it was based 'on a reaction of visual indifference', 'a complete anaesthesia' which abstracted any ideas of 'good or bad taste'.⁵ Emphasising their overt dislike for Art and artists, dadaists went on producing anti-art objects, in a state of mind that very closely followed Duchamp's idea that you should 'use a Rembrandt as an ironing board' if you wanted a 'Reciprocal Ready-made' (Duchamp, 1912-13).⁶ Moreover, while avoiding oil painting – for its traditional weight and its relation to man's self exaltation – while proclaiming art to be best anonymous and collective, Hans Arp defined Dada as 'senseless like nature', without being nonsense. Most defiant and consistent in his denial of all common ideals of sense and reason, Arp goes on arguing that Dada rejects philosophies as 'old abandoned toothbrushes' and leaves them to 'the great world leaders' for it aims at destroying 'the reasonable deceptions of man' and at replacing 'the logical nonsense of the men of today by the illogically senseless' (Arp, 1948: 48). Some decades later, and for Duchamp's utter dismay, Pop Art finds a particular interest in Dada's aggressive creations and revives their techniques without a hint of the philosophy behind them; it therefore turns what was then conceived as ugly, anti-aesthetic, to beauty. Duchamp assumes Pop Art as a Neo-Dada movement, also known as New Realism and Assemblage, and complains that it was an easy way out living 'on what Dada did'. Very much in bitter disapproval, he confesses in a letter to Hans Richter that he had 'thrown the bottlerack and the urinal into [people's] faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty' (Richter, 1965). But this is really what Pop Art was all about: to find in some 'anti' convention of art, in that same negativity praised by Dada artists, a kind of positive grounding whereupon something could

⁴ Duchamp's work first contact with the American public was at the NY Armory Show in 1913, where he contributed with four works, the most controversial and famous being *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Very much to his surprise, the public favoured and bought all his works exposed and the money he collected was enough to finance his trip to USA later on in 1915.

⁵ Duchamp's statement at the *Symposium* (see Duchamp, 1961).

⁶ Set of notes in typographic version published by Hamilton in 1960.

actually be built. Nevertheless, in its apparent easiness to reality, its coolness to all sorts of urban, folk or popular myths and trifles, it lacked any commitment to the subject matter it depicted. Generically, Pop Art is styleless and hostile to categories. This does not at all mean that Pop artists were scholarly unlearned, but quite on the opposite: despite their many differences and idiosyncrasies, all of them, American or English,⁷ were highly learned – as is the case of the British art historian Lawrence Alloway – and technically sophisticated artists, even when they simply ‘erased’ canvas, like Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953). However influential De Kooning was for Pop artists, specially when we are aware of how his images emerge from an abstract source of painting, he was seen as a prime name of the American Abstract Expressionism, specially in the late forties, together with Barnett Newman and Rothko. And so, ‘Erasing’ De Kooning, meant for Pop artists precisely to give up all ideals of sublimity, formal purity and ‘spiritual’ harmony that Abstract Expressionists had intended to convey as a kind of ‘comfort’ against all atrocities of World War II, including the H bomb calamity (De Kooning, 1951).⁸ The objection was ideological not actually technical. It should be enough to recall the highly formal artistic root on traditional painting techniques that art/ painting procedures like colourfield painting, hardedge, minimalism, pointillism, amongst others, certainly denounce. They eventually provide the intended emancipation of form and content as, for example, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns make it obvious. These also sustained the ‘social pertinence of art’ while pronouncing themselves against abstract representation and praised realism, defended intellectualism against emotion, the strategy of concept against obscurity, anonymity and impersonification against personal identity.

III.

It is commonly assumed that both Absurd Theatre and Pop Art deliberately play with and parody almost all traditional assumptions of Western culture, their artists being self-consciously ‘avant-garde’ in the way they use a reverse or perverse the usual language of sense. Neither of them, though, can be mixed up together or summed up in one all comprehensive concept and single phenomenon. Absurd Theatre and Pop Art should rather be taken separately as particular instances of postmodern diversity.

Absurd Drama and Theatre reject realism in their settings and therefore deconstruct reality by a consistent use of nonsense and absurd language, which fits the all prevailing atmosphere of irrational reasoning that underlies the whole arrangement of ‘plot’, characters and stage scenario. Ionesco reflects upon man’s uprooting from his traditional beliefs in religion, metaphysics and transcendence to explain his hopeless sense of loss in the modern world, whereas Kafka shows man almost as an aberrant creation in the midst of a mindless and soulless universe. Samuel Beckett, perhaps the most influential of all dramatists of the Absurd, presents his plays as parodies of all pointlessness of human actions and thoughts in a world that already has forgotten to question them.

⁷ It must be stressed though the important differences in American and European Pop Art traditions, a fact that has to do with their origins, whether in USA (New York) or in Britain (London), as well as with the artists themselves, their background particular learning and technical development.

⁸ “What Abstract Means to Me”, one of the three papers given at a *Symposium* at the Museum of Modern Art, NY, Feb. 1951.

The lucid and often sharp dialogues of plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days* display a double sense of absurd which combines the grotesquely comic with the irrational. In the first, two tramps are set in a waste place, waiting 'for waiting's sake' for an unidentified person named Godot, who eventually may or may not even exist, may or may not come to some kind of assumed appointment with them. Together with the absurd comic of the dialogues, Beckett makes a very conscious use of pratfalls and various other modes of slapstick to enhance man's – the tramps' – alienation and anguish. The metaphor of the waste, also current in modernist concepts and representations of modern Western societies, does not have the same sublime lyrical resonance as in Eliot's paradigmatic writings, both poems and plays, but it represents in itself the actual face of absurdity, where not men but clownish performers move about on an empty stage, along an imaginary road.

These performances on stage can be easily linked with other theatrical or even circus and street performances or shows such as pantomime, dance and acrobatic jumps and falls. Without attempting to make too quick associations when they are not completely accurate, as we clearly noted before, a certain affinity can be traced here to a very typical 'theatrical' attitude assumed by some Pop artist when they performed the so-called 'happenings' in the middle of anywhere, mostly in NY city streets, so as to bring forward the laws of chance and occasion with no kind of prior preparation or rehearsal. They meant to emphasise the intersection of the artist's subjective perspective with the apparently indifferent course of real events, just catching the moment for its own sake, with no other responsibility beyond life's hidden streams of fate behind any action. 'Happenings' as performances were developed so to say in close parallelism to common life but, like I said, they should not ultimately be taken on the same ground as Absurd Theatre performances.

Returning to Beckett, in *Happy Days*, an elderly couple, Minnie and Willie, are awkwardly set in their house yard: Minnie is literally stuck inside a sand hill, in the I act, up to her waist, in the II act, up to her neck. She insists on keeping a sort of dialogue with her husband but all her efforts come out to be utter failures to enact from him any proper answer. In the end, she has to resume to her most successful 'dramatic' monologues. In fact, Absurd Theatre dramatises the linguistic dimension of reality, very often bringing together in close intimacy its lyricism, laughter, and a nameless sense of sadness. Typical fiction-like plots are practically abstracted and characters turn out to be schematic figures, exquisite language effects, for the actor to fill in both physically and psychologically. Like in Beckett's prose fiction, such as *Molloy* and *The Unnamable*, characters in his plays can be defined as anti-heroes who seem to make their moves as if on an end game on the chess board of civilisation, so as to destroy its logical and syntactical coherence by means of destroying all remaining facts of language. The same process can be traced in Jean Genêt's or Harold Pinter's association of absurdism and diabolism, as well as in Stoppard's plays, where humour – most often black humour – deliberately substitutes deep philosophic thought.⁹ It is language – and absurd lan-

⁹ See Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* or *Travesties*. The representation of events which are simultaneously comic, brutal, grotesque, horrifying and absurd can be easily seen in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, Th. Pynchon's *V*, and on TV black humour series like *The Gentlemen's League* or, in a milder way, *Black Adder*, and even cartoons such as *The Simpsons*.

guage, not sensible language – that determines the internal textual coherence and, in the particular case of drama, it is meant to be impressive for the theatrical staging of the play. Oblique connections to the outside world are surely there to be understood by any audience of these plays, mostly because they produce a highly concentrated set of contents with an enormous amount of self-contained symbolism which is supposed to open up in all sorts of different meanings and propose uncountable readings, from the most obvious to the utmost controversial.

A final remark. Pop Art definitely made a point in showing that art was not made to last but to be consumed and therefore was transient and provisional. Absurd Drama and Theatre remained somehow more attached to traditional codes of art and literature in the way language – abused, perverted or almost annihilated though – as well as the closed restricted area of a theatre, separating stage and audience, prevented the ultimate fusion and remix of art and real common life, of art and market laws, of art and mass consumers' demands and tastes. Nevertheless, both of them in their own way were nonsensical and absurd languages and expressions in 20th century aesthetics, that faced the same world and the same urban post-war societies while they tried to mirror them, to denounce them and in the end to cherish them with no higher sublime or ethical ideals than those their deepest scepticism and irony, their sadness or their tenderness allowed.

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