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# Manifesting Meaning from a Performance of Cruelty: Parallels in the Musical Experimentalism of Antonin Artaud and Sub Ordinance

Cat Hope

*Edith Cowan University*

Sam Gillies

*Edith Cowan University*

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# Manifesting meaning from a performance of cruelty: Parallels in the musical experimentalism of Antonin Artaud and Sub Ordinance.

Cat Hope

Sam Gillies

West Australian Academy of Performing Arts,  
Edith Cowan University, Perth Australia.

West Australian Academy of Performing Arts,  
Edith Cowan University, Perth Australia.

This paper attempts to draw parallels between the French playwright, poet, actor and theatre director Antonin Artaud's (1896-1948) philosophy of the Theatre of Cruelty and the works of various musicians in both past and present forms of musical experimentalism. For Artaud, cruelty was inherent to life. Mere existence was an "inescapably necessary pain, without which life could not continue" (Artaud, 1993, p. 80). Could it be this conflict, this inherent cruelty and the need to express it that drives the various facets of experimentalism in art? Although Artaud's writings were primarily focused on the theatre, the concepts that underpin them can be applied to a musical context. This essay seeks to apply such a reading to the context of experimental composers and musicians such as Americans John Cage (1932-1992), David Tudor (1954-1993) and Frenchman Edgard Varèse (1906-1961). as well as the contemporary West Australian noise group Sub Ordinance, a group whose instrumentation of drum set and chainsaw suggests that parallels to Artaud's concept of cruelty may be closer to home than we might have considered.

## Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty

Artaud's concept of a Theatre of Cruelty is an incredible and unique landmark of artistic philosophy. Whilst his work contains elements of surrealism, Dadaism and Futurism, comparison to these particular movements is often more useful in constructing a meaning of his work within a

recognizable framework than any true reflection on the nature of Artaud's writing. Artaud's work exists in its own philosophical subcategory, dwelling on the inherent conflict and cruelty in the act of existence. Artaud's use of the term cruelty can be an initially misleading concept, as the physicality associated with art, in particular theatre, informing a bias towards a physical sensation and interpretation of the term cruelty. While the violent, physical component of cruelty is present in Artaud's works, cruelty instead refers to a more subjective, internal representation of struggle and conflict.

*"The word cruelty must be taken in its broadest possible sense, not in the physical, predatory sense usually ascribed to it. And in doing so, I demand the right to make a break with its usual verbal meaning, to break the bonds once and for all, to break asunder the yoke, finally to return to the etymological origins of language, which always evoke a tangible idea through abstract concepts."*

(Artaud, 1993, p. 79).

Cruelty can therefore be considered an internal struggle, an individual struggle and a violent, passionate struggle for each and every person, a philosophy that Artaud perceived as unrepresented in culture at large and sought to reflect in his work.

Amongst the many various components of Artaud's manifesto, the most significant and provocative statement is Artaud's intention to construct a

radically new theatre that represented the larger human condition, a theatre that tore down the masterpieces of the past.

*“Everyday love, personal ambition and daily worries are worthless except in relation to the kind of awful lyricism that exists in those Myths to which the great mass of men have consented. This is why we will try to centre our show around famous personalities, horrible crimes and superhuman self-sacrifices, demonstrating that it can draw out the powers struggling within them, without resorting to the dead imagery of ancient myths”*

(Artaud, 1993, p. 65).

It was this intention to redefine how theatre, and by extension art, could function that inspires the avant-garde aspiration to challenge the function of how a specific art form could be viewed or constructed.

Music and sound was to play an important aspect in Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. Of particular importance was the function of the instrument itself.

[Musical instruments] need to act deeply and directly on our sensibility through the senses, and from the point of view of sound they invite research into utterly unusual sound properties and vibrations which present-day musical instruments do not possess, urging us to use ancient or forgotten instruments or to invent new ones ... research is also needed into instruments and appliances ... which can reach a new scale in the octave and produce an unbearably piercing sound or noise”(Artaud, 1993, p. 73-74).

Artaud is of course not alone in a call for such sounds to be accepted into the vernacular of musical context, and his writing exudes similar ideas to that of Russolo’s Futurist manifesto some twenty years earlier and the writings of Cage some twenty years later. However it is the unification of this sonic aspiration with the internal philosophical concept of cruelty gives music an important function in Artaud’s works and theoretical framework for this paper.

Perhaps the use of the term ‘music’ in the context of Artaud’s ideas requires definition here. Artaud’s theatre pieces are notable for their combination of exorbitant set design that, for the most part, was technologically impossible at the time. The plays feature harsh, unremitting imagery that is intended to simultaneously exaggerate important aspects of good in the face of inherently cruel obstacles, and to provide the audience with a reference to recognizable images. With this in mind, American theorist Frances Dyson offers the following interpretation of music within the context of Artaud’s work:

*“Artaud’s interest in noise – etymologically linked to nausea, odious air and rumor (spread as “bad sound”) - ... further embeds it within the concept of contagion and transmission... The sounds that Artaud envisages include glossolalic utterances that completely disable the mechanisms of meaning – primal or otherwise”*

(2000, p.87).

The soundscapes utilized by Artaud are strong, noisy, dissonant sounds designed to shake and shock the audience with his concept of what a performance could entail. Yet the important point here is that these sounds are organically integrated with his perception of cruelty. The world he creates is often a fragile, violent or exaggerated imitation of his perception of the greater society, and the music tied to these worlds is a natural extension of this. The music is dissonant because such noise naturally suits the world that Artaud is creating. For Artaud, noise operates as a metaphor and reflection of greater disorder.

Noise music theorists such as Paul Hegarty propose noise functions as a raw music form, operating away from pure music conventions, a *musique brut* that raises the question of what music is and what it should be (Hegarty, 2007, p. 30). Hegarty discusses the term *musique brut* in regards to Artaud’s radio play “*Pour en finir Avec le Judgement de Dieu*” (To Make an end of The Judgement of god). Originally recorded for French radio in 1948, it was immediately shelved, only being broadcast some twenty-odd years later at a time when industrial, noise and grindcore bands had undertaken many of the same sonic explorations as Artaud had before them. “*Pour en finir Avec le Judgement de Dieu*” lasts for around forty minutes and creates an ugly and corrupted world conveyed in near hysterics for almost the entire performance. The soundscape is characterized by large, unstable blasts of percussion, noise and various permeations and degradations of the human voice. The percussion is not acting in a traditional musical role; rather it is intended to create an organic tool that acts to destabilize and transport the audience into Artaud’s perception of reality and into the cruelty inherent therein (Hegarty, 2007, p. 30) The music in “*Pour en finir Avec le Judgement de Dieu*” foreshadows the textural explorations of experimental music, in particular industrial and noise music, by some twenty years.

## Past Manifestations of Musical Cruelty

“*Pour en finir Avec le Judgement de Dieu*”, was heavily influenced by Artaud’s travels to the

America's, in that his inspiration for the piece was largely drawn from his criticism of North America. "The Theatre and its Double" (1970), Artaud's collection of essays and manifesto's pertaining to his theatre of cruelty, was not published in the United States until 1958; however it is important to note that it did have a significant influence on a number of key figures of the avant-garde music scene in America from the late 40's onward, who managed to obtain the text directly from publisher in Europe. A significant artist interested in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty was John Cage, who was introduced to Artaud's writings and philosophies through his collaborator David Tudor. Both men interpreted Artaud's writings in their own way.

*Tudor took this [The Theatre and its Double] as an encouragement to a performative violence, one with a temporal immediacy contrary to the types of duration involved in trance but not contrary to the immediacy produced by a trance-like abandon. What he was abandoning were the conventions of musical time and continuity...simply put Artaud provided the violence and physicality needed to enter another type of time.*

(Kahn, 1999, p. 327-328)

In a similar manner, these influences of violence, physicality and timelessness can be seen reflected in Cage's output of the early 1950's in the abrasive sonic textures featured in Imaginary Landscapes No. 4 for 12 radios, 24 players and conductor (1951), the dissociation of sound and time in the tape piece William's Mix (1952) and, of course, the still provocative 4'33" (1952) in its questioning of the very function of the art form. Even Cage's innovative usage of voice and vocal sounds in a warped or degrading way, manifesting the voice with physical characteristics and physical degradation in pieces such as Aria (1958) is similar to Artaud's own use of voice in an exaggerated caricature of modern society and the experience of living. Cage based his musical career on constant innovation, and Artaud's influence can be felt in the endorsement of challenging the audience and the conventions of the time while simultaneously embracing the spirit of the theatre of cruelty in the physicality and excessiveness of the works, and the subjective exploration of internal philosophies evident therein. While it might not be entirely accurate to paint Cage's interest in Artaud's writings as a chief source for his innovation, Artaud certainly served as a source for inspiration (Kahn, pg. 329).

Artaud's influence on earlier composer Varèse can be seen as more philosophical. Varèse worked with

the Italian futurists before settling in America in 1915, but the ideas of the Futurists were both inspiring and frustrating for the composer. While the Futurist's embrace of traditionally non-musical textures was a common aspiration of Varèse, he was frustrated that the Futurist sound was largely unabstracted, that they were content to merely reflect and copy the sounds found in a modern world. Perhaps it is not surprising to find that Varèse's eventual choice of librettist for his opera "The Astronomer" (1933) was Artaud. "Like Artaud, Varèse was concerned with the effect of sound on the audience, with its capacity for violence and control, and also with its object-like projection in space" (Dyson, pg. 91). While the opera was never finished, Varèse's plans to utilize music to force the audience to experience "the powerful joy of an intense, terrifying, salutary emotion that would annihilate...the personal ego" (Dyson, pg. 91) certainly read like a sound cue from an Artaud play, with a philosophy straight from the Theatre of Cruelty. It was this desire to redefine what music was and how it could function in its impact on the audience that ties the Artaud's and his influence on Varèse even closer. Varèse's most groundbreaking compositions were augmented with all manner of electronic instruments and 'noisemakers', such as sirens, theremins and other electronic instruments. Varèse used these textures to composer with what he described as shifting masses of organized sound (Varèse, 1967, p. 207), sharing striking similarities with Artaud's own use of sound to reflect his unique world view. In compositions such as "Poeme Electronique" (1957-1958) and "Déserts" (1950-1954) Varèse creates the sort of soundscapes that could easily be tied to an Artaud performance, while provoking the audience to redefine what can be considered music. It is this sort of radical redefinition of music that underpins Varèse's best work, and to a large extent shares a philosophy with Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

## Contemporary Manifestations of Musical Cruelty

Artaud's influence and perception of cruelty can still be felt today in experimental noise music. One such band to feature in this unique subculture of the West Australian music scene is Sub Ordnance, a noise duo that utilizes the unique orchestration of traditional rock drum kit, played by Charles Chase, and an amplified chainsaw, manned by Karlos Ockelford. It is this original and inspired fusion of the conventional with the unconventional in the construction of sound that first opens the group up to

comparison with Artaud. Part of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty was the necessity to utilize new instrumentation, and to push forward into the collective consciousness of the audience that would shock them into the realization of his message. Unconventional and noisy sounds were of particular importance and significance to the creation of meaning in Artaud's work, as is the inspired use of machinery to create new and original textures in Sub Ordinance's dense and evocative soundscapes. The utilization of guitar effects pedals subvert a preconceived notion of how the chainsaw may function in the context of the performance. Bass frequencies are a characteristic of the chainsaw's motor sound, and an essential component of the Sub Ordinance musical texture. One of the first public performances by the band resulted in complaints to the venue by neighboring residents that the bass frequencies generated by Sub Ordinance were not only shaking the windows of their house but their walls as well. (Karlos Ockelford, Sub Ordinance interview, 2009) Indeed, it is this physical manifestation of the chainsaw in the form of sound that provides the first true parallel with Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. The sound operates in an oppressive way through high volume and vibration, and in doing so physically involves the audience with a performance.

But perhaps more important than the sound of the chainsaw, is the provocative role of it as an instrument in musical context of the duo. At its most basic level it is a piece of machinery used primarily for destruction, or reducing nature into smaller portions of itself for purposes that suit the wielder of the instrument. This association immediately puts the user of the chainsaw in a position of power. It is equally impossible to escape the association of the chainsaw with that of violence in popular culture, with the chainsaw being a popular tool of terror and violence in film and video games. Sub Ordinance's drummer Charles Chase supported this idea:

*"Traditionally the chainsaw has had a strong role to play in horror films and gore films, the most obvious being 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre', and I think there is definitely a strong association between the way the chainsaw is used in Sub Ordinance and this cultural parallel."*

(Charles Chase, Sub Ordinance interview, 2009)

Thus, Sub Ordinance bring violence to the foreground of their performances where the chainsaw lays the foundational textures of their music. Violence, physical and otherwise, is at the heart of the Theatre of Cruelty, was the catalyst for exploring the inherent cruelty in our own social landscape and as such, in

the case of Sub Ordinance, the chainsaw can be seen to provide a reference to cruelty in a modern day musical context.

If the chainsaw provides an inherent reference to power, dominance and violence, then can we elicit any meaning from its coupling with a traditional rock drum kit? Charles Chase describes the role of the acoustic drum kit as such:

*"As the most ancient of instruments the acoustic drum occupies a unique place. The sounds and reactions to an acoustic drum are hard wired into the collective human consciousness. An acoustic drum needs to be "played". Every sound and rhythm must be generated using human thought and movement. In essence the drum grounds the Sub Ordinance experience in humanity whilst chaos surrounds and pushes consciousness to new places, perhaps less or more than human. I believe the juxtaposition of these two elements fosters the type of audience reaction we've found."*

(Charles Chase, Sub Ordinance Interview, 2009)

In this way, the drums are an important component of Sub Ordinance in providing contrast to the dense industrial textures otherwise evident in the music. The drum kit will often play rhythms that are at odds with any movement in the sound of the chainsaw, which establishes itself as a different voice, assuming a different role to that of the symbolically violent textures of the chainsaw. The drums are comparatively calmer, more reassuring in both their structural and sonic familiarity and their role in the music. They represent the traditional, the old, and the familiar. In other words, their role is the antithesis of the chainsaw; the drums are the world the audience is familiar with, the world Artaud would try to expose as cruel and ugly in his own work. In Sub Ordinance these two opposing forces combine their voices into one textual soundscape. It can therefore be seen that this soundscape is implied to be composed of the old and the new, the violent and the reassuring, the different the conventional. And this is why Sub Ordinance's music can be considered a reflection of Artaud's theatre of cruelty; in this way the music of Sub Ordinance effectively combines musical elements that evoke the same dialogue as Artaud's works sixty years ago.

Sub Ordinance operates primarily as a live act. The few audio recordings are sourced from live, improvised concerts at small venues around Perth, and a true inspection of their function with relevance to Artaud can be drawn from live performance. For those not familiar with the sound of a chainsaw in a

musical context, it emits a droning, rhythmic pulse, of which the harmonic structure has quite a bit of variation. It is amplified by way of a contact microphone and run through a variety of effect pedals operated by the performer. The chainsaw is left to run for several minutes as the performance starts to build up momentum, with alternations between high and low motor rev's resulting in alternating sonic textures being emitted from the chainsaw. After a while the drum set enters, and in a small performance space the sound is of the world coming to an end, of the very heavens being torn asunder. There is an inherent excessiveness at play here, in volume and density. The sheer force of the sound and its high volume physically assaults the listener, disorientating their perceptions and physically weakening them. As Ockelford points out, "We don't really have a choice when it comes to the volume of a performance. The nature of the chainsaw is that it's an uncontrollable instrument in that regard". (Sub Ordnance interview, 2009)

While the musicians express a desire to move towards more tightly composed and structured music, at this stage the music of Sub Ordnance is largely improvised in its structure, aside from the most basic outlines of sound and progression, and timeless with different rhythms mixing through the sound as some sort of organically changing, chaotic monster. It is a performance that in its very essence deconstructs everything conventional music holds dear to itself. The performance is sacred and the audience treats it as such. Here, much like Artaud, Sub Ordnance are content to exploit this convention and in doing so question its necessity, through their sonic assault on an audience, sometimes whether they want to be involved or not. The music implies a dialogue of violence and Sub Ordnance's ultimate achievement is to successfully subvert the traditional concept of performance, in doing so constructing their own performance of cruelty, all through the power of sonic suggestion.

Sub Ordnance's past performances have resulted in mixed reactions from audience members and near-by residents. One of their first performances was cut short after 12 minutes, after the dress of the event's MC became dangerously caught in the chainsaw's chain, almost following through with the gore-movie allusions of the instrument. (Karlos Ockelford, Sub Ordnance interview, 2009) Amazingly, most audience members believed this mishap to be a staged part of the concert. As Ockelford points out,

*"It was actually more of a shock to people when I told them it wasn't meant to happen. It was more of a shock to their system, I think the performance became far more disturbing after that. I don't know if it was because of the event that had happened or the sound associated with it or a mixture of both. It became one big, unintentional theatre piece, a chaotic theatre piece"*

(Sub Ordnance interview, 2009)

Drummer Charles Chase has sought to define what it is about a Sub Ordnance performance, inherent threats of physical mutilation aside, which is the cause for the often extreme reaction, during and after a performance:

*"After reflecting on the performance, essentially it occurred to me that frequencies we're dealing with are dangerous, definitely to a certain state of mind. Ideally what is needed is a mature, sober audience to objectively understand the sound that we create. The danger with the sound is, what if it taps into something primordial, in regards to an ancient consciousness? If you get a bunch of people around who are open minded and make them focus on chaos, you produce a consciousness that is born of chaos, perhaps you take things back to a state where chaos was the consciousness, if you take things back to this point in time you don't know what will happen."*

(Sub Ordnance interview, 2009)

This concept of an ancient consciousness links into Artaud's desire to release the audience from the artistic conventions of the time, the desire to break away from language in particular and to free the audience from what he considered an inherent form of cruelty. As Charles Chase points out, Sub Ordnance do this in that their music can be seen to be the embodiment an artistic consciousness freed from these constraints. While Artaud sought to break these bonds with his theatre, Sub Ordnance do so musically, in doing so expanding on it in their own chaotic manner. The reaction to a Sub Ordnance performance is often polarized, much like the initial reception of Artaud's theatre, and in a way both express a similar concept of cruelty, from two different standpoints.

## Conclusion

The concept of Cruelty is one that permeates throughout our lives, alluded to through art and culture, in the subjective analysis of the nature of existence. As such, cruelty is struggle and struggle inherently informs all, or at least most, forms of art.

This cruelty is not a one-dimensional factor; rather the concept embraces all aspects that drive our existence. Artaud reflected this cruelty in his work, and illustrated this idea eloquently in his collections of essays and manifesto's, and this image has permeated into other areas of art since Artaud's writings were published. Artaud's concepts have an ongoing influence on a range of experimental music, and in the performances of Sub Ordinance, are taken far beyond the original theatrical performance's Artaud could have originally envisioned. It is inspiring then that artists are as preoccupied now as they were 50 years ago to comment on the nature of existence. Sub Ordinance are a product of our time and place, they could not have existed in Artaud's time. And with the price of petrol increasing it is unlikely music such as theirs will exist in another 100 years begging the question, what will be next manifestation of cruelty?

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