

## Theatre of the Oppressed

# Theatre of the Oppressed

NEW EDITION

Augusto Boal

Translated from Spanish by  
Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride  
and Emily Fryer

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# CONTENTS

<i>Preface to the 2008 edition</i>	ix
<i>Preface to the 2000 edition – The Unruly Protagonist</i>	x
<i>Preface to the 1974 edition</i>	xxiii
<b>1. Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction	1
Art Imitates Nature	3
What is the Meaning of 'Imitation'?	9
What, then, is the Purpose of Art and Science?	10
Major Arts and Minor Arts	11
What does Tragedy Imitate?	12
What is Happiness?	13
And What is Virtue?	14
Necessary Characteristics of Virtue	15
The Degrees of Virtue	18
What is Justice?	19
In What Sense can Theatre Function as an Instrument for Purification and Intimidation?	21
The Ultimate Aim of Tragedy	22
A Short Glossary of Simple Words	29
How Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy Functions	31
Different Types of Conflict: Hamartia and Social Ethos	34
Conclusion	40
<b>2. Machiavelli and the Poetics of <i>Virtù</i></b>	<b>43</b>
The Feudal Abstraction	43
The Bourgeois Concretion	49
Machiavelli and <i>Mandragola</i>	56
Modern Reductions of <i>Virtù</i>	62

<b>3. Hegel and Brecht: The Character as Subject or the Character as Object?</b>	70
The 'Epic' Concept	70
Types of Poetry in Hegel	72
Characteristics of Dramatic Poetry, Still According to Hegel	74
Freedom of the Character-Subject	74
A Word Poorly Chosen	77
Does Thought Determine Being (or Vice Versa)?	79
Can Man be Changed?	82
Conflict of Wills or Contradiction of Needs?	83
Empathy or What? Emotion or Reason?	84
Catharsis and Repose, or Knowledge and Action?	86
How to Interpret the New Works?	88
The Rest Does Not Count: They Are Minor Formal Differences Between the Three Genres	90
Empathy or Osmosis	93
<b>4. Poetics of the Oppressed</b>	95
Experiments with the People's Theatre in Peru	95
Conclusion: 'Spectator', a Bad Word!	134
<b>5. Development of the Arena Theatre of São Paulo</b>	136
Need for the 'Joker'	144
Goals of the 'Joker'	150
Structures of the 'Joker'	157
<i>Appendices</i>	169
<i>Notes</i>	173
<i>Index</i>	178

# 1

## ARISTOTLE'S COERCIVE SYSTEM OF TRAGEDY

*[Athens] was governed in the name of the people, but in the spirit of the nobility .... The only 'progress' consisted in the displacement of the aristocracy of birth by an aristocracy of money, of the clan state by a plutocratic rentier state .... She was an imperialistic democracy, carrying on a policy which gave benefits to the free citizens and the capitalists at the cost of the slaves and those sections of the people who had no share in the war profits.*

*Tragedy is the characteristic creation of Athenian democracy; in no form of art are the inner conflicts of its social structure so directly and clearly to be seen as in this. The externals of its presentation to the masses were democratic, but its content, the heroic sagas with their tragi-heroic outlook on life, was aristocratic .... It unquestionably propagates the standards of the great-hearted individual, the uncommon distinguished man it owed its origin to the separation of the choir-leader from the choir, which turned collective performance of songs into dramatic dialogue.*

*The tragedians are in fact state bursars and state purveyors – the state pays them for the plays that are performed, but naturally does not allow pieces to be performed that would run counter to its policy or the interests of the governing classes. The tragedies are frankly tendentious and do not pretend to be otherwise.*

Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The argument about the relations between theatre and politics is as old as theatre and ... as politics. Since Aristotle, and in fact since long before, the same themes and arguments that are still brandished were already set forth. On one hand, art is affirmed

to be pure contemplation, and on the other hand, it is considered to present always a vision of the world in transformation and therefore is inevitably political insofar as it shows the means of carrying out that transformation or of delaying it.

Should art educate, inform, organise, influence, incite to action, or should it simply be an object of pleasure? The comic poet Aristophanes thought that ‘the dramatist should not only offer pleasure but should, besides that, be a teacher of morality and a political adviser’. Eratosthenes contradicted him, asserting that the ‘function of the poet is to charm the spirits of his listeners, never to instruct them’. Strabo argued: ‘Poetry is the first lesson that the State must teach the child; poetry is superior to philosophy because the latter is addressed to a minority while the former is addressed to the masses.’ Plato, on the contrary, thought that the poets should be expelled from a perfect republic because ‘poetry only makes sense when it exalts the figures and deeds that should serve as examples; theatre imitates the things of the world, but the world is no more than a mere imitation of ideas – thus theatre comes to be an imitation of an imitation’.

As we see, each one has his opinion. Is this possible? Is the relation of art to the spectator something that can be diversely interpreted, or, on the contrary, does it rigorously obey certain laws that make art either a purely contemplative phenomenon or a deeply political one? Is one justified in accepting the poet’s declared intentions as an accurate description of the course followed in his works?

Let us consider the case of Aristotle, for example, for whom poetry and politics are completely different disciplines, which must be studied separately because they each have their own laws and serve different purposes and aims. To arrive at these conclusions, Aristotle utilises in his *Poetics* certain concepts that are scarcely explained in his other works. Words that we know in their current connotation change their meaning completely if they are understood through the *Nicomachean Ethics* or the *Magna Moralia*.

Aristotle declares the independence of poetry (lyric, epic, and dramatic) in relation to politics. What I propose to do in this work is

to show that, in spite of that, Aristotle constructs the first, extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the 'bad' or illegal tendencies of the audience. This system is, to this day, fully utilised not only in conventional theatre, but in the TV soap operas and in Western films as well: movies, theatre, and television united, through a common basis in Aristotelian poetics, for repression of the people.

But, obviously, the Aristotelian theatre is not the only form of theatre.

### Art Imitates Nature

The first difficulty that we face in order to understand correctly the workings of tragedy according to Aristotle stems from the very definition which that philosopher gives of art. What is art, any art? For him, it is an imitation of nature. For us, the word 'imitate' means to make a more or less perfect copy of an original model. Art would, then, be a copy of nature. And 'nature' means the whole of created things. Art would, therefore, be a copy of created things.

But this has nothing to do with Aristotle. For him, to imitate (mimesis) has nothing to do with copying an exterior model. 'Mimesis' means rather a 're-creation'. And nature is not the whole of created things but rather the creative principle itself. Thus when Aristotle says that art imitates nature, we must understand that this statement, which can be found in any modern version of the *Poetics*, is due to a bad translation, which in turn stems from an isolated interpretation of that text. 'Art imitates nature' actually means: 'Art re-creates the creative principle of created things.'

In order to clarify a little more the process and the principle of 're-creation' we must, even if briefly, recall some philosophers who developed their theories before Aristotle.

### The School of Miletus

Between the years 640 and 548 BC, in the Greek city of Miletus, lived a very religious oil merchant, who was also a navigator. He



had an immovable faith in the gods; at the same time, he had to transport his merchandise by sea. Thus he spent a great deal of his time praying to the gods, begging them for good weather and a calm sea, and devoted the rest of his time to the study of the stars, the winds, the sea, and the relations between geometrical figures. Thales – this was the Greek’s name – was the first scientist to predict an eclipse of the sun. A treatise on nautical astronomy is also attributed to him. As we see, Thales believed in the gods but did not fail to study the sciences. He came to the conclusion that the world of appearances – chaotic and many-sided though it was – actually was nothing more than the result of diverse transformations of a single substance, water. For him, water could change into all things, and all things could likewise be transformed into water. How did this transformation take place? Thales believed that things possessed a ‘soul’. Sometimes the soul could become perceptible and its effects immediately visible: the magnet attracts the iron – this attraction is the ‘soul’. Therefore, according to him, the soul of things consists in the movement inherent in things which transforms them into water and that, in turn, transforms the water into things.

Anaximander, who lived not long afterward (610–546 BC) held similar beliefs, but for him the fundamental substance was not water, but something indefinable, without predicate, called *apeiron*, which according to him, created things through either condensing or rarifying itself. The *apeiron* was, for him, divine, because it was immortal and indestructible.

Another of the philosophers of the Milesian school, Anaximenes, without varying to any great extent from the conceptions just described, affirmed that air was the element closest to immateriality, thus being the primal substance from which all things originated.

In these three philosophers a common trait can be noted: the search for a single substance whose transformations give birth to all known things. Furthermore, the three argue, each in his own way, for the existence of a transforming force, immanent to the substance – be it air, water, or *apeiron*. Or four elements, as

Empedocles asserted (air, water, earth, and fire); or numbers, as Pythagoras believed. Of all of them, very few written texts have come down to us. Much more has remained of Heraclitus, the first dialectician.

### Heraclitus and Cratylus

For Heraclitus, the world and all things in it are in constant flux, and the permanent condition of change is the only unchangeable thing. The appearance of stability is a mere illusion of the senses and must be corrected by reason.

And how does change take place? Well, all things change into fire, and fire into all things, in the same manner that gold is transformed into jewellery which can in turn be transformed into gold again. But of course gold does not transform itself; it is transformed. There is someone (the jeweller), foreign to the matter gold, who makes the transformation possible. For Heraclitus, however, the transforming element would exist within the thing itself, as an opposing force. 'War is the mother of all things; opposition unifies, for that which is separated creates the most beautiful harmony; all that happens, only happens because there is struggle.' That is to say, each thing carries within itself an antagonism which makes it move from what it is to what it is not.

To show the constantly changing nature of all things, Heraclitus used to offer a concrete example: nobody can step into the same river twice. Why? Because on the second attempt it will not be the same waters that are running, nor will it be exactly the same person who tries it, because he will be older, even if by only a few seconds.

His pupil, Cratylus, even more radical, would say to his teacher that nobody can go into a river even once, because upon going in, the waters of the river are already moving (which waters would he enter?) and the person who would attempt it would already be aging (who would be entering, the older or the younger one?). Only the movement of the waters is eternal, said Cratylus; only aging is eternal; only movement exists: all the rest is appearance.

### Parmenides and Zeno

On the extreme opposite of those two defenders of movement, of transformation, and of the inner conflict which promotes change, was Parmenides, who took as the point of departure for the creation of his philosophy a fundamentally logical premise: being is and non-being is not. Actually it would be absurd to think the opposite and, said Parmenides, absurd thoughts are not real. There is, therefore, an identity between being and thinking, according to the philosopher. If we accept this initial premise, we are obliged to derive from it a number of consequences:

1. Being is one (indivisible), for if it were not so, between one being and another there would be non-being, which in fact would divide them; but since we have already accepted that non-being is not, we have to accept that being is one, in spite of the deceptive appearance that tells us the opposite.
2. Being is eternal, for if it were not so, after being there would necessarily come non-being which, as we have seen, is not.
3. Being is infinite. (Here Parmenides made a small logical mistake: after affirming that being is infinite, he asserted that it was also spherical; now if it is spherical it has a shape, and therefore has a limit, beyond which there necessarily would come non-being. But these are subtleties which should not concern us here. Possibly 'spherical' is a bad translation, and Parmenides might have meant 'infinite', in all directions, or something like that.)
4. Being is unchangeable, because all transformation means that being stops being what it is in order to begin to be what it is not yet: between one state and the other there would necessarily be non-being, and since the latter is not, there is no possibility (according to this logic) of change.
5. Being is motionless: movement is an illusion, because motion means that being moves from the place where it is to the place where it is not, this meaning that between the two places there would be non-being, and once more this would be a logical impossibility.

From these statements, Parmenides ends by concluding that since they are in disagreement with our senses, with what we can see and hear, this means that there are two perfectly definable worlds: the intelligible, rational world, and the world of appearances. Motion, according to him, is an illusion, because we can demonstrate that it does not actually exist; the same for the multiplicity of existing things, which are in his logic, a single being, infinite, eternal, unchangeable.

Like Heraclitus, Parmenides too, had his radical disciple, named Zeno. The latter had the habit of telling two stories to prove the inexistence of motion. Two famous stories, which are worth remembering. The first said that in a race between Achilles (the greatest Greek runner) and a turtle, the former could never reach the latter if it were allowed a small lead at the start. Zeno's reasoning went like this: no matter how fast Achilles may run, he will first have to cover the distance that separated him from the turtle when the race started. But no matter how slow the turtle may be, it will have moved, even if only a few centimetres. When Achilles attempts to overtake it once again, he will, nonetheless, have to cover this second distance. During this time the turtle will have advanced somewhat more, and to overtake it, Achilles will have to cover the distance – smaller and smaller each time – that will be separating him from the turtle, which, very slowly, will never let itself be defeated.

The second story, or example, states that if an archer shoots an arrow toward someone, the latter will not have to get out of the way because the arrow will never reach him. The same is true if a rock falls from above one's head: he does not have to flee because the rock will never break his head. Why? Very simple, Zeno would say (obviously a man of the extreme right), because an arrow or a rock, in order to move, like any thing or person, must move either in the place where it is or in the place where it is not yet. It can not move in the place where it is, because if it is there this means it has not moved. Neither can it move in the place where it is not, because of course it will not be there to make the move. The story is told that when rocks were thrown

at him for engaging in reasoning like this, Zeno, in spite of his logic, used to flee.

Zeno's logic clearly suffers from a fundamental fault: the movements of Achilles and the turtle are not interdependent or discontinuous: Achilles does not first gain one part of the distance to be run, in order then to run the second stage; on the contrary, he runs the entire distance without relation to the speed of the turtle, or to that of a lazy bear that might happen to be moving along the same course. The movement does not take place in one place or in another, but rather from one place toward another: the movement is precisely the passing from one place to another, and not a sequence of acts in different places.

### Logos and Plato

It is important to keep in mind that our purpose here is not to write a history of philosophy but rather to set forth as clearly as possible the Aristotelian concept of art as an imitation of nature, and to clarify what kind of nature it is, what kind of imitation, and what kind of art. This is why we have passed so lightly over many thinkers. Socrates, too, must suffer from this superficial treatment, since we want to establish only his concept of *logos*. For him, the real world needed to be conceptualised in the manner of the geometers. In nature there is an infinity of forms which are similar to a form generally designated as a triangle: thus the concept, the logos, of triangle is established; it is the geometrical figure having three sides and three angles. An infinity of real objects can thus be conceptualised. There exists, too, an infinite number of forms of objects that resemble the square, the circle, the polyhedron; therefore, the concepts of polyhedron, sphere, and square are established. The same should be done, Socrates said, with the logos of moral value in order to conceptualise courage, good, love, tolerance, etcetera.

Plato uses the Socratic idea of logos and goes beyond:

1. The idea is the intuitive vision we have, and precisely because it is intuitive, it is 'pure': there is not in reality any perfect

triangle, but the idea we have of the triangle (not of this or that triangle, that we can see in reality, but of the triangle 'in general'); that idea is perfect. People who love, realise the act of love, but always imperfectly; what is perfect is the idea of love. All ideas are perfect; all the concrete things of reality are imperfect.

2. Ideas are the essence of things existing in the world perceptible to the senses; ideas are indestructible, immovable, immutable, timeless, and eternal.
3. Knowledge consists in elevating ourselves, through dialectics – that is, through the debate of ideas posed and counterposed, of ideas and the negations of those same ideas, which are other ideas – from the world of sensible reality to the world of eternal ideas. This ascent is knowledge.

### What is the Meaning of 'Imitation'?

This brings us back to Aristotle (384–322 BC), who rejects Plato:

1. Plato only multiplied the beings who for Parmenides were a single being; for him they are infinite, because the ideas are infinite.
2. The *metaxis*, that is, the participation of one world in another, is unintelligible; in truth, what has the world of perfect ideas to do with the imperfect world of real things? Is there movement from one to the other? If so, how does it take place?

Though Aristotle rejects Plato's system, he also utilises it, introducing some new concepts: 'substance' is the indissoluble unity of 'matter' and 'form'. 'Matter', in turn, is what constitutes substance; the matter of a tragedy is the words that constitute it; the matter of a statue is the marble. 'Form' is the sum of the predicates we can attribute to a thing; it is all we can say about that thing. Each thing comes to be what it is (a statue, a book, a house, a tree) because its matter receives a form that gives meaning and purpose to it. This conceptualisation confers on

Platonic thought the dynamic characteristic that it lacked. The world of ideas does not coexist side by side with the world of reality, but rather the ideas (here called form) are the dynamic principle of matter. In the last analysis, reality for Aristotle is not a copy of ideas, though indeed it tends to perfection. It has in itself the moving force that will take it to that perfection. Man tends to health, to perfect bodily proportion, etc., and men as a whole tend to the perfect family, to the State. Trees tend to the perfection of the tree, that is, to the Platonic idea of a tree. Love tends to the perfect Platonic love. Matter, for Aristotle, is pure potential, and form is pure act; the movement of things toward perfection is therefore what he called 'the enactment of potential', the passage from pure matter to pure form.

Our concern here is to insist on one point: for Aristotle, things themselves, by their own virtues (by their form, their moving force, by the enactment of their potential), tend to perfection. There are not two worlds; there is no *mataxis*: the world of perfection is yearning, a movement which develops matter toward its final form.

Therefore, what did 'imitate' mean for Aristotle? To recreate that internal movement of things toward their perfection. Nature was for him this movement itself and not things already made, finished, visible. Thus 'to imitate' has nothing to do with improvisation or 'realism', and for this reason Aristotle could say that the artist must imitate men 'as they should be' and not as they are.

### What, then, is the Purpose of Art and Science?

If the things themselves tend to perfection, if perfection is immanent to all things and not transcendent, what, then, is the purpose of art and science?

Nature, according to Aristotle, tends to perfection, which does not mean that it always attains it. The body tends to health, but it can become ill; men in the aggregate tend to the perfect State, but wars can occur. Thus nature has certain ends in view, states of perfection toward which it tends – but sometimes nature fails. From this follows the purpose of art and science: by 're-creating

the creative principle' of things, they correct nature where it has failed.

Here are some examples: the body 'would tend' to resist rain, wind, and sun, but it does not in fact do so since the skin is not sufficiently resistant. Thus we invent the art of weaving and the manufacture of fabrics to protect the skin. The art of architecture constructs buildings and bridges, so that men can have shelter and cross rivers; medical science prepares medications for organs that have ceased to function as they should. Politics likewise tends to correct the faults that men have, even though they all tend to the perfect communal life.

That is the purpose of art and science: to correct the faults of nature, by using the suggestions of nature itself.

### Major Arts and Minor Arts

The arts and sciences do not exist in isolation, without relation to each other, but on the contrary, are all interrelated according to the activity characteristic of each. They are also, in a certain way, arranged hierarchically according to the greater or lesser magnitude of their fields of action. The major arts are subdivided into minor arts, and each one of the latter deals with specific elements that compose the former.

Thus, the raising of horses is an art, as is also the work of the blacksmith. These arts, together with others – such as that of the man who makes leather goods, etc. – constitute a greater art, which is the art of equitation. The latter, in turn, joins with other arts – such as the art of topography, the art of strategy, etc. – to make up the art of war, and so on. Always a group of arts combines to form a more ample, greater, more complex art.

Another example: the art of manufacturing paints, the art of manufacturing paint brushes, the art of preparing the best canvas, the art of the combination of colours, etc., together constitute the art of painting.

So then, if there are minor arts and major arts, the latter being the ones that contain the former, there will be therefore a sovereign art, which will contain all the other arts and sciences, and whose



field of action and concern will include all the fields of action of all the other arts and all the other sciences. This sovereign art, of course, will be the one whose laws rule over the relations among men in their totality. That is, Politics.

Nothing is alien to Politics, because nothing is alien to the superior art that rules the relations among men.

Medicine, war, architecture, etc. – minor and major arts, all without exception – are subject to, and make up, that sovereign art.

Thus we have established that nature tends toward perfection, that the arts and sciences correct nature in all its faults, and at the same time are interrelated under the domain of a sovereign art which deals with all men, with all they do, and all that is done for them: Politics.

### What does Tragedy Imitate?

Tragedy imitates human acts. Human acts, not merely human activities. For Aristotle, man's soul was composed of a rational part and of another, irrational part. The irrational soul could produce certain activities such as eating, walking or performing any physical movement without greater significance than the physical act itself. Tragedy, on the other hand, imitated solely man's actions, determined by his rational soul.

Man's rational soul can be divided into:

- faculties
- passions
- habits

A *faculty* is everything man is able to do, even though he may not do it. Man, even if he does not love, is able to love; even if he does not hate, he is able to hate; even if a coward, he is capable of showing courage. Faculty is pure potentiality and is immanent to the rational soul.

But, even though the soul has all the faculties, only some of them attain realisation. These are the passions. A *passion* is not

merely a 'possibility', but a concrete fact. Love is a passion once it is expressed as such. As long as it is simply a possibility it will remain a faculty. A passion is an 'enacted' faculty, a faculty that becomes a concrete act.

Not all passions serve as subject matter for tragedy. If a man, in a given moment, happens to exert a passion, that is not an action worthy of tragedy. It is necessary that that passion be constant in the man; that is, that by its repeated exertion it has become a *habit*. Thus we conclude that tragedy imitates man's actions, but only those produced by the habits of his rational soul. Animal activity is excluded, as well as the faculties and passions that have not become habitual.

To what end is a passion, a habit, exerted? What is the purpose of man? Each part of man has a purpose: the hand grabs, the mouth eats, the leg walks, the brain thinks, etc.; but as a whole being, what purpose does man have? Aristotle answers; the good is the aim of all man's actions. It is not an abstract idea of good, but rather the concrete good, diversified in all the different sciences and the different arts which deal with particular ends. Each human action, therefore, has an end limited to that action, but all actions as a whole have as their purpose the supreme good of man. What is the supreme good of man? Happiness!

Thus far we are able to say that tragedy imitates man's actions, those of his rational soul, directed to the attainment of his supreme end, happiness. But in order to understand which actions they are, we have to know first what happiness is.

## What is Happiness?

The types of happiness, says Aristotle, are three: one that derives from material pleasures, another from glory, and a third from virtue.

For the average person, happiness consists in possessing material goods and enjoying them. Riches, honours, sexual and gastronomic pleasures, etc. – that is happiness. For the Greek philosopher, human happiness on this level differs very little from