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Digital dramaturgy of cruelty: Antoine Artaud: Ludology and the plague metaphor in contemporary video games and new media

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Abstract

This article aims to trace the relationship between specific types of video games and digital media performances and the central theatrical concept of participation and plague introduced by Antoine Artaud, in his major and highly influential theoretical work *Le Theatre et son Double/Theatre and its Double*. The emphasis is on immersive, action, adventure and role playing games, especially combat, fighting, shooter games and survival horror, taking place in a digital 3D space. Relevant digital media performances like those introduced by Stelarc and Kac, among others, which incorporate an actual stage or real space, are also included in the discussion. Artaud's 'ludology' and his metaphor of plague are directly applied as a conceptual reflection, an aesthetic model or a method of performance to the above digital media genres, to explore their function as participated, embodied and sensed experiences onstage and/or in virtual environments. The discussion takes the form of a comparative study of drama and new media concepts. This leads to the conclusion that a new interdisciplinary area exists between

theatre/performance and digital new media. In this area, Artaud's notion of plague is materialized and developed further with the aid of digital technologies. This happens in a manner that precisely follows Artaud's fundamental aesthetics, principles and causes of his plague-like dramaturgic method, in a recent digital adaptation of his theatre of cruelty, introducing a novel type of dramaturgic realization.

Keywords

Artaud

ludology

plague metaphor

theatre of cruelty

digital dramaturgy

Introduction

New media are now used extensively in contemporary theatrical practice and in live stage performances (Dixon 2007; Giannachi 2004; Paul 2003). Live performances and theatrical acts have also been incorporated into a digital space or digital screens (Dixon 2007; Giannachi 2004; Paul 2003). Numerous examples of new media on live stages and also live performances in digital media are exhibited in festivals, galleries and museums, and are discussed in several publications (Dixon 2007; Giannachi 2004; Paul 2003). In many different ways, live and digital performance can therefore interconnect or coexist, as is demonstrated in this increasing number of contemporary art and media practices. In this way, new media communication, digital performances and video games can be said

to constitute a new hybrid art form within the theatre and performance arts. Recent broad discussion about contemporary media, performance and drama as a unified area of study has included digital technologies as a new performative or dramaturgic element (Berghaus 2005; Broadhurst 2006; Carver and Beardon 2004; Causey 2006; Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006; Dixon 2007; Giannachi 2004; Kaye 2006; Murray 1998), with even the computer graphical user interface on its own introduced as a theatre metaphor (Laurel 2001).

Many of these new hybrid digital performances contain certain elements of shock for the performers, the participants, the players or the audience, or they set up intensive interactions, which may be transformed into stylistically cruel characteristics. This seems to be the case especially in the most popular video games, which rely on stimulating adrenaline action through virtual killings, suspense, fear, etc. As well as games based on mortal combat or warfare, sports games and simulations (perhaps even peaceful ones) are based on adrenaline-generating participation via spectacular and interactive shocking effects that tend to awaken the senses via a tangible performed event on-screen. Cruelty-based acting techniques and embodiment also exist in several new media performances incorporating digital technologies, in works by Stelarc, Jeffrey Shaw and others (Paul 2003). In the most successful mainstream video games, this representation and virtually performed brutality and violence have raised ethical issues concerning their quality, usefulness or danger. This is an ongoing discussion at several different levels in society, in the media and in several publications (Anderson 2007; Barker and Petley 2001; Carter 2003; Trend 2006).

These two separate topics, (1) digital performances and/or games as theatre and (2) digital performances and/or games as shock generating or based on brutal actions (referring solely to those specific examples that demonstrate this effect), find common theoretical ground in Artaud's concepts of stage play participation and 'plague', in his modern theatre of cruelty. The main thrust of this article is to demonstrate the existence of such common ground, following the Artaudian plague metaphor as outlined in his seminal work *Theatre and its Double* (Artaud 1938), and to compare this concept with relevant works on digital media. The focus is mainly on the way in which Artaud's dramaturgical ontology of plague has been realized in a certain type of gameplay and digital 3D 'stages', and also in a certain type of digital performance and new media practices.

The basic Artaudian axiom: Language and theatrical narration

The Artaudian concept of a rebirth of theatre starts with a criticism of the 'fake' distance between what western society understands as 'civilization' and what it understands as 'culture' (Artaud 1938). Culture is the system of knowledge through which western people understand or categorize the world, while civilization is the applied norm of culture that drives our acts: the spirit within things (Artaud 1938). This is reminiscent of the classical ontological differentiation between phenomenon (concept, the occurrence or object as it is perceived by the senses) and noumenon (the thing-in-itself), in Kant's philosophy, a dualism between the idea and the empirical object or fact. This argument echoes centuries of philosophical thought, from Plato and Aristotle, the later

philosophical contrast between empiricism and intellectualism/rationalism (Vallianos 2001). Culture shapes the ways in which humans think according to certain systems of knowledge, so that they collect thoughts from acts, rather than identifying thoughts and acts as one (Artaud 1938). In this way, people influenced by western culture choose to be observers of their acts, moving into cerebral reflections about ideal forms, instead of letting their acts lead them on (Artaud 1938). For Artaud, this separation between culture and civilization should not exist, as he considers it to be an imaginary dualism arising from a fear of living one's life driven by magic, rather than controlling life rationally, by means of language and science-based experience. Notwithstanding this, there does exist a widespread demand for more magic and mystery in life (Artaud 1938), as this is an inseparable element of life itself with its chaotic causality, its uncontrollable and unpredictable procedures, occasioning natural cruelty. It is this human need for mystery and magic, one of Artaud's tenets, that brings the theatrical to the surface. Theatre, functioning as a kind of 'cruel poetry' for Artaud, can reveal without peril, because it is controlled experience, the magic elements in life along with the bizarre, even unearthly actions arising from the deepest aspects of human nature. Many celebrated dramas incorporate violent bodily or psychological conflicts and include grotesque or sacred elements, both in performance and in onstage dialogue, a fact that does not escape Artaud's attention. This element runs from ancient Greek drama, in cases like *Oedipus* and *Medea*, and in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet* and numerous other theatrical examples, right through to modern and postmodern theatre.

However, culture may be distinguished from civilization and from cultural products such as theatre and art in general, and therefore from the actuality of the elements of cruelty they exhibit. Culture dominates by means of its control of meaning and language.

Interestingly, Artaud makes a strong attack on language, skilfully articulating his arguments with the very tool he denigrates. He argues effectively though that knowledge encompasses more than ideas that can be expressed in language; it also exists empirically in the form of feelings and sensations. For Artaud, breaking the boundaries set by language is like constructing a theatrical event and then experiencing life and making it tangible. His manifesto (Artaud 1938) epitomizes theatre as a medium capable of mastering future embryonic forms, capable of escaping from the observer role into that of the creator, i.e., live performer or ‘auteur’ of the form or the event. His clarion call to his readers (Artaud 1938) to stop wasting time thinking about forms and instead to participate by jumping into the fire, and making their signs from inside the flames, has now come to pass: Artaud’s passionate metaphor has achieved a sort of actuality from inside the flames of a first-person shooter video game, with soldiers or zombies. There, in safety, players can face their deeper life anxieties and fears, fighting virtually but credibly for survival. Such a performance perhaps recalls the lively instincts of self-preservation, to be experienced and understood through feelings and action, as Artaud would suggest.

Artaud’s ludology and the double meaning of cruelty as both theme and method of performance

Within the spectrum of today’s video game terminology, it is at least possible to sense an eclectic relation between Artaud and ludologists. Supporters of video games as

participatory events (tele-presence performance [Transmediality: Birringer 2006]) and gameplay without narration, story and meaning are in stark contrast with narratologists, who see games as narration and therefore set within the cultural functionality of language. Artaud also supports a type of participated performance, out of the realm of cultural meaning, just as an experience. However, in contrast with ludologists, he sets a specific thematic or situation for his plays, which draws on cruelty. Eventually, this probably adds some meaning and a general narrative framework, a storyline, to his theatrical project. He also sets a final goal, which is the experience of the deeper aspects of life. Nevertheless, he is interested in an actual experience rather than a language-based narration. Here then is the determinant, bringing video games and new media closer to Artaud's concept of the theatre, in contrast with the actuality of western theatre itself. Certain types of video games and new media performances (discussed later) seem to satisfy Artaud's goals for a theatre of active participation in order to explore and bring to the surface the inner cruelty of life. This happens out of the realm of language and cultural meanings, in the area of sensual experience. Artaud's ludology, we may say, incorporates both the idea of cruelty as a theme of the play and the idea of cruel participation or interaction by the audience within the play. Artaudian cruelty then presents a double meaning as theme/story and as a cruel method of play, which is the Artaudian method of participation or performance. Cruelty could be seen not simply as theme but rather as part of Artaud's 'game mechanics', the central gameplay rule in his playful or 'ludologic' theatrical universe (probably not completely meaningless as ludologists would prefer though). Artaud's analysis seems to conclude that because life is cruel, interacting with it through theatre cannot escape a cruel way of action, and that

language alone is inadequate to make people really understand (feel) this. Therefore, cruelty exists as it should, for Artaud, in the theatrical situations or themes, as much as in the mannerism of the interaction of the audience/performers within the play. For Artaud, cruelty appears to be the ‘gameplay’ for life and theatre alike. Following this analogy, we could note the cruelty that also exists in both the themes of many video games (the types and genres that are discussed) and the gaming mannerism of their players. This brings the notion of Artaudian plague to the surface, as will be analysed further. These Artaudian principles of participation and cruelty merged in one seem to be the cornerstone of several new media performances and immersive, action, adventure and role playing games, especially in combat, fighting, shooter games and survival horror, bringing them close to the idea of Artaud’s dramaturgy. Cruelty is found in their interactive mannerism and gameplay in parallel with their storylines and themes. Artaud expressed this double nature of his theatrical notion of cruelty, using plague as a metaphoric term (discussed further), as plague is cruel and also cruelly enacted, causing hallucinations like a painfully embodied nightmare.

Video games and new media as digital participated theatre

While discussing video games as theatre or by using dramaturgy terms, one could argue that games are not theatre, at least not as we understand it to be. It is not a live or real performance or event, nor is it performed by real actors on a stage. The idea of the ‘aliveness’ of dramatic events (in classical drama, in real life, what could be termed ‘analogue’ theatre) proves to be less important, while the definition of the term ‘alive’ or ‘live’ also seems to be quite blurred. We understand what theatre is, that it is an event on

a stage, with real people acting in real time. We hear them, see them, and could walk up and touch them, even perform onstage with them. The question is, do we ever carry out any of these possible actions? Live theatre is more of a narrative experience for its audience, as Artaud states. The cultural framework (viewer's linear semiotics: transmitter–receiver-end) does not allow participation other than observation, apart from some later modernistic approaches probably also influenced by Artaud's views. Any other participation takes place at a conceptual and psychological level, by means of language and narration, and does not lead into any actual sensual experience, apart from visual and auditory. Thus, for Artaud the function of culture in the domain of theatre amounts to simple observation, and this is not the kind of theatre he approves of.

But in several new media-aided performances, like *Telesymphony* by Golan Levin (Paul 2003) and *Hallucination* by Jim Campbell (Paul 2003), and in video games whether or not networked, there is active participation, even over long distances. This also happens in most new media experiences and communications, for instance chat rooms, avatars and in several social media, even without the sense of cruelty, in those cases, that Artaud would require. They are still some kinds of participated actions, a digital type of 'theatre', even while drawing away from the basic Artaudian characteristics. In *Telesymphony* the audience participates through the use of their mobile ringtones, and in *Hallucination* every viewer becomes a performer while watching himself or herself burning into virtual flames, through a video screen in front of him or her, while also hearing the sound of the fire (Paul 2003). In video games and several other new media applications, viewers are also performers, receiving and transmitting continuously. Participation as a tele-presence

collaborative performance (Birringer 2006) occurs in real time, even though most of the tangible elements of real life are lacking and even though it is extremely limited in terms of specific acts by means of code-driven restrictions. This transmediality requires some physical participation, but concomitantly also withdraws from the physical presence of the viewer/gamer (Birringer 2006). It moves towards digital techniques, setting up a complex techno-human involvement as a new establishment of technology-driven kinaesthetics (Birringer 2006). It is an inter-human and human-machine exchange, with computers and through computers, as a continuous biofeedback (Birringer 2006). This sets the role of kinetics within a gamer-computer behavioural system of play in transmission, as the connection between the performing gamer's body and the digital system, which enables interaction between the gamers. It involves complex relationships between humans and machines, reality and digital simulations, an action-based participation in a semi-real, semi-digital state. In this transmedial way, new media systems move away from being a system of representation only, to being an 'emergent situation of a playground' (Birringer 2006), a digital playground extending beyond the screen, to where the gamer's performance takes place. In virtual reality (VR) systems, the body's kinaesthetic participation is more vivid. In all cases, both stages, the living one that involves the gamer's body and actions, and the virtual digital one, are interconnected, not only psychologically via the cinematic gaze (Metz 1977), but also in a material way by transmediation and inter-transmitting. All the individual living components, i.e., all users, of a networked game for example, are connected within a single stage: the totality of the interactions' digital playground. The outcome is not a narrative, but rather the formation of a collaborating, participating and experiential performance. This is a

situation, blurred between real and virtual space, real gamers/performers and digital characters/avatars, that seems to have been conceived within the framework that Artaud has set for his theatre.

Neither real-life theatre nor kinaesthetical digital theatre can present a ‘total’ system of theatre: the former lacks active participation, and the latter lacks what might be termed ‘canonical’ reality, the ordinary reality of everyday life as we perceive it, experience it and understand it, in our usual way of natural and social existence. Nevertheless, the establishment of a transmediated theatre can still be seen as Artaud’s acknowledgement of, and contribution to, a new kind of theatre, though ‘canonical’ reality does not interest Artaud. He is more concerned about a kind of ‘inner’ reality, meaning the realization of the fundamental, archetypical and unsolved conflicts of existence, and how this ‘inner’ state and the struggle of life could be realized and sensed more accurately. This is the purpose of his theatre of cruelty, and also the dramaturgic path that several types of new media performances and video games seem to have taken, as discussed. Furthermore, on realism, future technological development could perhaps fill this gap, moving the real and digital stages, and the experience of them, closer together. However, it is a matter of taste as to what kind of art/entertainment individuals choose, as both live and digital theatre seem to bring out different qualities. Nevertheless, it is the digital that seems to embody the essential characteristic of Artaudian drama, which is concerned primarily with action-based, participatory and mediated performance of the audience, if it includes cruelty, as a theme and a method of participation.

The Artaudian plague and its double meaning: Transference/embodiment and cruel mannerism

In Artaud's view, actors'/actresses' manners onstage reveal behaviour that does not occur in everyday real life (Artaud 1938). Actors perform while in a state of spiritual fascination involving a kind of theatrical transfer. This onstage transformation drives their acts, speech and gestures in real space, in a way that fits into a spiritual dimension of space and time. It obsesses their minds and behaviour, transferring them into the place, time and situation of their performance, as Artaud describes it. An imaginary environment is constructed, expressing specific meanings (the semiotics of the play), and it is embodied in the movements, mannerisms and behaviour of the actors, in such a way that they are no longer themselves but a character in a play (Artaud 1938). This condition is likened by Artaud to that of plague-sick individuals, in a maniacal delirium, chasing the plague-ghosts in their heads (Artaud 1938). The performers pursue these ghosts, which are the feelings and ideas belonging to a spiritual world, with art-driven, exaggerated manners, in a way that resembles the maniacal plague delirium.

There is a double meaning in the way Artaud discusses plague in his theory, which follows his double notion of cruelty, as discussed before: cruelty as theme of performance and cruelty as embodied action/performance. Obviously, plague is referred to as the theatrical transfer of the performer, the participating viewer as performer, into the conceptual state of the performed situation and role. It is like a 'disease' that attacks and occupies his or her senses and perception, just like the hallucinations of plague itself.

This transference describes a state of direct involvement or more accurately an

embodiment, a sensual and kinaesthetical interaction between performer and performed situation. This is one meaning of the metaphor of plague, and the second is the cruel – like plague – mannerism in which this theatrical transfer takes place. Artaud uses the metaphor of the disease to illustrate these ideas because plague seems to carry out this double meaning of spiritual transferring and cruelty in one term. The feeling of the play, the story and the situation has to be directly embodied, sensed and believed, just like the deadly hallucinations of plague. It also has to be so cruel and direct that it causes cruel behaviour/performance; generates shock, adrenaline, fear; and leads to a cruel type of interaction, though in a safe mode. It is like trying primitively (animal-like) to escape the hallucinated nightmare, the deeper innate cruelty of life for Artaud that has also cruelly occupied the body and senses. For Artaud, theatre has to be such a directly raw, sensual and cruel experience, not just in its themes and plots, as has been mentioned before, but even for the performers themselves and the way they sense, feel and act. The plague metaphor then also describes the double direction of an Artaudian type of interactivity: cruelty to the viewer/performer (‘passive’ transfer, embodiment) and cruelty from the performer (‘energetic’ transfer by cruel action). It is a state of cruel interaction and biofeedback, which constitutes the system of the Artaudian dramaturgy, or what we could call Artaudian cruelty, in his notion of a theatre of cruelty. Therefore, for Artaud, cruelty seems to mean the establishment of a complete dramaturgic methodology, an entire theatrical system. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

The dramaturgic system of the theatre of cruelty

Figure 1: Artaud's system of dramaturgy: A theatre of cruelty.

This notion of plague seems to describe, in principle, several types of new media performances and the genres of video games that have been mentioned. The performers or the players embody the action kinaesthetically, but also tend to feel the cruel tension of the performed situation on themselves. They feel the fear of a deadly danger and the horror of hunting and being hunted. This happens in safety and not as accurately as in a real situation due to technical limitations as mentioned; however, it is still on the path Artaud draws for his cruelly interactive dramaturgy. Empirically, we notice that the most commercially successful video games are precisely those that tend to offer more accurately these plague-like tensions in the gaming experiences; thus they have more accurate interaction capabilities, more precise embodiment of the generated feelings, cruelty as a theme and cruel performance.

The Artaudian plague in the digital realm: Video games

First-person shooter games are especially prone to such a transference of players to a virtual but believable environment, through the eyes and movements of the actual 3D character, i.e., the digital actor/avatar that they ‘possess’. Players experience the situation, the place, the fears, satisfactions and achievements as if they exist and act in this computerized world. They sense (insofar as current technologies allow) the agonies, the stresses and the adrenaline surge. The playing of the game attacks them as a ‘virus’ of an out-of-real-space active perception that guides their almost maniacal acts within a state of enjoyable playful ‘delirium’. This is how popular series of games such as *Doom* (id Software 1993), *Halo* (Bungie 2001), *Fallout* (Black Isle Studios 1997), etc. could be described in dramaturgical Artaudian terms. In particular, survival horror games like *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996), *Silent Hill* (KCET 1999), *Dead Space* (EA Redwood Shores 2008) and *F.E.A.R.* (Monolith Productions 2005), which attempt to terrify the player through the use of the conventions of the genre (dark thriller atmospherics, scary soundtracks, the undead, blood, gore and fear of death), exhibit an even more precise similarity to the Artaudian plague disease metaphor, also because of their narrative and aesthetical style as much as their theme. To illustrate with the case of *Left 4 Dead* (Turtle Rock Studios 2008), this game has attracted much criticism because of its lack of narrative. This shows its distance from the classical narrative structures of theatre and performance arts as Artaud states, and draws it away from the realm of language and cultural meaning. Obviously, containing a meaning, although possible, is not the central aim of this artefact production. It is not a didactic type of play, game or performance, but one that is made in order to be played, participated in and sensed, as is the Artaudian

requirement. The set of an actual background story, a narrative framework, exists only to introduce a thematic and to motivate the performing instance, rather than to complete a narration. It is an 'open' story suggesting the transferring into a dangerous, deadly situation, in a specific instance of time, which the players are asked to embody kinaesthetically, to feel and explore. The storyline concerns the 'Green flu', a pandemic disease rather like the plague, a virus causing extreme aggression, loss of the higher brain functions and psychosis. The game's theme is certainly cruel, revealing a deeper, grotesque, violent but sublime conflict of life (disease, human aggression and death) – natural cruelty as Artaud wants. The disease in this case, also being the actual game theme, gives an interesting insight with the use of plague as a metaphor by Artaud. The disease theme, in addition, brings with it the terrifying environmental framework implied by this situation in terms of style and art elements. In the gameplay, up to four players interact cooperatively, as a small participating audience whose game goal is to fight the infected living zombies and escape to the safe house. The plague metaphor is present not only as a theme but also in the dual manner, concerning the interactive performance method as described before. This is related to the player's transference into the virtual situation, embodying the 3D character and the virtual sensory experiences of the avatar ('passive' transfer), controlling the actions by means of navigation ('energetic' transfer). It is a plague-like interactive performance based on Artaud's notions, in which the player not only interacts but also senses the cruelty of the situation, feels the fear, the anxiety and the adrenaline generated. He or she therefore suffers, enjoyably though, and that is the oxymoron, the embodied cruelty of the situation, being cruelly transferred and cruelly acting. *Left 4 Dead* (Turtle Rock Studios 2008) could be seen then through Artaud's basic

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ideas for a theatre of cruelty. It transfers its audience/players into a digitally playful and dramatically deadly situation, in a way that satisfies the fundamental principles and thematic of a plague-like participation or interaction, which Artaud sets for his theatre of cruelty. Having met this determinant Artaudian goal, *Left 4 Dead* (Turtle Rock Studios 2008), as a representative for its genre, satisfies the requirements for the theatre of cruelty, perhaps more than classical or 'analogue' theatre. It is becoming a new technological and artistic development within a later, digital type of the theatre of cruelty, within its existing dramaturgic structure (Figure 1). This occurs as far as the establishment of a real stage or the existence of real actors does not seem to be an actual necessity. Actors and stage are mentioned by Artaud only because they have been the necessary theatrical mediums in his time. Nevertheless, Artaud's ideas render the actor only as an intermediate medium for the viewer. There is not any important role for the actor in Artaudian participated theatre, while the viewers themselves should become the actors of the plays they watch. The viewers play and act by themselves and for themselves, deconstructing and re-inventing the notion of the theatrical actor. Therefore, an actor who is not a viewer as well (actor-viewer), tends to become just another scenic element of the performance, while being completely dismissed from his/her central role to lead the play or the performance. This is the logical implication of Artaud's theories, although it has been proved practically inadequate for theatre of his times and the ways it was materialized. It seems also that Artaud's notions apply more to *Left 4 Dead* (Turtle Rock Studios 2008) and several video games of this kind rather than to the actual theatrical plays produced by Artaud himself. The players of the game are the actors-viewers of the 'play', having the leading role via their avatars (the central game

characters, the 'protagonists'). Any other game character who is not controlled by some player, the zombies for example, are secondary figures on the digital stage, serving the actualization of the performance. Therefore, it could be stated that theatre of cruelty principles are being materialized more precisely nowadays, with the use of digital technology.

The Artaudian plague in the digital realm: New media performances

In addition to video games, there is also the area of digitally aided live performance and interactive cinema where the presence of the Artaudian dramaturgical plague metaphor as a 'disease' of embodying the cinematic characters' feelings and situations into the viewer's body can also be seen in the works of certain celebrated pioneering artists. The case of Toni Dove's interactive movie installation *Artificial Changelinks* (Dixon 2007) presents a characteristic example of immersion in a narrative based on parallel stories in time. It concerns a nineteenth-century self-destroying kleptomaniac Arathusa and her future alter ego Zileth, a woman both real and imagined. Here again is an element of 'plague', actually a mental disease theme in the storyline, in a general end-of-the-self dramaturgic manner also influenced by Romantic art forms. Artaudian plague as performance method is also present. The player/viewer 'transfers' into the story, controlling the screening, the speed, the sound and the views using the game software and interactive system. This happens according to the viewer's movements and speed, while crossing certain floor zones or making gestures ('energetic' transfer). The player also 'transfers' into the virtual performer's body and space, having the option to embody her point of view (passive) while moving close to the screen (and 'energetic' transfer).

Therefore, the story and the feelings it generates in the cinematic heroes are ‘transferred’ into the viewer’s body and perception through the same process, as far as the project’s technology allows. Like a metaphor of a perception disease from a virtual space (seen as a different level or condition of life), a conceptual ‘plague’ invades the viewer, coming from the screen, and forces him or her to abandon the real self and actual space, diving into a fake but believable situation that reveals sensually a different or deeper life condition, the one established on-screen.

Stelarc’s projects are also emblematic in the field of digitally aided or new media performances, in part because of his theoretical point of view. His suspension performances are very well known, penetrating areas of masochism, self-torturing and pain, though perhaps not in their conceptual framework. As Stelarc himself mentions in an interview (Atzori and Woolford 2010), ‘suspension’ is taken to mean ‘between two states’. One is gravity and the other is upswing, levitation or flight, while the performer remains in his or her natural state of consciousness. This method is equal to Artaud’s dramaturgical transference through plague, in its principle and aim. Stelarc states that in using technology, piercing and skin-stretching, he erases skin itself as a barrier. He says that skin has been considered metaphysically in the past as a surface or interface, a boundary for the soul and the self, and simultaneously a border between the self and the world. Studying Stelarc’s case, through his projects and views, we can draw the similarities they carry to Artaud’s metaphor of plague. Stelarc wants to attack cruelly the human body, like a skin disease erasing skin as a border, in order to extend the self to the world, just like Artaudian plague extends the participating viewer’s perception into a

different or extended state of being, which is the performed situation. Both paradigms ensue independently of any language-driven meaning. They are embodied performances and cruelty applied to the performer, in order to transfer him or her into a different state of consciousness and being. Stelarc seems to take Artaud's cruelty even further, as he moves beyond Artaud's safety and the conditional type of cruelty he establishes for his theatre, although Artaud also states at some point that he would allow a few drops of blood onstage for the achievement of his dramaturgical aim (Artaud 1938).

For Stelarc, technology was always coupled with the evolutionary development of the body, and technology is a defining feature of bodily function. It is not antagonistic but rather part of our human nature, also influencing it. It 'extends' our bodies, he states characteristically (Atzori and Woolford 2010). This implies that the soul is also extended, because Stelarc, similarly to Artaud, does not isolate the brain, the human perception, language and ideas, from the body, its action and performance, in the typical Cartesian dualism. This is also Artaud's view against the unproductive separation between culture and civilization as presented, which forms the theoretical origin for his action-based, participated theatre of cruelty. Therefore, we should not have a Frankensteinian fear for incorporating technology to the body, Stelarc says, neither considering technology in a Faustian way, that we are selling our soul using forbidden energies. In other words Stelarc suggests that the application of technology into the biological body should not be considered deadly or alienating, like in Frankenstein's case, neither it should be seen as satanic power, given in exchange for the soul, like in Faust's by Goethe case. He believes it is no longer productive to think in that sense, but rather to think of the body plugged

into a new technological terrain. Artaud, accordingly, would like the body and perception of the viewer connected to his theatrical terrain, thus experiencing an embodiment of the performance. Artaud used the plague as a metaphoric term to express his dramaturgical ideas on paper, as there had not been any other term that could describe his novel theoretical capture, precisely. His practical theatrical experimentation onstage was rather interesting, but had not succeeded in applying his theories outright. What Artaud was seeking for theatre is better actualized nowadays with digital technology as a vehicle. Stelarc's thoughts extend Artaud's metaphor of plague into a new era for his theatre of cruelty. Artaud withdraws the word plague from its exact medical meaning of an illness, giving it a positive artistic significance and discussing it as a dramaturgical method for a 'cruelly' embodied and participated performance, in order to extend human perception. This is precisely the role that Stelarc gives to technology, also trying to move it away from any negative 'Frankensteinian' or 'Faustian' meaning it may have traditionally. The Artaudian plague is transformed into Stelarc's technological method in the digital epoch. It is applied in the framework of a general grotesque, cruel and deadly thematic that is expressed by the term 'plague', as discussed earlier. Therefore, Artaud's theatre of 'plague' nowadays turns out to be a 'plug-in' theatre, offering an interactive 'plug and play' function for the gamer or performer. The participant is simultaneously viewer and performer, who embodies and senses actions not words, just as Artaud would have liked. This is a general aesthetical paradigm and a methodological characteristic, which exists in the genres of video games and new media performances that are discussed. It is certainly present in Stelarc's later works, in an even more pioneering way.

Most of the later performances by Stelarc demonstrate the progression of his concept of the technologically extended body (body/mind/perception as one entity) ‘suspension’ between the state of its natural current condition and its potential (or actual) technologically driven evolution. Well-known projects like the *Ear on Arm* surgery (O’Reily 2009), the *Exoskeleton* (Dixon 2007), the *Stomach Sculpture* (Stelarc 1993), the *Extended Arm* (Stelarc 2000), etc. demonstrate the tension of the artist to attack his own body (‘passive’ transfer, embodiment), not just metaphorically but literally, although safely and scientifically, in order to attach, to ‘plug in’, a new robotic or bionic extension and ability to it. Then he acts/performs using it in a cruel, for his own body, condition (‘energetic’ transfer into the new bodily situation). This idea and practice still matches the description of the Artaudian plague. It is an attack, an invasion, a ‘disease’ for the body according to the current ethics and health rules. It aims artistically, experimentally or dramatically to ‘cure’ in a ‘playful’ and performative way its current state of being, by extending its biological abilities in reality and driving its evolution. It is a ‘plug and play’, ‘plague’ method as discussed. Especially in the extremely dangerous situation of the *Stomach Sculpture*, but also in the *Ear on Arm* surgery as much as in the hooked skin suspension performances, the notion of the technologically updated, Artaudian ‘plague’ method is clearly present. It is the artistic body invasion in order to achieve a dramaturgic, even though actual in Stelarc’s case, transference or participation to a different or higher level of perception.

The concept of the dramaturgic ‘disease’ metaphor by Artaud also fits with Stelarc’s future project ideas that he discusses in his interview, which proceed perhaps a bit further

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(Atzori and Woolford 2010). Stelarc states (Atzori and Woolford 2010) that it is time to build an internal surveillance system for the body with microminiaturized robots so that we augment our bacterial population, assist our immunological system, and monitor the capillary and internal tracts of the body. He sounds to be aware of current discussions and literature concerning nanotechnology. He says that we must develop microbots without pre-programmed behaviour, but activated by blood chemistry, temperature, the softness/hardness of tissue and the presence of obstacles in tracts. These robots will then work autonomously on the body. Speck-sized robots can easily be swallowed without even being sensed. At a nanotech level, machines will navigate and inhabit cellular spaces and manipulate molecular structures to extend the body from within. Stelarc's development of the 'plug and play' method is a nanotech invention inside the body; it is an actual 'disease', a more precise 'plague' and play idea, which aims to force its strengthening towards a next level of existence. These ideas are similar to notions from bio-art as well, and especially Eduardo Kac's work, such as *A-positive* (Kac 1997) and *Time Capsule* (Paul 2003), the implanted microchip project. Kac's *Time Capsule*, as most of his projects, also attempts to break the frontier between body and technology by invasion, inheriting artificial life (Paul 2003). The performance entails inserting a microchip with a programmed identification number into Kac's left leg and using web-based transmission. These latest developments, however, extend the original mystical or metaphysical idea of the plague metaphor in Artaud's dramaturgy into an era of scientific rationality and pioneering technological research. This builds a common ground between science and art, an attempt to aestheticize science and technology, demonstrating also

some artistic influence in the design of digital technology applications and scientific research.

The Artaudian oxymoron: Plague epidemic as cure

The connection between theatre and the plague is probably the most interesting argument in Artaud's theory, involving an apparent paradox. The oxymoron consists in his use of the disease metaphor, as an integral part of his concept of the positive healing influence of the theatre. In an actual case of plague, an ill person's delirium is the last stage before loss of consciousness, i.e., loss of the mind, and subsequent death. However, in the theatrical world this is the phase experienced before 'losing one's mind' in safety, because conditionally, it allows actors to step into a poetic world, and experience the deeper meaning of life (Artaud 1938). This is considered as a cruel transfer, as it demands the abolition of the self and the security and certainties of a rational brain and individual character. It is like a metaphorical death. Nonetheless, it seems to be one sure way to move beyond oneself, to progress safely towards an experience of deeper existential discoveries, even beyond the realms of language. Via theatre, then, will come experiences probably unknown to the audience: wars, revolutions and pain but also happiness can pass into the audience, like an epidemic disease (Artaud 1938) that can penetrate their inner world of feelings and thoughts. Artaud mentions happiness, but his plague-based dramaturgy cannot really include happiness in its themes or performance methods. Nevertheless, his embodied, sensual theatrical mode is accepted as a true experience, which can lead the audience into a deeper level of awareness and understanding (Artaud 1938). We could accept that this leads people to heal their current

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or canonical perceptions, from superficial empiricism and judgments, through this ‘shamanic’ passage, to a spiritual, almost platonic, world of ideas, through theatre. This condition can extend their experience and understanding, and may even allow them to enter the esoteric world and subjectivity of someone else, i.e., the character in the play. This similarity that Artaud’s conception for theatre shares with Plato’s spiritual world of ideas also demonstrates a doubleness in Artaud’s theatre. His theatre of cruelty exists between two worlds within the plague function as a link, which cruelly connects them. It is the world of the viewers in addition to the ‘esoteric’ world they perform, a world of ideas. It is a double theatrical world, as Artaud’s book title implies (1938).

The discussed new media and immersive video game paradigm demonstrates a tension towards metaphorical and actual body invasion, like a disease but with positive results as well, while entering a new dimension. In artistic and aesthetics terms it could be described as an Artaudian plague-like function, a conceptual or dramaturgical gate leading to a next level. In the case of Stelarc’s and Kac’s projects, this healing purpose of their ‘plague’ insertions, in order to extend the body and ‘cure’ it from its current state, is based on actual scientific methodologies. Perhaps their inspiration comes from scientific fantasies and utopias. Nevertheless, their digital version of Artaud’s plague moves closer to scientific rationalism and technological materialization, in contrast to the surreal, metaphysical, mystic or magical way in which Artaud expects his plague method to work for his theatre. The digital components that ‘invade’ the performers’ bodies tend to actualize the theatrical concept of plague that Artaud conceives metaphorically for his theatre, and they present his original idea and its healing cause in a material and

scientifically oriented dimension. No matter the technological development, this new media performances paradigm, as discussed, still seems to draw on the aesthetic, dramaturgic and conceptual origins of the Artaudian ontologies.

The final cause of theatre and Artaud: Aristotelian Catharsis and video games

Artaudian dramaturgy emerging in the discussed video game genres seems to have a strong appeal to those natural powers that tend to bring the mind back to the source of existential conflicts and evil powers. Their fundamental features lie in the fact that they provide a revelation or an ‘apocalypse’, an externalization of a deeper, hidden, silent cruelty as stated earlier. This revelation can help in the detection of all the distorted powers of the human brain, as Artaud (1938) declares. Like the plague again, these video games feel like the triumph of dark powers, fed by another, even deeper, power until it is swept away. The apocalypse progresses like a disease that leads either to healing and recovery or to total distraction or (virtual) death, Artaud would say, just like in theatre. This metaphorical description is also in-line with Aristotle’s tri-part structure of drama: (1) introduction, (2) conflict and (3) solution ending with Catharsis, the cleaning of the soul. The central part portrays an extreme, exaggerated fight or conflict, corresponding to the plague delirium of pursuing one’s own ghosts. All great myths are dark and set in surroundings of bloodshed, torture and massacre, as Artaud underlines. It is the function of drama to reveal the natural violence in life and in the human condition (Artaud 1938). When the conflicts are revealed, power is released, enabling solutions to be reached. Artaud appears quite sure and optimistic as to this potential role of theatre. Whether those powers are dark and evil is not the responsibility of theatre, but rather of life itself

(Artaud 1938). Thus, Artaudian drama, as well as its digital video game version, functions as a kind of Catharsis, as a catalyst that brings those inner conflicts to the surface to be seen clearly and to be solved (Artaud 1938). This theatrical ‘poison’, or gaming ‘poison’ in our case, could, as St Augustine warns (Artaud 1938), either destroy society just as the plague did or could help to cure the hidden ‘sickness’ as suggested in Artaudian dramaturgy (Artaud 1938). Total cure as an absolute solution cannot occur before a necessary catastrophe (Artaud 1938). The dramatic act, as well as the participatory gaming act, in the Artaudian plague metaphor, can have a beneficial effect, as it forces people to see themselves as they really are. The masks and hypocrisy are dropped, revealing the darker human side (Artaud 1938). Thereby, people can be given the strength to distinguish their qualities and make a decision to fight their natural fate, according to the values they have chosen, and be in command of their destiny. This final solution with its soul-cleaning effect echoes Aristotle’s views concerning the notion of a final Catharsis in tragedy (Aristotle 335 BCE). Catharsis then seems to be the final cause of theatre, also for Artaud. Perhaps the role of immersive and cruel video games as post-theatrical acts can function in such an Artaudian way, participating in his broad art experiment. In some ways, Artaud’s deeply held aesthetical view supports video game element of cruelty well, as a defence manifesto against scepticism and criticism. Players seek dramatic Catharsis through the actual experience of the onstage ‘disease’ within the plague-like gameplay.

Conclusions

The present article has put forward the notion of a connection between Antoine Artaud's modern theatre theory and specific types of new media performances and video games (immersive, action, adventure, role playing games, combat, fighting, shooter games and survival horror, taking place in a digital 3D space), discussing specifically his concept of plague within the framework of gameplay traditions. The argument aims to show how closely certain video games and digital performances' operations resemble Artaud's theatrical aesthetics of the 'disease', in a manner that suggests the actual materialization of his theories on the recently developed digital stage. The virtual stage is not inseparable from real-life actuality, as it is connected not just psychologically but also physically with the bodies and actions of the players/viewers. This marriage of digital performance and gameplay with Artaudian dramaturgy proposes the study and practice of a specific new media paradigm, through theatrical means and ideas as a relevant way to gain further understanding on the latest digital media technologies, concepts, practices and aesthetics. Artaud's main concept of plague is discussed in parallel with certain digital video gaming and new media performance case studies that also exemplify central new media practices in order to search for and estimate their dramaturgic qualities. The plague metaphor and the cruelty component, for example, are main and theoretically problematic cases, meeting with widespread social and political scepticism. Artaud's theatre may be cruel, brutal or raw in its whole system – not just in its stories or myths but also in its method of performance, as demonstrated by the discussion on the double meanings that cruelty and plague seem to carry in his theory. This is because Artaud's theatre sets out to attack the way in which the audience usually experiences the theatrical spectacle, passively, hidden away safely in the dark area, separated from the stage. Artaudian theatre also hits the

senses directly like a disease, intending to upset, even to abolish, the tranquillity of the viewers' dark area, forcing them to be onstage in order to further the action. Artaud also intends to get inside the viewer, forcing him or her to feel the action and explore it, searching for the solution actively, bodily and cruelly, to gain Catharsis and healing as an actual experience. This cruel 'invasion' of the viewer's private space and the viewer's actual body and senses (like a disease, like plague and delirium), which tends to destroy classical perceptions, including the cruel re-action it incites in the performer, can be described as Artaudian cruelty of the theatrical medium. Artaudian cruelty is then a theatrical system, or the cornerstone of Artaud's dramaturgical system, a central performative or 'gameplay' rule in his so-called theatre of cruelty (Figure 1). Several digital video game genres and new media performances seem to function on the track of Artaud's dramaturgic theory, leading his notions into their technological future. The 'invasion' of the player/viewer's body and perceptions is not just psychological as in classical theatre. It is radical, direct and unavoidable once one gets into a game or the performance, and is thus also raw and cruel in the mannerisms, the interactions and the thematic it establishes. This does not happen in the intellectual sphere but is rather direct physical action. However, it does not seem to be unpleasant, judging from new media and video games' immense commercial success and popularity. Therefore, the Artaudian notion of 'cure' (or the Aristotelian Catharsis) through this 'delirium' and 'plague' function could well be an illuminating metaphor in this case. These video gaming action and digitally aided performance genres can possibly be seen as post-Artaudian dramaturgies or performances. Furthermore, the discussed games and performances,

perhaps as a broader genre, and the Artaudian dramaturgy, move beyond classical theatre, while approaching each other in their practices and aesthetic principles and effects.

Artaudian theatre is not just a spectacle, and certainly not a language-based narration, as Artaud argues. It exists in a different sphere, a mixed reality between real and dramaturgical, imaginary or digital we could say. It is connected with those specific paradigms of digital performance and video gaming, perhaps more than theatre itself. It is organized, systematic mood management through artistic or other practices, but always by empirical means, as a shamanic opening to body experience and awakening of the senses and in turn the mind, a digital or actual extension or evolution of body and perception. This adrenaline-generating, contextual theatre provides a framework for certain video game types, performances and VR, but not necessarily a narrative, story or plot. It encourages the audience to be players or actors and to feel as if they freely exist within the context, suspending their disbelief, while demanding actual adrenaline-generating action and response. Artaud's concept of plague is not applicable to all types and aspects of video gaming, or all the different modes of engagement. It does not form a complete new media or video games study, or a complete or closed theory of theatre in the first place, but rather demonstrates some direct relation with specific and rather problematic concepts of some major and very popular examples and genres. This discussion of the Artaudian paradigm could perhaps illuminate their dramaturgical pathways, and serve also as a perspective for alternative points of view in production and practice-based research in the relevant fields.

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