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100 Years of Cruelty: Essays on Artaud by Edward -2 (review)

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Theatre Survey, Volume 54, Number 2, May 2013, pp. 309-310 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tsu.2013.a983757>



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## BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY KIM SOLGA, WITH SALLY COLWELL

*100 Years of Cruelty: Essays on Artaud.* Edited by Edward Scheer. Sydney: Power Publications [2000], reprint 2011, distributed by Seattle: University of Washington Press; pp. 334, 3 illustrations. \$29.95 paper.

doi:10.1017/S0040557413000082

Reviewed by Matthew McMahan, Tufts University

Edward Scheer's collection of essays on Antonin Artaud, *100 Years of Cruelty: Essays on Artaud*, originated in an event of the same name celebrating the centenary of Artaud's birth in 1896. Taken as a whole, the essays create a picture of the artist that manifests itself through the emergence of several telling and reoccurring motifs, such as his obsession with the scatological, his anarchic eulogy of destruction and the plague, his abnegation of God, and his personal experience with madness. The collection characterizes Artaud as a gambler whose primary motive was, in the words of essayist Sylvère Lotringer, to strip the "mask of sociality" (199) through a performance of his own persona that was exhibited in every facet of his life.

Though interesting and relatable to Artaud enthusiasts, the book neither organizes its essays in a manner that contextualizes them for the reader, nor places them in conversation with one another. They are merely arranged, without clear theme or motive, in four untitled parts. Consequently, without context, the essays appear mostly reflective (upon Artaud's career) rather than reactive (to academic discussion). Though unsystematic, the structure of the book should not detract from the quality of the essays in Scheer's collection: the volume contains a multiplicity of works that "reflect the diversity of [Artaud's] interests and effects" found in his writings, theories, and art (5).

The book may hinge around Lesley Stern's essay "'All Writing Is Pigshit,'" which playfully encapsulates the paradox between Artaud's disgust with *écriture* and a book commemorating such an anarchic thinker through a collection of writings. Stern argues that Artaud is compelled to "struggle with language through the very medium of language" in an effort to move beyond it (80). Similarly, in dealing with Artaud's often difficult and enigmatic ideas, we too must suffer through words to glean from what Artaud calls the "mysterious depths of ourselves" (quoted in Bill Schaffer's essay, "This Sewer Drilled with Teeth," 139). So, in effect, Artaud's clarion cry against speech and writing necessitates books like *100 Years of Cruelty*.

For theatre scholars, Sam Weber's essay, "The Greatest Thing of All: The Virtual Reality of Theatre," is perhaps the most noteworthy in the collection, for it justifies how Artaud sought to express the violent through the theatrical. Weber surprisingly puts Artaud in conversation with Aristotle's *Poetics*, ultimately arguing that Artaud was not explicitly "'anti-Aristotelian'" in the way Brecht was. Rather,

Artaud and Aristotle share certain values, condemning the same kind of narrative: “that which sacrifices action to character” (13). Unlike the proponents of realism and naturalism, Artaud sought an action that could signify beyond the psychological limits of characters, using action to create not a mimetic actuality but an expressive, unrepeatably virtuality made possible by the theatrical gesture.

One of the strengths of *100 Years of Cruelty* is its inclusion of considerations of every medium in Artaud’s oeuvre. This can be seen in Frances Dyson’s conversation about the quality of sound in Artaud’s work (“The Last Pulse”), Allen S. Weiss’s interpretation of Artaud’s poetry and glossolalia (“Libidinal Mannerism and Profligate Abominations”), and Sylvère Lotringer’s biographic narrative, which connects Artaud’s madness with his drawings (“The Art of the Crack-Up”). There is also a pair of essays which touch upon the legacy of Artaud’s theories on other artists: Douglas Kahn’s “Artaud in America,” which illustrates the proliferation of Artaud’s theories in America during the 1950s; and an interview conducted by Edward Scheer and Nicholas Tsoutas with Australian performance artist Mike Parr, who manifests cruelty through the mutilation of his own body.

Unfortunately, even with these last two examples in mind, there is not enough of an attempt in *100 Years of Cruelty* to “follow the traces left in our culture by [Artaud’s] thought” (6). Scheer’s introduction provides an all too brief explanation of the scope of the book and does not fully satisfy the question: Why one hundred years of cruelty? True, the title comes from an event commemorating the centenary of Artaud’s birth, but it also implies that there is some living legacy of Artaud’s work, vitalizing cruelty today. Scheer and his colleagues scarcely establish cruelty as the marker of an epoch beyond Artaud in and of himself. Where does cruelty stand today? Without more of a context, the hundredth anniversary of Artaud’s birth is nothing more than a convenient excuse for a collection of essays.

Given that these were originally delivered to Artaud scholars some sixteen years ago at a conference devoted to Artaud, a working knowledge of his theories and oeuvre is required to absorb this collection fully. The book should be treated not as an introduction but instead as a challenging forum through which to confront many of Artaud’s ideas, providing a variety of interpretations that may enrich our understanding of this profoundly singular thinker.

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*Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954–1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes.* By Stephen Sondheim. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010; pp. xxvii + 453, illustrated. \$45 cloth.

*Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981–2011) with Attendant Comments, Amplifications, Dogmas, Harangues, Digressions, Anecdotes and Miscellany.* By Stephen Sondheim. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011; pp. xxiii + 457, illustrated. \$45 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S0040557413000094

Reviewed by Jason Fitzgerald, Columbia University