

# artaud

September 4th last marked the centenary of the birth of Antonin Artaud. Poet, playwright, theatre and film actor, essayist, polemicist, visionary madman - Artaud the myth and the reality has been one of the most influential artists of the century, especially since his death in 1948. His most famous publication 'The Theatre and its Double' (1938) was a booklength manifesto that proposed the radical overthrow of every known theatrical convention and value to be replaced by a new 'theatre of cruelty' in which life and art would merge in the expression - through the ritualistic movements and pre-verbal breaths and cries of the body - of hitherto unknown regions of human and inhuman experience. Its ultimate aim was to bring about a total revolution of society and its repressive institutions. Not only did such writings influence each succeeding generation of playwrights, theatre actors and directors like none other this century, but Artaud's poems, essays and his tragic and passionate life - long periods of which were spent in mental institutions - have since inspired numerous movements ranging from the Beat poets and the 1960's and '70's drug-centred counter-culture in the US, through the rioting Paris students of 1968, and onto today's 'cybernauts' who recite Artaudian mantras such as "organisms are the enemies of the body" as they hitch themselves up to cyberpositive circuits and go in search of *techno sapiens* in a life beyond the limits of the human body.

Although Artaud's performances in Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'arc* (1928) and Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) are widely revered and the only script of his to be filmed *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (by Germaine Dulac in 1928) is a regular at screenings of classic surrealist works, his fascinating theoretical writings on the cinema remain less well known.

During the 1920's Artaud held out great hopes for the cinema, believing in its intrinsic revolutionary potential. Unfortunately his enthusiasm for the medium didn't last long. Nevertheless, the 40 or so pages of theoretical

writings and interviews coupled with the half dozen scripts he left behind contain enough ideas and innovations to enable one to lament the fact that he was never given the chance to establish himself within the film community. For Artaud the cinema was inseparable from thought processes. Rejecting both populist representational cinema and the abstract avant-garde works of his contemporaries, he thought of the cinema in terms of neurology, its images should shock the body, acting directly on the nervous system. Abstract experimental films were too cerebral, lacked a visceral punch. Thought for Artaud was born in unknown regions of the body and it was the task and unique capability of cinema to provoke the unconscious into action. "I considered that the cinema possessed an element of its own, a truly magical and truly cinematographic element, which nobody had ever thought of isolating. This element which differs from every sort of representation attached to images, has the characteristics of the very vibration, the profound, unconscious source of thought." In his script for *The Seashell and the Clergyman* Artaud explains that the films effect should come not from any external referent which would provide the meaning of the images, nor from any logical relationship between the images, not even from any dream logic as the surrealists believed, but from shock vibrations produced as a result of the association of the images amongst themselves. "A complete disruption of optics, perspective and logic" should ensue. In essence Artaud wished that the cinema should substitute its new logic for the spectator's own thoughts. Paradoxically, only when he became an automaton would the spectator be capable of new and worthwhile thought.

This idea that a more authentic form of thought lay somewhere in mankind's future, Artaud shared not only with fellow cinema revolutionaries such as Eisenstein (with his concept of 'thought-montage') but also with philosophers such as Heidegger with his celebrated maxim "most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking

time is that we are still not thinking." Moreover, the notion of an artwork acting directly on the viewer's nervous system is one that recurs in the painter Francis Bacon's discussions of his work.

"This scenario is not the reproduction of a dream and must not be regarded as such." Despite this crystal clear condition contained in the script, Germaine Dulac betrayed Artaud by portraying the events in his script of *The Seashell and the Clergyman* as dream-images rather than as real, as his entire philosophy dictated. This, combined with his inability to have any of his other scripts produced, as well as his over-exposure to many of the more mediocre film-makers for whom he had to act for financial reasons, led to Artaud soon becoming completely disillusioned with the cinema. From the late 1920's onwards he devoted all his energies to the theatre and poetry. When the first films of Bunuel and Cocteau were hailed as wildly original, Artaud quickly reminded them that it was his *Seashell* script that had made them possible.

More recently (in the late 1960's and early '70's) the Italian director Carmelo Bene produced an extraordinary sequence of films, including *Notre - Dame des Turcs*, *Salomé*, and *Capricci*, which proved him to be the true inheritor of the Artaudian film aesthetic. Sadly, he too turned his back on the cinema and now devotes himself exclusively to the theatre. In 1993 a fictionalised account of the last two years of Artaud's life appeared - French director Gérard Mordillat's *My Life and Times with Antonin Artaud*. Hopefully, the relationship between Artaud's thought and the cinema is far from over.



Antonin Artaud (right) in Carl Dreyer's 'La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc'