

The paper discusses how the metadramatic modalities of simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of the fictional universe figure in two contemporary plays: Pascal Rambert's *The closure of love* (2011) and Tim Crouch's *The Author* (2009). The discussion reveals that the two much-acclaimed plays belong to a resilient self-reflective line of dramas questioning the closure of representation that starts in the early modern period with such classical pieces as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Calderón's *The Great Theatre of the World*.

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# Deconstructing and Re-constructing the Fictional Universe: On Two Opposite Examples of Contemporary Metadrama

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My aim is to discuss the relevance and resilience of dramatic theatre – the one relying on the playtext preceding a theatrical production – from the perspective of its internal, inherited modes of theorisation and autopoietic rejuvenation, which seem to spite its supposed demise in the era of the postdramatic, of the no longer dramatic or of the post-post dramatic text. An insight into the way these modes are employed in contemporary playwriting could, I believe, bring us closer to understanding how it happens that the dramatic text is currently bouncing back and striking with a vengeance at all the attempts to reduce it to a purely linguistic and literary entity and to divorce it from the actualities of the stage, which have always guaranteed its structural specificity, even when it was considered to be just one of the “literary types”, to use Benjamin Bennett’s words (27–56).

Contemporary playwrighting does its best to parallel and engender postdramatic performances by its own attempts to break free from “the closure of representation”, as the invariant structure of Western theatre, which Artaud attacked and Derrida famously theorised as being metaphysical in kind. The endeavours to escape from this structure have, however, endangered the very notion of drama, for they often take the shape of either “lyric” or “epic” strategies of “de-dramatization”. As Liz Tomlin, however, pointedly argued in her foreword to Vicki Angelaki’s collection of essays on contemporary British theatre, before one discredits dramatic theatre as being irredeemably predicated upon totality, closure and temporally progressing a fictive cosmos enclosed in a pre-existing play-text, one should first reflect upon the historical accuracy of this definition, let alone acknowledge a respectable *dramatic* tradition of self-reflexive critique. Contemporary playwrights revive such self-reflexivity, for instance, when they explicitly refer to crucial instances of the very medium of theatre – to authors, plays, actors, audiences, playacting and spectating, as well as to the spaces, i.e., ontologies, that these agents and actions are supposed to occupy. As opposed to Tomlin’s emphasis on modernist predecessors, such as Pirandello and Genet – whose metadramatic confrontations with the “real” certainly figure among

the most intriguing disruptions of the aforementioned invariant structure – I will here go further back into the history of dramatic theatre. Following, namely, David Roberts’s considerations regarding the way Derrida’s discussion of Artaud could serve as a basis for the establishment of the two basic types of metadrama, I will show that the two early modern prototypes that Roberts singles out – Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Calderón’s *The Great Theatre of the World* – could indeed be used as models for understanding my two chosen extreme points in *contemporary* metadramatic experimenting.

Unlike Lehmann and other performance scholars who, to put it like Julia Jarcho, seem to “exhibit a kind of selective amnesia when it comes to Derrida’s critique” (4), Roberts reminds us of how suspicious Derrida is of the Artaudian dream of escape from the closed circle of representation. According to his version of Derrida’s thesis, the traditional theatre Artaud wants to abolish implies “the dominance of the word” and “the primacy of a founding logos, which endows the scene with the following elements: an author-creator, absent, distant, armed with a text, who supervises and controls the meaning of the representation”, making the “actors enact the will of an invisible master before an audience of spectators, consumers, voyeurs” (37). Derrida, however, also warns that Artaud’s theatre of the unrepeatable gesture and self-presence is impossible since repetition remains unavoidable; all theatre can do to undermine the afore-described theological structure is to “lay bare what the circle [of representation] contains” to represent “the limit of representation” by re-presenting the representation (Ibid. 37–38).

Based on such premises, Roberts introduces his two types of metadrama, which he differentiates according to the opposing strategies they use in order to undermine the fatal closure. Both types stem from the inherent possibility of dramatic theatre to question its own limits by foregrounding the spatial duality it implies since “every play [...] opens a *space of play* and represents *the world as play*” (Ibid. 38). The first type of metadrama, the “self-critical” one, inserts the limit of representation within its own play-as-world in the form of an inset play – for example, the well-known “Mousetrap” in *Hamlet*, which appears to be ordered by an invisible and unreliable Ghost-in-the-machine. The other, the “self-affirming” type, exemplified by Calderón’s *The Great Theatre of the World*, projects the limit out, into the world-as-play, by making the Author behind the scene appear out front as the All-mighty God who both runs and watches the show and who ultimately grants salvation or damnation of any actual audience watching Calderón’s play. To summarise the ideological stakes of this opposition, let me finish its all-too-short explanation by again quoting David Roberts:

[...] the one uses reduplication to *internalise* the origin and causality of the scene, the other to *externalise* origin and causality. [...] Theologically and historically the two types point in the opposite directions: the play within the play anticipates through

introversion the modern recession of origin, that is, *the paradox* of self-implication; World Theatre looks backwards to reaffirm through extroversion the medieval closure of meaning whose outcome is the *allegory* of self-explication (38–39).

The two contemporary examples that, in my view, make us recall these two types of self-reflexivity are Pascal Rambert's *Clôture de l'amour* (2011) and Tim Crouch's *The Author* (2009). I chose these two metadramatic plays since both of them, interestingly, bear in their titles some marked associations to Derrida's commentary of Artaud and to the previously described "invariant structure" of the Western theatre: while the first one seems to allude to the closure of representation, the second one invokes the centrality, if not the God-like position of the author. Although the French title of Rambert's play was translated into English as *The Closing of Love* or *Love's End*, I will insist on the allusive impact of the original title, which uses the same word – *clôture* – as Derrida does to describe the paradox of Artaud's ambitions. In my view, Rambert's play thus intentionally connects the crisis of love with the crisis of representation and culture in general and with the crisis of theatre in particular. My choice of Rambert's play could be justified as well by the sheer amount of resonance it provoked, for, unlike Tim Crouch's *The Author*, which toured mainly in the Anglo-American world, *The closure of love* – as I would translate Rambert's title – has already gained the status of a transnational phenomenon, having so far been performed in more than twenty different languages all over the world, from Brazil and the United States via Slovenia, Croatia and Italy to Egypt, Russia, China and Japan. However, in contrast, to Crouch's much-discussed and – for many critics (Bottoms, Rebellato, Henke, Delgado-García and others) – truly seminal play, the performing enthusiasm for Rambert's text has so far not been matched by serious scholarly analysis of its planetary appeal.<sup>1</sup>

So, why, precisely, *The closure of love*? Let me repeat that closure here is an ambiguous word, signalling both the self-containment of a universe and, at the same time, the end of that universe. In a wish to both denounce and announce the closure of the representation, to end it, to abolish it, and in the same stroke to revive it on his own terms, meant for Artaud, as Roberts reminds us, to inaugurate a pure theatre of presence, devoid of any hand that would govern it from the outside – to establish, in a word, pure immanence of life – *and of death*. In such a theatre, the actor becomes a martyr permitting his or her own destruction to become a spectacle proving the immanence of negation.<sup>2</sup> Artaud imagines a variety of techniques by which to assault,

1 The only exception I am aware of is a monographic issue of the journal *Parages*, no 7, 2020, in which one can find inspiring essays on Rambert as playwright and director; only, however, incidentally mentioning the play, and not interpretively engaging in its analysis. The journal itself is published by the National Theatre of Strasbourg, one of the regular sites of Rambert's collaboration, so the issue devoted to Rambert is more of a tribute to the home author than a scholarly publication. Nevertheless, there are in this issue some interesting remarks by the editor Frederic Vossier, Claudine Galea, as well as the actors who initially appeared in the French version of the play, Stanislas Norday and Audrey Bonnet.

2 It is insightful to consult in that light a recent monograph by Kimberly Jannarone, *Artaud and his Doubles*, 2015. She reads Artaud's text in the historical context and finds numerous correspondences between his obsessive motifs and metaphors on the one hand, and the fascist rhetorics on the other, especially when it comes to his repeated exposure of "the omnipresence of evil, the foulness of the body and the need to systematically employ cruelty and terror" (1).

benumb and confront the audience to imminent death: raging against the theatre of his time. He expresses disgust not only for “psychological” dilemmas but particularly for the whole cheap sentimentalism and verbalism of bourgeois domestic dramas. Pascal Rambert appears at first glance to be doing quite the opposite. In *The closure of love*, he writes a logorrheic play for the age-old apparatus of the *théâtre à l’italienne* that claustrophobically and obsessively addresses precisely the trials and tribulations of a typical modern bourgeois marriage. Lacking, however, in dialogic stichomythia, *The closure of love* consists of what appear to be two subsequent monologues but are, in fact, two monomaniacal “narrative” voices forced into a “dramatic” clash. As if Rambert, faced with the current trend to represent the world as broken into a Babylonian multitude of narrative ontologies, tried to test the form of drama, to put its current implosions to their utmost limit, to constrain this obsession with self-narration to be deployed within the common space/time of what Badiou would name the “Two scene” (29), of the archetypal and yet so modern drama of sexes. In so doing, Rambert, however, emphasises the need for the characters to also stay patiently silent for almost an hour each, to listen to the other and to respond to the other exclusively via their bodies, to silently provoke inadvertent dialogic punctuations – disruptions, hesitations and modifications, or indeed, additional momentum – within the monologic texture of the other’s speech. The dialogic clash here is not verbal; it takes place between one’s language and the other’s body.

Rambert’s actors address each other by their proper, everyday names since the play’s protagonists are “in fact” – that is, in the possible world, the fictive universe of the play, just as much as in the actual world of its enactment – actors. In a move much closer to Artaud’s poetics than it may seem, Rambert collapses fiction into the living and breathing, embodied actuality of the stage: the space of the play and the world-as-play are here one and the same space. His imaginary actors are, namely, caught in the midst of a rehearsal of an unknown play, perhaps a play on love as well, perhaps the very play they are, *qua* empirical actors, already actually acting in. Facing the fatal separation, the man and the woman thus, to express it through a proper paradox, seem to be what they actually are – two beings actually suffering from painful linguistic blows that their characters emit into each other’s bodies and, yet, beings who, in the very here-and-now of their irreducible, intimate performing selves, are, again, “just acting”, as if, even after the break-up of the couple, they would still be ready to start the rehearsal and the play anew. Indeed, whenever the play is re-played, the actors all around the world call each other by their proper names<sup>3</sup>, confronting their personal bodies and existences to the respective translations of

<sup>3</sup> The use of the proper names of the actors tends to reappear in contemporary theatre as a mode of indicating “authenticity” (as the discussion after my paper was delivered at the conference sufficiently proved). It is, nevertheless, a dramaturgical device like any other, which additionally blurs the already confusing semiotic status of theatrical names and the ontological status of fictional entities they refer to. I cannot enter into that intriguing discussion here, but it is certainly one worth pursuing along the lines suggested by Michael Y. Bennett (see Literature).

the play, so that this blending of sameness and difference in repetition works on the global level as well.

By its very re-configured repeatable unrepeatability, Rambert's *The closure of love* reverses and exacerbates the pivotal paradox Derrida detected in Artaud's writing by creating a meta-play, a play within the play, endlessly repeated in the-almost-same mise-en-scène, but always with different actors, different embodiments, different contexts of "the world as play". However, contrary to the violent scene of parricide that Derrida proclaimed to be necessarily haunting the stage Artaud so desperately wanted to clear from God's repressive presence, Rambert's play, and its never-ending differential movement, is opened up to the terrifying encounter of sexual differences, to the desperate search for an Irigarayan "way of love", for a way out of its fatal closure, which, like the closure of representation, results to be founded on what it declaratively tries to eschew: the metaphysics of self-presence, the mirage of the Real and the idea of Truth. To replace the originary scene of parricide with the troubling and yet eventually amorous "Two scene" already means to challenge the violent logic lurking behind Artaud's ambition to abolish God. As opposed to all the critics of Rambert's piece who praise the play for its universality – either willingly disregarding or completely missing the way in which it poses the question of *sexual* difference – I argue that the aforementioned meta-theatrical impact depends precisely upon allegiance to a revision of history and the blind alley in which the dominant culture of love seems to be still stuck, *from the woman's perspective*.

There are striking differences in Rambert's play in how the male character and the female character use language and address the issue of love. It is the man who announces the inevitable closure, the impossibility of a common future, the exhaustion of a certain concept of love. For Stan, the love relationship he is in is now nothing else but the endless repetition of the same, of the theatre of love as the worn-out theatre of representation, the theatre of the sentimental fiction, built upon something occluded: the hidden, cruel truth of negativity which should now finally be revealed, spelt out, brought out in the open. It is the Other, the woman, who is accused of holding too firmly to this fictional, worn-out, sentimental notion of love, of desperately ignoring and pushing away the negativity, of impeding the necessity for it to come out finally and of pressuring the man to continue along a common path. However, according to Stan, what is this hidden truth of love, the repressed ground of its stale theatrical illusion? Clearly, Stan's concept of love is impregnated by psychoanalytic terms, which formulate the relation to the other within the logic of Hegelian recognition and Lacanian desire. It is a logic that sees desire itself as grounded on the work of negativity, the unsignifiable Real, which marks the gap or lack in the constitution of the subject, allotting it to the gaze of the other, making it crave for something behind the other's gaze – a logic, by the way,

governing the metatheatrical structure of the exemplary psychoanalytic tragedy, *Hamlet* (Armstrong 6–29).

To falter for a moment in his destructive move, to recollect how love works, to recognise the Other, means for Stan, therefore, first and foremost, to evoke Audrey as an outstanding actress, the extraordinary screen and mirror to his own narcissism, and to project onto her the desired fulfilment of his own lack, proving the destructive logic of desire, whose constitutive insatiability produces the mirage of the foreclosed Real. Incapable of ever reaching its goal except in death, it can only produce a debasement of being into disposable things, objects and substances. Therefore, despite Stan's intermittent nostalgic reminiscences of the lost love, the break-up will soon degenerate into an anticipated dispute over separate items that hold for him, ironically, particular sentimental value. Stan's speech is forcefully "modern", or should we say "postmodern", steeped in quotations of clichés, ironic or not, in English jargon words like "turn-over" that pollute the French original with contemporary techno-managerial vocabulary, globally spread to kill meaning and communication. Such abuse of language can only lead to war. Perhaps it would not be such a terrible outcome if there were no children around: in the middle of Rambert's performance, just before the moment in which the man and the woman switch their sides on the proscenium, as also their speaking positions, a chorus of children enters as if interrupting the rehearsal and reclaiming the stage. Not all of these children are Stan and Audrey's children. Yet, let us recall the modern "recession of origins" that David Roberts ascribes to the first type of metadrama, which stands for the psychoanalytic plunging into the deep recesses of our memory. We could then say that the entire audience identifies with their children, who thus stand for all the children in the world.

However, the table turns here, and the woman starts to talk back, to prevent the man from simply exiting. Her way out is radically different, for she re-frames the meta-reference to the theatre to serve the right for the Other to answer and to inaugurate the perspective of the Two, especially since the break-up, any break-up, is never exclusively personal. It always somehow affects the entire world. In the temporal scheme of the play, just as in one of the histories of civilisation, the woman arrives second, indeed, she has been forced to cultivate, as Nietzsche would say, "the instinct for a secondary role" (69). The second part of the play will therefore be given over to this internal supplement of the man's logorrhoeic onset, that is, to her revision, to her refusal of the closure, to her challenge of the logic of the same, to her mimesis, her parody, her echo of Stan's speech, to the deployment, that is, of the most cherished Irigarayan strategies of deconstruction and dislocation of all closures – of thought, of sexuality, of identity and, above all, of human becoming and of love as its horizon. The woman's counter-attack will, as a matter of fact, make the man listen to himself since it will mock his defilement of language and especially the very word *war*, let alone the

grandiosity of the role Stan assigned to himself in it, sneaking out as the deserter from the battlefield of love, caring little for what this war, the war of words, will produce for their children, as for all the children of the world.

Her recollection of their love has nothing to do with splitting the ego, desires and projections but instead with joining seemingly disparate facets of life in daily work, regardless of who or what comes first. Audrey, therefore, debunks Stan's notion of the Real, both in love and in the theatre, as resting on violence and destruction, on an unacknowledged – Artaudian – fascination with death and cruelty. The body, her body, is for Audrey neither a thing to be exposed, displayed and debased, nor a mirror or a screen for Stan's "flamboyant exteriority", but the endangered locus of their common becoming and transcendence, which here replaces the emblematically empty circle, the O of Ophelia's lap, the castration anxiety that according to Philip Armstrong lurks behind the epistemological failure of Hamlet's "Mousetrap" (Armstrong 20–25). From this locus, Pascal Rambert's equally humiliated woman will make another attempt to call the man back. Although she cannot help but see in the two of them the inheritors of Masaccio's touching interpretation of the *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden*, the woman prefers to cast herself as Eurydice, "holding out her white hand", "walking with the man in a common dream", "coming back to life creating and procreating", opening up the temporality of the Two, rather than the substantiality of the one. The man will not join her, but the play will still end on an ambivalent note since the finales of their respective speeches make both man and woman acknowledge the need to continue their work as actors, that is, to continue repeating the play, and, to do so, as all the lovers of the world, over and over again.

As opposed to the internal reduplication and never-ending repetition endorsed by the intensely lit space of the play in Rambert's *Clôture de l'amour*, disturbed only for a moment by the uncanny irruption of children reminding the couple who is the unacknowledged internal audience to their theatrical display, Tim Crouch's *The Author*, as I have already suggested, represents metadrama's potential for extraversion, inaugurated by Calderón's *The Great Theatre of the World*. Now, I am far from suggesting that Tim Crouch's post-postdramatic *Author* longs for a medieval faith in the unshakeable ground of God's "true presence", but the structure Crouch envisaged, and the topics discussed by his characters, certainly do invoke a parallel tradition which, just like Rambert's piece, places theatre-making squarely into the field of ultimate ontological, epistemological and, above all, ethical questions of humanity.

This cunning metadrama could figure indeed as an extreme version of David Roberts's second type since here, the space of the play, just as much as the world of the play, is not reduplicated, as in Rambert's piece, but turns out to be almost non-existent: the entire action takes place as if outside the conventionally established borders of

drama, in the intensely lit space of the audience, in what seems to be the form of, again, a narrative address by theatre producers to the flabbergasted members of the actual public, divided into two groups facing each other, with only a tiny vacant corridor in-between them. The producers are visible and present, seated amongst others, only talking about their preparations for the show, which the audience never actually witnesses, except for one very short scene, just to have a glimpse of what it was supposed to be, a tiny moment of re-play of the creative process that introduces the audience to a crude, violent “slice of life” of a raped young woman Karen, a scene that quickly blends with the situation of the audience witnessing its re-creation. As in Rambert’s play, the actors are instructed to appear in *The Author* under their own, real life names as well, but the name of the author and director of the play, Tim Crouch, is always supposed to remain the same, regardless of the actor who would take his part. If Rambert’s actors can seemingly act as if no one is watching them, as if the fourth wall is shielding them from any public responsibility, only to be reminded that there is an internal audience that they ignore just as much as the real one, Crouch reverses the theatrical situation by focusing on all actual audiences of his play and by openly accusing them to consist of consumers and voyeurs who display the same kind of irresponsible indifference towards the “obscenity” of what they nevertheless insatiably watch, be it violence in the theatre or outside of it, on the screen or in their neighbourhoods.

Besides framing the entire play by the appearance and the monologues of the very author who wrote them – supposedly, the same Tim Crouch who also appears in the performance as the actor playing himself – Crouch parallels Calderón’s structural tautology in his complete conflation of acting with a chance to act ethically. Just like Calderón’s members of humanity who are allowed to exercise their free will and yet listen to the prompter named Faith, who advises them to choose to do good and thus acquire a place next to the Author-God at the supper to which he invites them after the performance, so also all the characters in Crouch’s play – the members of the actual audience included – are given an opportunity to take a stand when it comes to the ethical meaning and purpose of a theatre representation, especially the one representing graphic images of violence. Instead of Faith who figures as a prompter in Calderón’s piece, here, however, we have an ironic, if not diabolic advisor, a character of a deluded member of the audience – initially played by Adrian Howells – prompting the audience constantly to respond to his infantile enthusiasm for theatre’s most superficial attractions. The irony befalls the figure of the Author as well: the contemporary God-like creator turns out now to be a monomaniacal torturer of the actors he summoned, so absorbed in his righteous need to show the violence of the world to the world that he inevitably perpetuates it, thus destroying the actors’ lives, making them martyrs of a morality play with doubtful didactic outcomes. Unlike Rambert’s actors, who search for the truth of their love in other representations,

not only in Masaccio's picture but also in the myths of Adam and Eve, Orpheus and Eurydice and even in the myth of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's love, Crouch's characters search for the cause and origin of violence outside of representation: the character of the actress, initially interpreted by Esther Smith, claims that she went to the beaten women's shelter in order to understand the character of Eshma she has to interpret, where she met Karen, the actual relay for the *effet du réel* that the actress wants to produce through her interpretation. It turns out that the character of Karen, whom the audience got acquainted with in the rehearsed fragment of the inset play, is not part of the play in preparation, but only a kernel of reality used to make that play more "real". Moreover, the whole troupe visits an unknown East-European country in the war for the same purpose, just to grasp why a man would rape his own daughter and then use that knowledge in performance. Even the Author, Tim Crouch, declares at the outset of *The Author* that he decided to kill himself by drowning in a coffin-like tub of a spa, just to taste what death is like, or perhaps also to assume the ultimate responsibility for all the symbolical capital he used to exploit by representing images of violence to gain success and fame.

To sum up the surprising resonances with Calderón's emblematic metadrama, there is in Tim Crouch's play – an allegorical play, by the explicit designation, that the author professes within the play – even the mention of a dinner party to which "the author" invites his actors at the end of the show, just as the God-like Author does in *The Great Theatre of the World*. Crouch's dinner party, however, ends in the horror of all horrors: if Calderón's innocent unborn child ends in a Limbo since it never had a chance even to get an idea of what ethics means, here child appears in the guise of Esther's baby, innocently sleeping while the author – as, again, he himself confesses to the audience – masturbates to the internet child pornography he is watching on the computer screen while the rest of the guests, and his wife, go to sleep. Disgust that this confession may generate among the members of the audience is thoroughly welcome, for the Author finally kills himself indeed, right after having announced that writing had left him, before he even had the chance to leave it first and abandon the space of the play – as, we may add, Artaud had anyway wished the author to do.<sup>4</sup>

The contrasting two examples I decided to reflect upon in this paper thus nicely point to the limits of contemporary dramaturgical ambitions to match the prevailing impulse of forgetting the pressures and obligations towards a pre-existing play-text and devise theatre that would somehow spring from its own internal and momentary necessity. Whether engulfed in "universals" such as the issue of love and the question of sexual difference, or tackling the thorniest of all violent outrages

<sup>4</sup> The character of the author re-appears in a number of contemporary British plays, as Dan Rebellato points out, but it is striking that he never sees this obsession in the light of Artaud's (and Derrida's), problematisation of this role, so particularly invested in drama as a controversial case of literary "ownership", but rather chooses to connect Crouch's "death of the author" with Barthes's famous essay.

currently plaguing the world, the two dramatic constructions, deconstructions and reconstructions of representation that I chose as exemplary cannot but turn around their very theatrical conditions, that is, around the fundamental puzzle that never slips from the minds of their authors: what's *theatre* got to do with it? By rejuvenating inherited modes of metadramatic self-questioning, they testify to the curious fact that theatre – even the dramatic one – was never meant to be a representation of something absent from the here and now of its actual happening, of its performance, of its immediacy, its production of feelings, meanings and epiphanic moments. However, the reverse is true as well, that theatre was never only about the here and now of the sheer spontaneity and eventfulness; it was always closely tied to the very phenomenon of literacy, as a challenge posed by orality, corporeality and contextuality to the apparent semiotic fixity and narrative determinations of the written word. It is this warning, I think, that the two metadramas I have just discussed bring sharply to light, thus urging contemporary playwrighting to break free from the often deeply constraining field of the here and now (Jarcho 15) precisely in order to be able to repeat and by repeating – even if it concerns the dramaturgical patterns inherited from olden days – to make a difference.

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