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Epic Cruelty: On Post-Pandemic Performance

As today's catastrophic Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates ongoing crises, including systemic racism, rising ethno-nationalism, and fossil-fuelled climate change, the neoliberal world that we inhabit is becoming increasingly hostile, particularly for the most vulnerable. Even in the United States, as armed white-supremacist, pro-Trump forces face off against protesters seeking justice for African Americans, the hostility is increasingly palpable, and often frightening. Yet as millions of Black Lives Matter protesters demonstrated after the brutal police killing of George Floyd, the current, intersecting crises – worsened by Trump's criminalization of anti-racism protesters and his dismissal of science – demand a serious, engaged, response from activists as well as artists. The title of this article is meant to evoke not only the state of the unusually cruel moment through which we are living, but also the very different approaches to performance of both Brecht and Artaud, whose ideas, along with those of others – including Benjamin, Butler, Latour, Mbembe, and Césaire – inform the radical, open-ended, post-pandemic theatre practice proposed in this essay. A critically acclaimed dramatist as well as Professor of English and Playwriting at California State University, Northridge, Mitchell's published volumes of plays include *Disaster Capitalism; or Money Can't Buy You Love: Three Plays*; *Brecht in L.A.*; and *Ventriloquist: Two Plays and Ventriloquial Miscellany.* He is the editor of *Experimental O'Neill*, and is currently at work on a series of post-pandemic plays.

Key terms: Covid-19, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Bruno Latour, Aimé Césaire, Donald Trump, Black Lives Matter, statue toppling.

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency.
>
> Walter Benjamin[1]

BACK IN FEBRUARY 2020, when I began undertaking research for an essay about how theatre might effectively engage with pressing issues of the Anthropocene – our current era that began over two centuries ago with the onset of fossil-fuelled industrialization – human-induced climate change was the greatest existential threat of the twenty-first century. Today, in the autumn of 2020, as months-long fires consume millions of acres in my home state of California amidst record-breaking heat waves, it still very well might be, although the current Covid-19 pandemic, an ongoing crisis causing massive unemployment, homelessness, and, in the US alone, over 225,000 deaths during its first six months, has ignited new apocalyptic anxieties. Adding insult to injury, the Trump administration, choosing neoliberal ideology over science, has grossly misrepresented and mismanaged the pandemic, not to mention climate change, while utilizing Covid-19 as an excuse to gut environmental regulations and tighten already draconian anti-immigrant laws.

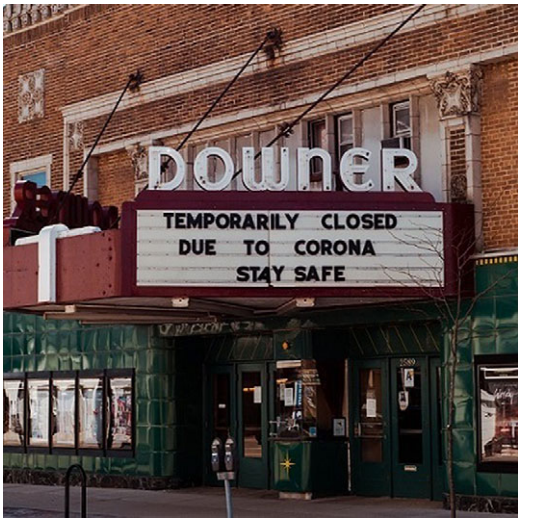
To make matters worse – as if that seemed possible early on, while most of the country nervously sheltered in place – the long-running crisis of US police officers killing African Americans came to an ugly head (yet again) two months into the pandemic, in late May, after a teenage girl recorded a White Minneapolis police officer callously squeezing the life out of a handcuffed Black man, George Floyd, by pressing his knee into the prostrate man's neck for nearly nine excruciating minutes, in spite of Floyd's repeated refrain of 'I can't breathe'.[2] Shortly thereafter, the

Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement kicked into high gear, with millions of supporters breaking quarantine to take to the streets throughout the US and around the world.[3]

Although the chaotic past few years have generated more anxiety than activism, today's highly fraught states of emergency demand a powerful response from theatre artists, and as the massive Black Lives Matter protests have suggested, there is strong potential amidst the crises for popular discontent to be effectively harnessed *right now* in ways that have rarely been possible during our lifetimes. We must be wary, however, of merely paying lip service to the current emergencies. See, for example, the many businesses that suddenly became eager to send out tweets in support of Black Lives Matter while avoiding instituting actual changes such as pledging to hire more Black employees.[4]

Similarly, as President Donald Trump creates fodder for fascist-style, law-and-order campaign ads with images of gas-masked federal forces standing tall in the foreboding fog of tear gas while aggressively beating back unarmed BLM protesters in Portland, this may not be the best time for a theatre of good intentions whose earnest, cause-and-effect plots often distort and conceal more than they reveal.[5] But there's something about this divisive, unprecedented pandemic moment here in the US – as the government criminalizes anti-racist and anti-fascist demonstrators while embracing armed-to-the-teeth white supremacists – which suggests that a radical, intersectional, post-pandemic theatre will be anything but business as usual.[6]

Unfortunately, half a year into the pandemic, nobody has any idea yet when theatres, closed down in March due to Covid restrictions, will be able to open back up, or even how many will be left standing. Plays, of course, could still be written, and productions, like so much else during the ongoing crisis, could potentially move to virtual formats. But with so much up in the air at the moment, including highly contagious coronavirus droplets, heat-trapping greenhouse gases, and democracy itself, it seems prudent to devote some quarantine time to radically re-imagining what socially engaged theatre might look like during the post-pandemic era. So before going back to the drawing board, I'd like to explore some ideas related to both performance and our up-for-grabs historical moment that could possibly inform and inspire an open-ended, politically and aesthetically relevant theatre practice which I'm calling – in a nod to Brecht and Artaud, as well as to the unnecessary suffering caused by today's intersecting crises – 'epic cruelty'. In order to set the stage, so to speak, for my discussion of post-pandemic performance on both the proscenium and in the street, I would like to first turn to that particularly virulent form of capitalism, neoliberalism, that's been suffocating the world for nearly half a century.



The Downer Theatre, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photo: Tom Barrett on Unsplash (2020).

Freeing the World from the Free Market

According to Bruno Latour in *Down to Earth: The New Climatic Regime*, early advocates of neoliberalism promised that an unfettered free market would fully modernize the globe while bringing unprecedented freedom and prosperity to everyone. Subsequently, by the 1970s and 1980s much of the world had begun to 'associate the horizon of modernization with progress, emancipation, wealth, comfort, even luxury, and above all rationality'.[7] Once fully embraced by multinational corporations

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and numerous governments, all obstacles to the flow of capital – from labour laws and corporate taxes to environmental regulations and human rights – had to be severely weakened so that money and goods could move more freely and efficiently, since a freer flow of capital would purportedly result in greater individual freedom and vastly improved standards of living. That promise, however, never materialized, and by the 1990s the explanations of why a global free market would deliver the world to modernization's horizon had proven false. As Latour points out, 'the rage to deregulate, the explosion of inequalities, the abandonment of solidarities have gradually associated that horizon [of promised modernization and wealth] with the notion of an arbitrary decision out of nowhere in favour of the sole profit of the few. The best of worlds has become the worst.'[8] This stark assessment is particularly evident in the United States during the current pandemic.[9]

Today, neoliberalism in the USA – especially popular among right-wing politicians, business leaders, and the small percentage of people who generously profit from it – embraces an extreme free-market, anti-'big-government' ideology that has proven to be tragically inept at leading an effective, organized response to the Covid-19 crisis, which is why the virus is surging more so than ever, six months in.[10] And as the infection rate continues to climb, right-wing leaders still refuse to take meaningful steps to curb it, since that would entail veering away from the every-individual-for-himself, hands-off-government philosophy that is central to dogmatic neoliberalism.[11]

Subsequently, as right-wing politicians and their followers continue to brazenly defy local mask mandates in the name of individual 'freedom', even in the midst of the dreaded autumn and winter infection surge now raging in the USA, the Trump administration has been trying to shift attention away from its botched pandemic response. Trump, for example, often uses the racist term 'China virus' to suggest that it is all China's fault, and he has continued to promise his maskless, tightly packed supporters at 'super-spreader' campaign rallies during the summer and autumn of 2020 that the country has 'turned the corner' on the virus, in spite of the facts, and he has sent aggressive, camouflaged federal forces into Portland and Seattle to intimidate and arrest Black Lives Matter demonstrators.

Additionally, Trump has undermined and attacked science-based recommendations from government agencies in order to push state economies to re-open in spite of rapidly rising infection rates, and he regularly denigrates government infectious-disease experts for presenting fact-based depictions of the pandemic that do not jibe with his highly distorted ones. In addition to spreading disinformation and ungrounded conspiracy theories, along with calling on people, including armed, white-supremacist militias, to 'liberate' their states from Covid-related government restrictions recommended by the Centres for Disease Control, Trump signed a law early in the pandemic that requires meat-processing plants – where Covid-19 has been running rampant, causing numerous deaths among the primarily Latino workforce – to open back up. Although those most at risk of infection and death are front-line, low-wage labourers who are disproportionately BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour), there's been little government effort to ensure workplace safety. In fact, the government has expended much greater effort to protect the economy, at least for some, at the expense of workers.

This sort of sacrificial approach to governance, which dates back to colonialism and slavery, is an example of what Achille Mbembe refers to as 'the ultimate expression of sovereignty', and it 'resides to a large degree in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die'.[12] As suggested above, such expressions of sovereign power, which Mbembe connects to both fascism and colonialization, have been shockingly close to home of late in the US, where, for Trump and his right-wing allies, the human cost of 'getting back to work' is not a primary consideration. As Judith Butler pointed out early in the pandemic, the 'only relevant measure [of progress against Covid]

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Black Lives Matter protest in Washington Square Park, New York, NY. Photo: Rom Matibag on Unsplash (2020).

is Wall Street. . . . The clear implication is that it is alright if the most vulnerable people die . . . as long as the economy can be revived. The nation is not its people, but only its markets.'[13]

The markets, of course, always take precedence, as climate activists often note when raising the alarm about the need to address rapidly intensifying climate change in substantive fashion. In spite of the pressing urgency to switch over to sustainable energy, however, accumulating carbon-energy emissions – abetted by the world economy's increasing (!) fossil-fuel consumption and Trump's pro-oil agenda – have continued to heat up the planet while pushing interconnected ecosystems perilously close to the tipping point. Thus, in spite of the fact that the world possesses the technology to become carbon neutral, it often seems as if climate activism has hit a wall, and at the worst possible time. Yet over the course of the first few weeks of the pandemic, the Covid-19 contagion was, remarkably, able to bring the fossil-fuelled global economy to the sort of abrupt halt long dreamed of by environmentalists.

Indeed, as Latour observes, the near total global economic shutdown early in the pandemic has taught climate and other activists, including BLM protesters, a 'most astounding' lesson: 'we have actually proven that it is possible, in a few weeks, to put an economic system on hold everywhere in the world and, at the same time, a system that we were told . . . was impossible to slow down or redirect.'[14] As the current struggles between progressive forces and more authoritarian ones suggest, the path forward after the pandemic shutdowns could end up skewing in one of two directions, either towards a more just world or a more oppressive one, where the gap between the super-rich and everyone else becomes even wider. Although progressive change won't come easy, and it is far from clear at the moment how the crisis will

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ultimately play out, Latour believes that the Covid-19 pandemic has provided the left with an unusually powerful and unexpected opportunity to alter history.

Seeing the machinations of neoliberalism come to a sudden stop, if only for a short while, has enabled us to realize, according to Latour, that if the world can be halted just like that, it can also be redirected, in ways that will primarily benefit people as opposed to markets. So Latour encourages us to seize hold of the moment and become conscious '*globalization interrupters*',[15] while radically re-imagining another type of world – *a task for which theatre is particularly well suited* – that will be more viable and just.

The Importance of 'Theatre-ing Up'

To state the obvious: the world is out of whack, and theatrical form must acknowledge that. Thus, rather than trying to make the content of these chaotic, catastrophic times conform to the parameters of our well-worn stages, which, regardless of their physical appearances or levels of professionalism, or even amateurism, are still often strikingly similar, theatre-makers must reconceive the medium so that it is able to keep up with our rapidly changing, crisis-laden landscape. There is, of course, no single recipe for creating theatre. Yet as resistance movements such as Black Lives Matter, Climate Action, and an unfairly maligned Antifa battle mightily against social injustice and repressive state violence, radical theatre practitioners should take a cue from today's demonstrators and, like the inspired BLM protesters, begin toppling monuments, including, for a start, the staid monument of theatre itself.

In his 1931 essay 'The Literarization of the Theatre', Brecht complains that the 'theatre apparatus' tends to 'theatre . . . down' complex texts that are inherently resistant to dominant theatrical and social conventions.[16] In other words, by the time theatre artists have wrenched divergent material this way and that in order to make it fit within the confines of the apparatus, it's been shorn of its subversive qualities. Thus, while thorny, heterogeneous material – whether of a revolutionary struggle or a radical play – demands that theatre serve a 'new function', such a function is as impossible as, say, anti-racist policing in Atlanta for as long as the old apparatus, whether of a theatre based on an outmoded form or of a state security apparatus whose foundation is the slave patrol, remains intact. A radical practice must, of necessity, strive for no less than a reformulation of the apparatus.

To illustrate this point, Brecht discusses his play *The Threepenny Opera* which, on one level, provides 'a kind of report on life as any member of the audience would like to see it'.[17] In its placation of the spectator (which is *one* aspect of the work), the play squarely conforms with the theatre apparatus, although other aspects of the play do not. While viewing *The Threepenny Opera*, for example, the spectator who enjoys watching a 'report on life' simultaneously 'sees his wishes not merely fulfilled but also criticized (sees himself not as the subject but as the object)'.[18] Within the dominant theatre apparatus (in both Brecht's day and, to a large degree, our own), the spectator cannot be *both* placated and critiqued – there is only room for the former – which is why a production of *The Threepenny Opera* limited to taking place *within* the theatre apparatus would focus on placating the audience while quashing the play's emphasis on the contradictory position of the spectator that is so central to Brecht's epic theatre.[19]

Brecht's comments about the necessity of remaking the apparatus are also relevant to socio-historical struggles seeking the sort of fundamental, lasting change that can be fully realized only within a radically altered social structure. Needless to say, a long-entrenched apparatus, whether of theatre or society, does not easily give way when challenged. As Brecht observes: 'This apparatus resists all conversion to other purposes, by taking any play [or, we could add, radical social movement] which it encounters and immediately changing it so that it no longer represents a foreign body within the apparatus – except at those points where it neutralizes itself.'[20] Like the theatre apparatus, state apparatuses also regularly neutralize elements foreign to them, particularly when they pose a threat.[21]

Protests against systemic racism, for example, might be triggered by an event that

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suddenly makes something appear out of place as a 'foreign body' within dominant beliefs, that is, the police, who protect us and uphold the law, systematically murder African Americans. Although movements like Black Lives Matter draw attention to and contest police brutality, the state apparatus denies that racist police brutality and racism in general exist. It is unfair, we are told, to judge police by the actions of 'a few bad apples'. Along those same ideological lines, the state, or at least its right-wing elements, cannot admit that BLM demonstrators are protesting against something that is out of place, or 'foreign', within the apparatus of American democracy, since right-wing ideology tells us that systemic racism does not exist. Such denial also leads to BLM protesters being criminalized as self-interested 'anarchist looters' and 'terrorists', as Trump has called them, who are trying to tear 'this great country' down.

These attempts to neutralize current demands for racial justice – which, in the above examples, either deny the existence of the foreign body of racism altogether, or turn the tables on anti-racism protesters by labelling *them* as the problem – have not been entirely successful.[22] A majority of Americans have indicated that they support the protesters, which suggests that the country could be moving closer to realizing racial equality, although it is not at all clear that this same majority is willing to overturn the social apparatus that makes systemic racism possible. While progressive change *within* the apparatus may be an important step, it rarely goes far enough, in a lasting way, for as long as the apparatus remains intact. After seeing, for example, how within just the past few years some hard-fought civil rights gains in the US seem to have been pushed back half a century, it is clear that some of the purported racial equality attained *within* the apparatus has been illusory.

As both Brecht and recent history suggest, theatre artists eager to move both the world and the art form forward – the two areas are *not* mutually exclusive – must be ready to alter radically the theatre apparatus itself. Refunctioning the theatre to support heterogeneous, progressive struggles may also be more feasible at the moment than radically altering the more unwieldy, hegemonic social apparatus, since theatre, able to operate under the cover of art, is more autonomous and has less at stake. Thus, rather than neutralizing intensifying social conflicts and other unruly forces by 'theatre-ing them down', a radical performance practice must 'theatre itself up' in order to meet the conflicts where they are and, in the process, alter the theatre apparatus itself.

Theatre of Cruelty in an Increasingly Cruel World

While there have been multiple attempts to upend the modern theatre apparatus – from epic theatre and the historical avant-garde, to radical anti-racist, feminist, and queer performance, to the postdramatic – the most well-known, all-out attack against the apparatus, at least on a discursive level, was undertaken by Antonin Artaud in *The Theatre and Its Double*, where he puts forth his ideas for the theatre of cruelty. In its emphasis on the unleashing of cosmic-like forces and states of emergency – the crucial first chapter of the book focuses on the terrifying plague as a model for a new performance practice – the theatre of cruelty evokes the sort of overwhelming forces that are in play throughout much of the world today, in the early 2020s, while suggesting ways in which artists might engage with forces whose sheer enormity threatens to dwarf theatre's most well-meaning efforts.

As 'epic cruelty', my term for an open-ended, intersectional, post-pandemic theatre, suggests, a contemporary performance practice could cull inspiration from both epic theatre and the theatre of cruelty, although the latter's emphasis on the cataclysmic and irrational could possibly be made more viable for a politically engaged theatre if tempered by progressive, rational elements, such as those found in the epic theatre. At the same time, the theatre of cruelty's foregrounding of overwhelming, irrational aspects of the world could help to shake spectators out of their complacency in the face of today's increasingly destructive forces which, in spite of everything, are *still* more or less shrugged off

by a substantial portion of the public, in addition to not being taken seriously enough by those who purportedly understand their dire consequences.

Artaud differs from Brecht in his desire to elicit a visceral response to the forces behind a world gone awry, which he does not contextualize. Brecht, on the other hand, encourages his spectators to become 'active' and to view a play's dramatic action critically, within a socio-historical context. While Artaud's and Brecht's very different approaches to theatre can be useful within a contemporary performance practice, Artaud's may be more impactful in our world of intersecting, out-of-control states of emergency. The theatre of cruelty, for example, utilizes a transgressive *peripeteia* which, while off limits within anti-Aristotelian epic theatre, can help to emphasize the catastrophic side of today's crises.

For both Artaud and Aristotle, *peripeteia* entails, as Aristotle writes, a sudden 'shift of what is being undertaken to the opposite' that leads to a type of 'outcome very different from what one intended'.[23] As Samuel Weber points out:

> It is this emphasis on the theatrical importance of an abrupt and violent turn of events, one that is both unexpected and also in some sense *necessary*, that most closely links Aristotle's notion of *peripeteia* to Artaud's notion of cruelty. Both insist on the implacable rigour and violence of a turn of events that escapes conscious control and that, as such, constitutes an essential moment of theatre.[24]

Unlike Aristotle, however, Artaud does not call for a *peripeteia* that leads to greater understanding, or *anagnorisis* – 'a shift from ignorance to awareness'.[25] Nor does he embrace the Aristotelian notion that catharsis must ultimately result in the confirmation of unity, a 'goal' of tragedy that is, according to Aristotle, 'the greatest thing of all'.[26]

While Artaud's theatre is not, like Brecht's, explicitly progressive, it also goes further in its attack on the theatre apparatus by insisting that drama must move beyond language while foregrounding concrete action. The theatre of cruelty, for example, de-emphasizes dialogue and the written, dramatic text while embracing thoughts that 'words cannot express and which, far more than words, would find their ideal expression in the concrete physical language of the stage',[27] which, for Artaud, is 'created for the senses [and] must from the outset be concerned with satisfying them'.[28] This emphasis on a poetry of the concrete that appeals primarily to the body and the unconscious does not, however, preclude the theatre of cruelty from fomenting complex thinking. Although Artaud indicates that 'from the outset' the theatre of cruelty must focus on the senses, he is careful to point out that this 'does not prevent it from developing later its full intellectual effect on all possible levels and in every direction'.[29]

While comparing the theatre of cruelty to the plague, a state of emergency if there ever was one, Artaud suggests that art which attempts to reduce an earth-shaking force to a particular meaning, or to place it within the confines of a theatre apparatus ill-equipped to represent such a force, will elide what is most important. As suggested above, Artaud, like Brecht, is strongly against 'theatre-ing' things down. Yet Artaud also attacks modern theatre's rational leanings by calling for a performance form that's more *felt*, deep down and viscerally, in ways that go well beyond conventional dramatic empathy, than understood. Rather than trying to enhance an audience's rational understanding of the world, the theatre of cruelty aims its attention towards the excavation of something more profound: 'like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized. Like the plague, the theatre is evil.'[30]

Some of the world's more evil, latent cruelties could be located within the perverse depths of US history, from the ownership of slaves to the rampant racism of today's criminal justice system. Similar to Walter Benjamin's permanent, intermittently visible states of emergency, which I discuss below, the 'latent cruelty' to which Artaud refers is always present, at least under the surface, although it resists being coaxed into a neutralizing apparatus. As Weber points out, 'like the plague, [the theatre of cruelty] does not have

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Black Lives Matter protest, evening, Washington, D.C. Photo: Koshu Kunii on Unsplash (2020).

to *come* into the world: it is already *there*, albeit dormant. Its time is not the linear time of narrative, of plot, of beginning, middle, and end, of before and after.'[31] Rather, the theatre of cruelty is all-pervasive and, like the much-dreaded plague itself, whose immense power exists outside of scientific explanation, everywhere and nowhere at once.

Artaud observes, for example, that while people may think they understand the plague, including how it spreads – it is a contagion that a certain type of flea transmits to a human – in reality they know practically nothing about it, since the ways in which the plague radically alters everyday life, its very unnerving and threatening presence, can cause it to impact the world in ways that are beyond human grasp, even when science can explain certain of its elements, such as how the disease physically infects people. Discussing a force like the plague rationally is 'too easy', Artaud declares. It 'explains nothing to limit the [understanding of the] transmission of such a disease to contagion by simple contact'.[32] Similarly, other narratives centred primarily on *explaining* phenomena, whether of pandemic transmission or the warming sea's impact on a destructive Caribbean hurricane, would not be worthy of the theatre of cruelty's attention, although the phenomenon itself, its aspects that cannot be mastered and controlled by humans, would be.

Walter Benjamin, Historicized Cruelty, and George Floyd

German cultural critic Walter Benjamin – a champion of epic theatre – also incorporates irrational elements into his writings in ways that suggest affinities with the theatre of cruelty. At the same time, his work contains a radical political element influenced not only by Marx, but also, to the chagrin of his friend Brecht, by mysticism and the (now) historical avant-garde. Like Artaud, Benjamin eschews cause-and-effect explanations and believes

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that the sort of powerful, all-pervasive forces, both aesthetic and historical, that deserve exploration resist being contained or effectively represented by linear narratives.

Additionally, Benjamin emphasizes the importance of deep, dormant cruelties, particularly within his essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', where he encourages a surrealistic, montage-like approach to writing and history 'based on a constructive principle'.[33] Unlike Artaud, however, Benjamin situates dormant cruelties historically. He discusses, for example, the concealed cruelty that suddenly flashes up and proffers a 'picture' of a charged historical moment that can help us to better understand the present: 'The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.'[34] For Benjamin, the unexpected 'flash' is an image of a latent *historical* cruelty, which, like capitalism's ongoing states of emergency, often remains out of sight. In order to harness fully the revolutionary *political* potential of the flitting historical image, we must, according to Benjamin, quickly comprehend its connection to the present, since 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably'.[35]

The flash of the historical past must not be viewed, as in conventional historiography, as 'homogeneous empty time' but, as Benjamin writes, 'time filled by the presence of the now'.[36] That is, we must make dialectical connections between past and present. A historical moment from the distant past, for example, cannot exist solely within its own time period, since we're able to view the past *only* through the lens of the present. And the flash of a resonant moment from the present occurs not only within the context of 'the now', but also in relation to history. According to Benjamin, recognizing a fraught, flashing moment in a revolutionary sense means to view it dialectically while radically historicizing past and present, and present and past, in ways that encourage a confrontation with both history and 'the now' that can drive society forward, towards a more just future.

'The True Picture of the Past' and Black Lives Matter

While serving as a linchpin for a post-pandemic theatre practice that selectively borrows from both Brecht and Artaud, Benjamin's poetic, montage-like approach to history and his notion of the 'flash' can also shed light on the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. We could, for example, view the video imagery of a white police officer sadistically killing George Floyd as a recorded moment that enabled BLM protesters to 'seize hold of a memory', a racist American past, which 'flashes up at a moment of danger'.[37] The image of an upright, white cop ruthlessly pressing his knee onto the neck of a prone Black man who is pleading for his life foregrounds contemporary police brutality against African Americans while implying, simultaneously and dialectically, the horrors of slavery, as well as systemic racism and its symbiotic relationship with the modern state. The 'flash' of the widely viewed video of Floyd's brutal killing also struck during a tense, race-related moment fomented by the still-raw, unjust, 2020 killings of two other African Americans by cops and ex-cops.

Shortly prior to the Floyd incident, much of the nation watched aghast as a haunting video, first released in early May, depicted the February 2020 killing of twenty-five-year-old Ahmaud Arberry, who, while out jogging in Georgia, was pursued and fatally shot by three white men in a truck, including a retired local cop and his son. And the release of that video came on the heels of the Breonna Taylor incident in Louisville, Kentucky, in mid-March, when three plainclothes cops forcibly entered her apartment late one night with a 'no-knock' search warrant and fatally shot the unarmed emergency medical technician. Adding to the fraught nature of the George Floyd moment was the pandemic (and ensuing shutdown) that has been especially harmful to people of colour, and the general lack of fairness for African Americans within the US criminal justice system. In late May, when the video of the barbaric murder of Floyd flashed before America's eyes, it compelled millions of outraged people to break quarantine and

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Black Lives Matter protest, Washington, D.C. Photo: Clay Banks on Unsplash (2020).

participate in BLM demonstrations across the country, which, in turn, ignited an impassioned, world-wide uprising that is still ongoing.

Toppling History

Six months after Floyd's murder, as BLM protests continue breaking out in response to new police shootings, and Covid-19 infections again surge, the US is preparing for potential, post-election violence spurred on, in large part, by President Trump. Finding himself behind in the polls, the president has been working diligently to delegitimize the election, spread conspiracy theories, and suppress voting. Subsequently, many Americans are understandably feeling worn out, from both the Trump-induced chaos and the intensifying, head-spinning states of emergency that seem to be springing up everywhere, one after another. Or perhaps our current societal numbness, forcefully abetted by consumerism and social media, has been inuring us to latent states of emergency all along, which may be why many of us now find ourselves more dumbstruck than horrified while living in the midst of multiple, overwhelming crises, including the demise of democracy.[38]

How else, for example, to explain the country's, indeed much of the world's, everyday tolerance of monuments to patriarchal racism which, until now, have failed to merit from most passers-by so much as a blink of an eye? Evidently, a fervour for white nationalism was there all along, embodied by state-sanctioned statues of white-male racists whose dominating, historical gaze has been permeating both the landscape and pedestrians for more generations than we care to admit. But now, as crowds of demonstrators from Los Angeles to New Orleans, and London to Bristol, have swollen and become emboldened, bringing the long-concealed state of emergency of racism to the fore, many of these statues have been splattered with red paint, ripped from their moorings and, when feasible, drowned in rivers like the Mississippi and the Avon, major routes, respectively, of

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the US slave trade and seaborne British imperialism.

Considering how long both racism and the monuments have been with us, this worldwide toppling of statues that has been especially prominent in the United States could have the *potential* to be as important as the toppling of the Berlin Wall. Who knows? The jury is still out, although Trump's summer of 2020 'executive order' to protect the statues indicates that the state is not yet ready to cede even symbolic territory in spite of the changing tide.

The contagious toppling of high-profile monuments that have occupied their respective public perches for hundreds of years can, assuredly, inspire new work for the theatre. And concepts from theatre could help us to better understand the abruptly sudden (after all these years) monument toppling, while perhaps suggesting new ways in which performance could be informed by activism, and vice versa. The unexpected undercutting of old, seemingly permanent statues, for example, brings to mind Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, through which everyday elements to which we have become accustomed are suddenly defamiliarized, or 'made strange'.[39] Subsequently, spectators are able to recognize a particular thing (or custom), which, due to habit, had become second nature, in startlingly new ways, as if seeing it for the first time, even though it has always existed right there in front of their eyes.

During the massive spring and summer BLM protests, for example, as we watched statue after statue go down and wondered, *Why didn't anyone think of this before?*, we could see that the systemic racism which has been with us all along, ever since Columbus, is not an exception but a (monumentalized) rule. In toppling the statues, the BLM demonstrators draw attention to entrenched, long-taken-for-granted white supremacy while simultaneously showing that *people*, who create and perpetuate white supremacy through their actions, laws, and even art, are also capable of dismantling it. Trump's sovereign executive order attempts to dismantle the dismantling through a law that protects the white-supremacist 'heritage' of inanimate monuments while denying the rights

Toppled statue of Christopher Columbus, St. Paul, Minnesota. Photo: Darren Thompson (2020).

of living people to reject and abolish racism. Trying to keep all of the old, hoary monuments intact makes sense, of course, for Trump, since, as Elias Canetti observes, 'The destruction of representational images is the destruction of a hierarchy which is no longer recognized.'[40] The attempt to reverse such destruction in order to uphold an outmoded, unjust social order is also absurd, which makes Trump's actions fruitful fodder for comedy.

Monument Toppling and its Double

Neither statues of racists nor compulsory respect for 'heritage' are as permanent or fixed as Trump and the right wing would like people to believe. In addition to being an object of ire for activists, the total inflexibility of either a massive metal monument or an extremist, right-wing ideology is a prime target for satire, as a new public performance project effectively demonstrates. Inspired by the Black Lives Matter protests, statue toppling, and the US government's reactionary responses, the Trump Statue Initiative – recently seen on the streets of Portland, Oregon, Washington, D.C., and New York City – utilizes gold-painted actors to portray 'living statues' within different tableaux, such as a 'statue' of Trump taking a selfie in front of a soldier pulling a BLM protester

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Live Statue, installation by Trump Statue Initiative in Washington, D.C. Photo: courtesy of Robin Fader and Trump Statue Initiative (2020).

into a gold van. This evokes the Portland BLM protesters who were thrown into unmarked vans during the summer by unmarked federal security forces deployed by Trump. Like Brechtian actors, the street performers remain critical not only of the roles they are playing, but also of the roles that Trump wants actual statues to play, while showing that statues, like humans, are not as fixed or heroic as some would like them to be.[41]

As we move from the street to the more conventional performance site of the stage, Artaudian 'cruelties' enhanced by epic theatre, Benjamin's historicized notions of montage and the 'flash', and even straight-up comedy, could help theatre artists to harness historical struggle for artistic and political ends while at the same time pushing their work further away from the rational discourse that serves as the foundation of modernity and related cultural forms, including systemic racism, authoritarianism, and dramatic realism.

Thingification

While a radical performance practice that engages with overwhelming, often irrational cruelties can benefit from a rational organizing

principle, or at least a sense of agency, the rational, like the irrational, can also be problematic and deceptive at times. In addition to neutralizing that which does not conform, the rational has long been an effective tool of the oppressor that has justified colonialism, slavery, and, more recently in the United States, attacks from right-wing government leaders against science, journalism, and peaceful protesters seeking social justice. As Aimé Césaire argues, rational discourse, the form of which often goes unchallenged, can be more oppressive and manipulative than it first appears.[42] Empirical 'facts' and rational discourse that support colonial 'progress', for example, such as 'statistics, mileages of roads, canals, and railroad tracks',[43] fail to account for 'societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled under foot, institutions undermined . . . extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out'.[44]

Césaire's critique of rational arguments for colonial benevolence is also applicable to contemporary explanations of racial progress, such as the citing of positive US employment numbers for people of colour as a sign of racial equality. For Césaire, colonization and racism equal what he calls 'thingification', a dehumanizing force which, like Artaud's plague, is always present and pervasive, yet difficult to fully comprehend and combat.[45] Although Césaire discusses 'thingification' as a problem of colonialism and race, it is a process that can extend beyond racism, too. Pervasive violence against women and the dehumanization of immigrants, for example, could lead to the thingification of a particular gender or group of people. And the horrific violence that underlies thingification can also be found within the overwhelming, thing-like forces that are central to the theatre of cruelty, as well as to climate change and the Anthropocene.

Climate Change and the Double

In 'Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change', historian Dipesh Chakrabarty brings to mind both thingification and the theatre of cruelty when he points out that, as a result of the world's extensive fossil-fuel usage, which begins in the late 1700s with early industrialization and leads to human-induced climate change, humans have inadvertently become a thing-like 'geophysical force'. Thus, during the 200-plus years since the invention of the steam engine and the advent of the Anthropocene, humans have acted as a 'non-human, non-living agency' through the geophysical role that they've played in altering the climate, while simultaneously playing a more human-like role.[46] As Chakrabarty argues, 'the science of anthropogenic global warming has doubled the figure of the human – you [now] have to think of the two figures of the human simultaneously: the human-human and the non-human-human.'[47]

Bobcat Fire, Monrovia, California. Photo: Nikolay Maslov on Unsplash (2020).

Evoking the notion of the double that is central to Artaud's theatre, the above passage suggests that a theatre that seeks to take on anthropogenic climate change might benefit from ideas of both the epic theatre and the theatre of cruelty. The human's dual role in climate change, for example, has a 'human-human' side, which could provide space for the sort of revolutionary agency promoted by epic theatre, while the 'non-human-human' side of global warming – its vast geophysical forces and time scales – is the province of the theatre of cruelty, which favours overwhelming, 'thing-like' forces. Although the two opposing sides of both the Anthropocene and the two performance practices, the rational (epic theatre) and the thing-like force (theatre of cruelty), are disjunctive and contradictory, those very qualities would, in combination, enhance a contemporary theatre that focuses on current social conflicts.

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Black Lives Matter protest, Portland, Oregon. Photo: Tito Texidor III on Unsplash (2020).

As Chakrabarty observes: 'Any effort to contemplate the human condition today – after colonialism, globalization, and global warming – on political and ethical registers encounters the necessity of thinking disjunctively about the human, through moves that in their simultaneity appear contradictory.'[48] For Artaud, the disjunction appears within the 'double', which opens up the stage to include not only irrational forces within the individual, but also, primarily, larger forces outside of human control. A theatre influenced by both Artaud and Brecht could feature montage-like disjunctions between the irrational and the rational in ways that are simultaneous, contradictory, and complementary. While the theatre of cruelty could help to upend a world that places the human or, more specifically, humans with power, at the centre, along with thing-like, 'non-human-human' forces, the revolutionary goals of epic theatre could help to move that world forward.

Cruelty and Active Spectatorship

With humanity 'acting as a geophysical force on a planetary scale',[49] and a zoonotic disease spreading like wildfire – as actual wildfires spurred on by climate change rip through millions of acres of forests and housing tracts – Artaud's notion that it is not human beings but the overwhelming force of *things* like the plague that frightens us most of all is, if anything, highly pertinent. Aware of his readers' anthropocentric biases, Artaud is careful to point out that the sort of cruelty he envisions for the stage does *not* include humans inflicting pain upon one another by, for example, 'hacking at each other's bodies, carving up our personal anatomies, or, like Assyrian emperors, sending parcels of human ears, noses, or neatly detached nostrils through the mail'.[50] Rather, the theatre of cruelty emphasizes overwhelming, non-human, and even anti-human forces, of the sort that are increasingly troublesome during this era of worldwide pandemics and fossil-fuelled climate change. Instead of focusing on the human cruelty to which we have become increasingly desensitized, Artaud's theatre seeks out larger forces while emphasizing 'the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads.

And the theatre has been created to teach us that first of all.'[51]

While Artaud's notion of what constitutes a cruelty, such as the sky suddenly crashing down on us, remains centred on overwhelming forces beyond human control, one could argue that the thingification of certain groups of people, which could be caused, for example, by a reifying sovereign and racist violence that has been deeply engrained in a society built upon a foundation of slavery, is also an overwhelming Artaudian cruelty which, although steeped in history, exists *simultaneously* as a cruelly inhuman and anti-human force. Like Artaud's example of the plague, which, on one level, can be explained by science, we can also *explain* racism, by, for example, focusing on its socio-historical roots and modern effects.

Yet like the plague, thingifying racism is *also* an all-pervasive, near-cosmic force, and it is this side of racism – the part that eludes us and resists explanation – that Artaud's theatre of cruelty would, I believe, find most terrifying and prefer to explore.[52] Perhaps a dramatic portrayal of thingifying racism as, in part, a frighteningly non-human force could help to reveal more fully the inexplicable horrors of white supremacy. At the same time, a performative presentation of, or at least a hinting at, this sort of *cruelty* could benefit from an *epic*, historicizing element, which suggests agency and the necessity of progressing from thingified object to active, revolutionary subject. Such a cruelty/epic dialectic could be central to an epic cruelty theatre that attempts to grapple with our own utterly overwhelming *and* historically situated states of emergency.

A post-pandemic play, for example, might utilize an historicizing montage technique that juxtaposes Artaudian cruelties with specific moments in history. Through its radically dialectical montage form, the play could create something akin to what Benjamin calls a 'constellation', whose points would, of necessity, be connected not by a pre-formed, rational, cause-and-effect dramatic plot, but through the critical/historical imaginations and memories of individual spectators. Dependent upon the audience members' interpretation of the play's different moments – in themselves and in relationship to each other, as well as to history – such a montage form, the antithesis of linear storytelling, would require the sort of active spectatorship that is especially important in our post-pandemic era of 'fake news', endless quarantine, and, perhaps most importantly, immense revolutionary potential.[53]

Always Destabilize!

People, of course, create and watch theatre, whose apparatus is human-centred, and they also participate in urgent resistance movements such as Black Lives Matter that demand a more *humane* world. Thus, Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*, with its emphasis on non-human, thing-like forces, may not be near the top of most people's reading lists these days. Nonetheless, something akin to a historicized theatre of cruelty could be more radical in some ways than even the most explicitly 'political' of theatre practices. Brecht, for example, whose epic theatre became a benchmark for modern political drama, never questioned theatre's anthropomorphism, although his work does subvert the modern notion of 'character' by minimizing empathy and individual psychology.

For Brecht, the dramatic character, like the world of the play, should never be stable but contradictory, and the forces that move a play forward are found not in the individual subject but within history. Epic theatre's characters are, like the world, never universal and fixed but historical and alterable, as is the overall *mise en scène*, all of which contributes to the destabilization of both conventional representation and dominant ideologies, although, in epic theatre, people are ultimately responsible for the state of the world.

The theatre of cruelty, on the other hand, sometimes removes people, or 'man', and even history, from the scene, which, while potentially problematic, allows performance to destabilize representation and subjectivity more fully, and thus opens up the spectators' ability to perceive the world on a wider and deeper scale that is also more frightening

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because humans cannot have an impact on it. As Samuel Weber observes:

> As long as the privilege of 'man' is taken for granted, the cosmos in which he dwells can be assumed to have a certain stability. With man at the centre of the universe, the sky's the limit. But if man can no longer be assumed to provide the governing principle of life and death . . . then there is no assurance that the sky will stay put. It can *still* fall on our heads.[54]

Additionally, unlike the *peripeteia* encouraged by Aristotle, Artaud's more radical *peripeteia* does not occur in the name of a clear-cut 'goal, such as the Aristotelian "unity" in which (privileged) "man"', modelled by Aristotle's hero-protagonist, is always at the centre. In fact, the theatre of cruelty precludes 'man' from claiming 'the right to set his own goals, and hence also to set goals for other beings as a whole. Artaud's innovative turn is to dehumanize the notion of *peripeteia*.'[55] The theatre of cruelty's dehumanization of this central facet of Aristotelian drama, along with Artaud's embrace of a radically concrete stage language and an uncompromising here-and-nowness that eschew not only goals, but also a meaning that points to an elsewhere, enables the theatre of cruelty to avoid the sort of *appropriability* that makes neoliberal globalization's ultimate *goal* – 'the *maximization of profit*' – possible.[56]

Shaking Things Up

As hurricanes intensify, white supremacy becomes more entrenched, and a virulent disease rips through the planet, one might think it would become easier to realize that the sky *can* fall on our heads. Maybe, in the midst of these never-ending, increasingly chaotic crises, we are moving closer to this realization, although it is just as possible that such a moment is still a long way off – at least for the majority of society – which is why it may be necessary to temporarily remove 'man' (and other human genders) from the universe and the stage in ways suggested by the theatre of cruelty, so that the urgency of the falling sky and the 'full intellectual effect' that it can potentially promote once it is historicized will motivate people to take action, like the inspired protesters of the Black Lives Matter movement, but on an even larger scale that will forcefully confront the world's increasingly oppressive forces.

Since, after realizing that the sky is falling, we will need human agency, some basic (and updated) tenets of Brecht's epic theatre that encourage 'active' spectatorship, especially when enhanced by Benjamin's montage approach to history and the post-pandemic 'now', could also be useful to the development of an engaged, contemporary performance practice. As I have been suggesting, an historicized and 'epic' theatre of cruelty, which is particularly pertinent as the world's intersecting, overwhelming crises intensify and spin out of control, can assist theatre artists in the difficult yet crucial task of shaking people up so that they might finally be able to say, 'Hey, you know, the sky *is* about to fall on our heads,' and then take action to do something about it.

While engagement with various ideas and movements can help to push both art and the world forward, it is crucially important that artists maintain, always and without compromise, the *freedom* to interpret and misinterpret, imagine and re-imagine. At the same time, and with so much at stake during our ongoing states of emergency, artists who care about the planet's fate should consider developing new ways – perhaps abetted by some renovated and recombined old ones – to harness the intense energy of our crisis-filled moment for an efficacious, post-pandemic theatre. My ideas here for an open-ended performance form – epic cruelty – are meant to be a modest contribution to that process, which will surely benefit from other ideas, practices, and areas of focus.

Coda: From Interruption to Re-imagination

As the current, intersecting crises wreak havoc on the world, but especially upon the most vulnerable, it is time to embrace the urgency of this fleeting, globe-interrupting moment and radically alter the world's current trajectory. But before we can move forward, we will need to reject the temptation to

return to our old ways, no matter how desirable that might seem after months of on-and-off quarantining and social distancing. As Latour pointed out early in the pandemic, in an observation that is as relevant to theatre artists as it is to everyone else: 'When common sense asks us to "start production up again as quickly as possible", we have to shout back, "Absolutely not!" The last thing to do is repeat the exact same thing we were doing before.'[57] Refusing to return to a world shaped by neoliberalism, racism, patriarchy, and other dominant forms, however, including a tried-and-true theatre apparatus, is not in itself enough.

We must also *imagine* a different world, for the theatre, the streets, and places in-between, while representing, confronting, and redirecting the one-after-another states of emergency which, although as numbing as they are outrageous, are not the exception but the rule, at least until we bring about, through performance, protest, and various other means, the real state of emergency, which could be just around the corner. Or maybe it is already here.

Notes and References

1. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 253–64 (p. 257).

2. In addition to the infamous, videotaped, 2014 police killing of Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, who, shortly before dying, repeated the phrase 'I can't breathe' eleven times as a cop maintained a chokehold around his neck, there have been scores of other people within recent times who have uttered the same phrase shortly before dying while being actively restrained by police. See Mike Baker et al., 'Three Words. 70 Cases. The Tragic History of "I Can't Breathe"', *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/28/us/i-cant-breathe-police-arrest.html>, 29 June 2020 (accessed 17 October 2020).

3. For a highly perceptive analysis of the historical context and intersectional concerns of the current Black Lives Matter Movement, see Cornel West's interview with Azad Essa, 'Cornel West on US Protests: The Chickens Have Come Home to Roost', *Middle East Eye.* West explains, for example, how US politicians are beholden to the power of the police, Wall Street, and the Pentagon: 'Once you see that kind of combination taking place, people began to see – "lo and behold – no wonder I feel powerless. No wonder I feel helpless. No wonder I feel hopeless; that the spillover from the vicious lynching of brother George Floyd now forces me to see the connections between lack of accountability in the police, lack of accountability on Wall Street elite, lack of accountability at the Pentagon elites and a lack of accountability of presidents"', <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/cornel-west-america-george-floyd-protests-chickens-have-come-home-roost>, 16 June 2020 (accessed 17 October 2020).

4. See Greg Bensinger, 'Corporate America Says Black Lives Matter. It Needs to Hold Up a Mirror', *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/opinion/black-lives-matter-corporate-pledges.html>, 15 June 2020 (accessed 17 October 2020).

5. See Mac Wellman's scathingly perceptive critique of earnest American plays that slavishly adhere to outmoded dramatic norms while manipulating audience emotions: Wellman, 'The Theatre of Good Intentions', *Performing Arts Journal*, 8.3 (1984), p. 59–70.

6. Suggesting how dangerous the Trump administration's embrace of heavily armed, white-supremacist militias could become, the FBI recently arrested militia members who were planning to kidnap, torture, and possibly kill Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, as a first step towards a white-supremacist revolution. Such right-wing extremist militias, of which there are many in the USA – in Michigan and elsewhere – consider Whitmer a 'tyrant' for trying to save lives by instituting federally recommended Covid-19 regulations such as limiting gatherings and requiring the wearing of masks. Tellingly, Trump and his Attorney General William Barr, who regularly disparage and threaten people who protest against systemic racism and fascism, have declined to condemn publicly the thwarted attackers. Also, Trump's rhetoric and actions continue to flout pandemic safety measures while emboldening white supremacists. See Jesse Wegman, 'The Radicalizer in Chief', *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/opinion/trump-extremism-conspiracy-theories.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>, 16 October 2020 (accessed 18 October 2020).

7. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), p. 19.

8. Ibid., p. 19–20.

9. Compared to other countries, affluent and otherwise, the USA, which currently leads the world in infections and deaths, has handled the pandemic poorly. See David Leonhardt, 'The Unique U.S. Failure to Control the Virus', which explains why the US is 'the only affluent nation to have suffered a severe, sustained outbreak for more than four months', *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/us/coronavirus-us.html>, 6 August 2000 (accessed 7 August 2020).

10. This ideology rationalizes the free flow of capital, even when it entails the devastation of the environment, labour, marginalized communities, healthcare, education, and the 'public good' in general. Incredibly but predictably, right-wing politicians are now citing neoliberal theory's emphasis on decentralization to justify *not* heeding recommendations, such as the need for a centralized approach to managing the pandemic. See Paul Krugman, 'Republicans Keep Flunking Microeconomics', *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/18/opinion/republicans-keep-flunking-microbe-economics.html>, 18 July 2000 (accessed 23 October 2020).

11. For an eye-opening critique of how right-wing neoliberalism in the USA has contributed to a 'cult of selfishness' which, in turn, has led to abject failure in the country's management of the pandemic, see Krugman, 'The Cult of Selfishness is Killing America', *New York*

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Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/27/opinion/us-republicans-coronavirus.html>, 27 July 2020 (accessed 23 October 2020).

12. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003), p. 11–40 (p. 11).

13. Judith Butler, 'Capitalism Has its Limits', *Verso*, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits>, 30 March 2020 (accessed 23 October 2020).

14. Bruno Latour, 'What Protective Measures Can You Think of So We Don't Go Back to the Pre-Crisis Production Model?' <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/853.html>, 2020, p. 1 (accessed 7 August 2020).

15. Ibid., p. 2.

16. Bertolt Brecht, 'The Literarization of the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964; 1992), p. 43.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Of course, theatre, like history, is constantly on the move. Thus, as Brecht himself would readily suggest, even (and especially) epic theatre must constantly be updated so that it does not neutralize progressive content. In other words, a regressive form will undermine even the most radical content. Also, when approaching, as artists, epic theatre, and even ideas in this essay, it is important to keep in mind that, according to actors who worked with him, Brecht would *never* discuss 'theory' during rehearsals. Although his dramas are complex and often embody, to varying degrees, his theoretical ideas, Brecht was well aware that they had to be effective, first and foremost, *as theatre.*

20. Brecht, 'The Literarization of the Theatre', p. 43.

21. For a further exploration of ideology and the modern state from a Marxist perspective, see Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)', in Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York; London: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

22. Recent polling suggests that about two-thirds of Americans support the recent protests for racial justice. See, for example, Andrea Germanos, 'Majority of Americans Back Black Lives Matter Protests and Think Demonstrations Will Help Justice: Poll', *The Meteor: The Voice of the People*, <https://meteor.news/2020/07/28/majority-of-americans-back-black-lives-matter-protests-and-think-demonstrations-will-help-racial-justice-gallup-poll/>, 28 July 2020 (accessed 23 October 2020).

23. Aristotle, quoted in Samuel Weber, 'The Greatest Thing of All: The Virtuality of Theatre', in *100 Years of Cruelty: Essays on Artaud*, ed. Edward Scheer (Sydney: Power Publications and Artspace, 2002), p. 7–32 (p. 17).

24. Ibid.

25. Aristotle, quoted in ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 38.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., p. 30.

31. Weber, 'The Greatest Thing of All', p. 27.

32. Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, p. 17.

33. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Phliosophy of History', p. 262. While Benjamin and Brecht's admiration was mutual, Benjamin would get under Brecht's skin when he insisted on merging the Marxist materialism that is so central to epic theatre, and Benjamin's own thinking, with 'irrational' forms that were important to his own style of materialist thinking and writing, including surrealism and Jewish mysticism.

34. Ibid., p. 255.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., p. 261.

37. Ibid., p. 255.

38. For a perceptive account of how the internet, cellphones, and social media have radically intensified consumerism and a 'remaking of the subject' (p. 42), to the point where consumption is dominating us not only during waking hours, but also as we sleep, see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London; New York: Verso, 2014).

39. For further details on the *Verfremdungseffekt* (or 'alienation effect'), see Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, especially p. 91–9, 143–5, and 191–7.

40. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1984), p. 19.

41. See Crystal Ligori and Tiffany Camhi, 'Living Statues in Portland push a satirical response to Trump administration actions,' *OPB*, <https://www.opb.org/article/2020/08/06/portland-oregon-trump-statue-initiative-bryan-buckley-interview/>, 6 August 2000 (accessed 23 October 2020).

42. For an insightful, feminist critique of the inherently oppressive ideology that has always been part and parcel of the rational *form* of dramatic realism, see Elin Diamond, 'Mimesis, Mimicry, and the "True-Real"', in *Modern Drama*, 32.1 (1989), p. 58–72.

43. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York; London: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 21.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change', *New Literary History*, 43.1 (2012), p. 1–18 (p. 11).

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid, p. 2.

49. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis; London, University of Minnesota Press, 2013) p. 7.

50. Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, p. 79.

51. Ibid.

52. What anthropologist Michael Taussig observes about terror in general is applicable to a world dominated by white-supremacist terror, where one finds 'the irregular rhythm of numbing and shock that constitutes the apparent normality of the abnormal created by the state of emergency': Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), p. 13. The counter-shock of the theatre of cruelty could perhaps radically disrupt these rhythms in order to reveal and foreground the abnormality of what has been normalized.

53. Several of Brecht's essays published in *Brecht on Theatre* discuss epic theatre's 'episodic' approach to representation. For an overview of Brecht's approach to montage, which is quite different to notions of montage associated with modern filmmaking, see Roswitha Mueller, 'Montage in Brecht', *Theatre Journal*, 39.4 (1987), p. 473–86.

54. Weber, 'The Greatest Thing of All', p. 15.

55. Ibid., p. 21.

56. Ibid., p. 27.

57. Latour, 'What Protective Measures?', p. 2.