Using Laughter to Inspire Change: Absurdist Theatre in Oppressive Societies

by

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Abstract

The 1959 play Rhinoceros by French playwright Eugène Ionesco is one of many plays considered by Martin Esslin to be a part of "Theatre of the Absurd", a genre of plays written by mostly European playwrights in the late 1950's. These plays typically center around ideas of existentialism, and seem to lack any type of logical consistency. Rhinoceros centers around a small French town in which all the inhabitants slowly turn into rhinoceroses, and was a response to the uprising of fascism in Nazi Germany and a commentary on how social ideas spread.

This thesis will discuss the use of absurdism to satirize and comment on political issues, in Rhinoceros as well as in plays that followed it, such as Dario Fo's 1970 play Accidental Death of an Anarchist, which was a response to the 1969 Piazza Fontana bombing and the subsequent mishandling of the situation by police. Both plays use exaggerated comedy and humorous characters, such as the Logician in Rhinoceros and the Maniac in Accidental Death of an Anarchist, to undermine authoritarianism and unjust systems as well as revealing the darker side of society as a whole.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The art of theatre and dramatic performance has been approached in a variety of different ways throughout history. While some seek to utilize theatre to tell down-to-earth stories and perfectly imitate the world in which they live, others have been more creative and imaginative with the art form. The concept of absurdism in theatre has been utilized differently by a multitude of playwrights across history to portray their own unique visions of the world, rather than the world as it "truly" is. In the rapidly changing society of the twentieth century, many playwrights across Europe used absurdism to showcase unbelievable, fantastical scenarios, transporting the audience to an entirely new world. For example, Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* uses the visual imagery of men literally turning into beasts to portray the dangers of mob mentality in response to the spread of fascism in Romania and France. Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* takes a specific historical instance of police abusing their power and exaggerates the most incriminating parts of the story, bringing the flaws in the police and justice systems into the spotlight. Vaclav Havel's *The Memorandum* satirizes the conventions of bureaucracy and the modern office environment by taking them to the extreme through the actions and gestures of the characters and painting a picture of a lifeless, robotic society. These plays make these tragic instances exciting and even funny, while also serving as commentary on the societies in which they were written.

This introduction presents a brief history of various artistic movements in Europe during the early 20th century, and touches on some of the important documents which contributed to the absurdist movement. Chapters 2,3, and 4 discuss specific absurdist plays: Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, and Vaclav Havel's *The Memorandum*, respectively. These plays take familiar situations and make them exciting and hilarious, while also serving as commentary on the societies in which they were written. Chapter 5 discusses the 2018 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury, and its use of absurdist techniques in a modern context.

1.1 European Art Movements in the Twentieth Century

What we now think of as absurdism started as a combination of many European art movements. This section provides a brief overview of the Italian Futurist movement, as well as the French movements of surrealism and existentialism, and also looks into the use of absurdist theatre in the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s.

1.1.1 Italian Futurism

The futurist movement began in 1909 when Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published *The Manifesto of Futurism*, in which he called for a violent, incendiary revolution, and the destruction of museums, libraries and relics of the past in favor of the modern age and the "beauty of speed" [1]. In 1915, Marinetti along with Bruno Corra and Emilio Settimelli published a book called *Il Teatro Futurista Sintetico*["The Synthetic Futurist Theatre"], which summarized his dramatic theory and hopes for the future of Italian theatre. 1915 was also the year futurists Fortunato Depero and Giacomo Balla wrote the manifesto *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo* ["Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe"] which expanded upon the ideas introduced by the other futurists. The futurist movement in Italy called for less realism and logical connections and more dynamic, poetic theatre based on movements and gestures rather than the text itself. This new type of theatre was meant to encapsulate a rejection of the past and a celebration of youth, industry and the future.

Marinetti also introduced the concept of Variety Theatre, a theatre comprised of all theatrical elements, including song, dance, gymnastics, poetry, etc. In a manifesto which he would read aloud at cabaret performances, Marinetti would proclaim the reasons why he believed the Variety Theatre was the way of the future. The manifesto ends with a stream-of-consciousness "poem" comprised of random words and phrases, in an utter rejection of the logical conventions of realist theatre [2]. This theme of randomness-on-purpose is replicated in many absurdist plays, including Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve*, which was influential in defining absurdism (see part 1.2).

1.1.2 French Surrealism

In France, playwrights like Guillaume Apollinaire and Jean Cocteau incorporated surrealism into their works, rejecting the depiction of reality in favor of a "deeper realism which... will surprise us as bizarre, even fantastic" (Carlson 344) [3]. Cocteau's *The Eiffel Tower Wedding Party* incorporates absurd actions which Cocteau stated to be a type of "theatre poetry" which was meant to picture reality "more truly than the truth" [4].

Existentialism was also present in France, with dramatists creating works which served to communicate their views of the human condition. For example, Albert Camus' 1942 philo-

sophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 play *No Exit* emphasize the struggles of man in a cold, uncaring universe, prompting the search for a deeper meaning in life.

1.1.3 Middle Eastern Absurdism

In the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, Israel took control over parts of Egypt, Jordan and Syria and placed about one million Arabs under control of a military government. The war prompted many writers to focus on political writing in an attempt to make sense of, and protest against, the effects of politics on the lives of citizens. Lebanese playwright Issam Mahfouz wrote a trilogy consisting of *The China Tree [al-Zanzalakht]*, *The Dictator [al-Dictadur]*, and *Saadoun The King [Sa'dun Malikan]*, the latter of which was never finished due to the war. Mahfouz then decided to focus on direct political writing, with his play *The Killing [al-Qatl]* [5].

While Mahfouz believed in direct political writing and tried to avoid symbols or allegories, Syrian playwright Sa'dallah Wannus implemented a more dramatic theatre, similar to the epic theatre of German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Wannus' 1977 play *al-Malik huwa al-malik* [*The King is King*] is a prime example of the use of theatre to critique societal hierarchies and classism. Wannus draws on the fantasy world of *Arabian Nights* and creates an epic drama about an ordinary man who is tricked into believing that he has been made king. At the end of the play, the ordinary man becomes king in a symbolic reversal of roles, showing that political hierarchies are meaningless, but also emphasizing the power of performance, in taking on a role and becoming a character.

Throughout the play, Wannus maintains a dramatic distance from reality, calling the play a "game" and having characters refer to themselves as "players". Aleya A. Said compares Wannus' technique in writing this play to the techniques of Brecht, stating that his writing "establishes a break with the audience/reader's comfortable understanding of what is real" [6]. This break from reality, which Brecht called the Verfremdungseffekt, was meant to cause an effect of alienation, or defamiliarization, between the audience and the world on stage. By combining this technique with the political themes of the play, Wannus draws a comparison between politics and theatre, suggesting that political roles are as arbitrary as actors playing roles in theatre.

1.2 Defining Absurdism

In "Theatre of the Absurd," Martin Esslin describes a form of theatre that seeks to portray not the "truth," but the playwright's inner truth. Absurdism forgoes the typical beginning-middle-end plot structure and subtlety of characterization in order to portray a world that is not real but exists in the author's mind. As opposed to the realist convention of plays with

a beginning, middle and end and a clearly summarizable plot, absurdist plays were "not intended to tell a story but to communicate a pattern of poetic images" (Esslin 294). Through these heightened portrayals of the world, playwrights are able to critique the societies in which we live by portraying characters whose actions appear nonsensical, but nonetheless are reflective of the world around them. The audience is forced to reconcile with the collection of poetic images they have been faced with, and forced to ask questions and engage in interpretation to try and piece these images together [7].

These new movements all rejected realism, traditional theatre conventions, logical connections between cause and effect, and the psychological development of character. Plays like this cannot be "summarized" in the form of a narrative, and a simple, easy-to-understand meaning cannot be extracted from them. As Esslin states, "the work of art itself is its meaning" (Esslin 12). Rather than searching for an oversimplified explanation, Esslin suggests that audiences pay attention to sets of themes and images and look for what questions the author is trying to ask, rather than some hidden answer that may not exist. For example, one should not try to analyze Beckett's Waiting for Godot by searching for some nonexistent clue as to who or what Godot represents. Instead, we must analyze the work as a whole and see what Beckett is trying to say about the world. The play is a static situation where two characters wait each day, repeating similar lines and never straying too far from the theme of waiting. In this case, the play serves to illustrate Beckett's perception of the world, which is that nothing ever really happens. Despite there being no overarching plot or narrative, the play itself still communicates a message through its form, structure and mood. We feel the passage of time, we engage in the act of waiting, and so we gain a deeper understanding of what Beckett thinks of life and the human condition.

The concept of forgoing traditional plot structure in favor of "poetic images" is exemplified in Eugene Ionesco's *La cantatrice chauve*, which Ionesco called "Anti-thematic, anti-ideological, anti-social-realist, anti-philosophic, anti-boulevard-psychology, anti-bourgeois" (Carlson 412). In this play, which was translated as *The Bald Soprano*, the rejection of traditional theatrical conventions is brought to the extreme. The play focuses on two English married couples, the Smiths and the Martins, who parody the polite conventions of English society by delivering meaningless poems and stories back and forth. The play begins with Mrs. Smith robotically listing facts about the dinner she'd cooked, and continues with the Martins seemingly meeting each other for the first time before discovering that they are actually married and have a child together. The characters often say sentences that don't connect to what was previously said, or outright contradict it. The audience is meant to feel disconnected, in the same way that Ionesco feels society is disconnected. At the end of the play, the characters all start saying random phrases, at which point the curtain falls, and rises again to reveal the play ending with the same lines that began it, an example of the circular ending that shows up in so many other absurdist plays [8]. After the hundredth performance, Ionesco changed the ending to substitute two different characters reciting the lines at the end instead of the characters who originally said them, introducing a new dimension

to this "anti-play" (Allen 42).

The Bald Soprano is well known as a perfect example of Theatre Of the Absurd – a play with no meaning, that doesn't tell a story. However, not every absurdist play has to be completely devoid of meaning. Since the advent of absurdism, many have used it to parallel real historical events, simply adding creative new elements or tampering with the conventions of theatre to engage audiences in their own world by portraying it through new and interesting ways. Absurdist theater became a way to comment on political situations and fight for social change.

Chapter 2

Rhinoceros

After writing a few short sketches and one-act plays, Ionesco made his full-length debut with the three-act play *Rhinoceros* in 1959. Unlike *The Bald Soprano*, *Rhinoceros* has a plot, or at least a situation that escalates from the beginning of the play to to the end. Moreover, *Rhinoceros* has actual characters, who may not be fully developed as people, but definitely stand for different ideas, and seem to encompass different types of people in the face of a societal crisis. The plot of *Rhinoceros* centers around the citizens of a small French town transforming into rhinoceroses until only one human is left [9]. The main character, Berenger, acts as the representative of individuality, resisting the pressure to conform and furthermore showing the perseverance and willpower it takes to remain an individual in a totalitarian society.

2.1 Historical Background

Ionesco was born and lived for many years in Romania, a country which was plagued by racism, fascism and anti-semitism during the 1930s and 40s. As a teenager and college student, Ionesco witnessed the horror of the Iron Guard, Romania's radical nationalist political party. In a 1970 interview, Ionesco spoke of the "ideological contagion" he witnessed as more and more of his fellow Romanians, close friends and university professors succumbed to fascism, stating, "all around me men were metamorphosed into beasts, rhinoceros . . . You would run into an old friend, and all of a sudden, under your very eyes, he would begin to change. It was as if his gloves became paws, his shoes hoofs. You could no longer talk intelligently with him for he was not a rational human being." [10]. Much like Berenger, Ionesco found himself isolated amongst an evil herd, betrayed by his friends and his own country.

In 1942, Ionesco left Romania and moved to France, another country which underwent a fascist takeover. In the first few months of France's occupation by Nazi Germany, Parisians passively accepted the new regime, and collaborated with the Nazis, glad that they were not being shot down in the streets [10]. Ionesco's own experiences with fascism in both

Romania and France are reflected in the play's text as the characters grapple with the issues of conformity versus defiance, and of logic versus intuition.

2.2 Conformity vs. Defiance

In the first scene of the play, an immediate contrast is drawn between Berenger and his best friend and literary foil, Jean. Jean is characterized as someone who is very concerned about social standing and looking good – in the first scene he criticized Berenger's appearance for looking sloppy, then gets upset about not being invited to a party. He clearly cares about looking good to others and performing well in social situations, in contrast to Berenger, who doesn't put much effort into his appearance or into showing up on time for meetings. When Berenger complains about how draining his job is, Jean simply replies, "The superior man is the man who fulfills his duty" (Ionesco 7). Jean is implying that everyone has an obligation to society at large, in this case a duty as an employee, which also demonstrates his belief in capitalism — the belief that everyone is a cog in a a societal machine rather than an individual. Throughout the play, this belief in fulfilling a societal "duty", rather than questioning why we are put into societal roles and made to fulfill them, ends up causing people to conform to a society that is ultimately destructive. In a review from The Los Angeles Times, Philip Brandes focuses on a production of Rhinoceros performed by Pacific Resident Theatre, calling Keith Stevenson's Berenger "endearingly floundering" in his attempt to fit in with a society that cannot be reasoned with [11]. However, Berenger is not weak – in a 1961 review, Howard Taubman spoke of the "courage, will, and knowledge" that was required of Berenger in order to resist conforming to the mob [12]. All in all, Ionesco's development of the characters in this play, especially Jean and Berenger, paints a picture for the audience of the type of person it takes to resist conformity.

Although the metamorphosis into rhinoceroses is a fantastical and comical allegory, similar real-life events have shown that the urge to conform is a powerful one, and can lead people to doing things that they might have originally never considered – even completely unethical things. In a 1963 experiment, Stanley Milgram performed a study in which he asked participants to administer electrical shocks at increasingly high levels until they refused to obey, in an attempt to test their levels of obedience to authority. Most of the participants obeyed the experimental commands fully, administering the highest shock level possible, despite showing signs of nervousness including sweating, trembling and nervous laughter [13]. This experiment demonstrated how far people were willing to go against their own morals in order to obey authority.

Ionesco satirizes the extent to which we are pressured to conform by illustrating a society in which humans literally transform themselves into beasts because others are doing it. In Act Three, Jean slowly transforms into a rhinoceros, all the while engaging in an argument with Berenger in which he attempts to justify his transformation. Berenger attempts to piece together exactly how and why the transformation happens, mentioning a "critical

condition". Jean was very much in a constant state of wanting to be acceptable to society, and so when the society began to change, he changed too. Brandes points out the "stultifying effect" of herd mentality on the characters in this society, and points out that Ionesco's "potentially deadly penchant for repetition" is skillfully used to portray the extent to which this mentality can be deadly.

As Quinney points out, Ionesco's "mechanical repetition of clichés" represents the ways in which fascist movements like these simplify their ideologies into easily digestible slogans, which citizens blindly listen to and repeat, not thinking deeply or critically about their beliefs at all. Ionesco called these "des architectures de clichés," and believed that they were as reprehensible as fascism itself [10]. Ionesco spreads a clear message that one should think for oneself, rather than blindly repeating ideas. However, he also shows how the process of logical debate can go wrong.

2.3 The Pitfalls of Logic

Another theme in the play is the misuse of logic, most clearly seen in the first act when a character aptly named the Logician explains logical syllogisms to an old man. Quinney points out that syllogisms can be seen as deceptive, as many philosophers have used them to prove nonsensical arguments. The Logician does just this as he provides an example to the old man: "The cat has four paws. Isidore and Fricot both have four paws. Therefore Isidore and Fricot are cats" (Ionesco 18). Clearly, this syllogism is flawed, as many animals have four paws but are not cats. Ionesco uses the Logician to critique pseudo-intellectuals who attempt to justify dangerous ideologies by coming up with long arguments and using a lot of words to say nothing. Later on in the scene, the Logician creates a long, drawn-out argument about whether or not the rhino the townspeople had seen had one horn or two, during which he doesn't actually answer the question at all. When Berenger points this out, the Logician simply replies, "Obviously, my dear sir, but now the problem is correctly posed" (Ionesco 37).

With Dudard and the Logician, Ionesco personifies the idea of using logic and facts to try to rationalize ideas which have no rationalization. The Logician embarks on a long and lengthy diatribe about how to tell whether or not a rhino is As Berenger states, "it doesn't much matter which comes from where. The important thing, as I see it, is the fact that they're there at all. . . " (Ionesco 60). People often try to analyze problems and figure out where they came from instead of solving them, and, though this can be helpful sometimes, it can often distract from the real issues. The problem of false balance or "bothsidesism" is well known even today, as the media often portrays both sides of a debate when one side is clearly more factually correct.

Dudard is another character who exemplifies the "facts and logic" mentality. He says "I'm simply trying to look the facts unemotionally in the face" (Ionesco 83), talking down to Berenger and trying to look smarter than him. While Berenger actually wants to act and do

something, Dudard is still trying to use an "intellectual effort" to try to figure out where the problem comes from instead of solving it. Through characters like the Logician and Dudard, Ionesco shows the problems with using cold, unemotional logic to try to tackle societal issues, and offers Berenger's humanity and emotional willpower as an alternative.

2.4   Modern Day Rhinocerization

The overwhelming "rhinocerization" of the citizens in Ionesco's play feels especially relevant in the modern age, where the internet acts as an echo chamber and creates more opportunities for unsuspecting people to become radicalized. The internet's version of turning into a rhinoceros is "taking the red pill", a process by which ordinary citizens can be radicalized by right-wing content online, where they are able to find vast amounts of misinformation and rhetoric, packaged with clichéd slogans designed to be blindly repeated. Brandes called the play "disconcertingly timely" for 2017, stating that it did not feel like an exaggeration in a society where people were rapidly becoming radicalized. It is no surprise that *Rhinoceros* continues to resonate with audiences even to this day.

Chapter 3

Accidental Death Of an Anarchist & The Memorandum

Rhinoceros is an abstract allegory and has been read as a commentary on multiple different fascist and authoritarianism regimes, from the Nazi occupation of France to the Iron Guard in Romania. In contrast, Dario Fo's 1970 play *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is based on, and directly references in great detail, a singular event of cultural significance. While Rhinoceros is a play about society losing its humanity, and Accidental Death of an Anarchist is about the abuse of power, *The Memorandum* seems to combine these two ideas. Satirizing the Communist government in place in Czechoslovakia in 1965, Vaclav Havel shows a society where humans are no longer human, and also one in which they conform to a strict social hierarchy.

3.1   The Death of Pino Pinelli

In 1969 a series of bombings took place in Italy, the most deadly of which was the Piazza Fontana bombing, in which sixteen people were killed and ninety injured. Police immediately blamed anarchists and arrested one anarchist named Giuseppe "Pino" Pinelli, who was subjected to three days of interrogation before "falling" to his death – his body was seen plunging out of the window of the office of Inspector Luigi Calabresi. The exact truth of how he died was never uncovered, but the police gave many contradictory statements in regards to his death, suggesting the police themselves were culpable. The title of Accidental Death of an Anarchist refers to the police ruling Pinelli's death "accidental", and many of the characters in the play are based on real people, including Calabresi himself. However, one character, known as the Maniac, was created wholecloth by Fo in order to create a dramatic statement and bring the absurd into the world created by this incident [14].

3.2 Slapstick as Societal Commentary

In the original performances, the Maniac was played by Fo himself, as he is heavily based on Fo's own style of comedy. Channeling the stock character from commedia dell'arte known as Arlecchino, the Maniac disguises himself as several different characters, including a judge, a doctor and a bishop, and utilizes the classic "jester" persona, whom Joseph Farrell states "has the license granted to the Fool in Shakespeare's King Lear but makes use of it not merely to amuse the power-holder but to jeer at all he stands for" (Farrell xlvi). The Maniac breaks into the police headquarters and starts questioning the officers about an incident of a man who died by falling out a window while in police custody, referencing the real-life statements of the officers and making comedy out of the fact that they were ridiculously inconsistent. For example, one of the officers was questioned and said the man's shoe came off in his hand, when he was clearly wearing two shoes after he fell. The Maniac extrapolates that the man must have been wearing three shoes, and questions whether he might have been a triped (Fo 52). By utilizing the archetype of a "jester" character that can see through the lies of those in power, Fo expertly critiques the police force and the justice system by revealing them to be untrustworthy and incompetent.

Fo also uses slapstick and comic violence to put the failings of the police force on full display. When the Maniac impersonates Bertozzo and antagonizes another officer, the situation escalates until Bertozzo gets punched in the face by an arm "shoot[ing] out of the doorway" (Fo 16). The Maniac's multitude of disguises and removable body parts also contribute to the exaggerated atmosphere of the play and help it to read as a farce. On the topic of farce, Fo stated in an interview, "I want to rehabilitate farce. Theatre critics have adopted the habit of writing that an unsuccessful comedy 'declines into farce'. Now I believe that farce is a noble – and modern – genre of theatre (Farrell xxiv)."

3.3 Anti-Catharsis

Fo believed that laughter was the opposite of catharsis, and his goal was to make audiences laugh so that they could then become angry. By pointing out the flaws in society in an absurd, comical way, Fo was able to draw greater attention to society's greatest danger, which is that it never changes. The Maniac reveals the hopelessness of trying to change when he states, "They want a revolution... and we give them reforms. We're drowning them in reforms. Or promises of reforms, because let's face it, they're not actually going to get anything" (Fo 75). At the end of the play, after it seems as though the Maniac is gone, he enters again exactly as he did in the beginning and begins the exact same investigation as before, much like The Bald Soprano ends in the same way as it starts. In the original performances, Fo would enter as the Maniac at the end of the show and proceed to open up a discussion with the audience, bridging the gap between the stage and reality.

The concept of anti-catharsis has since been utilized by Brazilian theatre practitioner Au-

gusto Boal in order to spread similar ideas about the potential for theatre as a vehicle for social change. In the book "Theatre of the Oppressed", Boal discusses how the ideas of traditional Aristotelian storytelling and catharsis designed to uphold the societal status quo and are not suited to theatre that wants to incite social change. Boal also discusses the concept of the "joker", a figure that, much like Fo's Maniac, interrupts the action and starts discussions with the audience. Boal notes that the Joker is closer to a spectator than a character, bridging the gap between stage and audience. Much like Fo's Maniac comments on the world he occupies and gets its characters into outlandish situations, Boal's Joker is also able to change the world his characters live in. However, the Joker actually has the ability to step outside the scene and change the course of the story, through the creation of new items or characters – "He is magical, omniscient, polymorphous and ubiquitous" (Boal 182). In many ways, Boal's introduction of interactive theatre and improv helped to further Fo's message of anti-catharsis and the use of theatre for social change.

3.4   The Memorandum

Like Dario Fo, Vaclav Havel was a playwright who was committed to political action and social change; he was a political dissident who was arrested multiple times for protesting on behalf of human rights. After the fall of Communism, Havel even became president of Czechoslovakia, and then of the Czech Republic. In his play *The Memorandum*, Havel critiques the economic state of then-Czechoslovakia under Communism's totalitarian rule, and the ways in which it affected working citizens. *The Memorandum* is a play about an artificial, inhuman language that is spread throughout an office environment, much like the rhinoceroses spread in Rhinoceros. The language used is virtually impossible to learn – the same word can have several different translations, none of which are grammatically related to one another, and this seems to be on purpose. Not only that, but it is impossible to have it translated due to the nonsensical bureaucracy of the office – the translation needs to be approved, but it can't be approved without the translation. All of these elements combine to portray a society that is no longer human, that has somehow lost its humanity due to a series of rules imposed on itself by the very humans who live in it.

The main character, Mr. Gross, is seemingly the only person who is against this language, being a self-proclaimed humanist, and ends up fired from his job for being against the language and its establishment. Eventually, though, the rest of the office ends up seeing the language's flaws and Gross ends up back at his old job, only now he has to fight for the establishment of a different artificial language [15]. This play has a circular format, much like Accidental Death of an Anarchist, and seems to convey a similar message – that no matter how many small changes take place, society at large ultimately stays the same and returns to the status quo. As Esslin puts it, "what passes in these plays are not events with a definite beginning and a definite end, but types of situation that will forever repeat themselves" (Esslin 39).

One of the ways in which Havel communicates this theme of society repeating itself is by including the repetition of various lines, gestures and actions in the play. The same conversations repeat several times, there is a birthday party every day, and certain characters have their own *gestus*, or characteristic gestures. In his 1913 essay "On Laughter," Henri Bergson explains why it can be funny when a situation repeats several times. These events are funny because they appear extremely coincidental, contrived, and in that way, mechanical, like a jack-in-the-box popping out over and over again. In the Italian Futurist movement, repetition was also used to emphasize the "crushing monotony" of life [16], a description which certainly seems to apply to the life of Mr. Gross. Bergson's main point in discussing the underlying principles of humor was that laughter comes from viewing "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (Bergson 37), meaning that when a person or a society acts as if they are automated, controlled by a machine, or being puppeted, the surprising contrast in this scenario makes us laugh. Hana does nothing but comb her hair and ask for food, and Mr. Lear continues to teach his class even after all the students have left, because they are puppets of the robotic society in which *The Memorandum* takes place. The "automatic regulation of society" (Bergson 47) is another example of what Bergson considers laughable, and the society in *The Memorandum* exemplifies this as well. It seems as though its rules were simply automatically put in place without any human input.

Another notable aspect of *The Memorandum*'s society is the theme of surveillance. The position of "staff watcher" is introduced when Mr. Gross hears an unseen voice talking to him from offstage. As it turns out, the building employs someone to sit in a hidden room between the offices and watch everyone who works there. At one point, Mr. Gross is forced to fill this position himself, and thus the audience is forced to reconcile with the fact that they, too, can play the role of "watcher". This certainly adds to the feeling of unease shown throughout the office environment, reminding the audience of George Orwell's "1984" and the pervasiveness of Big Brother. This idea of being watched is so powerful that it is no surprise how often it is used as a theatrical device. In fact, the play *Fairview* shows how the theatre can be used to communicate the theme of surveillance in a modern American context.

Chapter 4

Fairview & Conclusion

In the Pulitzer Prize-winning 2018 play Fairview, Jackie Sibblies Drury criticizes the systemic racism present in modern American society, and the extent to which minorities are constantly viewed through a white lens. Fairview follows a middle class African American family in what at first appears to be a simple family drama about preparing for a birthday party, but soon turns into the story of a black family seemingly trapped in a stage show about their own lives. The first act lulls the audience into a false sense of security by introducing what appear to be typical characters living a normal life; however, in the second act, the play takes a sharp turn as Drury introduces the element of a voiceover. While the characters on stage repeat the same actions as in the first act, the voices offstage discuss what race they would want to be, casually tossing around racial stereotypes as the black characters simply try to live their lives [17]. In an interview with NPR, Drury stated that she wanted the family's house and life to seem "perfect" in order to directly contradict these racial stereotypes put forward by the white characters [18]. Moreover, by utilizing a technique not often found in traditional plays, Drury is able to have white voices literally speak over the now-silenced black characters in the play, a theatrical representation of the ways in which black voices are silenced by the oppressive white majority. In a New York Times article, Jesse Green and Salamishah Tillet discuss the play's connection to the world of theatre and the ways in which the writings of white critics are considered more important than those of people of color, pointing out the need for black writers, directors and critics, not just shows like "The Lion King" with a black cast and an all-white producing team [19]. By using just one technique, Drury manages to convey a multitude of messages about the white gaze in an abstract way that anyone can understand.

Drury stated that she based the play on the concept of surveillance, and the "suspicion" one feels as a person of color when being watched by a white person. This echoes the concept of surveillance introduced in *The Memorandum*, but takes it to a new level – rather than being interchangeable and a meaningless position, the "watcher" is created by the society as a means for one group to exert power over another. As the offstage voices continue talking, they begin to comment on the play itself, projecting their own warped ideas of blackness onto

the family members. Although the family does not seem to know they are being "watched" yet, the audience's experience of the situation is still distorted. This distorted and disconnected vision emphasizes the idea of viewership, as when the audience is watching the play, they are forced to watch the lives of black people through the eyes of white people. Thus, the white audience members are forced to connect with their whiteness and realize that they have been looking through this white lens their entire lives.

The climax of the play comes when the family sets the table, dancing while bringing out more and more exaggerated fake food, all while the character Jimbo goes on an unhinged rant about his white power fantasy in the background. The white characters then physically enter the playing space and take on the roles of other black characters, basically performing a minstrel show without the blackface, and distorting the family's lives in order to fit in with racist stereotypes. All in all, the actions of the white characters are portrayed as extremely invasive, as Drury ramps up the absurdism with ridiculous costumes and reveals to further display how warped the media's portrayal of black characters is.

At the end of the show, the character Keisha breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly, asking the white members of the audience to step onto the stage and become the spectacle in a symbolic reversal of the ways white people have viewed black people's lives as entertainment for centuries. This ending echoes the original performances of Accidental Death of an Anarchist, in which Dario Fo as the Maniac would end the play by breaking the fourth wall and opening up a discussion with the audience. Tillet calls this ending "a stunning representation of the violent schizophrenia of American racism", and points out that this ending would not work with a completely nonwhite audience. Thus, this play is fundamentally about changing white audience members' points of view. Fairview is an example of theatre that, rather than simply telling a story which audiences can easily disconnect themselves from, incorporates the "poetic images" of absurdism to directly engage the audience and bring them into the world of the play, which is really a distorted representation of society as it is.

The concept of absurdism emerged in resistance to the traditional conventions and "rules" of theatre, so the fact that it has been used to resist totalitarian societies and their strict rules and bureaucracies comes as no surprise. By using techniques such as repetition of lines and situations, comic exaggeration through images and costumes, and circular endings that seem to break the fourth wall, playwrights like Ionesco, Fo, and Havel take the reality of their societies and highlight the places where they want to see change. Dramas like these have the power to change society by getting audiences to laugh at the world they live in, seeing all its flaws on full display. Playwrights like Jackie Sibblies Drury have already shown that these techniques can be brought forward into modern-day America, and used to shock audiences into seeing the world in a completely different light. Through the art of absurdist theatre, audiences can not only be made to laugh, but also to fight for real societal change.

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