

A. BOAL'S INTELLECTUAL THEATRE PEDAGOGY AND ITS ENCOUNTERS WITH ARISTOTLE'S NOTION OF TRAGEDY

There are various influences on the poetics of the Theatre of the Oppressed. To understand the originality of Boal's theatre pedagogy, one should begin with Aristotle and his Poetics since Augusto Boal began his career by deconstructing the Western traditional theatre in intellectual encounters with Aristotle. Boal almost from the very beginning of his thinking about theatre challenged accepted notions which Aristotle put forth in his Poetics. In my article, I will attempt to describe Boal's challenge to Aristotle. Based on the description of tragedy, I will briefly focus on specific concepts and their meanings in Poetics channeling my argument, eventually, to the concept of catharsis. I will try to explain why Boal's theatre pedagogy interprets catharsis as a concept aimed at intimidation, asserting that much of Western theatre practice constitutes a coercive system. Boal also questions Aristotle's concept of mimesis or imitation. I would like to see if there is space in Boalian poetics for the concept of catharsis. Could Catharsis actually happen in the arsenal of the Theatre of the Oppressed? If so, how? And if not, why?

Imagine a frozen image to express an understanding of the theories of Aristotle and Boal. This frozen image features sculptures of two men named A and B facing each other and engaged in a rope-pulling contest called tug-of-war. Both A and B have a tangled human ball at their sides, consisting of people lying on top of each other. A pulls the rope towards him in order to tie it around the human ball and keep them under his control. B likewise pulls the rope towards him in order to help the human ball disentangle itself.

The B image represents Boal and the rope represents the theatre. He pulls on the rope to return it to its origins. An ideal image would probably be one of people already untangled with the rope in their hands, and with Boal working to help other human balls to disentangle themselves. Disentangled people continuously work to maintain their untangled status because untangled is not a steady condition but a continuing process. Boal's theatre poetics is likewise a continuing process, one that challenges A (who represents Aristotle) with new theories and new methods to apply those theories. The following pages will attempt to describe Boal's challenge to Aristotle.

Boal almost from the very beginning of his thinking about theatre challenged accepted notions, which Aristotle put forth in his Poetics. The Poetics is one of the foundations of Western theatre practice, but Boal believed that it was written at a time (the fourth century B.C.) when theatre was taken away from the people. Boal notes that tragedy's origin in "dithyrambic song" (and comedy's in phallic song) indicate mass participation, an occasion in which everybody participated freely. By the time Aristotle witnessed theatre in Athens, it had been placed in the hands of aristocrats who changed the "very concept of theatre" and with it they attempted to impose a single version of reality or single view of the world. Aristocrats, in Boal's view, attempted to use theatre as a means to impose their values on people. Boal's intention is to take theatre back to its original form where everybody can participate and discover alternative versions of reality and where people make theatre for themselves.

In his Poetics, Aristotle describes tragedy as

An imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude; it employs language that has been artistically enhanced by each of the kinds of

linguistic adornment, applied separately in the various parts of the play; it is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents [. . .] . (17)

Based on the above description of tragedy, I will briefly focus on specific concepts and their meanings in Poetics channeling my argument, eventually, to the concept of catharsis. I will try to explain why Boal interprets catharsis as a concept aimed at intimidation, asserting that much of Western theatre practice constitutes a coercive system. Boal also questions Aristotle's concept of mimesis or imitation. My aim is not to analyze Aristotle's Poetics to the very detail and compare it with Boalean Poetics since Augusto Boal has already done a tremendous job of it in his book Theatre of the Oppressed. I would like to see if there is space in Boalean poetics for the concept of catharsis. Could Catharsis actually happen in the arsenal of the Theatre of the Oppressed? If so, how? And if not, why? According to Aristotle, the imitation of actions takes place through characters who are above the level of goodness (Virtue) of the man in general. Aristotle divides humanity into two moral spheres, one being virtuous and the other vicious. In his Poetics, Aristotle uses mimesis in two different meanings. In the first, man is the most imitative of all animals. Imitation is seeded in human nature because from childhood on, human beings learn through imitation. In the literal sense, therefore, mimesis is copying. In the fifteenth chapter of Poetics Aristotle changes the meaning of mimesis to "re-creating." If a painter, for example, imitates only the exact features of a man in his painting, the result will not be as pleasurable as it would have been had the painter added more color, to make his subject more handsome than he naturally looks. Thus mimesis in this instance is not simply copying, but rather ameliorating nature, re-creating nature to make it look better. The initial reason we get pleasure

from painting is because it imitates, and human beings also get pleasure from imitation. The additional reason we get pleasure from the painting is because we learn, and learning is a prominent feature of pleasure in and a principal function of tragedy. Through re-creation human beings not only derive pleasure but also learn. What human beings learn, is not about nature but how the artist manipulates nature and improves on it. We learn how the nature should be. Boal is most interested in this manipulative, ameliorative aspect of mimesis.

Tragedy is the imitation of an action, so what we take pleasure in and learn from is presented in action, which is organized through mythos or plot. Aristotle states that mythos is the “soul” of tragedy, which is organized around incidents either in the form of happiness or misery and for it to be pleasurable it should include parts like peripeteia, discovery and suffering. In peripeteia, a change happens from one state to the opposite of that state. In Oedipus, for example peripeteia takes place when the messenger reveals the secret of Oedipus’s birth; that discovery brings about a change from ignorance to knowledge. Peripeteia awakens pity and fear, which will be followed with destructive and painful action, resulting in suffering. Aristotle’s notion of plot therefore calls for actions arousing pity and fear from which human beings learn and get pleasure. Those incidents should, he says, arouse pity and fear even in the recitation of them. Boal is also interested in Aristotle’s notion of thought, which are the ideas contained within a dramatic structure, usually contained in what the characters say that has an effect on the plot’s outcome. Thought should complement the actions of the plot and assist its movement toward catharsis, best described as a purgation of pity and fear. Aristotle indeed insists that tragedy will be successful only when such purgation is achieved. Though he offers no detailed explanation in the Poetics about the concept catharsis, the common interpretation of the word is to rid the audience from

their passions. Catharsis thus serves a didactic purpose in tragedy because of its therapeutic function.

Boal rejects Aristotle's concept of catharsis, "Catharsis is correction," he says, but at the same time asks, "What does it correct? Catharsis is purification: what does it purify?" (TO 27). Catharsis, according to Boal, neither corrects nor purifies. Instead it represses. "And why is the repressive function the fundamental aspect of the Greek tragedy and of the Aristotelian system of tragedy? Simply because, according to Aristotle, the principle aim of tragedy is to provoke catharsis"(TO 25). Boal thinks Aristotle takes a somewhat value-neutral stance towards catharsis; for Boal, catharsis has a moral imperative.

To understand Augusto Boal's interpretation one needs to understand the moral view of catharsis, as Marvin Carlson has noted "In the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle condemns both excess and deficiency in the passions; he says that both art and moral virtue must aim at the intermediate" (Theories of the Theatre18). What Aristotle is doing in his concept is downgrading passion. Meaning of passion in Aristotle could be summarized as, an established faculty and a faculty is everything a man is capable of doing. Tragedy is concerned with faculties that become habits such as passions. "To what end is a passion exerted? What is the purpose of man? Aristotle answers: the good is the aim of all man's actions...what is the supreme good? Happiness"(97). According to Aristotle there are three ways to achieve happiness: through material good, through glory, and most importantly through virtue. Virtue is balanced between moderation and excess that needs to be learned and practiced since it will not come naturally. Thus tragedy's aim is to teach its audiences virtue, usually by avoiding passion and employing reason. Only catharsis can teach the audience that, by expunging excess emotion and immoderate

behaviors and habits, and teaching them virtuous behaviors and habits. Thus tragedy's purpose is to correct a citizen's behavior. As Boal states in his Theatre of the Oppressed

When man fails [. . .] in his virtuous behavior as he searches for happiness through the maximum virtue, which is obedience to the laws--the art of tragedy intervenes to correct that failure. How? Through purification, catharsis, through purgation of the extraneous, undesirable element which prevents the character from achieving his ends. This extraneous element is contrary to the law; it is a social fault, a political deficiency. (32)

Thus we can say that tragedy is cleansing of audiences from their desire and ability to act and think freely to change the single view of the world presented through pitiful and fearful incidents of the play. It is through tragedy the rebellious motives and inclinations of a citizen can be eliminated. This way the will of the citizen is domesticated. This is how Tragedy is used as a tool by the repressive social systems to intimidate citizens. Because having gone through catharsis, the purged audiences are now loosened of their wills or even worse, they are without a will. According to Boal, one way to keep the power of the repressive social system unshakably in its place is by purging the audience of revolutionary impulses. Catharsis intimidates audiences into thinking that the catastrophe, which befell the protagonist, will also befall them. Aristotelian theatre according to Boal, warns audiences not to challenge the existing system in society. That is why Boal calls Aristotle's the "poetics of oppression."

[. . .] the world is known, perfect or about to be perfected, and all its values are imposed on the spectators, who passively delegate power to the characters to act and think in their place. In so doing the spectators purge themselves of their tragic

flow -- that is, of something capable of changing society. A catharsis of the revolutionary impetus is produced! Dramatic action substitutes for real action. (TO 155)

Boal's remarkable achievement does not only lay on his criticism of Poetics and unveiling of Aristotle's coercive system but also lay in his groundbreaking alternative, an urgent one, because the Aristotelian ethic is so pervasive.

[. . .] a very powerful purgative system, the objective of which is to eliminate all that is not commonly accepted, including the revolution, before it takes place. [Aristotle's] system appears in disguised form on television, in the movies, in the circus, in the theaters. It appears in many and varied shapes and media. But its essence does not change: it is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists. If this is what we want, the Aristotelian system serves the purpose better than any other. (TO 47)

Boal's alternative is what he calls "dynamisation." "Dynamisation" attempts to overcome audience pacification and acceptance of society as it is and motivate change in society through action, first in a safe fictitious/real environment and secondly by giving them concomitantly the courage to practice change in real life, thereby achieving happiness. Boal's deconstruction of Aristotle transgresses the boundaries erected between the audience and performers and unifies people divided by notions of those who act and those who watch. The breakdown of such barriers has a kind of purgative effect in itself, giving people their right to originate their own theatre and utilize it as a social communicative mean. By that means they can better understand themselves as social beings and their social lives. Thus Boalean poetics enables the audiences to think, act

and take control of the drama not only the one rehearsed in the theatre but also the one practiced in the real world. Boal's poetics would thus restore the destroyed desires of people. To regard Boal's kind of catharsis the ultimate goal of Boal's poetics is however somewhat misleading. Catharsis in the Aristotelian theatre is usually achieved at the play's conclusion. There is no conclusion in Boal's theatre. There is a beginning, and it continues into life, taking place outside the theatre; Boal's poetics are much more focused on process than on a product like catharsis. During the process, spect-actors overcome obstacles, censures, blockages (both physical and emotional) they have encountered in the methods Boal has employed. Overcoming those obstacles means realizing their revolutionary desires and actions and liberating themselves and this is the kind of catharsis that has place in Boalean poetics. It is a cleansing course of action, a cleansing that is intended to continue as long as the spect-actor lives.