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## A Life of Slice;

Grand Guignol as Melo-Naturalistic Drama.



It's 1923, two actors pose for a photograph to promote a play, say, by André de Lorde, Oscar Méténier, Maurice Level or one of the other esteemed Grand Guignol playwrights. They strike a tableau, shift themselves into the best quarter-stance for the camera's eye, they tighten the muscles in the face, and hold their contortions as long as they can. The scene they represent may very well have taken place in a Guignol play, whether it's the face-frying moment in de Lorde's *A Crime in the Madhouse*, or some

eye piercing from Pierre Chaine's adaptation of Mirbeau's *The Torture Garden*, or maybe just your usual throat-cutting or strangulation, but they certainly didn't happen the way the photograph catches them – without swelling of dramatic action to get them to this point, with the actors getting right into a still and silent climax.

The photograph is just that, a photograph. It is not a live performance. For the most part, they are not even documentation of live performances; they are articles of publicity created to draw people to attend the live performance. In the photo we may see the patented 'face of fear', perfected by the Guignol actors, but they are not the seamless, detailed movement of an agonizingly drawn out death.

In the moment of the snap of the camera, the theatre of the Grand Guignol enters into the

precarious relationship between live performance and the recording apparatus. Sapping the aura, the camera exacts its Medusa-like measure and fixes the scene into a moment that will long outlast its native temporality.

When we look back at Grand Guignol, we look back largely at these images, screaming with expressionism, dripping with melodrama, and selling each play's most spectacularly violent moments.

As one would assume from the relative uniformity of these "staged" photos, the common assumption about Grand Guignol theatre is that if you've seen (or read) one Grand Guignol play, you've seen them all. The sense is that the plays were genre pieces of a peculiar Parisian trend, poaching the styles of the time to dress its horror theatre. But as evocative and exciting as the photographs are, we should be wary of allowing the photographs to limit our understanding of Grand Guignol. As Richard Hand and Michael Wilson note of the curious state of Grand Guignol promo photos, "Caution must be exercised when looking at photographic stills of performances, which might have been arranged for the aesthetic of the photographic studio more than the theatrical stage" [The French Theatre of Horror, 35].

Ultimately, to reduce Grand Guignol to a one-note fad is to do it an injustice. Grand Guignol was many things. It was a theatre space, it was a body of work written by established playwrights, it was a cultish tourist attraction, it was uniquely and simultaneously an avant-garde and popular form, and it was a style of both writing and performance with international manifestations with companies most notably in France but also in London, Rome and, briefly, the United States. Over the years the term Grand Guignol has also come to describe highly stylized death scenes, impossibly bloody murders or theatrical endeavors into horror in general. It is because of this round and varied usage that it's important to look back at Grand Guignol and

attempt to define through the myths.

Thanks in large part to its second director, Max Maurey, the Théâtre du Grand Guignol was responsible for a significant amount of its own myth-making. There were well-circulated stories of fainting and vomiting, but Hand and Wilson warn, “When Maurey added a house doctor to the staff to attend personally to members of the audience who were taken ill...it is more likely that this was a gimmick to publicize the anticipated horrors inside” [French Theatre of Horror 12]. There was also a strong assumption that the plays indulged in copious amounts of blood and guts, something akin to the Herschel Gordon Lewis films that it went on to influence (think of the theatre of horror scenes in his *Wizard of Gore*), but generally the aim of the special effects was to be convincing, not excessive; any extra blood beyond the expectations of the dramatic situation was not necessary. Many people tend to think of Grand Guignol as broadly representative of the horror genre in general, but in fact it never included any supernatural elements, science fiction or fantasy and plots adhered to “realistic” situations. And along with the photographs, the sensationalism behind their poster designs and play titles, the plays are often considered something of a burlesque shock theatre, yet the plays were written by highly respected playwrights of the day, and at the time (especially in its establishment in London), Grand Guignol was considered a playwrights theatre.

As surprising as it may seem, Grand Guignol was a brand of naturalistic theatre. I’m not sure which is worse for the others reputation: Grand Guignol, often relegated to the ignoble status of “mere” popular entertainment, still struggles to be taken seriously in academia, and naturalism tends to evoke thoughts of the most banal American-brand domestic drama. But perhaps both can benefit from their association if we highlight their radical link: Can the stale perception of naturalism be rejuvenated through its relation to such a stylized, extreme form of

theatricality? And in turn, can perceptions of Grand Guignol be moved beyond the spectacle to be seen as a complex, influential and legitimate writer's theatre?

The late nineteenth century was, as it has been so said so often, an exciting time for theatre in the West. If theatre has any impulse to mirror its social, political and cultural environment, theatre in the second half of the century no doubt had to reflect the revolutionary time of innovation that forged on into the beginning of new century. The turn of the century saw the working class rise in an industrialized urbanization, advancements in science and technology, and a cultural and philosophical shift away from the centrality of religion in day-to-day life. At the end of the century, realism attempted to offer that reflection by attempting to stage the lives of ordinary people represented in a realistic style under an expanded sense of moral relativity. The result: the beginnings of the modern theatre. Naturalism soon followed with a more dogmatic vision of what it meant to stage reality and a focus on Zola's "scientific objectivity", highly influenced by another kind of naturalist, Charles Darwin. Over time, naturalism and realism, progressive at their origin, have been essentially been braided together both categorically and as conventional forms again which to rebel.

Despite the tarnished legacy of naturalism, which was eclipsed by the sexier experimentation that defined itself in opposition to naturalism, like futurism, dada and Brecht, Grand Guignol may help remind us that fin-de-siècle naturalism was born out of the spirit of revolution, not only as a theatrical revolution whose foundations were partially constructed on disdain for the staid theatrical conventions of the time such as the well-made play, but also as a reflection of the concurrent revolutions in the fields of psychology (Freud), economics (Marx), sociology (Comte) and most importantly, the irrevocable transformation of science initiated by the work of Charles Darwin in the late nineteenth century. In other words, naturalism was,

ironically, a revolution keeping up with other revolutions. But, as Martin Esslin observed in his contextualization of naturalism, “nothing tastes staler than the revolutions of the day before yesterday” [67], so it’s easy to forget that the efforts of naturalists like Antoine and Zola “were in conscious rebellion against the characteristically romantic form of drama popular at the time” [Styan 2].

One of the central figures of naturalism, Oscar Méténier, added a very specific brand of play to the audiences at Théâtre Libre. His *rosse* plays (or “crass plays”) were modeled after or taken directly from *faits divers*, or true-crime blotters that fed morbid attractions to the Parisian underground. After aesthetic differences began to manifest between he and Andre Antoine, Méténier would left Théâtre Libre to open his own theatre in 1897 at 20 rue Chaptal, primarily as a platform devoted to his type of grimy naturalism. This theatre was The Théâtre du Grand Guignol. It was here where Méténier perfected “his own brand of sordid “slice of life” sketches to educate Parisian audiences how the underclass lived and thought” [Gordon 22].

Méténier may be the strongest link in personnel between Grand Guignol and naturalism, but with Méténier also followed the content and production style indicative of the movement which Zola said was the “impulse of the century” [Cole 5].

It is perhaps helpful to see the radical potential of naturalism through the lens of Grand Guignol. If naturalism attempted to explore and (re)present realities of life, Andre Antoine’s “slice of life”, then theoretically, its palette of material is rather vast within the bounds of possibility, not just as normative-upholding bourgeois drama that naturalism has been reduced to in retrospect. The dramatic texts of the Grand Guignol repertoire explored those bounds. Grand Guignol drama was not only reliant on verisimilitude as an effective way of transmitting its narrative without turning audiences off with its sometimes-grisly climaxes, but it was also indebted to

providing that which exceeded the day-to-day lives of its viewers. This is what Andre de Lorde, most prominent Grand Guignol playwright, referred to as his “slice of death” [Gordon 22]. In this regard, Grand Guignol was a self-styled “naturalism in extremis... out of necessity, extremely convincing in verisimilitude and delivery” [Gordon 32]. In addition, it should be pointed out that the Théâtre du Grand Guignol in France ran for 62 years, frequently playing to sold out houses during its height in the 1920’s and 1930’s, making it a highly successful enterprise of naturalism.

But I should be careful not to draw the connection between Grand Guignol and Naturalism too exclusively. As I mentioned, Grand Guignol was a combination of (sometimes contradictory) forms and influences. As Mary Homrighous argues “Grand Guignol emanates from three separate traditions: naturalism, melodrama and the well-made play” [43]. Other Grand Guignol scholars have also noted the connection between Symbolism and Expressionism as well (many of the plots of Symbolist or German Expressionist works, *The Torture Garden* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* for instance, were later staged as plays at the Théâtre du Grand Guignol). Grand Guignol was therefore a pastiche, or better yet, a rather mercenary “Theatre of Horror” that did not abide by the principles of any movement other than its own.

Although Grand Guignol never fully strayed from its naturalist roots, after Méténier’s departure, when the direction of the theatre transferred into the hands of Maurey, the style of the theatre did in fact embrace the popular melodramatic performance style which was easily imposed over the dramas. It should be pointed out that this was a purely stylistic choice and not a genre choice, Grand Guignol plays did not conform to the usual outcome of melodrama (simplified moral landscapes where good triumphs over evil), and instead aimed for a more “morally erratic universe” [London’s Grand Guignol 83].

But it's interesting to look at how these two forms were used in the narrative of the Grand Guignol play. Recalling the origin of Guignol in the *rosse* plays, the context of the plots necessitated a more realistic mode of presentation. Melodrama, on the other hand, can be seen as being applied strategically, added primarily when the action turns violent or ramps up emotionally. In a effect similar to how Douglas Sirk uses melodrama in his films, the style of acting functions as both distancing enough for a viewer to consume the scene without the safe artifice of the theatrical representation being broken, and engaging enough to appeal to the emotions of fear, pity, laughter and anything else necessary for catharsis. Summed this up nicely by Hand and Wilson: "This is one of the most significant contradictions of Grand Guignol drama: characters that emerge from naturalist assumptions, but demand stylized representations on stage... the opposing forces at either end of the tightrope, which keeps tense, are those of melodrama and naturalism" [London's Grand Guignol, 45].

Melodrama might be the form most associated with Grand Guignol, as its flourishes were tied to the more memorable, violent denouements, but naturalism was a necessary vehicle for getting there. This brings us back to the photographs. In referring to the melodramatic scenes in photos from London's Grand Guignol, Hand and Wilson warn that we should be wary: "Melodrama simply makes for a more exciting photograph than naturalism" [42].

For Grand Guignol to be effective as highly stylized horror melodrama, presentation had to be composed as if on a stylistic music score. Naturalistic acting retained the attention and narrative engagement of the audience, essentially getting its hooks in collaboration with the realistic plots as a way of not losing them to/in the melodramaticized scenes of terror. As Terry Heller argues in the *Delights of Terror*, plot is a powerful tool for the horror genre as it is strong enough to keep readers/viewers from turning away from objects of terror or abjection; only the

promised reward of “satisfactory closure” to maintain the gaze [Heller, 2-3].

Perhaps it would therefore be appropriate to say that Grand Guignol (if we were to label it as anything more than, simply, Grand Guignol) is a form of Melo-Naturalism, utilizing both at crucial moments in the drama as a means to an end.

Through Grand Guignol’s inter-stylist composition by its playwrights and directors, we can better see the radical possibilities of naturalism and be reminded such concepts as naturalism and melodrama are not just genres, schools or styles, but practical tools that can be used independently or cooperatively in the production of meaning and affect in the relationship between a dramatic text/concept and its audience.

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