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Antonin Artaud
Balthus

The painter Balthus met the writer and actor Antonin Artaud on the terrace of Les Deux Magots in the fall of 1932. Struck by their uncanny resemblance, Artaud approached Balthus and introduced himself. This encounter marked the beginning of an intense albeit short-lived friendship – one that revolved precisely around the concept of the double.

Balthus had recently returned from Bern, where he had been staying with Antoinette de Watteville, a Swiss aristocrat with whom he had been in love for several years. He left in despair after learning of her engagement to a local diplomat. Upon his return to Paris, he began work on a project that reflected his own romantic crisis: a series of pen-and-ink illustrations for Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. The doomed love story between the foundling Heathcliff and well-bred Cathy Earnshaw – who went against her heart to marry her high-born neighbor Edgar Linton – offered a direct parallel to Balthus's own seemingly impossible desire for de Watteville.

Equally important to the project was Balthus's growing friendship with Artaud. With his heavy brow, tousled hair, and intense gaze, Artaud served as a template for Balthus's depictions of Heathcliff. The association was grounded furthermore in shared personality traits, namely their unruly temperaments and resistance to social norms. But Balthus's identification worked on two levels. Not only did he see Artaud as Heathcliff, he also projected himself into both figures. This collapse of identities is perhaps most evident in his 1933 painting *La toilette de Cathy*, where he presents himself as a dark romantic character whose facial features mix all of these fictional and real identities.
The identities of Balthus's figures are deliberately unstable. Do they represent Balthus himself, Artaud, or some composite of the two? As his childhood friend Pierre Leyris observed, Balthus possessed "a force of character such that he could turn himself into the person he wanted. Once he latched onto an image – the sort of creature he wanted to be – he could metamorphose into the same."[1] His longing for de Watteville became inseparable from his desire to be Artaud – each passion channeled through and intensified by the other. Viewed from this perspective, Balthus's psychological profile aligns more closely with that of Cathy than of Heathcliff. Cathy's self-conception is fluid; for her, love involves merging with the beloved. "I *am* Heathcliff," she famously declares.[2] Indeed, while Balthus clearly modeled Cathy's appearance on de Watteville, several of the *Wuthering Heights* drawings depict Cathy and Heathcliff with nearly identical features – or positioned in such a way that one appears to mirror the other.

On July 20, 1934, Artaud discovered Balthus lying in his studio on the rue de Furstemberg, having taken an overdose of laudanum. Antoinette de Watteville had recently informed him that it was too late to break her engagement: before taking the drug, Balthus carefully placed her photograph beside himself. As Artaud later recounted, the gesture was clearly orchestrated for his benefit: they had a standing appointment around 6:30 in the evening, and Balthus had timed the overdose precisely to coincide with Artaud's arrival, fully expecting to be discovered – and saved – by his friend. Laudanum, moreover, was the same type of opiate that Artaud consumed habitually throughout his life. But unlike Artaud, Balthus was not an addict. His selection of laudanum as the vehicle for his attempted suicide appears therefore to be modeled on Artaud's own choice of drugs. In staging this scene, Balthus did not simply imitate Artaud; he enacted a kind of temporary possession, as if his friend had stepped into his body.

Several months before this episode, Artaud published his first commentary on Balthus – a review of the artist's April 1934 exhibition at Galerie Pierre. For Artaud, Balthus's paintings were marked by a distinctive theatricality. "The artist employs a kind of *trompe l'œil*," he wrote, "that extends beyond the painting itself to include the setting in which the canvas is placed."[3] In this formulation, the pictorial space absorbs the viewer, transforming the spectator into a participant in the psychic drama staged on the canvas. This effect is particularly evident in the handful of paintings from the mid-1930s that depict

figures pushed against open windows, on the verge of falling out of the confined space of the image. One famous example is Balthus's portrait of Lady Abdy, who would go on to play a central role in *Les Cenci*. In these works, the windows symbolizing the membrane between the inner and outer world – both spatial and psychological – are framed by drapes reminiscent of stage curtains.

Since 1932, Artaud had been developing a vision of theater that operated in much the same way. His "Theater of Cruelty" likewise sought to breach the separation between the domains of performance and reality. He likened its intended effects to those of a plague – a contagious force that would penetrate the audience's defenses and alter their behavior and state of mind.

Artaud's production of *Les Cenci*, which opened at the Théâtre des Folies-Wagram on May 7, 1935, was the closest realization of that vision. Balthus designed the sets and costumes for the production. Artaud adapted the play from historical accounts of the Roman nobleman Francesco Cenci, as fictionalized by Percy Bysshe Shelley and Stendhal. Francesco Cenci, played by Artaud himself, is a tyrannical father who subjects his children – including a daughter portrayed by Lady Abdy – to extreme abuse. The children ultimately conspire to murder him and are in turn sentenced to death. In an interview published in the theater journal *Comoedia* the day before the play's premiere, Artaud explained that Balthus's costumes were color-coded—with green signifying death and yellow representing what he called "bad death."[4] Roger Désormière's music and sound design, which included recordings of a church bell and machines in a factory, was intended to act directly on the nervous system, transforming the audience on a physiological level. Through language and audiovisual effects, Artaud attempted to enact, upon the spectators themselves, the same cruelty that he staged within the play.

Les Cenci was a commercial failure and closed after only a few performances. Shortly afterward, Artaud left Paris for Mexico. While there, he wrote an essay for a Mexican newspaper on the role of tradition in contemporary French painting where he described Balthus's work in terms that echo his theory of the Theater of Cruelty: "All his paintings," claimed Artaud, "are suffused with a vast respiratory harmony that ranges from the sudden breath of anger to the slow and wide breath of agony."[5]

But by 1939, following his mental collapse and institutionalization at the asylum of Ville-Évrard, Artaud's friendship with Balthus had deteriorated. Artaud began writing him hostile letters, accusing him – along with many other former friends – of having been replaced by malevolent doubles. These doubles, Artaud imagined, were the creations of a secret group of "Initiates" intent on persecuting him. Tellingly, he believed the headquarters of this sect was located near Balthus's former studio.

In a sense, Artaud never left the world of doubles. Even after his release from the asylum of Rodez in 1946, he continued to be surrounded by figures who mirrored him. As he reentered public life, Artaud attracted people who adopted his language, gestures, and voice. His radio play *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* reflects on this dynamic by opening with a back-and-forth between Artaud and the actress Maria Casarès, who recites Artaud's text in his voice, as if possessed. But Balthus had been the first of Artaud's doubles. What began as an experiment in identification had become, by the end of his life, a form of contagion – his presence transmitted through others, no longer imitated but inhabited.

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[1] Nicholas Fox Weber, *Balthus: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 260.
[2] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 81.
[3] Antonin Artaud, "Exposition Balthus à la Galerie Pierre," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 248 (May 1934), p. 900.
[4] Pierre Balatier, "À propos de 'Cenci': M. Antonin ARTAUD nous dit pourquoi il veut écrire un 'théâtre de la cruauté,'" *Comoedia* 29:8.122 (May 6, 1935), p. 1.
[5] Antonin Artaud, "La jeune peinture française et la tradition" (1936), in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 252.