

# Unbridled Imagination and Imperturbable Logic: an Analysis of the Theatre du Grand Guignol and the Historical, Technological, and Theatrical Changes it Embodied

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**ABSTRACT:** The Theatre du Grande Guignol was in operation between 1897 and 1962; during its tenure, it provided entertainment to the Parisian masses. This paper seeks to prove that the violent entertainment shown in the Theatre du Grand Guignol epitomizes a microcosm of the broader historical, technological, and theatrical changes during its 65 years in operation. Through primary source documents, such as the plays being performed, and secondary sources, such as French historical documents, this analysis consolidates these informative texts to understand the bigger picture of the Theatre in the grander context of human experience. The violent nature being represented on the stage of the Guignol soon reflected the brutal nature of World War Two, thus blurring the lines between fact and fiction, art and life, imagination and reality. This opens up a discussion on the essence of humanity and its ensuing effect on the entertainment industry leading into the modern day, and the enduring macabre fascination with gruesome spectacle.

From 1897 to 1962, Parisian theatre-goers could walk to the 285-seat Theatre du Grand Guignol at 20 rue Chaptal and witness spectacles of comedy and horror performed on the intimate 20 by 20-foot stage. This historic building was haunted by its previous life as a Jansenist convent in 1786 before its sacking during the Reign of Terror; confessional-style boxes housed the audience and large wooden angels hung from the ceiling (Gordon 14). Lingering symbols of the *ancien regime* and eerie gothic architecture, brimming with religious imagery, contrasted the gruesome violence and moral disarray of the Naturalistic horror performed there. It is crucial to understand the physical location of the Guignol within Paris as the Theatre, as both the literal building and the content performed, represented an epicentre of the immense social, scientific, political, and artistic transformations of the time. The Theatre du Grand Guignol epitomizes a microcosm of the broader historical, technological, and theatrical changes during its 65 years in operation. This analysis will examine these shifting ideas through the rise of the Guignol in 1897 amid Third Republic France and Naturalism, the height of the Theatre under Andre de Lorde, and the emerging field of psychobiology, culminating in the fall of the Guignol in the wake of WWII and the rise of the cinema.

The Theatre du Grand Guignol established itself at a time of upheaval for France. Surrounded by the historical shifts of *fin de siecle* France, the popularity of *faits divers*, and the birth of Naturalism, the Guignol encapsulates the changes of the time. By the end of the 19th century, French people were "defeated, occupied, ransomed, and reduced" (Goubert 266) by the short but calamitous Franco-Prussian War of 1870, leading to the Paris Commune of 1871. This paroxysm of vacillating power structures eventually led to the installation of the Third Republic, a system rattled by mediocre scandals, anarchist attacks, and "ferocious anticlericalism" (271). The end of the 19th century under the Third Republic was characterized by an overall "[lack of] confidence" (276) in the worth of the colonies and a denouncement of colonial undertakings. Many French people were not interested in the colonial project. They were critical of the disputes over colonial territory, the expropriation of indigenous resources and labour, and capital being sent to far-off lands. However, it is crucial to note that colonial undertakings became popular after soldiers provided by the colonies helped France in WWI (277). France's colonial project

became immense and significantly impacted its history and government in the following decades (303-6).

French sentiments at the time allowed the Guignol to present Naturalistic horror and bourgeoisie critiques with moderate success. The rampant anticlericalism consuming the French people under the Third Republic attracted audiences to the Guignol; the moral depravity of violence and sexuality, backdropped by the religiously charged atmosphere, embodied the feelings of the time. The popularity of *faits divers*, short anecdotal stories based on the grisly, gory true crime of the Paris underbelly, inspired the "tragic and absurd" (Jullien 68) plots of the early Guignol. The opprobrium of colonialism welcomed the natural depiction of "the bestial nature of humanity under post-colonial capitalism" (Jurković 5-6) offered by the macabre horrors and socially critical comedies of the Theatre. The protective frame of unreality provided by the Theatre allowed the intimate staging of human monstrosity to limit the disconnect between the audience and the crime performed, turning the spectator from a viewer into a witness and potential perpetrator of the crime. The "depiction of what is" (Zola qtd. in Jurković 5) supplied by Naturalism and the real-life inspiration of *faits divers*, in combination with the proximal staging, permitted the audience to "discover the monster hidden deep inside" (Jurković 2) themselves. The French sentiments under the Third Republic, their thirst for violence exhibited by the popularity of *fait divers*, and the phlegmatic character of Naturalism all fuse to establish a path of success for the Theatre du Grand Guignol.

Unlike Naturalism, which withered in the face of the brutal senselessness of World War One, the Theatre du Grand Guignol began to peak in popularity before and during WWI, and held fast in the following interwar period. Encapsulating everything that made the Guignol so successful at this time was the playwright, Andre de Lorde. De Lorde, also known as the Prince of Terror, was fascinated with the macabre from a young age when he realized that what he "envisioned in his mind's eye" would always be more terrifying than the "sight of an actual corpse" (Gordon 21). Writing for the Guignol from 1901 to 1926, the Prince of Terror took Naturalism, which sought to turn the stage into a laboratory of human experimentation, to its natural zenith, being one of the first playwrights to stage the action in operating

rooms, insane asylums, and laboratories; turning Naturalism's metaphorical laboratory of emotional experimentation into a literal lab of human experimentation. The Naturalism of the Guignol survived the death of the movement in WWI by merging the realism and complex human behaviour proposed by Naturalism with the sensationalism and predictability of melodrama. In de Lorde's words, the key to spectacular and enduring horror was the combination of "unbridled imagination and imperturbable logic, the fusion of nightmare and truth" (qtd. in Gordon 114). In his frequent collaborations with scientists and psychologists, de Lorde achieved the fusion of reality and horrific imagination in a new subgenre of the Theatre of Horror, the *Théâtre médical*, to great success. In de Lorde's works of maliciousmedical madness, the Guignol embodied the fears of the time.

Advancements in medicine and psychiatry marked the early 20th century. This time saw a diversification of the field of psychiatry into psychoanalysis, psychosomatics, and, most notably for the Guignol, psychobiology. Psychobiology embraced radical treatments of a physical nature, such as malaria fever treatment, insulin-shock therapy, the use of chemical convulsive agents, electroconvulsive shock therapy, leucotomy, and prefrontal lobotomies (Duffin 327-29). It was through these extreme experiments, carried out on vulnerable residents of ineffectual insane asylums, that the "most successful formula" (Jurković 12) for horror performed at the Guignol was developed. De Lorde perfected the marriage of logical fears with his morbid imagination to create immensely popular horror theatre. The vicious and frightening real-life-inspired medical horrors played out against the backdrop of the insane asylum displayed a new kind of monstrosity.

De Lorde's collaborations with actual scientists and psychiatrists injected a new level of complexity and realism into his drama. Exploring experimental psychiatry's problems in sanitoriums, de Lorde discovered the inherent bestial nature of the system to which man is subordinate. The nature of diagnosing mental illness in which a person displays abnormal behaviours is socially constructed and thus is often used to abuse and exert social control. Insane asylums were imposing buildings meant to symbolize the stature, power, and authority held by the system under which they operated. This system could hold patients "indefinitely" and administer "punitive treatments"

(Duffin 316). Those who ran the institution enjoyed the "absolute power" they held over the inhabitants and the immunity they had from the "courts and police" (316). De Lorde recognized the underlying horror of the system of asylums in which a person was deprived of freedom without a scrap of control over their lives. In de Lorde's theatrical environment of medicine and science, the monster no longer appeared "just in the form of a man or a being with monstrous features, but the system [itself]" (Jurković 10). In de Lorde's plays, such as *The Horrible Experiment* (1909), *The Laboratory of Hallucinations* (1916), and *Crime in a Madhouse* (1925), the monstrosity lies not only in the demented doctors but the entire system, allowing the sadistic violence to germinate.

The Prince of Terror's new horror genre exemplifies the prevalent fears of the time. The Guignol was successful in the interwar period because the Theatre of Horror was most popular during chaotic times. The industrialization of death introduced by WWI expanded the Guignol's lexicon of gruesomeness, trading in their pistols and daggers for poison gas and surgical instruments. The catastrophic human cost of WWI drove French audiences to seek comfort in the protective frame of unreality provided by the Guignol, to be reassured that the malicious violence on stage was just a representation. Ironically, WWII's inventive inhumanity would be the Guignol's downfall.

The events of WWII triggered the drawn-out death of the Guignol in 1962. The Guignol had a brief period of prosperity in the late 30s that quickly decayed in the wake of the 1940 German invasion of France. The invasion resulted in the unequivocal demise of the Third Republic and the "quasi-monarchical regime" (Goubert 295) of Vichy France. The authoritarian puppet state installed a new moral order that departed from the anticlericalism and parliamentary supremacy of the previous government. Vichy France demanded the glorification of the family, the sacrosanctity of work, and the veneration of organized religion while prohibiting any electoral system (295)—a considerable departure from the Third Republic tenets which allowed the Guignol to succeed. Like Vichy France, the Guignol gained a reputation for collaboration with the Nazis during the occupation. No longer were the audiences at 20 rue Chaptal millionaires and royalty but instead non-French speaking enemy troops; tremendously bad optics for the Theatre in the post-war period. Mirroring the "drained economy" (301) of France

under German occupation and post-WWII, the Guignol's finances fell into ruin. However, it was the reality of extreme torture under the Nazis which would hammer the final nail in the coffin for the Guignol.

In the aftermath of WWII, the Guignol lost its unique identity as a place that produced fantastic violence in a Naturalistic style. The havoc and disorder experienced by the French people during WWII left them traumatized and the only way for them to cope was through viewing "hideous events" (Gordon 31). However, thanks to the lived reality of Nazi atrocities, they no longer desired the protective frame of unreality imparted by the Theatre. Books, magazines, and documentaries immortalizing actual Nazi death camps and medical experiments made the plots of the Guignol tame in comparison. What de Lorde and writers like him "envisioned in [their] mind's eye" (21) was no longer more frightening than reality. De Lorde's plays, once so gruesome the Theatre's on-call doctor averaged two faintings a night, were now relegated to "pseudo-atrocities" (31). The imagination displayed on stage, formerly thought impossibly horrendous, did not hold a candle to the horrific truth expressed during the war. A grim reality that was easily accessible through relaxing film censorship laws and the propagation of nickelodeons, all of which allowed copious showings of Nazi atrocities. Charles Nonon, the final director of the Theatre du Grand Guignol, said succinctly, "We could never equal Buchenwald" (qtd. in Gordon 33). Although the Guignol did not close its doors until November 1962, its death began with the monstrous maliciousness of WWII and the extreme reality presented in archival footage, two things the Theatre could never hope to rival.

The Theatre du Grand Guignol may have died a quiet death in 1962, but the inventive plots of horror and bloody effects live on. The horrors of WWII sparked the Guignol's downfall, but the loosening of censorship laws in the film industry reduced it to ashes. The film industry may have inadvertently killed the Guignol, but it still carries a distinct impression from the Theatre, a quality of Grand-Guignolesque. The essence of the Guignol is present in the "intimate and claustrophobic" (DeGiglio-Bellemare 25) nature of horror films and the ability to not only witness, but feel the gruesomeness being depicted. The Guignol leaves its mark in both performance style and bloody special effects. The Guignol was not only the historic

building at 20 rue Chaptal but also an enduring horror genre. The Grand-Guignolesque piece of horror, theatre or cinema, recognizes the structures seen before: you know what will happen when someone explores an unknown noise, and yet it still will manage to scare you. The Theatre itself is gone, closed in 1962 and demolished in 1963, but the Guignol spirit continues to haunt and inspire today's horror.

The Theatre du Grand Guignol epitomizes a microcosm of the broader historical, technological, and theatrical changes during its 65 years. It embodies this through the rise of the Theatre amid Third Republic France and Naturalism, the height of the Guignol under Andre de Lorde, backgrounded by the emergence of psychobiology, and its demise in the wake of WWII and the rise of cinema. Studying the Guignol and the horror it inspires is crucial because its bestialness is an integral part of the human condition, as seen in the enduring nature of violent entertainment. As de Lorde relays, when all of humanity is stripped away, "nothing human [is] left except suffering" (qtd. in Gordon 185).

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