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0521619866 - Theatre of Chaos: Beyond Absurdism, into Orderly Disorder

William W. Demastes

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Theatre of Chaos

In this unique and invigorating study, chaos theory and quantum mechanics are employed as the basis for a clearer understanding of the often confusing contemporary theatre world. Examining numerous antecedents to contemporary thought on chaos and the cultural roots of the notion of chaos, William Demastes suggests links to playwrights ranging from Shakespeare and Ibsen to Tom Stoppard, Sam Shepard, and Tony Kushner. The author investigates parallel developments across the arts and sciences: connections between the dramatic naturalism of the late nineteenth century and Newtonian thought, for example, and theatre of the absurd and chaos theory.

After centuries of isolation and increased specialization, Demastes contends, it may once again be time to consider the “arts” and “sciences” together and to acknowledge their interrelations. These intersections confirm that “orderly disorder” is displacing a far more rigid and less viable system of knowing our world, and ushering in a rich, varied, and forward-looking theory of existence for contemporary society.

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A. A violent order is disorder; and

B. A great disorder is an order.

These two things are one.

Wallace Stevens, "Connoisseur of
Chaos"

For what is the heart but a sort of – A
sort of – *instrument* – that translates
noise into *music*, chaos into
order. . . .

Tennessee Williams, *Camino Real*

A door like this has cracked open
five or six times since we got up on
our hind legs. It's the best possible
time to be alive, when almost
everything you thought you knew is
wrong.

Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*

It's the end of the world as we know
it, and I feel fine.

R.E.M.

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PREFACE

Awash in Chaos

“THE WHOLE WORLD’S in a state o’ chassis,” bemoans Captain Boyle in Sean O’Casey’s 1924 classic *Juno and the Paycock*. Boyle’s 1922 Dublin was in fact a world of chaos and turbulence, but Boyle, his sidekick Joxer, and all of Dublin (except perhaps Juno) seem bound by a mindset that sees only the tragedy in this disorderly “state o’ chassis,” failing to envision that rising disorder paves the way for opportunities of change, relocation, and improvement. Disorderly “chassis” provides an opportunity O’Casey seems to have wanted his fellow countrymen to realize and grasp.

Even today, chaos is terrifying for those longing for the ordered, “simple” life of stability and constancy, especially given the prevailing cultural assumption that chaos is the absence of order, order’s polar opposite. However, if one looks at order and disorder/chaos not so much as either/or propositions but as places on an order-to-disorder (and disorder-to-order) continuum, then the almost irrational fear of disorder/chaos becomes a surmountable cultural phobia. It is not necessarily a case of black or white wherein one has either order or disorder in one’s life. Rather, one can look at existence as resting upon a sliding scale of varying degrees of order and disorder, where one extreme of complete order is little more than unendurable static tedium and the other extreme of complete disorder is nothing but random frenzy, equally unendurable. The vast middle ground between the two extremes is where life occurs and what makes life worth living.

This adjustment to an appreciation of orderly disorder entails a terminological adjustment as well. Captain Boyle uses “chaos” as our culture generally uses it, as equivalent to and synonymous with disorder and randomness. This use, however, is a relatively recent one in the course of human events, centuries old, perhaps, but not at all millennia old or objectively irreducible. History shows us that chaos need not necessarily be synonymous with randomness and disorder, and the term need not have the negative connotation we currently attribute to it. In many premodern cultures, chaos was often seen as the soup of energy out of which change, creativity, and hope have sprung. While most of us would agree that a world of inexplicable randomness would be unendurable, a world of chaos need not be dreaded, provided, of course, that we re-vision chaos and look upon it as it was once perceived.

In fact, after centuries of seeing chaos as the exact opposite of order, contemporary Western civilization is once again beginning to adjust its vision to see chaos as a place of opportunity, a site of interactive disorder generating new orders and of order transforming to regenerative disorder. Chaos is increasingly being seen – again – as a dynamic blending of disorder *and* order, not as the entropic, final result of *degeneration* but as embodying the loop and cycle of constant generation, degeneration, and regeneration. To the static “being” of order and the eruptive “nonbeing” of randomness has been included a vast middle realm, the “becoming” of chaos.

For most of us, however, all of this very likely seems little more than the rantings of lunatics, lovers, and poets, heartened by the touching but impractical thought that much madness is divinest sense. We have heard this all before but have yet to fathom its fundamental reality. Significantly, the twentieth century has spawned yet another group of men and women that perhaps should be added to the list of lunatics, lovers, and poets. That least likely of groups is scientists, especially a growing band of thinkers known as chaoticians who are now challenging the static Newtonianism that seems always to have existed and that has so thoroughly demonized the notion of chaos.

With the advent of thermodynamic studies, quantum physics, and ultimately chaos theory, scientists have mounted a challenge to the static visions of existence we have so long *desired* to verify and validate. These new scientists are demonstrating – rationally

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and empirically – that our desire for stability is tantamount to a rejection of natural dynamics themselves and amounts to little more than a desire for death, the consummate stability. Life, these scientists argue, is a soup of vitality demanding change and functioning in rich patterns of nonlinear creativity. Theirs is a neo-Romantic vision that challenges the “Newtonian” world governed by a strictly linear causality, which asserts a world of invariance and which ultimately results in a vision of an unchanging “Eden” where every day is like the next and where individuation is ultimately impossible.

Echoing a distant premodern vision, nonlinearity, these new scientists argue, is what best describes our world. Between the extremes of order and disorder lies a vast middle realm that embraces a certain stability as it also promotes change. The stability we experience is a temporary matter, not a culmination but part of a process of ascent and decline as time progresses. Because this stability is temporary and nonlinear, it is not as invariable as order’s linearity, but neither is it random as pure disorder is. We have orderly disorder. This is what the new scientists call “chaos”: nature’s pursuit of patterns of order amid a constant sea/constancy of change and reorder.

This vision of chaos is not fundamentally a new one; what is new is that our new twentieth-century prophets – those men and women whom we today trust rationally and empirically to describe truth and reality and whom we call scientists – are validating for us (at least for those requiring such validation) the visions of lunatics, lovers, and poets. They are recovering ideas from the marginalized realms of culture and placing them once again on center stage. This time, however, the ideas are supported not by magic and mystery but by the very sciences that once relegated them to the margins. Validation, clarification, and demarginalization are these scientists’ contributions, for what their work in the latter half of the twentieth century has given us is an opportunity to “test,” understand, and more clearly articulate these visions, not via a return to premodern mystery but through a full engagement of postmodern machinery. Catching up to the arts and formally validating their suggestions as the sciences now appear to be doing, the results could very well lead to an interdisciplinary reintegration of the arts and sciences through a large feedback loop wherein one discipline helps to crystallize the musings of the other, and vice versa.

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This book looks at numerous antecedents to contemporary thought on chaos, at the cultural roots of the notion of chaos, and at the new sciences themselves (including thermodynamic studies, quantum physics, and chaotics). It then focuses the resulting observations on several selected events in contemporary Western theatre. The aim is to demonstrate a crucial twentieth-century interconnectedness of thought between the various disciplines that help to promote critically essential and vitally new cultural visions of existence.

While the recent “new” sciences have moved along a path of nonlinearity, so have the arts, each in ways initially conceived of as unique and distinct. A close look reveals that parallel concepts found in the arts and sciences suggest a meeting of minds that must be more than coincidental. Admittedly, quantum physicists like Werner Heisenberg use theatrical metaphors to describe their work. And playwrights like Tom Stoppard occasionally actually discuss chaos theory in their plays. But the actual depth of the interconnections is rarely acknowledged, perhaps because it is so rarely directly evident. However, while the various connections may not be direct, parallel developments suggest implicit, culturally prevalent synaptic cross-wirings utilizing a network of cultural connectors that dart bits of information from one discipline to the other and guarantee that the “separate” paths will eventually merge and then continue on parallel trajectories. Put another way, there appear to be nonlinear influences interaffecting the arts and sciences themselves, assuring an orderly, almost parallel progress even amid seeming disorder. While this study does have opportunity to observe direct links, often the connections are far more tenuous. While Stoppard will provide two crucial opportunities to see self-conscious interaction at work, the efforts of other playwrights are less directly connected to the science movement.

It is on these independently derived points of coincidence that perhaps even greater value should be placed, for while emulation has its unquestioned virtues, elucidation and validation through an apparently entirely separate creative process seem even more significant, if for no other reason than the apparently mystifying parallelism. With the new science articulations, however, such mystification begins to reveal rational, defensible foundations. The “mystery” of parallel thought that this study documents can in part be explained by the coincidences of that thought springing

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from mutually experienced single cultural influences and focusing on a single subject – “nature.” Given that both artists and scientists strive to understand nature, and given that points of curiosity and matrices of approach are culturally influenced, it only makes sense that they will at least occasionally hit upon parallel conclusions.

With these parallels in mind, this study will also confront the related point that the work of the scientist and that of the artist are not as distinct as they are fabled to be. Because of recent breakthroughs in thinking about the scientific process, even traditional scientists are beginning to accept the proposition that culturally predicated influences affect their work and that inspiration has its place in the lab. Likewise, the contemporary notion of the artist as an isolated, self-inspired, almost renegade thinker requires adjustment. Artists, too, are culturally influenced. In essence, after centuries of isolation and increased specialization, it may once again be time to consider the “arts” and “sciences” as allied enterprises and to acknowledge interrelationships between them similar to the accepted blendings of the arts and humanities in the “natural philosophy” that preceded the triumph of eighteenth-century Newtonianism.

Traditional Newtonianism – in fact and in inclination – is the thing chaotics challenges, both in the new sciences and in the arts. In the sciences, Newtonian thought has been the modern cornerstone, rigorous in its causal assumptions, asserting a strict, inescapable linear interaction between events and objects, arguing for a precise and inescapable universal order. But as scientific developments cracked away at Newtonian order and confidence, a growing concern arose that order and meaning could only be replaced by disorder, meaninglessness, absurdism. Chaotics swings the pendulum back to an acceptable middle ground in that it denies the extreme “meaningful” order of linearly comprehensible Newtonianism but it also rejects the extreme visions of an embracing random, incomprehensible disorder.

So, too, with the recent history of the theatre. Dramatic naturalism of the late nineteenth century created a theatrical dynasty of technique and philosophy based on a strict Newtonian causal order that could be seen as the culmination of Aristotelian thought itself. When that tight, ordered vision began to show its cracks, the theatre of the absurd produced an evolved vision of the universe as

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being “governed” by total randomness, which at its best equated such randomness with the existentialist concept of freedom unfettered by objective truths. While theatre of chaos agrees with the absurd and denies the linear order of naturalism, it also in part sides with naturalism by challenging the randomness of the absurd. Like the chaotics of science, it espouses a vision of dynamic interaction leading to orderly disorder.

One may sense that theatre of chaos is not any more new than chaotics in general is new. To a large degree this point is true, as evidence of a chaotics theatre surfaces among the Greeks and Elizabethans as well as among other pre-twentieth-century theatre venues. What we have come upon in the twentieth century, however, is a precise means to articulate a vision that has been aging and ripening for centuries, awaiting the right cultural moment to be brought out of the cellars. Like chaotics, which derives from a long history of scientific thought, theatre of chaos, though technically postabsurdist and postnaturalist, is really more a theatre path – one of many the theatre has taken – that one can follow back to Thespis himself, who rose out of the security of the Chorus into the great unknown of individuation, bored with ordered security and risking disorder to investigate the possibility of new orders.

It is my hope that this book will succeed as a “prolegomenon” to future speculations on the nature of chaos, science, and the arts. I should emphasize that chaotics is not a conception that needs to be limited to twentieth-century studies. Although I focus on a very limited group of twentieth-century playwrights, I hope it becomes increasingly apparent that chaos theory extends well beyond my subjects and indeed well beyond theatre, into other arts disciplines as well, elucidating that which has often been thought but perhaps never so well expressed.

Finally, and most significantly, these ventures into chaotics should lead to even larger feedback loops, incorporating more than just science and the arts and expanding to include individual and cultural patterns of understanding and behavior as well. Instead of bemoaning a “world o’ chassiss,” perhaps we can evolve attitudes that embrace orderly disorder as inevitable states of nature that we must learn culturally to emulate. Rather than longing for returns to idyllic orders that very likely never existed, we can adjust to embrace dynamically variable orders. Instead of isolating ourselves in insular, static orders, perhaps we can grow to

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learn the universality of a new sort of ordering system and thereby eliminate constricting nationalism, racism, sexism. Perhaps we can all learn to be more like lunatics, lovers, and poets – and scientists – and perhaps the world will be a better place for it.