

Bertolt Brecht's epic theater: Fostering critical thought and social transformation

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Abstract

Bertolt Brecht was a renowned playwright, poet, and theater director known for his pioneering work in developing Epic Theater. One of the central concepts in Brecht's Epic Theater is the Alienation Effect. He aimed to distance the audience from the emotional and empathetic engagement with the characters on stage. Instead of allowing the audience to passively identify with the characters, he wanted to make them think critically about the social and political issues presented in the play. This was achieved through various techniques like actors breaking the fourth wall, using placards, and highlighting the artificiality of the performance. Brecht's plays were deeply rooted in the historical and social context of his time. He often used historical settings and characters to comment on contemporary issues, drawing parallels between the past and present. Brecht's Epic Theater was didactic in nature. He believed that theater should not only entertain but also educate the audience. His plays were often overtly political, addressing social injustices, class struggle, and the consequences of capitalism. Brecht wanted his theater to serve as a tool for social change and consciousness-raising. Brecht rejected the traditional Aristotelian dramatic structure, which emphasized a linear narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Instead, he used episodic structures that fragmented the narrative, making it easier for the audience to see the broader social and political issues at play. In summary, Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theater was characterized by its commitment to critical engagement, historical and social context, political didacticism, and innovative theatrical techniques. His artistic personality was shaped by his desire to use theater as a tool for raising awareness, fostering critical thinking, and advocating for social and political transformation.

Keywords: Alienation Effect (Verfremdungseffekt), Historical Context, Non-Aristotelian Dramatic Structure, Epic Theater Techniques.

1. Introduction

Bertolt Brecht serves as an exemplary author who keenly navigates the intricate currents of politics, economy, and society within his contemporary era. He scrupulously observes these phenomena, offering a perceptive commentary. Brecht, however, maintains a distinctive approach by both engaging with and distancing himself from these issues. He simultaneously concurs, dissents, and opposes these societal aspects, preserving this opposition in both the thematic content and aesthetic structure of his works.

From a young age, Brecht exhibited a penchant for concise and lucidly expressed social critique. His early dissent, originating from his hometown of Augsburg, did not primarily target the class divisions in society but rather represented a youthful rebellion against the prevailing social norms of his time. He harbored disdain for the compulsory donning of sailor suits by boys, the regimented military parades during princely birthdays, obligatory piano and violin lessons, familial authoritarianism, paternal outbursts, and his mother's inclination to prioritize peace out of fear, all of

which constituted a form of upbringing through coercion.

The author's relationship with his hometown has always been marked by ambivalence, and the same can be said for his feelings toward Berlin. Initially, he held a negative view of Berlin, dubbing it "cold Chicago," where he perceived a cutthroat environment where people jostled, disdained, and overwhelmed one another. However, following his permanent move to Berlin in 1924, he became enmeshed in this bustling urban milieu, ultimately emerging as a successful author. Nonetheless, Brecht's aspirations transcended mere applause from the Berlin theater audience.

In the early stages of his creative career, the influence of contemporary expressionism is evident, as well as the precedents of the burgeoning "Storm and Momentum" movement and the young playwright Georg Büchner. However, this idealistic pathos of expressionism was soon supplanted by a critical perspective in Brecht's work.

2. Epic Theater: Brecht's Vision of Engaging Feeling and Reason

Bertolt Brecht, a renowned theater innovator, is the progenitor of a groundbreaking theatrical concept known as "epic theater." This theatrical approach diverges significantly from the traditional Aristotelian model. Brecht defines his theater as "dialectical theater," merging philosophical concepts with the art of theater. However, it's important to note that Brecht's epic theater doesn't form a systematically structured theory but rather comprises a collection of interconnected thoughts and incipient ideas revolving around core concepts.

Brecht's concept of epic theater isn't encapsulated in a single, finalized text. Instead, he initiated this endeavor as early as 1939 with a project titled "Messingkauf." This project aimed to elucidate the fundamentals of epic theater through dialogues involving a philosopher and several theater experts. It was designed to encompass poetry, theatrical scenes, and essays. Regrettably, this work remained incomplete, despite Brecht's intermittent efforts to develop it throughout his lifetime.

An important part of this concept is the text "On experimental theater," which has been used as a general introduction to the theory of epic theater. Also, the "Small Organon for the Theater" is another text that contains an extract of material from the "Messingkauf" and was used as a means of introducing the actors to the idea of epic theater.

Brecht's main concept in epic theater is its differentiation from the Aristotelian model of theater. This distinction includes some basic features of the epic theater, which are analyzed in his texts, confronting them with the Aristotelian model of the theater.

Bertolt Brecht is the only one among the modern epic-dramatic authors who accompanied his work with theoretical writings. These theoretical writings include not only a dramaturgy of modern drama, but also a complete theory of the theater in general, to which Brecht brought all his experience as a playwright, director and ideologist. Although his theoretical writings take his "epic theatre" as their point of departure, they do not treat theatrical experiences in isolation. Let us analyze in this chapter the connection of his theatrical practice with the theory formulated by him.

It is well known that at a young age Brecht was influenced by the work and efforts of the director Ervin Piscator for the "Proletarian Theater", with whom he collaborated for some time. As Piscator himself writes: "*Vielleicht ist die ganze Art meiner Regie nur entstanden aus einem Manko der dramatischen Produktion*" / "*Perhaps this whole way of directing of mine was born as a result of a lack of dramatic creativity.*"¹

¹ Piscator, Erwin; *Das politische Theater*, Berlin 1929, p. 128.

Perhaps this is exactly one reason that encouraged this kind of dramaturgical creativity, similar in form to Brechtian theater. The new vision for the world and the great change that took place in the world after the communist revolution required a theater that for a number of reasons did not match Aristotelian dramaturgy. As we have mentioned above, certain scenes brought back in time had to be presented in the social and political context, with a general vision, instead of being fragmented as the Aristotelian drama requires. Another reason lies in the demand for a pedagogical theater, if we can call it that, which with the help of commentary goes in the direction of education. The time also required an objective, scientific theater that rises beyond the individual, which found realization in epic dramaturgy. The excitement for this type of theater probably started with Piskatori's theater, but it definitely reached its shape in thought and artistic value with Brecht. In his theoretical writing "Small organ for the theater" Brecht lays the foundations of his new vision of the world, inspired by Marxist theory. In this text he also describes the new function of the theater in the conditions of social reorganization.

According to Brecht, the epic dramatist uses different events and situations separated from place and time, putting them in a certain context for the spectator. It makes it possible to present events in their simultaneity, being able to repeat the action and see it from another point of view, interrupting and commenting on the event. It is precisely this freedom in relation to the material it deals with, the opportunity it creates to comment, that makes epic dramaturgy more suitable for the new visionary theater.

In the notes for the opera "The Rise and Fall of the Mahogany City" Brecht contrasts the dramatic and the epic, where as he points out:

*"Dieses Schema zeigt nicht absolute Gegensätze, sondern lediglich Akzentverschiebungen. / This scheme does not show absolute opposition, but only shifts of emphasis."*²

Dramatic form of theater	The epic form of theater
action	story
Inclusion of the spectator in the scenic action.	It makes the spectator critical but
consumes his activation	wakes up its activation
allows him to feel	demands judgment from him
evocation	worldview
the spectator enters the event	is placed in front of the event
suggestion	argument
feelings are conserved	they are provoked to understand
the spectator in the center, experiences	the spectator opposite, studies
man is considered known	man as an object of study
the unchanging man	adaptable and changeable human
pressure	tension during the performance
one scene for another	each scene on its own
growth	montage
linear development	in a curve
evolution inevitability	leaps or jumps
the fixed man	Man as a process
thought determines existence	Social existence determines consciousness.
feeling	Reason

This juxtaposition has more to do with the way events are presented. Regarding the opposition "feeling - reason", which has also sparked a large number of discussions,

² Brecht, B: Schriften zum Theater, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M 2000, p. 19.

Brecht clarifies that it is not about giving up emotions. I think this opposition should be seen and analyzed perhaps in relation to the goals of Brechtian theatre.

Brecht's epic theater aims to engage the audience's critical thinking and active participation, and the "feeling - reason" dialectic is a means to achieve this.

In Brecht's theater, emotions are not eliminated but rather harnessed to create a critical distance. Instead of allowing the audience to become completely absorbed in the characters' emotions (as in traditional theater), Brecht seeks to make the audience aware of the emotional manipulation happening on stage. This awareness prompts viewers to think critically about the social and political issues presented in the play. So, in the Brechtian context, "feeling" refers to the emotional response that the audience should experience, but it's meant to be accompanied by "reason," which encourages the audience to question, analyze, and reflect upon those emotions and the broader themes of the play. This approach challenges the passive consumption of emotions and narratives often associated with conventional theater.

In summary, the opposition between "feeling" and "reason" in Brecht's theater is a deliberate strategy to engage the audience's intellect and promote active critical engagement with the material, rather than simply evoking emotional reactions.

In this context, Ernst Bloch's definition holds true, in which Brecht's drama is characterized as an educational drama, and Brechtian theater is described as a "paradigmatic institution." However, it would be a misconception to perceive it as a form of simplistic school drama. On the contrary, this educational theater is of a philosophical and enlightening nature. Bloch emphasizes that Brechtian theater does not present the audience with pre-packaged answers and examples. Instead, the audience views Brechtian theater more as a "rehearsal" using a model from which to learn. Brecht's plays take diverse paths, presenting unique cases for discussion and serving as a "laboratory for blending theory with practice," where experiments occur without dramatic consequences, and various alternatives are continually explored. It's worth noting that the Marxist perspective guides the direction of these experiments.³

3. Brecht's Vision: Theater as a Provocative Tool for Social and Intellectual Transformation

In the "Small organ for the theater" Brecht describes this theater as a kind of "workshop in which the sketching of society is practiced, being able to influence it". In addition, Brechtian theater serves to stimulate and exercise the process of "thinking". Many of Brecht's plays raise problems but do not provide solutions, which has made them the object of Stalinist criticism. So, for example, the drama "The Good Man of Secuan" is interrupted right at the climax of the conflict, the main character appears in front of the audience asking about the solution. Likewise, mother Kurajo is not made aware of her mistakes at the end of the drama and the piece does not show the audience a solution, but Brecht expresses the opinion that seeing the behavior of mother Kurajo, the public can learn from this example.

*"...wenn jedoch die Courage weiter nichts lernt – das Publikum kann, meiner Ansicht nach, dennoch etwas lernen, sie betrachtend. / ... if Courage continues to learn nothing, then, in my view, the audience might learn something by confronting him."*⁴

³ Bloch, Ernst: Das Prinzip Hoffnung, Berlin 1953, Bd. 1, p. 441.

⁴ Brecht, B.: Anmerkungen zur Mutter Courage, p.49.

It seems clear that Brecht intends to provide stimulus in the direction of thinking. Its parts serve the development of consciousness. "The Three penny Opera" (1928) and "The Rise and Fall of Mahogany City" (1928/29) were Brecht's first confrontations with epic dramaturgy, and specifically in these two parts with "Epic Opera". Initially there was a gap between the author's intentions and the public's perception. This clearly showed that Brecht's theater requires a prepared audience to perceive the piece in the way the author wants and intended. At the first performance of the "The Three penny Opera", the audience, accustomed to performances of a different nature, did not receive the appropriate stimulation to analyze the presented event, but received it directly. Parody is the main device that Brecht uses in it. By putting theses and expressions of a civic and Christian character in the mouths of criminals, the author alienates these theses. He emphasizes the epic development of the action through ironic writings, which are realized through tables, projections, etc. The epic style had a funny and provocative effect, but did not emphasize the ideological aspect, which did not fulfill the author's intention, and therefore the play underwent several revisions.

In the opera "The Rise and Fall of Mahogany City" Brecht presents the model of a negative utopia of capitalist society. The events take place in Mahogany, a fictional town in North America at the beginning of the 20th century. On their way to the coast where they would find gold, three crooks get stranded in a deserted area, where they decide to set up a city of entertainment, called Mahogany, where the rich would enjoy the bars and brothels and in return leave here their money. Peace and harmony should reign in this city. The city entices with "seven days without working", with "Gin and Whiskey", with "girls and boys", while life everywhere is different: "Überall gibt es Mühe und Arbeit / Aber hier gibt es Spaß. / *Everywhere there is work and toil / Here there is fun.*"⁵

Victims of deception become all those who do not like life in big cities, the "disaffected of the continents" who want to live in the "paradise city". Four lumberjacks come here to enjoy life with the money saved from their hard work. But even Mahogany knows a crisis like all big enterprises:

*"den Haifischen wird es mit der Zeit langweilig, die Paradiesenstadt gibt ihnen nichts mehr / over time the sharks get bored, paradise city doesn't give them anything anymore."*⁶

Spokesman for the disappointed is Paul Akerman, who mentions the many prohibitive rules as a reason for not fulfilling the claims to be happy. Paul's displeasure reaches its peak when he learns news of the approach of a typhoon that threatens the city. He discovers the law of human happiness which is expressed under the motto "permitted". The only thing that is not allowed in this city is not having money. Before the destruction by the typhoon, he makes it clear to the people through a song that the greatest destruction comes from the people themselves.

*"Wir brauchen keinen Hurrikan / Wir brauchen keinen Taifun / Denn was er an Schrecken tun kann/ Das können wir selber tun." / "We don't need a hurricane / We don't need a typhoon / The horror he can cause / we do more to ourselves."*⁷

Many cities are destroyed by the typhoon, but surprisingly Mahogany is saved and the fun life continues as before in this city. But the character Paul forgets the famous law, the only limitation of unlimited freedom: "everything is allowed only when you have money". One day, when he has no more money to pay, he finds himself in front

⁵ Brecht, B.: *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, Suhrkamp Frankfurt; Berlin 2013, p. 19.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

of the court and he no longer even has the support of his friends and girlfriend. He is found guilty of the “great crime” of “lack of money” and sentenced to death. The opera ends with Mahagon’s descent into chaos. As the city burns, those who have not yet suffered demonstrate in the streets, unprepared for their ideals and the progress of the “money age”, and no one can be saved. As the finale of the work, wanting to emphasize that everything is a game, Brecht has chosen the words: *“Denn Mahagonny das gibt es nicht. Denn Mahagonny das ist kein Ort. Denn Mahagonny ist nur ein erfundenes Wort. / Because Mahogany does not exist. Because Mahogany is not a place. Mahogany is just an invented word.”*⁸

In the presentation of Mahogany, Brecht starts from a concrete political situation, which is presented as an anarchy that comes from the defects that this society has and that make it so vulnerable to crisis. The world presented in Mahogany is a reflection of the capitalist world that the author saw at the beginning of the 20th century. The city had to resemble life. In Mahogany, the law of money rules and determines relationships between people. The new law was anarchy, theft, murder, treason, all of which are allowed in Mahogany.

From a formal point of view, Brecht relies on epic dramaturgy and again uses the same episodic tools as in “The Three penny Opera”, i.e. titles, projections, songs, etc. The work was created as a collaboration between Brecht and composer Kurt Weil and was intended as a polemic against traditional opera.

Brecht purposefully uses the opera, which is characterized as gender unrelated to reason, to criticize and parody the irrational social order of a society such as that presented in Mahogany City.

“Also sollte etwas Unvernünftiges, Unwirkliches und Unernstes, an die rechte Stelle gesetzt, sich selbst aufheben in doppelter Bedeutung. / Well, something unreasonable, unreal, untrue had to be put in the right place, so that it would stand out in a double meaning,” says Brecht in his notes on the piece.

A similar approach is also used in “The Three penny Opera” and other works, where reality is parodied by consciously addressing the “irrational” desires of the audience, pushing them to absurd extremes, and then correcting and placing them in the appropriate context within the parody. It’s somewhat akin to what we’ve seen in Pirandello, where the mask is presented as a mask and thus demystified.

In his other dramas, Brecht appears even more direct and provocative. He aims to exert a direct influence on amateur artists, intending to achieve the desired educational effect. According to Brecht, the audience that requires this type of theater consists of workers and students, whom he considers as that segment of society that needs to be educated through art. With this theory, Brecht aims to transform art into a pedagogical discipline.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, Bertolt Brecht’s concept of epic theater represents a unique and innovative approach to the world of theater. His vision was to create a form of theater that not only entertained but also engaged the audience’s intellect and emotions simultaneously. Brecht believed that traditional theater, which focused primarily on emotional identification with characters and situations, lacked the critical and analytical engagement necessary to provoke social and political change.

Brecht’s epic theater aimed to disrupt the passive consumption of theatrical

⁸ Brecht, B.: *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, Suhrkamp Frankfurt; Berlin 2006, p. 149.

experiences by the audience. Instead of allowing the audience to get lost in the emotions of the characters, he sought to make them conscious, critical, and reflective spectators. He achieved this through various techniques, such as the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), which aimed to distance the audience from the characters and the plot, encouraging them to think and analyze rather than passively empathize.

One of the key elements of Brecht's epic theater was the active involvement of the audience. He wanted the spectators to question, debate, and challenge what they saw on stage. By interrupting the narrative flow, using placards, songs, and projections, Brecht constantly reminded the audience that they were watching a performance and not reality. This intentional disruption forced them to engage their reason alongside their emotions.

The dichotomy between feeling and reason in Brecht's theater was not about discarding emotions but rather about balancing them with critical thinking. He believed that art could be emotionally stirring and intellectually stimulating simultaneously. Brecht wanted to create a theater that left a lasting impact on the audience, encouraging them to think about the social and political issues presented in the plays long after they left the theater.

In this way, Brecht's epic theater was not just a form of entertainment; it was a tool for social and political change. By engaging both feeling and reason, it aimed to provoke discussions, challenge the status quo, and inspire action. Brecht's vision of theater as a medium for both art and education continues to influence playwrights, directors, and performers worldwide, making his legacy enduring and impactful in the world of drama and theater.

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