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Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Structure

For Bertolt Brecht, the dramatic structure underlying any situation reflects the structure of social forces at work in society. Since Brecht was a Marxist living in an industrial capitalist nation, he understood these social forces as competing classes (although he also dealt with historical struggles, such as "science versus church," in his play Galileo). For Brecht, any narrative either disguises and obscures the structure of social forces, or reveals and exposes them. Brecht's drama aims to reveal and expose the social forces underlying everyday events.

Brecht distinguished his epic drama from the naturalist drama of the day, which he called "Aristotelean" but was actually Stanislavskian. Brecht attacked the "illusionism" of naturalist theater, which was based on the audience's empathetic response to the principal characters. Brecht believed that empathy destroyed the audience's critical capacity. He attacked empathy in theater by creating distance between the audience and the character, and between the actor and the person portrayed. He called this distance the "Alienation Effect" or "A-effect."

It is well known the contact between audience and stage is normally made on the basis of empathy. Conventional actors devote their efforts so exclusively to bringing about this psychological operation that they may be said to see it as the principle aim of their art. [I] have made it clear that the technique which produces an A-effect is the exact opposite of that which aims at empathy.

Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting"

Brecht's rejection of empathy did not result in his draining all emotion from the theater, although many of his readers mistook his intentions on this question.

It was only 'an unfortunate fact that [Brecht's] objection to empathy in art were taken as objections to feeling in art.'

Willet, "Messingkauf Editorial Note"

ACTOR: Does getting rid of empathy mean getting rid of every emotional element?

PHILOSOPHER: No, no. Neither the public nor the actor must be stopped from taking part emotionally; the representation of emotions must not be hampered, nor must the actor's use of emotions be frustrated.

Brecht, "Messingkauf Dialogues"

Brecht took to the theater because he saw it as a form of imitation. His theater *is* about reproduction, but it is a critical type of reproduction. His goal wasn't to make original stories, but to show things that are familiar and reveal the social forces behind them. He had to imitate events and at the same time "defamiliarize" them, or make them strange.

The task of epic theatre, Brecht believes, is not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions. But to 'represent' does not here signify 'reproduce' in the sense used by theoreticians of Naturalism. Rather, the first point at issue is to uncover those conditions. (One could just as well say: to make them strange.)

(Walter Benjamin 1966, 18-9)

The perfect case study for epic theater is the streetcorner scene (Brecht, 121-9). Brecht used the streetcorner scene as a method for training actors to work in epic theater. The participants are witnesses to an accident. Some have seen it, while some have only heard it. They disagree with each other about what happened. Some of the witnesses then demonstrate the actions of the driver or victim or both.

Brecht makes the following points about this kind of theater:

1. The demonstrator need not be an artist.
2. The capacities he needs to achieve his aim are in effect universal. Suppose he cannot carry out some particular movement as quickly as the victim he is imitating; all he need do is explain that he moves three times as fast, and the demonstration neither suffers in essentials nor loses its point.
3. On the contrary it is important that he not be too perfect. His demonstration would be spoilt if the bystanders' attention were to be drawn to his powers of transformation.
4. The street demonstrator's performance is essentially repetitive, but admits it is a demonstration (and does not pretend to be the actual event). The theater exposes its machinery.
5. The demonstrator has been through an 'experience', but he is not out to make his demonstration serve as an 'experience' for the audience.
6. The experience of the driver and the victim is only partially communicated by him, and he by no means tries to turn it into an enjoyable experience for the spectator.
7. He is not interested in creating pure emotions (i.e. he does not try to reproduce the fear caused by the accident).
8. The demonstration should have a socially practical significance (i.e. to show that a certain attitude on the part of driver or pedestrian – distracted? absent-minded?

aggressive? – makes an accident inevitable, or to fix responsibility).

9. The demonstrator need not imitate every aspect of his character's behavior, but only so much as gives a picture.
10. This type of theater has to acknowledge certain limitations. It must be able to justify any outlay in terms of its purpose. The demonstration may, for instance, be dominated by the question of compensation for the victim, etc.
11. This type of theater is not based on characters but on actions.
12. A key feature of epic theater is the interruption of representation by commentary. Wherever he feels he can, the demonstrator breaks off his imitation in order to give explanation. This interruption produces the "A-effect" by labeling the events as something striking and showing that they call for explanation.

Brecht includes a footnote that contrasts the epic theater with a satirical theater that imitates people for the sole purpose of comedy. Brecht is not against comedy, but he believes that both the sensible and senseless behaviors of a person, and the switch from one to the other, should be imitated. Brecht's purpose is to submit a complex scene to the audience for their judgment, which was always open to both positive and negative criticism. The audience may laugh, but Brecht's primary goal is to get the audience to submit an opinion.

Brecht on The Alienation-Effect:

The achievement of the A-effect constitutes something utterly ordinary, recurrent; it is just a widely practised way of drawing one's own or someone else's attention to a thing The A-effect consists in turning the object of which it is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected.

A common use of the A-effect is when someone says: 'Have you ever looked really closely at your watch?'

Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting"

The chief means of achieving the Alienation-effect is by interruption, the intrusion of one discourse into another.

The Epic Theatre makes use of interruption to produce the Alienation-effect.

It was...Piscator who first coined the term 'epic theatre,' which implied for him the inclusion of social and historical background within a production and led him to make

use within the theatrical performance of film (in the form of newsreel clips and cartoons), and of statistics and diagrams, narrators, music, and large choirs, and multiple settings.

(Eddershaw, 1996:11)

The art of epic theatre consists in arousing astonishment rather than EMPATHY.

(Walter Benjamin 1966,16)

On The Dialectical Theatre:

At the end of his life, Brecht renamed the Epic Theatre the "Dialectical Theatre."

Dialectic:

(1) The art of investigating the truth of opinions; the testing of truth by discussion

(2a) Investigation into metaphysical contradictions and their solutions

(2b) The existence or action of opposing social forces

OED Definition

Dialectical Materialism:

The Marxist theory that political and historical forces are due to a conflict of social forces caused by man's material needs.

OED Definition.

Definition of Dialectical Theatre:

An engine-room of change and transformation.

Gestus – 'Grund-Gestic' – Social Gest

It is at once gesture and gist, attitude and point: one aspect of the relation between two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed. It excludes the psychological, the subconscious, the metaphysical unless they can be conveyed in concrete terms.

(John Willett – The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht, pg173)

All feelings must be externalized.

Brecht

By Social Gest is meant the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period. Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique in Acting"

Although Brecht claims that his theory of drama is diametrically opposed to Stanislavsky's realism, the two men are in many ways interested in the same problem: how actors discover intentions and convey them to an audience. They differ in their approach. Bill Brueh, (a Stanislavskian, says that all drama is internal while Brecht says it must be external. In either case, the key is to discover intentions. If I may add my two cents, I think that discovering intentionality is the key to any drama, conventional or interactive. If I were directing a project, I would focus on how to discover/interpret/invent intentions first, and all other considerations should be considered less important.

More resources

- *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic by Bertolt Brecht*, John Willett (Translator). Hill and Wang; Reissue edition (January 1, 1964)

Barry Jason Mauer is an associate professor in the Department of English at the University of Central Florida, and teaches in the Texts and Technology Ph.D. Program. He has served at UCF since 1999. His published work focuses on developing new research practices in the arts and humanities. His latest research is about citizen curating, which aims at enlisting a corps of citizens to curate exhibits, both online and in public spaces, using archival materials available in museums, libraries, public history centers, and other institutions. He also publishes online comics about delusion and denial, particularly as they affect the realm of politics. In addition, Mauer is an accomplished songwriter and recording artist. Mauer completed his graduate studies at the University of Florida in the Department of English, where he worked under the direction of professors Gregory Ulmer and Robert Ray. He lives in Orlando with his wife and daughter, his dog, his cat, and two chickens.

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