

Bertolt Brecht: Contradictions as Method
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WHY EMPATHY MATTERS:
A POLITICAL AND ECOLOGICAL CRITIQUE
OF BRECHT'S RATIONALITY
Jan Motal

Theatre Faculty, JAMU, Czech Republic
motal@jamu.cz

Introduction

“We have to think of ourselves as children of scientific age,” said Bertolt Brecht in his *Short Organum for the Theatre* (Brecht, 1974b, p. 183). The aim of this paper is to meet the requirements of Bertolt Brecht to build any aesthetics possible on the scientific grounds. I would like to focus on the question, whether it is possible to promote a social revolt in audience rationally. In the *Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction* Brecht wrote: “I must say I do need the sciences. [...] One important field for the playwright is psychology”. (Brecht, 1974d, p. 73–74) I entirely agree that if we would like to construct any theory of acting and spectatorship, we have to deal with the up-to-date psychology. As I would like to try to show in the following short time, Brecht’s old school behaviorism is not able to comply with the quoted demands.

My critique is going to be political and ecological in the end, but at first I have to reveal why I maintain that Brecht’s theory of empathy is flawed and why we need empathetic understanding to build a community and a political movement.

Brechtian behaviorism

Brecht was devoted to social behaviorism, although this preoccupation was influenced by Marxist pragmatism. As Hansjürgen Rosenbauer showed in his study *Brecht und der Behaviorismus*, Brecht in the accordance with behavior psychologists focused on “behavior rather than on action, on observable processes rather than on introspection, and on environmentally conditioned reflexes rather than on subjectivity.” (Giles, 1995, p. 85) The behaviorism contradicts introspection, as we can demonstrate in Brecht’s instructions for actors’ rehearsals: “[I]t is the crudest form of empathy when the actor simply asks: what should I be like if this or that were to happen to me? [...] –instead of asking: have I ever heard somebody saying this and doing that?” (Brecht, 1974b, p. 195–196)

The emphasis on observation is excluding any form of phenomenological understanding. But its goal is hardly only descriptive. Steve Giles argues, that Brechtian behaviorism was oriented pragmatically towards “provoking contradictions which are immanent in society.” This theoretical basis of *Sozialbehaviorismus* was in opposition to “entities such as the soul and procedures such as ‘Einfühlung’.” (Giles, 1995, pp. 93, 89) Physicalism is characterized

by its belief in causality, so called *physical causal closure*. For Brecht, actors have to “help us to understand [...] causes and protest. [...] Therefore, all incidents between men must be noted, and everything must be seen from a social point of view.” (Brecht, 1974a, p. 98–99) As we can see, Brecht’s critique of empathy was deeply rooted in the then radical movement of physicalism being critically reinterpreted by Marxist pragmatism—and, surprisingly, this theory relied on a specific Brechtian dualism, as well. Brecht considered emotions and rationality to be two separately operating mental processes. (Krasner, 2006, p. 261) This is a self-contradictory form of materialism, which is inherently monistic. This dualism is caused by Brecht’s aesthetic program. For him, empathy (‘Einfühlung’) was predominantly connected to the bourgeois theatre being part of “the bourgeois narcotic business”, which he presents as follows:

“For always and everywhere theatres were the amusement centers of a class which restricted the scientific spirit to the natural field, not daring to let it loose on the field of human relationships. The tiny proletarian section of the public, reinforced to a negligible and uncertain extent by renegade intellectuals, likewise still needed the old kind of entertainment, as a relief from its predetermined way of life.” (Brecht, 1974b, p. 179)

Brecht proposed a theatre, which should reveal socially and historically determined behavior and provide a distance to analyze, judge and revolt. Instead of presenting timeless morals and human essences, characters on the stage have to be “moved by social impulses” according to the historical period. (Brecht, 1974b, p. 190) Brecht understood empathy in the sense of unification approach, which was popular in the 19th Century. Authors such as was Robert Vischer regarded “as an experience that merged subject and object through identification.” (Krasner, 2006, p. 266)¹ Therefore Brecht was distrustful of empathy (being “a trance”). If theatre has not to be emotional, it has to be instructive.²

¹ Brecht often uses “empathy” and “self-identification” as synonyms. See e. g. (Brecht, 1974b, p. 195).

² “We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.” (Brecht, 1974b, p. 190)

As I would like to argue, from the scientific perspective these assumptions are flawed and ill-founded. I will focus mainly on the proclaimed separation of rationality and emotions and empathy.

There is no reason without emotions (and *vice versa*)

Behind the Brecht's conception of rationality lies an assumption that cognition can (and should) be separated from emotions. As Paul Woodruff claims, Brecht's critique of emotionality in art resembles the complains of Plato. According to him, emotions in theatre has "the opposite effect of moral education on the emotional faculties of an audience". (Woodruff, 1988, p. 235) As Woodruff notes, according to this tradition of thinking empathy and identification disable spectators' power of reason. From the view-point of contemporary psychology this is hardly true.

As Antonio Damasio proves, emotional and cognitive abilities of human brain are not separated. In fact, these abilities are so perfectly interconnected that it is impossible to separate them, and damage of their connectors leads to irreversible loss of decision-making ability. (Damasio, 1996) Specifically, Damasio shows that it is the ventromedial sector of the prefrontal cortices which "connects" emotional and cognitive parts of brain.³ His so-called "somatic markers hypothesis" presents the decision-making process as tied to human experience through emotional reactions. When some situation in person's life resembles previous experience, a reaction is activated in higher-order association cortices, leading to:

"the recall of pertinently associated facts which will be experienced in imagetic form. [...] But depending on previous individual contingencies, signals related to some or even many of those images, or even the entire situation, act on the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (which has previously acquired the link between the situation or its

³ Another important part of the human brain for making decisions is amygdala, the center of „fight or flight“ reactions. Amygdala is concerned with emotional responses and although it "is involved in all types of emotional response (both 'positive' and 'negative')", it is particularly important in situations that elicit anxiety, fear or rage." (Johns, 2014, p. 39) The emotion of rage especially seems to be important for us, because it is this affection which is the energy of revolt and class war—and the class war is required by Bertolt Brecht. It is hardly plausible that any rebellion can start on mere rational basis. Even Brecht could not imagine that workers would start their revolution after cold-minded decision based on the performance of argumentative intellectual endeavor.

components and the class of somatic state), and trigger the re-activation of the somato-sensory pattern that describes the appropriate emotion.” (Damasio, 1996, p. 1415)

The re-activation can be performed via “body loop” (actual somatic changes) or “as if body loop” (changes relayed to somatosensory cortices), both of them can be conscious or non-conscious. This activation of emotion “marks” options imagined in the process of reasoning and helps to constrain multiple possibilities via alerting “to the goodness or badness of a certain option-outcome pair.” (*Ibid.*) This means that consciously and non-consciously human brain uses experience hidden in the memory to judge our decisions and limit them to those which are in particular situation plausible for logic-based analysis. In short, emotions serve as a filter which constrains our decisions on the basis of our previous experience. How important this skill of human brain is we can understand from clinical cases, which reveal the impossibility of doing right decisions when the ventromedial sector of prefrontal cortices is damaged. The well-known case is the story of Phineas P. Gage (1823–1860), an American railroad construction foreman. During an accident, a large iron rod was driven through his brain damaging parts of its left frontal lobe. The previously hard-working and responsible man suddenly became an impatient, irreverent, indulging, capricious and “child in his intellectual capacity.” (Harlow, 1993) Another example is Damasio’s patient, Elliot, an intelligent, skilled and able-bodied man, although detached, cool, “unperturbed even by potentially embarrassing discussion of personal events.” (Damasio, 2006, p. 34–35) Elliot had a brain tumor causing a damage of his frontal lobe from below. Having a normal intellect, Elliot was although unable to make proper decisions, especially when he focused on personal or social affairs. He thus became dependent on the care of others. Damasio summarizes Elliot’s predicament “as *to know but not to feel.*” (Damasio, 2006, p. 45) Without feeling, there were no correct decisions. As we can see, it is hardly possible to “disconnect” emotions and cognition as well as emotions and decision-making.⁴ There is no “pure”

⁴ Other classic cases (Louis Victor Leborgne, Henry Gustave Molaison) prove that even language production and declarative memory rather depend on “the coordinated activity of different regions rather than single areas in the frontal or temporal lobes.” (Thiebaut de Schotten, et al., 2015) This so-called “disconnection paradigm” was formulated by a pioneering American neurologist Norman Geschwind in 1965 for the first time. (Geschwind, 1965) I use the term “disconnect” in this sense of meaning.

rational and analytic mind, unless it is damaged mind, incapable of even simple life decisions. This leads us to empathy.

The imaginative force of empathy

Brecht conceived empathy as an emotional identification inhibiting spectator's cognitive abilities. From his point of view, empathy necessarily leads to "closure" implying conformity and homestead, a typical bourgeois attitude. But as theatre scholar David Krasner argues, on the contrary—empathy "allows us to cross boundaries between us" and "serve as a bridge connecting alternative social spaces." (Krasner, 2006, p. 256) It is "empathetic imagination" what makes us able to comprehend other's lifestyle, fate or situation. Philosopher Peter Goldie in his book *The Emotions* explains that empathy has its cognitive function and enables a spectator to *understand* other's situation and personality through "*imagining the experience of narrative* from that other person's point of view." Thus the empathetic understanding is kind of "acting in our head", not mere "imagining being someone else". The latter mixes two personalities ("What would I think and feel if I were in her shoes?"), the former leads to deeper understanding of other's personality even making the spectator to be able to *predict* the responses of the character. (Goldie, 2000, p. 178)

This cognitive function of empathy has its evolutionary importance. It makes us and other animals to make sense of other's actions and goals and predict their behavior. This is a crucial skill for survival and in the case of *Homo sapiens* it allows the species to form complex social groupings. It is impossible to do any symbolic performance (such as is speech or acting) without understanding other's personalities, actions and goals. Humans differ from other primates, because with the rise of symbolism humans were "released from proximity" and "could communicate through time and space." (Stringer, 2012, p. 119) This 35,000-year-old human revolution was possible only because we—such as some other animals—are empathetic beings gifted with the skill of "theory of mind".

The term "theory of mind" was originally coined in the field of primate's ethology. In 1978 David Premack and Guy Woodruff proved that chimpanzees could comprehend actions seen on a videotape and understand the actor's purpose. (Premack & Woodruff, 1978) The term "theory of mind" labels the mind's module focused on the simulation of the mental processes of others. The module works on the neural basis of superior temporal sulcus, part

of the human brain, which is related to a variety of social processes including language. (Beauchamp, 2015) We can say that the superior temporal sulcus connects empathy with symbolic skills, when described posterior-to-anterior.

The superior temporal sulcus it is, where *mirror neurons* are located in human brain; as well as they can be found in left rostral prefrontal parietal lobule (BA 40) and left inferior frontal cortex (BA45). (Rizzolatti, et al., 1999) The Brodmann area no. 45 with the area no. 44 makes up Broca's area, a region active in semantic tasks—in the left cerebral hemisphere it is responsible for speech and written language, in the opposite hemisphere it is involved in non-verbal communication, "such as facial expression, gesticulation and modulation of the rate, rhythm and intonation of speech." (Johns, 2014, p. 35–36) The damage of Broca's area cause *expressive dysphasia*, i. e. patients are unable to clearly express themselves. (*Ibid.*) The inferior parietal lobule (BA 40) is an association area lying "at the junction of the visual, auditory and somatosensory cortices" and "contributes to aspects of receptive language" and "it is also involved in spatial and symbolic representation of abstract concepts" (*Ibid.*, p. 31–32)

The mirror neurons are very popular among theatre scholars as they seem to be crucial for spectator's experience. We can say that they are involved in simulating and understanding actions of others as well as they contribute to making theories of other's minds. These processes are hardly "rational" and performed "in distance" in Brecht's sense of meaning. Without "theory of mind" and mirror neurons any theatre can hardly make a sense—and these parts of human brain are also responsible for feeling empathy. From this perspective, empathy is not mere "identification". More likely empathy truly has a cognitive function and any symbolic communication and understanding could not be possible without it.

Building community (and movement)

The aforementioned research proves that any requirement of practical judgement, which does not involve empathy, is to be flawed. Without empathy humans are not able to understand other personalities, the purpose of their actions and they can make misguided predictions. From the other point of view, empathy is not a mere identification, but it is both emotional and cognitive endeavor aimed at strengthening of social bindings and improvement of communication. In fact, empathy makes possible to build a truly human

community, transgressing our differences, social and class boundaries and establish society of mutual understanding. It does not necessary inhibit our sense of revolt, because through empathy we are able to understand misery and oppression of other's.

Bertolt Brecht relied on classical Marxist concept of classes—when there are masses of workers ruled by the bourgeois minority. Brecht's appeal on behavioral analysis of historical conditions omits social actors' intentions and choices. His concept of *Gestus* is based on the perspective of historical materialist. For Brecht, social actors are representations of social relations and class is therefore a pre-existent supra-individual reality "in which the dispositions and actions of individuals are situated." (Barbalet, 1991/1992, p. 446) And for Brecht as well as for Marx in capitalist society there are only two classes—the bourgeoisie ("owners of the means of social production") and the proletariat ("the class of modern wage-laborers" selling "their labor-power in order to live") (Ollman, 1968, p. 573) In reality, there are hardly only two conflicting classes. Marx's theory contains a lot of contradictions and ambiguities. For instance, are farm laborers proletarians? What status has *Lumpenproletariat*, such as are homeless people and never-worked individuals? Where to place intelligentsia? Are writers, theatre directors, philosophers and teachers really just "the brothers of capitalists" without exception? (This should be really devastating discovery for Brecht and all of us here) (Ollman, 1968) In the social reality of the 21st century, the whole question is even more complex. The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification of The United Kingdom used in UK Census includes up to eight classes. (Macionis & Plummer, 2005, p. 251) And then, there is no ready-made class identity fully explaining an individual's behavior. Any collective identity is socially constructed and has to be achieved. And moreover, even from Marx's position every individual in capitalist society can take a part in a number of possible collective identities. (Barbalet, 1991/1992, p. 460) To rise an action, first of all an oppressed group has to form a community which means that the individuals have a) to choose an identity, b) to establish social ties. Choosing an identity involves the performance of somatic markers and it is based on previous individual *and social* experience,⁵ social ties can be established only through the empathy. It is not a rational choice. (Barbalet, 1991/1992, p. 466–467) Therefore any theatre which aims to

⁵ Brecht demands: "All incidents between men must be noted, and everything must be seen from a social point of view." (Brecht, 1974a, p. 98) I believe that to have a social point of view means that a spectator should have a social experience.

provoke a collective revolt should present personalities and actions which can be emotionally and empathetically understood and connected to individual's experience. The individual's ability to form "theories of mind" can hardly be disabled. Any theater director should know that even if he appeals rationality, the spectators are engaging their empathetic skills to understand what is performed on the stage. And not only to understand humans actions. As we have seen, even some animals are able to perform empathy. This leads to inter-species understanding, which is crucial in our times of environmental crisis. It is absurd to expect that humans can rise a collective action to save the planet based on a mere rational analysis. In fact, as we know there are stacks of scientific data available and presented in media on a daily basis. As we know from the latest sociological research in Czech Republic, the vast majority of people across classes are aware of the massive climatic changes caused by human and they consider them as a threat. But significantly fewer respondents said that they are willing to donate 5% of their income to face the climate crisis. (Kočí & Cibulka, 2019) And in Czech political reality we hardly see any massive rebellion against polluters and exploiters of the environment. Indeed, mere information and analysis are not enough. In order to mobilize, people must establish an emotional link with endangered species. Experience the fact that we are all part of one natural order. In fact, Brecht's theory is highly anthropocentric and anti-ecological. As an incurable modernist, he can be hardly regarded to be a foregoer of environmentalism. In his *Short Organum for the Theatre* he appreciated the human „success in exploiting and dominating nature“. Brecht merely regretted that this progress was stopped by „the class which [mass of men] brought to power“ and said that this scientific approach should be extended to the field of social relations, where „darkness still reigns“. For Brecht, „[t]he new approach to nature was not applied to society.“ (Brecht, 1974b, p. 184) These ideas are fully in line with his historically materialistic rationalism and his neglect of emotional ties between humans, animals and other natural beings. The community for Brecht was always exclusively human. On the contrary, empathy allows us to extend the boundaries of our community to include other species. It is science, so much adored by Brecht, what shows that man is not completely different from primates, other mammals, lizards. As scholars such as psychiatrist Anthony Stevens say, the human brain is a hierarchical system whose oldest parts connect us to our phylogenetic ancestors. It is as if there were animal predecessors in the deeper layers of the human body whose species groups we left during evolution. The so-called

triune brain consists of almost 300 million years old instinctive reptilian brain, a little bit younger paleo-mammalian brain, which is less rigidly determined by instincts and the youngest neo-mammalian brain or neocortex, which is “rational” or “conscious”. Therefore in every human are present three minds, two of them being unconscious, to a large extent automatic, but inseparable from higher functions. (Stevens & Price, 2000, p. 16–18) Emotions and empathy being rooted in these phylogenetically older minds, are human connection with the animal kingdom. We can reach these deeper layers of our psyche through archetypes.⁶ Archetypal experience is environmental in the sense that it reveals even our natural conditions. Through archetypes we can reunite with our animal brothers and sisters.

Engaging archetypes in artwork by itself does not mean to present metaphysical harmony, on the contrary. In Jungian sense of meaning, through archetypes art provokes “us to think and react in the face of its representations and representations. We are not only surprised but often also perplexed and stunned, unless we can accept the imposed *confrontation*.” (Gaillard, 2006, p. 333) This means that even archetypal imagination is in accord with Brecht’s dialectics—although the social dimension of the contradictions is not implied by archetypes, but it is presented by historical context of the narrative. But the contradiction can be overwhelming and even destructive, leading to new understanding. (Gaillard, 2006, p. 362) Therefore Brechtian “critical scrutiny” can be produced by imagination rooted in unconscious being free of political ideologies. Moreover, if Brecht demands the absolute “freedom” of spectator,⁷ this can be much better reached by a free archetypal imagination and individual empathy based on personal experience than by merely receiving an ideological message about society. As Angela Curran notes:

“Brechtian theater cannot ‘prompt’ or encourage critical viewing in the spectator through the use of ‘epic theatre’s’ dramatic practices, for this makes the critical

⁶ “[A]rchetypes form the basis of all the usual phenomena of human existence and we inherit them as part of our genetic endowment. They are the phylogenetic (evolutionary) foundations on which ontogenesis (individual development) proceeds. An individual's entire archetypal inheritance makes up the collective unconscious, whose authority and psychic energy is co-ordinated by a central nucleus which Jung termed ‘the Self’ or ‘the archetype of archetypes’.” (Stevens, 2006, p. 79)

⁷ Brecht instructs directors and actors to “leave the spectator’s intellect free and highly mobile.” (Brecht, 1974b, p. 191)

viewer a mere product of these practices, contradicting Brecht's claim that critical viewing requires "freedom of thought" (Curran, 2001, p. 179)

There is one more problem to be solved. In his critique of emotions at the theater, Brecht points out that the emotion evoked is independent of its cause. Thus, the perception of suffering experienced by the viewer is disconnected from the social cause of the suffering. (Brecht, 1974c) From our point of view, this complaint can be answered in two ways. First, as I have shown, empathy does not only mean experiencing emotions, but understanding the personality of the other with the possibility of predicting his actions. This also implies an understanding of the situation in which he is. It is only up to the art of the playwright, director and actor whether they can convey the historical context sufficiently vividly and plastically (even if not realistically).

Secondly, it should be noted that the historical-materialistic assumption that a unique (social) cause of an action can be identified is philosophically problematic. We do not have time for a broad debate here. However, I refer to a brilliant analysis by Jane Bennett, who in her book *Vibrant Matter* convincingly demonstrated that the "strong" causality is an anthropocentric residue. It is necessary to grasp human decision-making as a process involving both collective and non-human actors. (Bennett, 2010) This is so-called *new materialism*.

If we include also non-human actors (such as are mirror neurons, limbic system, the older layers of brain) in our thinking about causes of our actions, then we must likewise reject the theory of "strong" causality including Brechtian concept of historical materialism. It is not enough to reveal the contradictions of social reality; it is also necessary to show how this social reality is dependent on non-human actors, the objects that surround humans and of which they are composed. Only in this way can be human truly reintegrated to the environmental context escaping the anthropocentric delusion.

Conclusion

The question to ask is: what enables the critical viewing and the spectator's understanding of social contradictions and environmental threats? What can lead to the transformation of audience's attitude, which could give birth to the social change? At first, we have to

conclude that it hardly can be any pure rational theatre. On the contrary, theatre have to address spectators' emotions and inner experiences and use their ability of empathy to more deeply understand misery and oppression of others' (or their own). The social contradictions have to be constructed by the narrative historically—and this is the original Brecht's discovery. Any political theatre aiming to show social contradictions has to be historical and to be based on a very thorough research and empirical material: "The theatre has to become geared into reality if it is to be in a position to turn out effective representations of reality, and to be allowed to do so." (Brecht, 1974b, p. 186)

But even archetypal layers of our experience is of political importance. As evolutionary psychiatry claims, psychopathology arises from insufficient fulfillment of archetypal expectations. (Stevens & Price, 2000, p. 30) Confrontation with the archetype also means confrontation with social and economic conditions that prevent its full development and harmonization with other components of the soul. Unconscious should not be avoided in political art.

As Curran claims, even "Brecht's own works show that engaging with characters *can* be useful for reflecting on the social causes of suffering." (Curran, 2001, p. 181) Moreover, from the environmental point of view, engaging spectator's "inner animal" is one possible way how to reconnect him with nature once again—transgress the anthropocentrism. Rationality disconnects humanity from nature, because it fuels the flawed myth of human exceptionality ("speciesism"). Revealing our inner contradictions and touch the unconscious heritage of phylogenetical ancestors can promote better understanding of other animals' needs. And only through this depth hermeneutics we are able to use our imagination in a truly new (ecological?) way.

Empathy is an instrument of building community—including other individuals of our own class, our society, animal realm, all the beings of nature. Of course, we can receive the message that our politics has to change. And in fact, we already did receive it. But to perform an action, we have to be deeply moved. And our emotions are able to lead us not only to flight, but certainly to fight.

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