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NAFAE conference, Lancaster, July 2016

Martin Fowler

A critical analysis of the relationship of Brechtian theory to my contemporary art practice

"I'm teaching him how to see."
(from 'Galileo' by Bertolt Brecht)
(Squiers p114)

In this analysis I will discuss Brecht's strategies for cultural production and their relevance to our contemporary socio-economic context. I will also provide an analysis of the impact of Brechtian strategy upon approaches to both process and product within my practice.

Through an on-going analysis of Brecht's key theories, as advanced in his essays on theatre and in his journals, I have identified a number of factors which are of intrinsic importance. These factors are namely; 'Epic theatre'; 'estrangement technique'; 'alienation'; and dialectical materialism.

Within the practical and theoretical application of these strategies we may find that factors such as de-stabilisation, de-familiarisation and a resistance of the habitual are established.

The analysis of Brecht's theory and its influence will be described and related to the development of specific works which I have created since January 2016. These are; 'A History of the Village of Figgate' (Jan. 2016); 'Spar' (Feb. 2016); and 'The defacement drawings' (Apr.-Jun. 2016).

Brecht's 'Epic theatre'

'Epic theatre incessantly derives a lively and productive consciousness...This consciousness enables it to treat elements of reality as though it were setting up an experiment with the 'conditions' at the end of the experiment, not at the beginning.'
(Benjamin)

In Brecht's usage 'epic' means 'episodic'; a theatre deriving its formal structure and theoretical approach from the 1920's Modernist invention of montage, as exemplified in the work of the collagist's John Heartfield, George Grosz and the film-maker Sergei Eisenstein. Brecht, who was a friend of both Heartfield and Grosz, two of the key figures of the 1920's German avant-garde - references this particular contextual influence when he writes:

In Brecht's theory he develops his thesis on the role of '*pleasure*' and '*instruction*' within '*epic theatre*' and the critical role of such factors within the audience experience of the performance. These factors are discussed and related specifically to the socio-economic conditions of Brecht's contemporary audience. Brecht therefore clearly signals his fundamental belief that the cultural and social production of art, must be directly related to the conditions of production.

Brecht develops his thesis further in the establishment of a link between art, artistic production and the sciences. A specific example of this link is demonstrated in Brecht's admiration of a Baconian methodology, the 'scientific method', which clearly links to Brecht's theory of 'complex seeing'. A term that proposed an explicit challenge to bourgeois cultural conventions, such as fixed point perspective within Renaissance painting, a convention which originated from the Aristotelian application of logic, as a means of deciphering the world.

For Brecht an understanding of alternative methods of inquiry such as science, were not unrelated to his role as a playwright, but indeed fundamental to his observation of the world. In Brecht's thesis the importance of observation and experimentation were a method of deciphering a specific subject and an example of Bacon's influence. However in the adoption of such a methodology, the producer must ensure that the deployment of the 'scientific method' does not in itself become a new set of parameters. At such an impasse the subsequent application of a dialectical method would arguably re-liberate the enquiry.

As Brecht remarks in the essay:

'The new alienations are only designed to free socially conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today.' Brecht (p192)

We must therefore consider Brecht's position as that of the post-Formalist, the cultural producer adopting both counter-hegemonic and counter-canonical positions.

Non-linear narrative structure and the socio-temporal order

A key aspect of Brecht's deployment of a non-linear narrative/dramatic structure and approach was his absolute commitment to the application of Marxism to the social conditions of his time. For Brecht, Marxism is the defining philosophy which lies at the centre of his project, and we can argue that any analysis of Brecht which fails to acknowledge this central philosophical belief, condemns that analysis to a reductive discussion of the purely formal aspects of Brecht's project.

At this point we must now introduce a further reason for Brecht's deployment of a non-linear narrative structure. This element is specifically concerned with what Brecht saw as the *socio-temporal order*.

An example we might use to clarify what this term means can be found in what Brecht would argue is the difference between a day as a structured unit of time to that of a week comprising of 7 days.

Brecht would argue that the day, as a unit of structured and definable time, is validated by the actual experience of the rising and setting of the sun. Therefore the day is defined structure within nature. Brecht would suggest however that in the case of 7 day week we encounter a construct. This constructed unit of time

Brecht argues is a construction of the bourgeois ruling class, the owners of the means of production and subsequently has no validation within the natural structure as experienced in the day.

Therefore in Brecht's project it is essential that he opposes and challenges the validity of the socio-temporal order as a mechanism designed solely to impose upon and control both cerebrally and physically, the worker.

Within Brecht's identification and challenge to the structure of the socio-temporal order we see a crucial challenge to both the conditions of production and the hegemonic control of the ruling class. In Brecht's opinion, if this order can be challenged and over-thrown, then new ways of living can be identified and implemented and history can progress beyond the class bound contradictions of contemporary society.

The socio-temporal order and the deployment of montage

In regard to the physical manifestation of this Brechtian theory within my practice I would cite the example of my recent Twitter posts.

Using a daily stream of re-purposed images from the British broadsheet print media, I attempt to challenge the socio-temporal order through the deployment of montage. The term 'socio-temporal order', in the context of this discourse, refers to the imposition of a structured concept of time as controlling mechanism, upon the cerebral and physical nature of the individual. A state of being in society which Foucault defined as 'the carceral continuum'. Ultimately, the mechanism serves as a means of societal control for the dominant class. A hegemonic system of naturalising as a means of nullifying contradiction and critical consciousness.

The montages, collages and drawings which I am currently making apply the techniques of cutting, pasting and re-configuring the received image in attempt to disrupt the naturalising conventions of the established broadsheet media as representative of . The result of this cannibalising and problematizing approach to the construction of a particular language is then returned into the social space provided by the internet. In my most recent collages I have supplanted defacement and the application of children's stickers with the doubling-up of the image.

This approach was taken in response to my growing dissatisfaction with what was now becoming both a formalised and familiarising process. As a means of de-stabilising this process I purchased two copies of the same broadsheet newspaper and placed two of the same image next to one another. This doubling of the image instantly created a new dynamic within both process and image. An experience within which a form of montage was introduced but significantly a disruption of the socio-temporal structure of the original image. However, within a short space of time this approach became both familiar and familiarising.

If we then consider Brecht's belief in an anti-aestheticization of the image and subsequently the wider concept of art, we discover his theoretical and practical

response to what he understands as the unceasing challenge provided by the fluxus nature of the world. Such a situation places the contemporary artist into a position wherein they must accept this constantly changing world and in turn respond with a practice and methodology which is both reactive and mutable. Such a methodology can have no truck with the establishment and maintenance of a consistent aesthetic and language, but rather posit a constantly evolving methodology which is guided by a reactive empiricism and a rejection of any canonical and formalist values.

To be clear, in the adoption and application of such a methodology I am attempting to respond directly not only to the challenges of Brecht's theory but to the writing of the British economist Paul Mason. Mason proposes that the most significant factor of contemporary history is what he terms 'the info-tech revolution'. This technological revolution, Mason believes, is the most significant development of the last 15 years. An example which he provides to support his thesis is provided in the video footage of Wall St. on the day of Lehman Brothers collapse in 2008.

The people in the street that day are using Sony Ericsson, Nokia and Motorola phones. Mason points out that unlike the outcomes of the 1930's economic crash, the implosion of the financial system in 2008 did not halt the 'info-tech' revolution. Rather the revolution continued apace and this can be borne out in the reality that those brands so identified with that era of contemporary history are no longer with us. They have been usurped by the iphone, the ipad and the tablet. Mason believes therefore that this is a very significant indicator of a fundamental change in the nature of our society.

Verfremdungseffekte

The latter stages of Brecht's essay introduces an explanation of the term 'alienation'. In this particular case, Brecht's use of the word translates as 'alienation' or estrangement from the German word '*Verfremdung*'. In this particular form the term is distinctive from Marx and Hegel's use of the word '*Entfremdung*' also meaning alienation, only in that the former is a literary form, whilst the latter is a general form. Therefore the essay is significant in its demonstration of Brecht's awareness of Marxist theory and his ability to adapt it to the contemporary theatre of the Berlin Ensemble.

The methodology of my current drawings and collages has seen the development of an increasingly vital attitude to process in which familiar approaches are jettisoned. This conscious and continuous jettisoning, within a mutable and reactive process leads to a type of a situation, which although attritional and anxiety-making in its demands, rejects formula and habit. Supplanting instead a destabilising and de-naturalising approach to image-making, the aim of which is to achieve what Brecht called '*estrangement*' or '*barriers to empathy*'.

Therefore to apply such a range of approaches was an attempt to distance and defamiliarise both myself and the audience from the received convention and attendant narrative of the broadsheet newspaper. Therein lies a significant challenge and riposte to the convention of the political cartoon and its formalist,

canonical aspect. Therefore the attitude or creative mind-set must then become one which is intent upon destabilising not only the methods and processes of the producer, in this case the artist, but also an active and constant destabilising of the audience. Within such a destabilisation the participants can experience, as Godard would suggest, not a consideration of a picture of reality, but a consideration of the reality of that picture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Brecht is writing in an era marked by a number of significant geo-political factors, namely; the rise of European Fascism; the Great Depression of 1929; and the disastrous impact of hyper-inflation upon the economy of the Weimar Republic. We may draw comparisons to our own moment of history and its geo-political forces which are shaping it such as Brexit; the rise of the far-right in Europe; and the stagnation of the world economy. As Paul Mason suggests, in time we may come to acknowledge these forces and their influence as the first cracks in Western neo-liberalism.

It is also necessary however to note the socio-cultural context of Brecht's writing, appearing as it does in an era which is after the development of both Analytical Cubism (1908–1912) and the technique of 'montage' in the Modernist avant-garde of the 1920's. If we consider the socio-cultural context of our contemporary society we may argue that we are witnessing a rapid connectivity and subsequent exchange of information as primary commodity, through the developments of the info-tech revolution; the growth of oppositional and counter-hegemonic movements such as Occupy; and a growing challenge to the conventions and traditional models of patronage pertaining to the gallery system.

Brecht's theories propose a set of cultural strategies for artistic production. Instruments for the development of both a critical intelligence and critical literacy within the audience. Brecht demonstrates therefore his acute awareness of this fundamental function which he believes theatre and artistic production can and must play. Brecht proposes a specific exposition of what he believes are the key factors of *'pleasure'*, *'instruction'* and *'morality'* within the cultural production. These factors are subsequently deployed as mechanisms within the theatrical experience which he presents to the audience. However, it is crucial to note that at no point can these mechanisms be recognised in their deployment and activity. They must remain unfamiliar and destabilising to ensure that the dialectic is effective as a strategy for change. Without the dialectic and its destabilising effect the desired cognitive disruption cannot be achieved.

Brecht therefore proposes a form of cultural and artistic production which acknowledges the integral role of pleasure and fun within our experience of art, whilst explaining that these factors are not, as we might believe, exclusive from the elements of instruction, didacticism and morality. In essence, Brecht demonstrates his absolute commitment to the development of an artistic production which is socially and politically relevant. A production which is equipped to challenge the dominant hegemony of its age, in its use of the 'scientific method'; its privileging of process over product; and its understanding of the socio-economic forces which shape society.

Finally, within Brecht we find a consistent and passionate commitment to the 'problematizing' of the cultural production, a critical factor through which Brecht encourages the audience and the cultural producer, to constantly question the received and naturalising picture of reality.

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