

# Epic theatre

[Entertainment](#), [Theatre](#)



The only form that can grasp the processes which drama needs to grasp if it is to provide an all-encompassing view of the world" BB's 'all-encompassing view of the world' was Marxism. Epic Theatre derives from Greek. Epos, story. A form of theatre which self consciously narrates. Estrangement effect = estrangement/alienation effect: distancing the viewer from the action; encouraging rational thought and analysis; reducing emotional catharsis. Aristotelian Theatre / non-Aristotelian Theatre.

Term derives from Aristotle's Poetics. A. formulated an aesthetic based on catharsis, (= purging of emotion through empathy), hence BB's description of his Epic Theatre as " non-Aristotelian Theatre". Epic Theatre = Historicised theatre, theatre about the present, but not set in the present. (Distanciation) verfremdungseffekt (V-Effekt): Entfremdung both equal alienation. But? Estrangement aims to facilitate rationality, reason, reflection; militate against empathy and catharsis; learning either from or against characters; making politics into art: " The politicisation of aesthetics and the aestheticisation of politics. "

BB was also a great manipulator of genre. Adaptations, parodies, allegories, parables (political not moral e. g. Arturo Ui). 1 . PARODY: Keeping an existing cultural form, but inserting a different content. The Threepenny Opera (1928): an opera peopled by beggars, gangsters ; prostitutes 2. TRAVESTY (= disguise): retaining a familiar existing content, but delivering it in a new or different form. Two examples: The Sex Pistols' punk version of God Save the Queen. The credits' music at the end of Michael Moore's Bowling for Columbine? : the Ramones upbeat version of Wonderful world originally recorded by Louis Armstrong.

Why is that travesty, and what's the effect in the context of the film and its subject matter (crime, racism and the gun-culture in the LISA)? 3. PARABLE: "Narration by analogy. A didactic narrative conveying a moral truth or message in another guise." M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, London, 1988. Compared to Kafka's parables (e. g. *Before the Law*)? 4. ALLEGORY: "A narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived so as to make coherent sense on the 'literal', or primary level of significance, and also to signify a second, corresponding order of agents, concepts and events".

M. H. Abrams, *ibid.* *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941) reflects in parabolic form events in Germany 1929- 1939. Allusion, rather than direct one-to-one reference. Apparently/superficially about gangsters in 1930s Chicago, but actually about fascism's rise to power in Germany. Hitler as Al Capone, Nazi politicians as 1930s Chicago gangsters, but talking in classical metre and presented as if in a classical tragedy. Also a parable, with a political moral: 'The womb is still fertile'.

Donmar Warehouse London, 2008: Arturo Ui as Robert Mugabe. . As parables by definition simplify complex processes, BB's model of Germany 1929-1938 is inevitably incomplete. What is missing historically? Complex negotiations re. Weimar cabinets before 1933 The book burnings (1933) The Persecution and expulsion of intellectuals (post-33) The Nazi Olympic games (August 1936) The Hitler/Stalin pact (August 1939) The Spanish civil war July 1936 - March 1939) The Munich agreement (Sept 1938) What is retained? 1 .

The NAZI tactic of pseudo-legality, so for instance the Nov 1923 Beer Hall Putsch is referred to as a failed bank robbery. BUT: There's no mention of Hitler's electoral support. BB suggests that the petty bourgeoisie were forced to support Hitler. Various political manoeuvres around Hindenburg are addressed in the play, but Brecht's portrayal distorts history: In reality the Junkers supporting Hindenburg were not captains of industry, but pre-industrial agricultural landowners, economically archaic, a politically powerful landowning elite.

BB solves this problem by giving the cauliflower trust a dual function: they are both industrialists and they also represent the Junkers' agricultural interests. 4. The 'Anschluss' (annexation into the greater German Third Reich in 1938) is portrayed by BB, but BB gives a different reason for it in the play, so that UI invades Cicero to allow business to expand its interest and markets. BB ignores the political and nationalist motivation of Hitler's Anschluss, i. e. bringing the Germans 'Heim ins Reich'. The play portrays historical figures in characters represent types: social, political, economic, class positions.

Dogsborough represents the old right-wing traditional conservatives in Germany, Dollfuss the same in Austria, Trustherren represent the capitalists, and Kleinhändler represent the middle class. But BB gives hardly any insights into Hitler the person. Although Ui is a lively theatrical character, he's very one-dimensional, a thug with hardly any charisma. Brecht: using non-realist techniques to penetrate beneath the surface appearance of capitalism to reveal its essential reality, its power strategies and economic relations.

Dramatic realism (naturalism): Dismissed by Brecht as too preoccupied with the accuracy of surface details. The realist myth of a 'slice of life' Mere reproduction of reality is inadequate. dramatic action is Art as a lamp, not a mirror Illumination, v. reflection Art should draw attention to the conditions and the process of its own production Non-realist': expose the illusion striven for by naturalist and realist writers and directors, the myth that what they offer an audience (in a theatre, cinema or wherever) is an uncomplicated unmediated " slice of life".

For Brecht non-realist methods, transcending the limitations of the strictly empirical, the verifiable, were (paradoxically? ) those most appropriate to understanding the true nature of reality, not just its superficial appearance. Brecht believed he was not anti realism as such, he preferred a different form of realism. In this experimental sense Brecht was both a realist and a modernist. Typical techniques of Brechtian epic theatre in performance 1 . Announcer summarising the events to come. 2.

Actors stepping outside their roles, addressing the audience, reminding us we are watching a play 3. Characters singing (as in opera, but to didactic effect) 4. Actors swapping roles (to prevent emotional identification). 5. (In film) Montage Verfremdungseffekt : a practical example SPRING The play of the sexes (regeneration of the species) is renewed Every Spring. The lovers Meet. The gentle embrace Of the lover's hand makes the Girl's breast tremble. Her fleeting glance beguiles him. In Spring the countryside Appears to the lovers renewed. The air is already warm.

The days grow long and The fields stay light later. In Spring the trees and grass Grow free of inhibition. Fertilisation in the forests and fields gathers pace. And the earth gives birth to the new, Free from care and precaution.

From the sound film *Kuhle Wampe* co-scripted by Brecht, Germany, 1931/2

James Lyon, Brecht and Hollywood Conclusion: Some broader Brecht issues to reflect on: BB's primary attraction to Marxism was his thirst for greater knowledge and greater understanding of social processes, what he called the "temptation" of rational thought (Galileo? BB was above all a scientific thinker, who sought rational solutions to social problems. He rejected metaphysics and all forms of irrationalism, and prioritised empirical thought. Precisely because of his apparently total ; exclusive dedication to rationalism BB was worthy of the term UTOPIAN thinker. BB was the ultimate rationalist, more dedicated to the analytical methods of Marxist enquiry than to Marxism's practical implementation. Did BB fetishise idolisescience?

Did he acknowledge its limitations? How appropriate is BB's work to the post-modern age, when scepticism about the uncritical appliance of science, and thus about the desirability of human progress humankind, seem to dominate the political agenda? How does the above relate to *Life of Galileo*? Is BB now passé, given the end of the Cold war, the demise of "real existing socialism" in eastern Europe, and the 'disappearance' of his chosen German homeland (DDR) after German re-unification in 1990?

Or is BB's project (to inject politics into art and art into politics i. e. to make both activities fun) now even more necessary? Look out for the predilection amongst some TV advert designers for Brechtian self-irony! The essays

excerpted in John Willet's *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht* are a good starting-point for investigating Brecht's views on theatrical practice. From *The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre* (notes on Mahagonny): the 'shifts of accent' between dramatic theatre and epic theatre.

Wears down his capacity arouses his capacity for for action action provides him with sensations forces him to take decisions experience picture of the world the spectator is involved in he is made to face something something suggestion argument instinctive feelings are preserved are brought to the point of recognition the spectator is in the thick of it, spectator stands outside, studies shares the thehuman beings taken inquiry the human being is the object of the for granted eyes on the finish eyes on the course one scene makes another each scene for itself growth montage linear development in curves evolutionary determinism Jumps man as a fixed point man as a process thought determines being social being determines thought feeling reason Brecht on Theatre.