PEIRCE ON THE POLITICS OF THE EPIC THEATER

Iris Smith

Bertolt Brecht was fond of saying that "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." By this he seems to have meant that the principles of epic theater can be convincingly demonstrated only by carrying them out on the stage. In his work as director of the Berliner Ensemble, he encouraged a somewhat relaxed, experimental form of rehearsal, in which an actor might try a dozen different ways of falling off a table. When the movement finally created the right "social gesture," Brecht and the actor would be satisfied. This sort of practicality, which views physical evidence as the best test of a theory, applies equally well to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. Like Brecht, Peirce felt that objects (to use the semiotic term) otherwise unapproachable often leave their traces in the actions they produce. In this indexical sense of "traces," Brecht's epic theater reveals itself to be a self-consciously semiotic activity, devoted to that particular kind of signification known as Verfremdung or alienation. Within the physical confines of the performance, social and economic conditions outside the theater become visible, invoked by the actor's "alienated" presentation of his character. My aim in this paper will be to demonstrate just how epic theater locates itself in performance vis-à-vis two historically placed "objects": our present, imperfect society and a more just, future society toward which this performance, and the responses of its spectators, will work. Readers familiar with Peirce's semiotic will recognize that by looking for the proof of the pudding in the eating of it, we will be led into a discussion of indexicality.

Roughly translatable as "social gesture," Gestus is a dialectic designed to rouse an audience's awareness of

current ideologies. It is not necessarily a dialectic of personalities or characters. Constructed in a variety of media, it contributes to the overall alienating effect of the play. In "On Gestic Music" Brecht gives the example of Fascist troops marching enthusiastically, the Gestic move being the addition of corpses upon which the troops are seen to be trampling. Walter Benjamin (1931: 11) gives a further example of a family quarrel in the midst of which a stranger appears, suddenly shocking the participants and spectators into a new view of the situation. Whatever the success of Gestus as a political move, it demonstrates how Brecht goes far beyond a psychological framework of illusion-making and -breaking to place epic theater on a semiotic basis. Although Gestus as a tool for analysis is remarkably compatible with elements of Charles Peirce's semiotic, few studies have touched on the ways in which this semiotic can elucidate the dialectics of Gestus. Various Peircean triads related to Brecht's Gestus could be explored as well, but in this paper I will confine myself to the relations of sign to object, particularly the indexical relation.

The Question of Distance

Before I consider these relations as they are found in The Caucasian Chalk Circle and Mother Courage, I would like to point out the inadequacies of a common approach that discusses epic theater in terms of its acceptance or rejection of illusionism. When critics approach epic theater as "anti-illusionist," Brecht's own definition of Verfremdung is often trotted out, to the accompaniment of speculation on how much empathy he has allowed to slip in between spectator and character. Of course Brecht's theories, particularly those early in his career, do encourage us to treat epic theater as one that disrupts illusionism as vigorously as possible. Moreover, Brecht himself links the techniques of illusionism with the creation of empathy and rejects both. Verfremdung, whether translated as estrangement, alienation or defamiliarization, suggests that the spectator is never allowed to involve himself in the story unless that involvement is accompanied by a consideration of the manner in which the play is being presented. And I would agree with this formulation. But we should note that it rests on a term which has been examined only for its usefulness in describing states of mind. That term is "distance." Examined

semiotically, it may allow us to break out of the illusionism/anti-illusionism duality.

Edward Bullough's 1912 essay, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," has played a central role in the modern dispute on "aesthetic distance." Bullough decided, to the subsequent satisfaction of many scholars, that the desired "antinomy of Distance" could be described as "the utmost decrease of Distance without its disappearance" (Bullough 1912: 94). The spectator enjoys a "personal" relation to the work, but not a "practical" relation--i.e., the action must not appeal to us as do "the persons and incidents of normal experience" (1912: 91). Distance comes to mean "illusion." Thus when Oscar Buedel (1961) uses Bullough's definitions to talk about Brecht's epic theater, he castigates Brecht for not realizing that by definition the spectator's interest in the play results from his detachment, i.e. that these events need not be taken literally, and will not concern the spectator practically, in his day-to-day living. Buedel comes to the conclusion that Brecht has made the spectator's aesthetic identification with events impossible by destroying aesthetic distance. But Buedel takes this view not because he feels Brecht has adopted a formalist stance, whereby (in Buedel's eyes) the matter and the means of theater are confused. Rather, Brecht has erred in the opposite direction of propaganda, i.e. an attempt to make the performance entirely practical for the spectator.

Hence, Buedel attributes little artistic merit to epic theater, only in those instances when illusion is created for an audience despite Brecht's efforts to eliminate it. Buedel gives more credit to formalists such as Pirandello for successful dramatic artistry, but it must be understood that Buedel's approach leads necessarily to a broad repudiation of such modernist art. Moreover, failing to credit Brecht's work with any such formalism is a serious mistake. While Brecht is engaged in a type of theatrical experiment very different from Pirandello (or Artaud, whom Buedel does not discuss), Brecht defines "distance" more in their fashion--that of emotional estrangement or lack of empathy. (He favors it, of course, while Artaud deplores it.) Understanding epic theater as related to formalism and modernism is more useful than Buedel's approach, for it allows us to see that while spectators will engage the play intellectually (and "practically," as Bullough puts it), that engagement involves <u>all</u> aspects of the performance--form and content together.

But even if we accept that Brecht shares at least some terminological ground with Pirandello and Artaud, we still do not have an adequate understanding of the term "distance" in order to analyze epic theater. Bullough, Buedel, and such artists as Artaud are confining distance in various ways to the psyche and its responses to what the person is seeing and hearing. It may be more useful in the case of epic theater to go outside the notion of aesthetic distance and look for a semiotic definition. For it is true that as a theater encouraging a "practical relation" between performance and spectator, epic theater is not primarily an aesthetic experience, nor Verfremdung an exclusively aesthetic term. Semiotics can provide a more appropriate definition of distance by discussing the discreteness of the entities sign, object, and interpretant. Distance precedes both the signification of "real" and "fictional" events because distance precedes all signification. Used in this way, distance has the metaphor's capacity to suggest the ways in which immediate and dynamical objects make themselves known to the spectator, or the ways in which the spectator participates in the creation of various interpretants, including aesthetic ones. The "measure" of distance is provided by the distinctions among the objects; whether they lie in the present, past, or future; and how the interpretants are defined in the performance and by the spectator. In this practical sense, Brecht is trying by means of epic theater to reduce the distance between the present state of things and the future towards which we all should work. Which is to say, he is trying to reduce the difference between a projected or dynamical object and a present immediate object. Brecht's plays address themselves to this transition, but they do not necessarily depict a future time, or even a transition to a future time. In fact, a play such as Mother Courage suggests that the conditions which activated and kept reviving the Thirty Years' War are still with us today. But the dialectics of Gestus whether in that play or in The Caucasian Chalk Circle direct the audience to criticize this situation. And we do find a direct attempt to approach a time in which current ideologies and oppressive conditions have improved. It is the "measure of distance" between the projected dynamical object of a just society and the immediate object presented in the theater space that I propose to take up next.

The "Measure" of Distance

If we consider The Caucasian Chalk Circle as a sign, where do we find its dynamical and immediate objects? (The play incorporates other signs and complexes of signs, of course, but let us disregard those for the moment.) In his commentary Peircean Semiotic Joseph Ransdell explains that the "logically prior sign" of the dynamical object is the immediate object, "presumably so-called because it is the object in its immediately available form--namely, its representative form within the semiotic sequence--for purposes of referential identification" (1983: 28). This sequence of course extends from the dynamical object to the immediate objects and signs. Some of these signs will be interpretants, referring to other signs which refer back to the object. Ransdell goes on to say: "The word 'dynamical object' is used for the object considered without regard for any given representation of it, though still considered as something represented [and representable] . . . , and it is presumably so-called because it is the source of dunamis or the power generating the sign-interpretant series." The sign-sequence of The Caucasian Chalk Circle could be generated by a number of dynamical objects. If I am holding a copy of the written text in my hand, I might be tempted to call it the dynamical object, but it would be more accurate to treat it as an immediate object, since in committing his conception of the play to paper, Brecht made inevitable compromises with his ideas. Nor could we treat a performance of the play as a dynamical object. In fact, given the contributions of actors and collaborators, as well as work done on Brecht's plays since his death, the objects called The Caucasian Chalk Circle seem to multiply. But it would be more accurate to say that the dynamical object lies behind all these. The fact that the dynamical object must be considered "without regard for any given representation" of it seems to make it a potential as well as an actual object, the possibilities of which are never quite exhausted by these representations or bounded by Brecht's intentions.

An individual performance, if placed in relation to this dynamical object, might be termed an immediate object. It exists as an object in its own right even as it represents to us in the fashion of a sign. We could also go on to discuss how the thoughts of the spectators, treated as signs, combine with the signs presented on stage to approach the dynamical object in

some fashion. While we will scratch the surface of this topic here, more intricate questions, such as the function and location of the final and energetic interpretants, will have to be set aside for another occasion.

One additional distinction must be made. Considering the play as the end of a semiotic sequence, or a dynamical object, leads us to deal with it as an aesthetic object and to treat Gestus as a structural element of that aesthetic whole. As we know, this is not the purpose of epic theater. The spectator must become aware that the play is part of a larger semiotic sequence wherein the open structure of the entire performance signifies the open (or changeable) structure of history.

Let us take the example of The Caucasian Chalk Circle, a fable set in medieval Georgia. The action of this fable is enclosed within a "modern" frame-tale that seems equally fantastic: the members of two Soviet kolkhozes make the unlikely move of sharing their land in the period of hand-to-mouth survival after World War II. Commentators have noted the lack of detail in the portrayal of that period, but as in Good Woman of Setzuan, Brecht is deliberately setting his play in times and places that signify more importantly by their figural qualities than their specific temporal relation to the situation of the audience.

Within the frame-tale Brecht deflects what might have been purely aesthetic qualities of the action by a variety of techniques. Let us look at one of the two main characters, Azdak, who in other hands might have been a character appreciated only for his wily humanity and eccentric humor. Azdak is a clerk who has unwittingly saved the life of the Grand Duke, as the latter is being hunted down by his own guards. Penitent for having aided the oppressor, Azdak turns himself in and is "rewarded" by being made the new judge. While he was writing The Caucasian Chalk Circle in 1944, Brecht delayed completion of the project while he determined the "social reasons" for Azdak's behavior. "Social" presumably replaces the usual psychological motivations found in the characters of "culinary theater." Specifically, Azdak was to be disappointed "that the fall of the old rulers had not introduced a new era but merely an era of new rulers" (Brecht 1944: 314). As an unwilling participant in the new regime, Azdak the judge subverts the system of justice by an effective combination of shrewd insight into the hidden parameters of the cases brought before him and an effort at a blind or

random dispensing of justice. Brecht continues: "[Azdak] goes on practising bourgeois justice, but in a disreputable, sabotaged version which has been made to serve the total self-interest of the judge." Azdak's apparent self-interest (or, on the other hand, his ironic sense of humanity) never becomes interesting in itself. The "social reasons" for Azdak's behavior are not displayed as motivations or, as Brecht calls them, "excuses." Rather, social and economic influences become an integral and visible part of the actor's presentation.

Darko Suvin has pointed out that in the Chalk Circle a sense of open history (or possibilities for change) is transmitted through open dramaturgic structures which resemble what I am referring to as Gestus. He finds these structures in the tension between utopia and history, future and present. Interestingly, he notes that one avenue of mediation, perhaps the most important one, is the Speaker who periodically reminds the audience of the frame, located in a future close-by but still unrealized, when people can and do conduct their lives peacefully. Suvin even suggests that the Speaker constitutes a "semiotic model" of the "New Theatre" (Suvin 1973: 273), although he does not go on to explain this idea in any detail. Certainly in Brecht's double-layered casting of the Speaker as Azdak we see how he highlights in performance the structural tensions of the play. In fact, to determine how the performance as a whole signifies the openness of history, we must examine the techniques by which the actor is foregrounded. One key lies in the indexical connection between the actor's work on a gesture in rehearsal and the unpolished quality of the gesture that is communicated in performance. Both the overall relation of play to society, as a product of that society, and the techniques for communicating this relation rely most heavily on the sign-function Peirce called indexicality.

Indexicality

Brecht does not try to dispense with the distinction between character and actor, to make the actor disappear; instead, he plays on the distinction, highlights it. The audience who witnessed the production of the Chalk Circle directed by Brecht himself must have been struck by his casting of one actor in the two roles of Azdak and Speaker. As the actor shifted from one role to the other in full view of the audience, they must

have reflected on their impulse to identify with Azdak and may have taken the step back from the play that Brecht wants them to take. In one sense, Brecht is foregrounding the indexical aspect of that individual who is playing these characters, since both the actor and the spectator live in the same historical situation and share the "same" politico-social realities. Of course, this indexical connection also is made with actors playing only one character; after all, the actor in epic theater is to treat his character as another person whom he observes. In that limited sense the actor's indexicality must be brought to the spectator's attention again and again.

Of course, the character also has an indexical relationship to material outside the play. The character may be based on a historical personage, or may be given lines or attributes which link him to events outside the theater. Indexical relations such as these exist in many types of theater. But epic theater places less emphasis on this indexical quality, since it seeks to keep the spectator always aware that the character is also an actor, whose actions here result from causes that lie in the larger context of the society around them. At the conclusion of Mother Courage the main character, who has now lost all of her children as a result of the war, drags her cart off once again to follow the troops, as she has for so many years. Mother Courage has learned nothing by the end of the play about her complicity in the war--but the audience is directed to recognize that she is to be blamed for this willful blindness. Brecht writes: "In giving the peasants money for Kattrin's burial, Weigel quite mechanically puts back one of the coins she has taken out of her purse. What does this gesture accomplish? It shows that in all her grief the business woman has not wholly forgotten how to reckon. . . . To dig out the truth from the rubble of the self-evident, to link the particular strikingly with the universal, and to capture the particular that characterizes a general process, that is the art of the realist" (Brecht 1956: 142). In calling Mother Courage's gesture a "particular that characterizes a general process," Brecht highlights the symbolic aspect of the sign. But this symbolic quality rests on an indexical relation that comes to the spectator's attention as well: namely, that he or she, the spectator, is part of the object which by cause and effect, or a brute relation, has initiated that sign. The spectator recognizes that the actor and playwright are criticizing him through the character of Mother Courage,

and he cannot relax into an attitude of empathy with her. Thus, the recognition of these two types of brute relation of sign to object constitute the spectator's understanding of the Verfremdungseffekt. Moreover, the dynamical object of that play--namely, a society in which Mother Courage would not be compelled, nor would she agree, to sacrifice her family for profit--this dynamical object has been placed in the fabric of history, and the spectator and others must proceed to work toward it.

Finally, we could frame the indexicality of Gestus in a different way by saying that as a dramatic act, the gesture of keeping the coin results directly from the process of selection which has taken place in rehearsal. That is, the gesture is in no way inevitable, and Weigel's manner of playing the gesture should bring out this rough or unfinished quality. While the audience may not become aware of the process that has produced this gesture, it can and should, according to Brecht, see this gesture as an index of an absent sign. The "free and mobile" intellect of the spectator is to be cut loose from any sense of inevitability about the events on stage--or off-stage--so that the spectator can consider the possibilities. Brecht writes: "It is the same as when an irrigation expert looks at a river together with its former bed and various hypothetical courses which it might have followed if there had been a different tilt to the plateau or a different volume of water. . . . And similarly in the theatre our spectator should find that the incidents . . . are also accompanied by echoes and by traces of sketching" (Brecht 1949: 191).

In conclusion, I certainly would not claim that Brecht's highly indexical theater is the only one which can communicate a sense of irony about the current political or social situation. One only has to look at the plays of, say, Wedekind or Sam Shepard for viable alternate forms of irony. These other theaters may rely less on an indexical connection and more on a symbolic, i.e., convention-based, presentation of the gesture. Brecht prefers however to rely on the brute relation of indexicality to channel the spectator's perceptions and to challenge him. I have suggested three ways in which epic theater employs indexicality: between the actor and spectator as members of a common society, between the gesture and absent sign, and between the play and the societal conditions which have caused it to be written. In each of these cases Brecht does not find conventional (that is, symbolic) aspects of signs to be adequate for

his purposes. The task that remains is to demonstrate how indexical signs in epic theater guide other types of signs into the deforming of certain habitual actions, both during and after the performance. But this discussion will have to be taken up at another time.