



A Philosophical Perspective on the Impact of Theater in Shaping Consciousness and Cultural Transformation

رؤية فلسفية لتأثير المسرح في تشكيل الوعي والتحول الثقافي

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Article abstract:

This study examines the interplay between theater and philosophy, arguing that art inherently reflects societal evolution. Each ideological shift or historical turning point spawns new artistic movements, as seen in epic theater's philosophical transformations. Ideology operates as both a latent framework and an explicit discourse, permeating daily life and artistic expression. Theatrical texts thus embody lived experiences and collective worldviews, rendering abstract ideologies tangible. Human relationships and behaviors materialize through art, revealing underlying perceptions of reality. Consequently, theater serves as a dialectical space where dominant ideologies are both reproduced and contested. This analysis underscores theater's agency in shaping cultural consciousness

Key words : Theater ; Ideology. ; Consciousness ; Brecht.

ملخص المقال : سيحاول هذا البحث الكشف عن تعالق النصوص المسرحية بعلوم الفلسفة، انطلاقا من أن الفن ليس بمعزل عن الحياة الإنسانية وتطورها، لذلك فإن كل تطور أو تغيير يطال بعدا من أبعاد الحياة يجد له أثرا في الفن، فكم من مدرسة فنية نشأت نتيجة لحدث سياسي مفصلي أو لتغير في موقف فكري أو نشأة أيديولوجيا ناهضة ولعل هذا الأمر ينطبق على المسرح الملحمي باعتباره قد عرف تحولات عديدة ناتجة عن تطورات فكرية وفلسفية. فالحديث عن الأيديولوجيا يجعلنا نرى أنها تصور للعلم يتجلى ضمنا في الفن وفي جميع تظاهرات الحياة اليومية للفرد والمجتمع، فتصبح بذلك المعنى المعاش والانعكاس لها يعود في الفن ومن خلال الأفكار التي تظهر على مستوى النص، فعندما تصبح الأيديولوجيا التي يحملها صريحة في قولها "، وبهذا المعنى المعاش والانعكاس الممارس لمختلف العلاقات التي يقيهما الإنسان مع سائر الناس، فكل سلوك ونشاط يحمل تصورا للعالم ويتجسد في الأفكار التي تتضمنها الأعمال الأدبية والفنية.

كلمات مفتاحية: مسرح، أيديولوجيا، وعي، بريخت.

Introduction

Since its inception, theater has been intrinsically linked to ideological phenomena, understood both as a science of ideas with its own precise logic and as a system of representations (encompassing images, myths, concepts, and perceptions) that holds historical significance and function within a given society. However, the perspectives of theater practitioners—playwrights and directors—remain diverse and evolving, shaped by their theoretical frameworks and artistic-philosophical orientations. This multiplicity inevitably gives rise to a series of theoretical, procedural, and epistemological challenges, which in turn influence both the nature of dramatic texts and the complexities of their reception.

It is within this context that our study turns to the theorist of epic theater, focusing particularly on the philosophical underpinnings of his theory. Our aim is to delineate the defining features and characteristics that collectively constitute this theoretical framework as a comprehensive creative system. Such an analysis necessitates an examination of the key concepts and terminology specific to epic theater, as well as the philosophical foundations upon which it is constructed. Only through this critical engagement can we fully grasp the structural and conceptual elements that render it a cohesive and transformative theory of performance.

If the dramatic poet was not primarily concerned with instilling doctrine in the Greek individual or transmitting religious rituals—unlike European theater during the Middle Ages—the connection between theater and spiritual values was far more didactic in the medieval period. In the modern era, however, as philosophical schools diversified, so too did the objectives of theater. From an educational standpoint, modern theater reflects a richness and diversity in philosophical and ideological discourse. And while theater was not religious in the strictest sense, it often assumed a political dimension, particularly in the artistic experiments of Piscator and Brecht. What, then, is the relationship between dramatic texts and the discipline of philosophy? And how was the interplay between philosophy and theatrical art effectively achieved?

1. The Ideological Dimension of Epic Théâtre

Art is not isolated from human life and its evolution; thus, every development or shift affecting any dimension of life leaves its mark on art. As a vision of the cosmos and a conception of existence, art is influenced by other worldviews—whether religious, philosophical, or scientific—and even by the crises that punctuate human history. Countless artistic movements have emerged in response to pivotal political events, shifts in intellectual attitudes, or the rise of new ideologies. This principle applies equally to epic theory, which has undergone numerous transformations driven by intellectual and philosophical developments. These shifts altered perceptions of the universe and humanity, redefining the functions of theater and, in turn, necessitating the evolution of theater itself.

Epic theory arose from an awareness that the world had changed and that traditional dramatic forms were no longer capable of encompassing reality, expressing it, or even comprehending it. These forms also failed to align with the aspirations of contemporary individuals, whether theater practitioners or ordinary people. Epic theater, founded on distinct principles, did not emerge in a vacuum. It drew upon diverse sources, including ideology, which (Marx & Engels, 1951, p. 139) "a mental process carried out by the thinker consciously, yet this consciousness is false, for they remain unaware of the true forces driving them. Were they to recognize these forces, their thought would cease to be ideological." Ideology thus operates as an invisible force, directing thinkers, writers, or artists along a predetermined path—one whose influence only becomes palpable upon immersion.

Discussing ideology reveals it as a conception of science implicitly manifested in art and all facets of daily life for individuals and societies. It becomes lived meaning, reflected in art through ideas expressed in texts. (Belhassen, 1984, p. 97), "The text exposes its author, laying bare hidden intellectual reflections and visions, rendering explicit the ideology they carry." The text is a compilation of prior generations' experiences within the writer's mind, reinterpreted into new forms. In this sense, ideology is both lived and reflected in human relationships, where every behavior and activity embodies a worldview, materializing in literary and artistic works.

These broad concepts illustrate how Brecht was deeply imbued with Marxist-Leninist thought, particularly drawing from Marxist ideology. (El-Kashef, 2008, p. 30), "Brecht's embrace of Marxism profoundly influenced his theatrical focus—his performances emphasized analyses of social relations through Marx's framework." These Marxist ideas permeated Brecht's works, especially his plays, where he replaced Marx's concept of a society necessitating change with the theatrical society—the audience—by arming them with revolutionary ideas to spur transformation

The world has witnessed scientific, intellectual, and philosophical developments that fostered pluralism of perspectives, enabling the transcendence or outright rejection of metaphysical conceptions of humanity. Pioneers of epic theater notably adopted one such vision - the Marxist perspective - which locates humanity's authentic struggle not against omnipotent supernatural forces, but rather against entrenched social and political structures. This worldview maintains that the oppressed find themselves in such conditions not through divine predestination, but due to systematic socio-political and economic mechanisms of marginalization. Consequently, submission becomes unnecessary when the adversary is clearly embodied in historical reality rather than existing as some transcendent absolute. It therefore becomes imperative for individuals to critically analyze these social, economic, political, and ideological structures, deconstruct them, and ultimately strive to transform them to emancipate themselves from lived suffering.

Aristotelian theater advocated for catharsis in the spectator's psyche - a spectator perceived as a singular, autonomous subject. Brecht, however, proposed a fundamentally opposing view. He sought to transform Aristotle's conception of humans as discrete individuals into an understanding of humans as expressions of social relations, occupying specific positions within complex, interconnected networks. This perspective was deeply influenced by Karl Marx's assertion that "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of social relations" (Al-Omari) . These philosophical and ideological ideas profoundly impacted Brechtian epic theater, leaving a distinct and evident imprint on its theoretical foundations.

Several scholarly studies on Brecht's mature late works (1933–1947) argue that he engaged with the ideology of historical alienation from human consciousness. These plays present this engagement as both a solution to the problem of alienation and a means of liberating humanity from estrangement, ultimately striving toward a free, unalienated human history.

The Aristotelian theater's emphasis on emotional engagement led epic theater practitioners to critique it as obscuring and distorting reality. They argued that by fabricating artificial conflicts, it prevented audiences from recognizing the genuine struggles they ought to confront. Moreover, they contended that this approach inundated spectators with a torrent of emotions that dulled their critical faculties. Consequently, epic theater proponents saw the necessity of redefining the very purpose of addressing the audience—shifting from emotional manipulation to intellectual and political awakening.

This far-reaching ambition, which once occupied the imaginations of Marx and Brecht, now appears significantly grander than Brecht's own aspirations—though he remained profoundly faithful to the Marxist-Leninist ideological tradition, shaped as it was by the prevailing political and economic conditions of his era, which he inhabited with genuine commitment to his leftist ideals. What has become clear through our examination is the impossibility of conceiving human existence disentangled from the infinite manifestations of alienating ideology. The alienation experienced by an individual, a

group, a class, or an intellectual social stratum at a particular historical juncture in fact represents a historical-civilizational necessity—a dialectical imperative for transcending its epoch. While such alienation may appear regressive when measured against subsequent, more advanced stages of civilizational progress, it nevertheless contains within itself latent new forms of alienation appropriate to future human conditions, stages, and environments.

These ideological dimensions did not undermine the overarching structure of Aristotelian theater; rather, they dissolved within it like salt in water, as Aristotelian conventions resisted these novel concepts (Azzam, 2008, p. 56): "When Brecht embraced the Marxist notion of change, he subordinated theater to its service. Yet the very concept of theater confronted him, compelling him to develop his epic theater theory and its techniques—including its function, which transformed from Aristotle's catharsis to Brecht's (alienation effect)."

What becomes evident is that epic theater remained grounded in the philosophical ideology of German thinkers, who served as its primary compass. Brecht maintained that "the inevitable consequence of enlightening the people would be revolution against all constraints on humanity, particularly the working class." He sought to convert every theatrical performance into a mass demonstration—so radically that in some plays, he distributed actual rifles from the stage to audience members, as if summoning them to immediate revolt (Osman, 1982, p. 80)

2. Hegelian and Marxist Philosophy in the Works of Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht's political and literary works were profoundly shaped by Marxist and Hegelian analytical thought. His philosophical outlook drew heavily from Karl Marx's ideology, which advocates for a philosophy of changing the world rather than merely interpreting it. Throughout his artistic career, Brecht sought to reach the broadest possible audience, aiming to persuade them of the necessity of liberating their means of production from capitalist control. His first major theatrical success, *The Threepenny Opera*, delivered a scathing critique of bourgeois societal structures. Ironically, the play garnered widespread acclaim even among the very social classes Brecht sought to condemn. *The Threepenny Opera

The principle of epic theater is not inherently linked to the aesthetic conceptions of German philosophers in the first half of the previous century. Yet even these aesthetics (the aesthetics of Kant and Hegel), as Marx himself pointed out..." (Brecht & Trans. Jamil , p. 107)

Brecht engaged deeply with the works of Marx and Lenin, drawing profoundly from their theoretical frameworks to develop a scientific stance toward humanity, society, and history.

Guided by Marxist philosophy, Brecht assimilated these philosophical concepts, strategically adapting them to serve his innovative theatrical approach - a theater that deliberately subverted Aristotelian conventions. "The epic theater concept first emerged in Germany during the 1920s, simultaneously evolving as both a theatrical movement and ideological stance. It represented the culmination of preceding theatrical developments... through a fundamental transformation of theater's very form and content." (Elias & Hassan, 1997, p. 97)

Brecht incorporated diverse dramatic techniques that imbued his theater with its distinctive epic character, drawing substantially on the philosophical frameworks of Marx and Hegel.

This profound influence enabled epic theater to innovate both theatrically and thematically, marking a pivotal shift toward imbuing theater with social value that advocated for employing dramatic art as a vehicle for social change. Consequently, Brecht's epic theory revealed theater's function as a social institution charged with expressing ideology.

The Marxist path is fraught with ideological pitfalls, entrenched traditions, and obsolete modes of thinking and living, while being besieged by systems and apparatuses that propagate alternative



worldviews - precisely what attracted Brecht to formulate his epic theory. (Owen & Trans. Ibrahim, 1983, p. 144)

3. Educational Theater

The term "educational theatre" is derived from the word didactique, which itself originates from the Greek didaktikos, denoting anything with an instructional quality. The concept of educational theatre is broad and is not confined to a specific theatrical genre; rather, it encompasses any play with a didactic or pedagogical dimension. The educational aspect of theatre has existed since ancient times, though its focus has varied according to the dominant intellectual foundations of each era—such as religion, ethics, philosophy, and politics (Elias & Hassan, 1997, p. 137)

In essence, educational theatre is an extension of theatre's earliest Greek origins, where plays served the societal purposes they sought to promote. In ancient Greece, theatre functioned in the service of philosophy, reinforcing Greek societal values. During the Renaissance, after the Church adopted theatre as a medium, it became a tool for clergy to disseminate religious teachings. In later periods, theatre increasingly served political objectives rather than mere entertainment. Nevertheless, across all these historical phases, theatre has consistently retained its educational role, a function that endures to this day.

Since its inception, drama (or theatrical performance) has been fundamentally rooted in its educational dimension. Through its contemporary discourse directed at audiences, we observe that it "emerges from knowledge, lived experience, and collective engagement to transform societal conditions or interrogate social and political realities in need of change" (Al-Nassir, 2010, p. 76). This audience-oriented discourse has, from its earliest origins, drawn upon the socio-political contexts of society, only to return to them in a cyclical manner—aiming to reform the very structures that perpetuate dysfunction.

Educational theatre surpasses epic theatre in effectiveness due to its stronger pedagogical dimensions, functioning as a series of sociological experiments. Bertolt Brecht employed this framework to study both individual and collective societal behaviors, subjecting them to the methodological constraints of his didactic approach. Educational theatre thus serves as a mobilizing platform—preparing audiences to critically engage with societal flaws, identify points of systemic failure, and ultimately erect barriers against the escalation of negative social phenomena.

4. Brecht and Aristotelian Theatre

The core of the disagreement between Aristotle and Brecht can be summarized by Karl Marx's famous dictum: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (Saleh, 1997, p. 89). Thus, it becomes evident that Brecht remained ideologically faithful to Marxist principles, shaped by the prevailing political and economic conditions of his time. His commitment aligned seamlessly with his leftist convictions, as he sought to expose social injustices—particularly the exploitation of one class by another—through his theatrical works.

Brecht sought to analyze class dynamics through the movement of society, depicting social relations and the inherent conflicts between individuals. His epic theater was designed to provoke the spectator intellectually, filling their consciousness with revolutionary ideas that called for change. This stands in stark contrast to Aristotelian theater, which renders the audience passive, merely consuming what is presented on stage without critical engagement.

The world witnessed significant scientific, intellectual, and philosophical developments that allowed for diverse perspectives, some of which moved beyond—or entirely broke with—metaphysical

interpretations of human existence. Among these emerging views was the Marxist perspective, adopted by pioneers of epic theater. This framework rejected the notion that humanity's fundamental struggle was against supernatural or metaphysical forces, instead positing that the true conflict lay within existing social, political, and economic structures.

According to this view, the oppressed or marginalized individual finds themselves in such a condition not due to some preordained divine fate, but rather as a result of systemic socio-political and economic structures that enforce exclusion and subjugation. Consequently, submission and resignation are not inevitable—the "enemy" is neither transcendent nor abstract, but concretely embedded in historical reality. It thus becomes imperative for individuals to critically analyze these social, economic, political, and ideological structures, deconstruct their mechanisms, and ultimately strive to transform them.

In this paradigm, the struggle is no longer against mystical forces but rather a sociopolitical and ideological one—a conflict between human beings and the dominant power structures that govern their lives. The objective is to challenge and revise the laws that perpetuate oppression, thereby liberating humanity from exploitation, tyranny, and systemic subjugation. Epic theater, particularly in the Brechtian tradition, serves as a vehicle for exposing these dynamics, urging audiences to recognize their agency in reshaping an unjust world.

Brecht fundamentally opposed the principles laid out by Aristotle, instead grounding his epic theater in Marxist materialism. This approach interprets dialectical materialism—as formulated by Marx—as a method for analyzing social conditions as if they were subjects of an experiment, scrutinizing their contradictions to emphasize society's susceptibility to change.

Brecht's philosophy asserts that human beings contain vast potential; they are not bound to remain as they are, nor should they be perceived merely in their current state. Rather, they must be seen in terms of what they could become (Zaki, 1989, p. 113). By integrating Marxist philosophical concepts into his theatrical framework, Brecht sought to make them instrumental in shaping his new epic theater.

His epic theater thus functioned as a means of exposing social contradictions and inspiring collective transformation, reinforcing the idea that humanity is not fixed but capable of radical evolution.

Bertolt Brecht, the pioneer of epic theater, embraced the Marxist worldview which posits that humanity's true struggle is not against metaphysical forces, but against existing socio-political structures. This perspective maintains that oppressed individuals find themselves in such conditions not due to divine predestination, but because of systematic socio-political and economic mechanisms of marginalization. Consequently, passive resignation becomes untenable - the adversary is neither transcendent nor abstract, but materially embedded in historical reality. It thus becomes imperative for individuals to critically analyze these social, economic, political and ideological structures, deconstruct them, and ultimately strive to transform them to escape their suffering.

This redefines the conflict: no longer a metaphysical struggle, but a socio-political and ideological one - humanity's confrontation with dominant power structures aimed at changing the laws governing these relationships and liberating people from oppression, exploitation, and tyranny. Marxist ideology and other philosophical currents fundamentally shaped epic theater theory. For Brecht, ideology functions similarly to catharsis - not as emotional purging, but as intellectual awakening. The spectator undergoes transformation through the ideas presented during the performance, emerging armed with the weapon of change in both thought and action.

Epic theater theory was fundamentally characterized by dialectics - a concept originating in Marx's philosophy of dialectical materialism. This dialectical approach facilitates proper understanding through the confrontation of opposites, operating within a materialist-dialectical framework that transforms theater into an instrument of change rather than a tool for preserving existing power structures without questioning their inevitability.

As articulated in Marx's theory of dialectical materialism (White & Trans. Mohamed , 2005, p. 27), this conceptual framework encompasses numerous concepts and beliefs that constitute his ideological perspective. For Marx, dialectics represented a historical process where human history cannot be

understood in isolation from human agency and consciousness - a consciousness shaped by human will, aspirations, relentless struggle, and the fight for complete freedom, all of which emerge from humanity's creative, suggestive potential.

Human consciousness of its own alienation marks a qualitative leap in the course of history. This awareness was not a passive factor within the phenomenon of alienation itself. Rather, at a certain historical stage and in a given era, overcoming alienation—or striving to overcome it—allowed humanity to articulate itself through the law of dialectics (dialectique) in historical materialism: the negation of the negation. All of this was theoretically assimilated by the epic tradition through Hegelian philosophy.

"Hegel conceived of existential truth as a dialectical progression of the Absolute Spirit, which continually arrives at new syntheses, beginning from the thesis and antithesis. Hegel's philosophy presents a comprehensive rationalist doctrine, yet it remains deeply romantic due to its dynamic and evolutionary nature." (Bochenski & Trans. Ezzat, 1978, p. 29)

Since drama is fundamentally rooted in growth and development in its actions, Hegel provided Brecht with a foundational principle that he later transformed into a cornerstone of his epic theory.

Since drama is a practice intrinsically linked to social structures, class divisions, and class struggle, it constitutes a collective creation tied to the bonds of social groups and categories—without carrying any trace of their individual ideas or ideologies. With the emergence of historical materialism, the notion of "creation" as a metaphysical concept receded, proving inadequate for analyzing the nature of dramatic practice or discerning the relationships between drama and its underlying ideology.

Hegelian philosophy served as a crucial theoretical foundation for epic theory (or epic drama), equipping it with the dialectical element that defines Brechtian drama. (Anikst, 2000, pp. 32-33)

"The key features of Hegel's philosophy emphasized the nature of his teachings on drama, as dialectics permeated his entire theory of dramatic art.

The Epic Theater's engagement with Marxist philosophy and its materialist conception of history necessitated a dialectical logic founded upon a series of antagonistic contradictions. The clash of these contradictions serves to expose socio-political truths, stripping away false consciousness. (Azzam, 2008, p. 130)

"Brecht immersed himself in the study of Marxism and came to believe in the necessity of transforming the world rather than merely interpreting it. This conviction led him to declare war on bourgeois conceptions of theater and literature."

The most significant manifestation of this lies in the Epic Theater's dramatization of conflict—particularly the clash of contradictions, especially in their social dimension, as embodied in class struggle. This means that dialectics and class conflict are not merely abstract ideas presented in Epic Theater; rather, they function as both a theatrical device and an artistic mechanism. The task of Epic Theater, then, is to deepen dialectical engagement and intensify class struggle, treating them as instruments that hasten the process of revolutionary change.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Bertolt Brecht's contributions lie in his comprehensive re-examination of theatrical texts, principles, and foundational concepts—subjecting them to rational discourse among his characters. These include key notions such as mimesis, naturalism, illusion, immersion, realism, the social function of theater, theater as both entertainment and education, the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), theater in the scientific age, and other nuanced issues that collectively illuminate the poetics of Epic Theater.

Brecht's theater cannot be fully understood except through its ideological function, which transforms theatrical performance into a means of exposing—rather than concealing—societal contradictions. Consequently, Brechtian drama emerges as a paradigmatic model of the interplay

between aesthetic function (the overturning of literary conventions) and ideological function (the dismantling of dominant social structures)

Brecht possessed a singular ability to articulate abstract concepts in an engaging, creative, and intellectually provocative manner. Among his most thought-provoking works are his writings on doubt and truth. He systematically questioned established norms, epitomized in his assertion: "Doubt must be applied to all things simultaneously, for since all things are interconnected, I cannot, of course, isolate individual elements with any certainty. Fundamentally, I do not doubt things themselves, but rather my own perceptions—which may convey these things to me inaccurately or erroneously".

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