

FABIO TOLLEDI

STYLE AND CHARACTER BETWEEN BENJAMIN AND BRECHT

The relationship between Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht represents an extraordinary point of connection between a revolutionary practice and a never-ending question about ways and concrete production of concepts.

Walter Benjamin has spent a lot of time with Bertolt Brecht, especially during Brecht's exile, in Svendborg, Denmark, from 1933 to 1938.

The importance of Brecht figure for Benjamin is fully proven, in spite of the fact that the influence of Brecht has created a few problems to Benjamin. From Adorno to Scholem, critiques towards this relationship have been very disappointing, mainly due to a very negative opinion about Brecht.

Even if from different sides, Marxist orthodoxy and a deeper and deeper radicalization of their positions will determine isolation for both Brecht and Benjamin in their respective environments.

Walter Benjamin has positioned the Bavarian playwright among the most eminent German mother tongue writers of the early nineteen-thirties, acknowledging Brecht's absolute relevance from the literary point of view, more than for his political activism.

Benjamin got in touch with Brecht thanks to Asja Lacis, his Lettonian assistant director and actress.

To Asja Lacis has been dedicated a book that marks an important turning point for Benjamin, *One-Way Street*¹. This book – written between 1923 and 1926 – is made of aphorisms that, while describing the town, describe the life of its inhabitants and the details that represent its real life pulse. According to Benjamin, the town is starting to become the space of living life. For Asja Lacis, Benjamin wrote in 1928 *A Programme for a Proletarian Children's Theatre*².

In this work as well emerges in Benjamin the context value, the tangible space where experience is shared, the flux of knowledge. According to Benjamin, «Proletarian education needs first and foremost a framework, an objective space *within* which education can be located. The bourgeoisie, in contrast, requires an idea *toward* which education leads»³.

Benjamin believes it is not important to ascertain whether a children theatre does or does not relate to the sublime, highest peaks of theatre over its millenary history. If anything, its' an instrument to mark the distance from conservative theatre, marked by the origin of profit, on the financial side, and by the instrument of *sensationalism*, from the social point of view.

Proletarian theatre made by children lives in its absolutely collective dimension, up to making marginal the final performance element and to highlighting, unlike the conservative theatre, its collective theatre character. In this theatre teachers are subject to learning, while children are leaders of the knowledge process.

The *Programme* development highlights elements that recall Benjamin's interest for the form of theatre, the learning process, the flux of knowledge due to transformation operated by the actor.

¹ W. BENJAMIN, *One-Way Street*, in *Reflections*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1978

² In W. BENJAMIN, *A Programme for a Proletarian Children's Theatre* in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 192-1930, Volume 2: Part 1, edited by M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, G. Smith, Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 202.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 203.

Konrad Fiedler is the first to have shown in his *Writings on Art* that the painter is not a man who sees more naturalistically, more poetically, or more ecstatically than other people. He is, rather, a man who sees more accurately with his hand when his eye fails him, who is able to transfer the receptive innervation of the eye muscles into the creative innervation of the hand. What characterizes every child's gesture is that creative innervation is exactly proportioned to receptive innervation⁴.

The actor's act of knowing is a concrete action, a bodily action, just as the audience look is a concrete action on which theatre is based. In those same years, Antonin Artaud affirmed from a different point of view that the spectator that goes to his theatre is aware he will undergo a surgery operation, where not only his spirit but all his senses and flesh are put at stake.

As for *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (written in 1936) the major issue is for Benjamin the *Jetztzeit*, which represents the real historical present, as any child action is not addressed to the eternity of the products, but to the right time of the gesture. That's why theatre is the Art of Childhood.

According to Benjamin, the genius of education is observation.

This alone is at the heart of unsentimental love. No pedagogic love is worth anything unless in nine-tenths of all instances of knowing better and wanting better it is deprived of its courage and pleasure by the mere observation of children's lives. It is sentimental and vain. For the true observer, however – and this the starting point of education – every childhood action and gesture becomes a signal. Not so much a signal of the unconscious, of latent processes, repressions, or censorship (as the psychologist like to think), but a signal from another world, in which the child lives and commands. (...) For this reason, the "theory of signals" is not mere figure of speech. Almost every childlike gesture is a command in a signal in a world in which only a few unusually perceptive men, notably Jean Paul, have glimpsed.⁵

The *Programme* first draft dates back to 1924 and its ultimate version dates back to November 1928. In this context, stands out the consideration according to which the real pedagogical genius is observation. In Svendborg, many years later, Brecht writes a poem that is perfectly clear since its title: *Speech to the Danish working-class actors on the art of observation*.⁶

This poem by Brecht seems to sum up all of Benjamin's *Program* indications.

The craft, the daily work of the man of theatre in strict, direct and constant contact with his companions and colleagues, is to be added to the above observations.

In this poem, Brecht sees himself as part of the audience, sitting on the low benches, where a dispute is being born and grows.

The art of observation is, according to Brecht, the art that an actor must possess first of all:

You, actor
Must master the art of observation
Before all other arts.
For what matters is not how you look but
What you have seen and can show us. What's worth knowing
Is what you know.
People will observe you to see
How well you have observed.
The man who only observes himself however never gains
Knowledge of men.⁷

The act of knowing, of the overlook that becomes action, is based on a radical and shattering

⁴ Ibidem, p. 204.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 205

⁶ B. BRECHT, *Speech to the Danish working-class actors on the art of observation* in *Poems* edited by J. Willett, R. Manheim, Eyre Methuen, 1976 pp.121-129.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 122.

implication. The art of observation marks the common belonging to the world.

See how they walk and speak, those rules
Who hold the threads of your fate in their white and brutal
hands.
You should inspect such people exactly. And now
Imagine all that is going on around you, all those struggles
Picturing them just like historical incidents
For this is how you should go on to portray them on the
stage:
The fight for a job, sweet and bitter conversations
Between the man and his woman, arguments about books
Resignation and revolt, attempt and failure
All these you will go on to portray as historical incidents⁸.

Forty years later, René Lourau and his institutional analysis have given birth to an action method to study the relationships that the various social parts maintain with the institutional system, whether evident or not. In this kind of intervention, the analyst is a subject implicated and involved in the network of institutions that he analyses, he is not an external element of the group, community or organization that he observes. In the relationship between establisher and establishment, observation already becomes a horizon of intervention. Not a distant, third party description, but a concerned action⁹.

As Brecht suggests to Danish worker-actors, « He observes badly who does not know/How to use what he has observed. The fruitgrower /Inspects the apple tree with a keener eye than does the walker/But no one can see man exactly unless he knows it is/ Man who is the fate of man»¹⁰.

This operation of a radical turn that concerns the implication of the actor-subject makes the common action of Brecht and Benjamin emerge with great precision.

Man as mankind's fate is a formula that Brecht constantly uses – also in this *Speech* – and it contains an extraordinary intuition. In the moment in which the actor's body meets the spectator's body, it performs an action that concerns both politics and knowledge and that transforms the world, *carves* the world.

In some diary writings of June 1938, Benjamin reports a conversation he had the previous evening with Brecht. Talking about epic theatre, the director makes some important considerations about the theatre for children. In this theatrical form, delivery mistakes bestow epic traits on the story. Exactly in that conversation, Brecht refers to the birth of epic theatre.

Also in this case, the interruption of the ordinary tendency suggests Brecht a possible and new way.

His friend Karl Valentin, a genius for comedy since Weimar Age, creates a new acting style by observing still actors.

It starts to be clear how Benjamin has influenced the development of Brecht's drama theory, especially the concept of the non-tragic hero that can be put in contact with the epic scene.¹¹

Benjamin observes that baroque tragedy and epic theatre are related through an anti-Aristotelian aesthetics; in both theatrical forms exist an issue concerning the social sphere of interaction, rather than a sequence of events connected to the individual nature of the single character. Such influence

⁸ Ibidem, p.123.

⁹ R. LOURAU, *La chiave dei campi. Introduzione all'analisi istituzionale*, a cura di P. Fumarola, Sensibili alle foglie, Roma 1999.

¹⁰ B. BRECHT, *Speech to the Danish working-class actors on the art of observation*, cit., p. 125.

¹¹ See E. WIZISLA, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht – the story of a friendship*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2009.

is clear when we consider that *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* was written by Benjamin in 1926 and Brecht's writings about *Theory and Technique of Theatre* collected under the clearly titled section *A Non-Aristotelian Drama*, include essays and speeches ranging from 1933 to 1941.

In 1938, Benjamin goes on writing in his diary that Brecht remembers the moment when the idea of *epic theatre* came. It was during the rehearsals of *Edward II* in Munich. In the battle Brecht couldn't solve the problem of the soldiers: finally he asks for an advice to Karl Valentin. And the actor said "they look like dead". Then the faces of the soldiers were covered with white lime. And this was the turning point.

One of Benjamin's most meaningful efforts in the field of comprehension, interpretation and diffusion of Brecht's work concerns epic theatre, as something very different from Tragedy.¹²

Interruption is among the stylistic instruments that Brecht uses to reach the epic dimension. According to Benjamin, the prerequisite of a non-Aristotelian theatre co is represented, first of all, by its analogy to the non-Euclidean geometry. Eliminating the parallels postulate in the latter means suppressing the cathartic process in the first. For Brecht's theatre, this elimination pertains to the liberation of love, through the touching participation to the hero's destiny.

Main objective of epic theatre must be «to deprive the stage of its content effect».¹³

For that purpose, the non-tragic hero needs a third party look on stage. Benjamin remembers that in the French classical theatre, well visible on stage, among the actors, sat top rank people. The thinker presence, observing but without any narrative coherence in respect to what is performed on stage, allows that estrangement effect originating active questions about what happens before us. In this sense, Benjamin recognizes Brecht's style as a theatre of contradictions that constitute our society.

Among original characteristics of the epic theatre audience, is a flair for astonishment that takes the place of identification. According to this perspective, the audience's task is getting astonished in front of the situation and context: they do not have to identify with the hero's destiny.

It is about discovering the situation that highlights the action of watching carried out by the audience. In this sense, the scene becomes double. It expands, exceeds and embraces the complexity that we call theatre. This way, theatre does not live *only* on stage, in the identification fiction of the fourth wall, but rather in the whole theatre area, that is in the place where actor and audience meet.

Therefore, for Benjamin and Brecht, a theatre performance is not the restitution in the sense of the naturalism theorists. Instead, it is essentially about finding out these situations. Here, in Benjamin's text, intervenes a strange aside, in brackets. With some Derrida style coquetties, we could affirm that the German *Klammer* (literally, clothes peg, and only secondarily a graphic sign that indicates brackets) hangs us. And maybe to not wear his clothes (that is the Italian equivalent of *walking in somebody's shoes*, translator entry), to not empathize, Benjamin adds in brackets «to grow them apart we can say an *alienation effect*».

Moreover, it is surprising the way Benjamin, through the value of *interruption* can seize an exigency that belongs to the centuries-old Chinese and Japanese theatre. In that context, gesture, posture, every element of the actor technique strives for becoming gesture and sign. The most important quality of an actor is what Zeami described in *The Flowering Spirit* (the first Italian translation title of this exceptional book was *The Teaching of the style of flower*)¹⁴. Zeami, Japanese actor and playwright of the 14th century, guides his secret teaching in the fluctuation between visible and invisible, in the secret of an actor energy on the scenic area, along the subtle line that ties the audience look in the making of the performance.

Benjamin and Brecht share the same passion and study of Chinese and Japanese culture. Brecht's diaries include the scant list of the objects that the director possessed in December 1939.

¹² W. BENJAMIN, *What is Epic Theatre?* in *Understanding Brecht*, Verso, London 2003 pp. 15-22

¹³ Ivi.

¹⁴ M. ZEAMI, *The Flowering Spirit, Classic Teaching on the Art of Nō*, edited by W.S. Wilson, Kodansha International, Tokyo 2006.

I possess: a Chinese roll THE MAN THAT DOUBTS, 3 Japanese masks, 2 small Chinese carpets, 2 Bavarian farmer knives, 1 Bavarian hunting knife, an English fireplace chair, a copper washbowl for the feet, copper jugs, copper ashtrays¹⁵.

It is impossible to not notice the objects that open this list of poor things belonging to a man who had lived in exile for many years, in extreme poverty.

Also the work *Me-ti, The Book of Changes*, predominantly written during his Danish exile period, between 1934 and 1937, was described by Brecht as «a little book written in the Chinese manner»¹⁶, and the character of *Me-ti* unequivocally shows the great importance that Far East culture has had for the Bavarian director.

In his introductory notes, Brecht says that *Book of Changes* was translated in German using the translation from Chinese to English by Charles Stephen.

Through the *Eastern* origin instrument of interruption, Benjamin comes to define another essential element of epic theatre: the quotable gesture.

According to Benjamin, interruption is one of the fundamental processes of every shaping of form. This process goes far beyond the simple artistic sphere. Events interruption happens by a quotation. As a matter of fact, «to quote a text means interrupting the context in which it falls»¹⁷

One of the essential assignments of epic theatre is making possible the quotation of gestures, after all, from epic theatre to nowadays, we have been present to theatre forms deeply connected with gestural art, theatre substance, language and sound substance. To millennia-old China and Japan cultural tradition, Benjamin adds his attention to all the element of contemporary technique, of new shattering art forms, cinema first.

According to Benjamin, the fundamental form of the epic theatre is the shock, like in a movie. In the *song*, captions detach every situation from the other.»¹⁸ All of these technical processes tend to produce that interruption element generating intervals that are prone to limit the audience illusion.

Up to now, we have considered the style elements that lead to a path that intertwines Benjamin and Brecht, between baroque drama and epic theatre.

Nevertheless, both of them have given an extraordinary contribution for what concerns *character*.

In *Fate and Character*, Walter Benjamin deals with the issue of tragedy and *hybris*.

Theatre has to do with Character, an element that refers to the character itself as well as to characterisation. Both the German (*Charakter*) and the English (*character*) terms reveal this essential instrument of the theatre story.

The Greek term *χαρακτήρ* refers to the action of carving and, maybe earlier, to scratching. Anyway, the style issue

would seem to advance in the manner of a spur of sorts (*éperon*). Like the prow, for exemple, of a sailing vessel, its *rostrum*, the projection of the ship which surges ahead to meet the sea's attack and cleave its hostile surface. Or yet again, and still in nautical terminology, the style might be compared to that rocky point, also called an *éperon*, on which the waves break at the harbour's entrance. (...) The style-spur, the spurring style, is a long object, an oblong object, a word, which perforates even as it parries¹⁹.

Maybe with this instrument it is possible to move towards the same form of representing, reproducing, up to arriving to the character, to the letter shape that is attributed to the form of writing. Even now, here, I chose a character that, later, will be transformed according to the

¹⁵ B. BRECHT, *Journals 1934-1955*, edit by J.Willett – H.Rorrison, Routledge, New York 1996.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 3.

¹⁷ W. BENJAMIN, *What is epic theatre?*, p. 131.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 132.

¹⁹ J. DERRIDA, *Spurs, Nietzsche's style*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1979, pp.37-38

directions of the editor of this volume. Now, while I am writing with my computer, I am using a Book Antiqua font, size 14, this character will become Garamond through a change of *font*, a change of *size*. After all, agreement (i.e. *scrittura*, in Italian, that means both *writing* and *agreement*; translator entry) is the contract that a theatre producer uses to hire an actor. And the hired actor will get into his part with an accurate operation of subtraction of the playwright's words, an operation of sliding that is never clear enough and involves an utter distance between written work and script and, again, an extra distance between script and stage.

But how does the body carve this character? And why this distance between the Italian word *Personaggio* (i.e. character), the French *Personnage* and the English word *Character*?

According to Agamben, wise is the person that, even accepting without discussing the role (the "mask") that fate assigns, as far as humble it can be, does not identify with it and simply represents it as well as possible. In this perspective, the term *prosopon* changes its meaning, and, while being the opposite of 'person' in theatrical sense, it starts to designate man 'moral personality', the power that equips the action criterion and remains above all the possible actions that it is possible to produce²⁰.

In Boethius's *Contra Eutychem* this ambiguity can be seen in its original undivided coherence. Boethius is perfectly conscious of the theatrical meaning of the term «person», but he tries to transform it into a philosophical category, making of this term the equivalent of the Greek *hypostasis*, in the sense of *naturae rationabilis individua substantia*. In a passage where tragedy and comedy relevance in respect to the status of person has its own original legitimacy, the difficulty of this crucial semantic change emerges to conscience as a «lack of words»²¹.

The term *person* seems to have different origins, that from masks [*personis*] that, in comedies and tragedies, represented the men about whom the performance was. It is self-evident and draws attention the fact that the mask is related to *per-suonare*. Also Greeks call these masks *prosopa*, due to the fact that they are put in front of the eyes to cover the face²².

The *dramatic* theory of the actor is based on the awareness of contrasting forces, of a non-linear dimension, a form that Eastern theatre defines as a creating opposition, a look able to explore also oneself own horror.

In a text of 1931, Benjamin illustrates the destructive character. This element knows only one password: Make Space; only one activity: Clean Up²³.

According to Benjamin, the destructive character does not see anything lasting. «Even where the others clash against walls or mountains he sees his way out. He reduces the existent in ruins, not for the love of ruins but of the way out that crosses them»²⁴.

On the contrary, we can find in the creative tension of the opposite another category along the axis Benjamin/Brecht.

In *Commentaries on the Poems of Brecht*²⁵, a definition stands out – referred to the Chinese Lao Tse – and is related to a strange category: *kindness*.

Benjamin's comment concerns the poem *Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao-Te-Ching on Lao-Tsu's Road into Exile*²⁶. In this poem Brecht refers to Lao Tse – without mentioning him –, the wisest among all wise men, who is exiled because of his wisdom. On the other side we find another

²⁰ G. AGAMBEN, *Categorie italiane. Studi di poetica e di letteratura*, Laterza, Roma- Bari 2010

²¹ Ivi

²² Ibidem, pp. 23-24.

²³ W. Benjamin, *The Destructive Character in Selected Writings*, edited by M.W. Jennings, G. Smith, H. Eiland, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2005.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 425.

²⁵ W. BENJAMIN, *Commentaries on the Poems of Brecht*, in *Understanding Brecht*, pp. 43-74.

²⁶ B. BRECHT, *Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao-Te-Ching on Lao-Tsu's Road into Exile*, in *Poetry and prose*, edited by R. Grimm, Continuum International Publishing, New York, 2003, pp64-69.

character, the tax collector. The tax collector's eagerness of knowledge will allow him to get wisdom out of the sage man. The tax collector asks the wise man a simple question that he cannot leave unanswered. The tax collector's question concerns the basis of Lao Tse's teaching and the results that the sage has achieved after many years.

Tao treasure arises from this urgent question. Kindness, for Benjamin, marks three essential passages: firstly, it does not have to be manifested inconsiderately, from any point or any voice. Secondly, courtesy doesn't consist in giving occasionally small things, but in giving very big things as if they were very small.

After having understood the tax collector's urgency, its appropriateness, Lao Tse defines this way the eight days that he dedicates to the Taoteking writing: «Well, a brief pause». The tax collector's urgency introduces an interruption that, while bursting, changes the evolution of history. Thirdly, Benjamin states that kindness makes distance among people a living thing.

Kindness as a Brecht category can be found in another poem from *Domestic Breviary*²⁷, a ballad describing the world different kinds of kindness. They are three also in this case: the mother adjusting diapers; the father offering his hand; people throwing soil on a grave.

Even in this case, the art of observation produces a scene that transforms the way we look at things.

Lao Tse, literally the child-old man, seems to defrost a troubled trajectory that connects Benjamin and Brecht.

The child-old man is maybe also a way, in Far East, to define the actor that can master his craft, oscillating between style and character, and marks an irreversible crisis point.

In crisis point, **Style** and **Character** communicate between the border of the art making experience and the constant flux of the living artwork, which is theatre.

The conclusion of the *Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre* can be considered the prefiguration of theatre in the second half of the XX century. And since then, it works effectively even today, here and now.

What is truly revolutionary is not that propaganda of ideas that incites to make impossible actions and that disappears before the first sober consideration made leaving the theater. «What is truly revolutionary is the secret signal of what is to come that speaks from the gesture of the child.»²⁸

²⁷ B. BRECHT, *Domestic Breviary* in *Poetry and Prose*, edited by R.Grimm, Continuum International, London 2003.

²⁸ W. BENJAMIN, *Program of a Proletarian Children's Theatre*, p. 206.