



The Techniques of the Arts

Hartmut Wickert (✉)

Zurich University of the Arts, Pfingstweidstrasse 96, 8005 Zurich, Switzerland

hartmut.wickert@mailbox.org

Abstract

This essay for the inaugural issue of *Technology and Language* explores the languages of the theatre which define and constrain its mode of production. The very inability of the theatre to establish, even as an illusion, a non-theatrical reality, turns out to be its major asset and strength. Especially in regard to Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin's reflections on history, technology, and Brecht's epic theatre, the peculiar grammar of gestural reading and writing becomes apparent. A quotable gesture is not tied to a particular subject but stands, frozen in time, as an element of action. It exposes the unfulfilled promise of a historical moment, allowing theatrical techniques to uncover the message of redemption in the cultural material of a tragic past. Accordingly, the many intersecting, non-instrumental technologies of theatrical production give us a language for reading history and deciphering here and there an index of a better future that was buried in the past.

Keywords: Art; Techniques of the theatre; Walter Benjamin; Bertolt Brecht

Аннотация

В этом эссе для первого выпуска журнала «Технологии в инфосфере» («*Technology and Language*») исследуются языки театра, которые определяют способ постановки. Сама неспособность театра создать, даже как иллюзию, нетеатральную реальность, оказывается его главным достоинством и преимуществом. Это, в частности, касается размышлений Бертольда Брехта и Вальтера Беньямина об истории, технологиях и эпического театра Брехта, где становится очевидной своеобразная грамматика жестового чтения и письма. Изображаемый жест не привязан к конкретному предмету, он застывает во времени, как элемент действия. Он отражает невыполненное обещание исторического момента, позволяя театральным техникам раскрыть послание искупления в культурном материале трагического прошлого. Соответственно, множество пересекающихся, неинструментальных техник театральных постановок предоставляют нам язык для чтения истории и расшифровки индекса лучшего будущего, которое похоронено в прошлом.



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The Techniques of the Arts

The arts have command of their specific technical means of production. These technical means vary according to the artistic discipline that makes use of them to render its products. The works or products of the arts are as diverse as the arts themselves. Roughly speaking, the arts are divided into the performative (performing) and visual arts. The performative (performing) arts essentially produce ephemeral products, the visual arts material artefacts. The production of these products requires techniques which in the performative (performing) arts engage the use of bodily powers, and in the visual arts recruit and organize materials, instruments, tools and entire production facilities. These techniques are tied to the special abilities of the artists, who have skills in dealing with the powers and forces, tools and forms of production. Furthermore, there is an ongoing discussion about the fact that the use and application of the techniques of the arts is nothing without creativity, inventiveness, and imagination. Without these, it is said that the techniques of the arts are not sufficient to produce art.

The question of the nature or essence of art is not what concerns me here. Nevertheless, the question of what art is, what distinguishes it from the artistry of artisans, and what renders its products unique will have to be asked again and again – even more so when the focus is on techniques and the technical side of art. The fine arts, video, theatre, and dance programs at academies and schools of higher education always ask this question, at least implicitly, even if they try to avoid it. They probably try to avoid this question because it touches on the sensitive question whether the arts are as teachable as are the crafts.

PERFORMING AND VISUAL ARTS

The question regarding the technology and the techniques which afford the physical manifestations of the arts, sounds banal, the answers aren't. The question concerns the differentiation of the various materials and its significance for the products of the various arts. The distinction between the performing and visual arts, for instance, rests on the differentiation of the materials of their art. The core material of the performing arts is the human body and its actions, which shape the artwork – in contrast to painting, for example, where the instruments are also implemented and guided by physical action, but where this action does not normally appear directly in or with the artwork.

Just as the arts have techniques and procedures that are diverse, multifaceted, and discipline-specific, the arts have languages. The visual arts speak a language that is bound to images and forms, the performing arts speak the languages of physical expression. In the so-called theatre of the spoken word, the arts also speak the language of language (in opera this is singing, in drama it is monologue and dialogue).

Drama uses the languages of the human body. As such it is closest to our social reality. This reality is a language-bound reality, some say it is a linguistic reality.



THE DRAMATIC THEATRE AND ITS METHODS

Dramatic theatre mediates between reality and form with its practices and procedures. Perhaps the most interesting among the arts, it practices in an artistically designed environment by way of a fusion of techniques of the body, of speech, of the social. Performances create and use a complex, structurally and systematically executed production process, which turns a given text or material for speech into a complex social experiment. This experiment is, among other things, repeatable and sets in motion repeatable communication processes as the same production is performed again and again. In contrast, the process that produces the experiment seeks novelty, surprise, and uniqueness.

Despite all attempts to mechanize and formalize it, dramatic theatre revolves around the human figure in a created space. (This is the resistance of the theatre against the modern forms of representation and narration such as film or television).

The process of making a few pages of written words (drama) become reality is a mixture of social creativity, structural adherence to certain procedures, ingenuity, and the deployment of instrumental and physical forces. Before each production there is nothing but the intention to “read” and transform a text through the production process of the theatre. This is the basis and the raw material from which the reality of the scene is created. The routines and techniques of the theatre enable it to produce unique performances. They also enable the theatre to constantly recreate itself. The recreation of the theatre is a learning process induced by the use of its production practices – stable environments, technical frameworks related to the human body at their center – and its actors.

Mediating between reality and form, a fusion of physical, elocutionary and social techniques, organized around the human body, an intentional reading of drama and recreation of itself, these then are the texts of the dramatic theatre.

THE TEXTS OF THE THEATRE

The storehouse of dramatic texts represents “*Urtexte*” (source texts) or traces that lead into the routines and production practices of the theatre and engender various new unpredictable forms of text. All text forms that the theatre creates are designed to communicate. As such they reach beyond the exhibited performance which is a finalized test of how the social experiment of staging the text worked out, inviting the audience, in turn, to read the production process. So, the staged performance is only another text of the theatre, by no means its product.

The texts of the theatre are the technical prerequisites on which the work of the theatre is based – the plays (the writings of the theatre), the buildings, sites and areas (the places of the theatre), rehearsals, construction forms, performances, reviews, public communication (the routines of the theatre), actors, directors, stage and costume designers, builders and stage hands, stage managers (the actors or agents of the theatre).



But the texts of the theatre are also the cultural and socio-political attributions that situate the theatre in society. In this context, the theatre has experienced a wide variety of definitions which, roughly speaking include

- the ritual or cult of coping with the powerlessness of humans in the face of the violence and power of the gods or nature,
- the psychological process of confronting the inner nature of people
- the moral improvement of people and the communicative form of social self-affirmation and education.

These functions (or texts) each have their own internal structures and work simultaneously for – and with – each other. Together they form the grand narrative of theatre as the play of society with itself. At the same time, theatre is a game with the question of redemption and overcoming the tragic state of the world. The theatre develops its texts to offer humanity a kind of everlasting hope. The theatre helps to make the unimaginable imaginable.

SELF-REFLEXIVITY

The various texts of the theatre address its own practices of production. Like all art, theatre thus has, and needs to have, a tragic capacity for self-reflexivity. And especially the theatre needs to have this. In its narratives the theatre always tells its own story. With its most desperate attempts at depicting real events as closely as possible, the theatre does not succeed in placing the performers in non-theatrical reality. (And if it does, then only as a deception, which proves the imprisonment of the medium within its own boundaries. Heiner Goebbels demonstrated that ingeniously in his work “*Eraritjaritjaka*”).

So, since theatre is unable to escape outside of itself, much effort is put into creating the impression that the performance on stage is taking place for the first and only time. The techniques used to make the routines of repetition invisible arise from a bet on the paradox of the theatre: on the one hand, the trace of the literary precept is followed – this is the promise the theatre makes to the spectators – but on the other hand, this trace must be embedded within the logic of a specific version – “handwriting” or “interpretation” – in order to claim validity.

The theatre always remains in its textual domain. It cannot be brought into congruence with the realities that it tries to depict, reconstruct, deconstruct or illuminate. Theatre remains play and is condemned to remain play. But that is in turn its exceptional achievement and its potential.

THE TECHNIQUES OF THEATRE

Since the 1920s, Walter Benjamin has attempted to think of technology in non-technological (non-instrumental) terms. Technology then serves not to rule over nature but to shape the relationship between humans and nature. For Benjamin, technology as a medium between human and nature has the potential to function as a universal language, i.e. a language used by both sides. If technology is the medium in which humans and



nature meet, then there are several ways to orchestrate this encounter. "Good" (non-instrumental) technology creates a space in which the relationship between humans and nature can be shaped freely and playfully. Art has its place in this space of non-purposeful interaction. Art opens a space to try, test and practice the relationship between humans and nature, to discover the unplanned, to experience surprises, to situate amazement as the opposite side of knowledge and recognition. All this can serve to interrupt the catastrophic course of history, to overcome relationships of oppression, domination and violence. Here the idea of redemption, which Benjamin pursues throughout his entire work, plays a decisive role. In the course of history humankind has distanced itself from the state of redemption and thus from the perfect realization of the promise of happiness that it carries within it ("the hapless angel"). Since history seems to accelerate this distance, the task of humanity is at all times to interrupt this movement: if the past carries within it a "secret index" by which it refers to redemption¹, then this index must be deciphered by the present. How can this deciphering happen? The promise of the past is hidden in the cultural assets that have been left to the present. Among other things, these are the conversations and disputes, the hope and despair that dramatic literature offers us. The role of the theatre is to make these voices from the past audible, to hear and understand the messages that former human generations left us and to integrate them into our present life. The techniques of the theatre serve the remembering and re-presenting of these voices and the playful handling of their meaning. What is the playful approach of the theatre to its material? Benjamin projects his idea of the redeeming power of the theatre on Bertolt Brecht's experiments. In Brecht's epic theatre, Benjamin discovers the "dramatic laboratory" in which the theatre recovers its age-old opportunity, namely the "exposure of the present" (Benjamin, 2011b, p. 693). In the epic theatre, Benjamin finds a counterpart to his philosophy of history which is strictly oriented towards questioning the concept of progress and exposes the interruption, the standstill as an opportunity to reorient the catastrophic course of history. The epic theatre practices this stopping of the action, the interruption of progress. This ties in with an Aristotelian concept of action and thus sets itself up against a bourgeois subject-centered understanding of theatre. Aristotle had already emphasized action, and not the person, as the central element of the theatre², prescribing variations to the action in the Brechtian sense in order to be and to remain exciting – providing unexpected turns.³

The epic theatre is based on interruptions in the progress of the action. These interruptions of the plot generate gestures, for Brecht the essential element for producing knowledge and pleasure. "Making gestures quotable is the actor's most important achievement; he must be able to block his gestures like a typesetter blocks words" (Benjamin, 2011b, p. 536). With the gesture the actors surrender themselves to the event,

¹ The past has a certain index by which it is referred to salvation (Benjamin, 2011a, p. 693).

² "For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life" (Aristotle, ca 350 B.C.E/1902).

³ "Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect" (Aristotle, ca 350 B.C.E/1902).



which cannot be traced back to any particular subject. They become the objects of their gestures. The epic theatre makes these gestures quotable, repeatable and exhibitable. Since they mean nothing other than social agreements, routines, and behavioral patterns tied to them, they can be exhibited, quoted, and varied in the dramatic laboratory. This is probably the “age-old opportunity of exposing the present” that Benjamin speaks of. It allows “present existence to splash out of the riverbed of time” such that it will “dazzlingly stand in emptiness for a moment.” This is the moment that Benjamin calls remembrance (“*Eingedenken*”) in another place: the course of time comes to a halt, allowing those present to recognize and marvel at the fragments of the past, moments that are not yet completed.

Benjamin’s interest in theatre is giving it a role that meets the “messianic mission” of the present: making the past readable with its unfulfilled claims. Art, and especially the theatre, playfully, experimentally, and constructively test the use of the techniques for making history and the world readable.

Thus the theatre becomes the language and the tool for finding and realize happiness, reading and exhibiting what is inscribed as an unredeemed promise in the handed-down material. The languages and techniques of the theatre would thus be understood as the non-instrumental medium in which humankind practically and constructively puts to test the idea of universal happiness.

Hartmut Wickert

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