



# Tracing the Influence of Bertolt Brecht on Contemporary Theatre and Popular Culture Production: A Study Based on Theatre for Social Change and Interactive Popular Culture

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## Abstract

This paper explores the influence of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre on Indian theatre traditions and its continuing resonance in contemporary cultural production. Brecht's rejection of Aristotelian catharsis in favor of critical engagement reshaped global theatre, emphasizing alienation, dialectics, and the breaking of the fourth wall. While Brecht drew from Marxist philosophy and global performance traditions, his innovations found fertile ground in India, where indigenous ritual and interactive performance practices—such as Theyyam—already blurred the performer-spectator divide. Post-independence Indian dramatists, notably Girish Karnad and Habib Tanvir, adapted Brechtian techniques to create a strand of theatre for social change, merging indigenous forms with epic theatre's rationalist, political aims. Beyond theatre, Brecht's methods have influenced cinema and popular culture, from Ritwik Ghatak's *The Cloud-Capped Star* to contemporary films and digital media. By examining this intercultural dialogue, the paper highlights Brecht's lasting impact as both an artistic innovator and a catalyst for political and social critique.

## Introduction

Bertolt Brecht was not, at least historically, the first dramatist or playwright to challenge the Aristotelian notion of tragedy and its most crucial pointer: catharsis (Squiers). Many practitioners believed that the purgatory effect of the said catharsis was momentary and that it plummeted the impact that art was capable of (Curran). Nevertheless, this

German dramatist redressed the inherent issues of catharsis and theatre by introducing an ingenious theatre movement called epic theatre (Anderson). Though Brecht was not a vocal supporter of the ‘art for life’s sake’ movement, the dramatist made a noticeable contribution to the aforementioned stream of thought when introducing a theatre aimed at cultivating critical thinking among the audience (Frimberger).

As a person who aimed to develop a theatre that could make the audience think and drive social change, Brecht had a noticeable impact on twentieth- and twenty-first-century theatre (Mumford). Raymond Williams once said, “Brecht’s work is the most important and original in European drama since Ibsen and Strindberg” (Williams 277). Several aspects accounted for the originality of Brecht. First, it noticeably moved away from the Aristotelian strand of dramatic theatre (Reiss). Second, it challenged the social value of the impact that catharsis claimed it could have on the audience (Bentley). Third, Brecht brought to the forefront the concepts of alienation and the ‘breaking of the fourth wall’ through his popular plays (White). It is not surprising that such a playwright has had a distinguished impact on contemporary theatre and popular culture production, and the impact persists even today (Brecht).

Resembling many other cultures in history, ancient India also had some noticeable contributions to make in the field of theatre and performance (Dharwadker). There is a wide variety of forms of performances, including but not limited to folklore culture and other productions that have indigenous origins (Dalmia). Although not connected with the Western concept of theatre—or its concept of tragedy and comedy—these theatrical elements had an impact on how drama was shaping itself up in the years preceding colonization (Kumar). In many instances, theatrical performances had to deal with identity, representation, and inclusion (Mujumdar). For instance, Theyyam, a popular ritual performance art from the state of Kerala, was performed by people who belong to the lowest level of the caste structure, and this performance had a psychological aspect that mainstream art still does not concern itself with, even nowadays (Harit).

It happens to be such a coincidence that the influence of Bertolt Brecht made it to India, which already had its own line of interactive theatre (Banerjee). The European colonization was one of the reasons why the Brechtian legacy made its way to Indian theatre (Esleben). How Indian playwrights and dramatists managed to contextualize these theatrical concepts to create a new strand of Theatre for Social Change, as well as how the same techniques manage to impact the contemporary production of popular culture, has been the grounding point of this academic paper (Stodder). This paper aims to analyze the ways in which Brechtian concepts of epic theatre have impacted the pre-existing concept of theatre in India, with a special focus on how ritual and Indigenous performances and the new strand of Brechtian epic theatre were amalgamated to form a modern Indian theatre that aimed to entertain and instill thought (Bhagwat).

It is an understatement that epic theatre contested against some of the core tenets of the Aristotelian dramatic theatre (Gürsoy). What Bertolt Brecht proposed through dialectic theatre, which is the name that Brecht preferred for his endeavors, had to do with the overall purpose of theatre and art in general (White). Brecht did not believe in art that entertained the audience and even offered some level of purgatory exercise over the course of time (Politzer). Instead, Brecht envisaged a strand of theatre that could have a long-term impact on the audience, making them think about the world they live in and the socio-political situations that they are a part of (Williams).

An ardent believer in Marxism, Bertolt Brecht had also borrowed some ideas, such as alienation, from Marxist philosophy, and these ideas had found their own space in Brechtian theatrical adventures (Steer). Brecht’s belief that theatre should appeal to the spectator’s reason instead of their feelings became one of the best ways to express Marxist ideas as well (Kiralyfalvi). Since Brecht was aiming to create a different attitude among the audience, the dramatist proceeded to develop the *Verfremdungseffekt*, one of the most popular theories by Brecht (Anderson). In many ways, this theory paved the way for a redress of ‘catharsis’ as the accepted end of tragedy (Blanariu). Brecht believed that the dramatic form is not oriented toward growth and that the dramatic performance does not include relationships that are capable of social change (Williams 289).

Unlike many of the other alternatives that catharsis had seen in the past, epic theatre was grounded on an entirely new concept of art's purpose (Ungvári). It cannot, however, be said that all the concepts Brecht had used in his theatre were invented by himself (Kelly). For instance, the pillars of the alienation effect have been traced back to some traditions in Chinese theatre (Baker). In quite a similar way, there have been theatre techniques and movements that encouraged the use of minimal props and a unique use of lighting and sound effects (Stevens). Brecht's excellence was in that he contextualized all these concepts—combining them with Marxist philosophy—in order to create a new strand of theatre that served the critical faculty rather than the emotional faculty of the audience (Rossi).

While it is unclear whether Brecht wanted to specifically redress the issues of catharsis and the dimensions that catharsis had given to the art of theatre, dialectic theatre from Brecht and its core ideas, such as the alienation effect and breaking of the fourth wall, contributed to creating a theatre that has managed to impact not just the theatrical tradition but also the pop-culture production that followed (Basuki). How the current popular culture production makes use of the aforementioned techniques, along with the theory proposed by Bertolt Brecht, will be analyzed in the upcoming sections.

### **The Impact of Brechtian Theatre in India**

During the post-independence period, the Indian stream of theatre and performance was enriched to the extent that the first roots of theatre for social change were formed (Dalmia 256). While some of these movements were formed by dramatists who received their training from abroad, there were also indigenous dramatists who embraced what the orthodox theatre practices in India had to offer (Harit 29). Due to the equal impact of both of these aspects, the overall nature of post-independence Indian theatre was not homogenous at all. Instead, it received inputs from itself and the West. As far as the inputs from the West are concerned, the remnants of colonization played an important role, and it is quite expected that Brechtian theatre and performance techniques made it to the Indian community of dramatists (Yadav). Even in contemporary theatre and popular culture production in India, forms of entertainment that have certain political stances have inclined towards an amalgamation of Brechtian epic theatre and ritualistic theatre in India (Roy).

Furthermore, there were Indian dramatists who credit Brecht for some of the commonly used techniques (Saroj). Girish Karnad, for instance, has been one of the very few people to explicitly admit the influence of Brecht—both his texts and practice—on his works (Mathews 12). This is one of the reasons why the works of Girish Karnad are noted for their shift from an Aristotelian, catharsis-oriented performance to something that instills an even deeper critical thought among the audience (Prajapati). He was also noted for the use of techniques such as the estrangement effect and the breaking of the fourth wall (Suvorova). Of course, these elements helped the dramatist construct a scenario where the audience is frequently reminded of the illusory nature of the performance they are witnessing. Breaking the fourth wall meant that many of Karnad's characters talked to the audience directly, thereby negating the existence of an imaginary fourth wall between the audience and the performer (Dharwadker 200).

However, it cannot be said that the interactive elements in modern Indian theatre are exclusively influenced by Brecht (Biswas). Indigenous performances in Indian culture were noted for the presence of interactive elements, which often meant that the border between the performer and audience was blurred (Bhagwat). For instance, Theyyam, a common performance in the northern region of Kerala, is noted for direct interaction between the viewer and the performer (Duy3neR3m2J). However, Theyyam also has a psychological aspect, as the performer is supposed to become an incarnation of a deity for the duration of the performance. In contrast, Brechtian epic theatre does not observe such an element, as most of Brecht's works had a Marxian undertone and were secular at their core (Dharwadker). It is also worth noting that Brecht borrowed several ideas from other cultures for stories and performances. For instance, the core ideas of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* can be traced back to one of the popular Chinese plays by Li Xingdao (Allana 10).

Reducing the impact of Bertolt Brecht on Indian theatre to Girish Karnad would be an understatement of the power of epic theatre (Esleben). Several dramatists, such as Habib Tanvir, improvised Brechtian epic theatre techniques to suit their purpose of theatre, one of which was social change (Giri 7). Both Karnad and Tanvir did not want their audience to experience traditional catharsis and its purgatory effect. Instead, these dramatists aimed to cultivate deeper thought, prompting the audience to contextualize what they saw and question the nature of their surroundings (Kumar). In the case of Habib Tanvir, there was a more evident effort to create an amalgamation of indigenous theatre techniques and Brechtian concepts (Stevens). These instances demonstrate how impactful Brecht was in modern Indian theatre. The next section will explore Brecht's impact on contemporary production.

### **Brecht and Contemporary Cultural Production**

It is not surprising that Bertolt Brecht's impact on cultural production was not limited to theatre and associated performances (Curran). After the posthumous fame Brecht and his epic theatre received in the United Kingdom and the United States, several directors and filmmakers attempted to incorporate Brechtian ideas of estrangement and breaking of the fourth wall into their movies (Koutsourakis). These techniques were used for two general objectives, both often but not always combined. First, the estrangement effect helped the audience avoid getting lost in the narrative presented in a film. Second, it transformed the viewer into a conscious observer of the work of art (Krasner). The latter objective also ensured that the audience could use their rational thinking capabilities to analyze what was being shown on the screen, preventing the domination of emotions (Fuegi). While most films that adopted Brechtian techniques were part of the parallel cinema movement, they were critically acclaimed for both their content and the unique ways in which the content was presented (Brockmann).

Some of the films noted for their inclusion of Brechtian theatre techniques include *The Threepenny Opera*, directed by G.W. Pabst and released in 1931, and the Indian classic *The Cloud-Capped Star*, directed by Ritwik Ghatak in 1960 (Gressler). *The Threepenny Opera* was an adaptation of Brecht's play of the same name, with Brecht himself overseeing many of the changes made to the adaptation (Brecht). However, *The Cloud-Capped Star* was different, as it utilized the techniques of estrangement and breaking of the fourth wall within a story set in post-partition India (Esleben). The film, which follows the tragic life of Neeta, includes several moments in which the actor directly addresses the audience, even when other characters are present in another part of the frame. In this case, Ritwik Ghatak used these techniques to establish a deliberate distance between the actor and the narrative (Bartoňová). However, in mainstream films that followed, these techniques were largely abandoned in favor of realism and dramatic performances, reinforcing Aristotelian theories of performance (Vargas).

Contemporary cultural production, particularly in theatre for social change and film, continues to incorporate Brechtian techniques (Anderson). This testifies to the longevity and adaptability of Brecht's theories beyond theatre and cinema. The shift from Aristotelian dramatic performances to Brechtian performances enhances the potential of art, particularly in influencing audiences (Tully). This shift also marks a distinction between when an artist wants the audience to experience catharsis and when the artist wants their cultural product to extend unique ideas and provoke critical thinking (Reinelt).

For instance, contemporary social theatre explicitly encourages audiences to recognize that they are watching a performance, preventing emotional immersion in the narrative regardless of how tragic or emotional the portrayals may be (Ahmadov). This Brechtian approach is designed to make audiences question why such an art form exists and critically engage with its subject matter (Brecht). In contrast, Aristotelian theatre prioritizes emotional engagement over cognitive engagement, which explains why performances associated with protests and social change movements tend to favor Brechtian techniques (Art). The ability of Brechtian theatre techniques to reduce the distance between actor and audience is highly effective in conveying messages that cultivate critical thinking. Conversely, Aristotelian theatre has traditionally maintained this distance to facilitate the portrayal of an idealized world (Brownlee).

This is not to suggest that all films incorporating Brechtian theatre techniques are intended to stimulate critical thinking (Kleber and Visser). These techniques are often used in Hollywood and Indian films for comedic purposes as well. For instance, *Deadpool* presents a superhero who is aware that he exists within a film (Giri). In addition to using flashbacks told directly to the audience, the protagonist frequently breaks the fourth wall to engage in meta-conversations (He). Both *Deadpool* and *Deadpool 2* stand as some of the most popular and unconventional superhero films to employ Brechtian methods (Brecht). Unlike *The Threepenny Opera* or *The Cloud-Capped Star*, these films use Brechtian techniques primarily for comedic effect (Pillai). However, this does not negate the fact that a superhero acknowledging his fictional existence may shift the audience's perceptions of superhero movies in general. The use of estrangement and breaking of the fourth wall in these films also serves as a foundation for their satire and black humor (Brecht).

In the age of digitization, interactive popular culture has become increasingly common (Fuegi). The rise of entertainment platforms and the accessibility of content creation tools have contributed to an industry that encourages individual content production (Brecht). Many platforms enable content creators to interact directly with their audiences, allowing for dynamic control over what is presented to viewers (Reinelt). These trends can be understood as an extension of Brechtian epic theatre in that these popular culture products do not rely on catharsis as their ultimate goal. Instead, content creators and audiences acknowledge the performative distance between them, creating a new mode of engagement that surpasses the limits envisioned by catharsis (Charnow).

### **Brechtian Theatre as A Political Tool**

The instances above clearly indicate the potential of Brechtian theatre techniques as a political tool in the current socio-political scenario (Squiers). While it is observed that many protests and movements for social change are making use of these techniques, there is still unlocked potential for what was proposed by Brecht through epic theatre and the two theories in question here: the estrangement effect and breaking of the fourth wall (Saleem and Reshid). It should also be noted that the major undertone of these political aspects is Marxist and that a form of art that relieves the viewer from bourgeois concepts and reductionist perspectives is what Brecht had envisaged when he set out to subvert catharsis and the potential core of Aristotelian tragedy (Basuki).

In the Indian context as well, Brechtian epic theatre has some more potential, especially when considering the political situation and how many people have been led to believe in a mystery—akin to the bourgeois world that Brecht wanted the audience to recognize and resist (Anderson). Theatre for social change in India has also received much input from what Brecht put forward through his epic theatre (Zazzali). Considering that the world always needs a community that approaches issues from a critical perspective, Brechtian theatre techniques as a political tool have implications that are socially, politically, and intellectually relevant (Roberts). The impact of Brecht on interactive cultural production, however, is indirect, and there are aspects that are yet to be fully recognized (Squiers).

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