

Music, Mimesis, and the Politics of Parabasis (Part 2)

Why Mike Pence Should Have Felt Offended at the Richard Rodgers Theatre

Von: Christian Kirchmeier

3. Antagonistic Differences

The concept of Brecht's "epic theatre" is often misconstrued as merely fusing the epic and dramatic genres, where narration is intertwined with performance. However, Brecht's intentions went far beyond this amalgamation – he originally sought to create an entirely new aesthetic form for music theater.

Contrary to popular belief, Brecht's main adversary was not dramatic theater but rather Richard Wagner's operas. In his notes on the opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), a collaboration with Kurt Weill, Brecht launched a scathing attack on Wagner's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Brecht criticized Wagner's operas for their use of music to merely "paint the psychic situation" and "augment the text".¹ He pinpointed Wagner's compact difference between the mimetic modes as source of an aesthetic ideology, asserting that this approach only enhances the illusion, rendering the audience passive and silent – or, as he puts it, "intoxicated" in a way akin to drug use.²

From Brecht's perspective, this state of intoxication led the audience to identify with bourgeois ideology. Conversely, his aspiration was to establish aesthetic forms that foster a rational distance between spectators and the theater. To achieve this, he advocated for a "separation of elements."³

This separation could be accomplished by disassociating the two mimetic channels from each other. In his plays, Brecht employed an innovative technique: He used songs that invoked contradicting emotions, thereby creating a striking contrast between the mimesis of action and the mimesis of music. This approach, often unsettling to the audience, disrupted the seamless unity that Brecht criticized in traditional theater.

A prime example of this aesthetic strategy is the "Alabama song" from the *Mahagonny*-opera, famously covered by *The Doors* and David Bowie. In the opera, the song is performed by the character Jenny and six girls who find themselves in a desperate

situation. They are traveling to the fictional city of Mahagonny where their only chance of survival is to work as prostitutes. A famous recording of the song is the version by Lotte Lenya.

The song employs the “doctrine of affections” in a particularly intriguing manner. One key element is the significant shift in mood between the verses and the chorus: The melody in the verses consists of very short, staccato notes on a minor third c–a, reflecting the weary state of the travelers.

The image shows a musical score for an excerpt from the "Alabama Song". The tempo is marked "Moderato assai" with a quarter note equal to 69 (♩ = 69). The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score is in 4/4 time. The vocal line is on a single staff in treble clef, and the piano accompaniment is on two staves (treble and bass clefs). The lyrics are: "Oh show us the way to the next whis-ky bar." The first two notes of the vocal line, "Oh show", are highlighted in yellow. Above these notes, there is a "Vi-" symbol with a downward arrow, and the name "Jenny" is written above the notes. A piano dynamic marking "p" is placed below the piano accompaniment. A rehearsal mark "24" is enclosed in a box at the end of the first vocal line.

Figure 3: Excerpt from the “Alabama Song” [iv]

This is still very much within the realm of a compact difference. However, the chorus, featuring very long, legato phrases spanning a full octave that center on lullaby-like words such as “moon,” “Alabama” and “mamma,” introduces an intriguing twist.

26 Jenny *p*
Oh! Moon

tell you we must die!

26 *p*

of A-lab-a-ma we now must say good

27
bye. We've lost our good old mam-

Figure 4: Excerpt from the “Alabama Song”⁵

This is the section where the song exemplifies the unique paradigm of Brecht’s aesthetic program. Brecht and Weill use the music to create a nostalgic atmosphere that starkly contradicts the action on stage. The elegiac melody of the chorus evokes a very different feeling from the one portrayed by the characters in the play. Instead of being compact, the musical and the theatrical mimetic modes directly oppose each other. They establish what I propose to term an “antagonistic difference” between the mimesis of action and the mimesis of music.

In many of Brecht’s songs, this antagonistic difference is used to open the stage, break the fourth wall, and enable direct parabolic contact between the singers and the audience. In the *Mahagonny*-opera, Weill even proposed placing the orchestra on the same level as the audience (in direct opposition to Wagner), so the singers could

approach the spectators. In the “Alabama Song,” the performers would approach the audience by walking through a small curtain on stage, thus signaling the beginning of a parabasis in the literal, etymological sense of stepping towards the audience.

In summary, it can be observed that while the “compact difference” of mimetic modes maximizes the mimetic quality of a theatrical performance, the “antagonistic difference” of mimetic modes serves to increase its parabolic quality. At the heart of Brecht’s aesthetic project was his utilization of the antagonistic difference to enhance the parabolic quality of his plays. This strategy is succinctly explained in a small text by Brecht on film music:

A young man rows his girlfriend out on a lake, overturns the boat and lets the girl drown. The composer has two choices. He can anticipate the audience’s feelings in his accompanying music, developing the tension, amplifying the evil of the deed, etc. Or instead he can express in the music the lake’s serenity, nature’s indifference, the event’s everyday quality insofar as it is simple excursion. If he chooses this latter possibility, allowing the murder to appear even more horrendous and unnatural, he gives to the music a far more independent function.⁶

It is noteworthy how closely this quote resembles Aristotelian poetics. The antagonistic opposition of the mimetic modes does not reduce the emotional effects. Instead, it intensifies the feeling of horror. The central idea behind Brecht’s “doctrine of the affections” is to provoke conflicting emotions in order to create a critical distance for the spectators, enabling them to detach themselves from potential ideological immersion. According to Brecht, art can only be truly political when it incorporates a substantial degree of the parabolic quality.

In stark contrast to Wagner, Brecht identifies the politically free spectator not in the audience of tragedy, but in the audience of parabolic comedy. This leads to Brecht’s most notable claim regarding the connection between aesthetics and politics: He firmly believed that art could and should produce political effects, but these effects should not stem from political content alone; instead, they should arise from an aesthetic form of disruption. Or, to adapt a sentiment expressed by György Lukács in a similar context: It is the parabolic aesthetic form that is political, not the content.

4. Shallow Parabasis

These dramaturgical observations lead me back to the Richard Rodgers Theatre in New York for a conclusion. To accurately evaluate the final parabasis of the *Hamilton* performance, it is crucial to view it as a problem of aesthetic form. Let me revisit a portion of the cast’s statement: “[W]e truly hope that this show has inspired you [Pence] to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us.” This raises the question: Why express this hope on stage? Either the show inspires the audience to adopt a political stance or it doesn’t. Articulating a political meaning does not enhance the political potency of an artwork, rather it dilutes it, as it dislodges the message from the aesthetic sphere. Even more critically, from a Brechtian perspective, the artwork

becomes ideological. In other words, when the *Hamilton* cast waits until after the final curtain to address Mike Pence, their parabasis ceases to be an aesthetic form altogether and becomes (in every sense of the word) *plainly* political – it is straightforward and frank, but also oversimplifying and flat.

Hamilton had the opportunity to weave its criticism into a parabasis within the musical itself. But when the cast chose to address Pence during the curtain call, the characters had already vanished, and the music had ceased. The play, therefore, sacrificed both mimetic modes to achieve a parabasis that creates an image of political activism for the cast. But their critique remains shallow because it is a critique that ultimately benefited the production, attracting even more of the dominant anti-Trump east-coast audience.

In an ABC interview, a woman who was part of the audience (and who presumably was not much against Trump) commented on the incident with the perhaps most revealing sentence of the debate: “We spent a lot of money to come and see *Hamilton* and we really don’t want to hear political statements.”⁷ This sentiment encapsulates Brecht’s critique: From a Brechtian perspective, the core issue of the evening was that this spectator could follow the performance without encountering any conflict or irritation in her political views.

There is reason to fault the production for steering clear of spectators like her, for treating them merely as customers and not as a political public – especially in a play where it would have been possible that the founding fathers themselves address Pence in the middle of the performance. Instead, only the actors were speaking. The parabasis, rather than becoming a potent tool for political critique, was reduced to shallow political communication.

Pence was mistaken when he said that he did not feel offended by the criticism, as the cast did not oppose him on the aesthetic, but on the political field, where as a politician, he is obliged to and entitled to respond. Yet, in the asymmetric communicative setting, with Pence in the auditorium and not on stage, he was not even given the opportunity to answer. That is why Trump was correct in identifying the situation as political, not as an aesthetic discourse under the guise of art. And while the cast did the right thing in choosing not to apologize for their political critique (because they have every right to speak as political subjects wherever they want), they missed an opportunity to use the aesthetic form as a vehicle for their political critique.

References

1. In Brecht’s words: „die psychische Situation malend“ and „den Text steigernd“ (Bertolt Brecht (1991): Anmerkungen zur Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, in: *Werke*. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe, ed. by. Werner Hecht et al., vol. 24, Berlin /Weimar: Aufbau and Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1991, pp. 74–86, here p. 80).
2. Brecht writes about “unwürdige Räusche” (ibid., p. 79).

3. „*Trennung der Elemente*“ in the German text (ibid.).
4. Kurt Weill/Bertolt Brecht (2011): *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. Oper in drei Akten (1927/1929), piano score by Norbert Gingold, revised by David Drew (1969), Wien: Universal Edition, p. 17.
5. Ibid., p. 18.
6. Bertolt Brecht (2000): On Film Music, in: *Brecht on Film and Radio*, translated and edited by Marc Silberman. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 10–18, here p. 14.
7. <https://youtu.be/xEcomgfAA2k?t=147>.

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