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Feyerabend's Epistemology and Brecht's Theory of the Drama

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

FEYERABEND'S EPISTEMOLOGY AND BRECHT'S THEORY OF THE DRAMA by S. G. Couvalis In his early paper, "On the Improvement of the Sciences and the Arts," Feyerabend argues that, just as rival hypotheses show the shortcomings of entrenched scientific hypotheses, so the theatre which presents hypotheses contrary to common beliefs about human beings shows the shortcomings of these beliefs. It develops understanding of human relations more effectively than intellectual debate because it is a more complex medium whose elements can "represent the contrary hypotheses at the same time."¹ He takes Brecht to be the first theorist of such a theatre. I shall argue that Brecht's epistemology is similar to Feyerabend's early epistemology and that his dramatic theory is a consequence of it.² I shall also argue, however, that

Feyerabend is wrong in saying that Brechtian theatre presents contrary hypotheses at the same time, because plays, like descriptions, are theory-laden and Brecht, in any case, intends to show on stage that tragedies have social origins and not to present contrary hypotheses about human beings. According to Brecht, most people improperly assume that human behavior and social relations follow fixed patterns inherent in nature because they have been unable to compare the human behavior they know with that in other societies. They take what they experience to be typically human. Moreover, they interpret their social world as they have been taught: "A child, living in a world of old men . . . knows the run of things before he can walk."³ Feyerabend brings out the effect of such training very vividly: "The teaching procedures both shape the 'appearance,' or 'phenomenon' and establish a firm connection with words, so that finally the phenomena seem to speak for themselves. . . ."⁴ Because these interpretations of the social world which children are taught are descriptive, explanatory, and prescriptive, they are more 117 118 Philosophy and Literature complex and more dangerous than the interpretations of physical objects they are taught. For example, children learn different evaluations of precisely the same behavior in males and females through being taught how to describe it. In being taught to describe certain behavior as "manly" they are taught both that it arises from a male's nature and that it is laudable behavior for boys but not for girls. "Manly" behavior in a woman is not "confident" or "forthright," but "aggressive" or "pushy." In order to stop us from regarding traditional behavior patterns and social relations as unchangeable, and to enable us to question our descriptions of them, Brecht argues that the dramatist must cause us to cease to regard such patterns and social relations as familiar givens that can only be described in one way. To achieve this, he must not structure his plays on the Aristotelian model. The Aristotelian model makes audiences incapable of criticizing the dramatic message, imparts the view that the sources of tragedy lie in an inexplicable human essence, and presents social rules as if they were unquestionable natural laws. Instead, he should structure his plays to induce in audiences a scientific attitude to social relations and patterns of behavior. Like Feyerabend, Brecht realizes that a scientific attitude is not displayed by collecting descriptions of experience without considering whether the interpretations contained in the descriptions are correct. In Galileo, his view of those who mechanically describe experience in traditional terms is shown in Galileo's replies to the Aristotelian arguments of Andrea. When Andrea argues, "I can see that the sun's not in the same place in the evening and morning. So it can't stand still. It just can't," Galileo replies, "You 'W! What do you see? You see nothing at all. You're just gaping. Gaping isn't seeing." He then demonstrates to Andrea that the apparent motions of objects need not be their real motions because an apparent motion can be caused in more than one way.⁵ Brecht shows that the central question for the scientist is not "How shall I collect descriptions of appearances?" but "What is it that I really perceive and how is it caused?" He argues elsewhere that "there's a vast difference between experiment and experience" because experiments are set up to test...

FEYERABEND'S EPISTEMOLOGY AND BRECHT'S THEORY OF THE DRAMA

by S. G. COOVALER

IN HIS EARLY PAPER, "On the Improvement of the Sciences and the Arts," Feyerabend argues that, just as rival hypotheses show the shortcomings of entrenched scientific hypotheses, so theatre which presents hypotheses contrary to common beliefs about human beings shows the shortcomings of these beliefs. It develops understanding of human relations more effectively than intellectual debate because it is a more complex medium whose elements can "represent the contrary hypotheses at the same time."¹ He takes Brecht to be the first theorist of such a theatre. I shall argue that Brecht's epistemology is similar to Feyerabend's early epistemology and that his dramatic theory is a consequence of it.² I shall also argue, however, that Feyerabend is wrong in saying that Brechtian theatre presents contrary hypotheses at the same time, because plays, like descriptions, are theory-laden and Brecht, in any case, intends to show on stage that tragedies have social origins and not to present contrary hypotheses about human beings.

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