

# BOAL, BLAU, BRECHT: THE BODY

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Augusto Boal's theatre is intensely physical in nature: everything begins with the image, and the image is made up of human bodies. Boal's theatre takes the body of the spect-actor as its chief means of expression. The body also becomes the primary locus of the ideological inscriptions and oppressions Boal wishes to address through theatre. The initial apprehension is of the body; discussion of the ideological implications of the images follows upon that apprehension.

Although his theatre privileges the body, Boal has not theorized the performing body in any continuous or systematic way. My project here is to examine what he has said on the subject and situate his thought in relation to that of other performance theorist-practitioners, particularly Bertolt Brecht and Herbert Blau, and also Michael Kirby and Jerzy Grotowski. In so doing, I shall treat Boal's scattered and fragmentary comments on the body as theoretical texts even though they are, in the main, occasional notes and sets of instructions whose intentions are more pragmatic and explanatory than theoretical. My intention here is not to hold Boal to a standard of theoretical rigor inappropriate to the nature of his writings, but rather to treat these writings as accesses to important issues concerning the body in performance implied and engaged in his work. Boal's fragmentary theorization of the body, and the affinities with Blau and Brecht it reveals, permit us insights into Boal's basic conception of theatre and the means by which he sees the theatre as serving an ideological function. I have taken two central moments in Boal's account of the history of the body in theatre as starting points for two separate, but related, discussions.

## BOAL AND BLAU: THEATRE AND THE BODY OF DESIRE

For Boal, the body is the primary element of life inside and outside the theatre: “We have, before all else, a body—before we have a name we inhabit a body!” (1992:114); “The first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body” (1985:125). Boal’s remarkable choice of a creation myth for the theatre, “the fable of Xua Xua, the prehuman woman who discovered theatre” (1992:xxv–xxx), situates the origin of theatre in the pregnant body of Xua Xua who, after giving birth to a son and losing control over this now separate entity that had been part of herself, discovers theatre. This discovery takes place at “the moment when Xua Xua gave up trying to recover her baby and keep him all for herself, accepted that he was somebody else, and looked at herself, emptied of part of herself. At that moment she was at one and the same time Actor and Spectator. She was Spect-Actor” (xxx). It is not so much in the functions of acting and spectating that Boal sees the essence of theatre as in the (self-)consciousness they imply: “This is theatre—the art of looking at ourselves” (xxx).

Boal’s concept of the spect-actor who combines both functions is reminiscent of Michael Kirby’s description of a performance art form he calls the Activity in which “the actions of the person himself become the object of his own attention” (1969:155). The differences between Kirby’s formulation and Boal’s are instructive, however. For one thing, Kirby feels that an art form derived primarily from the experience of self-consciousness has to be called something other than “theatre” (158). Kirby was thinking primarily of such task-based, conceptual autopformance modes as Fluxus performance, works of art which “can only be seen by one person and can only be viewed from within” (155). Even though Boal locates the essence of theatre in self-consciousness, the actions of the spect-actor are played out in a communal setting, to be perceived and addressed by a group of spectactors all engaged in similar self-conscious activity. And whereas Kirby sees the purpose of this self-conscious activity as lying in its exploration of consciousness and its assertion that “all art exists essentially as personal experience” (169), Boal sees the self-consciousness he describes as a means to examine interpersonal, which is to say ideological, experience.

For Boal, theatre is a form of self-consciousness modeled on the post-partum division or the split posited by the mind—body problem before it is a transaction between actors and audience. Nevertheless, Boal’s radical conflation of actor and spectator in a single entity does not

remove his theatre from the economy of desire that is, according to Blau, always played out in the deep structure of the theatrical event, not least in the spectators' desire to see theatre as the thing that can bring them together as a community.

Boal's suggestion that the theatre begins with what Blau calls an "original splitting" reverberates sympathetically with Blau's recent writings in *The Audience*, where he notes that "what is being played out [in theatre] is not the image of an original unity but the mysterious rupture of social identity in the moment of its emergence" (1990:10). It is in such a rupture, splitting, or surrendering of unity that Xua Xua discovers the self-consciousness that produces her as both a social and a theatrical subject. Blau also points out the central paradox of theatre: "The very nature of theatre reminds us somehow of the original unity even as it implicates us in the common experience of fracture" (10). The desire that theatre evokes, addresses, but ultimately refuses to satisfy, is "for the audience [to become] as community, similarly enlightened, unified in belief, all the disparities in some way healed by the experience of theatre" (10). Whereas Blau's concern is with the actor—spectator relationship as an enactment of rupture that is still haunted by the ghost of this imagined primal unity, Boal dispenses with the traditional actor—spectator relationship in favor of the spectator who, like Xua Xua, embodies both functions in a single, self-conscious entity.

That Boal's thought, too, is haunted by the specter of an imagined primal unity becomes apparent in a significant inconsistency in his discussion of the body. Boal proposes that theatre begins in Xua Xua's self-consciousness. In speaking of acting, he emphasizes the need for "rationalized emotion": the emotions the actor accesses through Stanislavskian emotional memory should not be employed in a raw state, but should be subjected to Brechtian rational analysis. In a passage as remarkable as the legend of Xua Xua, he cites as an example Dostoevsky's ability "to retain, during his fits [of epilepsy], sufficient lucidity and objectivity to remember his emotions and sensations, and to be capable of describing them" in *The Idiot* (1992:48). A few pages later in the same book, however, at the head of a section on physical exercises, Boal asserts "that one's physical and psychic apparatuses are completely inseparable" (61). If this were true, there could be no rationalization of emotion, no theatre of self-consciousness as modeled by Xua Xua for, as Blau reminds us, "what can look at itself is not one" (1990:55), and the converse is also true: what is one cannot look at itself. For the rest of Boal's conception of theatre to work, one has to assume some degree of

separation between mind and body and some degree to which consciousness is able to apprehend the workings of both mind (emotions) and body from a distance, an interior original splitting.

My purpose here is not to take Boal to task for being inconsistent, but rather to suggest that this provocative inconsistency exemplifies Blau's claim that theatre paradoxically gives rise to a desire for an imagined original unity even as the existence and experience of theatre are themselves testimony to the impossibility of that unity. This is as true of Blau's exploration of the performer-spectator relationship enacted between two separate bodies as it is of Boal's discussion of the spect-actor, the single entity that subsumes both functions within a single body. In focusing on the spect-actor, Boal posits an original splitting that produces a divided subject rather than an originary division between separate subjects. To put it another way, the hyphen in "spect-actor" is important as the indicator of a unity born of rupture. Boal's own rhetoric finally suggests that Xua Xua did not really reconcile herself to her baby's departure, did not really understand that he never was part of herself, but remains caught up, like Blau, like Boal, in the paradoxical economy of desire—the yearning for an impossible unity—that is performance.

### **BOAL AND BRECHT: THE IDEOLOGICAL BODY**

Having ventured forth in one direction, I would like to take another originary rupture in Boal's account of the history of theatre as the starting point for a different discussion.

In the beginning the theatre was the dithyrambic song: free people singing in the open air. The carnival. The feast. Later, the ruling classes took possession of the theatre and built their dividing walls. First they divided the people, separating actors from spectators; people who act and people who watch—the party is over! Secondly, among the actors, they separated the protagonists from the mass. The coercive indoctrination began!

(1985:119)

If for Blau the moment at which the audience is divided from the actors is the moment at which theatre becomes possible, for Boal it is the moment at which theatre becomes ideological; and the moment at which the actor is separated from the dithyrambic chorus is the moment at which theatre becomes a means of ideological oppression. (In saying

this, I am not suggesting that Blau positions performance outside of ideology at any point in its hypothetical evolution; quite the opposite is true. My main purpose here is to clarify Boal's thought by reference to Blau's.) This oppression, signaled by a division of one body from the mass, is also inscribed upon the mass of bodies.

That the body is (quite literally) inscribed by ideological discourses is a major tenet of Boal's conception of a theatre committed to ideological analysis. Boal adopts Marx's base-superstructure model according to which consciousness is determined by material relations; the first step of his method, therefore, is to free the body, our most basic connection with material life, from the "social distortions" imposed upon it by the oppressors' ideological discourses (1985:126). His analysis of this social deformation of the body is based directly upon Marx's account of alienated labor. Boal refers to the ways in which the body is shaped by the regimens imposed upon it by the demands of particular kinds of work as "muscular alienation," which must be overcome before the body can become expressive in performance (127). In identifying the specific ideological discourses that shape the body as social body, Boal focuses on work and professional status (e.g. the cardinal versus the general (1985:127-8)). Another interesting observation he makes is that the body's physical regimen is also shaped by place (1992:73), by what Andrew Feenberg (1980) has called "the political economy of social space." He does not explicitly identify other ideological discourses (such as those of race or gender) as shaping the body, though such considerations are implicit in his work and emerge explicitly in the course of certain image theatre exercises, as we shall see.<sup>1</sup> Just as Marx sees the abolition of the division of labor as one of the essential steps in the transformation of capitalism into communism, so Boal proposes the "de-specialization" of the body as a necessary step toward the exploration of oppression through theatre (1992:62).

Because the mechanisms of oppression shape the body, it is through the body and its habits that those mechanisms can be exposed. Boal provides numerous examples of this technique; I shall cite only one. He recounts one response to his request that the spect-actors participating in an image theatre session create static images of what they understand to be oppression:

In Sweden, a young girl of 18 showed as a representation of oppression a woman lying on her back, legs apart, with a man on top of her, in the most conventional love-making position. I asked the spect-actors to make the *Ideal Image*. A man approached and

reversed the positions: the woman on top, the man underneath. But the young woman protested and made her own image: man and woman sitting facing each other, their legs intertwined; this was her representation of two human beings, of two “subjects,” two free people, making love.

(Boal 1992:3)

The exercise reveals how ideology (in this case the ideology of male dominance) is expressed at the most basic material level through everyday, habitual routines and regimens of the body and, therefore, how non-hegemonic ideologies might be expressed through bodily counter-routines exploring physical alternatives to the oppressive regimen.

This conception of the relationship between ideology and the base of material, bodily existence is strongly reminiscent of Brecht’s concept of *Gestus*, “the attitudes which people adopt towards one another, wherever they are socio-historically significant (typical)” (Brecht 1964:86). In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Azdak expounds the idea of *Gestus* as he instructs his disguised visitor, who is hiding from the police, in how to appear poor: “Finish your cheese, but eat it like a poor man, or else they’ll catch you...Lay your elbows on the table. Now, encircle the cheese on your plate like it might be snatched from you at any moment” (Brecht 1983:191). The act of eating thus becomes gestic, expressive of social relations of oppression, just as the gestic implications of a sexual position are brought out in the Boal exercise. Boal’s notion of “the ‘mask’ of behavior” imposed on a person by multiple, habitual social roles (1985:127) corresponds to the Brechtian *Gestus* in its largest sense, as the sum of all specific social gestic. For both Brecht and Boal, the material life of the body is expressive of oppression because the body itself, its actions and gestures, are determined by ideological relations.

Despite their common analysis of the ideological body, Brecht and Boal contrast in the nature of their respective ideological commitments. Although most of Brecht’s plays, especially his work of the 1940s, are not Marxist in any doctrinaire sense, the ideological commitment he demands of his actors is quite explicit. In the “Short Organum,” Brecht states that “unless the actor is satisfied to be a parrot or a monkey he must master our period’s knowledge of human social life by himself joining in the war of the classes...[T]he choice of viewpoint is...a major element of the actor’s art, and it has to be decided outside the theatre” (1964:196). In the physicalization of the *Gestus*, then, the Brechtian

actor exposes the social implications of particular actions and behaviors revealed when those actions are examined from a specific ideological point of view.

Although Boal couches his cultural analysis in Marxian terms, he is, as Adrian Jackson points out, careful to avoid categorization in terms of any particular political philosophy or ideology (Boal 1992:xxiii). He is also careful to insist that “it is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path” (Boal 1985:141); the theatre is at most a laboratory for social experimentation, not a means of arriving at genuinely political solutions. Nevertheless, while Boal may not want his theatre to be associated with any particular point on the ideological spectrum, he clearly is committed to the idea of theatre as engaged in ideological work and to a generally leftist conception of that work. What Boal seems to be after in his work with the spect-actor, however, is not so much a Brechtian gestic body educated and shaped by its experience of class struggle, as a body that can step aside momentarily from its particular ideological regimens to try on others for size. This is not necessarily with the intention of adopting them, but as a means of exploring other configurations. For the duration of an exercise, the oppressed may try on the body of the oppressor, of other members of the oppressed group, of others they may be oppressing themselves, etc. Or, as the Swedish woman’s exercise indicates, potentially non-oppressive conditions may be embodied. These relations are not reified as solutions but explored as possibilities. The real ideal condition (as opposed to the ideal *image*) must be determined, and the means to achieve it must be discovered, outside of the theatre.

This moment in Boal’s theorizing of the body is admittedly problematic, for he seems to suggest that it is possible for the ideologically encoded body to adopt a neutral (that is, non-ideological) position, however momentarily, in its transit from one Gestus or mask to another. He writes of actors destroying “rigid, hardened ‘structures’ of ideas, muscles, movements, etc.” without “replac[ing] them with others” (1992:139). Especially from a post-Foucauldian perspective, this seems highly unlikely: the body, always already ideological, can never escape ideological encoding; it exists only insofar as it is “structured” through discourses.

Another element of Boal’s discussion of the body that is disturbing from this point of view is his privileging of the physical text over the verbal text. He refers to the physical tableaux of image theatre as “making thought *visible*” more efficaciously than could spoken language (1985:137). At first blush, this appears to link Boal with the

tradition of what Peter Brook calls “holy theatre,” exemplified particularly by the thought of Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski. For both Artaud and Grotowski, the body provides access to levels of archetypal meaning that are universal and true in a sense that spoken language cannot be. In the tradition of holy theatre, the purification of the body, the neutral position that Boal implies, is a necessary condition for accessing archetypal levels of meaning. As Grotowski puts it, “the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses” (1968:16).

Upon closer examination of both the spirit and letter of Boal’s writings, however, it becomes clear that whereas for Grotowski the neutralized body is an end in itself, for Boal it is essentially a rhetorical figure. The Boalian body never comes to rest in a neutral state; rather, the point is for the spect-actor to be able to move from one mask to another while retaining a critical distance from all masks. The spectator cannot exist outside ideology and doesn’t even attempt to, but can only try on different ideological positionings as they are inscribed on the body. The spect-actor is a postmodern subject, divided in itself, fully aware that it cannot escape ideology, that its only choice is amongst different ideological masks. Boal implies, however, that this subject’s own interior division becomes a source of the critical distance that enables it to realize, as I once heard Blau say, that even if the only choice we have is a choice of masks, some masks are better than others. The Boalian body is finally the virtual antithesis of the Grotowskian body; it is a body that remains firmly defined by its experience as a material entity that exists in relation to ideological systems, not a rarefied, dematerialized, spiritualized body. Although aspects of Boal’s thought and practice clearly link his work with the tradition of holy theatre and the communitarian experimental theatre practices of the 1960s, his connection to Brecht and his commitment to a theatre rooted in the examination of material manifestations of ideology prevent his thought from slipping into the mysticism of Grotowski or the solipsism of Kirby’s Activity.

In a published discussion (reprinted in this collection), Michael Taussig and Richard Schechner debate Boal’s status relative to postmodernism. Schechner argues for seeing Boal as a postmodernist because his theatre entertains ideological options without privileging any as “true” or ideologically correct (p. 28 above). Taussig argues that Boal’s faith in the ability of human beings to transcend difference and communicate directly with one another marks him as a traditional humanist (p. 30).



I would agree with Taussig to the extent of saying that Boal is a humanist in the same sense that Marx was a humanist. For Marx, alienation is pernicious primarily because it is dehumanizing: human beings, who are supposed to be autonomous, free subjects, endow things outside of themselves, whether another class, a deity, or the products of their own labor (commodities), with power over themselves and become slaves to those things. As I have suggested, Boal's use of the basic categories of Marxism in his analysis of the body in performance suggests that, like Marx, Boal wants to overcome alienation and restore basic autonomy by eliminating actor and spectator in favor of the spect-actor, thus overcoming theatrical alienation (the audience's surrendering of its autonomy to performers who act in its stead) and returning the "protagonistic function" (Boal 1985:119) to the audience from which it was taken at the second of the historic ruptures I have used as nodal points here.

Schechner's analysis of Boal is pertinent, however, to the ongoing discourse on the possibility of a postmodernist political art. One of the primary issues in that debate has been the apparent impossibility of achieving the critical distance necessary to political art within the information-saturated environment of the postmodern (Jameson 1984:87). In my reading of Boal, he implies at least a provisional "solution" to this problem by grounding critical distance within the fractured subjectivity of the postmodern subject itself without reifying that subject, claiming it can exist outside of ideology, or exempting it from the economy of desire that Blau sees as defining performance. A fractured, postmodern subjectivity becomes the necessary condition for critical distance rather than the condition that renders critical distance impossible. The legend of Xua Xua, the narrative of the birth of the theatrical and ideological subject in an original splitting, enables a reconceptualization of critical distance precisely as a postmodernist trope.

## NOTES

- 1 For discussions of the issue of gender in Boal's work, see Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman 1990 and Berenice Fisher's essay in this collection.

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