Grotesque images and sardonic humour: pain and affect in German drama

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In Art and Pain 1 2003 I discussed language that injures and causes pain. I looked in particular at ‘injurious speech’ and ‘linguistic vulnerability’ in German dramatist Heiner Müller’s play Germania 3 Ghosts at Dead Man. I suggested that in Germania 3 speeches uttered by dramatic personas mimicked the operations of hate-speech in the social sphere, with the addition that the effects of the speech are also shown. I suggested that Müller’s writing transforms a painful history into the discursive practices of the theatrical text and that the play’s impact and its importance reside in symbolic accounts of the pain and suffering of modern German history.

This paper turns from language to images that evoke a painful history. In particular, it considers theatrical images whose effect is to call up or hail the real or metaphoric pain that circulates around historical events. These images belong to the symbolic or semiotic order but also, as I hope to show, the affective domain where feeling is provoked alongside cognition. Pursuing the theme once again through the work of Heiner Müller, the paper considers his direction of Bertolt Brecht’s The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui, which opened at the Berliner Ensemble on 3 June 1995. The Berliner Ensemble, as many know, was the theatre founded by Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel in 1949 in East Berlin, and which became the flagship theatre company of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In the lead role of Müller’s production was the talented and articulate Martin Wuttke, whose menacing and utterly compelling Arturo Ui prowled, pranced and preened across the stage for the duration of the performance. The production marked a return to form for the Berliner Ensemble, which had been beset with artistic, financial and leadership problems throughout the early years of reunification. Its critical and box office success stamped Müller’s artistic authority on the Ensemble for what would be the brief but dazzling period of his leadership. The work lives on, as it should, with Arturo Ui remaining in the Ensemble’s repertoire today, with tours abroad including to France, Italy, Portugal, South America, the United States and India.

The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui
The history of the play takes us back to the early years of World War Two and specifically Germany and Hitler. Brecht, like many artists and intellectuals, was in exile with his family in Finland waiting for visas to sail for the United States where he would spend the war years with other German émigrés in California. In March 1941, waiting for the paperwork to arrive, Brecht wrote the play as a critical response to Nazi Germany and with an American audience in mind. It is, as the Announcer claims in the Prologue, the ‘great historical gangster play’ (Brecht 1981: 5). The basic fable concerns the rise of a small time Chicago gangster, Arturo Ui, and his gang who first take over the city’s vegetable markets and then the city itself. As their regime of murder and extortion expands, they take over neighbouring Cicero. The text is demonstrably influenced by the great gangster movies of the 1930s and Charlie Chaplin’s comic representation of Hitler in The Great Dictator, 1940. The fable is understood to be an estranged critique of Hitler and National Socialism and an experiment in the epic mode of dramatic composition.

In an interview in 2001, Martin Wuttke acknowledged that the play was written for American audiences, but noted that when viewed from a German perspective it changed considerably. The ‘doubling of the actor and the historical figure’ poses particular challenges for a contemporary German production.

First, we have to demystify Hitler as a person and show him as a figure we could laugh at. We have to work against making him a figure larger than life. For somebody growing up in Germany, there are so many different ways of encountering Hitler as a phenomenon. The totality of this phenomenon cannot be fitted into the role of Arturo Ui. In the production, I have tried to keep the historical figure in mind (Wuttke 2000).

Ui is a mixture of ‘politics, criminality and entertainment’, intended as a Hitler-reference that ‘we [Germans] could laugh at’ (Wuttke 2000). He also gives non-Germans an insight into a contemporary treatment of the historical Hitler, here estranged as the Hitler phenomenon. Within this context, Müller’s decision to mount a new production of Brecht’s parable of the rise of Hitler can be viewed as a re-confrontation with fascism. With the Brecht Estate keeping strict control of the play texts, Müller is not permitted to turn the text into one of his ‘synthetic fragments’ for a contemporary postmodern, postmarxist Berlin. But he does use his directorial authority to add sound and image to the text. Martin Wuttke confirmed this in an interview:

A mere reproduction would have resulted in a didactic interpretation of the play. We consciously tried to make some scenes difficult. We also introduced emotional heat into the play through music and acting (Wuttke 2000).

The preference for ‘emotional heat’ over the ‘didactic interpretation’ is significant as it shifts the play further into the affective domain than is usual for a discursively weighty Brechtian text (where debate is intended to appeal to reason rather than feeling and sensation). For Wuttke, like many critics, the historical Hitler is far more complex and emotive than his representation in Brecht’s play, which is written before the Holocaust. Most of the objections centre on Brecht’s construction of Ui as a product of capitalism in a way that does not account for the militarism that drives the Russian campaign or the anti-Semitism and xenophobia that drives the concentration camps. For the play to have impact today, Ui should both refer to and exceed Hitler – specifically, he should speak to racist ideologies then and now and denounce them, expose them for ridicule and put them up for critique.
An example of this affect occurs when Wuttke contorts his body into a swastika.

The body is a reference to ‘the historical Hitler’ but in this moment we also see the contemporary performer embody the sign. Thus the historical and the contemporary co-exist through the swastika. Ui as Hitler appears comical, something to laugh at, as dysfunctional and idiotic. The swastika is a sign and a parody, a reminder of the dysfunctional and monstrous ideology of which it is a sign, and its idiocy. With his heavy boots and guttural speech, we see the attempt to locate the contemporary neo-Nazi in Ui's punk style. We also see the ultra right self-made man unmasked. The image is both powerfully performative and full of ‘heat’, that is, full of affect (Wuttke 2000).

One of the most powerful images in the production's treatment of ‘the historical Hitler’ is the grotesque and comic image of Ui’s castration. I have suggested that while the content of images has symbolic meaning, indexed to historical and cultural references outside the performance, they also function in the affective domain. In terms of this domain, the ‘affect’ of Müller's theatrical images re-politicises Brecht's World War Two parable for the contemporary situation. This occurs not through the historical references to Hitler, but through the bodily response to images that do not belong to the original text.

Affect

Before discussing this scene, I want to delineate the idea of affect as it used in contemporary cultural theory. Affect and its derivative, the affective and the affective domain, denote concepts that go back to Deleuze and Guattari’s thought. Claire Colebrook’s definition of affect in Understanding Deleuze (2002) is a good starting point for understanding its workings. For Colebrook, affect refers to ‘the power of images themselves’ to make us feel something like disgust, repugnance, fear, laughter, terror or boredom. It is not the meaning of an image, its cognitive element, but the response it prompts. Her example of English playwright Harold Pinter’s creation of affect is useful for considering its theatrical application. Pinter was, according to Colebrook,

>a great creator of the affect of 'boredom' . . . achieved through long pauses in the dialogue, by characters who exchange questions (rather than questions and answers), by interactions that seem to have no reference or direction. It is not his characters who are bored, nor are his plays boring; but they convey the boredom of modern bourgeois life (Colebrook 2002: 23)

What is important here is not so much whether Colebrook’s assessment of Pinter is correct or not, but her suggestion that, in this case, boredom ‘is created as a general affect’ (2002: 23).

Brian Massumi has further developed the work on affect, making a case for the primacy of the affective in image reception (2002). Here he is referring to the fact that the intensity, strength or effect of an image can produce a more powerful response in the
spectator than the content or meaning of the image. This occurs as the effect is not always logically connected to its content or its quality. For example, sad content can produce pleasure where pleasure is the affect of the image on the sensing body. 'What comes out here is that there is no correspondence or conformity between qualities and intensity' (Massumi 2002: 24). Intensity produces the affect but this is not the same as emotion, although emotion can be part of affect. Related to image-reception, irreducible bodily sensations, autonomic in nature – as in the hairs on the back of the neck, the momentary change in 'skin resistance' (Massumi 2002: 24), 'the recoil of the nostrils at the smell of cheese' (Colebrook 2002: 21-22), ‘feverish thought’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 258) – are all examples of affective responses.

Affect is also understood poststructurally as that part of the image that exceeds and spills over from the frame and the narrative, and has to do with paradox, ‘irreducible excess’, ‘gratuitous amplification’, disjuncture, the unqualified, the unexpected and the inexplicable (Massumi 2002). The importance of understanding affect has to do with the way in which the image flows through contemporary communication.

There seems to be a growing feeling within media, literary, and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered (Massumi 2002: 27).

Understanding affect may allow for the indeterminacy of meaning in communications, which resist taking a fixed position. It can also contribute to an understanding of how theatrical images work, and is especially useful for Heiner Müller’s image-based theatre. The power of Müller’s stage images is well-recognised and their effectiveness the subject of ongoing debate. David Bathrick wrote in New German Critique that ‘the primacy of the image and its potential for an explosion of variegated meaning always represented for me Müller’s greatest provocation’ (1998: 31). That provocation can work both ways. Gitta Honegger objected strongly to Müller’s ‘Hitler kitsch’ with ‘its grandiosely aestheticised pantheon of Nazi icons’ (1999: 4). Yet, her criticism fails to account for the ways in which the images depart from what we have come to expect of representations of Hitler, particularly in the wake of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's film (Hitler – A Film From Germany, 1994) in which comic and grotesque images of Hitler flood the screen. The onset of Hitler-fatigue is also apparent in Ernst Schumacher’s review in Theater der Zeit. While commending Wuttke’s ‘artistically brilliant executions’ of ‘Hitleristic attitudes’, he felt overall that,

> the production remains in the form of a history lesson, in ‘living’, very statically effective pictures that make sense in the face of . . . nazi history, but leave currently appearing forms of a new fascism out of the picture (Schumacher 1995: 4).

I suggest that a reading of the images for affect reveals something of the unexpected and inexplicable that makes the images anything but static. This mode of reading activates a different approach in which, as Massumi puts it, ‘the stakes are the new’ (2002: 27).

**Affect in Arturo Ui: Seduction/Castration scene**

As an extended example I have chosen the scene in which Arturo Ui seduces the widow Betty Dullfeet, whose husband he has just murdered, and is ‘castrated’. Müller adds a
gestural text that runs parallel to Brecht's dialogue and overwrites it.

In the scene, Martin Wuttke’s Ui is a gentleman in top hat and tails. Prior to this, he has been transformed from a petty gangster to a political leader in the famous comic scene in which the old Shakespearean actor teaches the gangster how to speak and comport himself as a statesman. During the course of the lesson, Wuttke’s stooped and rustic body, which was forever protecting his genital area, is straightened into a goosestepping parody of Nazi corporeality. The hands are trained away from the genitals into the characteristic upraised arm salute. Possessed now of statesmanship and wearing top hat and tails, Ui tests his newfound identity in the manly act of seduction. Choosing a bourgeois woman as his target further ups the ante.

No sooner in Müller’s production is Ui alone with the widow, Betty Dullfeet, played by Traute Hoess, than Ui is embarrassed by the too obvious sign of his intentions. He quickly covers his genitals with his top hat, a move that returns his bodily comportment to something of its coarse origins. Next to the woman he is rendered oafish and dorf, obvious and vulgar. Emphasising her own refinement, she tells him he pleads ‘like a serpent pleading with a bird’ (Brecht 1981: 89).

I would not necessarily argue against the claim that the scene so far is within the realm of cliché. But in the second part, which takes place in the Cicero funeral chapel after Dullfeet’s funeral, the gestural text departs significantly from the script. While speaking Brecht’s text, in which Ui explains to the widow why she should buy his protection, Wuttke bends her backwards over the body of her late husband and rapes her. She does not protest, but neither does she submit. She merely lets him get on with it. Müller makes Brecht’s central gest – Ui courts his victim's widow – more explicit in a way that brings ‘a tinge of the unexpected’ to the text. Ui sees his seduction as the making of a bridge between them; for Betty Dullfeet the distance between them will remain a chasm. This difference is sardonically underlined in what follows. When Ui stands up, Wuttke has tucked his genitals between his legs and appears castrated, like a woman. There is laughter in the audience, Ui looks down, discovers the missing organ, searches for it and quickly pulls his pants up.

The key image here is the castrated Ui, the pain of his loss dulled by the sardonic humour that attends the act, but it is a mutilation nonetheless that evokes the affective domain, a keyhole for laughter and pleasure, or recoil. Looked at from this point of view, what do we get from the castration image?

Firstly Ui’s seduction goes terribly wrong. In this lateral offshoot from Brecht’s text, Ui emerges from the dark feminine passage of the other as the castrated Führer. The image is unexpected and comic; Wuttke’s stage trick gives the spectator a prolonged glimpse of the mutilated masculine as the comic grotesque. This is a monstrous exaggeration of the cliché of the impotent Hitler and a warning to the fascist that lies hidden within the members of the audience. The recoil from the threat of castration, with its pain and loss, and its relief through laughter is a powerful resignification of the Hitler phenomenon through the affective domain. Thus there is disgust, recoil and laughter at
the stage images.

In a further departure from Brecht, Betty is no shrinking feminine ‘cringing with horror’ (Brecht 1981: 92), but a powerful stage presence dictating a confident and morally assured feminine identity. Dressed in a white wedding dress, the actor forms a composite feminine figure: bride, diva, ‘the eternal feminine’, ‘the true woman’. She knowingly plays the part of the screen onto which the emotionally and sexually crippled Ui projects his fantasies and his fear of the other. On this Lacanian model she would be passive, with no subjectivity of her own and consequently ‘not exist’, but this is not the case.

On carrying out the threat Ui thinks the (monstrous) feminine poses to him, Betty laughs. With her long hair and white dress, Betty Dullfeet, like Helene Cixous’ reclaimed monster, the Medusa, is ‘beautiful and she’s laughing’ (Cixous 1981: 254). The moment is a good example of what Zizek calls the ‘uncanny domain in which amusement turns into disgust . . .’, or for our purposes, into affect (Zizek 1999: viii). Betty Dullfeet’s laughter makes her powerful and contemptuous of his hatred of her even as he lays his pathetic head on her ample breast.

The laughter of the powerful woman who refuses to be the screen onto which his fears are projected, serves as a model of one who finds the rise of Arturo Ui utterly resistible. The image of the laughter of the raped widow is also unexpected. She laughs and tosses her hair, he is castrated – both combine to produce an unqualified and unexpected response of surprise. He quickly conceals his castrated self and the Brechtian fable continues.

Summary

The castration scene opens up a gap within the already fragmented episodic structure of the Brechtian fable from which possibilities of the new take form. These possibilities include new readings of the text, new perspectives on the themes, new sensations of pain, loss, fear, guilt and joy. There are also new possibilities for laughter. As a spectator you are aware that this is not how things are supposed to happen; that this is not how the fable is told. And then the moment is gone. The image of the diminished physicality of the Führer amplifies, resonates and dampens the historical content and functions at the level of the affective – the unexpected and inexplicable – producing, for a moment, an affective rather than cognitive response. And the pleasurable horror lingers. The production is more than a museum piece or a history lesson. The image offers the contemporary spectator the possibility of a new response to the character whose bodily movements no longer signify only Hitler, but the man who uses his power to impinge on a woman. As Wuttke has said,

Another topic debated is the relationship between politics, criminality and entertainment. This is the aspect which gives it universal appeal. So I have tried to keep that in mind when I do the role of Arturo Ui. Political demagoguery is related to personal charisma (Wuttke 2000).

Ui demonstrates how power operates in the affective domain, where ‘personal charisma’ is persuasive. Ui’s confident manly stride, the raised salute and the execution of Dogsborough, enable him to attempt seduction. He expects to succeed. But in a move that emphasises the ‘resistible rise’ of Arturo Ui, the woman does not fall for it. When he grasps and twists her hair, the charisma soon turns to violence and the
attempt at seduction is abandoned. He is intent on causing pain and gaining satisfaction. In the end, the male body stands before us signifying the mutilation and deformity of Germany's fascist past, creating at the same time an image of impotence, as if to reaffirm that Hitler is dead. With the castration and the subsequent search for his 'sex' and the comic spectacle of Wuttke's stage trick, the audience laughs and squirms in the wake of this momentary ‘gap’ in Brecht's parable. Beyond Hitler, here is an image of the criminal of our times.

Conclusion

The sequence of unexpected actions takes us into the affective domain through the sudden pleasure at the unexpected. This contradictory sensation also takes us into the realm of Schadenfreude that Müller described as 'the spring of all humour; the joy at the fact something goes wrong and that one is in the position to write about it. I believe that is a basic model for theatre and also for comedy (Müller et al. 1986: 115)'.

Müller’s Schadenfreude – the ‘joy at the fact that something goes wrong and that one is in a position to write about it’ – is the pleasure in somebody else’s pain, but also pleasure in survival. It is a further illogical, unexpected, affective response.

The reading of the sequence of action according to affect suggests that the images are not part of a static history lesson. Nor is their meaning fixable. Rather we chase the images around and let them run wild. The sequence does and does not take a position on Hitler; he is a man who uses his power to impose his will; he is a male body that bears the pain of the Nazi past; he is the object of her ridicule but he is also the unexpected and the unqualified.

This also takes us back to signification and the reference points within the image to German history. Ui/Hitler is the image that bears the guilt, the effigy that takes the punishment for the guilt that ‘lies in the foundations of our Christian-determinate civilisation’ (Müller 1992: 316) and for the Nazi past, a guilt deferred in the former eastern theatre. Where the performance now takes place five years into reunification, it offers ‘a new, living image that makes the past contemporary to the present of sensation and perception’ (Massumi 2002: 15). There is the pain of the past that cannot be changed, but if the pain is played out on the stage then it’s not happening to us. The pleasure in somebody else’s pain gives the spectator a momentary distance from the pain shared across a reunified nation. This is reason enough to keep going to the theatre in troubled times – to defer the pain.

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