International Journal of Education & the Arts

http://www.ijea.org/ **ISSN: 1529-8094**

Volume 15 Special Issue 2.1 **October 6, 2014**

How can ABER Serve the Public Good? A Critical Brechtian Perspective

Donald Blumenfeld-Jones
Arizona State University, USA

Citation: Blumenfeld-Jones, Donald. (2014). How can ABER serve the public good? A critical Brechtian perspective. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, *15*(SI 2.1). Retrieved from http://www.ijea.org/v15si2/.

The Premise

I must start with my premise about Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER). Conventionally I find that some of ABER uses art as a prompt for participants to think, reflect and reveal, after which the researcher gathers the "data" garnered from the participants through these prompts and experiences by interviewing the participants and, subsequently analyzes that data in sometimes, often, standard ways. Or, someone is making art and is solipsistic, exclusively focused on her/his experiences, rendering those experiences in aesthetic forms. I consider the former to not be ABER and I consider the latter to be an inadequate performance of ABER. In this essay I will be dealing with this latter manifestation and try to demonstrate how we can take this form of ABER and transform it into something that extends beyond the personal, beyond $n = 1$, even when the ABER practitioner is in fact dealing with her/himself as the n.

My premise: ABER involves someone making art as her/his response to educational phenomena. I make art and through the process of making art I perform my research. I may have "data" that I have gathered in more standard ways (or not) but I work with it not through

standard means of analysis and thinking but through making art that is a response to the "data." My essay and concern are based on this premise. My concern is with the importance of making good art as the only route to doing good ABER.

I begin with a riff and then onto a Brechtian analysis of doing ABER.

The Riff

In art there is the artist. While there are certainly collaborative artists and co-produced art, for the most part I would say art is the artist confronting her/his world with an inquiring body and wanting to know of the conundrum of experience and "What makes something tick" through the individual encounter with the world. The artist works in the medium of the image whether rendered on the medium of "crayon, ink, paint, and more on paper, canvas, film, a barn wall support" or "sound & silence" or "motion in space" or the "plastic art of sculptural enactment". No matter the medium it is what Buber termed,

> . . . a man faced by a form which desires to be made through him (sic) into a work. This form is no offspring of his [sic] soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. (Buber, 1958, p. 9)

This makes of the artist a person responsible *to* that demand. "No offspring of his soul": no idiosyncratic noumenal being, but the flesh of the world demanding its due.

So much of art is the singular artist but, as we can see with Buber and later with Brecht, this singularity is not what the artist feels, which is nothing in the face of this demand, but what the world asks.

So, we have the artist, we have the world, we have a demand.

The artist is the vessel of some sort of encounter, the distillatory of experience, the rendering of new relationship demanded. The particular artist is the particular focus of the art: "this artist, this art" and "that artist, that art".

But given Buber's assertion that the art is "no offspring of his soul", we cannot allow the art to become solipsistic, to allow this n of 1 to be turned inward, except as: "a geography of the world out there", experienced "in here" as a momentary turning away in order to *feel* that territory in ways as yet unfelt.

The art must return to the world for its warrant, must turn to the world for its moment of insight. Without that connection the artist is but rummaging about in the attic of her or his

memoried life, an attic hidden away as was Mr. Rochester's mad wife.

Not only must the artist return to the world but the artist must find the world in her, in him, find the ground which s/he did not create but upon which her or his own soul is founded. There is no art that comes out of the soul, which is not simultaneously found outside the soul in the world that was there before this soul existed. This is the truth of which I wish to speak, the social solidification of me, the intersection of self, soul, and world, no revelation this but only the beginning of wisdom.

For it is wisdom that I think we need, not wisdom of where our work leads for it does not lead. Leading happens from those who encounter the work just as someone leads a horse out into the green pasture and rides into the wind or sideways to the wind that blows in from the world outside the pasture, the stream, the forest, the mountains. Can you feel that wind you did not make, feel that horse that canters in its own way and bears you into the world again?

I ask you not to think about that special self that is you, or that you think is you, but about this self born into this world by all the others and bear witness to your non-isolation.

I was once asked about the personal character of my work: wasn't I the center of that writing? I was shocked and responded: it wasn't about me, it was *never* about me. I was but some "data", a story I knew well but nonetheless nothing to do with me except as a sample of the world. I asked her to read again and see me as but one expression of that social world into which my story is borne.

The *n of 1* is always an *n of multiplicity* – the 1 is a fiction.

It is a useful fiction for it is simultaneously the case that it is "I" who is the sieve, the funnel, the flask in which boils that particular moment in the world that is queried, is addressed, addresses me. It is my specificity that is the beginning moment, the moment of the world, that particular collision or sliding inside of "me and it" all at once.

Such a peculiar inter-moment – they are all peculiar and specific and, yet, they are all pedestrian, ordinary, common, common as dirt wherever you find them, as the dandelion which is treated as a weed, not treated as its own unique self,. What *might* I know about the world through the specific expression of "this dandelion?"

To know this is not enough and to think of the world again is to think of the public good even as we are in the world at all. Even if our attention upon the public good is oblique, the very notion of the public good is the starting gun. This is, perhaps, sufficient in order to credit us

with that intention of the public good. Perhaps not enough yet, but the intention may be a thread, a thin ghost drawn through the skein of the work that if we but have it hovering at the edge of consciousness is enough, may be all we need and all we should have, lest the work be driven from the incautious conscious mind that *is not* the origin of art.

Remember Buber: the world calls *us* to *it*, demands of *us*, not we the masters but we the *servants* to its need. If we become the masters, we become a sledgehammer that destroys the now brittle anvil upon which the art is forged. And in so doing the world disappears and we are lost in the void that becomes ourselves, suffocating in the settling dust of what we have brought to ruin.

Brecht

In this part of my discussion I will focus on an exegesis of Brecht, using two sources: Brecht's essays on art, critiquing Lukás, found in *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977) and Brecht's essay on "Theatre for Pleasure and Theatre for Instruction" (1936).

The Purpose of Instructional Theatre

In his essay "Theatre for Instruction and Theatre for Pleasure", Brecht notes that the artist may be motivated by a moral impulse. In his case, the moral impulse that animates him or her (and which can often be merely an intellectual concern with what is right) "is not only [a] moral consideration that make[s] hunger, cold, and oppression hard to bear. . . . The objects of our inquiries was not just to arouse moral objections to such circumstances . . . but to discover the means for their elimination. We were not in fact speaking in the name of morality but in that of the victims." This is similar to Toni Morrison's statement in her foreword to *The Bluest Eye* in which she writes about her use of a young girl as the center piece of the novel:

> One problem was centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn't work: many readers remain touched but not moved. (Morrison, Toni (2007-07-24). The Bluest Eye [Vintage International] . Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)

She is telling us that her purpose was not to tell a moral tale in which we could nestle inside our emotional response but to move us to think about what we might do. The "what we might do" does not necessarily translate into conventional actions but Morrison is asking us, as is Brecht, to consider what we need to change in the world around us for this to change.

For Brecht his art, which he termed "epic theatre" was made to join with a "society which is interested in seeing vital questions freely aired with a view to their solution . . ." Brecht is suggesting that there is not a single answer or solution mandated by a particular political viewpoint but rather a "free airing" of ideas through the art which makes apparent the conditions under which we are living.

Favor Instructional Theatre

Brecht favors epic theatre but, more specifically, the Theatre of Instruction. In this theatre

> The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically . . . by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding.

The epic theatre spectator has the following experience:

> The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when the laugh.

Contrast this with the experience of the dramatic theatre spectator. This person says:

> Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh."

This latter is what I think Toni Morrison references as being touched but not moved.

Instructional Theatre Must be Art

Such a theatre (or any art for that matter) may be seen as antithetical to art or pleasure and while Brecht is concerned with an art that can teach he does not separate this from an art that is pleasurable and an art that is adept at art. The idea of pleasure linked to instruction is not the more standard notion that learning, when it is genuine, is always pleasurable. Rather it is that art that is not good art cannot hope to be either pleasurable or instructive. As Brecht puts it, "Whatever knowledge is embodied in a piece of poetic writing has to be wholly transmuted

into poetry. Its utilization fulfills the very pleasure that the poetic element provokes"(4).

There is a problem with engagement with moral questions, an engagement which he does favor. It may be done at the expense of good art. In this case the engagement will fail. Brecht wants us to move beyond mere engagement with a moral question which he terms "observe without intervention". He writes, that

> [W]e [may start] our observations out of a pure passion for observing and without any practical motive, only to be completely staggered by their results.

One must begin in observation, in just seeing because if one begins with an already set idea of what the scene contains, then you will only see what you were already going to see, and nothing new for you will emerge. But having begun in observation, what eventuates must move both artist and recipient of art to consideration of previously unseen implications.

In my art, I do not start with what I know but with what I don't know. And I don't know a lot. Through the making of the art, through the inquiry into whatever it is that is the so-called "subject" of the art, I come to know something about my relationship, as a contextualized knower in the world, to that object of inquiry. I don't do this in a cognitively conscious manner. I allow the art to speak to me but, and I emphasize this, it is not a matter of being "led around by the nose" or "knowing" in any conscious sense. I make decisions on an aesthetically driven sense, a sensory, bodily, dreaming feel of the emerging "thing." I allow it to speak to me and I allow multiple possibilities to be there and out of this I feel my way to what is emerging. In short, I have the art reveal newness to me. That is the idea, it seems to me of all research, that it surprises the researcher as much as those who receive the report. I think Brecht is telling us that were he to have a point to make through his art, then he could never be surprised because the art is being made to fulfill an already complete vision and the opportunity to be staggered is nullified.

Our difficulty, then, is how to make an art that explores, exposes, shows the world in a mirror in which we can find ourselves and our own place in the difficulties without proselytizing for a point of view which makes for failed art. As Brecht writes, too often

> [t]he questions confronting our politically engaged literature have had the effect of making one particular problem very actual - the jump from one kind of style to another within the same work of art. . . . Political and philosophical considerations failed to shape the whole structure, the message was mechanically fitted into the plot. The 'editorial' was usually 'inartistically' conceived - so patently that the inartistic nature of the plot in which it was embedded, was overlooked.

The work fails when it is inartistic. The way to making art is to see the whole of the art, not merely the "content" that seems "correct" and not merely a love of form: conjoin the two - the form of the art is informed by political and philosophical considerations and political and philosophical considerations are only so "instructional" as their complexity finds a life in the chosen form. Stanley Aronowitz, in his essay "Colonized Leisure, Trivialized Work" (*False Promises*) wrote that John Ford, the filmmaker, might have made films that were politically to the right but his techniques were highly democratizing. For instance, he would place a single camera framing two people and let the scene unfold. An audience member was allowed to compose the scene in any way s/he saw fit. This is democratizing filmmaking as it is not manipulation to drive home a singular point of view. Aronowitz contrasted this to a film maker who made films that had politically acceptable content but his TV style editing technique produced a totalitarian experience as his many edits forced the viewer to interpret the film in specific ways. The aesthetics of this latter editing run counter to the desired politics expressed in the content of the film.

Another issue arises: how to maintain the complexity of human life processes even while witnessing the shift in social life. We are not about the making of "great individuals" in the form of characters or making even "individuals" in our work but rather the ways in which individuals struggle with the vagaries of the political-social-cultural-economic life in which they are engaged. The public good is served only when we witness this and link the personal to the social.

Problem with the Theatre of Instruction: Not Amusing or Pleasurable and the Place of these in Making an Art Dedicated to the Public Good

Brecht provides an image of a theatre that attempts to instruct through the art (there is ABER work of this ilk). Brecht is clearly disparaging of an art which, however well-meaning, ceases to be art, ceases to be, in his language in this essay, amusing.

Brecht sees this as a wrong tack:

> Generally there is felt to be a very sharp distinction between learning and amusing oneself. The first may be useful [and educational research is often judged as to its usefulness in effecting change in education and if it doesn't then it's not useful], but only the second is pleasant. So we have to defend the epic theatre against the suspicion that it is a highly disagreeable, humourless, indeed strenuous affair. (p2)

Brecht asserts that "the contrast between learning and amusing oneself is not laid down by divine rule; it is not one that has always been and must continue to be." (p.2) Brecht suggests

that what he terms amusement and pleasure are core to the art experience and that learning does not take place without them, especially in an instructional theatre (or instructional art of any kind). He writes, "If there were not such amusement to be had from learning, the theatre's whole structure would unfit it for teaching. Theatre remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre it will amuse." Insofar as it is good theatre: clearly only good theatre can both instruct and amuse, give pleasure.

But Brecht remains concerned that we will think that theatre is merely a teaching tool for he asks " . . . what has knowledge got to do with art? We know that knowledge can be amusing, but not everything that is amusing belongs in the theatre." (p. 4) Brecht suggests (and this may be seem contradictory but I think it is not) that he needs scientific understanding in order to perform this sort of work. He does not feel capable that through his own imagination, he can imagine truths that need promulgation. For Brecht this is an artist's strategy that does not obviate "amusement" but allows Brecht to think *and* make art.

Place of Alienation in Art

Returning to *alienation* we must note that Brecht argues for forestalling simple empathy as being of the greatest importance. (David Purpel, 2004, draws a distinction between compassion and sentimentality, notes that sentimentality does not lead to action but only to feeling badly for someone else.) An art that is meant to help people see in new ways that might bring to them some way to conceive of how the world might need changing, must start with them seeing that they are not seeing, must interrupt the sentimentality of art. (It is not the case, I believe, that art must be about changing the world in some major way but it is my belief that art functions to bring the world to us in ways that allow us to illuminate ourselves and place ourselves in the center of complicity with the world, whatever that means to us.)

This brings us directly to the issue of the relation of pleasure and amusement to a theatre that instructs. When Brecht contrasts the theatre of instruction with the theatre of pleasure it is not for the purpose of dismissing pleasure. Brecht writes of the history of theatre as becoming at his time a theatre of instruction.

> Oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market, all become subjects for theatrical representation. Choruses enlightened the spectator about facts unknown to him. Films showed a montage of events from all over the world. Projections added statistical material. . . . Right and wrong courses of action were shown. . . . The theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished not just to explain the world but also to change it. So we had philosophy, and we had instruction. And where was amusement in all that? Were they sending us back to school, teaching us to read and write? Were we supposed to pass

exams, work for diplomas?

In sum, Brecht provides an image of a theatre (read any arts-based work) that attempts to instruct through the art. Brecht is clearly disparaging of an art which, however well-meaning, ceases to be art, ceases to be, in his language in this essay, amusing.

Genre and Form

This plea leads on to a central concern of Brecht's, that we render reality in our art. This is the theatre Brecht sought: one that would awaken people through art dedicated to reality. To accomplish this it did not have to take some representational form, typical of "realism." Brecht felt that experimentalism was a perfectly acceptable approach to attempt realism. But, in the end, one must be in touch with reality. He, at the time, was working on a book on Caesar. He chose a diaristic approach and he felt the need to study extensively about Caesar to accomplish this. He asserts, in his aesthetic essays, that science can help the artist understand some things art will not reveal. The artist must be interested in many things in the world outside of art but in the end it is the art which reveals. So to be clear, I am not arguing for any particular mode of art-making or kind of product or even particular political viewpoint (all viewpoints should be welcome if the art is credible and the inquiry is humane). I am arguing for a focus on realism as Brecht describes it and on the making of art first as the only way to achieve understanding and that understanding is achieved through alienation, distancing, objectively slanted eyes toward one's own perspective. For, as Brecht notes, there are those Marxist artists who are not even aware that their art is actually complicitious with capital.

But Brecht remains concerned that we will think that theatre is merely a teaching tool for he asks " . . . what has knowledge got to do with art? We know that knowledge can be amusing, but not everything that is amusing belongs in the theatre." (p. 4) Brecht suggests (and this may be idiosyncratic) that he needs scientific understanding in order to perform this sort of work. He does not feel capable that through his own imagination, he can imagine truths that need promulgation.

Rendering Reality and What Does it Take to Render Reality?

This brings me to exactly what is done in making this art. A theatre dedicated to awakening us is dedicated to do so through a rendering of reality. To accomplish this it did not have to take some representational form, typical of "realism." As already noted Brecht had no problems with experimentalism. To render reality we must be aesthetically unafraid. We must not be concerned merely that the "message is correct." We must be concerned with rendering reality in ways that are effective not for message sending but for provoking thought. Realism requires our courage to attempt new approaches. As Brecht puts it:

> With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to 'tried' rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master. (Brecht, 1977, p. 81)

To be realistic doesn't necessarily mean to perform, in writing for an example,

> "the so-called sensuous mode of writing - where one can smell, taste, and feel everything - is not automatically to be identified with a realistic mode of writing; we shall acknowledge that there are works which are sensuously written and which are not realistic, and realistic works which are not written in a sensuous style. . . . Realism is not a mere question of form. Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists. (p. 82)

Here we see Brecht making space for all kinds of art, not just conventional representational art. This, however, does not mean that the responsibility for an attention to reality is not required. And reality is a matter of *n = many* even when distilled through *n = 1*.

The Place of Form and Formalism in a Realistic, Instructional Art

Brecht, in his essays attacking Lukács distinguishes between realism and reality. He favors reality, seeing realism as a particular genre of art that is no more privileged to represent reality than any other genre. But he also understands that the artist must be concerned with the form s/he is using to render that reality, must, as he puts it, be "constantly occupied with formal matters." The problem with formalism is: it often falls into the trap of being exclusively interested in form and not what is contained in that form. In this case even a work done from a realist point of view can fall into formalism and be shown to be quite unreal.

Why is this? Because, in life the forms of life are filled with the content of life and it is not possible to separate the two. The form is filled with life and life can only be experienced from within some form. The artist must be careful to not fall into the trap of mere formalism even though careful choice of form and how to manipulate the form is essential to the making of art. Rather than being "formalistic" with a focus on form exclusively and not caring much about the meanings and content that is found within that form, we must attend to form that has a concomitant attention to what is contained and what is best contained by what form. To be clear: bad form and good content is bad art and good form and no content is bad art. Both are necessary: reality and form. The attention, in so much of ABER, to the self as a form, at all costs it seems, is problematic because it is not automatic that the world will be regained

thereby.

This is the point: that the world be regained in perhaps "new" ways that illuminate some corner, bring something to light that is not owned by the self even if reflected through the self. To have one's attention on what is reflected and how it is connected to the larger world, to be clear about the possibility of this connection without necessarily explicitly explaining it (for explanations are dangerous narrowings of possibilities), this is what takes the solipsistic and makes it no longer solipsistic.

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About the Author

Donald Blumenfeld-Jones is Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies and Ethics at Arizona State University. He received his doctorate in Curriculum Studies from UNC-Greensboro under David Purpel. He specializes in curriculum theory, ABER, ethics and the classroom, hermeneutics, and critical social theory. He has a book dedicated to all these areas (*Curriculum and the Aesthetic Life: Hermeneutics, Body, Democracy and Ethics in Curriculum Theory and Practice)*. He has numerous refereed book chapters and journal articles. He received the James B. Macdonald Prize in Curriculum Theory and has given international keynote addresses in Brazil and Canada. He founded and directs ARTs (Arts-based Reflective Teaching), a teacher preparation program dedicated to the development of aesthetic and ethical consciousness as the basis for curriculum decision making and classroom teaching. He danced professionally for twenty years, performing, choreographing and teaching throughout the U.S. and Canada. He practices ABER using dance and poetry.

International Journal of Education & the Arts