

AMBIVALENCE AND NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

By Johnny Herbert

Having acquired the sculpture remnants of Georgian sculptor Valentin Topuridze (1907–1980) in 2019, Nina Sanadze took responsibility of what she considers the “anti-climactic” artefacts of Georgia’s past. The Topuridze family, her next-door neighbours when growing up in Georgia, sold the archive not only for financial reasons but also because they were unable to store the sculptures suitably. Yet, Sanadze told me in an email exchange, they perhaps also harbour a “hope that his talent might be preserved and recognised once again.”

I will reflect on the ambivalence of this responsibility via a consideration of what Sanadze has called the “grandeur” of the sculptures, a grandeur, we might add, fitting for the architecture of Kunsthall 3,14. I will take up the notion of “the epic” following a reference to it by a member of the public in a discussion after Sanadze had given an online presentation. A link was made between her musical background (Sanadze was an accomplished concert pianist before studying art) and the classical music in the video *Terminus* (2020) with her use of the Topuridze sculptures in terms of “the epic”. Although the questioner didn’t go further, it’s a trajectory I’d like to very briefly pursue as I feel a probing of “the epic” might offer some orientation points for consideration of her work with the Topuridze sculptures in conditions in which “epic” big-budget filmmaking and the often inescapably grandiose approaches to critical thinking I prefer to abbreviate as “heroic thinking” are commonplace. How to view monuments, standing or not, and Sanadze’s necessarily ambivalent engagement with the Topuridze sculptures in *these* conditions of culture and thought?

The notion of “the epic” I’d like to sketch looks to veer away from the tropes invoked above: “high periods”, like cafés furnished in Art Nouveau [*Jugendstil*] style, and the overly-dramatic narratives of obscene ambition and individual heroism. A medium most readily associated with “the epic” is epic theatre. A long history of theatre based on Aristotle’s teachings designed for audiences to empathically identify with characters presented tragedies as epitomised by the sense that they began and ended in the theatre, a tragic play lived its whole life—from birth to death, so to speak—in front of the audience. The epic however, leaked through the frame of the stage and theatre. Spectators

were drawn along less by the arc of the form from beginning to end but instead made repeatedly aware of their position as voyeurs or flys-on-the-wall for an excerpt of an unrepresentable narrative arc. Bertolt Brecht, whose theatrical works he considered to be a rejuvenation of epic theatre, did not understand the epic as a genre or connoting a specific scale of a production. In the 1930s, Brecht, with close friend and fellow theorist of the new epic theatre, Walter Benjamin, claimed that epic theatre needed to come to terms with the glittering new media of radio and cinema that were quickly gaining popularity at the time; conditions of experience were changing, theatre needed to respond.

Following the technique of montage in film, Brecht and Benjamin asserted that it was important that a new epic theatre be “based on interruption”. But what was it interrupting? “It interrupt[ed] [...] action. Or more precisely: plot.” Yet, this interruption had “a pedagogic function and not just the character of a stimulus”. Indeed, Brecht worked with “estrangement effects” (*Verfremdungseffekt*, variously translated as “alienation effect”, “distancing effect”, or “V-effect”) to prevent absorption in a plot or audience identification with characters. This was a theatre of self-reflection and analysis, extremely weary of empathic catharsis and dramatic hyperbole. The plays, Benjamin proclaimed, are “not brought home to the spectator but distanced from him [*sic.*]” This epic theatre performed a complex series of operations on the previous epic model, turning it inside out in ways I can only hint at here. However, one reorientation—or “refunctioning” (a favourite term of Brecht’s)—was how the new epic theatre took the previous sense of being in the middle of a larger plot I have alluded to and reoriented this sense of “middle” away from narrative arc and into the current states of affairs of audience members and actors—putting the world in, so to speak. It was as if the reorientation spun the interconnectedness of the stage away from the off-stage areas and towards the theatre floor, this linking of stage and audience necessitating “the burial of the orchestra” (sitting most often in the orchestra pit between the stage and audience) and enabling a different relation between actors and audience. The startling self-reflective effects of this new epic theatre were meant to organise and instigate audience (and actor) analysis and action, sending people out the doors of the theatre not temporarily comforted but with thoughts and questions pertinent to the streets they flooded out onto. However, the difficulty with this work today, as theorist Rey Chow has noted, is that Benjamin and Brecht were “still writing at a time when relaxation and distraction could be embraced as emancipatory sense modalities, as opposed to the contemplation and absorption necessitated by traditional, bourgeois cultural forms such as the novel and painting.” Can the interruptive power, the

estrangement effects, and the reflexive (self-aware) forms of Brechtian epic theatre still be said to operate almost a century later?

It is here that we can reconnect with the feeling of “anti-climax” Nina Sanadze noted in response to the Topuridze sculptures in that perhaps we can think of an anti-climax as a *negative interruption* of sorts, where hopes, desires, and a sense of direction—life’s “plot”—dissipate. Yet the deflation felt here is also because of the attachment to climactic form, even if negatively—an anti-climax is still relating to a climax. Consider form was something I learnt about when studying music composition. Musical form—the organisation of sonic materials in time—quickly became the most crucial and difficult aspect. Further study taught me that climaxes were not only unnecessary but often dragged a composition into a certain homogenous logic and particular formal structures that were a questionable strategy for new music-making. Thus, what I think we can claim here is that *anti-climaxes operate within the logic of tragedies and their totalising drama of beginnings and endings*, whilst what we might look to do when considering Sanadze’s work in *Terminus, Apotheosis* (2021), and *Head under the bed* (2023), is to *think epically*.

What could this be?

I would be tempted to start by claiming that the conditions and power of interruption, estrangement effects, reflexivity and self-reflection have altered (we can condense “reflexivity” here to mean something that seems to be self-aware, e.g. a film that shows aspects of its making.) An aspect of this change has come by way of art’s use and abuse of what, after Brecht, became the avant-garde trope of reflexivity—nuanced often to a significantly lesser degree than in Brecht’s work—in tandem with the constant encouragement to “turn” to (and on) ourselves when addressing psychological deflation and *be* the dramatic heroes proliferating Netflix. Thus, reflexivity easily tumbles into a hermetic, narcissistic grandiosity and estrangement effects today are weakened given the extent of mediated mass estrangement (online); we’re more self-aware than ever and yet also “alone together”, as Sherry Turkle has quipped.

As when Ovid’s Narcissus sees himself with Echo’s ambient distortion (or mimicry?) of his own voice in his ears, the slippage of epic theatre’s conditions I’m putting forward here revolves around a *staging of self-reflection* in a way that can no longer be considered a kind of mirroring but where the

“turn” to/on oneself is emphatically *socially* mediated. In short, mediation and a “middling” like that of epic theatre are intensified in a new way: from narrative form to social form, to psychosocial form. Perhaps this is nearing epic thinking. Rather than take up a reflexive trope for an umpteenth time, Sanadze’s practice maintains the ambivalence of care and criticism saturating what I’ve outlined as today’s staging of self-reflection. In this sense, maybe, in stating that her work is “based on [...] disjuncture” she nears a reversal of Benjamin’s assertion that interruption had replaced contradiction.

Can pulling down monuments deemed offensive—whether by states or citizens—absolve anyone of the complicity of entangled histories? Such actions negatively herald monuments as still important and in operation *as they were intended*, as if their evolved monumental form is unsurmountable even in public spaces in which cyberspace is the most operative territory. In Nina Sanadze’s work, we’re invited to stay with troubling inheritances, bearing the irreconcilability of histories, and practice what poet John Keats named, in a letter of 1817, “negative capability”. Sanadze stressed to me that it was difficult for the Topuridze family to see Valentin Topuridze’s work largely destroyed for the ideology it represented. She cares for and lives with ruins as debris piles up in front of us. Hopes have changed, ambitions have changed. Thought forms need to change.

“There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awake the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.”

(Walter Benjamin, thesis IX from “On the Concept of History”, *Selected Writings Vol 4*.)

References

Walter Benjamin, "A Family Drama in the Epic Theatre", *Selected Writings Vol 2:2*.

Walter Benjamin, "What is the Epic Theater (I)" (1931), my translation.

Bertolt Brecht, 'Notizen zu Arbeit', *Gesammelte Werke 19*.

Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture*.

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*.

Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*.

As Sanadze wrote to me in an email exchange.

As part of the VCA Art Forum (associated with The University of Melbourne)

Samuel Weber's *Benjamin's -abilities* goes into detail about the contrast of Brechtian and Aristotelean epic theatres.

Walter Benjamin, "A Family Drama in the Epic Theatre".

Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, 98.

Walter Benjamin, "A Family Drama in the Epic Theatre".

Although often ignored, Brecht didn't attempt to abandon empathy outright, producing his learning-plays [*Lehrstück*] to harness theatre-goers' apparent entrancement with empathic experience, even if he looked to work with something beyond just "spiritual empathy" (see *Gesammelte Werke 19*, 413-414).

Walter Benjamin, "What is the Epic Theater (I)" (1931), my translation.

Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture*, 23.

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*.

Email exchange with Sanadze.