

BRECHTIAN THEATRE: DETERMINED AND  
DETERMINING

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Brechtian drama has been revered and denigrated, caught between the rise of fascism, later Cold War Western hostility and Stalinist Straight-jacketing of all but Socialist Realist art. For twenty years, Brecht's plays were virtually prohibited in the Soviet Union, his art described as "Formalist", a category warranting, in the case of Brecht's contemporaries, Meyerhold and Tretiakoff, the death penalty.<sup>1</sup>

What irony for an artist whose initial identification, shared by others of his generation, was with the dynamic impulses of American capitalism and English culture (the prize-fighter, journalism, sportsman, Shakespearean and medieval epic).<sup>2</sup> This Anglicized identity represented a form of protest against the First World War which deepened into the radicalization of post-War Germany, in close league with the Russian Revolution and fed by frustrated German working class aspirations. Brecht's left-wing social-democratic leanings of the early 1920s (grew over <sup>Ullmann's</sup>). into Marxism, in response to the failings of the social-democratic leadership of the Weimer Republic. His works were an integrated part of the culture of radicalization. It is here that the second element of irony comes into play: Brecht was almost rejected by the very Communist forces which he struggled through his theatre. Brecht was jettisoned by both of his traditions.

Brecht's theatre is an historically located product of the

*good* ✓ very forces which spawned its later rejection. But the theater is not trapped within its own history: the questions which it poses are currently relevant; in a period of rising social, economic and political crisis; a new wave of working class radicalization and a mass culture preceded by a naturalism based in the nineteenth and twentieth century forms. As well a regrouping of fascist forces is reemerging on a global scale. — substantiate 'value laden' statements such as this.

After the suppression of his work <sup>came</sup> a reawakening of interest in his plays during two major reform movements: the post-1956 thaw in Eastern Europe introduced Brechtian theatre (text and practice) into the satellite countries and the USSR itself.<sup>3</sup> John Willett, in The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht describes three stages of interest in his work: "virtual rejection, then the enthusiasm of a minority who saw here a politically tenable approach to artistic innovation, then final acceptance and a consequent decline in impact."<sup>4</sup>

In the Western World Brecht was resurrected in the 1960s and 1970s, but his theater was separated from his aesthetic theory. The process of cooption or adaption of his work into repertoire meant a partial loss of Brecht's aesthetic value. — explain what? which? As Terry Eagleton suggests, the production of a play is not equivalent to its text and interpretation can act as a conscious means of transformation:

The relation between text and product is a relation of labour: the theatrical (staging, acting, skills and so on) transform the "raw materials" of the text into a specific product, which cannot be mechanically extrapolated from an inspection of the text itself. The question of two different productions of a dramatic text is relevant here



is the problem of translation as interpretation. How the 'interpreted' or 'understood' is further interpreted & understood.  
3.

for two such productions can vary to the point where the question of in what precise sense we are dealing with the "same" text becomes pertinent.

Brecht's plays achieve a dialectic between form and content, structuring, to some extent, the mode of presentation (choruses, demonstrative acting, historical reflection). Eagleton is also correct when he suggests that this mediates the extent of possible interpretation:

As a determinate product, the text naturally presses its own modes of producibility upon the recipient and in this sense may be said to produce its own consumption-not that it dictates a single sense to the reader, but that it generates a field of possible readings which, within the conjuncture of the reader's ideological matrix and its own, is necessarily finite.

do you totally accept this? Perhaps put this in your own words.

But this field of meaning can be distorted by rearranging the order of the scenes to allow cathartic effects; naturalistic acting; the omission of didactic songs and statements. Or, interpretation can maintain meaning: the Performance Groups's Mother Courage presented Mother Courage speaking out of character, as the actress, of her child's death. Her matter-of-fact tones countered identification and pathos.<sup>?</sup> Beyond conscious distortion, a central element of interpretation is the historical location of the performance (part of the audience's field of meaning). Brecht rejected the concept of the survivability of the text.

What is significant about Brecht, as Willett, Avron and Eagleton all point out, is his ability to continue to produce and grow as an artist within and despite the historical problematic of his times. His productivity allows us to test his practice against his criticism and theory, placing him on a qualitatively different plane than other critics, who criticize but do not produce art, and who often focus their polemics on the work of other critics, a further step removed from art production.

If the question of aesthetic value is historically relative, as both Brecht and Eagleton suggest, then it is important to identify the historical conditions of the original process of production as represented in the spheres of ideology and artistic theory. This will permit as well a recognition of elements which are consistently relevant through situating the present historical conjuncture. It will suggest ways that contemporary audiences will read the texts.

Historical analysis requires a recognition that art is both connected to and separate from concrete economic and political development; interdependent with material conditions, but connected to specific historical developments within ideology itself. Reducing artistic texts to a mere reflection of historical reality is an inadequate method of analysis, which bypasses their specific relationship to ideological production. Aesthetic values linger over time because of the long-term nature of ideological structures and practices (concepts of male authority for example) which do not shift in direct one-to-one ratio with economic conditions. At the same time, however, new ideologies develop under the weight of changes in social relations which transcend elements of old ideas, or challenge old ideas for hegemony. In relation to culture, Eagleton suggests:

Some works of art certainly survive their contemporary moment and others do not, but it is not determined by something called "aesthetic level". It is determined, as I have suggested, by the aesthetic "producibility" of the concrete ideological conjunctures in which they adhere- conjunctures of which the available relatively autonomous lineages of literary forms are a crucial structure. "Survivability" as Brecht saw is in any case a profoundly suspect criterion of literary value: the history of the life, death and resurrection of literary texts is in part the history of ideologies... Literary works transcend their contemporary history not by rising to the "universal", but by some virtue of the character of their concrete relations to it-relations themselves determined by the nature of the historical conditions into which the work is inserted.<sup>8</sup>



Brecht's work uses structural forms from Elizabethan drama, and refers to ideologically consistent themes (women as mothers, war, class oppression).

Brecht's conjuncture is the massive defeat of the European working class and the rise of Fascism. <sup>this</sup> Brecht's most productive years were during the second wave of radicalization of the German working class following the failed Spartacus uprising. The mid-20s radicalization (1926) resulted in the election of a social democratic government, with these results:

It was all too quickly forgotten that recent electoral successes of the working class parties in Germany and Great Britain resulted from a mass movement for a referendum on the expropriation of the rich and from a General Strike respectively; in other words from massive if unsuccessful social actions which had strengthened the solidarity of the workers and even won them support of wavering voters.<sup>9</sup>

Social democracy allowed its policies to be dictated by bourgeois coalition parties, its practical programme modified by a reformism "divorced from a class analysis" and mediated by parliamentarism:

belief in the possibility of reform through government office. But precisely their illusions were the key to power over the working masses who had voted for them... (who) hoped that reformist ministers in the government would be able to obtain for them what they had up till now had to struggle for themselves.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the defeat of the Western European Revolution shaped the policies of the USSR and its relations to European Communist Parties. By 1928 the USSR was isolated<sup>internationally</sup> as were the CPs in many countries from their own working classes, resulting in a slavish acceptance of the CPSU's line. Correctly assessing the oncoming economic crisis and observing the growing repression of bourgeois regimes, the Communist International adopted an ultra-left and sectarian position: defining all bourgeois

and socialdemocratic parties as Fascist, refusing to differentiate between the leadership of socialdemocracy and their workingclass base and opposing unity between workers organizations. "By adopting such an attitude the Communists destroyed all hopes of an alliance to fight the fascist threat, and opened an almost unbridgeable gap between the socialdemocratic and Communist workers."<sup>1</sup> The Communists, expelled from the unions for their policies, attracted the unemployed and grew through 1930-1933. They failed to respond to Hitler's election as Chancellor, seeing it as just one more "fascist" bourgeois government.

Meanwhile the leadership of the CPSU around Stalin intensified its purges and murders of old Bolshevik cadre and secondary leadership (Kirov 1934; Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov, Pyakatov and others in 1936) as well as leaders of the now-illegal European Communist Parties, exiled in Russia. In the face of fascist reaction, the CPSU adopted a policy of purge at home and popular frontist conciliation abroad, a response to the disastrous left-turn of the past. Rapprochement with social democracy was sought first, and then coalitions with bourgeois forces: the Communists liquidated their own programmatic and organizational independence to achieve this.

In 1939 the USSR entered the Hitler-Stalin pact, betraying Communist and Socialist resistance forces, and attacking Finland in 1939. The War brought increasing autonomy to European CPs working in the Resistance, who, despite the Soviet line, began to mobilize against fascism wherever possible (in Germany resistance forces were unable to effectively pull together because of the weight of repression). When Germany attacked the USSR, the Soviets reversed their position calling now for unity of all democratic forces against Fascism.



The workers movement in post-War Germany was too weak to reassert the previous hegemony over the working class. The division of Germany in 1949, the creation of the GDR and the lack of a real mass base for its leadership led to rule by Stalinist repression and the Berlin Wall to control movement out of the GDR to West Germany. In 1953, "overhasty collectivization plans, attacks on the Church and a further raising of work-norms led ~~to~~ first to the strike of construction workers in Berlin and then to the events of June 17, 1953. The workers rose against the party that claimed to represent their interests and the Red Army had to intervene to save the regime."<sup>12</sup> This too is Brecht's context.

Major debates raged amongst political artists during this period. In the 1920's Proletkult had argued for new forms of committed theatre, for "shock troops" which could communicate political theory and analysis to the workers. Meyerhold used "biomechanics" <sup>applied to</sup> the new "collective" emotions of the constructivist stage. The artist was to rebuild the stage in the "image of our technical world"<sup>13</sup> Art would be the ideological mirror of the new forms of socialized production. The spectator would share in the creation of the work.

While Proletkult in the early revolutionary years was given a "sort of state monopoly of culture, artistic freedom was allowed."<sup>14</sup> The historical animosity of Formalism, critical of the revolutionary process, developed in this period. After 1925 reaction set in against all forms of modernism; art was brought under strict control by 1932. Socialist Realism, endorsed by Stalin and Zhadanov, inspired by Gorky, became the only form of art which was supported by the Soviet leadership and was officially canonized at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. Writers were to be "engineers of the human soul". The



artist was to provide "a truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development".<sup>15</sup> Thus:

Soviet literature must be able to portray our heroes and see our tomorrow. This will not be Utopian since our tomorrow is being prepared by planned and conscious work today.<sup>16</sup>

The unconflicted and positive hero was the model of the plotless literature which followed these guidelines. As a party sponsored form of art. Socialist Realism dominated not only in the USSR but throughout the international Communist parties.

"'Brecht', wrote Herbert Ihering of Trommeln in der Nacht in 1922, 'has his blood, his nerves, soaked in the horror of our time.'"<sup>17</sup> This "horror" led to an aesthetic movement against artistic and political repression which focused in the last part of the 1920s and the 1930's and '40's on a debate about aesthetic strategies against Fascism: "The most significant way of deciphering what is finally at stake in these polemics is to see each aesthetic case as some kind of mediated response to precisely the historical moment."<sup>18</sup> The struggle to resist Fascism defines both content and forms for Lukacs, Brecht, Adorno and the Socialist Realists

Brecht proposes that "if working class consciousness is to be prised free from what paralyzes it, then every available technique of shock, irony, assault and indirection must be exploited."<sup>19</sup>

For Brecht, this meant at first a call to activity through agitation, presenting political parables of historic or epic quality to the audience, in an interrupted, gestic process.<sup>20</sup> Behavior would be shown and debated. Through dislocating and demystifying art would reveal the real, to "persuade us into living<sup>a</sup> new discursive and political relation to the real."<sup>21</sup> Rationality is only

discovered through practice, not through sifting through events or narratives to discover the historical essence and then portraying it. Brecht's theatre uses constant conflict, opposition, negation. The theatre will teach us to use reason, not emotion, <sup>and</sup> to make conscious choices. The resolution of these conflicts may be suggested on stage, but never completed—that is the task of the audience, the ultimate judge, in the arena of the real world. Aristotelian catharsis must be refused. The theatre must be stripped of morality and sentimentalism from the past.<sup>22</sup> The audience would be shocked out of identification with the characters, through the use of the alienation effect. The spectator must flip through the play like a reader seeking instruction from a book, with an attitude of critical judgement.

Brecht rejected a return to the Romanticism of the 19th century and an empty humanism as a solution to the appeal of Fascism. Brecht was in political opposition to a rapprochement with bourgeois parties and elements, and therefore rejected such a capitulation in the sphere of cultural production.<sup>23</sup>

*change connection*  
 Brecht's epic form was not tied to time as a linear representation of historical events, ~~and~~ the dialectical interaction provided structure and plot. *ad this* This allowed fundamental questions of human morality as formed by class society to be debated beyond the constraints of time and place. The importance of Brecht's dialectic is his belief in "historiocity", that "realism, can only be, so to speak, retrospective."<sup>24</sup> The realism of the dramatic text is established not through an intrinsic examination of but through its effects. These effects change over time: "realism is as realism does".<sup>25</sup> The audience judges



the questions of morality within their own historical placement, if it judges the text to fail at realism, in a sense, at structuring the debate correctly, than either the text or the audience must be rewritten. The text cannot exist for its own sake.

Brecht provides a dialectic of powerful oppositions. His strength is his refusal to indulge in a Hegelian abstraction through exposing the "essence" of the dramatic text or moment. But his weakness is a certain reductiveness into binary oppositions; thus nationality and racism can become simplified out into class conflict between the two major classes, without a discussion of their specific determinations. His contradictions seldom balance in a positive direction. Rather, Brecht emphasizes that reality is conflictual and that good intentions can be twisted, because of social relations which twist them into harmful actions. We experience the "ethical confusion of a confused society".<sup>26</sup> Some critics, such as Martin Esslin suggest that Brecht's negativity is unbalanced towards pessimism. In Brecht's dialectical terms it is consciously such: the power of negation lies with the audience not with the individual playwright.

Brecht's alienation effect is most powerful when he uses humour: "Brecht is at once unmelancholic and cultivates the alienation effect; for few things are funnier than auto-referentiality."<sup>27</sup> It is the humour, the constant doubletake, the built in self-reflection which rescues the plays and their method from pure negativity. Brecht assumes that the means of existence exist in the outside world, at the disposal of his audience. It is only when Brecht is placed outside of a political framing that the text can be read as cynical.

*This is a major problem in Brecht's cultural political practice.*

Solomen in Marxism and Art derides Brecht's lack of cathartic effects, for it is catharsis, he believes which brings revolutionary cleansing and a will to act.<sup>29</sup> Again, this refers to a human essence, beneath the deformations of civilized class society which, when liberated can cleanse human existence. The artist then, must seek this essence.

Questions of Brecht's realism lie in the realm of political responsibility. Are people moved by misery or hope (as Solomen and others suggest)? And prescriptive art can lead to important political errors being made. Sartre's oblique refusal that literature could be instrumental because of its immediacy denies a theatre which demands a reflective audience. It also denies the reality that whether explicitly prescriptive or not, art, as ideological production, inevitably speaks to the question of strategy for human practice. But the problem of prescription does arise with Brecht's early 1930s work: his plays drew analogies with Russia in 1917 that were historically untrue and carried strong statements about a correct communist attitude: to discipline, to women, to reformist political forces. His later work, dealing with deeper questions of the historical epoch made Brecht more comfortable perhaps because the immediate possibility of misdirecting masses of people through one's art was removed.

A second problematic in Brecht's theatre centres in the strength of characterization of the symbolic antagonists (in St. Joan for example), and the relative weakness of the collective working class mass, either absent, presented as chorus or without character. In a sense Brecht was mixing theatrical technique be-

This part is worth expanding upon - it does informally under critical reflection - does that necessarily become a part of Brecht's dialectic?

examples!



tween Meyerhold's post-individualist post-capitalist bioenergetics which formed all characters into collective social identities and the Medieval epic play with a strong sense of individual meaning in characterization. The audience can then identify with the capitalists (antagonists) but little identification with the proletariat exists because the new collective identity which Brecht desires does not yet exist. Brecht's ~~there~~ is caught in this contradiction: the proletariat is not yet transformed into the ruling class, and in particular, it has not yet fully developed its ideology. Brecht's refusal to idealize this collective ideology is correct, but there remains a void for lack of an alternative: one must imagine not only one's liberation but the instruments of liberation as well. On the other hand, the individualization of the capitalists leads at times to their reduction into caricature, diminishing the real power which their class holds; the treatment of fascists as gangster characters only shows one part of the story: omitting the collaborative nature of fascism and monopoly capitalism in the last instance.

Lukacs' strategy is quite different; it assumes that "a correct epistemology and ontology will produce significant art."<sup>30</sup> If we can criticize reality, throw off its ideological diversion, we can reach into facts and find the rational core. Eagleton suggests that the weakness of Lukacs' position is his belief in unity deriving from contradiction. Unity is essence. The artist for Lukacs must first abstract the essence of reality then conceal that essence in his text by recreating it in its immediacy. It is only through the "totality" that we can see life steadily.<sup>31</sup>

good.

That's why  
The Threepenny  
Opera was so  
popular to  
all classes  
during the  
Weimar  
Republic.

Lukacs believes that bourgeois artists would tend naturally (as a projection of their Enlightenment roots) towards critical realism.<sup>32</sup> In the 1930s he sought to draw them, on this basis, into a popular front against Fascism, and feared any interventions which might exclude such as alliance, even <sup>nose (of an artist)</sup> artistic.<sup>33</sup> Modern writers faced, he believed, the choice of reportage or fiction. The relationship between subjectivity and objectivity must be established within the text: content must always be placed in relation to the human experience.

Lukacs attacked Brecht in 1938 on the basis of Brecht's rejection of bourgeois art. Lukacs discussed Brecht's alienation technique was merely a "Formalist" literary device, imposed on the text by Brecht. It resulted in a severing of the relationship of the spectator to the play, creating false mediations between the theme and its natural dramatic tension.

Brecht rebuts this by suggesting that the central danger of Formalism is the adoption of antequated and irrelevant forms. Innovation of form can in fact enhance a Marxist aesthetic.

Adorno presents a second set of questions to Brecht's strategy. Adorno rejects the creation of works of art specifically about Fascist injustice for "by turning suffering into images, despite all their hard impalpability, the wound our shame before the victims,

For these are used to create something, works of art, which are thrown to the consumption of the world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instance, slithers into the abyss of its opposite.<sup>34</sup>

✓  
important  
quote



Adorno rejects committed art. Instead the goal must be:

...a work of art free from any ulterior goal. For this art is a reminder of that sensuous pleasure in which even-indeed especially-the most extreme dissonance, by sublimation and negation, partakes. 35

The power of such art lies in its representation of non-conceptual objects. Committed works too easily "credit themselves with every noble value". Such was the case with the atrocities of Fascism, which were clothed in a veneer of morality. The liberating force is in fact the irrational, the negation of social order represented by works of art which point precisely through their negation to "a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life." This concentration on the irrational is inspired by the German radical psychoanalytic tradition which analysed Fascism as caused by and responding to sexual repression.

Adorno's perspective suggests that "negation negates itself because it cannot help but posit the object it desires to destroy."<sup>36</sup> The problem is that the negation in actuality is "never quite as pure a negation as you want."<sup>37</sup> It reveals its constant integration into the dominant system; the political reality of negation is ever more complex than its positive idea. Eagleton suggests that although Adorno shares Brecht's concept of art as "critical, subversive"-it is a subversion which is the "negative essence of the real," the mirror opposite of Lukacs' positive essence.<sup>38</sup>

Adorno, from this perspective, cannot but reject Brecht's explicitly political stance. He believes that Brecht's characterization "renders fascism innocuous", rather than exposing the real dynamics of capital. These Brecht obscures with false historical parables. Epic drama, by relying on a negation which assumes acquiescence speaks to a restricted audience. It is therefore forma-

list.<sup>39</sup> Brecht's pretensions of mass art in fact require the intervention of a petit-bourgeois intellectual for their realization in the people's language. Brecht's poetry is "stained" with political falsehood, his work protects itself against Stalinist violence by adapting to humanist moralism.

Brecht's work was attacked by Socialist Realist critics of the 1930s because it lacked optimism, and represented Communist strategy inaccurately. It failed to provide a proletarian hero. The Mother was "condemned as formalist, for the simple reason that it did not obey the crude conventions of a purely representational theatre, where all the political propaganda was neatly wrapped up in the plot itself."<sup>40</sup>

Brecht believed that he was an effective Marxist, one who challenged his audience to act:

But the party did not want the audience to be put into a critical frame of mind. It wanted them to be hypnotized and made uncritical by having their emotions fully engaged in favour of the positive characters and against the negative ones. Brecht wanted to let them draw their own conclusions from a critical reflection on the play... Brecht considered himself a better Marxist than the party officials.<sup>41</sup>

Does Brecht deepen his practice in the face of these criticisms and the developments in cultural analysis of the 1930s? Does this deepening provide a bridge between changing historical periods?

Brecht, <sup>he</sup> Acutely conscious of historical change, adapted his theatre to meet changing conditions:

The wild plays of his Munich period coincide with the post-war inflation, ending with Hitler's beer parlour putch. The less hectic years dominated in politics by Streesman result in a group of frivolous but savage satires, where American financial and technical aid seem unconsciously mirrored in the Anglo-Saxon myth. Then from the autumn of 1929



(failure of Happy End) on, the spreading of the economic crisis and the revival of the Nazis are matched in Brecht's work by the development of the didactic Lehrstück and the return to the stronger language and methods of Edward II. In exile he tries to discredit the triumphant Nazism by all the means in his power, then with the approach of war he begins to look further ahead.<sup>42</sup>

But the shift in content matter can be seen in political framework as well. His pre-Fascist didactic plays (1929-1932) concentrate on the potential of the collectivity to rise against circumstances, on the individual to consciously choose (The Measures Taken, The Mother) to situate themselves in relation to history. These plays were performed in concert halls with minimal scenery, for a mass audience. Brecht viewed these productions as educating the actor as much as the audience. Audience participation was encouraged through screen projections of choruses which could be followed and sung.<sup>43</sup>

~~Brecht~~<sup>He</sup> was refused the right to perform at Baden-Baden in 1930 and ~~Brecht~~<sup>with</sup> and ~~Eisler~~<sup>later</sup> turned to the Socialist-Communist workers' societies for voices. When several of the societies agreed to play Die Massnahme the movement split and Brecht's work was performed for the converted by the converted. He returned to professional actors for productions such as The Mother for this reason.<sup>44</sup>

His plays in exile were generally produced by amateur theatre groups. However, the focus of his writing shifted from those which dealt with the need for revolutionary activity, to more analytical work. Mother Courage represents the position of capital's cyclical war-hungry force, ready to sacrifice anything to guarantee economic well-being. The Caucasian Chalk Circle demonstrates through a human metaphor, the notion that resources should go to those who most need them and will care for them properly.

Accompanying the shift to more abstract theoretical analysis and coincidental with the victory of fascism comes the removal of the working class as protagonist and a more obvious refusal to dictate possible resolutions. Thus, Brecht's later work has been described in these words:

The poor are mean and the rich are ruthless and cruel. Repeatedly Brecht demonstrates the theory that the suffering poor if given a chance to get on top would be as greedy and heartless as the vulgar, rapacious businessmen he so delighted in putting before the audience. War is the natural state in a world peopled by men. And there is no justice...

That is the negative side of the world. Again and again in his later years Brecht asserted that this was only half the picture. On the positive side, he claimed, it was counterbalanced by the hope, the virtual certainty of Communism. But invariably in Brecht's plays have an elliptical construction: the negative side is presented at length and the world is shown to be a dreadful place. Sometimes at the very end there is a suggestion that all this must be, and could be changed. Sometimes it is left entirely to the audience to draw this conclusion for itself. But the positive side is merely postulated it is never shown.

In fact if anything, he introduces a humanist quality into his later plays, strengthening the dialectic between emotional identification and alienation. For bourgeois critics this was often interpreted as jettisoning Marxist analysis. In fact Brecht was enriching his method always conscious that class identity is brought to the stage. Mennemeir writing of Mother Courage misreads Brecht:

In exile Brecht created figures of flesh and blood, figures which were no longer the emblems of sociological forces but living beings existing in terms of yes and no.

This in fact strengthened the alienation effect, for an attitude of distance can create disinterest in the outcome, while the conflict between alienation and identification can reinforce criticism.



Brecht's historical flexibility is well demonstrated by his two mothers: The Mother (1929-30) and Mother Courage (1937-1939). The Mother was written at a time when women were radicalizing and moving towards the Communist Party of Germany, in part because of their economic vulnerability (unemployment) and resulting disillusion with social democracy. The 1905-1917 period of Russian history provided an apparent parallel to Germany (1929-1932).

<sup>This play</sup>  
 (The Mother) represents an element of the proletarian mass, one "mole" emerging amongst many. The theme of the play is the development of an instrumental consciousness, of an individual, but one who really represents the collective consciousness of the party.

<sup>The Mother:</sup>  
 The play works through a series of negations to represent the Mother's politicization. She first leaflets a factory to protect her son. She is already conscious of class exploitation but believes herself to be helpless. Once convinced to act, she then believes that a peaceful protest would be effective, but at the demonstration strikers are shot by the police. One of the men who is shot is an older worker who became a revolutionary because he was arrested for reading a strike leaflet which he originally opposed, handed out by the mother. Good intentions can be negated but not because of individual malice; through saving her son and his friends another life is lost. But this individual loss results in collective gain.

Her son is arrested but she is not stymied in her activity: her consciousness is now at a higher level, she is a convinced revolutionary. Through negation, the Mother educates the teacher: counterposing her meanings in language against her teachers. Hers

are born of ~~real~~ experience, his of abstraction. While Pavel laments a lack of codling, Pelagea without criticizing him directly, corrects him by explaining to the audience that she has maintained a close family through shared political activity.

In one of the funniest speeches in the play the Mother explains to a group of women that the concept of "God" has changed from a man in heaven to a gas, to an abstract idea as each scientific discovery negates God's previous image. The power of dialectical logic defeats mystification.

When Pavel is killed she becomes inactive but rises on the eve of the October Revolution to agitate and lead the demonstration, explaining to us that she has moved from ~~whining~~, to participating in economic struggles to struggling for state power.

The Mother's motivations are classically maternal- she becomes active for the sake of her son and embraces the proletariat as her own (once) class conscious.<sup>her</sup> She explains the logic of her activity in terms of others not herself: she is a worker's widow and a worker's mother, how else can she act?

Mother Courage, written in the face of possible world war is the antithesis of The Mother. Mother Courage uses an historically wider epic analogy than The Mother, the Thirty Years War.

The play depicts petit-bourgeois interests and actions in quite hostile terms, reiterating Brecht's rejection of class collaboration and reinforcing the role of the petit-bourgeoisie in the rise of fascism. The play is also a history lesson: the petit-bourgeois of four hundred years ago is the imperialist of to-day.



Mother Courage will sacrifice her children to insure that she has money and is well-provisioned. The mindless activity of profit continues beyond all mediation by humanist pretense. Mother Courage wants the war to continue when it will benefit her interests and to end when it threatens her. (There are at least four references in the play to the hope that the war will continue).

Mother Courage's offspring represent various strategies of the petit-bourgeoisie trapped by the war. Eilif, the clever son "heroically" starves his men so that they will rob and murder peasants (with whom they might otherwise identify). His heroism becomes criminal activity as soon as "peace" restores liberal normalcy to property relations: he is punished. Her honest son (taught honesty only because he is too stupid to learn manipulation) protectively holds onto the money with which she is entrusted and is accused of theft and killed. Katrin, the pacifist daughter (who is also dumb) martyrs herself in a gesture ineffective against the totality of war. As each child dies, Mother Courage is either unwilling (in Swiss Cheese's case to spend the money necessary to save him) or else too engaged with her commercial ventures to intervene.

As with The Mother there is constant contradiction. In Katrin's attempt to warn the town the soldiers cannot shoot her down without themselves announcing their presence. Mother Courage recognizes that freeing Swiss Cheese will leave them all destitute. The ironic statement "Nothing is sacred to her" is applied not to Mother Courage but to Katrin, saving the lives of the townspeople.

Throughout the play we are provided with an analysis of war and its effects (economic, social, psychological) on people. Characters like the clergyman, step out of their roles to comment on the play,

Mother Courage speaks of the courage of the poor, living under oppressive rulers (fascism). She explains that good generals don't require heroes, the difference between the ideology of the leaders used to impress the troops and their thirst for profits, the role of imperialist powers and the Church in maintaining the war and the role which individual workers and peasants play in continuing to fight.

Brecht uses the metaphor of motherhood in both plays but with vastly different contexts. Mother Courage, symbolizing not the Communist Party but petit-bourgeois fascism (perhaps Germany "herself"), is an evil mother, a "hyena" who eats her own offspring. The role of motherhood was the focus of changing Soviet attitudes to women at this time and Nazi propaganda was strongly oriented to women as mothers as well. In each play women are shown as very class conscious, one as a proletarian, the other as a petit-bourgeois.

The major difference between the two plays is that The Mother provides a positive identification and strategy for action, while Mother Courage also provides strong characterization, but no positive identification or concrete strategy. It provides an analysis of war and a cry of opposition.

The audience of Mother Courage is ambiguous. In some ways, Brecht seems to be, despite himself, addressing collaborators in the process of war- perhaps the return to the formal stage signifies an appeal to an audience which is itself petit-bourgeois. In any case it is clearly an adaptation to a different historical conjuncture than that of The Mother.

It is in the sphere of art and art alone that Brecht makes his



spirited rebuttal to the second historical form of repression of the 1930s: Stalinism.

This returns us to the questions raised in Adorno's discussion of committed art. What happens when the artist becomes an apologist for political errors committed by the Party? Brecht's earlier didactic writing came close enough to representing KPD positions but those positions were not always correct- the analogy between Russia 1905-17 and Brecht's Germany is questionable. But more importantly, what becomes of the committed artist who can no longer agree with Party policy? While Brecht linked the political struggle against fascism to his art, as a Communist (Party member or no) he apparently felt compelled to restrain his political criticism of Soviet policy while attacking an artistic policy which was its logical outcome.

Brecht's essentially accepted (and in his later writings reified) a division of labour between political and aesthetic production. While on one hand it is correct to allow for the particular historical development of an art form and to allocate certain tasks to artistic production, in Brecht's case, there seemed to be no other choice but to accept the analysis made in the Short Organum of 1947, a retreat back into the sphere of entertainment, and away from pedagogy. This is a logical response to the defeat of political theatre as a strategy, and the openings of a new defensive era, but more so, to the increasing pressure to criticize Stalinism which the continued unity of theatre and politics was bringing.

In a sense, Brecht begs for the traditional artist's privilege to stand outside politics and criticize by situating his political

discourse so thoroughly inside his art. Thus in 1935 Brecht launches his *Verfremdung*, alienation-effect, a direct response to Socialist Realism, which he attacked as "prettification". In his plays of the 1930s despite Soviet policy, he ruthlessly criticizes fascism and the national bourgeoisie, eschewing rapprochement.

Later, in East Germany, Brecht first defends the GDR and its tactics against the workers revolt of 1953 and then turns to defend German artists against the repression of cultural life by the Party:

*quote*  
 No new state can be built up without confidence in the future... but facile optimism is dangerous... Prettification and complacency are not only the worst enemies of the beautiful but also of political reason... Art must strive to be widely understood. But society for its part must raise the level of appreciation of the arts by an educational effort. The requirements for the population must be met-but in opposition to the demand for Kitsch. From the point of view of the administration and to suit the requirements of the officials available to it, it may be simpler to work out certain schematic patterns for work of art. Then the artist 'only' will have to put their (or the administration's) thoughts into the required form and everything will be "in order". But the cry for living art will then be a cry for living things to fill coffins. Art has its own order,

The problem is certainly complex for Brecht is right to protest cultural repression and forced conformity, But again the sphere of culture is both autonomous and related to historical development; the suppression of artistic freedom; the fear of creativity, of the expression of irrationality and contradiction has always marched hand in hand with a lack of political democracy. When faced in East Germany, with the task of eulogizing the state, Brecht failed utterly, because his methodology, based on a recognition of contradiction, could not but recognize the contradictions of the GDR. The relegation of criticism to the cultural sphere



when dealing with socialism, collapsed when the content was political.

At the same time it would be wrong to argue that Brecht should have abandoned the debate of artistic forms and content for a debate on political theory: his attempt to locate the realm of aesthetics and within the process of consciousness formation and to identify the consistency of certain forms of ideological production is invaluable in the face of current challenges to political artists.

We must be certain to engage at both levels, rather than repeating errors which arose, in part, from the tremendous terror unleashed on artists during the 1930s.

Grade A

Sad, this is an excellent piece of work. <sup>However</sup> Watch your interpretation of Eagleton's scholarship. If you do use his work, substantiate fully why you are quoting for otherwise the quotes may lead to less of an understanding and more confusion that your own work can possibly contain.

Also be-aware of a predilection you have for stringing at times unrelated ideas and statements together with few connections or linkages between them. It becomes a little breathless at times, both for your reader and, I am sure, for you when writing. Perhaps a little more time would

have helped to make the work  
more cohesive as an argument - time  
for a little reflection and self-criticism.

If you decide to continue your studies of  
Brecht, perhaps you might like to read Walter  
Benjamin a very informed critic of Brechtian  
Theory & practice. If interested see me for a  
few articles and sources sometime before the  
Fall. Benjamin is the touch stone for  
much of Eagleton's work as I am sure  
you are aware though his warnings of overreacting  
after leads much to be desired.



FOOTNOTES

1. Henri Avron. "Marxist Esthetics. Helen Lane translator. Fredric Jameson, Introduction. London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973, pgs. 88-9.
2. John Willett. The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht, A Study From Eight Aspects. New York: New Directions Books, 1959. p. 72.
3. Willett, p. 208.
4. Willett, p. 200.
5. Terry Eagleton. Criticism and Ideology. London: Verso Books, 1978. p. 65.
6. Eagleton. p. 167.
7. Paul Ryder Ryan. "The Performance Groups Mother Courage," The Drama Review, Political Theatre Issue. Vol 19, #2 (T66), June 1975.
8. Eagleton, p. 178.
9. Wolfgang Abendroth. A Short History of the European Working Class. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972. p. 90
10. Abendroth, p. 91.
11. Abendroth, p. 93.
12. Abendroth, p. 147
13. Abendroth, p. 63
14. Abendroth, p. 63
15. Avron, p. 86.
16. Martin Esslin. Brecht, the Man and His Work. New York: Anchor Books, 1960. p. 215.
17. Willett, p. 187
18. Terry Eagleton, "German Aesthetic Duals. Review article: Aesthetics and Politics" New Left Review, #107, Jan-Feb. 1978. p. 33
19. Eagleton, NLR, p. 26
20. Walter Benjamin, Illuminations. Hannah Arendt editor, intro. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 151.
21. Eagleton. NLR, p.26
22. Hubert Witt, editor. Brecht as They Knew Him. New York: International Publishers. 1974, p. 99.
23. Avron, p. 105.

24. Eagleton, NLR, p.28
25. Eagleton, NLR, p. 28
26. Willett, p. 85.
- 27, Eagleton, NLR, p. 32
28. Esslin, p. 273.
29. Maynard Solomen. Slection and critical comments: Marxism and Art. New York: Vintage Books, 1974, p. 359.
30. ~~Eagleton~~, NLR. p.25.
31. Eagleton, NLR, p. 27
32. Avron, p. 101
33. Avron, p. 102
34. Theodore Adorno, "Committment", from Artistic Theory and Cultural Criticism, 1962, p. 312-313.
35. Adorno, p. 315.
36. Eagleton, NLR, p. 31.
37. Eagleton, NLR, p. 31.
38. Eagleton, NLR p. 31.
39. ADorno, p. 308.
40. Esslin, p. 216.
41. Esslin, p. 216 .
42. Willett, p. 187.
43. W<sup>l</sup>illett, p. 135.
44. Willett, p. 137.
45. Esslin, p. 273.
46. Franz Norbert Menneneier, "Mother Courage and Her Children" in Peter Demetz, editor, Brecht: A Collection of Critical Essays. New Jersey: Prentice-hall, 1962, p. 139.
47. Esslin, p. 197.



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