The "Brecht Effect": Politics and American Postwar Art

Glahn, Philip, Afterimage

In the mid-to late-1960s, the New Left grew increasingly critical of the passive consumerism and individualist complacency that defined the liberalist climate of postwar America. Activists and intellectuals aimed to bring about a culture of participation and direct action. As the artists of the New Left sought to politicize art and make politics a public and cultural matter, Bertolt Brecht's theory of art as social practice and an articulation of political awareness regained currency. Brecht's dialectics of modernist aesthetics and revolutionary politics served as a model for a number of artists and provided an alternative to the introverted formalist exercises of the advanced American arts. This essay is part of a larger project aiming to examine the "Brecht effect" on the visual arts. (1) It is not an attempt to trace the presence of Brecht as a person in the United States, though his presence left its own distinct marks on the cultural and political scene. Rather, it is concerned with what Lee Baxandall has called the "Americanization of Bertolt Brecht": how his work has been received, "how it has come across," how it has been variously appropriated and applied by the artists of the Old Left and the New Left and by those who abandoned the left, disenchanted with its seemingly failed utopian promises. (2) It is concerned with what is considered "Brechtian" at specific moments in the history of American art and with the rearticulation of that history from a perspective of political engagement.
The American postwar or neo-avant-garde was familiar with Brecht’s work. The anti-illusionism of his “epic theater” and his strategy of “estrangement,” of jolting the complacent spectator into a self-conscious state of perception, are referred to in the writings of artists from Andy Warhol to Dan Graham, Hans Haacke to Martha Rosler. Brecht also found his way into the central discourses and texts of the postwar years. His poetry and theater are discussed by Roland Barthes, Michael Fried, Clement Greenberg, and Herbert Marcuse, among others. Yet this reception is varied and highly selective, depending in each case on the specific historical climate. Brecht’s first real encounter with the American left ended in the playwright being thrown out of rehearsals and a lot of bad press. The Theater Union’s 1935 production of The Mother in New York City—for which Brecht was shipped in from his exile in Denmark (Brecht spent time in Denmark while exiled from Germany before he came to the U.S.)—had been streamlined by its translators in anticipation of the intellectual limitations of its proletarian audience. This Lehrstück, or “play for learning,” with its purposely fragmented and shockingly contradictory format, was simplified into a more palatable play that the press dismissed as “didactic” and “pretentious,” “amateurish” and “affected,” “an entertainment for children, for it is a simple kindergarten for Communist tots.” (3)

In the climate of Popular Front alliances and the economic successes of the New Deal, the “Brecht effect” was a divorce of tendency and technique. Rather than retaining the dialectic interplay of the commitment to social change and the cognitive-aesthetic politics of form, the reception of Brecht’s work was often marked by either the rejection of its revolutionary content as “communist infantilism” or the dismissal of its anti-illusionist dramaturgy and prose as elitist and over-intellectualized. Aware of this split reception, Brecht tailored his next two plays to be explicitly anti-fascist in message and (as he later admitted to a friend) with an American middle-class audience in mind. Fear and Misery of the Third Reich (first performed in 1938 but written in 1935–36 while Brecht was in Denmark), translated, published in part by New Directions, and performed in the 1940s under the title of The Private Life of the Master Race, received favorable reviews, recasting Brecht as a pacifist playwright rather than one of class struggle. Only a small
faction of the Old Left maintained a concern for socialist content and form in its appropriation of Brechtian aesthetics. Among these, Eva Goldbeck elaborated on the revolutionary importance of the Lehrstück in a 1935 article published in the Daily Worker, while her husband Marc Blitzstein had found in Brecht the "solvent of his career," producing The Cradle Will Rock (1936), fusing Blitzstein's interest in popular music and speech with radical social consciousness. (4) Mordecai Gorelik discussed the "epic theatre" at length in his influential 1940 book New Theatres for Old, which in turn had an impact on the young Andy Warhol. (5)

In 1939 Greenberg published an article on Brecht in the Partisan Review. (6) This text as well as Greenberg's 1941 essay, "Bertolt Brecht's Poetry," are early and important instances of Greenberg's influential depoliticization of the historical avant-gardes. (7) In light of the harsh realities of existing communist and socialist totalitarianism, Greenberg's Marxism turns defensive, and he tries avidly to save Brecht the poet from his political self. Greenberg had admired and kept extensive notes on Brecht since the early 1930s, professing to find in him "authenticity" and "originality" despite his overt didacticism. (8) Greenberg casts Brecht as a humanist rather than a Socialist as his poetic form, not his prose, provides respite from the ideological corruption of political intent. The "collage-compositions" of various popular elements provide a contradiction and reflective distance that foregoes any extra-aesthetic purpose. (9) For Greenberg, Brecht's contribution to modern art lies in his rejection of illusionism through the sensual and physical affirmation of the medium's materiality. But rather than finding in Brecht, as T.J. Clark does, a "difficult, powerful counterexample to all the critic wished to see as the main line of avant-garde activity," I would argue that Brecht has a decisive and positively formative effect on Greenberg: Brechtian strategies of estrangement and distanciation, of rejecting any kind of cathartic illusionism in art, made the progressive, committed production of art seem possible. (10)

After World War II, a thriving affirmation of American capitalism in the form of material affluence and military might coupled with cold war anti-communism did not leave much room for revolutionary Brechtian methods in the American arts. Through the 1950s, any interest in Brecht's work was relegated to a few small bohemiæs of avant-garde culture and political dissent, such as the Living Theatre and the Evergreen Review. Performances of Brecht's plays appeared far-off Broadway on college stages and downtown lofts, while New Directions and Grove Press
published a small number of Brecht's works in translation. The relative absence of Brecht at this time in many cases constitutes the "Brecht effect," and it proves to be as insightful as his presence. Whether out of fear of the McCarthyian witch hunt or from a lingering distrust in ideological commitment, it is remarkable that his work would be ignored or rejected by artists who knew of him and to whose work an understanding of Brechtian strategies would appear to be of central importance. Like many other artists at the time, John Cage and Merce Cunningham frequently visited the Living Theatre, attending performances of Brecht adaptations. Yet nowhere in Cage's writings or interviews does one find a reference to Brecht. The Tulane Drama Review had already published a special issue on Brecht a few years before its 1965 issue dedicated to Happenings and Fluxus and would publish two more in the following years. (11) Even so, Brecht was not mentioned once in its discussions of Action Theater in the 1965 special issue that examined the difference between Happenings and traditional theater, issues of spectatorship, stage and environment, improvisation and everyday experience. When recently asked why Allan Kaprow never showed any obvious interest in Brechtian theater, the editor of his writings, Jeff Kelley, told me that "Kaprow's work, while often resonating with the social implications of the day, was a-political, unlike Brecht." (12) Brecht equaled politics to many artists who tried to avoid ideological complications, especially given the appropriation of abstract expressionism as an exported lesson in American freedom and individualism sponsored by the United States Information Agency. The U.S. neo-avant-garde struggled to revise the overbearing legacy of Greenbergian formalism from within its framework, expanding the narrow definition of aesthetic experience beyond self-sufficient medium-specificity. Still apprehensive of considering art’s ideological dimensions, artists such as Cage and Kaprow included the "everyday" less as a political or social concept than as a physical and phenomenological one. These artists could be considered part of what Todd Gitlin has called the "old New Left"--disenchanted with the shallow promises of freedom and equality to be delivered by the dream of affluence and with the cathartic idyll of pleasurable entertainment and introverted art. Aiming for an art of inclusion without a new political utopia and maintaining a "folk culture in the absence of an actual folk," these artists opened the confines of artistic production and reception for the radical repoliticization to come. (13)

In order to overcome the consensus-politics of postwar American liberalism that viewed ideology as "defunct and exhausted" and social problems as "discrete, isolated, and manageable," the New Left would have to revise leftist politics. (14) By the early 1960s, publications such as Studies on the Left had located the failures of the Old Left in its anti-
ideological stance, theoretical impoverishment, and intellectual passivity. Given this lack of active involvement and the conviction that liberalism is not a neutral system of political participation. Any form of social change required a consciousness on behalf of those who were excluded from the active articulation of experience and identity. Therefore, the definition of "proletarian" (separated from the means of production) needed to be expanded to designate not merely the labor characteristics of the industrial proletariat but also the degree of access to the tools that produce social and individual experience. The public sphere—as the arena of experience provided by the media and education, culture, and the arts—was seen as what enables experience or, on the other hand, what limits and cripples it.

In the mid-1960s' climate of a generally renewed interest in social and political issues spurred by the war in Vietnam and the student and civil rights movements, Brecht enjoyed great popularity. The publication of his works and theoretical writings in translation as well as off- and on-Broadway productions of his plays boomed. He was discussed in influential publications such as Aspen, Partisan Review, the British film magazine Screen, Studies on the Left, and Studio International. In 1969 the Art Workers Coalition demanded that artists reconsider the art of the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s, that they make "socially good works" and "change affect into effecting changes." (15) To many visual artists, Brecht's work served as an example for a revolutionary modernism, as the possibility to move beyond the deadlocked opposition of political commitment and artistic autonomy. Brechtian aesthetics allowed artists to address issues such as war and sexism, exploitation and corruption. In addition, Brecht's notion of the "gestus," of the work of art as socialist praxis, turned form into political action.

Many artists, of whom Yvonne Rainer and Rosler are prime examples, employed what Lucy Lippard has called "collage as dialectic, collage as revolution." (16) The juxtaposition of various and often seemingly disparate elements enabled the artist, in the manner of Brecht, to "lay bare the device," to expose the underlying mechanisms, not represent the surfaces, of reality. Referring explicitly to Brecht's notion of estrangement, Rosler has repeatedly chosen photomontage as a technique that rejects the authoritative claim for objective truth by art, the news media, and the advertising industry. The artist aims for "the Verfremdungseffekt, the distanciation occasioned by a refusal of realism, by foiled expectations, by palpably flouted conventions." (17) In "Bringing the War Home" (1967-72), a series of montages combining
media images of the war in Vietnam with representations of serene and comfortable domestic interiors from advertisements and home improvement magazines, Rosler juxtaposes pictures of American soldiers, crying children, and dead bodies with upper-middle class American standards of living. Her montages lend themselves perfectly to what Brecht called "crude thinking": they use an easily accessible everyday language to articulate complex relations of property and violence, freedom and oppression. Although not collages in the strict sense, "Bringing the War Home" emphasizes the fact of its own constructedness through the incompatibility of its imagery, extending the experience of art into a dialogue about the communicative mechanisms of the production of values and views. The confrontation between the visual and narrative elements remains an unresolved encounter between two familiar but incompatible factors determining experience in 1960s' America.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The films of Rainer created a similar demand for the viewer's participation in questioning social norms and conventions as well as the channels that produce them. As a dancer, Rainer relied on the assertive physicality of her body in light of the ideological institutionalization of art. As a member of the Judson Dance Theater and as an individual choreographer, Rainer introduced everyday movements and gestures, spontaneity and improvisation, in an attempt to dismantle the theatrical illusionism of traditional dance. In pieces such as We Shall Run (1963) and Parts of Some Sextets (1965), the performer's body was transformed from an ahistorical site of projected perfection and emotional expression to a minimalist, material presence. The banality of the movements and the mundane physicality of the corporeal denied the viewer the passive pleasure of the emotional catharsis of drama. Rainer was familiar with Brecht in the 1960s and the denial of empathetic experience on the part of the spectator certainly resonates with the strategies of epic theater. Yet, a decidedly conscious turn toward Brecht takes place in the early 1970s as Rainer politicized the minimalist, objective body as being subject to ideological inscriptions. Moving from the physical to the social dimension of the body as determined by notions of gender, race, and class, Rainer produced a number of Brechtian films, some filtered though New Wave cinema—especially that of Jean-Luc Godard—as well as Screen, whose editors hailed Brecht as "an exemplar of revolutionary cinema." (18)
As early as 1972, Rainer directed feature-length films that employ Brechtian devices of estrangement and defamiliarization, "disjunctive strategies of exposition, juxtaposition, and collage," to articulate the socio-political complexities of bodily experience. The 1974 Film About a Woman Who ... examines the everyday frustrations of women within the confines of heterosexual relationships. Empathy and distance provide the content and format of the film, the latter relying on techniques such as superimposed text and intertitles, characters directly addressing the camera, a confusing and contradictory narrative, off-camera action merely audible to the spectator, repetition of frames and actions, actors watching themselves act, and unsynchronized sound, music, and speech throughout the film. It is not just the rationalization of the cinematic experience that resonates with the Brechtian call for audience awareness and participation but the dialectic between empathy and estrangement that characterizes the connection between the viewer and the film’s characters. It is as if the viewer at all times has to decide whether or not to emotionally connect to the characters as they navigate the complexities of sexual expectations and gender stereotypes, domestic relations, and objectified love. At the same time, the spectator is encouraged to analyze the mechanisms of prescribed, gendered behavior and her or his role within them. It is a common misconception that Brecht intended to deny the audience all forms of pleasure, that he aimed for an aesthetic of the clinical, the cerebral. Brecht was fully aware of the power of joy and feeling. And he believed that feeling was just as historically conditioned as ideas. In Brecht’s work as well as Rainer’s, the viewer is invited to gain pleasure from a source other than that of emotional consumption: from thinking.

Despite a post-1968, renewed disillusionment among the left, given the failure to achieve revolutionary change, despite the fragmentation of its polities and its emigration to English departments and the pages of October magazine, and despite the resulting relativism of postmodern anti-aesthetics, which made politically engaged art a lad, Brecht’s method of turning his audience into amateur experts in the topics at hand remained a model to many artists, and his work provided an alternative to Althusserian dystopias and Baudrillardian simulacras. Many art activists and public artists have looked to Brecht for a way to articulate ideas and mechanisms that remain at the core of western society. With the fall of the Soviet Union and its Eastern Block allies in what has been declared the victory of democracy and free enterprise over the oppressive practices of socialism and communism, the question remains what Brecht’s work has to offer today. Rather than merely a nostalgic glance back toward the
carefree association of the artist with Utopian causes, perhaps what can be gained from Brecht's drama and politics is what Fredric Jameson found to be a method at the core of Brecht's thought. Taking Brecht's advice not to start "from the good old things, but from the bad new ones," this method has as its form and content the dialectics of a world still governed by opposites, no matter how complex its structure. The usefulness of these dialectics, the ability to situate the self historically in a "process of reflection and self-reflection, of reference and self-reference," and to create from that historical positioning a basis for analysis and judgment, might just be a productive continuation of an enlightening project given the recent re-emphasis of leading political, economic, and cultural figures to rely mostly on their instincts, their faith, and a fundamental belief" in good and evil at the core of all matters. (20)

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