

# The Mirror and the Dynamo: On Brecht's Aesthetic Point of View (1967, 7,300 words)

## NOTE 2021:

*How does this essay fare more than half a century after its publication? I still share its attitude and horizon. However, after so much has changed in the world and how we understand it, I would today wish for more precision anent some strategic terms; an approximation to them is found in my later work listed in "My Brecht". For example, I have subsumed the merely visual denotation of terms like "(world) view, viewing, look" under Brecht's much more useful term *Haltung* (stance, approach, attitude) that includes the whole body. Also, I would today talk much less about ethics and much more about politics in Aristotle's sense of regulation of people's relationships in the community. Ethics without politics is eyewash.*

*And then, esthetics: as of the 1970s I've been growing dubious about this term. On the one hand, it remains a useful defence of the arts' creative autonomy from philistines and power holders, and classical "aesthetic" categories like play, pleasure or sensibility ought to be critically inherited. On the other hand, however, this term opens the door wide to the crypto-religious theory of "two realities", the rough material one and the esthetically spiritual one – as if the arts were not also material activities subject to death or penury. For my elder me this essay is in places too formalistic, that is, it may lack dialectics.*

*Most immediately important is perhaps that I today essentially disagree with the essay's evaluation of Brecht's second phase, and don't believe that his opus can be neatly fitted into Hegel's triad of "thesis – antithesis – synthesis". The brief paragraph devoted to his "plays for learning" is onesided. That is, what I pose and criticise there does exist but it is not always this series' dominant: Brecht's undoubted commitment was never, not even when expecting an imminent civil war in Germany, primarily ideological in the strict sense. This phase has been much and usefully investigated, but compared to its cognitive importance it is not yet fully understood; this is indicated by its use in many rebellious movements and guerrilla theatres. History, when carefully taken into account, is wiser than any scheme. A special essay should be devoted to it, and I've been dreaming about it for decades but deterred by the huge material at hand. Perhaps I approached it in a few essays since, e.g. those in the Note. In the meantime this part of the essay should be seen – to reuse a title by Shklovsky -- as "the monument to an error".*

## Brief bibliography to Note

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The time has come to give art, by a pitiless method, the precision of the natural sciences. But the principal difficulty for me is still the style, the indefinable Beauty resulting from the conception itself.

Flaubert, *Correspondence*

In the preface to his most famous theoretical essay, the *Short Organon for the Theatre*, Brecht in part retracted his early vituperations against aesthetics, which in the 1920s had led him to ask (as the title of an article of his goes), 'Shouldn't we liquidate aesthetics?' With the growing maturity and complexity of his poetry and plays, the feedback from practice to theory which was a permanent feature of Brecht's work led him to recognize that those vituperations -- which he never wholly abandoned -- were directed at 'the heirloom of a depraved and parasitic class' (GW XVI: 662), and not at a philosophical and sociological discipline dealing with the pleasing and the beautiful (mainly in art), as such or as a whole. For by the end of the 1930s, Brecht had in his lyrics and dramas, as well as in his theoretical writing, recognised that his own work was also pleasurable -- if pleasure were no longer opposed to learning. This assumed a redefinition of aesthetics which refused to recognise the divorce between entertainment and learning, between the aesthetically pleasing and the intellectually cognitive functions of artistic signs (GW XV: 285ff), but on the contrary insisted that aesthetic standards were linked to the cognitive adequacy of a work of art. Such a new aesthetics involved a radical departure from any attitude of indifference to practical experience. It redrew questions concerning the relationship of a pleasure-provoking object to 'external reality'. The new aesthetics redefined imagination as creative, the aesthetic attitude as a significant activity, and the aesthetic response as a constructive and interpretive event. Cognitive meaning was thus recognised as a no less important element of 'style' than, say, sensuous surface.

Within such a context Brecht felt that his 'theatre of a scientific age' could take up its abode in aesthetics. Even natural sciences, he explains somewhat curtly in the *Organon* preface, create an aesthetics of their own, and he quotes approvingly Robert Oppenheimer's dictum about a scientific stance 'having its own beauty and being well suited to man's position on Earth'. Brecht concludes this preface (in the dignified first-person plural which he affected as a semi-humorous form of acknowledging his mistakes): 'Let us therefore, probably amidst general sorrow, revoke our intention to emigrate from the kingdom of the Pleasing, and let us, probably amidst even more general sorrow, manifest our intention to take up our abode in this kingdom. Let us treat the theatre as a place of entertainment, as proper in aesthetics, and let us examine which kind of entertainment suits us!' (GW XVI: 662-3).

In this essay I wish to demonstrate, first, that this attitude of Brecht's should be taken seriously, and that the distinctive values of his work and its enduring qualities are to be found in the ambitious formation of a specific Brechtian beauty, pleasure or aesthetics. His work can therefore be analysed using -- and where necessary modifying -- some classical aesthetic categories. Second, I wish to show that the most significant of these categories is a look backward from an imagined golden future of justice and friendliness to his (and our) cold world and dark times. Brecht's central aesthetic device, the technique of estrangement [*Verfremdungseffekt*], and the whole estranging arsenal of Brechtian poetics flow logically out of such an angle of vision.

1. The basis of Brecht's world view is a Marxian horror at our present state and a firm orientation towards changing it: "[Einstein said] that he has, ever since his childhood, thought only about the man hurrying after a ray of light and the man in a falling elevator. And just look how complicated this grew! I wanted to apply to the theatre the saying that one should not only interpret but change the world' (GW XVI: 815). The references to Einstein and to Marx's Eleventh thesis on Feuerbach locate the starting point as well as the all-informing stance of the new aesthetics. Beyond this, an awareness is implied of what needs to be changed (an alienated world) and of how theatre could represent the changing of the world (by understanding the work of art as a 'symbolic action' or as a de-alienating pleasure-in-cognition). They represent two closely connected aspects of Brecht's vision: a theory of human reality, and a theory of art as an autonomous understanding of that reality. Both of these may have been aspects of an artistic vision rather than systematically formulated doctrines, and the term 'theory' should doubtless here be taken primarily in its etymological sense of *theoria*, an understanding look or viewing (see now my essay "Long"); none the less, they were constantly informing Brecht's aesthetic practice. It is a measure of his relevance that these are the foundations upon which any radical renewal in aesthetics has to be based.

Brecht's mature aesthetic *theoria* presents us again with the problem of the relationship between Art and Nature, known in aesthetics as the Aristotelian question of mimesis. From the very beginning of Poetics, where Aristotle defines most poetry and singing as mimesis, this central concept is susceptible to three principal translations: *copying*, *representing* (performing), and *expressing*. Though Aristotle's use, in spite (or because) of his professional pleasure in neat definitions, oscillates between these meanings, the above example indicates what has also been found by Koller's examination of the use of the term in Aristotle's time (say in Plato or Lysias) -- that the central meaning of mimesis includes an active relation of the *mimoumenoi*, the 'representers' or 'performers', to the model. It is sufficiently clear that singing about an event, or dancing it, cannot be taken as a straight copy of that event, but only as an expression according to autonomous musical or choreographic modes. The central position of the term *representation* for mimesis can perhaps be clinched by Aristophanes' use in the *Thesmophoriazusai*, where Mnesilochus wants to meet Euripides as the protagonist of his latest play, *Helen*, and sets about performing a little play-within-the-play, dressed as Helen: 'I'll represent [Euripides'] brand-new Helen.'

The changing fortunes in the use and abuse of mimesis, from Sophocles and Plato to, say, Stanislavski and Zhdanov, offer material for fascinating studies in the history of aesthetics, philosophy and politics, which would -- together with the equally fascinating history of catharsis -- explain why Brecht persisted in calling his dramaturgy 'non-Aristotelian'. From all that emerged in this long debate we are here concerned simply with the fact that even in Aristotle's time mimesis fundamentally meant representing (in theatre: performing, showing). This means that both the model to be represented and the ways of representing it (technologically, in a given medium, and culturally, in given possible conventions of representation) were- and were admitted to be-co-determining elements of the mimesis. Throughout the centuries, creators and theoreticians of art not wholly blinded by ideologies have seen that art was no magic window opening on reality but itself a specific reality neither a photographic nor a symbolist copy of Nature but a representation of processes in reality, which is parallel to scientific or philosophical ways of representation, and interacting with a changing world. In this light, Brecht's formulation of a modern Marxian or Einsteinian epistemology 'merely' took up and refashioned the mimetic tradition dominant from tribal performances through Indian, Chinese and Japanese plays to the Renaissance, which bourgeois aesthetic practice and theory had interrupted. This also underlies Brecht's affinity for the

(largely plebeian) Asian, medieval and Elizabethan dramaturgies. However, as already noted, this classical mimetic tradition underwent in its turn a major inversion of its horizon and telos at his hands. In the words of Marx, which became the basic orientation of "The Philosopher in the Theatre" -- as Brecht liked to call himself -- this is: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is -- to change it."

Or, as one might formulate the position of Einstein (whom Brecht also took as an exemplary figure, liked to compare himself with, and was preparing to write a play on): there is no specially favoured coordinate system or reference point; each coordinate system has its own time dimension; yet the general laws of nature are equivalent for all reference systems. In other words, though the old notion of an eternal, essential identity of reference systems must be abandoned, yet through modification -- which can in each case be analysed and grasped -- general principles of Nature (read: history of human relationships) remain valid in a new dialectical way for all reference systems. Marx's disdain for the old ways of interpreting the world as something given, as a text to be reproduced by an indifferent actor of the World Play, and Einstein's insistence that though Nature was not chaotic there was no absolute perspective from which all events were scaled up or down, both represent fresh strategies of grasping reality, closely akin to Brecht's own. (One could also place within that kindred family of visions those of Picasso or Eisenstein, but that would be matter for another essay.)

By the 19th century, bourgeois aesthetics had wholly forgotten the traditional implications of mimesis, reacting with a sterile denial of any relation between art and nature. As discussed in my earlier essays, this rested on the twin axioms of individualism -- conceiving the world from the individual as the ultimate reality -- and illusionism -- taking for granted that an artistic representation in some mystic way directly reproduces or 'gives' Man and World. Against this, Brecht took up a position of productive critique, showing the world as changeable, and of what I shall for want of a better term call dialectics: conceiving the world as a contradictory process and man as emergent. In contrast to the idea of a one and only Nature and Human Nature-to be found in or beneath existing relationships, Brecht's work is based on an emergent human history within which all variants of Nature -- and of Human Nature -- are specific societal achievements and simultaneously alienations. All existing societal relationships (including the ones in the first States claiming communist as their horizon) are historically unique and yet cautiously commensurable; none are final or perfect. All of them are therefore to be met by dialectic critique, keeping in mind the possibility and necessity of change.

In sum, art is not a mirror which reflects the truth existing outside the artist: art is not a static presentation of a given Nature in order to gain the audience's empathy; Brecht sees art as a dynamo, a vision or organon which penetrates Nature's possibilities, which finds out the 'co-variant' laws of its contradictory processes, and makes it possible for critical understanding to intervene into them. This attitude attempts to raise art to an epistemologically higher plane of creative significance than illusionism. The estrangement [*Verfremdung*] of ways of speaking, for example, 'makes it easier to translate the natural into the artistic [ins *Künstliche*]; moreover, [it] translates according to the meaning' (GWXV: 370): to Brecht, art is a Meta-Nature with its own language, yet not in the sense of a negative of nature (in the *l'art pour l'art* fashion) but participating in the meaning of reality. Art is no beautiful platonic lie, but an autonomous, 'artful' (*Künstlich* is a pun uniting 'artistic' and 'artificial') reality; and its productive stance is analogous to that of modern cosmology and anthropology. It is experimental, testing its own presuppositions-in-theatre, by feedback from the effect in practice of its text-performance. Seeing the world as sets of changing possibilities, it is a reflection on, not of nature-including human nature, developing within history and as history.

Borrowing a Brechtian method of exposition, which he took from German philosophy, Table 4.1 may be useful. The 'mirroring' attitude corresponds to the alienated reality which was characteristic of the nineteenth century, but which lives on tenaciously (among other places, on all the Broadways and *boulevards* of the world). The 'dynamic' attitude corresponds to the twentieth-century tendencies toward de-alienation, although some of its champions may also be found in a long tradition: since, say, Epicurus and Lucretius, and including, notably, isolated oppositional figures in the nineteenth century such as Marx, Büchner, and Rimbaud -- all of them, logically enough, Brecht's favourites.

2. The basic strategy of 'dynamic' aesthetics is to observe the possibilities realised at any given time and compare them with a fuller realisation of the same possibilities - looking at the present from a point of comparison located in another epoch. The "dreams" of the poets are merely addressed to a new spectator, who relates to them differently from hereto fore', wrote Brecht in a planned conclusion to the *Messingkauf* dialogues: he followed this with the statement that poets themselves are men of such a new epoch. From this position, "The question of the didactic becomes an absolutely aesthetic question, solved, so as to speak, in an autarchic way' (GW XVI: 3\*). From the vantage point of this projected new world, a scientifically questioning look at human relations sees the present as an historical epoch: all of its events (especially the most 'normal' ones) are remarkable. 'As empathy makes an everyday occurrence out of the special, so estrangement [*Verfremdung*] makes the everyday occurrence special. The most

**Table 1**

<i>Illusionist and individualist aesthetic attitudes</i> (the Mirror)	<i>Critical and dialectical aesthetic attitudes</i> (the Dynamo)
Reality is seen as an ensemble of visible and calculable commodities (including Man).	Reality is seen as interacting processes in an experience of painful humanisation.
Nature including Human Nature is universal, eternal and unchangeable; surface differences are so much local colour.	Nature -- including Human Nature -- is historically conditioned and changeable; different forms of behaviour result from tensions between a humanising possibility and specific societal alienations.
Mimesis copies Nature as the only reality; art (theatre) is a reflected, purified Nature, a <u>Pseudo-Nature</u> .	Mimesis brings forth a specific reality; art (theatre) is a metaphor of and alternative to Nature, a <u>Meta-Nature</u> .
The work of art suggests the existence of previously known objects.	The work of art proves its own existence as a creative vision and object.
Art (theatre) transmits insights into a subjectively reflected objective reality.	Art (theatre) creates insights into the subject-object relations in possible realities.

Ideas and ideology are the basis of aesthetic being: philosophical idealism.

The universe is monistic and deterministic: growing awareness leads to tragedy, lack of awareness to comedy (Ibsen, Strindberg, O'Neill).

Man is seen as a three-dimensional character revealed psychologically through conflict with environment; the unity of such a character is a metaphysical axiom.

Highest ideal: eternity (Nirvana); fulfilment in noble dying.

Patriarchal, authoritarian strength.

To feel a magical aesthetic illusion fully is to penetrate into an eternal human experience.

The 'well-made' play's *closed form* is composed of a chain of situations linked by deterministic causation and moving to a climax on the same plane.

Indispensable arbiter: Policeman, Royal Messenger (*Rosmersholm*, *The Inspector General*).

Ideal synoptic point of the play: a look through the eyes of main characters (the presuppositions of the play are given).

Ideal onlooker: he to whom all unfamiliar things are familiar because he sees their eternal essence through surface appearances -- God.

Material practices are the basis of aesthetic being: philosophical materialism.

The universe is pluralistic and possibilistic: growing awareness leads to comedy, lack of awareness to tragedy (Shaw, O'Casey, Brecht).

Man is seen as a contradictory *ensemble* of several possibilities and qualities, intersecting in his actions; the unity of such an ensemble is a datum of social action.

Highest ideal: liberty (classless society); fulfilment in productive living.

Power-sharing, liberating suppleness

To understand a critical aesthetic showing fully is to gain insight into the possibilities and societal limitations of human experience.

The well-made play's *open form* is composed of fixed points of a process distributed in various planes with a climax calculated to happen beyond it, in the spectator.

Indispensable arbiter: Judge, Wise Fool (*Saint Joan*, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*).

Ideal synoptic point of the play: a look at all characters from outside the play (the presuppositions of the play are tested).

Ideal onlooker: he to whom all familiar things are unfamiliar because she looks for the unrealised potentialities in each stage of human development -- person of blessed classless Future.

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general happenings are stripped of their tiresome character by being represented as unique. No longer does the onlooker escape from the present into history; the present becomes history,' says Brecht (GW XVI: 610). And further: 'He who has looked with astonishment at the eating customs, the jurisprudence, the love-life of savage populations, will also be able to look at our

eating customs, our jurisprudence, and our love-life with astonishment': only the spiritually impoverished philistine sees everywhere an Everyman adaptable to all roles: 'Like Lear, he has reaped ingratitude, he has raged like the Third Richard. He has sacrificed all sorts of things for his wife, like Antony for Cleopatra, and he has treated her more or less like Othello. Like Hamlet he hesitates to wipe out an offence in blood, and his friends are Timon's kind of friends. He is absolutely like everybody, and everybody is like him' (GW XVI: 574-5). If this petty-bourgeois is wrong in his empathising, if his motivations are not eternal nor his standpoint and epoch normative, then it is his actions and his world which are shown to be catastrophic and savage:

I am a playwright. I show  
 What I have seen. At the markets of men  
 I have seen how men are bought and sold. This I, the playwright, show.

How they step into each other's room with plans  
 Or with rubber truncheons or with money  
 How they stand and wait on the streets.  
 How they set snares for each other  
 Full of hope  
 How they make appointments  
 How they string each other up  
 How they love each other  
 How they defend the spoils  
 How they eat  
 That is what I show.

I see avalanches appearing  
 I see earthquakes advancing  
 I see mountains straddling the way  
 And I see rivers overflowing their banks.  
 The earthquakes have money in their vest-pockets  
 The mountains have alighted from cars  
 But the avalanches wear hats  
 And roaring rivers command policemen.  
 That is what I reveal.

*(The Playwright's Song, GW IX: 789-90)*

If such a 'slaughterhouse' period as ours obviously cannot be historically privileged, then all its surfaces are 'period', historical exhibits before the evoked jury of spectators 'differently related to experience' -- that is, posterity (die *Nachgeborenen*, to whom Brecht's possibly most significant poem is addressed). Another poem is entitled 'How Future Times Will Judge our Writers': those times and generations are the supreme arbiters of the Brechtian world. Friendly and inexorable, they sit in judgement on this age, like the plebeian Shades on the great Lucullus, consigning its vivid criminals into nothingness (where Mother Courage's actions also consign her); they judge, accuse and condemn, like Azdak judging the rapacious Natella Abashwili, like Shen Te accusing the cruel world and the bland gods, and like Galileo's scientific 'I' condemning his weak empirical self. The central, informing model of Brecht's dramaturgy is the tribunal.

In still another fragment of the *Messingkauf*, Brecht himself openly indicated that the external standpoint of his approach is in the future: the key for understanding any figure in his dramaturgy lies 'not only outside the sphere of the figure, but also further forward in evolution. The classics have said that the ape is best to be understood starting from man.' (GW XVI: 610- a reference to Engels's essay on human evolution through labour) He repeated this view in the *Organon*: the proper estranging way of playing a role is as if the character 'had lived a whole epoch to the end and were now, from its memory, from her knowledge of future developments, saying those of her words which had proved important at that point of time -- for important is as important becomes' (GW XV: 367). Perhaps the most effective way of putting this is again to be found in a poem, whose date (about 1926) makes it a document of the moment when the look backwards from a happy future crystallised in the young Brecht. The poem is called 'This Babylonian Confusion' and shows how the author wanted 'slyly to tell a story' about a grain dealer in Chicago:

To those who have not yet been born  
But will be born and will  
Live in quite different times  
And, happy they! will no longer understand  
What is a grain dealer of the kind  
That exists among us.

The impulse for this poem is biographical:

For a certain play [it was to be called *Wheat or Joe Fleischhacker from Chicago* and to play at Piscator's; studies for it were later transmuted into *St Joan of the Slaughterhouses*, DS] I needed the Chicago grain market as background. I thought I would acquire the necessary knowledge by a few quick questions to the specialists and people in that field; but the affair was to take a different course. Nobody, neither well-known economists nor businessmen -- I travelled from Berlin to Vienna to meet a broker who had worked his whole life on the Chicago exchange -- could give me a satisfactory explanation of the happenings at the grain market.... The projected play wasn't written; instead of that I started reading Marx.

But from this true story, Brecht in his poem ascends into allegory and an Erewhonian dialogue with yet unborn listeners. The listeners, however, show no understanding, ask unanswerable questions about the world which boasted of grain dealers, and finally put the writer off:

With the calm regret of  
Happy people. (GW VIII: 149-51)

From this vantage point of an imaginary just and friendly future of happy people, where 'man is a helper to man' (*An die Nachgeborenen*), the poet can in his plays and verse practise the classical (Marx's, Bellamy's, Morris's) anticipatory *look backward* into his own bloody, empirical times, taking in the reality of this age of strife between classes and nations, of mankind divided against itself in the societal alienation of the capitalist mode of production and consumption. In this way of looking there is no sharp division between the epic and the dramatic in the sense of Aristotelian or (more precisely) Schillerian poetics. If the aesthetic uniqueness of such an attitude lies in confronting man as changeable in time, then 'Schiller's



distinction that the [epic] rhapsodist has to treat occurrences as wholly past, and the [dramatic] mime as wholly present (letter to Goethe of Dec. 26, 1797) is not quite exact any more' (*Organon*, GW XVI: 684). For if people are not temporally fixed points in Newtonian space but future oriented vectors in Einsteinian time/space, they are not to be encompassed either by a mimic, dramatic present or by a rhapsodic, epic past. Looking at them from the author's imagined future, they are objects in the past, to be shown by epic narrative. Looking at them, simultaneously, from the author's present, they are subjects in the present, to be shown by dramatic presentation. The new view of them will therefore consist of a precisely graded mingling of the 'epic' and the 'dramatic', of people as an object of cool anthropological cognition *and* as a subject of passionate dramatic sympathy.

As compared with 'Aristotelian' Individualist poetics -- especially as understood by the German 19th century from Hegel and Schiller to Freytag -- this kind of performing was not 'pure' drama, it was 'epic'. In fact, however, it fused 'dramatic' presentation with 'epic' narration, embodying this in the alternation of action with narrators, songs, titles, etc., and in a special behaviour of the dramatic figures. The whole arsenal of estrangements is the aesthetic working-out of such a new epico-dramatic, dialectical mode of dramaturgy. When estranging had fully worked itself out in Brecht's practice, he was able to recognise that, although his theatre was 'epic' compared to orthodox quasi-Aristotelianism, this term did not render it justice: 'We may now abandon the designation "epic theatre" for the theatre we had in mind. This designation has fulfilled its duty if the narrative element, always present in theatre, has been strengthened and enriched... creating a basis for the particularity of new theatre' (GW XVI: 925). The proponents of the designation 'epic theatre' had too readily assumed that it was, 'naturally', epic compared to the existing drama and theatre: they had fallen in the trap of looking at Schiller's or Reinhardt's dramaturgy as *the* dramaturgy, forgetting in the heat of the battle their own basic estranging standpoint, and mistakenly conceding drama to the enemy. The strategy of the look backward, then, presented dramaturgic situations simultaneously as 'human, all too human' history for our sympathetic involvement and as inhuman, alienated pre-history for our critical understanding. It created tension between a future which the author's awareness inhabits, and a present which his audience inhabits; this tension is at the root of the most significant values of Brecht's work. It is because the golden age is yet to come that man in this iron age cannot be good, try as he may, without being pulled apart either from within, as Puntilla, and from without, as Shen Te:

Your bidding of yore  
To be good and yet to live  
Tore me in two halves like lightning.  
I Don't know why: I couldn't be good to others  
And to myself at the same time.  
(*The Good Woman of Setzuan*)

3. Brecht's central aesthetic and historical standpoint of looking backward can be analysed in his practice into two principal estranging components, which can be called *the view from below* and *the view from above*. The view from below is the anarchistic, humorous 'Schweik look' of plebeian tradition; it is inherent in the stance which Brecht's (and Hašek's) Good Soldier assumes in facing the world. Its richness stems from a constant juxtaposition of the official and the real, the sentimental and the naive, the ideological and the practical. Figures like Azdak are obvious protagonists of this comic look. The view from above, on the other hand, is the

rationalist 'Diderot look' of intellectual tradition; it is inherent in the stance which the author of *Jacques the Fatalist* (or of *Candide*, or of *The Persian Letters*) assumes in facing the world. It critically illuminates the most intimate structures of bourgeois life and art. Brecht, as Chiarini has noted, is the last great pamphleteer of the bourgeoisie, who, however, turned against his own class (as he himself said in the poem 'Kicked Out with Good Reason', *Verjagt mit gutem Recht*), 'baring its secrets to the people'. The Diderot look meets the Schweik look in the politics of de-alienating the human animal.

The Schweik element in Brecht's work is evident at first glance. Equally important, however, is the patron saint role of Diderot (in the 1930s Brecht even tried to found a Diderot Society for the study of theatre). Like Diderot, Brecht started from the assumption that human reason can understand and master even the most unreasonable instincts, even the most complex circumstances, even the bloodiest contradictions of this stockyard world. Like Diderot, Brecht was interested in how art relates to a new concept of nature, man and society, to a new aesthetics. Like Diderot and his fellow theoreticians, Brecht asked from the actor 'that his tears flow from the brain'. Like Diderot, he wanted a dramaturgy which could give the *homme moyen sensible* of tomorrow insights into human relationships and the relations behind those relationships (GW XV: 256-60). Like Diderot, Brecht thought of himself as of a 'philosopher in the theatre' (with the distinction of having advanced from Shaftesburian to Marxian optimism). No wonder that the following fragment might have come from either of them: 'In the great play, the play of the world, the one I always return to, all emotional souls occupy the stage, whereas all creative people sit in the orchestra. The first are called mad (alienated); the second ones, who depict their follies, are called sages (philosophers). The eye of the sage is the one which lays bare the follies of various figures on the stage'.<sup>7</sup>

Brecht's opus might be most usefully divided into three phases: the early and the middle 1920s; the late 1920s and early 1930s; and the mature phase from the middle 1930s on. The first two phases abstracted and made absolute the views from below and from above. These two at last coalesced into the dynamic look backwards of his final great plays.

The first, anarchist phase, from *Baal* to *Mahagonny*, is marked by a tendency towards *absolute non-consenting* or a self-indulgent nihilism. The author distances himself from reality without having open historical horizons or new values in sight. The estrangement takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, and operates by isolating banal elements from reality. Critics have not been slow to notice that *The Threepenny Opera* works by equating the gangsters to the bourgeois (as Gay's play and other English literature of that epoch did -- see Fielding's *Jonathan Wild the Great*), implying that therefore the bourgeois are gangsters too. Perhaps it has not been as clearly stated that this 'opera' also *delights* in such asocial bourgeois gangsters. The gangster-bourgeois equation is, therefore, an object of uncritical admiration at least as much as of social criticism. Possibly it is just the delight in such an unsolved incongruity which led to its huge success with all shades of the middle-class audience. Brecht himself, craftily truthful, proclaimed it was still a 'digestive' play where the bourgeois dream is both realised and criticized (GW XVII: 991). That is also why in his next phase he so strenuously tried to change it when rewriting the scenario for the Pabst movie and even more notably when writing *The Threepenny Novel*.

Most critics would probably agree that Brecht's plays of the first phase do a far better job at the destruction of bourgeois values than at setting up any -- even implicit -- new values. They do not deal in transvaluation but in devaluation, similar to much that was happening at the time in Central Europe, from the Dadaists to, say, Pirandello. Therefore this phase of Brecht's vision foreshadows some essential traits of the later grotesque or 'absurd' playwrights such as Beckett or Ionesco. At least one of his early plays, *The Wedding* [*Die Hochzeit*] is

almost pure Ionesco *avant la lettre*. What is here, however, perhaps most significant is that Brecht soon outgrew this uncritical non-consenting attitude. By the end of the 1920s, he was sufficiently above his 1919 playlet to change its name to *The Petty Bourgeois Wedding* [*Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*]. This apparently slight change is symbolic. Where Ionesco makes a given *condition humaine* into the human condition, Brecht locates it in a precise anthropological and societal context. He denies it eternal status by tying it down to an alienated socio-cultural system, with whose change the historical human condition would change too.

The second, rationalist phase, from *Man Is Man* to *The Mother* -- the phase edges being, as always, blurred -- is marked by a tendency towards absolute consenting or a somewhat self-indulgent didacticism. If the first post-World War One, phase was given to apolitical ideologising, the second, which came about in an atmosphere of fierce political struggle in Germany, was given to political ideologising. This finally resulted in a kind of Mystery play, as exemplified by *The Measures Taken*. Whereas the absolutely non-consenting phase tended to deny society in favour of the individual, this play implies that the individual should deny himself in favour of the society. He should disappear into a collective *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, it being then of secondary importance whether this God is identified as such or laicised into, say, the World Revolution. The apology of an *ecclesia militans* may have been quite understandable at that high point of tension in Germany, but it has to be seen as such when looking back at Brecht. Such a play is a poetical expression of a lay faith whose aims are of this world but whose methodology is fundamentally religious, even though not theistic but political. It is interesting to note that at the time it was first produced, this play was acclaimed by some Christian critics as a great crypto-religious tragedy, and severely taken to task by some Marxist critics, although written as a glorification of what Brecht conceived the Communist Party was (or should have been) like. Certainly, such uncritical consent is more Jacobin or Anabaptist than truly Marxian.

The final, mature vision of Brecht's sequence from *The Good Woman of Setzuan* to *Life of Galileo* came when the playwright had seriously (and joyously) accepted practical corrections against over-confidence in either plebeian anarchy or lay clericalism. In the 1930s it became obvious that the gangsters of *The Threepenny Opera* led also to Nazism, and that the fanatics of *Measures Taken* led also to Stalinism. Therefore, constantly on the alert for feedbacks from lived human history yet holding on to the significant standpoint of a future friendly humanity, Brecht fused the strengths of both the view from below and the view from above. From the plebeian view, he took a disrespectful, critical attitude towards everything that claims to be an eternal value, especially towards societal power structures. He also took the parodic forms used to such effect in plays like *The Threepenny Opera*, based on the puppet theatre, on street ballads and pamphlets, on fair-barkers and penny arcades, and distilled through the traditions of Büchner's revolutionary bitterness, Wedekind's provocative bohemianism, and the goon thinking of Nestroy, Valentin or Karl Kraus. The rationalist view taught him to search for clearly defined values which make out of understanding and cognition a pleasure, an aesthetic principle, and which were used to such effect already in plays like *The Mother* or (in the richest prefiguration of his later masterpieces) *St Joan of the Slaughterhouses*.

The mature Brechtian vision then, used both kinds of estrangement, the nihilist 'Schweik' one and the rationalist 'Diderot' one, and fused them into one method, which finally understood itself as dialectical. In a very noteworthy passage of Brecht's *Dialogues of Exiles*, the interlocutors come to agree that Hegel's dialectical method is a great humorous world principle, because it is based on switching between different levels of understanding, just like humour or wit. Thus this dialectical Brechtian vision is a new link in the classical chain of wits, the bitter or smiling debunkers going back to Lucretius and Aristophanes, Rabelais and

Cervantes, Fielding and Swift; and perhaps one might mention also Brecht's favourites outside literary discourse: Breughel and Picasso in painting, Chaplin and Eisenstein in film, and Marx.

Using the language of dialectical estrangement to master the alienated world, Brecht's mature aesthetic is not based on pure idea. It is in a permanent two-way relation of theory to practice, and it therefore overcomes ideological dogmatism. That is how he could also overcome the weaknesses of its components: the primitive and insular aspect of anarchism, still peeping out in *Schweik in the Second World War*, and the aprioristic and monochromatic aspect of rationalist progressivism, still to be found in a play like *The Days of the Commune* (both, however, were left unfinished, and have to be considered as first drafts only). The open-ended character of Brecht's aesthetics led to a methodology of experiment or 'essays', and he accordingly called all his works after 1928 *Versuche*. What he meant by this is perhaps clearest if one looks at the successively richer (though to my mind not finally resolved) versions of *The Life of Galileo*.

To the dramaturgic representation of people's interrelationships on the stage, Brecht's mature aesthetic vision says at the same time yes and no. It says yes to them as human potentials, looking back at them from the vantage point of the future; from the same point of view, it says no to them as instances of *homo duplex*, the cleft human of this specific perverted period. All of his plays together, the ambitious if unfinished *summa* or *Comédie humaine* of Brecht's, might borrow the title of *Der Jasager und der Neinsager*, *He Who Says Yes* and *He Who Says No*. They were always strategies of de-alienation, of a striving towards an integral humanity, towards people who would be students and masters of what Brecht called the greatest art -- the art of living. Liberating aesthetics finally found its foundation in firm ethics, understood as a basic need on the order of food, sex, sociability or knowledge; and the demand for cognition as an ethical imperative led to the recognition that theatre 'must be allowed to remain something wholly superfluous, which, to be sure, means then that one in fact lives for the superfluous' (*Organon*, GW XVI: 664). This is Brecht's final vindication of aesthetics in terms of the Marxian jump from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom (or in terms of its prefiguration). The ironically superfluous commodity, the supreme good that one can rightly live for, is on that side of the boundary between necessity and superfluity, which turns out also to be the boundary between death (or a death-in-life, zombiedom) and life. Trickily, Brecht's term *Überfluss* (here translated as 'the superfluous' in order to echo the preceding *Überflüssiges*) also means plenty or abundance, indeed even excess and exuberance, literally 'overflow': one lives for plenty, exuberance, overflow. In another *Organon* passage Brecht praises the untrammelled societal pleasure in the magnificence of even an anti-social activity, such as that of a river in flood, provided society may master it (GW XVI: 673). Thus the collective rationalist has looped the loop, incorporating into his rationalism the anti-social magnificence -- of his Mauler, or Coriolanus or, best, of Azdak -- as a bearer of the Renaissance principle of fullness and plenty; or indeed of the Dionysian (Nietzschean?) principle of raging excess. At this dynamic and utopian convergence point and vanishing point, Judge and Wise Fool met with the Princely Child: the German Chalk Circle closed.

## Notes

1/ All quotations from Brecht have been taken from his *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973ff.); all translations are mine. They will be indicated in the text by a GW in brackets, with the Roman numeral indicating the volume and the Arabic the page number.

2/ This is already clear in one of his fundamental essays. *The Street Scene* (1938; GW XVI: 546 ff.) with another landmark, *Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Learning?* (1936; GW XVI: 262 ff.) marking the visible transition towards it.

3/ Cf. H. Koller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike: Nachahmung, Darstellung, Ausdruck* (Bern, 1954).

4/ First argued in Mordecai Gorelik's unjustly neglected *New Theatres for Old* (New York, 1940: 1962).

5/ Compare the Swiss playwright Max Frisch's discerning diary observations from the time of his acquaintance with Brecht in 1948: 'Brecht relates to a projected world which doesn't yet exist anywhere in this time, visible only in his behaviour which is a lived and inexorable opposition, never daunted through decades of external toil. Christians related to the other world, Brecht to this world.' (*Tagebuch* 1946-1949 [Frankfurt, 1950], p. 287.)

6/ Brecht's note, quoted in H.J. Bunge, W. Hecht, and K. Rüllicke Weiler, *Bertolt Brecht* ([East] Berlin, 1963), p. 40, transl. D.S. Elisabeth Hauptmann, Brecht's collaborator at that time, wrote in her diary of July 1926 about Brecht's work on *Joe Fleischhacker*, a play planned as carrying on the series of 'the coming of mankind into the big cities' begun with *In the Jungle of Cities*: 'Finally Brecht started to read national economics. He asserted that money practices were obscure, he had to see now what money theories were like. But even before he came to important discoveries, at least for himself, he had concluded that the old (great) form of drama wasn't fit for representing such modern processes as the international distribution of wheat, the life stories of people of our times and generally for all events with consequence.... During these studies he drew up his theory of "epic drama"' ('Notizen über Brechts Arbeit 1926', *Sinn und Form. Zweites Sonderheft Bertolt Brecht* (1957), p. 243; transl. D.S.)

7/ Diderot, *Le Paradoxe du Comédien*, ed. E. Dupuy (Paris, 1902), pp. 96-101 (transl. D.S.).

8/ The term has been taken from Brecht's own use in such plays as *The Baden Learning Play on Consenting*. 'Consenting' was one of the key terms of post-war German sociology which Brecht seems to have been quite well acquainted with, especially through Fritz Sternberg and Karl Korsch (see Sternberg's memoirs *Der Dichter und die Ratio* [Göttingen, 1963], and the discussion of Brecht's correspondence with his mentor Korsch in Wolfdietch Rasch, *Zur deutschen Literatur seit der Jahrhundertwende* [Stuttgart, 1967]). Compare Max Weber's chapter 'Einverständnis' [Consenting]. in *Über einige Kategorien der verstehenden Soziologie* [Max Weber, *Soziologie -- Weltgeschichtliche Analysen -- Politik* [Stuttgart, 1964], pp. 126-40).