BRECHT ON THE MARGINS: FILM & FILM THEORY

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In considering Brecht's importance to film and film theory 30 years after his death, I have chosen the title "Brecht on the Margins." Brecht's influence on film has perhaps always been indirect, and this is certainly due in part to the profound challenge which his ideas pose to the dominant assumptions of cultural production. I would like to trace briefly the lines which Brecht's marginal yet persistent critique has allowed since his own experiences with the film industry. But more important to me here is the connection between Brecht's ideas on film and the similar political dilemmas faced by filmmakers and theorists today.

I believe there is an international tradition of Brechtian filmmaking at work in the U.S. today, but it needs to be constantly reclaimed, since its history is a series of dead-ends, betrayals, and misunderstandings. Today again there is a danger that what Martin Walsh has called "The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema" will disappear in the institutionalization and academicization of film theory. My goal, then, is to place Brecht's ideas solidly back into the discussion of radical film theory, particularly in the context of feminist theory. My example for this project will be Yvonne Rainer's 1985 film The Man Who Envied Women.

First let me examine two avenues one might expect Brecht's influence to have taken, which turned out to be dead ends: his own involvement with film projects and the revival of American attention to German cinema since the 1960s. The insistence that Brechtian filmmaking is necessarily radical is useful in explaining why the Brechtian tradition is so slender and so often interrupted. Most film adaptations of Brecht are not Brechtian at all. Instead they have treated him as either a source of provocative material or as the inventor of a now-classical style. Thus, there seems to be a consistency between three Brecht productions that otherwise have little to do with each other: The Three-Penny Opera, Hangmen Also Die, and Galileo. Brecht himself sued the producers of the Three-Penny Opera (1930/31) since G.W. Pabst's direction placed the few "epic" elements preserved within a quite conventional, naturalistic narrative. Hangmen Also Die (1942/43), directed by Fritz Lang in Hollywood, similarly couches some Brechtian dialog, characters, and situations within the conventions of the gangster thriller genre. Finally, Joseph Losey's version of Galileo (1975) succumbs to the same contradiction as innumerable theater productions of Brecht up to the present. His theatrical alienation devices have hardened into an aesthetic style which no longer causes viewers to reflect on their role in the processes or institutions of cinema. This is why I take seriously Brecht's statement before the House Unamerican Activities Committee in 1947: "I am unaware of any influence, political or artistic, that I could have exercised on the film industry." (1)

One other Brechtian film made while Brecht was alive led to a different kind of dead end. The only film of its kind produced by the left in the Weimar Republic, Kuhle Wampe (1932), was censored but finally released. No tradition could be built on this slender basis, since the National Socialists soon took
power in Germany. The Soviet avant-garde tradition to which Kuhlle Wampe was related, represented by Vertov, Medvedkin and in some ways Eisenstein, was also cut off between 1929 and 1932. Even since the war, in the GDR, neither the Brechtian nor the Soviet avant-garde tradition has been evident in feature films. In 1955, Wolfgang Staudte began filming Mother Courage, but Brecht was unwilling to abandon yet another script to the control of a film director. When he realized that his play was to become a Monumentalfarbfilm, Brecht protested strenuously. (2) This led to the interruption of the project, which could not be revived before Brecht's death the following year. Despite exceptions, such as The Gleiwitz Case by the late Gerhard Klein or some documentary films, one can safely say there is no radical Brechtianism at work among the thirty or so feature film directors of the GDR.

One might expect the most direct avenue for contemporary Brechtian influence in the U.S. to be the so-called New German Cinema, which for a time seemed to offer an alternative to Hollywood norms. Alexander Kluge and the team of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub were among the first notable artists of this period and I believe the most important in relation to the reception of Brecht for the cinema. Kluge's films, from Abschied von gestern (1965/66) to Der Angriff der Gegenwart auf die übrige Zeit (1985), owe much to Brecht in their fragmentation of narrative, the use of intertitles, quotation from other texts or art forms, and engagement with the audience aimed at dialogue rather than manipulation.

A Brechtian concern for the role of history in cultural self-definition is central to the work of Kluge as well as to Straub/Huillet. All of the films of the latter shed some light on the potential of Brecht's ideas for film, which is certainly why they take up a substantial part of Martin Walsh's work Brechtian Aspects of Radical Cinema. (3) Straub/Huillet's History Lessons (1972) could indeed stand as the only post-war film of a Brecht text which makes productive use of a Brechtian process as well. Based on Brecht's novel fragment Die Geschäfte des Herrn Julius C., the film shares the novel's project of exposing the emptiness of the narrative view of history as the exploits of great men. Caesar recedes from both the novel and the film and is replaced by the testimony of various men who knew him. These "documents" certainly do not add up to produce a great man, but Brecht sought to produce through them a way of understanding the logic of empires. Straub/Huillet's film adds to this fragmentary approach to Caesar a Brechtian approach to film, the text, and their context. Along with a "documentary" approach to Brecht's words--mainly the monologues of the witnesses--other documents are presented: the unstructured everyday reality of 1972 Rome, a statue of Julius Caesar erected by the Fascists, and maps of the shrinking empire. If history's meaning is not to be found in an appreciation of Caesar's biography, the audience is left with the task of producing meaning from the materials presented through Brecht's words and the film's images. Brecht had criticized the film medium because its "mechanical reproduction gives everything the character of a result: unfree and unalterable." (4) The practice of Straub/Huillet opens up the possibility that the "result" of Brecht's investigation, and of imperial history, has yet to be determined. It may be just this Brechtian approach which puts Kluge and Straub/Huillet outside the category of new German
directors who have become well known in the U.S., i.e. those who built on Hollywood aesthetics (Fassbinder, Wenders) or those who return to earlier German models (Herzog). German feminist filmmakers have been similarly neglected in the American reception, perhaps also because they challenge conventional filmmaking, sometimes also in Brechtian ways.

The Brechtian film tradition I feel is most significant today in the U.S. arises indirectly from the work of Jean-Luc Godard, Straub/Huillet, and others, beginning in the early 1960's. The turning of Brechtian theory toward the film itself became most explicit after 1968. The importance of the social upheaval of 1968 in the course of film theory ought not to be underestimated. In any case, theoretical discussions have been at least as important as the reception of Brechtian films themselves since this period. An important mediator in this process was the British journal Screen which published a special issue devoted to Brecht in 1974. Brecht's role at the time is crucial for us to consider now, twelve years later, since the theoretical work which was so vibrant at that time threatens to degenerate into that which it initially opposed.

It is surely no coincidence that this new interest in radical film theory was simultaneous with a rapid and energetic development of feminist film theory. Screen had set out the Brechtian terms for a radical critique of film practice, and Ben Brewster had borrowed from Brecht a name for this enterprise, "The Fundamental Reappraisal." (5) In 1975 Laura Mulvey spelled out a fundamental reproof against the manipulative basis of film pleasure from a feminist point of view:

"The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical filmmakers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure, and privilege of the "invisible guest," and highlights how film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms. Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret." (6)

Screen and feminist film theory had returned to the idea shared by Brecht, Benjamin, and the Soviet avant-garde, that it was not enough to take over the mechanisms of cultural production, one must also transform them. Brecht's theoretical influence offered a way of merging into the subject matter of film a critique of the process of filmmaking, its place in society, and the role of the audience.

An editorial statement by Ben Brewster and Colin McCabe reveals Brecht's central position in 1974: "it is above all his reflections on his own work in literature, theatre, and cinema and on the politico-aesthetic controversies of his day that provide the framework within which it is possible to begin to think of a revolutionary cinema." (7) The connection between Mulvey's essay and Brechtian concerns of the time is made clear by McCabe: "It is this emphasis on the reader as producer (more obvious in Tout va bien, which is some ways more Brechtian than Kuhle Wampe) which suggests that these films do not just offer a
different representation for the subject, but a different set of relations to both the fictional material and reality." (8)

More than a decade later, Teresa de Lauretis takes this juncture in the history of film criticism as a starting point for her work *Alice Doesn't*. She also returns to it later in the book, in the Chapter "Semiotica and Experience," to discuss feminist anti-Freudian criticisms of *Screen* and its hopes for a Brechtian cinema:

"Unless we too want to toss the baby along with the bath water, both Marx and Freud must be retained and worked through at once, and this has been the insistent emphasis of *Screen* and its extraordinary important contribution to film theory and, beyond it, to feminism. That patriarchy exists concretely, in social relations, and that it works precisely through the very discursive and representational structures that allow us to recognize it, is the problem and the struggle of feminist theory. It is also, and more so, a problem of women's life." (9)

This stress on the connection between theory and experience perhaps does not even go far enough in clarifying the priorities of *Screen*’s introduction of psychoanalysis and semiotics twelve years ago. In their attempt to create a theory of revolutionary cinema in the Brechtian sense, *Screen*’s editors were by no means interested in theory for its own sake. The "scientific" insights of psychoanalysis and semiotics were meant to serve as more advanced tools for the task at hand, and as a safeguard against Romantic, ultra-left and other simplistic temptations. As the editors wrote in 1974,

"In the last issue of *Screen*, we published Franco Fortini’s text on ‘The Writer’s Mandate’ which took the position that art is that area which deals with the irreconcilable contradictions of life over and beyond the particular contradictions of the class struggle and of their successful resolution in the revolution. It was suggested in the editorial that, in order to avoid a fall into romantic and ultra-left positions, these irreconcilable differences had to be theorized within the scientific concepts offered to us by psychoanalysis." (10)

Although seeking a revolutionary transformation is still implicit in feminist film theory, it has clearly moved from center-stage back to the margins since the early 1970’s. Perhaps because a global transformation of society by feminism or by the left seems less and less likely, the theoretical aspects of the discussion have taken on a life of their own. There is less and less talk of political goals, little common ground between theorists and filmmakers, and the reference to psychoanalysis as a mere scientific tool in the service of Brechtian aesthetics would seem to many contemporary critics positively funny.

Therefore, such work as de Lauretis’ is extremely important in restoring a balance between a Brechtian critique of representation and the theories of psychoanalysis and semiotics. What de Lauretis stresses too little, I believe,
is the political dilemma of the artist, which is clearly addressed by Brecht and again by Fortini in "The Writer's Mandate and the End of Anti-Fascism." (11) If the reader/spectator is to find room to move within this complex of irreconcilable contradictions, the artist must do so, too.

Yvonne Rainer has taken the sum of these practical and theoretical dilemmas as the starting point for her most recent film, _The Man Who Enviwed Women_. We can trace some Brechtian aspects of this film by comparing to one of Brecht's notes on epic form:

"Today, when the human being must be conceived as the 'ensemble of all social relations,' the epic form is the only one which can grasp those processes that serve drama as the material for a comprehensive world view. The individual human being, too—the flesh-and-blood human being—is only tangible through the processes in which and as a result of which it exists. The new drama must methodologically incorporate the experiment (Versuch) into its form. It must be able to use connections in all directions; it must make use of statics; it will have a tension reigning between its individual parts, mutually charging them. (12)

Rainer's film can be seen as an experiment, or test (Versuch), on several levels. Most fundamentally she is exploring and opening up the structure of relationships which make up her narrative or even authorial persona. The film does have a narrative, provided by the female voice-over of Trish, but this subjectivity does not incorporate all parts of the film. Instead it stands apart from other elements, producing the tension Brecht describes. The voice over near the beginning of the film sets up the terms of other relationships the film will examine:

"It was a hard week. I split up with my husband and moved into my studio. The hot-water heater broke and flooded the textile merchant downstairs. I bloodied my white linen pants, the senate voted for nerve gas, and my gynaecologist went down in Korean Airlines 007. The worst of it was the gynaecologist. He was a nice man. He used to put booties in the stirrups, and his speculum was always warm. (13)

J. Hoberman called this "brutally slapstick leap from the private to the public, unexpectedly clinched with a dancer's emphasis on pure physicality." (14) The montage of elements introduced here expands outward from the domestic melodrama of Jack and Trish, which is not acted out on the screen: we see Trish's shoulder from the back as she takes her ironing board out of the apartment. Jack also wants her to remove her "art work" from the wall, but the collage of photos remains to become a focal point for the wider issues Trish's voice will consider later in the film.

One of the photos is an ad for estrogen supplements for older women, supposedly helpless with a (male) doctor's care and prescriptions. Another is a photo of mutilated bodies of torture victims in El Salvador. Like Trish's opening speech, these images violently confront private biological reality with world
politics. Later in the film is another juxtaposition of the two, as Trish remarks on the photos, "the woman who has stopped bleeding and the corpses that have stopped bleeding."

The other half of the domestic melodrama is Jack, the husband who gets to keep the loft. Amid a variety of film quotations, Jack's language floods through the film with confessional and theoretical monologues related to women, sex, power, and psychoanalysis. The text itself is a collage of quotations from Raymond Chandler, Frederic Jameson, Michel Foucault, and others. Although Jack is often seen in New York lofts, he seems oblivious to the dispute over the renovation of loft space in New York City. The film returns to the documentary footage of hearings where low-income people compete with artists for housing. But it is the female voice over that says "property is profit and not shelter," and "the language troubles my New York sleep."

The narrative of the woman who leaves this theorizing man, and who ponders the connection of New York housing policy to war in Central America is not the only subject which is presented epically -- in a state of tension and constant revision. Since Rainer was once a dancer and performance artist, there is a strong sense of performance in her film as well. As Stephen Heath has noted in regard to Brechtian film practice, "One mode of distanciation in film has often, and centrally, been the exact reference to theater." (15) Aspects of theatricality abound: two different actors portray Jack Deller, his text is made up of quotations, his monologues to his shrink are delivered from a stage while excerpts from Hollywood melodramas are projected behind him. A dream sequence is artlessly acted out, with Trish's voice-over narration, and at one point Rainer bends down near the camera lens to say "Would all menstruating women please leave the theater." Rainer also calls our attention to the materiality of the film image by including film footage which is deliberately of technically inferior quality.

This fragmentation of the film's material and its narrative does more than call our attention to its construction by the artist. It makes us aware that the artist's subjectivity is also constructed. When we hear the voice-over discussing with friend whether to call her friend Jack Teller or Jack Deller, we cannot be sure whether to identify this voice with a fictional character or with Rainer, the filmmaker. A strong alienation effect also takes place when Jack patiently or pensively moves one of the photos pinned to the wall. As the camera isolates the photo, the female voice-over says, "I have another to put up." The viewer must construct both the nature of this "I" and her own relationship to the image out of the relationships posited by the film.

There is no need here to analyze the other aspects of the film which have a Brechtian orientation. These would include the acting styles, the use of quotations of many kinds, the disjunction between sound and image, or the use of documentary. Both Brecht and Godard are recalled by the theoretical discussion overheard on the streets and in a coffee shop. I would, however, like to concentrate on two scenes of the film to reveal its importance for a return of feminist film discussions to more materialist concerns. In these scenes, the "clash of ideas" J. Joberman finds so exciting (and reminiscent of Kluge) (16) is placed within a feminist and Brechtian transformation of the means of presentation.
In the first example, Jack Deller #1 is to deliver a lecture on Foucault et al. to a class. The process of filmmaking is foregrounded in the scene in several ways: the actor asks "are we rolling?" before he begins his lecture; as he speaks, the sound track is eventually distorted, then we begin to hear directions for the camera movement, which moves from Deller to the class, then back in the room until it isolates a single student. Returning to Jack, it reveals that the actor has been replaced by Jack #2.

To this intriguing study of film techniques is added the reference to the other "narrative" concerns of the film. As always, Jack is theorizing about sexuality and power, and establishing his own power at the same time. As the camera travels, it reveals that the classroom is in reality a remodeled loft-condominium. One critic referred to this scene as "numbing" because he was apparently concentrating on deciphering the sound track. (17) Rainer says this is "missing the meaning" of the space since the visual track "supplies a subtext for the lecture with its retroactive associations of urban university land-grabbing." (18) The Brechtian tension, which escapes many critics, can be made quite clear. One aspect of the lecture is Foucault's refusal to enter into political debates because, he says, "political discourse abnegates true discussion," and that there is only "opposition, not true difference." After this and some discussion of the nature and origins of language (Lacan vs. the ego-psychologists), the camera finally reveals the expansive accoutrements of the loft's kitchen and bath, and Trish's voice-over raises another claim on the meaning of this scene: "You know, this expression 'class struggle'..." (the soundtrack returns briefly to Jack #2 on Husserl and subjectivity)...(sound track beep)..."You know, this expression 'class struggle' applies to El Salvador or Guatemala, not to the U.S. In Guatemala the war against Communism is in reality a war against the poor. Here in America, the war against the poor does not yet have to be masked as a war against Communism."

My final question is the significance of all the theory quoted by Rainer. Is her importance to feminism suspect because she relies so heavily on the theories, and on the presence, of men? Her film even contains the line "in a manner of speaking we're all mean," and the question raised by one critic must be addressed seriously: "Throughout the film, Jack keeps citing Foucault. Does this make Jack an authority or Rainer?" (19) First, of course, Rainer is an authority, pure and simple. And she is the author of the film. But in citing so much theory and filmmaking produced by men, is Rainer carrying on a male tradition of intellectual and artistic mastery? I don't think so. On the other hand, the film does not make simplistic oppositional claims, for instance that male-dominated theory be replaced by female-dominated theory, or even perhaps that the alternative to all this high theory is not theory at all.

This simplistic opposition, in fact, is criticized by the final segment of the film, where two theoretical arguments--texts by Michel Foucault and Meaghan Morris--supply the script for Jack and Jackie's heterosexual mating ritual. The content of these theories is clearly not absurd--neither Foucault's assertion that "there is no opposition between what is said and what is done," nor Morris's criticism of theory that has "no teeth." What is absurd is the placement of these theories in the context of clichéd sexual maneuvering rather than in a context where their usefulness in the world could be tested. To ask Rainer to depict this usefulness, however, would be to ask her to return to traditional narrative didacticism. We should also not look for a reassuring image of "woman"
in her film, since the imposition of such an image has long been central to film as an institution. Instead of presenting a true theory to replace the false ones, Rainer's film ends with women's voices, insisting one last time on a connection between the images on the wall and an individual's ability to act. The very last word in the film—over the credits—is not theoretical but practical: a documentary sound recording from a rally for abortion rights.

In Rainer's own word, she is "talking about films that allow for periods of poetic ambiguity, only to unexpectedly erupt into rhetoric, outrage, direct political address or analysis, only to return to a new adventure of Eddy Foot or New Perils of Eddy Foot..." (20) Thus she does not reject theory or action, traditional narrative clichés. Instead she hopes to put them into a productive relation to each other, or to open up some breathing space, where the archetypal female rivals might one day stop tearing off each other's dresses to say "Hey, we're wearing the same dress, aren't we? Why don't we pool our energies and try to figure out what a political myth for socialist feminism might look like?" (21)

Rainer's film sustains the tense relationship between aesthetic theory and political practice which has been consistently central to the reception of Brecht. Without the Brechtian tension between the two realms, there is a danger that they will diverge and individually retreat from work on the means of production to work on its products alone. (22) In the realm of film theory the danger lies in aestheticisation of theory itself and its academic institutionalization (witness Rainer's film). In the political realm, some feminists have decided to appeal for greater state power to control pornography rather than addressing the continuum of violence on which that state power depends. Brecht's role in film theory today could be to challenge these diverging tendencies and maintain their productive tension. The history of Brecht reception so far warns us that this is not an easy task.

Footnotes

1. Bertolt Brecht, Schriften zur Politik und Gesellschaft, Gesammelte Werke 20 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 305. The reasons for Brecht's lack of influence on commercial film deserve more study, since they could reveal something of the logic of the culture industry. For instance, it could be that Brecht's belief in the wisdom of popular culture was successfully incorporated rather than resisted by Hollywood. In capitalism, no political moment is inherent to the word "popular." Walter Benjamin seems to have been more sensitive than Brecht to this two-sided potential in mass culture.

2. Wolfgang Gersch, Film bei Brecht (Munich: Hanser, 1975), 292.


5. Ibid.


10. Colin McCabe, *op. cit.*, 17


16. J. Hoberman, *op. cit.*


18. Ibid.


21. Ibid.


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