

# Introduction

## Revisiting Brecht and Cinema

One of the most abused critical terms we have is “Brechtian.”

—Jonathan Rosenbaum



GIVEN THAT BERTOLT BRECHT’S dealings with cinema were only intermittent, resulting in comparatively few films and writings on the medium, the ubiquity of his name in film criticism is astounding. One encounters it in discussions of practitioners as diverse as the Brothers Taviani (*Padre Padrone* [Father and Master; 1977], *La notte di San Lorenzo* [The Night of the Shooting Stars; 1982]), Apichatpong Weerasethakul (*Tropical Malady* [2004], *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* [2010]), and Russ Meyer (*Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* [1965], *Beneath the Valley of the Ultra-Vixens* [1979]), and throughout the decades spanned by their careers. The continued and varied relevance of Brecht for film practice and theory has been joined by an increasing breadth of meanings that Brecht’s name connotes, the fact that inspired Rosenbaum’s quote above. This book at once narrows the term “Brechtian,” so as to help enhance the scientific rigor of Brecht-inflected film scholarship, and expands it, so as to reflect the diversity of ways in which Brecht has impacted cinema.

The term “Brechtian” can have at least three broad meanings in the context of theater and film studies. The most obvious of these is historical: a play by Brecht is Brechtian just as *King Lear* is a Shakespearean play. The least ambiguous sense of the adjective, this is also the least common of the three. One is more likely to encounter the word “Brechtian” in a commentary of a play by Peter Weiss or Naomi Wallace, or—potentially more confusingly—of any theater production that opposes the narrative and/or stylistic norms of Aristotelian realism (which illustrates the word’s second usage), than in a discussion of *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (The Good Person of Szechwan, 1939).

There is a conundrum posed by the practice of applying the same term “Brechtian” to the works that display narrative, stylistic, and political differences as great as are those between, for instance, Weiss’s *The Investigation* (1965) and Takashi Miike’s *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A* (2006), or between Wallace’s *In the Heart of America* (2001) and *Beneath the Valley of the Ultra-Vixens*. *The Investigation* is a documentary-drama based on the 1963–1965 Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials, employing the contradictions among the witnesses to the genocide as a principal structural feature, while *Big Bang Love* focuses on the erotic attraction between two murderers in a juvenile detention center. Wallace’s play bitterly criticizes the American Gulf War, paralleling it with the war in Vietnam, whereas Meyer’s film is a minimally plotted spectacle of campy humor and large bosoms. Both *Big Bang Love* and *Ultra-Vixens* are, then, at odds with the partisan politics of all Brecht’s mature works. What allows for their comparisons with Brecht (albeit problematically) are their formal operations: the former film flaunts its artificiality through a minimal setting and lighting scheme and through scenes whose claims to objectivity are uncertain, while the latter refrains from continuity editing and uses reflexivity (exemplified by Meyer’s appearance in one scene carrying a film camera around the set).

A third usage of “Brechtian” applies to discussion of editing stylization, where an attempt is made to cinematically adjust Brecht’s theatrical strategy of foregrounding the constructedness of a presentation to aid the spectator in creating a critical distance from it. Those to whom the term is applied in this way emphasize in various manners the “spaces” between shots, as smallest units of the filmic chain, instead of aiming for the impression of unity between discrete segments of the spaces that those shots represent, as do filmmakers who work within the continuity editing system.

These varied senses of the term “Brechtian” can serve as the lines along which to divide the existing scholarship on Brecht and cinema. One group of texts employs historiographic approaches to the topic, highlight-

ing Brecht's writings on specific films and the medium in general, and the films on which he creatively collaborated: Martin Brady's "Brecht and Film" (2006), Angela Curran's "Bertolt Brecht" (2009), Wolfgang Gersch's *Film bei Brecht* (Brecht at Film, 1975), Walter Hinck's "Kamera als Soziologe" (Camera as a Sociologist, 1971), Thomas Elsaesser's "From Anti-Illusionism to Hyper-realism: Bertolt Brecht and Contemporary Film" (1990), Roswitha Mueller's *Bertolt Brecht and the Theory of Media* (1989), Marc Silberman's "Brecht and Film" (1997), John Willett's "Brecht and the Motion Pictures" (1998), "The Lessons of Brecht" section of Robert Stam's *Reflexivity in Film and Literature* (1995), Karsten Witte's "Brecht und der Film" ("Brecht and Film," 2006), and certain portions of Maia Turovskaia's *Na granit'se iskusstv: Brecht i kino* (At the Border of Art: Brecht and Film, 1985) and Martin Walsh's *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema* (1981). The texts vary chiefly in their respective emphases, but commonly reflect upon the cinematic influences on Brecht, and point to the impact of his ideas and techniques on film studies (manifested most persistently in the version of psychosemiotics proposed by the contributors to the British journal *Screen* in the early 1970s) and film practice (shown in a range of cinemas and film movements, most distinctly in certain films of the French *Nouvelle vague*, Brazilian *Cinema Novo*, and New German Cinema). The other group of texts is informed by what David Bordwell disparagingly refers to as "SLAB" theory (the initials of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Roland Barthes, writers whose ideas—linked by their use of semiotics—the theory amalgamates). Dominant in film studies until the rise of Bordwell's and Carroll's oppositional "cognitivism" in the 1980s, the "SLAB" discourse has produced numerous texts, the most influential of which (Jean-Louis Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" [1999 (1970)], Peter Wollen's "Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'est*" [1999 (1972)], Colin MacCabe's "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses" [1974], and Stephen Heath's "Lessons from Brecht" [1974]) are summarized and critically commented upon in chapter 1, along with Dana Polan's and Murray Smith's critiques of it ("Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflexive Cinema" [1974], "A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film" [1985] and "The Logic and Legacy of Brechtianism" [1996], respectively). The lack of a recent book-length study that employs a phenomenological perspective to tackle the broader subject of Brechtian cinemas (as opposed to any one filmmaker's Brechtianisms) provided a further impetus for writing this volume.

Our era of unbridled liberalism has seen a proliferation of versions of Brecht that downplay his politics to one level or another, regarding

them as fish bones that have to be removed for the dramatic or interpretive meal to become edible. A more holistic approach to Brecht considers not only his theories but also his Marxist agenda. This choice finds its rationale in the ongoing relevance of Brecht's work for the cinematic practices that acknowledge his dramatic theory as a decisive influence. As John J. White suggests, Brecht's thinking about theater developed in a linear fashion, becoming increasingly informed by Marxism in the mid-1920s. According to White, the change of emphasis from political to artistic radicalism that occurred in the middle phase of Brecht's work as a theorist of theater, and the decreased presence of recognizably Marxist ideas in his work from the period, should both be attributed to the circumstances of exile: in his countries of asylum, Scandinavia and the United States, Brecht was required to refrain from political activity, even in the aesthetic realm (White 79). This book, then, regards *Verfremdung* and related Brechtian concepts as possessing a political function.

Brecht's politics and the best examples of his film practice intersect at the notion of dialectics. The filmmakers who constitute this book's focus are selected for the diversity of formal ways in which their work uses his method as a structural principle, and for the cultural diversity they represent. The choice of Lars von Trier, a Dane, and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet and Peter Watkins, filmmakers who worked in different European countries and the United States, illustrates that the phenomenon of Brechtian cinema is not exclusive to the German cultural context, where Brecht has long enjoyed the status of a canonical writer.

Some readers might expect to encounter additional case studies in a book bearing a title that promises a degree of comprehensiveness. Alexander Kluge and Harun Farocki, two major filmmakers who have eloquently expressed their indebtedness to Brecht, are excluded from this consideration because the prevalence of the nonfictional mode in Kluge's later works and in most of Farocki's oeuvre does not fit the book's concern with stage-like stylization. The careers of two other influential practitioners in relation to whom Brecht is often mentioned, Glauber Rocha and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, ended too long ago for their films to exemplify Brechtian filmmaking today, as one of this volume's central concerns. Lastly, Jean-Luc Godard, whose several 1960s and 1970s films nod to Brecht's literary and theoretical output, is left outside the scope of my investigation owing to the abundance of scholarship on his work.<sup>1</sup> (Nonetheless, he is frequently invoked in these pages, as a good specter).

Of course, the filmmakers discussed here at length are worthy of exploration for more reasons than their relation to Brecht. This book's

secondary goal is to delineate the formal characteristics of Straub and Huillet's, Watkins's, and von Trier's cinemas as they have developed against a backdrop of changing cultural and social circumstances, and to update the rich critical dialogue the filmmakers have elicited. Huillet died two years after the appearance of the last English-language study on her and her artistic and life partner, Ursula Böser's *The Art of Seeing, the Art of Listening* (2004), but Straub continued to produce prolifically (often in various collaborations). Since the appearance of the only book in this language dedicated solely to his work, Joseph A. Gomez's *Peter Watkins* (1979), Watkins has produced *Resan* (The Journey, 1985) and *La commune* (*Paris, 1871*) (2000), ambitious films that have largely fallen under the public radar. On Lars von Trier there is not a scarcity of commentaries, but the filmmaker's rapid production rate and the polarized views on his relationship to Brecht<sup>2</sup> merit this addition to the existing literature.

The four filmmakers increasingly use the profilmic event as a source of Brechtian estrangement, at the expense of such specifically cinematic techniques as camerawork and editing. This trend seems conditioned by the ongoing shift of Hollywood as a globally dominant film industry from its ideal of stylistic transparency to the use of attention-grabbing cinematography and cutting as defining characteristics. To offer but one among abundant examples, the James Bond installment *Quantum of Solace* (Marc Forster, 2008) establishes a narrative connection between the scene of a horse race and the sequence of an interrogation turning into a chase only after it has crosscut between the two lines of action for a good minute. For the indicated duration, the viewer is kept perplexed about the race scene's connection to the story world.

Bordwell considers the described changes of Hollywood style sufficiently extensive to be given a distinct name: "intensified continuity." He identifies the following four strategies as characteristic of the evolved Hollywood style: (1) increasingly rapid editing; (2) "forcing the perspective" through the use of bipolar extremes of lens lengths; (3) reliance on close shots; and (4) wide-ranging camera movements (*Way* 121). All these strategies aim at distorting the everyday perception of "reality," or—in the words of the Russian Formalists and, in a modified form, Brecht—at making the familiar strange. Mainstream cinema's adoption of a language that does *not* want to be overlooked—to invert the linguist Berthe Siertsema's oft-quoted observation—necessitated the change of emphasis of Brechtian filmmakers, with their aim to estrange. As a logical consequence of their opposition to verisimilitude (in the sense of what Brecht terms "surface realism"), these filmmakers' later works are progressively more theatrical.<sup>3</sup>

## The Titular and Other Key Terms

As Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait suggest, *theatricality* is often used interchangeably with a variety of related but distinct concepts—from mimesis to *theatrum mundi*, from ritual behavior to performativity (33). The writers do not identify the context in which the term was first used in 1837, but the assumption seems safe that the original usage was restricted to theater as an art, and that the word originally denoted the medium's various contemporary conventions. The term acquires a decidedly more complex meaning with its appearance in Russian as *teatralnost*. It is widely considered that Nikolai Evreinov, the theorist and practitioner who coined that term (Féral, "Theatricality" 95), found inspiration in the concept of literariness (*literarnost*), introduced into critical discourse by the Russian Formalist school of literary criticism. Presumably because theater addresses different senses, Evreinov's definition of the former concept is much broader than the Russian Formalists' literariness, that peculiar quality of literature separating it from other artistic forms and extra-artistic reality (Jestrovic, "Theatricality" 55). Evreinov attributed the principle to all actions resulting in transformation of the elements of the subject's environment or to those actions themselves, as well as to the human beings' will for transformation (which he referred to as "theatrical instinct"). The array of meanings attached to "theatricality" was broadened yet further with the term's 1990s penetration into the international critical discourse.<sup>4</sup> Three overlapping approaches to theatricality can be discerned in the literature on the subject: a predominantly historical one, which aims to elucidate the notion by tracing the changes of its negative connotations across the millennia of theater history; a predominantly phenomenological approach, which associates theatricality with not only the medium itself but also other kinds of human endeavor; and a predominantly semiotic approach, which focuses on the notion within the context of theater per se.

The historical line of inquiry into theatricality typically starts with that part of its etymological history that links it to such negatively marked traits as fakeness, superficiality, and extravagance. Representatives of this methodology—among others, Jonas Barish (*The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 1981), Marvin Carlson ("The Resistance to Theatricality," 2002), and Davis and Postlewait (*Theatricality*, 2003)—are engaged in a dialogue with the tradition of Western theater detractors running from Plato, Tertullian, Rousseau, and Nietzsche to Sartre on the one hand and to Michael Fried on the other.<sup>5</sup>

The phenomenological approach to theatricality might be called "expansionist," as it involves transferring the idea of theatricality from

the context of the medium into the totality of social activities. Starting in the 1950s with the work of the anthropologists Milton Singer and Victor Turner, the move necessitated a new vocabulary: instead of theatricality—one of whose connotations concerns the institutional aspect of theater, irrelevant for the variety of disciplines that were adopting the idea—the more general term “performance” was embraced. It has been used, as Janelle Reinelt writes, “to differentiate certain processes of performing from the products of theatrical performance, and in its most narrow usage, to identify performance art as that which, unlike “regular” theatrical performances, stages the subject in process, the making and fashioning of certain materials, especially the body, and in the exploration of the limits of representation-ability” (201). The dissemination of the terms theatricality and performance into the realms of anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology, and linguistics did not leave unaffected the studies of theater. Among the key contributors to the transformed discourse on theatricality, the first that proved relevant for the field was J. L. Austin, who in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) remarks that performative utterances (such as “I swear” and “I bequeath”) do not simply describe the reality of the acts to which they refer, but—being the sole location of the mentioned acts’ truthfulness—help create that reality. Another influential writer who uses the theatrical metaphor is Erving Goffman, whose *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) views the individual’s interaction with others as a performance aimed at creating impressions favorable for the individual’s purposes.

The semiotic approach to theatricality seems a reaction to what Elin Diamond describes as the dominance of performance discourse to the point of stupefaction (qtd. in Davis and Postlewait 31), a view that seems informed by Erika Fischer-Lichte’s observation that “if everything is ‘theater,’ the concept becomes so wide that it loses any distinctive or cognitive capacity” (qtd. in Reinelt 207). The semioticians critique the “expansionist” approach because it disregards the differences between the signs used in theater and outside of it. Eli Rozik enumerates them all in a critique of the line of thought that connects such writers as Austin, Goffmann, and Richard Schechner:

- 1) The semiotic systems employed in action and enacting an action are different: Whereas action is fundamentally indexical, enacting an action is iconic. (114)<sup>6</sup>
- 2) The ways action and enacting an action refer to a world are fundamentally different: while action is self-referent, enacting an action is both self-referential to the actor,



in producing signs, and deflects reference to a character.  
(115)

- 3) Although indexicality is shared by action and enacting an action, there is an essential difference. In real action, indexes refer to the doers, and are only self-referential.  
(115)

Rozik defines theatricality at once broadly and precisely: to him, the fundamental principle of theater is acting, “imprinting images of indexes and deflection of reference” (122). This refers to not only human acting, but “enacting” in the sense of “representing and describing” an object in a real or fictional world by any real onstage object (110)—a process inherent also to most of cinema.

While Rozik’s notion of theatricality is too broad to be applicable here, Jacques Gerstenkorn’s focus on theatricality as it relates to cinema provides a suitable framework. Gerstenkorn distinguishes between (1) theatricality as it appears in films that explicitly reference theatrical practice (theater as a content); (2) as it is produced by a film’s use of a characteristically theatrical mode (theater as a form within form); (3) as it is achieved through a process he calls recycling (*recyclage*), using a distinctly theatrical convention (for example, addressing the camera in a Woody Allen film) to divest it of its aura of medium-specificity and fully assimilate it within the cinematic context (16–17). In this last context, the term pertains strictly to those aspects of a film that are semiotically marked as derivatives of theater. Because of my focus on how film borrows from theatrical conventions that are foregrounded as such, and on the implications of that strategy as it relates to a given film’s use of Brecht, Gerstenkorn’s third category is of particular importance here.

*Montage* denotes the formal principle of works of different arts, whereby heterogeneous parts are assembled to produce a fundamentally new relationship with each other (Bordwell, “Idea” 10). Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* succinctly identifies two dialectically opposed tendencies underwriting the principle: “Montage . . . disavows unity through the emerging disparateness of the parts at the same time that, as a principle of form, it reaffirms unity” (202). The connections established can be purely abstract (as in Eisenstein’s intellectual editing, explicated below), or can result in a semblance of spatial or temporal coherence (as in the canvases of the Renaissance painter Arcimboldo, which convey recognizable human portraits through the compositional arrangement of realistically depicted everyday objects) (Figure 1.1).





Figure 1.1. Montage in Renaissance Painting: “Vertumnus—Portrait of Rudolph II” (Giuseppe Arcimboldo, 1590). Digital frame enlargement.

As can be inferred from this example, montage before the letter can be traced to a distant past in art history. However, it is the twentieth century—and in particular the era of the historical avant-gardes (1910–1933)—when the technique saw its most prolific application. The period’s development of mechanical reproduction changed the understanding and practice of montage, facilitating its use and allowing for the artist’s subjectivity to recede, as the basic constituents of a montage were no longer necessarily a result of her work. Examples of montage exist in the novels *St. Petersburg* (1922) by Andrei Biely and *Ulysses* (1922) by Joyce, the Cubist poetry of Reverdy and Apollinaire, the Surrealist collages of Max Ernst, the satirical photomontages of John Heartfield, and the theater of Ernst Toller and Meyerhold. Finally, montage is employed in the cinematic traditions of both the West (for example, in D. W. Griffith’s 1916 *Intolerance*) and East (most notably, in the works of 1920s Soviet filmmakers).

The development of montage-based art was brought to a halt at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s as a result of the sociopolitical occurrences in some of the period’s leading artistic centers, the Soviet Union and Germany. Following Stalin’s succession of Lenin in 1924, the First Five Year Plan was implemented in 1928, which centralized all sectors of social life, including cultural production. Prominent revolutionary artists such as the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and most montage filmmakers were not in favor with the new government and increasingly faced accusations of “formalism.” By announcing the decree “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations” in 1932, Stalin unofficially inaugurated the doctrine of socialist realism, which sought to represent the real in its revolutionary development using the conventions of nineteenth-century realism. The gap that separates the artistic experiments of the early post-revolutionary years and socialist realism is well illustrated by the comparison between the Vasilyev brothers’ socialist realist film *Chapaev* (1934) and the eponymous book by Dmitri Furtanov upon which it is based (1923). The book belongs to the mixed genre of factograph, promoted by *LEF* (the Mayakovsky-edited journal of the loose association of Soviet cultural workers Levy Front Iskusstv [Left Front of the Arts]), and uses a fragmentary structure whose different parts integrate the conventions of diverse forms, including the diary and journalism. In contrast, the screen adaptation follows the rules of continuity editing and other norms of cinematic classicism, thereby approaching Hollywood’s ideal of stylistic transparency. Although the influence of the Soviet montage filmmakers is evident in one of the best known cultural artifacts from Hitler’s Germany, Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 1934), the

Third Reich's film industry likewise came to favor a style comparable to Hollywood's, after condemning much of modernist art as degenerate.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the umbrella term "montage filmmakers" used to describe them, the Soviet montage cinema displays a great formal diversity. David Bordwell adopts Luda and Jean Schnitzer's classification of the most prominent Soviet montage filmmakers according to the aesthetic implications of their respective politics. He associates Kuleshov with Pudovkin as conservative cineastes, and—on the other—Eisenstein with Vertov as extreme leftists ("Idea" 11). Kuleshov is today remembered less for his films than for the montage experiments he conducted between 1919 and 1924, all of which highlighted the dual nature of the film image: representational (what it shows) and relational (what inferences the joined shots leads to). The other three filmmakers are briefly addressed in reverse order of their importance for Brecht. Vertov, like Brecht and their many other contemporaries, had a fascination with the epoch's scientific developments and relativity theory in particular. The 1922 manifesto of the film collective "*Kinoki*" (cinema eyes), where Vertov was the leading figure, quotes as an aesthetic mandate the application of "the theory of relativity on the screen" (Vertov 9). As did Kuleshov in his "creative geography" experiment, which produces an impression of continuous time and space by joining together shots taken in different locations, Vertov created in *Chelovek s kino-apparatom* (Man with a Movie Camera [1929]) a semblance of a single city by combining images photographed in various parts of the country, thereby "conquering space and time" (87–88).

The metaphoric parallel between the described example and relativity theory seems apt, but Vertov's trust in the revelatory power of sight precludes further comparisons with Einstein as a subatomic physicist. Vertov's aesthetic is based on the syllogism where the camera equals an improved human eye. The task he sets for the instrument can be compared to that which the microscope or telescope has in science—to enhance perception and, thereby, also knowledge (Möbius 398). Unlike Eisenstein, however, whose intellectual montage is a means for rendering visible the truth beyond the observable phenomena, Vertov sets as a goal of his cinema "showing life as it is" (Vertov 45), "caught unawares" (41). Antagonistic to mimesis (in the sense of "representation" versus "presentation") as a heritage of the obsolete bourgeois form he sees theater to be, Vertov is unique among the Soviet montage filmmakers as a militant devotee of the documentary mode. He conceives of his cinema as "the FACTORY OF FACTS" (59), to which he contrasts popular genre films together with Eisenstein, a filmmaker with an eclectic style that borrows from the other art forms and builds extensively upon the past traditions.

Vertov conceives of montage as a broad notion that underlies all cinema's formal operations from photography to projection, as well as the cognitive processes that govern film viewing.

The implications of Brecht's special liking of Pudovkin, the least avant-garde of the identified Soviet filmmakers, have been largely ignored. As the country's other contemporary cineastes, he considers montage "the basic process of filmic creation" (Pudovkin 93). Still, the more crucial term in Pudovkin's system is neither Eisenstein's "idea" nor Vertov's "fact," but plot (in the sense of narrative).<sup>8</sup> Pudovkin distinguishes between constructive montage (which provides a scene, episode, reel, and the script with verisimilitudinous coherence) and montage as an expressive instrument (which influences the viewer's state of mind [62] through the use of such medium-specific devices as parallel editing). By suggesting that the expressive function of montage is mainly to enhance the viewer's emotions as opposed to advancing the narrative, Pudovkin implicitly ascribes primacy to constructive montage as a principally dramaturgical device. This appears the first reason for Pudovkin's appeal to Brecht, in whose system *Fabel* (fable, myth, or story) occupies a central place. The second reason probably concerns the Soviet filmmaker's special interest in acting. Pudovkin rejects Eisenstein's notion of type casting and acting (responsible for the former's assessment of the roles in *The Battleship Potemkin* [Eisenstein, 1925] as "depressingly banal" [22]), advocating instead the use of Stanislavski's method adjusted for film, with the close-up and the breakup of the performance into separate shots as the technology's defining characteristics.

Sergei Eisenstein, in "The Cinematographic Principle," equates montage with conflict not only between the elements in adjoining shots and between the elements within the shots: conflict of graphic directions ("*lines—either static or dynamic,*" either actual or implied through the movement of an object in the shot); the conflict of scales (the relative size of objects in the shot); conflict of volumes (the absolute size and shape of objects in the shot); conflict of masses ("*volumes filled with various intensities of light*"); and conflict of depths (the positions of objects in the photographed space and in the film frame) (39). He distinguishes between several strains of the technique, of which intellectual editing is the most complex. Eisenstein describes it as "combining shots that are *depictive*, single in meaning, neutral in content—into *intellectual* contexts and series" (30). Using the example of Japanese ideograms, Eisenstein demonstrates the viability of a cinema whose formal operations would be based on the Hegelian dialectical triad, whereby synthesis arises from the opposition between thesis and antithesis (45). Among the examples

he gives of images combined within the ideograms to create new meanings are water and an eye (signifying weeping), a mouth and a bird (signifying singing), and a knife and a heart (signifying sorrow). Relevant here are both this sense of the term “montage,” aphoristically described by Hans-Joachim Schlegel as “denotation through connotation” (qtd. in Bogdal 263) and the sense the term usually has in English: to describe more conventional disruptions of continuity of space and time between scenes, and/or of coherent spatial and temporal relationships among the profilmic events within scenes.

Montage figures prominently even in Brecht’s earliest systematic articulation of the epic/dialectic theater concept, “Anmerkungen zur Oper Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny” (“Notes to the Opera ‘Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny,’” 1930).<sup>9</sup> The table of contrasts between dramatic and epic theater—reproduced in its entirety later in the chapter—juxtaposes montage to growth. As John J. White notes in *Bertolt Brecht’s Dramatic Theory*, the three pairs of terms surrounding the cited one help clarify the sense in which “montage” is used in the context (56):

DRAMATIC THEATER	EPIC THEATER
one scene makes another	each scene for itself
linear development	in curves
evolutionary determinism	jumps

All three contrasts pertain to narrative structure, rather than the other codes of a performance, inscribed in the playtext or added in staging. Elsewhere in his writings, however, Brecht uses the term “montage” more broadly, to describe the opposition to the classical and Romantic idea of stylistic organicity (Friedrich, “On Brecht” 156), which entails art’s concealment of artifice through imitation of nature.<sup>10</sup> Brecht sometimes refers to montage also in relation to realms other than artistic, a possibility suggested by the term’s inherent possession in German of such connotations as construction and assemblage.

The last titular word that needs defining is *Brechtian*. In the context of this book, it describes something substantially influenced by Brecht’s theory of epic/dialectic theater, as acknowledged by the filmmakers themselves. The following few pages briefly survey the theory’s main terms.

All Brecht’s major theatrical and filmic concepts converge toward *dialectics*. As defined in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, dialectics is “the process of reasoning to obtain truth and knowledge on any topic” (Blackburn 99). Traceable back to the Socratics, it acquired



distinct meanings in various subsequent Western philosophies, and is today associated especially with Hegel and with Marx and Engels. The “Great Method,” as Brecht often refers to dialectics, informs his 1927 “Schwierigkeiten des Epischen Theaters” (“Difficulties of Epic Theater”; *Werke* 21: 209–10) and figures prominently as a term in a wide range of later writings, from the 1931 “Notizen über die dialektische Dramatik” (“Notes on Dialectical Dramatic Art”; *Werke* 21: 431–43) to the 1951–1956 series of writings under the common title “Die Dialektik auf dem Theater” (“Dialectics in the Theater”; *Werke* 23: 386–413). To Brecht, dialectics is

a practical doctrine of alliances and of the dissolution of alliances, of the exploitation of changes and the dependency on change, of the instigation of change and the changing of the instigators, the separation and emergence of unities, the unselfsufficiency of oppositions without each other, the unification of mutually exclusive oppositions. The Great Method makes it possible to recognize processes within things and to use them. It teaches us to ask questions which enable activity. (qtd. in Jameson 117)

Applied to the realm of art, dialectics then refers to the practice that can instigate a societal change, an expression of what Brecht calls interventionist thinking (*eingreifendes Denken*).

This links Brecht’s understanding of dialectics to his original concept of *Verfremdung*. Each of the existing translations of the term to English—alienation, distantiation, defamiliarization, and estrangement—is only partly adequate. The first of these implicitly collapses the boundary between the Brechtian term and *Entfremdung*, used by Marx to describe the effects on man of the capitalist mode of production: his separation from his labor and its products, as well as from his fellow man.<sup>11</sup> The other English translations of the Brechtian term fail to reflect *Verfremdung*’s intended purpose: to provide a new understanding of a given situation enacted onstage, thus closing the dialectical triad whose first two constituents are “to understand” and “to not understand” (*Werke* 22.1: 401; translation mine). This is what distinguishes Brecht’s project from such modernist avant-garde movements of the twentieth century as Surrealism, which likewise sought to astonish the recipient but often did not aim for more than a mere destruction of the mundanely familiar (Oh 180).<sup>12</sup> In its political slant, *Verfremdung* differs also from the related Russian Formalist concept of *priem ostranenia* (device of making

strange). Unlike Brecht, Russian Formalism presumes the ability of art to attain a relative independence from the other social realms, and sets as its ultimate goal a recovery of “the sensation of life,” “[making] one feel things, [making] the stone stony” (Shklovsky, “Art” 12). *Ostranenie*, then, refers not to cognition but only to perception.<sup>13</sup>

*Verfremdung* has been developed in contrast to the principle of empathy (*Einfühlung*), a central term of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (335 BC), which summarizes the formal procedures of the theater in the writer’s epoch. Brecht sees Aristotelian theater as an “artistic device of an era in which the people are changeable, and their environment invariable” (*Werke* 22.1: 553; translation mine). Late capitalism’s reversal of the described relationship calls for an alternative model, based on *Verfremdung* in its epistemological and practical aspects. The following definition of the concept touches upon both: “To defamiliarize an event or character means first, simply, to take away what is taken for granted, what is familiar and obvious, and instead generate astonishment and curiosity. . . . To estrange means also to historicize, to represent the events and persons as historical and transient” (554–55; translation mine). These words merit Klaus-Detlef Müller’s view of historicizing (*Historisierung*) as an “encompassing substantial term of the technique of *Verfremdung*, . . . its most important formal characteristic” (29; translation mine). Besides representing a dramatic event as if it has already transpired, *Historisierung* involves depicting the dramatic events as changeable (Knopf 1980, 386), whereby the spectator herself is conceived as “a great modifier, able to intervene in the natural and social processes” (*Werke* 22.1: 554–55; translation mine).<sup>14</sup>

While Brecht tends to discuss the broader notions of his aesthetic vocabulary in terms of each other, his definition of *Gestus*—as another *Verfremdung* technique—is self-standing. Fredric Jameson translates the original verb, *gerere*, as “to carry on,” to wear, to bear, and to wage (99)—whereas Marc Silberman traces *Gestus* back to the Greek *bastos*, the root of which, *bas*, “indicates coming or going in a specific, intentional direction” (“Brecht’s *Gestus*” 320). In 1767, Lessing referred to *Gestus* as “an actor’s tool that can make moral symbolism or general moral principles perceptible and comprehensible” (qtd. in Silberman, “Brecht’s *Gestus*” 321)—a sense similar to *Gestus* for Brecht. His earliest written reference to *Gestus* is from 1929, slightly postdating the use of the term by the composer, Brecht’s collaborator Kurt Weill.

To John Willett, *Gestus* is “at once gesture and gist, attitude and point: one aspect of the two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed” (*Theatre of Brecht* 175). Patrice Pavis’s



definition of the concept as “the social relationship which the actor establishes between his character and the other characters” (“Brechtian” 177) highlights its communal significance. From the late 1930s onward, Brecht used the term almost invariably in the sense of “social Gestus” (Silberman, “Brecht’s Gestus” 325), and in 1951 he made a statement closest to a definition: “As a social gestus, we should understand the mimical and gestural expression of social relationships, in which the people of a certain era stand together” (qtd. in Becker 34; translation mine). The examples of *Gestus* in Brecht’s theater include the use of masks to convey the changes of Peter Lorre’s Galy Gay in the 1931 production of *Man Equals Man*, the beggar teaching a rich man how to eat like the poor in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and the lack of Courage’s emotional reaction to the death of Katrin in the twelfth scene of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Brecht uses also the term *Grundgestus* to refer to what Silberman describes as “surprising reversals or the unexpected identity of opposites” (“Brecht’s Gestus” 326). *Grundgestus* comprises various, typically contradictory gestic material, such as Richard Gloucester courting his victim’s widow, Azdak using a chalk circle to identify Michael’s true mother, God betting with the Devil for the soul of Dr. Faustus, and Woyzeck buying a cheap knife in order to murder his wife (*Werke* 23: 200).<sup>15</sup>

*Gestus* and *Historisierung* are but two devices in the inventory of Brecht’s *epic* theater. Erwin Piscator—the one twentieth-century theater practitioner besides Brecht with whom the term is widely associated, attributes the term’s coinage to the poet, novelist, and dramatist Alfons Paquet—who allegedly used it in 1924 to describe his play *Fabnen* (Flags [1923]) (Knopf 1980, 394). For Piscator, the epic denotes primarily the disruption of the conventional theatrical models by borrowing from the other media, and especially those that rely on contemporary technologies. Brecht likewise does not describe the term as a strictly determined form, but as a quality that can be recognized in a variety of those forms (Knopf 1980, 396). He associates it with critical observation, with rejecting the notion of destiny and awakening of social activism, with demonstrating the dependence of thinking and language on the sociohistorical processes, transmitting the materialistic thinking, and democratism (reflected in the attempts to lift the boundary between the spectator and performance) (396).

The aforementioned epic/dialectic theater’s characteristics can be understood even better from Brecht’s own writings. The below schema, which originally appeared in “The Notes to ‘Mahagonny’” (1930), concisely juxtaposes dramatic (Aristotelian) and epic (Brechtian) theater:

## DRAMATIC THEATER

plot  
 implicates the spectator  
  
 wears down his capacity for action  
 provides him with sensations  
 experience  
 the spectator is involved into something  
 suggestion  
 instinctive feelings are preserved  
  
 the spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience  
 the human being is taken for granted  
 he is unalterable  
 eyes on the finish  
 one scene makes another  
 growth  
 linear development  
 evolutionary determinism  
 man as a fixed point  
 thought determines being  
 feeling

## EPIC THEATER

narrative  
 turns the spectator into an observer, but in a stage situation  
  
 arouses his capacity for action  
 forces him to take decisions  
 picture of the world  
 he is made to face something  
  
 argument  
 brought to the point of recognition  
  
 the spectator stands outside, studies  
 the human being is the object of the inquiry  
 he is alterable and able to alter  
 eyes on the course  
 each scene for itself  
 montage  
 in curves  
 jumps  
 man as a process  
 social being determines thought  
 reason (*Brecht on Theatre* 37)

The schema invites the reader to alternate between vertical and horizontal readings, and varies its focus from dramatic structure to dramatic spectatorship. Both its formal peculiarity and its political inflection appealed to the late 1960s generation of filmmakers and critics, crucially concerned with the spectatorial agency and its transposition to the “real world.” It is mainly on the basis of the schema that practitioners and commentators alike have constructed their understandings of Brecht.

## Brecht's Dramatic Theory in Film Studies: From the Apparatus to Cognitive Film Theory

In terms of its scope and longevity, the influence of Brecht's concept of epic/dialectic theater on film studies surpasses that of all other theories of the stage. Evident already in the 1950s, this impact took hold two decades later—an occurrence that Sylvia Harvey and Noël Carroll explain by Brecht's influence on Godard (Harvey 49; Carroll, *Mystifying* 91) as one of the most prominent and innovative filmmakers of the previous decade. Carroll notes also that the influence Brecht's ideas exerted on Roland Barthes, “*the* exemplary cultural critic of contemporary theorists” (91), was another factor in leading film theorists and critics to appropriate Brecht's ideas in the 1970s. Harvey also explains the phenomenon by the contemporary appearance of Benjamin's “Conversations with Brecht,” Brecht's “Against Lukács,” and texts by Russian Formalists and futurists hitherto unavailable in English (50), while Silberman mentions in a similar context the 1969 publication of Brecht's *Texte für Filme* (Texts for Films) (“Brecht and Film” 198). Finally, Harvey quotes as an additional reason for the return to Brecht during this period the growing interest in the relationship between cultural production and social change, and the accompanying search for the protocols of a radical art (49).

Although this book's main argument bases itself neither on the “SLAB” theory's appropriation of Brecht nor on the cognitivist critique of it, it is worthwhile to summarize, and offer a critique of, the key articulations of the two strands of thinking that continue to impact how Brecht is understood in film studies: Baudry (1999), Wollen (1999), MacCabe (1974), Heath (1974), Polan (1974, 1985) (representative of the former), and Smith (1996) (indicative of the latter). Both of these strands of thinking about Brecht are problematic insofar as they place an exceeding emphasis on his formally subversive aspect, configuring him as the rejector of past techniques and traditions and—in turn—obscuring such defining features of his art theory and practice as dialectics and narration. The second reason is the complexity of much of “SLAB” theory, and its often opaque articulations. The following few pages clarify and question “SLAB” theorists' and cognitivists' view of Brecht and further illustrate the position of importance that Brecht has occupied in film studies for the past several decades.

Since the advent of digital technologies in the early 1990s, the question of cinema's uncertain future informed discourses on moving image media with increasing frequency. Long before the now seemingly irreversible death of celluloid and photographic emulsion, with the crisis of indexicality as its corollary, Godard proclaimed cinema dead in

*Week-End* (1967). The film was released nearly a decade after Godard's feature-length debut, *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless* [1959]), which had performed the acrobatic act of simultaneously celebrating Hollywood cinema and deconstructing its "language." The former impulse was expressed in the film's numerous and earnest homages to various symbols of America, from revolvers to convertible cars and from Humphrey Bogart to William Faulkner, whereas the latter impulse manifested itself in the film's rejection of the transparency associated with the classical style. Namely, *Breathless* replaces the standard combination of three-point lighting and slow stock with available lighting and fast stock, smooth tracking shots with jittery handheld ones, and—most (in)famously—continuity editing with jump cuts. Produced at a time when the techniques of Godard's first feature had already petrified into conventions, *Week-End's* announcement of cinema's demise did not concern merely the death of "invisible style." The problems of filmic signification, which by then had preoccupied theorists and theoretically conscious practitioners alike, were now being transposed from the terrain of industry (cinema as a product of any and all film companies from "Hollywood" to "Mosfilm") to that of ontology (cinema as a medium of photography, and therefore of representation). Also in 1967, Marxist critical theorist and filmmaker Guy Debord launched *Society of the Spectacle*, a book that diagnosed the Western obsession with spectacles of representation and identified—in words strongly reminiscent of Brecht—the supplantation of genuine activity by passive identification with spectacle (12).

The West's pre-1968 revolutionary optimism allowed for Godard's proclamation of cinema's death to be interpreted as a tongue-in-cheek rewording of Louis Lumière's description of his own invention as one without future. Similarly, Debord's indictment of representation could then still have been dismissed as an extremist exaggeration. But these expressions acquired a different tenor in the atmosphere of disappointment that marked the intellectual circles at the left side of the political spectrum in the years following the demise of the students and workers' protests. Increasingly unable to determine the aesthetic path to an efficacious progressive cinema, film theorists were now questioning not only specific "forms" and/or "contents," but also the medium itself.

The earliest text to apply Debord's ideas specifically to cinema was also an inaugural one in the corpus of texts known as apparatus theory, which decisively introduced Brecht in the context of film studies: Jean-Louis Baudry's "The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." Imbued with a dark outlook that Brecht would probably designate as retrograde, the article draws on diverse philosophical sources from Plato to Jacques Lacan to interrogate the possibility of attaining

the real through representational art. Baudry adopts the ancient Roman *perspectiva naturalis* / *perspectiva artificialis* binary, which refers to the difference between the way most of us perceive the world visually (with two moving, concave-shaped eyes) and the way the results of visual perception are represented with the use of *perspectiva artificialis*, a fourteenth-century convention of visual representation that implies the hypothetical observer's fixity and monocularity, and a mathematical adjustment for flat surfaces. He implies a parallel between the two kinds of perspective and the opposites of the real and its appearances, as they appear in Plato's cave parable. The immobile slaves who confuse the shadows on the wall that they are facing with real things serve in this account as a link to the cinematographic apparatus, a term encompassing the entire film-making technology. Baudry charges the invention with being inherently conventionalized through its deployment of *perspectiva artificialis*, thereby functioning as a barrier from the real while disguising itself as a pathway to it. In addition, he indicts such agents of cinematic continuity as narrative procedures, framing, camera movements, and editing for helping subjectify the viewer, the meaning of which verb varies according to the philosophical tradition Baudry refers to in a given section of the article.

Lacan, for whom perspective is a means of man's reduction to an eye and of an eye to a point (qtd. in Damisch 45), helps Baudry advance his anti-cinematic argument by expanding the prisoner-spectator analogy to include the infant in the mirror stage. According to Lacan, the infant recognizes itself in this phase of development as an entity separate from its surroundings. This recognition leads to the formation of its unconscious and—because the unconscious is for Lacan structured like language—to the infant's entry into the realm of the symbolic. Cinema's ideological effect that Baudry refers to, following Althusser, involves configuring the domain of the spectator's natural existence as secondary in importance to that of the transcendental, of "the beyond," which ultimately hinders her possibility of acting in the world politically. While not referring to Brecht, Baudry evokes him by placing his focus—and critique—on the process of spectatorial identification (with both the characters represented and the cinematographic apparatus itself) that the medium supposedly encourages.

The period's earliest major piece of film criticism in English to draw substantially on Brecht was Peter Wollen's "Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'est*" (1985 [1972]), which discusses Godard's body of work in general and the titular film in particular in terms reminiscent of the epic versus dramatic theater schema. Wollen juxtaposes the "seven deadly sins" of cinema (the left column of the schema reproduced below) with "the seven cardinal virtues" of counter-cinema (the right column):

## NARRATIVE TRANSITIVITY

Identification  
 Transparency  
 Single diegesis  
 Closure  
 Pleasure  
 Fiction

## NARRATIVE INTRANSITIVITY

Estrangement  
 Foregrounding  
 Multiple diegesis  
 Aperture  
 Unpleasure  
 Reality (501)

Lacking the transparency of Brecht's schema, Wollen's binaries require explanation. He defines narrative transitivity in terms of establishing causal relations among the represented events, which entails the arrangement of "function[s] that chang[e] the course of the narrative" (501) so as to produce the impression of "one thing following another" and to conform to the structure of "equilibrium—equilibrium disrupted—equilibrium restored" (501) as a version of Aristotle's "beginning—middle—end."<sup>16</sup> In contrast, narrative intransitivity involves "gaps and interruptions, episodic construction [and] undigested digression" (501). The second dichotomy explicitly reveals its indebtedness to Brecht.<sup>17</sup> Wollen's explanation of the next pair of terms, transparency and foregrounding, notes the lineage of the style of dominant cinema in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance approach to language and representation as self-effacing instruments for "showing" the world, as opposed to making it "readable." The latter approach is exemplified by what Wollen calls Godard's pictography, an assemblage of techniques that endow images with genuine semantic codes and illustrate the problem of representing the abstract through the concrete.

The fourth "deadly sin" and "cardinal virtue," single diegesis and multiple diegesis, pertain to a film's depiction of homogeneous versus heterogeneous worlds. A conventional film is a coherent "story," whose elements belong to the same space and time, whereas a counter-film can feature elements purposely incongruous in those two respects. This dichotomy bears a close relationship to that of closure and aperture, descriptively defined by Wollen as "a self-contained object, harmonized within its own bounds, v. open-endedness, overspill, intertextuality—allusion, quotation and parody" (505). The first term in the next pair of binaries, pleasure, refers to the aspiration of the cinema as a commercial enterprise to satisfy the viewer, which Wollen sees as occurring at the cost of distracting the masses from the stern tasks that are their true destiny (506). The counter-cinema should therefore provide "unpleasure," which could help mobilize the viewer toward recognizing and achieving her political goals. Wollen uses the Freudian terms of desire and fantasy

to describe the principles underlying conventional filmic representation. While Brecht, following Horace, strove to both “delight and instruct,” Wollen sees Godard in *Vent d’est* (Wind from the East, 1969) falling short of constructing fantasy, a condition necessary for revolutionary politics, in ways other than those of sadomasochistic provocation (507) and, therefore, of “unpleasure.” Contrary to what one might expect from the penetration of psychoanalytic terms toward the end of the article, Wollen defines the last binary—“fiction” and “reality”—not in terms of Lacanian psychoanalytic orders of the Symbolic, Real, and Imaginary, but in terms of the difference between the fictional and nonfictional mode and the results of combining their respective conventions.<sup>18</sup>

Wollen’s article provided the context for the appearance of the first Brecht-dedicated issue of *Screen* (1974). Arguably most influential among the contributions have been Colin MacCabe’s and Stephen Heath’s articles, both of which downplay the importance of fantasy (in the sense of pleasure) for revolutionary cinema. In his “Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses,” MacCabe notes that the classic realist text (a term he applies to both literature and film) is partly defined by its use of metalanguage, which creates an impression of allowing reality to (merely) appear, and denies its own status as articulation (9). MacCabe illustrates his point with a short excerpt from George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), where the omniscient narrator—whose status is concealed by the narrative’s use of the third person—problematizes a character’s attitude to his neighbors’ opinions about him. According to MacCabe, the metanarrative confirms its claim to be axiomatically truthful by implicitly inviting the reader to evaluate the veracity of the juxtaposed characters’ views of each other. However, the metalanguage “cannot deal with the real as contradictory” (12) as it is necessarily ideological, ensuring “the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularly” (12).

MacCabe introduces into the discourse Lacan’s concept of *méconnaissance*, which refers to both the subject’s self-knowledge and misunderstanding, involved in the successful use of language or any other similarly structured area of the symbolic (18). As a result of *méconnaissance*, the subject is “continually ignored as being caught up in a process of articulation to be taken as a fixed place founding the discourse” (18). MacCabe further develops the idea of the individual’s inevitable transformation into a subject (through each and every social institution in the broadest sense of the term) with the help of Althusser’s view of ideology. According to Althusser in MacCabe’s interpretation, the subject falsely “holds out the promise that the victorious conclusion to the class struggle will result



in the arrival of the new and true ideology which will correspond to the real" (23).

MacCabe links the above thinkers to Brecht via the latter's view of the film spectator, as expounded in his article "The Threepenny Lawsuit" (1931, published 1932). As MacCabe summarizes Brecht's position on the medium, the cinema possesses the "ability to place the spectator in the position of a unified subject that ensures the contradiction between his working activity which is productive and the leisure activity in which he is constantly placed as consumer" (24). Finally, he acknowledges Roberto Rossellini (*Rome, Open City* [1945], *Journey to Italy* [1954]) for shaking the metalanguage by replacing one dominant discourse with a multitude thereof (19). But the only examples MacCabe gives of films that fully oppose the metalanguage are *Tout va bien* (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972) and *Kuble Wampe*, works he designates as revolutionary (21) or progressive realist texts (22). In his view, the two films resist privileging the narrative against the characters and use it as "the method by which various situations can be articulated together" (24).

The main theses of the article indeed strongly evoke Brecht and his position on realism in art as evidenced in his contributions to the debate on the topic with György Lukács in the 1930s. But MacCabe's unreserved embrace of this position is hardly congruous with his commentary on Eisenstein. MacCabe does not work from any of Eisenstein's definitions of montage, instead inferring one from the dichotomy the Soviet theorist establishes between montage and "affidavit-exposition"—"representation shot from a single set-up" (qtd. in MacCabe 14). This definition, according to which "montage is the showing of the same representation from different points of view" (14), slights the difference between continuity editing and nonlinear editing patterns that won international fame for Eisenstein and other Soviet filmmakers of his generation.

MacCabe goes on to correctly conclude that there is no possible language of "affidavit-exposition" that could convey such abstract concepts as widowhood (to give the example from Eisenstein that MacCabe uses), thus pointing to the incompatibility of the theorist's supposed definition of montage and Eisenstein's example. He objects to Eisenstein's conception of montage as exemplified by the definition provided, because it falsely presumes a stability of meaning for "the raw material of the montage" (13)—the images and sounds that comprise it. In effect, MacCabe argues, this conception obscures the contradictions of the "raw material" while attempting to illuminate those between individual constituents of the montage. As a remedy, he proposes a modified view of montage "as the effect generated by a conflict of discourse in which

the opposition available in the juxtaposed discourses are contradictory and in conflict” (16).

MacCabe does not demonstrate the practical viability of cinematic signification without representation, which the above proposal appears to advocate. And indeed, even the attempts at departure from mimeticism in film as radical as Eisenstein’s own projected screen adaptation of Marx’s *Capital* illustrate the importance for a film to retain a degree of representational verisimilitude in order to convey a meaning. Consider, for example, the importance of naturalistically representing the texture of the silk stockings from a test scene for the film—their smoothness, shininess, etc.—for Marx’s idea of this object’s transformation into a fetishistic commodity to be effectively communicated. Second, MacCabe’s emphasis on the convergences between Brecht’s and Eisenstein’s theories comes at the expense of Brecht’s preference for Pudovkin, closest among the Soviet montage filmmakers to Hollywood’s style and narrative. Pertinently, neither MacCabe nor Heath acknowledge the centrality of *Fabel* in Brecht’s dramatic system. This allows MacCabe to proclaim *Tout va bien* (where the narrative has arguably receded further into the background than in *Kuhle Wampe*) more Brechtian than Brecht and Dudow’s own film (25).

Heath radicalizes MacCabe’s ideas, bringing together Freud (fetishism), Althusser (interpellation), and Brecht (the passivity of the spectator in Aristotelian theater). All these ideas converge into a metaphorical diagnosis of human position in society: we are all dominated subjects, “set in position” (106). Heath opens his explanation of Brecht’s relevance for cinema by noting Godard’s use of distancing formal strategies, whereby “the reality of our struggle in ideology against the representations it produces and the positions of the subject they hold” (104)—or, more broadly, the relationship between reality and its representations—receives a thematic treatment. The commentary on Godard announces two of the sources for the article’s main ideas: Louis Althusser, the key terms of whose concept of Ideological State Apparatuses Heath adopts (ideology, the subject, and interpellation), and Freud, upon whose trope of sight as used in “Fetishism” he draws. Freud’s article describes the case of his patient, for whom the condition of sexual satisfaction was the appearance of “a shine on the nose.” The analysis transformed “shine” (*Glanz*) into “glance” in English (the patient’s mother tongue, which he had nearly forgotten in Germany), and concluded that the patient alleviated anxiety from castration by glancing at the woman’s nose—the substitute for the penis whose lack in women the patient had recognized as a child.

Heath takes up both “glance” and its displacement to German in the following parable of mainstream film spectatorship. The implicitly male Heathen viewer casts his glance at the photograph projected onto the

film screen, which “[holds] him pleurably in the safety of disavowal; at once a knowledge—this exists—and a perspective of reassurance—but I am outside of this existence” (107). Heath uses the term “*Glanz*” to link the fetish with representation of the latter notion as “a brilliance, something lit up, heightened, depicted, as under an arc light, a point of (theatrical) representation” (107). His view of the photograph’s structure as fetishistic, capable of “[subliming] anything into the security of beauty” (107) receives support in a reference to the historic resistance to sound in cinema in the name of sublimity and beauty. Behind Heath’s failure to acknowledge that the development of the microphone and the speaker was likewise governed by the purpose of verisimilitude, one can detect a view of sound as the formal aspect of cinema especially suitable for Brechtian interventions. Such a view can be accounted for by the fact that the material typically constituting the main element of film sound track—dialogue—operates with arbitrary signifiers. The filmmaker can foreground their arbitrariness, thereby exposing the viewer’s interpellation through language.

Heath connects fetishism with interpellation via the fixity of the subject, posited by both Freud and Althusser: “ideology” (embodied in ideological state apparatuses such as “family, school, church, press, art, etc.”) (107) “takes up individuals” and “subjects them” (114).<sup>19</sup> Distantiation requires breaking the separation down, repositioning the spectator so that she can adopt a critical (multi-) perspective. Heath extends the insight to Brecht by concluding that most of Brecht’s criticism of Aristotelian theater concerns the type of spectatorial identification (*Einfühlung*) it promotes. For him, fetishism and interpellation are related processes, operating at the levels of both narrative and style. These processes are supported by the adherence of the medium’s optical apparatus to Renaissance perspective and the architectural setup of conventional theater and cinema. Their concomitants are empathy and catharsis, the effects on the viewer fostered by Aristotelian theater and mainstream cinema through an array of formal characteristics associated with realism as a style (not “the illusion as reality,” but “the illusion of reality”) (113).<sup>20</sup>

Heath goes on to establish a parallel between the fourth wall, one of the stylistic conventions of Aristotelian theater, and mainstream cinema’s stylistic operations that emulate ostensibly objective and neutral third-person narration, through a metaphor based on Barthes’s remark that “Aristotelian theater and cinema are held together in this bond according to a series of shared aims (the effect of ‘Reality’) and devices” (117). Both media “dispos[e]— . . . la[y] out—the coherence of a subject-spectator whom [they] hol[d] in position” (117). Being itself an ideological state apparatus, cinema cannot demolish ideology but can attempt to displace its formations by posing the specific relations of those formations in

the mode of production (124). More succinctly, cinema can complement the unavoidable interpellation with its opposite: disinterpellation through distantiation, defined as a work of demonstrating contradictions (119)—fundamental elements of the real. Brechtian form thus becomes “the form . . . of the domination of reality” (123), a term Heath distinguishes from “Reality” (121), as the subject’s faulty impression of the real.

Heath’s discussion of the three broad strategies used to achieve distantiation in film—(1) self-reflexivity; (2) montage; (3) theatricalization (narrative references to the medium and the use of its stylistic conventions)—collapses the distinctions between montage and the other two. The examples of self-reflexivity he provides entail a process essential to montage: juxtaposing (the representation with its account of itself), and one of the definitions of theatricalization is “critical heterogeneity” (119) (in other words, a montage of styles). By proposing both montage and theatricality as viable techniques of cinematic estrangement, Heath treats their compatibility as a given, disregarding the problems in blending the two modes from the standpoint of perception. Namely, if the intercutting between two or more images that represent objects of indeterminate mutual spatial and temporal relations alternates at such a speed that the purported theatricality of those images is rendered inconspicuous, then the perceptually challenging rapid editing will take precedence over *mise-en-scène* techniques.

Between narrative and so-called Brechtian form (which Heath sees as predicated on montage and related principles), Heath posits a contrast. In support of this position, he refers to Brecht’s note of narrative interruption as essential (122) (thereby blurring the distinction between linear and nonlinear narrative forms), and interprets Brecht’s remark on movement as a basic unit of film structure to be a tacit suggestion that film needs to “hold back the narrative” (125). The “narrative/montage” dichotomy (121) that Heath attributes to Brecht disregards the centrality of the notion of narrating (*erzählen*) in both of Brecht’s schemas that contrast dramatic and epic theater.

Finally, Heath establishes a link between the Freudian-Althusserian parable of the processes underlying dominant (mainstream) cinema and the project of counter-cinema theory and practice through a passing reference to fetishism as a concept in Karl Marx. The Marxist aspect of the reform of cinema that he calls for further manifests itself through the resonance between the eleventh of Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” (“the point is to change the world”) (qtd. in Heath 110) and an argument from the article’s final segment, that “the real work is the attempt at a ceaseless transformation [of cinema]” (126).

During the same period as these essays, Dana Polan lightened the serious apparatus discourse by offering a made-in-Hollywood example

of reflexivity and deconstruction: Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck cartoons in which the characters address the camera and comment on the act of filmmaking. Following Shklovsky, Polan notes that all art is distanced, that the formal operations the 1970s contributors to *Screen* hail as radical can in fact be readily encountered in mainstream cinema, and that the notion of “classic realist text” and its vicissitudes delineated by MacCabe are questionable in light of such works as *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767). The eighteenth-century novel, notes Polan, foregrounds its artifice no less than *Tout va bien*. Shklovsky’s description of the novel as “the most typical [one] in world literature” (“Tristram” 57) comes in handy to advance an argument against the *Screen* critics. But the Warner Bros. cartoons and *Tristram Shandy* possess another key commonality, on which Polan is silent: they are prominently humorous. And if all art requires distanciation, this is especially so with comedy. If it were not for the slapstick’s jocose stylization, the genre’s violent content would unsettle us rather than make us laugh. The emotional and intellectual distance promoted by literary works and films that aim primarily—or at least importantly—to incite amusement enables us to accept and justify the reflexive commentaries suffusing such texts. In Mel Brooks’s *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993), the title character (Cary Elwes) objects to a narrative development as untrue to the script, an element that would constitute an intolerable transgression in an “earnest” rendition of the tale.

As to Shklovsky and *Tristram Shandy*, the Russian critic’s view of the novel differs from what the decontextualized quote Polan uses may lead one to infer. For Shklovsky, *Tristram Shandy* destroys before the letter the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel by laying them bare. It is the novel’s parodic inventorization of techniques that later came to be associated with the genre that makes *Tristram Shandy* typical. The novel’s similarities to such contemporary works as *Tom Jones* (which Polan compares with and contrasts to Laurence Sterne’s novel) are, then, homologous rather than analogous: its shared traits serve different aesthetic functions, much like *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* and such non-comedic renditions of the legend about the Sherwood forest archer as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). Accordingly, Shklovsky’s argument would better support MacCabe’s view than Polan’s.

As importantly, Polan’s cinematic examples come from animated films, the kind to which many of the issues apparatus theorists advance do not apply. Baudry and the others would hardly refute that it is perfectly feasible to *draw* a scene that defies the rules of *perspectiva artificialis*, and to reproduce it via the cinematographic apparatus so as to maintain intact the perspectival relations among the scene’s elements. What they would deny instead is the possibility of “bypassing” the Renaissance discovery when *photographing* a three-dimensional object, as the entire

lineage of optical instruments from the *laterna magica* to the movie projector base themselves on the principles of Brunelleschian perspective. Notwithstanding the youthful bravado of his prose, Polan's article thus cuts the Gordian knot: it dismisses the problems identified by apparatus theorists as irrelevant by ignoring some of their crucial postulates.

The cybernetic revolution of the 1980s spurred the ascent of cognitive science,<sup>21</sup> and a band of film scholars—perhaps most notably David Bordwell and Noël Carroll—soon rode the tide of the new discipline. The proliferation of computer technologies during the period was not the sole reason that the word “revolution” was less and less associated with politics: the economic downfall and the suppression of democratizing currents in communist Europe now seemed irreversible; Jerry Rubin had completed his transition from a hippie into a yuppie; and Francis Fukuyama was about to proclaim the free market as the ultimate point of humanity's development. The Freudian-Althusserian visions of the mind and society as a labyrinth without an exit, which had pervaded film theory in the preceding couple of decades, were now being replaced by sobriety-exuding discourses predicated on the analogy between the mind and the computer. Whereas apparatus theorists understood the experience of film viewing as entailing an interpellation of passive subjects, the cognitivists regarded that experience as an active engagement with cues provided to the viewers. The process sees the viewer making inferences and formulating hypotheses by comparing the cues against the schemata—different kinds of knowledge relevant to the processing of cues.

Carroll was the first critic of cognitivist orientation to offer a lasting commentary of pertinence to the application of Brecht to film. In *Mystifying Movies* (1988), he attacks Brecht for setting the ground for “SLAB” theory's conflation of illusionism and representation (91). The former term is, he notes, inadequate to describe the effect on the spectator of a mimetic representation, as it—unlike visual illusions proper—does not rest on deceiving the recipient (93). Building upon that, Murray Smith notes in his “The Logic and Legacy of Brechtianism” (1996) the causality poststructuralist film theorists posit between the illusionism of mainstream films and spectatorial empathy. He traces the conjecture back to Brecht, from whom he derives the following two premises:

*Premise 1:* Emotional response of the emphatic type requires that the spectator mistake the representation for reality.

*Premise 2:* Having an emotional response of the emphatic type deadens our rational and critical faculties (132).

As a proof that Brecht saw theater as capable of inducing the confusion referred to in the first premise, Smith offers a quote from “A Small Organon,” which proposes that “too much heightening of the illusion in the setting, together with a “magnetic” way of acting . . . gives the spectator the illusion of being present at a fleeting, accidental, ‘real’ event” (qtd. in M. Smith, “Logic” 132). He then proceeds to dispute the premise, noting that “spectators do not behave as if they mistook represented actions for real ones—for if they did, they would in many instances flee or intervene, rather than weep and laugh” (132).

The observation, which Smith describes as “damning” (132), is itself questionable. First, it carries the unwanted implication that spectatorial responses of weeping and laughter belong to an order essentially different from that represented by leaving the theater house in panic or interacting with the people and objects onstage. Of course, reality proves otherwise: the former kind of reactions are no more characteristic of artwork reception than of other contexts, and we respond to everyday life phenomena in a wide range of ways, often merely observing situations that allow—and call for—direct involvement. This being obvious, it is difficult to infer what criterion has led Smith to implicitly establish the two categories of responses once the possibility is dismissed that they were meant to correspond to the spectatorial “passivity”/“activity” involved (the dichotomy, prominent in Brecht and his poststructuralist followers, neither serves Smith’s specific argument nor fits the general cognitivist conception of the viewer as producer of meaning).

Even if we disregard the inadequate proof Smith uses to demonstrate that viewers do not mistake onstage representations for real events, the assumption underlying his point—that Brecht equated the effects on the viewer of a “surface realist” stage representation and of an actual event—remains hard to accept. The multiple hints in the article that *Verfremdung* is indebted to *ostranenie* indicate that Smith assumes Brecht’s familiarity with Shklovsky, and therefore also with Shklovsky’s view that estrangement is the essential condition of all art. But Smith’s discussion implies that it somehow escaped Brecht that the average theater spectator with some knowledge of everyday matters will *not* mistake a stage event for a real one. Heath, a representative of the poststructuralist school of thinking against which Smith mobilizes his insights, did not miss the quotation marks surrounding the word “real” in the quotation of Brecht that Smith offers. In “Lessons from Brecht,” he reminds us that Brecht maintains that “the spectator never loses consciousness of the fact that he is at the theater,” but “remains conscious of the fact that the illusion from which he derives his pleasure is an illusion” (113).



That is precisely where lies much of the appeal of illusions, at least in the sense Brecht uses the word. For instance, optical illusions would not be perceived as such if they did not flaunt their operations (the Müller-Lyer arrows, for example, become just two figures of different length if they are not accompanied by the explanation that their length is actually equal).<sup>22</sup> Optical illusions, then, are defined by their persistence in spite of our cognitive correction of our faulty perception of them. Tom Gunning's description of the push and pull between belief and disbelief that one feels when watching a manipulated photographic image teetering on the verge of plausibility ("What's" 45) applies to all media that lend themselves to creating verisimilitude.<sup>23</sup> This impression can occur if we see from the right spot the fresco on the flat ceiling of the Church of St. Ignazio in Rome, where the painting's use of linear perspective helps convey the impression that the structure possesses a dome, or a photographic image whose properties emphasize its similarity to the object it represents. That an artwork's verisimilitude can vary from that of a *Peanuts* comic strip frame to a frame of a documentary in 3D is a key question here, to reverse Smith's remark that "the force of defamiliarization is, of course, variable, but that is another question" (134).

Smith downplays the difference between arbitrary signs (such as linguistic ones) and non-arbitrary signs (such as the iconic and indexical signs used in much of theater and cinema). To that end, he uses an example from literature in a discussion of how an aesthetic context transforms the perceiver's emotions into "quasi-emotions" (133). He quotes the Russian Formalist critic Victor Erlich, for whom the word "blood"—when used in a poem—"becomes an object of esthetic contemplation rather than a catalyst of fear, hatred, or enthusiasm" (qtd. on 133). In Smith's account, Erlich's "poetic" context is conflated with a broader, aesthetic one. This allows his argument to advance, but only at the expense of a fact for which no other example needs to be sought than Erlich's, when adapted for theater and cinema. Many viewers are disturbed by convincing visual representations of blood even when they do not understand the narrative context of the latter's appearance, and when they are aware of the artifice typically involved by such representations.

Smith identifies two problems with Premise 2: first, its assumption of a dichotomous relationship between emotion and reason, contrary to the dominant position in contemporary cognitive science and philosophy of mind that no emotion can arise without a preceding cognitive evaluation. Second, combining the insights of Kendall Walton and Victor Erlich, Smith argues that the aesthetic context—with which Brecht and his followers are concerned—transforms emotions into "pseudo-emo-

tions,” thereby defamiliarizing them. We are thus led to infer that the strategies of *Verfremdung* Brecht advocates are already embedded even in those artworks that Brecht would see as addressing our emotions rather than our reason, which makes his techniques superfluous.

A few points need to be made about this postulate and Smith’s commentary on it. First, by stressing the Brechtian term *Einfühlung* (“identification”) in the introductory paragraph of his article, Smith neglects to acknowledge the development of Brecht’s own understanding of the relationship between “feeling” (*Gefühl*) and “reason,” reflected by Brecht’s replacement of the binary with that of “identification” (*Einfühlung*) and “reason” (*Ratio*) in the revised version of the dramatic/epic theater schema. Second, given that what Smith refers to as “Brechtianism” was propelled by an opposition to dominant cinema, it seems ironic that he criticizes the discourse partly in the name of another discourse’s *dominance*, without attempting to explain the positive connotation he implicitly assigns to the term. Pertinent to the second point is also the question of whether the position Smith uses against “Brechtianism” really is dominant, given the existence of important dissenting voices in cognitive science, such as Greg M. Smith. The latter film scholar has convincingly built the case for the independence of emotion from conscious condition, following the insights by Cannon (who noted that emotional behavior may manifest itself even when the cerebral cortex has been anesthetized), Normansell, and Panksepp (who reported that play behaviors in decorticated animals do not completely cease), and Pylyshyn (who noted the impossibility of eliciting and extinguishing emotions through purely cognitive efforts) (G. M. Smith 20–21).

Murray Smith thus attacks “Brechtianism” for its lack of scientific rigor, while the discipline he uses for the endeavor is itself fraught with uncertainties and contradictions, and frequently denigrated as a “soft” science. Even if it were otherwise, a troubling question would remain: does the attempt of Murray Smith and some other writers working within the framework of cognitive science to overturn the feeling/reason dichotomy seem viable, given the global epistemological stability the dichotomy had enjoyed since long before both they and Brecht came along? And does not the persistence of both terms in cognitive science itself indicate a degree of the dichotomy’s continued usefulness? Also, does not the fact that “emotion is [normally] integrated with perception, attention, and cognition” (133) add relevance to the contrasting comparison (rather than detract from it), much as the color green, for example, can be productively compared with yellow precisely because of their possession of a common element? Finally, Walton’s sound argument that Murray Smith adopts is valid in the context of “Brechtianism” only if we substitute

Brecht's understanding of illusion for that of Murray Smith. The reasons against that move have been explained.

Despite the authority of Murray Smith's deprecating assessment of Brecht's legacy in cinema, the concepts of epic/dialectic theater continue to inspire film practitioners. Before looking at some examples in detail, Brecht's own practical and theoretical dealings with the medium need to be examined.

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## Brecht the Filmmaker

### The “Great Method” Adjusted

A priori l’oeuvre de Brecht n’a pas affaire avec le cinema. Je dirais plus: elle repousse, elle refuse violement le cinema. [Brecht’s oeuvre has nothing to do with cinema. I would say even more: he rejects, he violently refuses cinema.]

—Bernard Dort



**B**RECHT’S PROLIFIC LITERARY OUTPUT includes poems, short stories, novels, and journals, in addition to dozens of plays. Blurring the low art / high art dichotomy well before the advent of postmodernism, he also embraced the proliferating mass media as his expressive outlets. Among the results of such ventures are his recordings of some of the Kurt Weill–composed songs for which he was the lyricist, and the rhymes for an automobile newspaper ad. Brecht likewise periodically forayed into cinema as a writer and director, provided bases for several films in whose production he did not participate, and served as a model artist for a great number of major filmmakers from the 1960s onward. What could then have prompted Bernard Dort to make the above statement (in Witte 62)? This chapter pursues that question, approaching Brecht’s relationship to cinema from historical, aesthetic, and theoretical standpoints.