

transcendence which provides the context for the process we have just outlined no longer possesses any concrete religious content. It is entirely nihilistic—though without modifying the essentially religious character of the process. Benjamin notes: ‘Allegory goes away empty-handed. Evil as such, which it cherished as enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing but allegory, and means something different from what it is. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents.’ And equally perceptive is Benjamin’s insight that it is ‘the theological essence of the subject’ that is here expressed.<sup>9</sup> And this subjectivity, whose creativity has exceeded all bounds and arrived at the point of self-destruction, has a mode of receptivity corresponding to it. Here too, Benjamin’s unremitting rigour provides the essential commentary: ‘For the only diversion the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory.’<sup>10</sup> Benjamin is much too precise a stylist for us to be able to ignore the pejorative undertones implicit in his use of the word ‘diversion’. Where the world of objects is no longer taken seriously, the seriousness of the world of the subject must vanish with it.

## On Bertolt Brecht

|

In the realm of aesthetics, the way a thing is expressed is of a qualitatively different order from what it would be in science. No one will deny that even in science a statement can be made in a clear or confused, an elegant or a laboured manner, etc., and that depending on this the method of presentation can accelerate, impede or retard the acceptance of novel ideas. But it would be misguided to see in this any justification for the sort of analogy between science and aesthetics often put forward nowadays, as a reaction to works of art lacking in content and appealing solely to the feelings. The aestheticization of science and philosophy in the Romantic movement, and again at the end of the nineteenth century, sprang from diametrically opposed motives, but begs the actual question in similar manner. The view dominant today is expressed as follows by Bertolt Brecht in his *Short Organon for the Theatre*: ‘Today it would even be possible to compile an aesthetics of the exact sciences. Galileo himself already spoke of the elegance of certain formulae, and of experiments as having a witty point. Einstein suggests that the sense of beauty has a function in scientific discovery. And the nuclear physicist Robert Oppenheimer praises the scientific attitude because “it has its own kind of beauty and appears highly appropriate to man’s position on earth”.’<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 233.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Versuche*, 12, Berlin 1953, p. 110.

Such analogies create confusion, because they distort the relationship between form and content in aesthetics. For if they are taken to their logical conclusion—something which Brecht fortunately avoids, for the most part, in his mature works—they result in a conception of content in art as something essentially distinct from form. As a result, form would be degraded to the level of something with a genuine use, but ultimately of secondary importance. However, it is evident—and this is confirmed in its essentials by Brecht's own practice—that artistic expression and aesthetic content are inseparable. Even where the content is profoundly intellectual, as in the philosophical poems of Goethe or Schiller or in the late painting of Rembrandt, etc., we find ourselves unable to make a meaningful aesthetic distinction between the two. The intellectual profundity of such works is actually constituted by those particular words or that particular arrangement of light and dark. Even to change the sequence of words or tonal nuances of the colours would transform depth into triviality.

In contrast to this, the content of the theories of Einstein or Galileo can only gain or lose in value if their grasp of the facts of the matter, as these exist independently of consciousness, is affected by the simplicity or complexity of their arguments, or by the greater or lesser incisiveness with which they are expressed. The content of a work of art—however intellectual—does not just consist in such a relationship to things in themselves, even though this may form an essential aspect of the work as a totality. It entails also a personal response to the factual complex it reflects and from which it is inseparable. Whether that response be one of tragic shock, optimistic acceptance or ironical criticism, etc., carries as much weight as the thought content itself. Nor does such a response abolish the work's objectivity; it merely gives it new emphasis. What counts is the importance of both the content and the response it elicits for the development of mankind and the way in which both can become the property of humanity.



We are concerned here with the much-debated 'alienation effect' of Bertolt Brecht. He defines this effect as follows: 'A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject but at the same time makes it appear strange.'<sup>12</sup> This is enough to make it clear that Brecht ultimately has the same thing in mind as is referred to in our own concept of generalization [*Verallgemeinerung*]. There is, however, one important, or at least would-be important difference. Brecht is out to discover a revolutionary theatre, that is to say, one in which an actual performance will inspire the audience to revolutionary activity. From this standpoint he criticizes not only the existing theatre, but the entire dramatic tradition. 'The theatre as we know it shows the structure of society (portrayed on the stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium).'<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *Short Organon for the Theatre*, §42.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* §33.

This argument does not seem too convincing. Many of the greatest plays in world literature do, in fact, depict essential social changes. Examples are the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy in Aeschylus, the breakdown of mediaeval feudalism in Shakespeare, the collapse of bourgeois society in Chekhov and Gorki, and in the case of the latter we even see the emerging new social forces coming on to the stage. And even when Brecht argues that 'Things that have long remained unchanged, appear unchangeable',<sup>14</sup> this may seem very cogent at first sight, but it is not in fact confirmed by the history of drama. Ostrovsky's *Storm* or Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena* depict worlds which have long remained unchanged. But Dobrolyubov's outstanding analysis demonstrates that it is this very fact that is responsible for the revolutionary impact of Ostrovsky's tragedy.<sup>15</sup>

Brecht goes on to use the sentence we have just quoted as a weapon against theatre and drama as it has existed hitherto, and calls for a theatre which 'must amaze its public, and this can be achieved by making the familiar appear alien'.<sup>16</sup> But this is mere shadow-boxing. Even without alienation effects, writers have succeeded not just in surprising the audience, but in moving them profoundly by dramatizing the contradictions of a given social order. Chekhov, a major dramatist of a past epoch which extended right into the present, shows that it is perfectly possible to realize what is poetically rational in Brecht's programme without recourse to alienation effects. His plays are built on the conflict between the subjective intentions of his characters and their objective tendencies and significance. This constantly creates a divided impression in the minds of the audience. On the one hand, they understand the characters' feelings and can even sympathize with them. At the same time, they are forced into an intense experience of the tragic, tragi-comic or comic conflict between these subjective feelings and the objective social reality. It could be said that the whole of his drama is *one* single alienation effect; but, by that very token, its form makes it drama and not alienation effect.

We may add that Brecht's later, major dramas themselves—in conflict with his own programme—trigger off 'traditional' emotional reactions; and that they achieve their revolutionary impact despite the alienation effect, which acts as a disruptive and inhibiting factor, rather than a beneficial one. To realize this is to come close to the roots of the theoretical error committed by this important poet and playwright, and enables us to throw light on the general problem at issue. The source of the alienation effect is to be found in the embittered and one-sided polemics which Brecht conducts against 'empathy theory', even at the cost of obscuring historical facts and interconnections. In our earlier discussion of ornamental art, we have already encountered a similar antipathy on the part of Worringer. Of course, it would be wrong to equate his polemic with Brecht's. Worringer launched an attack on empathy theory from the right, in the name of a reactionary irrationalism; whereas Brecht does so from the left, in the name of socialist revolution.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. §44.

<sup>15</sup> Dobrolyubov, *Ausgewählte philosophische Schriften*, Moscow 1949, pp. 594 ff.

<sup>16</sup> Brecht, op. cit. §44.

Worringer argues in favour of death and inhumanity, Brecht for humanity and life. His mature artistic practice, therefore, and the immediate artistic insights resulting from this, become increasingly opposed to the fashionable but narrow antinomy [of abstraction and empathy].

For example, he regards the technique used in his *Galileo* as 'opportunistic'. But at the same time he gets the essential issue right when he treats his new play as the antithesis of the earlier parables.<sup>17</sup> 'In the former, ideas are made incarnate; in the latter, a specific subject-matter gives birth to certain ideas.' This really implies the abandonment of the entire theory of the didactic drama (*Lehrstück*). The 'opportunism' of his new play, and the authentic dramatic representation we find in it (as well as in the other great works of his later period), come into focus in a way that is theoretically inconsistent, but is highly rewarding from a dramatic and poetic point of view. It does credit to Brecht's grasp of theory that he is able to perceive the deeply problematic character of epic theatre. As he writes in his diary (in March 1941), 'It is quite clear to me that we have to get away from the antagonism between reason and feeling.' Henceforth, the alienation effect should no longer prevent an emotional reaction, but should be concerned to provoke the right responses.<sup>18</sup> But Brecht fails to notice that these remarks, far from making concessions to empathy theory, in fact dispose of it completely.

For all that, Brecht and Worringer share one misconception. They both confuse 'empathy' with the theory and practice of the great epochs of European realism. Both fail to see that empathy is a specific Philistine theory of art, which may indeed define certain ideological aspects of the art of its own age, but which is prevented by its superficial character from doing justice even to its own important artistic monuments.<sup>19</sup> Without attempting to give a full description of the theory at this point, I would only observe that this is the theory which gives rise to that vague and entirely passive response to works of art for which Brecht rightly feels such profound contempt. On the other hand, however, since the great art of the past is the reflection of reality, it is rigorously opposed to empathy of any kind. We can 'empathize' with something whose objective nature is wholly unknown or a matter of indifference to us; but when confronted with an evident reality or its correct representation, we can only be beguiled into the sort of re-experiencing which includes the awareness that we are responding not to our own subjectivity, but to a 'world' independent of it.

The specificity of an experience which directly concerns you, '*tua res agitur*', is to be found precisely in this duality which distinguishes a felt reality from empathy and from introjection. To be aware of the

---

<sup>17</sup> Such as *The Measures Taken*, *The Exception and the Rule*, etc. [Trans.]

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from the essay by Ernst Schumacher, 'Brechts Galilei: Form and Empathy', *Sinn und Form* 1960, No. 1v, pp. 510 ff. and 522 ff.

<sup>19</sup> I have given an analysis of the essential contents of this theory in my account of F. Th. Vischer, who was in fact its progenitor (although the term empathy stems from his son, Robert). Vischer's summary of the core of the theory is this: 'Intuition in its ideal form reads *into the object [schaut in das Objekt hinein]* something it does not possess.' See Georg Lukács, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Ästhetik*, Berlin 1954, pp. 263 ff.

'impatience' of a locomotive may imply an act of empathy; to experience *Faust* can never do so. The misleading concept of the 'alienation effect' comes into being because Brecht's passionate, but one-sided polemic induces him to succumb to this modern prejudice. One consequence of this is that the necessary process of generalization runs the risk of excessive conceptualization, of being converted from Signal System 1' to Signal System 2.<sup>20</sup> A further consequence is that what we have earlier described in detail as the subsequent 'effect' [*Nachber*] of the receptive aesthetic experience is introduced into the structure of the work itself, and this factor reinforces the above-mentioned tendency.



[As in the case of Thomas Mann], it would be a formalistic error to include Bertolt Brecht in the ranks of avant-gardism merely because of his theory of the 'alienation effect'. We have already conducted a polemic against this concept elsewhere. What we would like to establish here is that the basic intention of the alienation effect is diametrically opposed to avant-gardism. In particular, it contains no trace of conformism, however well-hidden. On the contrary, its very purpose is to jolt people out of the false sense of security which frequently arises from their failure to see through the surface of existence to which they have become habituated. His aim, instead, is to provide their minds and actions with the signposts that will enable them to perceive the true nature of reality, and the right way to alter it. The reality whose existence avant-gardism denies, and which it strives to destroy aesthetically, is the starting-point and goal of the alienation effect. It is true enough that Brecht too began his career as a dramatist with allegory. But although the products of his first period were allegories, they never inhabited a merely subjective void. Quite the reverse, they were allegories by virtue of an all-too-direct passion for immediate, direct social action. And with greater maturity, this insistence on the all-too-immediate gradually diminished. He wrote powerful plays—despite the alienation effect—plays whose underlying themes are dramatized in a way that raises them to true poetic greatness. Such counter-movements are much feebler in contemporary painting and sculpture. One of the tasks facing historical-materialist research will be to show why the trend towards realism breaks off almost completely with Cézanne and Van Gogh, and why such great talents as Matisse, and such powerful creative geniuses as Picasso, so frequently become bogged down in problematic experiments.

*Translated by Rodney Livingstone*

---

<sup>20</sup> Lukács's argument here takes its lead from Pavlovian psychology. Pavlov had distinguished between the first-order signals of animals which result from immediate perceptions as mediated by the reflex action of the central nervous system (Signal System 1), and the system of second-order signals as constituted by the language of human beings (Signal System 2). Lukács accepts the Pavlovian theory in the modified form. In an attempt to distinguish between artists and thinkers, Pavlov had included the former in Signal System 1. Lukács, however, rejects an approach which reduces artists and the psychology of art to the conditioned reflex. Instead, basing himself on an analysis of work, he proposes a third system, Signal System 1', to denote the realm of the imagination which occupies a space between immediate perception and the concepts of language. [Trans.]