

# Re-considering Brecht and Sartre On Theatre

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the debates between Brecht and Sartre and discusses the relationship between theatre and philosophy. The Brechtian conceptualization of epic theatre suggests that revolutionary art can be achieved by rejecting old literary and theatrical apparatuses. For Brecht, a specific form is nothing less than a part of the “Great Method”—a method that is consistent with an agent’s ways of living. The Brechtian category of method always already includes an ethical and a political as well as an epistemological dimension: this was the precise goal, which Brecht aimed to achieve throughout his aesthetic practice. The Brechtian concept of technique invents a mode of perception, revealing the way in which one can produce a particular effect in the process of cultural practice. However, Sartre’s formulation of theatre presupposes the transcendental unity of actors and audience in which everybody shares an equal capacity to think and to communicate with each other; thus, there is no distinction between actors and audience. In Sartre’s sense, actors can be the audience and vice versa whereby the two bodies of agents can achieve a communicative correlation through the analogical image of the other. Sartre’s criticism of Brecht raises several important issues about theatre. The essay explores the

ways in which Brecht and Sartre constitute the relationship between theatre and philosophy. My argument lies in that Brecht and Sartre mark a crucial shift from representation to engagement in the aesthetics of theatre.

**KEYWORDS**

Brecht, Sartre, Lukács, Adorno, Benjamin, theatre, philosophy, Marxism, aesthetics

## INTRODUCTION

It is not easy to find a comparative approach to Bertolt Brecht in relation to Jean-Paul Sartre, even though Sartre frequently mentions Brecht's theatrical works in his essays and interviews. In 1968, Judith Kay Zivanovic published a monograph on humanism in Brecht and Sartre, but since then not many works try to read Brecht through Sartre, or vice versa. However, there is no doubt that the whole contour of the Marxist debates revolving around theatre cannot be delineated without Brecht; he is the thinker who not only expounds on an idea, but also explicates the method by which to flesh it out. Epic theatre is the method that embodies the Brechtian concept of art.

The Brechtian conceptualization of epic theatre suggests that revolutionary art can be achieved by rejecting old literary and theatrical apparatuses. For Brecht, a specific form is nothing less than a part of the "Great Method," a method that is consistent with an agent's ways of living (*Method* 109). In this way, the Brechtian method includes, by definition, ethical, political, and epistemological dimensions. Such was the precise goal which Brecht aimed to accomplish throughout his aesthetic practice. Therefore, in the process, the Brechtian concept of technique reveals the way in which one can invent a mode of perception and produce a particular effect.

Woven in with Brechtian aesthetics are various practical dimensions, in particular, the pedagogy of theatre. Brecht stresses the pedagogical function of an artwork, which can be carried out by the effect of estrangement. Sartre, however, repudiates Brechtian pedagogy, saying that Brechtian epic theatre mainly provides a judgment, as opposed to a communicative correlation between actors and audience. Sartre is concerned not with the question of the pedagogical function of theatre, but rather with the ways in which the audience's intellection can be re-educated by images in theatre. In Sartre's formulation, the most important function of theatre is to expose the contradictory aspect of subjectivity through action.

Sartre's philosophy of theatre presupposes the transcendental unity of actors and audience. Making no distinction between actors and audience, everybody shares an equal capacity to think and to communicate with each other. In Sartre's sense, actors can be the audience and vice versa; the two

bodies of agents can achieve a communicative correlation through the analogical image of the other.

## I. THEATRICAL REALISM

Brecht's theory of theatre cannot be considered separately from the aesthetic debates among Marxist theorists of his generation who were concerned with the issue of representation. Brecht's argument counters the formulation of realism by Georg Lukács which is based on the traditional notion of representation. An essential aspect of Brecht's anti-representational aesthetic resides in how his conceptualization of realism rightly reveals the problem of Lukácsian genre criticism.

What Brecht calls "the formalistic nature of the theory of realism" alludes to Lukács's argument of realism, a theory that regards "a few bourgeois novels" as the standard form of realism (Adorno 70). For Brecht, Lukács's theory of realism is too ideal, and cannot be actually applied to revolutionary aesthetic production. Brecht criticises Lukács's conceptualization of realism for merely providing an inert criterion for academic literary critics. In addition, Lukács's theory of realism is held to ignore the possibility of formalistic experiments, and to fail to serve any application except the novel.

What Brecht points out in his criticism of Lukács seems a valid argument insofar as Lukácsian realism can be limited to genre criticism. In this respect, for Brecht, Lukács's theory of realism limits the field of practice of realism to a specific literary genre, namely the novel. However, Lukács also presupposes a practical dimension in his theory of realism as it focusses on the author's political tendencies as well as his or her attitudes toward reality. As Eugene Lunn stresses, there is in fact a similarity between Brecht and Lukács insofar as "their dispute remained, with all its freedom from Stalinist crudities, within the parameters of Communist cultural discussion and political militancy" (77). That said, on one hand, Brecht's idea of realism might be seen as a supplementary formulation to Lukácsian realism, expanding on the theory of realism to include other genres such as lyric poetry and theatrical drama. On the other hand, Brecht may be viewed as presenting an alternative to Lukács all together.

From this perspective, Brecht's rejection of Lukács can be regarded as an aesthetic attempt to establish a new method beyond bourgeois literary conventions. Brecht sees traditional literary technique as a bourgeois cultural legacy which revolutionary artists must disrupt. For Brecht, the individual dimension of aesthetics is nothing less than ideology. As Adorno says, Brecht seeks "to translate the true hideousness of society into theatrical appearance, by dragging it straight out of its camouflage" (183). In Brechtian realism, the form of theatre is a vessel in which the vortex of real contradictions is revealed as such without any representational apparatus.

What is relevant to Brecht's idea of realism is that the alternative aesthetic, the revolutionary principle of cultural production, must be a critique of the traditional system of representation. As in the case of Benjamin, Brecht's position seems quite simple: realism must be linked not to the good old days but to the bad new ones. Brecht's aesthetic experiments aim at abolishing the aesthetic conventions of the old descendant class, which is the bourgeois cultural legacy, and his theory of realism purports to defend the emerging aesthetic of the working class. In this way, Brecht's idea of realism may be deemed to be fundamentally different from Lukács's formulation of realism, which stresses the revolutionary mediation between bourgeois and proletarian cultures. What Brecht is warning Lukács about is the strategic error that artists make who regard the classical forms of art as the aesthetic standard for their contemporary aesthetic production. This tendency is not useful for the production of non-classical aesthetic practice in a new historical situation. In other words, form is not a universal, transcendental entity independent from its own historical situation. Form must be changed in line with newly constructed aesthetic demands.

As Fredric Jameson claims, the important point of Brechtian realism resides in the category of "usefulness" (1). For Brecht, it is related to learning from aesthetic practice, a learning that not only belongs to philosophical speculation, but also to "amusement." Brecht argues that, "if there were not such amusement to be had from learning the theatre's whole structure would be unfit it for teaching" (*Theatre* 73). This is where Brecht formulates his theory of the epic theatre—a theory that realistic theatre must provide

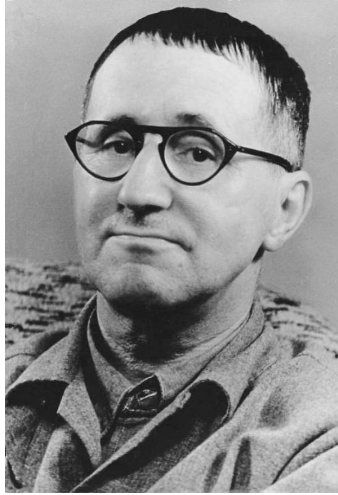


Fig. 1. Bertolt Brecht in 1954. This photo is attributed to Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-W0409-300 / Kolbe, Jörg / CC BY-SA 3.0 DE

a distance between the spectator and the artistic apparatus. Brechtian epic theatre does not aim at producing a harmonious form for resolving any social contradiction, but rather at showing the contradictions that exist.

The essential point of epic theatre is that the pre-given artistic apparatus is an obstacle for realizing the real—an ideological illusion whereby a spectator cannot come to grasp things. *Verfremdungseffekt*, defamiliarization, or better still, the effect of estrangement, is nothing less than a moment of *Erlebnis*. Brecht applies this theory to his dramas; he designs the role of a narrator or an announcer who interrupts the events and disrupts the audience's empathy with the actor's performance, thereby giving rise to the effect of estrangement.

Brecht appropriates tactics in which actors speak directly to the audience, with examples in *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Mother*. In *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht sets up Peachum's opening speech to the audience in line with a large sign lowered from a grid. This technique allows the character to have a conversation with the audience, and at the same time, lets the audience

know that this is nothing less than a dramatic performance. In this sense, it is difficult to characterize the speech as simply a monologue, which is common in any traditional theatre. Brecht sets apart the character speaking to the audience from other actors by endowing the character with independence, thereby explaining the procedure of dramatic events and synthesizing the narrative.

This effect reminds the audience to recognize the theatrical apparatus in advance and serves to absolve the production from attempting to solve any social contradiction in the dramatic performance. In this way the Brechtian estrangement-effect is based on the assumption that “a contradiction is not an opinion or an ideology in that sense; an estrangement is not exactly a philosophical concept, let alone a system; change may make you act, and even think, but perhaps it is not itself something you can teach” (*Method* 90). Brechtian pedagogy is nothing less than learning without teaching. In this respect, Brecht argues that the epic theatre appeals “less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason” (23).

Brecht does not follow the traditional criterion—a criterion that an audience’s empathy with theatrical characters is necessary for the performance—but rather suggests that emotional compliance with apparatuses must be renounced in order to create a new category of reality. To quote Brecht:

The modesty of the avant-garde’s demands has economic ground of whose existence they themselves are only partly aware. Great apparati like the opera, the stage, the press, etc., impose their views as it were incognito. For a long time now they have taken the handiwork (music, writing, criticism, etc.) of intellectuals who share in their profits—that is, of men who are economically committed to the prevailing system but are socially near-proletarian—and processed it to make fodder for their public entertainment machine, judging it by their own standards and guiding it into their own channels ... Their output then becomes a matter of delivering the goods. Values evolve which are based on the fodder principle. And this leads to a general habit of judging the apparatus by its suitability for the apparatus without ever judging the apparatus by its suitability for the work. (34)

This is the presupposition on which Brechtian realism is based: the critique of established aesthetic judgment. Brecht believes that so-called great art hides its interests in the guise of transcendental form, asserting, “great art serves great interests” and “epochs without great interests do not have great art” (*Theatre* 33). For Brecht, those interests belong to intellectuals who desire to seize cultural power, and the category of reality in a specific era is a mode of ideology crystallized by a particular group or class. Brecht does not approve of the presupposition that there is a universal foundation of aesthetic production entirely free from material interests. From this standpoint, Brecht criticizes Lukácsian realism as an inert aesthetic useful only for academic critics.

However, it is to be noted that Brecht’s understanding of the relationship between intellectuals and aesthetic production seems to be less elaborate than the way in which Antonio Gramsci draws a distinction between “traditional” intellectuals and “organic” intellectuals. In a Gramscian sense, the concept of traditional intellectuals means a category of professional intellectuals that Brecht assumes to universalize the interests of a particular class across the whole of society (Gramsci 9).

Brecht criticises the idea of mediation as an ideology in his conceptualization of “great art.” However, paradoxically, Brecht’s consideration of aesthetic production as a pedagogical procedure seems to assume a mediated relationship between artists and spectators. As Adorno points out, the process of Brechtian aesthetic reduction of political truth involves innumerable mediations, which Brecht’s own formulation rejects (Adorno 183).

## 2. BRECHT AND MARXIST THEATRE

The logic of Brechtian realism is clearly revealed in his argument about the relationship between popularity and reality. Brecht claims that “the workers judged everything by the amount of truth contained in it; they welcomed any innovation which helped the representation of truth, of the real mechanism of society; they rejected whatever seemed like playing, like machinery working for its own sake, i.e. no longer, or not yet, fulfilling a purpose” (*Theatre* 110). The way in which Brecht stresses the role of the working class



in aesthetic judgment precisely constitutes his idea of realistic artwork: the work of art in which the real situation of social contradictions is completely represented.

Today, Brecht's presupposition about realism, whereby he postulates the category of the working class as a good criterion of aesthetic judgment, might be regarded as the naivete of orthodox workerism. However, I would like to suggest that the way in which he sets up the category of the working class as a guideline of realism implies a more philosophical meaning, akin to Lukács's conceptualization of class-consciousness. But while the Lukácsian concept of class-consciousness denotes an absolute category of collective cognition in a capitalist society, Brecht stresses the actual experience of the working class, focusing on detailed experiences of everyday life under capitalism. Brecht does not endorse Lukács's early workerism, but rather develops his own way of understanding Marxist realism: the working class is the very agent of change upon the category of reality, akin to Benjamin's consideration of the relationship between the habitual perception of reality and the epistemological category of reality.

Like Benjamin's dialectical image—the standstill moment of shock—Brechtian realism aims at breaking the habitual perception whereby the masses reproduce the dominant category of reality. On the other hand, unlike Benjamin, Brecht endorses workerism in his formulation of realism. It is difficult to assert, however, that Brecht's workerism is the by-product of utopianism, as in the case of early Lukács. Instead, for Brecht, the working class stands for a new need. In Brecht's sense, historical progress derives from a new need, while regress only gratifies old needs with new stimuli (*Politics* 102). That is to say, the most important point of progress is to create a new object of mimetic desire, a new objectivity. Brecht focuses on the dialectical way in which a new object creates a new need and vice versa. In this sense, the working class, an innovative bearer of new needs, should be located at the heart of cultural production and squarely regarded as the new criterion of art. This is the Brechtian idea of cultural revolution: positive about form but negative about content.

Brecht argues that literature should give the working class truthful representations. The meaning of truthful representation in Brecht's formulation is nothing less than an aesthetic practice showing raw social contradictions by distancing the audience from literary or artistic apparatuses. For Brecht, realism functions as a shock of dialectical thinking. As suggested earlier, in Brecht's terms, truthful representation to the working masses means "usefulness." Such representation should be intelligible and acceptable to the people (*Theatre* 107). This may lead us to conjure up a simple idea that the realistic is popular, but Brecht suggests a more complex layer of popularity. By explaining the linguistic context of *Volkstümlich*, he establishes an ideological struggle revolving around the term of popularity.

Brecht attempts to demystify the traditional usage of the word "popularity" in the German cultural context. Distinguishing amateur actors from professional ones in his formulation of pedagogy, Brecht argues that "professional actors, together with the existing theatre apparatus, should be used in order to weaken bourgeois ideological positions in the bourgeois theatre itself, and the audience should be activated" (*Politics* 88). As Jameson claims, this Brechtian pedagogical tactic gives rise to the way in which "the spectacle as a whole should try to demonstrate to the audience that we are all actors, and that acting is an inescapable dimension of social and everyday life" (*Method* 25). Undoubtedly, this is the primary principle of Brechtian realism, the principle that intellectuals function as educational instruments to educate people to be statesmen and philosophers. For Brecht, true philosophy is true politics: "politicians have to be philosophers, and philosophers have to be politicians" (*Politics* 89). Thus this kernel of Brecht's theatrical realism, which Benjamin insightfully observes in his study of epic theatre, is the aesthetic effort to fill in the orchestra pit, "the abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living" (*Brecht* 1). For Benjamin, Brecht's epic theatre is an attempt to change "the functional relationship between stage and public, text and performance, producer and actors" (2).

This presupposition leads Benjamin to analyze a fundamental task of epic theatre, namely, the rational utilization of gesture. To quote Benjamin:

The gesture has two advantages over the highly deceptive statements and assertions normally made by people and their many-layered and opaque actions. First, the gesture is falsifiable only up to a point; in fact, the more inconspicuous and habitual it is, the more difficult it is to falsify. Second, unlike people's actions and endeavours, it has a definable beginning and a definable end. Indeed, this strict, frame-like, enclosed nature of each moment of an attitude which, after all, is as a whole in a state of living flux, is one of the basic dialectical characteristics of the gesture. This leads to an important conclusion: the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in an action, the more gestures we obtain. Hence, the interrupting of action is one of the principal concerns of epic theatre. (3)

In this way, Brecht claims that “plays and production style should turn the spectator into a statesman; that's why one should appeal not to the emotion in the spectator which would permit him to abreact aesthetically, but to his rationality” (*Politics* 88). This is where, unlike Lukács, Brecht does not criticize modernism as the illness of representation; Brecht probably understands the positive side of rationalization as a reification of modernism. In addition, Brecht is interested in re-adopting modernist experiments, in the technical effects of its apparatus.

Brecht's modernism sets forth the positive attitude toward technology which influenced Benjamin's famous essays on technology. Benjamin's understanding of the relationship between technology and realism is indebted to Brecht; moreover, Brecht was influential in shaping the Marxist Benjamin, who is notably distinguished from the early mystical Benjamin. Benjamin's emphasis on non-sensuous experience through the dialectical image is couched in the Brechtian idea of realism as a method.

The Brechtian idea of the relationship between artwork and technology bears no relation to the positivistic view of technological progress that Benjamin criticises in his theses on history (*Writings* 394). Brecht's conceptualization of progress seems to be influenced by his understanding of dialectics: “dialectic is a method of thinking, or, rather, an interconnected sequence of intellectual methods, which permit one to dissolve certain fixed ideas and reassert praxis against ruling ideologies” (104). It is clear that Brecht rejects

official dialectical materialism by claiming that nature does not work dialectically. For Brecht, dialectical methods are better applied to societal conditions than natural ones, in the sense that the nature of society is dialectical. Thus, if Brecht is another guide for Benjamin's Marxism, then the Brechtian concept of the dialectic influences Benjamin's idea of historical materialism, "which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress" (*Arcades* 460).

On the other hand, the way in which Benjamin understands Brecht provides an insight that is useful in approaching the precise Brechtian idea of realism—namely, realism as the thinking of shock. Brechtian realism aims at provoking shock experience by an interaction between theatre and audience (and it always already presupposes the theory of pedagogy). What Brecht expects from pedagogical realism is the production of new knowledge—a new category of reality—by changing the way in which the masses think about the world. A significant factor in Brecht's pedagogical idea of Marxist realism resides in his conceptualization of a theatre in which there is no distinction between actors and spectators. In this conceptualization, actors are simultaneously students. Interestingly, this is the point where Brecht meets Sartre with the notion of "commitment."

### SARTRE'S CRITIQUE OF BRECHT

There is a similarity between Brecht and Sartre in their conceptualizations of commitment. For both Brecht and Sartre, commitment arises from a shared conviction that artwork is definitely related to history. However, there is an undeniable difference between the ideas of commitment of Brecht and Sartre. In contrast to Brecht, who definitely presupposes militancy in participating in the historical process, Sartre's formulation of commitment is based on the phenomenological conceptualization of the subject. Important to Sartre is that the self is not completed with the Cartesian *cogito*, but rather through an ongoing project of engaging in the world.

In comparison to Brecht, Sartre is a philosopher who is more concerned with the reification of language, elaborating a distinction between poetry and prose. For Sartre, poetry is beyond the utility of language, while prose is within it. Sartre argues that "the empire of signs is prose; poetry is on the

side of painting, sculpture, and music” (*Literature* 4). For Sartre, a poet is “certain of the total defeat of the human enterprise and arranges to fail in his own life in order to bear witness, by his individual defeat, to human defeat in general” (25). In Sartre’s sense, the poet partakes in the world by way of the loser winning, whereas the writer of prose partakes in the world through a greater success.

In *The Psychology of the Imagination*, Sartre argues that the work to be accomplished by art is “to make an object ‘appear’” (20). By this argument, Sartre describes how, “while perception is observation of a real thing (three faces of cube) and while conception gives us at once the knowledge of the object (the cube has six faces), imagination gives us only a profile, an *Abschattung*, which cannot be investigated further” (Suhl 19). This presumption constitutes the very kernel of Sartrean philosophy, which rejects the Cartesian correspondence between subject and object in such a way as to separate the self from consciousness.

As formulated in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, which constitutes the preliminary ideas of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre claims that “the ego is not directly the unity of reflected consciousness” (60). For Sartre, a state is an intermediary category between the body and *Erlebnis*, while an action is nothing other than a transcendent object (69). In this sense, a method can be regarded as an action—that is, a transcendent object of reflective consciousness. What is implicit in Sartre’s defense of the self is that the category of the subject is necessary for the mode of representation. Based on the idea that the subject is essential in cognition, Sartre postulates the concept of *analogon*, the mode of analogous representatives. The concept of *analogon* is constituted by Sartre’s phenomenology of an imaginative consciousness and a reflective consciousness. In his words, “an imaginative consciousness is a consciousness of an object *as an image* and not consciousness of *an image*” and a reflective consciousness is “a second consciousness” whereby the belief in the existence of the image appears (*Psychology* 99). Therefore, consciousness cannot directly touch an object without the mediation of an image.

Sartre retains this idea of analogous representation in his formulation of writing. In a Sartrean sense, literature is “the work of a total freedom

addressing plenary freedoms and thus in its own way manifests the totality of the human condition as a free product of a creative activity” (*Literature* 206). Sartre argues that the most important task for writers today is not to destroy words, but to construct words. In this way, Sartre seems to remind us of the Brechtian idea of realism, particularly when he claims that “the function of a writer is to call a spade a spade” (210). In Sartre’s sense, however, what is called a spade is not an actually existing spade. For Sartre, the designated spade is nothing less than a justified object as an analogue. Sartre applies this idea only for prose, not for theatre, acknowledging that theatre is a different mode of aesthetic production which uses action rather than language.



Fig. 2. Jean Paul-Sartre in 1965. This photo is attributed to Dutch National Archives, The Hague, Fotocollectie Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau (ANEFO), 1945-1989.

In a dramatic representation, an action is just an image, whereas in the literary representation, a word is an analogue. This distinction applies to the way in which Sartre distinguishes dramatic performance from literary writing. For Sartre, only poetic language functions as images. In poetry,

language is nothing less than a mirror of the world, a thing alienated from both the poet and the world. Sartre regards an image as the physical aspect of the word.

Sartre argues that “the way in which we hear ourselves speak is not exactly the same as the way in which we speak” (7). For Sartre, what cannot be reached by our recognition is not an object, but an image. The image is not a by-product of reflection because the image does not have an object. The image is a non-reflected picture because it is out of reach; the image is not an objective judgment, but rather the consequence of self-justification and self-judgment. In “On Dramatic Style,” Sartre argues that an action is related to a moral life in such a way that “every act comprehends its own purposes and unified system; anyone performing an act is convinced that he has a right to perform it; consequently, we are not on the ground of fact but of right” (*Sartre* 13). This means that an individual who decides to act must justify his own action by reason, thereby believing “he is right to undertake it” (14). Thus an action is always carried by moral judgment and needs to be reflected by reason to discover its own moral implication.

Sartre’s formulation of the image repudiates a traditional view of the relationship between image and a thing in itself, a view that gives an image the status of a thing (a thing that is a lesser version of an original thing). According to Peter Caws, Sartre redefines the conventional preconception of the image as follows: “the thing perceived is in-itself but not for-me; perceived it is in-itself and for-me; in the image it is for-me but not in-itself” (Caws 32). In Caws’ statement, Sartre reveals the essence of an image; it always already comes along with subjective alienation. In this respect, Sartre argues that “for consciousness, to exist is to be conscious of its existence. It appears as a pure spontaneity, confronting a world of things which is sheer inertness” (*Imagination* 2). Here, it may be inferred that Sartre endorses the Hegelian category of being-in-itself and being-for-itself in explaining the interaction between consciousness and object. The correspondence between subject and object is impossible since there is the reification of the image in the process of representation, which is produced by the reflection of consciousness. Therefore, in Sartre’s sense, art is nothing less than compen-

sation for the impossible representation of individuals. Indeed, individual men are not real objects to each other, but rather images. This is what Sartre presupposes when he refers to the impossibility of representation: “arts exist because you never wholly manage to see a man face to face; so you have images; and you have images, you have special relations to them, relations of participation” (*Sartre* 90).

For Sartre, an image is a particular relationship between individuals and produced by a certain form, an action, a movement intended to show something else, as in any performance of theatre. As has been discussed, this is an ironic situation by which fiction conveys the truth through its image. In this way, Sartre’s aesthetic is nothing other than another aspect of his philosophical project which goes beyond the conventional binary of realism and idealism—or which assumes that “otherness” is objectivity. We are permanently objectified by other people; our relationships with other people are always already reified by our own perceptive processes. In this way, Sartre considers an image not as a mental picture, but as the consequence of an intentional object, the activity-based visual perception. This image is produced by man’s commitment.

This image does not contain any prejudicial meaning because it is a thing that sends back to the poet his own image, like a mirror. This is quite a different position from the position Brecht takes in his formulation of epic theatre, insofar as Brecht clearly stresses the important role of rational explanation which causes the estrangement-effect throughout a dramatic performance. For Brecht, an image is a by-product of empathy that must be disenchanted by shock experience.

Sartre criticizes Brechtian epic theatre, precisely because Brecht compels the spectator to judge rather than to participate (78). Sartre regards such a Brechtian tactic as an obstacle to commitment. For Sartre, judgment is “an adherence of my will and a free commitment of my being”, and in consequence, judgment rules out “neutral and floating ideas which are neither true nor false” (*Literary* 171). To put it another way, Sartre argues that Brechtian theatre does not allow the spectators to join in the way of free engagement because Brechtian theatre provides a judgmental criterion at the expense



of objectivity. Impartial ideas allow for communication between men and the reciprocal correlation between actors and spectators. Sartre applies this idea to his own political drama, *Les Mains Sales* which is similar in structure to Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, but the effect of the prologue is designed in quite a different way.

Sartre rejects the way in which Brecht draws a distinction between epic theatre and dramatic theatre. For Sartre, insofar as we rule out bourgeois individualism and pessimism, we must bring out "the dual aspect of all individual acts, that is to say that each individual is only an expression of what Brecht called the social *gestus*, the totality, the social totality, of the contradictions within which the person concerned lives" (Sartre 114). As is the case with dramatic theatre, epic theatre also expresses the social *gestus* although Brecht is not concerned with subjectivity in his formulation of epic theatre. Sartre argues that Brecht was never able to find room for subjectivity (160).

Furthermore, for Sartre, there is a more important problem—namely, the conditions assumed by Brecht in his idea of epic theatre have changed. Sartre implies that circumstances surrounding theatre today are more complicated than circumstances in which Brecht produced his theory of theatre. In contrast to Brecht, Sartre's idea of theatre presupposes conditions in which bourgeois cultural power dominates all aesthetic production. Sartre describes circumstances where the totalizing system of the culture industry does not allow any possibility of revolutionary cultural production, at least controlling people's idea of culture. As Sartre claims, this is the milieu within which "the bourgeois dictatorship over the theatre has created a bourgeois theatre" (79). Sartre does not identify dramatic theatre as such with bourgeois theatre, but rather regards the bourgeois theatre as the reification of dramatic theatre. For Sartre, Brecht's epic theatre is an attempt to solve the reification of bourgeois theatre in which there is nothing but the image of madness, the reification of participation; as such, Brecht himself does not understand what is really problematic in bourgeois theatre. Sartre argues that "the bourgeois audience is mad, not because it participates, but because it participates in an image that is an image of lunatics" (97). In other words, if the image in which the audience participates is crucial, then the problem

for Sartre is how to change the image because participation is a general and necessary activity in any theatrical performance. However, Brecht is concerned not with changing the image, but with producing a distance between audience and theatre by interrupting empathic participation. To resolve the reification of participation in bourgeois theatre, Sartre turns his attention to the possibility of communication between actors and spectators, repudiating Cartesian realism, or the idea of correspondence between consciousness and reality. Here, Sartre still endorses his early formulation of perception, i.e. what is perceived is produced by our observation of a particular object with senses by focusing on the communicative aspect of aesthetic realism.

In this vein, Sartre's philosophy always already implies the notion of a subject that should carry on the participation of being; any realistic perception of the object cannot be immediate, and it must be mediated by action. It should be noted that Sartre tacitly abolishes the Brechtian pedagogy of theatre with this presupposition. While Sartre conceptualizes "gesture" as an individual image, Brecht regards it as something collective. As Jameson points out, what is lacking in Sartre's formulation is the category of history, even though Sartre shares the idea of "*Erlebnis*" with Brecht and Benjamin (*Origins* 208). For Brecht, the pedagogy of *gestus* is "more than a mere theme or motif, and [we] begin to appreciate the structural originality of its relationship to form as such" (*Method* 93). Brecht's conceptualization of *gestus* clearly presupposes the way in which the collective audience recognizes social contradictions through a theatrical performance. Therefore, the Brechtian concept of gesture always implicates the pedagogical methodology in such a way that "the dramatic representation is the showing of showing, the showing of how you show and demonstrate" (91). Sartre, however, regards gesture as just a movement, or the acts that actors intend to denote. From this standpoint, Sartre maintains that "since gestures signify acts in the theatre, and since theatre is image, gestures are the image of action" (*Sartre* 91).

Unlike Sartre, Brecht does not consider gesture as a neutral image, but rather as a method whereby actors transmit a new way of thinking. In

other words, the Brechtian conceptualization of gesture plainly supposes the objective image—the dialectical image at a standstill—but it is not related to Sartre’s idea of image. Sartre’s idea is that image shows truth through its fiction, whereby individuals can be in communication with each other. This is where Adorno’s criticism of Brecht and Sartre can be seen as valid: if Brecht’s gesture is not an image in the sense that actors show social contradictions through their actions, Brecht has to accept Adorno’s criticism that Brecht simply reduces aesthetic truth to political truth without any consideration of mediation. Sartre seems to know this problem, claiming, “intellection is not the mechanical result of a pedagogic procedure, but rather that its origin lies solely in my deliberate willing, my application, my refusal to be distracted or hurried, in the undivided attention to my mind—to the radical exclusion of all external forces” (*Literary* 170). However, Sartre also cannot be free from Adorno’s criticism that the Sartrean principle of commitment “slides towards the proclivities of the author ...which for all its materialist undertones, still echoes German speculative idealism” (Adorno 181). This constitutes the problem of Sartrean philosophy, in that it has nothing to do with reality outside subjectivity.

As an action arises from contradictions, so it is necessarily contradictory. That is to say, as Sartre maintains, several actions occur at the same time, assembled and inseparable because a number of elements are pressing forward simultaneously (*ibid*). For this reason, the most significant aim of his philosophy is not pedagogy, but communication between men, in the sense that thinking is not so much a by-product of education as of a creative act, which can be seen as the assemblage of man’s contradictory driving forces.

As for Brecht, the problem may be understood in a worldly sense: Brecht does not endorse the Cartesian ideal assumption of monadic subjectivity, or more specifically, of the man whose thinking can be free from any material condition. For Brecht, there is no neutral thinking independent of the material relations of interests. Brecht says, “even if I couldn’t think I might still exist,” still, “I couldn’t verify that myself” (*Theatre* 93). Interestingly, Brecht’s materialization of *cogito* negates what Slavoj Žižek calls “the obsessional compulsion to think” in Cartesian philosophy, the kernel of which is, if I stop

thinking, I will cease to exist (Žižek 2). Brecht hardly aims at revealing the psychoanalytic dimension of modern subjectivity; rather, Brecht's materialistic interpretation of the Cartesian *cogito* is an attempt to provide a holistic approach to the relationship between individuals and social conditions. For Brecht, the way in which man verifies himself is the self-legitimation of his material life.

Sartre's criticism of Brechtian epic theatre discloses another aspect of Brechtian realism. Indeed, Brecht is not interested in the reciprocal aspect of realism, but rather the dialectical image in which social contradictions are revealed. Brecht also regards the theatre as representative rather than as representation. For Brecht, more important than representation are social contradictions, which are revealed by representation. Brecht implicitly regards representation as the aesthetic representative of reality like Sartre. From this perspective, Brecht's idea of epic theatre is simply based on the belief that theatrical representation can present society as an object to the audience (*Sartre* 120). For Brecht, such representation is a methodological vessel that enables spectators to obtain "new" intellection. As to this pedagogical aspect of Brecht, Jameson points out that "the emergence of new social possibilities is suggested by the excitement in sheer intellection itself" (*Method* 92). The newness of change produces vitalizing excitement in Brechtian realism. From this perspective, Brecht presupposes that "objective transformations are never secure until they are accompanied by a whole collective re-education, which develops new habits and practices, and constructs a new consciousness capable of matching the revolutionary situation" (92). In a sense, what must be stressed here is not the change of objectivity, but a new subjectivity which would be produced by collective education. For Brecht, theatre is the very revolutionary instrument to produce a new consciousness.

Meanwhile, Sartre's idea of aesthetic production is constituted in the more reified condition of late capitalism. Sartre has recognized that change is not always new, but rather at times regressive, as is the case with actually existing socialism. For this reason, Sartre emphasizes creativity in the production of new intellection. Seeing that official dialectical materialism

is another iteration of metaphysics, he attempts to offer a third synthetic category between materialism and idealism. To the extent that materialism simply reduces mind to matter, Sartre concludes “in all good faith that it is a metaphysical doctrine and that materialists are metaphysicians” (*Literary* 187).

For Sartre, both individualism and pessimism are symptoms of a society dominated by the bourgeois class. That is, the bourgeois class imposes its own specific cultural taste on other classes, and universalizes its particular value system in modern society. Sartre’s statement highlights a situation in which Western intellectuals have become increasingly disillusioned with actually existing socialism, and strive to find an alternative way to end capitalism.

Sartre’s defense of dramatic theatre can be understood to mean that finding a solution to the reification of the image is a more urgent task than abolishing the image as such. Here, Sartre’s conceptualization of the duplicated aspect of the image does not seem far from the way in which Benjamin formulates the principle of dialectics. Therein, the image is a dream image at a standstill; the commodity provides the image as a fetish. Sartre still acknowledges the apparatus of traditional theatre and the realistic effects of empathy, which Brecht attacks as old cultural residues. More importantly, in Sartre’s philosophy, including in his conceptualization of commitment, the subjective intervention is the more significant element in the process of artistic production. Brecht, on the other hand, stresses the objective condition from which such engagements derive. In changed cultural circumstances, Sartre’s notions of monadic man and the contradictory unity of subjectivity have been since denounced by structuralism and onward. Sartre, however, is not a “dead dog” of old philosophy, but alongside Brecht one of the essential precursors of Marxist theatre who formulates a shift from representation to engagement.

## **NOTE**

1. This article is based on my PhD dissertation, “An Aesthetic between Utopia and Reality: The Idea of Realism in Western Marxism”.

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