

What is radical art? A comparison of Brecht's Epic Theatre with Soviet Socialist Realism

BY RORY FAIRWEATHER
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

I posit that radical art is that which deliberately increases the likelihood of radical modes of analysis; increases questioning of current political, economic, and social conditions; and consequently increases the likelihood of radical actions to bring about change. In this article I will demonstrate that Socialist Realism is not radical art, but instead a form of conservative propaganda – especially in the context of Soviet Russia. In that context it is conservative as it attempts to neutralize resistance against the powers that be. On the contrary, Bertolt Brecht's concept of Epic Theatre, as depicted in his "A Short Organum for the Theatre", is radical as it seeks to create critical audiences who question aspects of society – specifically the presence of Capitalism. The conclusions that the audience reaches by themselves may lead to radical actions. Georg Lukács is an important figure in this discussion both for his critique of modernism and his separate defence of realism. Lukács highlights some problems with Epic Theatre but, as I will demonstrate, these can be overcome. Lukács' defence of realism is ultimately unsound and, I argue, Socialist Realism should be rejected as conservative propaganda. I conclude that Brecht's Epic Theatre is radical art.

Firstly, I must clarify what I mean by radical art. Radical art is that which encourages us to question the current dominant ideology, such as Capitalism or Leninism, and thus increases the likelihood of significant political and ethical change. Radical art increases the likelihood of radical thoughts or modes of analysis and, consequently, radical actions. Radical art provokes debate and alters how we discuss issues of politics, economics and ethical conduct. However, radical art only allows for significant and rapid change but does not necessarily guarantee it. My concept of "radical" is partly the negation of "conservative". For my purposes here, conservatism can be understood as an attitude or disposition against change and in favour of stability. At its most active it can allow for gradual reform, as exemplified by Edmund Burke (1729-1797), who advocated "not blind resistance to change, but rather a prudent willingness to 'change in order to conserve'".¹ Conservative art maintains our current modes of analysis in that we are not encouraged to question underlying or prevailing ideologies and social structures. Within this definition of radical art there is no necessity for it to be realist in form or content contrary to Lukács, as I will demonstrate.

To increase the likelihood of radical actions art must provoke the reader (i.e. the audience) into contemplation about some element of the real world. In doing so it allows or encourages the reader to conclude that said aspect of the world is contrary to their interests or moral codes and practices. Allowing the reader to reach their own conclusion, in turn, engrains that conclusion into their day to day thoughts and actions. A simple passive acceptance of an ideologically loaded piece of art will not result in comparable levels of engagement or commitment to the cause advocated by the artwork. Instead of this passivity the reader must be critically active and engaged with the piece and must be allowed to reach her own conclusions. Radical art is thus thought-provoking rather than thought-directing, and the conclusions are ambiguous rather than transparent.

I intend to make clear now that Socialist Realism creates a passive, unquestioning audience resulting in a conservative rather than radical response. Primarily, my argument focuses on Socialist Realism in post-1917 Soviet Russia. However, the criticisms are applicable in part to Socialist Realism in the wider context. The term is accredited, questionably, to Stalin by his hagiographers.² Socialist Realism became the only state approved artistic form in 1932 when the several artistic and literary organizations were disbanded following the Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations from the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party.³ The term was first expanded theoretically by Stalin's cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov in his "speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers".⁴

Socialist Realism aimed "to educate workers in the spirit of Communism".² Aleksandr Gerasimov, a key figure in Socialist Realism, defined it as "an art realist in form and socialist in content".² Socialist Realism "aims at a truthful reflection of reality" combined with advancing the cause of Socialism.⁵ Three main features are apparent in Socialist Realist art. Firstly, Capitalism was portrayed as exploitative. Secondly, the Bolshevik revolution, its leaders, and the subsequent Socialist political movement are shown as glorious. Thirdly, the working class is shown as noble, happy,



A. Gerasimov, *Lenin on the Tribune*, 1930⁸



V. Malagis, *Steel Workers*, 1950⁷

and well-off under Socialism. These features were all intended to educate the reader about the benefits of Socialism and the harshness of Capitalism. Indeed, Zhdanov set as a goal “the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism.”⁴ Thus Socialist Realism was an instrumental art form, with a clear purpose.

Lukács writes “the perspective of Socialist Realism is, of course, the struggle for Socialism” and that this perspective “enables the writer to see society and history for what they are.”⁵ Both the greatness of Socialist society and the advantages of such a viewpoint are unquestioned in Socialist Realism. Zhdanov writes that Soviet “literature is impregnated with enthusiasm and the spirit of heroic deeds. It is optimistic.”⁴ Along similar lines, Vladimir Kemenov, Deputy Minister of Culture of the USSR in the 1950s, describes Socialist Realism as “ideologically forward-looking.”⁶ Socialist Realism is portrayed as a useful way of bringing about socialism. It is an instrument that guides the people “along the true path indicated by the genius of Stalin.”⁶ Thus, it is a teleologically-orientated artistic style. By including a conclusion in the work the audience need not draw their own. They become passive recipients of the conclusions and thus cease to be active and critical.

This brings me to criticisms of Socialist Realism. I intend to show that it is deeply conservative rather than radical on the basis of my definition of radical art above. Chronology is a critical factor to my argument. Socialist Realism came 15 years after the Bolshevik revolution. Showing Capitalism as bad and Socialism as good cannot result in the population revolting against Capitalism for that has already been achieved. Instead, as I argue, Socialist Realism aims to keep things as they are. To this end I shall go through each of the three features of Socialist Realism, as expressed above, in turn.

Works showing the exploitation of the worker under capitalism include Malagis’ *Steel Workers*.⁷

Referring to the portrayal of Capitalism, Kemenov writes that Socialist Realism portrays “profound sympathy for that part of humanity living under the Capital-

ist system, a system which cripples and degrades men”⁶. The aim of art “is to liberate the toilers” and to free the workers “from the yoke of Capitalist slavery.”⁴ But this portrayal of Capitalism comes after the revolution when the workers are no longer under that system of exploitation. Rather than inspiring radical action against Capitalism, Socialist Realism is attempting to entrench anti-Capitalist leanings to decrease the chances of a return to Capitalism.

The second feature of Socialist Realism is its glorification of the revolution and Party figures. A famous example is Gerasimov’s *Lenin on the Tribune*.⁸

Painted after Lenin’s death, Gerasimov literally gives Lenin an aura. It shows him as heroic - part of the revolutionary crowd but always above it. Similar hero worship encourages obedience of the hierarchies in place. This works to create a homogenous population in awe of its leaders who passively and unthinkingly accept the new dominant ideology of Socialism. Once again Socialist Realism is conservative rather than radical.

The portrayal of the working class in Socialist Realism is exemplified in the Ukrainian artist T. S. Naumova’s *Celebration*.⁹

The working class is shown as happy, well-fed, and well-off under Socialism. They are well clothed and possess material goods; for example, the bicycle in the foreground. It depicts a society that is working well; one which the subject should be happy to live in. Therefore, it attempts to discourage efforts to destabilise the status quo.

In all of these ways, Socialist Realist art aims to create homogeneity. This uniformity under the “fraudulent” iconography is unthinking and uncritical of society as it is.² The audience are not engaged or active and thus Socialist Realism is not radical art.

The “realism” of Socialist Realism can be doubted as well. Herbert Marcuse argues that Socialist Realism shows things which never take place and avoids showing things which are real but are inconvenient to its telos.¹⁰ He continues by saying “it is a realism that conceals, that hides what reality actually is” in the sense that



T. S. Naumova, *Celebration*, 1950s⁹

portrayal of “the dark, tragic side of human life” is to be avoided in Socialist Realism.^{10,11} Another criticism of the “realism” comes from Brecht in “Popularity and Realism.” He writes that “reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change.”¹² If realist art stays the same, even if it was representative in the beginning, it would cease to be so after some time. What is real is continually changing and so realist art must do so also. Brecht writes: “If we wish to have a living and combative literature, which is fully engaged with reality and fully grasps reality... we must keep step with the rapid development of reality.”¹² At best, Socialist Realism shows an outdated and unrepresentative portion of reality. At worst it fails to show reality at all. The motivation behind this cynical manipulation of reality is arguably to strengthen the conservative effect of the works.

Socialist Realism, then, takes a number of opportunities to be conservative rather than radical. For example, Socialist Realism prescribes conclusions to the audience: thereby making them passive receivers of the dominant ideology instead of encouraging them to question it. Socialist Realism might fundamentally encourage criticism of Capitalism, but its predilection for prescribing conclusions means that it never creates an active audience which makes the ideas their own. Therefore, it never creates active and deeply committed critics of Capitalism. The impact of Socialist Realism in Soviet Russia was propagandistic and the impact outside of the Soviet context was weak. Socialist Realism is not radical art.

I move now to Brecht’s Epic Theatre. For Epic Theatre Brecht brought together a number of aesthetic practices already used in theatres by other writers and directors including Erwin Piscator and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Brecht gathered various techniques together and popularized them through his own works, including *The Good Person of Szechwan* (completed in 1943). Epic Theatre was in part a rejection of realism which had become popular towards the end of the 19th century. Realism had remained popular during the first half of the 20th century not least through the efforts of Constantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko who together had created the Moscow Art Theatre which drove forward a new naturalist and realist aesthetic.¹³ Epic Theatre aims to create an audience which thinks critically and reaches its own conclusions. Whereas Socialist Realism tells you exactly what to think about something, Epic Theatre merely encourages you to think. In this regard, Epic Theatre is also making a more modest claim to knowledge than the Socialist Realists. Under Socialism the vanguard elite directs the people to “the truth”. Epic Theatre does not arrogantly profess to know “truth” but encourages the audience to create their own. With Epic Theatre, conclusions are reached through much more democratic and dialogical methods than in the hierarchical Socialist imposition of a fixed and spoon-fed conclusion. In agreement, Roland Barthes says that Epic Theatre encourages the spectator to ask “what is to be done in such a situation?”¹⁴ The way in which this was achieved was through “alienation effects.”¹⁵

Brecht writes, “A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.”¹⁵ The unfamiliarity to which Brecht refers makes the play seem less smooth to the audience, which in turn gives opportunities for the audience to think. By breaking from familiar staging and acting techniques, Brecht highlights various social issues and conventions of bourgeois theatre. He writes, “Who mistrusts what he is used to?” in an attempt to make us question what we normally do not, such as the underlying ideology of a piece of art. He also encourages us to ask why it might be that we normally do not question that.¹⁵

Brecht’s above reference to alienation can cause confusion here and so it needs some exploration. It is useful to consider it as alienation from the comfortable conventions of theatre. We are stopped – alienated – from falling into the emotionality and drama of the play by various techniques, such as breaking the fourth wall. Alienation effects compel the subject to consider the social and political causes of situations. The difficulties the characters face are understood as “made” rather than as “fate” and this “encourages the spectators of Brecht’s plays to take the matter of political change directly into their own hands.”² This, therefore, is radical art.

The actor has an important role in creating alienation effects. “At no moment must he go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played. The verdict: ‘he didn’t act Lear, he was Lear’ would be an annihilating blow to him.”¹⁵ The point Brecht is making is that the audience must be aware that the actor is at all times an actor. To this end he has the same actor play several roles.¹⁵ The audience must not empathise with the characters, as Walter Benjamin writes, “Instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should be... astonished at the circumstances under which they function.”¹⁶ This astonishment will lead the audience to question their own circumstances and how they function within them.

The entire production, not just the actor, is aimed at creating the alienation effect. Brecht does not use atmospheric music or highly believable set design so as to discourage the audience from being absorbed into the drama and away from their role as critical subjects.¹⁵ Also, “the episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement.”¹⁵ Brecht gives us opportunities to think, to reach our conclusions, and attempts to limit our chances of being passive.

Brechtian theatre is also radical in the way it portrays the role of human agency in rectifying a situation. Two clear examples of this can be found in *The Good Person of Szechwan*. The courtroom scene ends with Shen Teh crying to the gods “I need you terribly! ... Help!”¹⁷ In the prologue, the following dialogue takes place:

Wang: ... We all know that Kwan province has suffered from floods for years.

The Second God: Oh? And why is that?

Wang: Because they are not god-fearing people, I suppose.

The Second God: Rubbish. Because they didn’t look after the dam properly.¹⁷

Again, the point is being made that the answer to human problems is human action. Instead of pacifying the audience with prescribed conclusions, Epic Theatre not only tells us to think for ourselves it also tells us that it is our own action that can bring about change. Epic Theatre currently fits the criteria of radical art. I turn now to its critics to see if it holds up to inspection.

At times Brecht struggles between making his works enjoyable and maintaining alienation effects. He acknowledges that “from the first it has been the theatre’s business to entertain people.”¹⁵ It is hard, for example, not to engage with the character of Shen Teh at some point in her difficult struggles and the audience might slip into passivity. Thus some of its radical impact is lost. Alternately, we may find ourselves more actively engaged if we do feel sympathy for the characters. It might serve to create an emotional provocation which would in turn encourage radical consequences. Getting the balance between emotional connection and estrangement is difficult; some emotional connection may make for a more radical artwork but too much would leave us passive. As mentioned above with regards to atmospheric music and believable staging, Brecht does take important steps to reduce the likelihood of the

audience becoming passive recipients. This combined with a reasonable but minimal emotional connection with Shen Teh might create highly radical audiences.

Here I turn to Lukács and his selection of criticisms of modernism and its ability to bring about change. Given that “there is every reason to consider Brecht a theatrical modernist”, Lukács’ arguments are likely to be of relevance here and thus worth greater consideration.¹⁸ Firstly, I must demonstrate the basis of Lukács’ criticisms. Lukács was deeply critical of Capitalism and Capitalist ideology. This ideology, namely the bourgeois ideology, was fully accepted by the worker; “The proletariat’s natural ‘values, beliefs and ideas were subdued by Capitalism’.”¹⁹ Lukács did not claim it was a “false consciousness” in the traditional sense of Marx and Engels, but rather a “true consciousness for a false situation.”²⁰ This false situation is sustained by the dominant bourgeois ideology: composed of property rights and class-antagonism between employer and employee, which reifies people.²⁰ But, for Lukács, this can be changed. The significance of Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* is its (Hegelian) assurance that through knowing society we can change it. Subjects produce culture which in turn forms society, according to Lukács. Society and culture are thus man-made, so the subject – the human being – should be able to consciously manage it. This determinism of subject-to-culture-to-society allows for the revolutionary subject to alter society by first changing culture, including art in all its forms. Lukács was not so much aiming at the creation of a specific alternative (such as classless society), but was primarily concerned with showing the possibility of an alternative to the unsatisfactory Capitalist, class-based society.¹⁹ This aim, to reveal and dissolve the Capitalist ideology, brought Lukács into conflict with modernism. Lukács, drawing on the few texts by Marx and Engels on realism, saw realism, not modernism, as the only artistic practice capable of disrupting the system by which Capitalism spreads its bourgeois consciousness and ideology.

Modernism, with its focus on subjective experience over objective totality, causes a “retreat from social engagement.”²² Modernism, contends Lukács, is pessimistic. He cites the example of Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.²³ Sascha Bru writes that Samsa’s “irrational transformation from man to insect, expressed only a part (the particular) within the totality (the universal).”¹⁹ Instead of looking at the cause of the angst of his period, Kafka mystifies it. Kafka gives no suggestion of how to overcome it. Lukács writes that “Kafka is the classic example of the modern writer at the mercy of a blind and panic-stricken angst.”²³ Lukács does, however, acknowledge that this modern angst-ridden vision of existence actually undercuts bourgeois ideology. However, it fails to “frame or visualise this vision in a larger social constellation.”¹⁹ The same cannot be said for Brecht, who applies the angst of modern existence to our place within capitalism and forces the audience to question that form of existence. Though Lukács may be correct about some modernism, his criticism cannot be applied to Epic Theatre which does attempt to question the pervasive bourgeois ideology by revealing and interrupting it.

Lukács makes further criticisms of modernism. For him, it “reflects social and historical realities – though in a distorted, and distorting, fashion.”⁵ Lukács’s adherence to realism makes him indiscriminately critical of all that is not realism. However, from the perspective of radical art, in Brecht the distortions of reality, through alienation effects, add to its radical power; including its power to reveal bourgeois ideology which Lukács himself supports as a goal of art. Lukács’s point certainly fails to do damage to the view of Epic Theatre as radical art. Brecht achieves far greater criticism of reality by disregarding realist and naturalist aesthetics

than he otherwise might. In effect, there is no need to accurately portray reality in order to condemn it or change it. Brecht correctly recognises this. For example, in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, the presence of gods and their search for a good person, though clearly not a realist device or realistic premise, stands to reveal the difficulties facing those living under capitalism of acting ethically towards others. If restricted to realism and naturalism, Brecht would have been unable to reveal such aspects of reality in his plays. When applied to Brecht’s theory and practice Lukács’s criticisms of modernism are misguided.

Lukács makes a further point; The characters are “mere spokesmen” through which Brecht imposes his ‘intellectual schemata.’⁵ Lukács, it seems, is criticising Brecht for imposing conclusions on the reader. However, as I have already discussed, the audience is given significant opportunity to draw their own conclusions and to think for themselves. And yet it is Brecht who frames the areas for discussion and decides which issues the audience should consider. The audience do reach their own conclusions, but it is Brecht himself who chooses which issues they think about. Lukács’s criticism is not entirely unfounded. However, Lukács’s criticism only applies to Brecht’s practice, not his theory. And even with this concession, using the above definition of radical art we can still consider Epic Theatre to be radical art despite this flaw as the audience are engaged and active as a result of Epic Theatre.

The final criticism made against Brecht is that his audiences are predominantly bourgeois. This is explicitly not his intention. He writes, “Our representations of human social life are designed for river-dwellers, fruit farmers, builders of vehicles and upturners of society, whom we invite into our theatre.”¹⁵ The problem is that the theatre is a traditionally bourgeois medium. It takes time and usually costs money. Furthermore in Brecht’s plays a lot is asked of the audience, regardless of Benjamin’s claim that the audience will be relaxed and able to follow “the action without strain.”¹⁶ Working class people may not be able to afford the time or money and might not have the energy to participate in Brecht’s plays. This criticism stands.

However, for art to be radical it need not necessarily engage the working class. Lukács claims that “the proletariat fought capitalism by forcing bourgeois society into a self-knowledge which would inevitably make that society appear problematic to itself.”²⁰ He acknowledges that self-awareness in the bourgeois society is a powerful, radical instrument of anti-capitalism. But is it necessary for the proletariat to bring about this self-knowledge? I contend that it is possible for the bourgeoisie to be radicalised against capitalism. In *The Good Person of Szechwan* it is not just the poor who are suffering under capitalism. The rich, also insecure in their wealth, so often choose not to do good deeds for fear of ending in penury. Indeed, the character of Shui Ta is created to protect Shen Teh’s wealth from slipping away through kind deeds to those in need and to aggressive creditors such as the carpenter.¹⁷ The point I am making, though conceding to the criticism above, is that the bourgeois audience of Brecht has something to gain from radical action against capitalism also. Thus they are a susceptible audience to radical art, i.e. they are also encouraged to draw radical conclusions about the state of society. Opposing this claim, one could argue that making the current dominant class the agents of radical change might end in a reassertion of current hierarchies. This reassertion of the status quo is not a radical change and I accept this criticism. However, this is only a possibility, not a guaranteed outcome of dominant classes responding to radical art.

To summarise: I have argued that radical art is that which creates active, critical, and socially aware audiences thereby resulting in an increased likelihood of radical action. Radical art is not

necessarily linked to an accurate portrayal of suffering under capitalism or the benefits of socialism. I have shown that Socialist Realism aims to create passive, unthinking audiences that accept the three main features of Socialist Realism: the horrors of capitalism, the wonders of socialism, and the heroic and glorious nature of Soviet leaders. On the contrary, Epic Theatre provides the audience with questions, not conclusions, and this creates critically active and socially aware members of society. Thus I conclude that Epic Theatre is radical art and Socialist Realism is conservative.

References

- ¹Heywood, A. (2003) *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (3rd ed). Palgrave Macmillan.
- ²Foster, H., et al. (2004) *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism*. Thames & Hudson.
- ³Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party. (2003) "Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations." In *Art in Theory: 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Harrison, C. and Wood, P., eds. Blackwell. Pg 417-418.
- ⁴Zhdanov, A. (2003) "Speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers" *Art in Theory: 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Harrison, C. and Wood, P., eds. Blackwell. Pg 426-428.
- ⁵Lukács, G. (1963) *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Merlin Press.
- ⁶Kemenov, V. (2003) "Aspects of Two Cultures" In *Art in Theory: 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Harrison, C. and Wood, P., eds. Blackwell. Pg 656-658.
- ⁷Malagis, V. (1950) "Steel Workers." *Marxists Internet Archive*. <<http://www.marxists.org>> (Accessed 11/04/2010)
- ⁸Gerasimov, A. (2004) *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism*. Thames and Hudson. Pg 262.
- ⁹Naumova, T. (1950) "Celebration." *Marxists Internet Archive*. <<http://www.marxists.org>> (Accessed 11/04/2010)
- ¹⁰Marcuse, H. (1981) "On The Aesthetic Dimension: A Conversation between Herbert Marcuse and Larry Hartwick." In *Herbert Marcuse: Art and Liberation*. Kellner, D., ed. Routledge. Pg 218-225.
- ¹¹Kellner, D. (1984) *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*. University of California Press.
- ¹²Brecht, B. (1938) "Popularity and Realism." *Art in Theory: 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Harrison, C. and Wood, P., eds. Blackwell. Pg 499-502.
- ¹³Styan, J. (1981) *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- ¹⁴Barthes, R. (1956) "The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism." *Marxist Literary Theory*. Eagleton, T. and Milne, D., eds. Blackwell. Pg 136-140.
- ¹⁵Brecht, B. (1949) "A Short Organum for the Theatre" *Marxist Literary Theory*. Eagleton, T. and Milne, D., eds. Blackwell. Pg 107-135.
- ¹⁶Benjamin, W. (1939) "What is Epic Theatre?" In *Illuminations*. Benjamin, W., ed. Fontana. Pg 144-151.
- ¹⁷Brecht, B. (2009) *The Good Person of Szechwan*. Methuen.
- ¹⁸Ley, G. (2007) "Theatrical Modernism: A Problematic" In *Modernism*. Volume 1. Eysteinnsson, A. and Liska, V., eds. John Benjamins Publishing Co. Pg 531-544.
- ¹⁹Bru, S. (2007) "A Map of All Possible Paths: Modernism after Marxism." In *Modernism: A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*. Eysteinnsson, A. and Liska, V., eds. John Benjamins Publishing Company. Pg 107-124.
- ²⁰Lukács, G. (1971) *History and Class Consciousness*. Merlin Press.
- ²¹Jay, M. (1984) *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. Polity Press.
- ²²Wollaeger, A. (2006) *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900-1945*. Princeton University Press.
- ²³Lukács, G. (1964) "Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?" In *Realism in Our Time*. Mander, J., trans. Harper and Row.