

The Relevance of Brecht: High Points and Low

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No one's to blame for crises!
Over us, changeless and inscrutable, rule
The laws of economics.
And natural catastrophes recur
In dreadful cycles.

Bertolt Brecht
Saint Joan of the Stockyards (1928-31)¹

The rules of the global economy are like the law of gravity.
They are not American rules.

Bill Clinton to Boris Yeltsin, at a summit in Moscow.
O Estado de São Paulo, 3 September 1998

With your permission, I am going to play devil's advocate. I want to begin by explaining the point of view according to which Brecht today has no relevance whatsoever. It might be a good place to begin in order to test the relevance of Brecht, who enjoyed dialectic and might have approved of taking the discussion in this direction.

Roberto Schwarz, "Altos e baixos da atualidade de Brecht," *Sequências brasileiras: ensaios* (São Paulo: Companhia das letras, 1999) 113-148. This commentary followed a public reading of *St. Joan of the Stockyards* organized by the Companhia do Latão. [Thanks are due to Nicholas Brown and Maria Elisa Cevalco for providing incisive comments and suggestions that helped make this translation possible, and to Mathias Nilges for vetting passages that refer to a German original. — Trans.]

His trademark, as everyone here knows, is the aesthetic-political preference for “narrative” theater, along with the aesthetic-political critique of “dramatic” theater. In keeping with that position, Brecht proposes — in contradistinction to the actor who identifies himself with his role in the first person and tries to live it dramatically, in flesh and bone — an actor who considers it from a distance, as if he were narrating from the outside, in the third person.

On one side stands the anti-illusionist staging that lays the methods of theatricalization bare instead of hiding them. The audience consequently becomes aware of the constructed quality of the figures on the stage and, by extension, of the constructed quality of the reality they imitate and interpret. In underlining the extent of pretense in theatrical action, the extent to which it is a *made* thing, Brecht wants to demonstrate that the actions of everyday life also have a representational aspect, or else that outside of the theater the roles and the play could also be different. In sum, it is a matter of understanding that in reality, like in the theater, processes are *social* and, therefore, mutable. Meanwhile, on the other side of the partition would be the historically obsolete theater, so-called “Aristotelian” theater, which, through catharsis, the purging of affect, helps men to rediscover an equilibrium in the face of the eternal and immutable nature of human affairs.

To illustrate, I am going to read the prologue of *The Exception and the Rule*, where those themes are summarized. The author-narrator is speaking to the students for whom the play is intended (a non-commercial public, following Brecht’s own preference):

We are about to tell you
 The story of a journey. An exploiter
 And two of the exploited are the travelers.
 Examine carefully the behavior of these people:
 Find it surprising though not unusual
 Inexplicable though normal
 Incomprehensible though it is the rule.
 Consider even the most insignificant, seemingly simple
 Action with distrust. Ask yourselves whether it is necessary
 Especially if it is usual.
 We ask you expressly to discover
 That what happens all the time is not natural.
 For to say that something is natural

In such times of bloody confusion
 Of ordained disorder, of systematic arbitrariness
 Of inhuman humanity, is to
 Regard it as unchangeable.²

You see here, marked by the relationship between exploiter and exploited, the convergence of the themes I mentioned a minute ago. Once things are examined carefully, without the anesthetic of illusion, the familiar will be revealed as strange, the most ordinary experience might be difficult to explain, and the rule, which is what we are used to, might be incomprehensible. And there also, under the pressure of the baleful character of our times, is the demand that we (the children and we) be distrustful, that we consider nothing natural so that everything may be considered subject to change. The didactic attitude and prosaic verse, in which we should recognize among other things an *avant-garde radicalization*, play an essential role in Brecht’s literary technique. The writer sought out cold forms of enthusiasm and emphasis, in order to respond effectively, as an artist, to the circumstances of class conflict. Naturally, the proximity to catechism is a risk.

In an extra-theatrical key, these themes can be approximated by the Marxist concept of “denaturalization,” of which you all have heard. Against economists, who considered the division of society into classes as the final expression of human nature, Marx explained it as a historical formation, which emerged at a certain moment and would disappear at another. It should be said between parentheses that the author of *Capital* considered that critical conclusion one of his sources of pride. Returning to Brecht, the well-known demand that the scene represent the world as transformable shares in the same spirit. If we consider it as merely a reminder of the historical, ever-changing character of human relations, always changeable, today it could only seem banal. Yet, if we recognize the emphasis on the *transformable*, with its tacit rejection of the exploitive present, we face a more difficult imperative, for which the comprehension of historicity cannot be said to be real if it does not attend to the need for a transformative intervention. The appropriateness of the demand and also the difficulty of fulfilling it become immediately clear.

Well then, this combination of political convictions, aesthetic theses, and literary methods that forms the texture of Brecht’s art has been severely affected by recent history. It is obvious that times have changed. Whoever is old enough to remember the Brazilian cultural climate before 1964, or before 1968 — which was when the rightist coup finally hit the intellectuals — knows that those positions stirred considerable emotion and agitation. When an actor said, as you heard in *Saint Joan*, that the injustice of class is not a

natural misfortune like rain, and that it therefore could be contested, the effect of revelation and even galvanization was incredible. The unanimity became even stronger if, on the contrary — because of blindness or collusion with oppression — the character declared that injustice is, indeed, a natural misfortune like rain, and therefore to fight against it is pointless. It seems that the rejection of the hypnotic force of conformism and of the stage did not itself fail to hypnotize... Thus, once we understood that injustice was social, and not natural, the difficulty seemed to have been overcome and the transformation of the world within reach. Time having passed, that ease, not to say credulity, now seems disconcerting.

As the words themselves suggest, that domination which owes its strength to custom, to constant repetition and to the appearance of naturalness, is of a pre-modern type. The struggle of doubt against obscurantism, inside and outside of our very selves, is a classic figure of bourgeois emancipation, which had for its adversary feudal authority and its religious guarantee. Clearly, Brecht's anti-obscurantism no longer belongs to that period, from which at the same time it does not disengage itself completely. It is as if something of feudal naturalness and prestige had been passed on to capital, and something of the resigned fatalism of the serf subsisted in the working class, so that the fight against the immobility of yesterday's powers remained on the agenda. As for today's capitalist system, whose foundation has not been for some time the veneration of old customs, we are all aware that the movement from naïveté to everyone-for-himself shrewdness is not enough to overcome it. Let us say that in denaturalizing submission and its automatisms, and in historicizing what had been eternity, the Brechtian theatrical gesture invoked a space of freedom in which the world figured as transformable *in the abstract*. Once the oppressed made out the strange in the familiar, the irrational in the everyday, and the anomalous in the rule, an acceptable and comprehensive reorganization of society was close at hand. This is the context, if I am not mistaken, in which to understand the muted pomp surrounding the estrangement effect and particularly its revolutionary aspiration.

In some parts of Europe, World War One swept away the superstition of order and authority, the same superstition that was in principle the target of denaturalizing criticism. The following years witnessed other equally "unnatural," and novel, cataclysms that exacerbated the upheaval. The list is well known: the Russian Revolution, hyperinflation, the crisis of 1929, unemployment, and the rise of Nazism. The summary of the contemporary world found in the prologue of *The Exception and the Rule*, published in 1930, brings news of a new scene. We live in a time of "of bloody confusion / Of ordained disorder, of systematic arbitrariness / Of inhuman humanity

[...].” In order for this state of things not to be called immutable, the school-master-actor beseeches the children to doubt... the habitual, the familiar, the simple. Well then, you will tell me if I am mistaken, but I find that between the synopsis of the period and the advice given with regard to it there is a certain maladjustment, *which reflects an objective insufficiency*.... The world in the two cases is not the same, the moments do not coincide. Bloody confusion, systematic arbitrariness, and ordained disorder are not habitual, familiar, or simple; and in this sense counseling against their credulous acceptance is like bringing coals to Newcastle. In other words, can it really be true that society a on the road to fascism, characterized by chaos, conspiracy, direct action, manipulation, etc., would seem *natural*? And can it be that the obstacle that keeps the exploited in their condition, closing off the exit that leads to a just society, resides precisely there, in that illusion of naturalness? Note that none of this causes Brecht's distanced and pedagogical gesture to lose its poetic force. We will return to the issue.

In 1948, soon after the end of World War Two, Brecht undertook to join the recommencement of life in the Soviet Occupation Zone, which later would become the German Democratic Republic. Fleeing from McCarthyism in the United States, which already had him in its sights, he sought to participate in the construction of socialism, about which he was full of his own, completely unconventional ideas. How should we consider this association — as a matter of fact, full of reciprocal reserves — between the avant-garde luminary and the new state? The latter strove to bring about one of humanity's historical aspirations — though this did not stop it from being a police state, as well as an imposition and a satellite of the Soviet Union. The situation's truly dark tangle proscribes poorly informed judgment, as my own would be in this case. The reader of *Working Diaries* and of the poems from that period nonetheless feels, along with the literary force and the thriving, sometimes astonishing critical disposition, moments of bureaucratic fustiness and signs of mummification. With the playwright's death in 1956, his worldwide consecration takes off. Depending on the circumstances, what prevails is either esteem for the most innovative of the artists on the Left, or the exploitation of his prestige with an apologetic end.

Brechtian theater entered the cultural life of São Paulo in the same second half of the 1950s, initially as part of the modernizing militancy to which the good professional companies dedicated themselves, bringing to the stage the renowned authors of the period: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Jean-Paul Sartre and others. It was only natural that Brecht's turn would come, recommended by a growing European glory. His assimilation however was more difficult. Not so much for being a communist author, since many of the nation's admired writers had been or continued being communist

32 Roberto Schwarz

militants and sympathizers, or interested critics of communism. As far as I can tell, what turned Brecht's plays into a foreign body was the radicalness of artistic innovation. In his case, it was not enough to accept or reject a set of more or less audacious positions, conventionally staged. The new proposal included a package of novel attitudes and methods whose A-B-Cs had to be learned. The general implications, which wished to be revolutionary in relation to bourgeois culture as a whole, remained shadowy for the moment. The difficulties ranged from the elementary, from the comprehension of what the "estrangement effect" could be, all the way to the inevitable contradiction with cultivated interests: theater companies revolved around famous actors, who wanted to know if their art of entrancing the audience now would be thrown in the dustbin — or rather, if the new technique didn't kill emotion. I remember the genuine confusion that accompanied the rehearsals of *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1958), during which Maria Della Costa and Sandro Polloni asked for clarifications from Anatol Rosenfeld, who was beginning to assume with relish his role as Brecht's explicator.

The modernization of São Paulo stages during the 50s, which was a widely-noted advance, had depended on the contribution of foreign directors. It had also attained a new professionalism, with good actor training, an updating of the repertoire and, seen as a whole, a bourgeois aggrandizement of theatre life. At the premiers in the Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia one breathed class distinction, not unlike, incidentally, at Cultura Artística concerts, where internationally renowned musicians were presented under an atmosphere of civilized enjoyment and fur coats. Meanwhile, the tendency on the national level was another, imprinting the notion of progress with a different content. The radicalization of developmentalist populism began to gain momentum: a movement that would lead to years of pre-revolution — that is, of day-to-day questioning of the country's intolerable class structure — and to the military dénouement of 1964. In place of cultural *updating*, whose points of reference were prestigious American and European stages, came the interrogation of internal class relations, whose humiliating backwardness, in which we recognized ourselves as part of the Third World, was taken as a problem and necessary element of a sound, national and *modern* solution. For a lively period, which would not last, the commitment to the historical advancement of the working people took priority, as a condition of modernity, over the educated classes' longings for modernization.

Living culture veered to the Left: it changed class alliances, age group, and, with these, the standard for judging what should be considered relevant. A little in reality and a great deal in the imagination, the directors, audience, subject matter, program, technique, and international sympathies changed, all now fixed to the Cuban Revolution, a work also created by the non-

conformism of people who were not yet thirty years old. The new theater generation, representing a less finished training than the previous one, was aligned with the university movement and its rapid politicization. It sought contact with the organized working class and peasant struggle, *with popular music*, and shared the precarious and pre-adult lifestyle of the students, who were often poor themselves. The relative loss in artistic specialization, as well as a certain bohemianism, in this context figured as harbingers of socialism. Both tendencies disregarded the cultural boundary between classes and were in tune with the new shape of the populist movement. The umbrella of populist nationalism promoted contact between progressive sectors of the elite, organized workers and the left-wing fringe of the middle class, in particular the students and young intelligentsia: for ideological purposes, this semi-demagogic and semi-explosive alliance was now the people. The acute and critical injection of cultural exertion more than compensated for the artistic refinement of the previous decade, which at the end of the day had been quite conventional. The thorough permeation of the theater arts by the historical task of giving a voice to national inequalities was of immense importance. To this day it has not exhausted itself.³

The propensities and talents called for in this new situation were those of *agitprop*. There were distinguished predecessors in Brazilian modernism's shock phase of 1922, a likeness that nevertheless took a great deal to become conscious and productive. The alternatives in question, which were everywhere and had, even if precariously, historical scope and practical grounding, destabilized the usual compartmentalization of the life of spirit. The moment called for political intelligence, formal inventiveness, organizational agility, and a disposition for confrontation, in addition to irreverence in the use of consecrated culture and a capacity to deal on equal footing with the resources of erudite art and popular tradition. This is the stew of militant culture in which Brecht's artistic and ideological rigor, his systematic engagement with the revolution (which, partly because of language difficulties, was more guessed at than known) would go on to gain life. After decades, it was a matter of the Third World resurrection of the consequent artist of the 20s and 30s, who had conceived his combative avant-garde art within the immediate atmosphere of the Russian and German revolutions — already foreseeing, however, the antifascist clandestinity that would come afterwards. In truth, nothing could be further from the impeccable but outdated performances with which the Berliner Ensemble, under the direction of the Master himself, had won a certain hegemony in the European theater in the 1950s.

The usefulness of the Brechtian spirit for the Third World Left is easy to understand. The linking of language and literature to a program of collective experimentation of all sorts, be it artistic, political, philosophical, scientific

or organizational, along with the rejection of socialist realism, responded to real reformative impulses. Amid orthodox and heterodox communists, left-wing Catholics, anti-imperialist populists, vanguard artists and libertarians in general, and in spite of a lack of information, Brecht became something of a diffuse superego. The playwright whose innovations had as their reference the independent reflection on class struggle was an ideal, and in fact proposed a new axis. Indeed, the sense of reality and the wide spectrum of his experimentation changed the quality of experimentalism itself, conferring on it a different note, freeing literary modernism from mere scribbling. That said, it is worth mentioning, in order to reflect on the matter a bit, the incongruities occasioned by Brecht, since the 1920s were not the 1960s, nor was Germany Brazil.

As translators know, the bare language of class interests and contradictions, which marks the *sui generis* sharpness of Brechtian literature, has no equivalent within the Brazilian imaginary, informed as it is by relations of personal dependency and sallies of roguery. The understanding of life that is sedimented in our popular speech has a specific critical meaning, distinct from that of Berliner proletarian slang, which is informed and sharpened by class confrontation. In accordance with an analogous incongruity between the respective orders of the day, our Joe Nobody still needed to be transformed into a respectable citizen, with a proper name; while for Brecht overcoming the capitalist world, like the discipline of class warfare, depended on collective logic and on the critique of the bourgeois mythology of the detached individual. In short, the historical constellations were not identical, even though the underlying question — the crisis in the domination of capital — was the same, assuring a common denominator. Incidentally, something of that Brechtian aspiration for an overpowering anonymity can perhaps be found, among us, in the political poetry of Carlos Drummond de Andrade, who also wanted to annul the petit-bourgeois within himself. In this same vein, the linguistic codification of class antagonism was one of João Cabral de Melo Neto's programs.

The principle maladjustment, however, was bound up in the idea of estrangement itself. This required opening up a space between the individual and his social functions, in such a way so as to open the way to critical consciousness, making patent the absurd structure of society, the class logic of the system, and the ridiculousness of merely individual struggle. Now, the nationalist dimension of developmentalism required, on the contrary, a large dose of that mystifying identification which Brechtian estrangement — itself in part a product of the Left's critique of the patriotic slaughters of World War One — undid. The compromising solution developed by Teatro de Arena during the period became famous, brilliant from many perspectives, in

addition to being representative in its inconsistency: on center stage, a popular, nationalist hero, with whom the actor and public strongly identified; surrounding this figure, anti-heroes of the dominant class, to which Brechtian recourse to dis-identification and analysis, with the corresponding cool-headedness, lent a brilliance and truth which, by an irony of art, the other role, the one which should have served us as a model, ended up lacking.⁴

It occurred to no one to follow Brecht's teachings to the letter, but they nevertheless functioned as a kind of challenge, coming from more demanding regions of aesthetic and political reflection. The emphasis on clear reasoning, on class exploitation and on turning an x-ray on cheap ideologies turned the gelatin of nationalist populism indigestible — besides standing in sharp contrast to the weak political tenor of Brazilian literature in general. Without being able to speak of strict filiation, these were positions that artists in search of consequence, and some of the spectators, began to recognize as their own. Naturally, the literary historian might ask about the importance of Brecht for *Revolução na América do Sul* [*Revolution in South America*], Augusto Boal's crude and extremely innovative play, or for *A mais-valia vai acabar, seu Edgar* [*Surplus Value Won't Last Forever, Boss*], a didactic farce written by Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, in which the A-B-Cs of economic exploitation are explained. Yet, the question would be better and more materialist if it were asked the other way around. The truth is that the political ascendancy of the working masses and of conflicts proper to industrial society made the narrow frame of bourgeois drama irrelevant and forced the developing dramaturgy to reinvent the wheel, that is to say, the logic of narrative theater — with results that were as alive as they were precarious. In this context, Brecht's work had much to offer.

If I am not mistaken, its principal impact was in suddenly elevating the level of ambition, in a field that until then had not been very bold. The prospects that the new type of political theater opened to song — and vice versa — can give us an idea of the type of leap this was. As is well known, Brechtian song took part in the most advanced theatrical experimentation; it was composed by avant-garde musicians, its lyrics were the work of a great poet, and the conjunction of these elements produced a high point in the questioning of the bourgeois order. Without trying to belittle anyone, we must admit that this was a constellation that was not found in Brazil, except for, up to a certain point, the last of these elements. This, however, as if it were enough to suggest the rest, without, however, supplying them.... Our theatrical groups did not come from a strong literary formation, and the same could be said, as far as I know, about the musicians with whom they worked. Yet, inspired by the historical radicalization underway, which opened a decisive channel between artistic experimentation and the transformation of

the contemporary world, the shows performed by Teatro de Arena, the CPC [Centro Popular de Cultura], Oficina, TUSP [Teatro da Universidade de São Paulo] and certainly others reached new levels. Once nourished by the acute feeling of the present, to which it was necessary to respond with whatever means available, the relative cultural inadequacy and limitation of means changed signs, giving rise to an incredible demonstration of accelerated self-overcoming, in which for better or worse the historical moment pulsed. The clarity in regard to this aesthetic and political lack of training, during that moment of notable initiatives and improvisations, always somewhere between brilliant and amateurish, counts among the more memorable aspects of the period.

Returning to song: the theater's involvement with popular music would make a tremendous difference under these circumstances. For the theater, because the attempt to join its language — of restricted circulation — to another of immense popularity, with a very different productive process and class origin, changed everything. For song, because political and experimental theater directs itself, in the name of freedom, to the country's vigilant fraction of counter-elites, in opposition to the flock of consumers. This avant-garde posture (or pretension) bears something irreplaceable. It is true that the deliberate combinations of samba, an experimental spirit, and the conquests of modernist poetry, which forced together various social and cultural divisions, came from a previous moment and had not begun in the theater. Such juxtapositions formed a brilliant part of Brazilian modernization, with its moments of decompartmentalization and class realignment, where, thanks to imagination and artistic work, the well-known fissures that rendered the country unviable were surmounted in productive and promising ways. That said, the horizon of revolution, staged by the theater, introduced a radical point of departure into that process. The peculiar representativity of singer-songwriters like Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque, or, in another sphere, the filmmaker Glauber Rocha, owes something to the radiation of that moment, when the processes of popular art, aesthetic experimentalism and political theater came together like a historical force.⁵

Something parallel occurred in relation to the revue, whose popular triviality was rejected by a serious theater, which sought to be culturally up to date. Skeptical of the seriousness of serious theater, the stages that took Brecht as a reference undertook to reconnect with the irreverent dimension of the revue; above all, with its loose form, intercalated songs, and general mischievousness, in which it discerned potential bases for critical distancing and resources for an antibourgeois art.

In 1964, without really facing any form of resistance, the rightist military coup truncated the vast democratic process to which the new theater had

sought to respond. As is well known, the suppression of the workers' and peasants' movement was brutal, whereas censorship, intended to paralyze oppositional students and intelligentsia, proved avoidable. Thus, in little time the Left returned to making its presence felt and even to prevail within the movement of culture, but now in a socially confined environment, ruled by the box office and aloof from the popular audience which in the previous period had conferred transcendence — in the proper sense — to its production. Due to an unfortunate turn of events, or better, due to the force of the Right's victory, the new theater generation finally reached artistic fulfillment — to which the question of revolution had been essential — at the moment in which the historical conditions favorable to its project had disappeared. Having once been an effective move on the part of the left-wing intelligentsia, the aesthetic-political turn to the people was reduced to the condition of glorious and interrupted experiment, which would continue to feed the imagination of many, while at the same time, on another plane, it was transformed into successful material for the cultural market. As was inevitable, the onstage triumph of the Left which, in the street, was beaten almost without a fight, would carry and elaborate the signs of what had happened — taking, among other things, Brechtian experimentation itself in unforeseen directions. For example, the use of narrative procedures, originally conceived as a means of fostering critical distance, was at times seen transformed by Boal and Glauber into its opposite, into a vehicle of national emotions “of epic proportions” to offset the political defeat. The compensating identification from which Brecht sought to liberate culture was making a comeback. At the same time, in the theater of Zé Celso [José Celso Martinez Corrêa], the estrangement effect acquired an equivocal quality, more in the order of rejection than that of enlightenment, in which fierce self-condemnation (the critical impulse) and shameless self-complacency (the discrediting of criticism, since its bearers had been defeated) alternated and were confused, staging a kind of hysterical and historical collapse of reason. These are substantial culminating positions, at times impressive, which allow us to consider the impasses of our recent destiny.

In 1968, with the Ato Institucional nº 5 [Institutional Act no. 5], the dictatorship extended to the middle- and upper- class opposition, as well as to the field of culture, the repression that it had heretofore reserved for the popular movement. Subjecting its own social base to terror, it lost whatever common sense it still had and reached a greater level of barbarism. In its critical role, intellectual life remained without any public dimension whatsoever. However, to prohibit is not to refute, and in that sense the Brechtian inspiration, like discussion on the Left in general, went offstage but did not lose its reason for being. On the contrary, its repression was like living

testimony of its relevance. The surprise would come much later, throughout the 70s, when democratization opened up a space in which to resume previous positions — *but these no longer convinced anyone*. Due to the dictatorship, the political debate had remained in the freezer while the world and the country changed. Now, however much our literary criticism might say to the contrary, artistic methods have presuppositions that are not themselves artistic: the fall of communism, which had begun, as well as new features of capitalism, affected the credibility of Brecht's theatrical technique. We were entering the world of today.

The foregrounding of artistic artifice was one of the avant-garde's general methods, determined to tear away the sanctifying and naturalizing veil of organic form. For some, it was a matter of attacking the pacifying reverence that formed part of the aesthetic attitude; for others, of de-automatizing the readers' and spectators' attention, dulled by habit; for others still, of highlighting the material aspect of the artists' work, to align it with progress, with other forms of profane production. All of these dimensions existed in the Brechtian method, where they nonetheless changed ambit when they were inscribed directly into the general turn of contemporary history from capitalism to communism. The link between provocative experimentalism and the struggle for the political transformation of society conferred Brecht's writing with a peculiar type of relevance, not to mention authority. For the same reasons, it would become more vulnerable than others to the denial that history inflicted on its expectations.

Schematically, the Brechtian transformation of theater — conceived in the 20s — presupposed the imminent *overcoming* of capitalism by communism, or, in a parallel track, its *cross-dressing* as fascism. Directed against this last possibility, anti-illusionist methods preached an anti-*kitsch* mental sobriety capable of exposing impostures. As for capitalism, the estranging stance threw into relief its *obsolete* irrationality, which the workers — that is, the revolution — would go on to overcome. Now, as it is generally known today, the historical experience created in the name of communism moved worlds away from initial intentions and got the worst in its confrontation with the capitalist order. There are different explanations for the defeat, but, whatever they may be, it was difficult to imagine that a better society might be gestating within the field of “actually existing socialism.” Thus, the clearheadedness and place on the leading edge of history that Brecht's method presumed found itself without support in the real course of things, transforming critical superiority into an illusion. Estrangement illuminated the backward aspects of the capitalist world, but by itself could not help visualize the hoped for better system of life — whose shape once again became unknown. Let us say then that, today like yesterday, capitalism's

absurd and devastating character imposes itself as a fact, which is nevertheless historically shackled to another, that is, to the revelation of the regressive dynamics of societies that broke with the bourgeois model in their attempt to overcome it. This does not make that model insuperable, but instead demonstrates that it is not enough to stand outside of it in order to create another, better order. Against what the Left supposed, the passage from criticism to overcoming revealed itself to be neither automatic nor obvious. Under these circumstances, the didactic component of Brechtian estrangement was left without having anything to teach, at least directly, and changed meaning. A staging that would be adequate to what we have painfully learned has to take that difficult horizon into account, or else it risks transforming the gesture of sobriety into second-degree *kitsch*.

Thinking about the public that inspired his innovations, which in turn shaped that public, Brecht refers to “an assembly of world transformers” — a peculiar company, of proletarian character, friend above all to a well-formulated dissatisfaction, critical in spirit and with subversively materialist and practical proposals.⁶ If it is not a retrospective illusion, this spectator tailor-made for political theater existed during a brief period, in a few places, attached to special conditions, which deserve consideration.⁷ It was the result of the junction between the “free theaters” — an important experiment, affiliated with literary naturalism, in which the voluntary contribution of its members removed business considerations and the official point of view from the scene — and the historical advancement of autonomous workers' organizations. As Iná Camargo Costa well notes, that alliance formed, partially, a popular appropriation of the means of cultural production.⁸ Soon after, however, with the imposition of Soviet national interests onto the workers' movement, the picture turned out to be different. The critical dimension of Brechtian estrangement no longer had the winds of history in its favor, especially in the socialist camp, and became an exercise in style or, further, in nostalgia for glorious times — times recently-ended, shut down almost before starting, though this transience does not keep them from having existed as a canonical moment of revolution. To close the circle let us remember that in the USSR of the 1970s the “obsession with fixing the world” came to be the very name of the mental illness of dissidents, whose cure required psychiatric internment. Working in the German Democratic Republic, it would not be strange for a worker with a Brechtian flair to have opposed “habitual but incomprehensible” ideological inculcation, only shortly thereafter to prefer capitalism and end up in prison. The automatic alignment of estrangement and socialism had long been ideology.

When it was brought down, in 1964, [President João Belchior Marques] Goulart's government had been raising progressive social flags. The military

coup in defense of “tradition, family, and property” once again confirmed a classical distribution of roles that had largely vanished from the agenda of the developed countries: the Left wanted to change society, while the Right clung to the past. Something like this traditionalism had been the initial horizon of the historical avant-gardes, a horizon that gave signs of persisting in the Third World, where Brecht’s literary technique found its old precision once again. In this way, the program of denaturalization of theatrical conventions seemed part and symbol of another more transcendent turnabout, aligned with the socialist triumph over of the bourgeois order, itself *incapable of evolving*.

Then, ten or fifteen years having passed, when the drawn-out process of democratization permitted aesthetic and historical thought to communicate again, it was evident that the years of the dictatorship had not exactly been conservative — its horror notwithstanding. In addition to the leap taken by industry and by its internationalization, which changed things substantially, there was during the years of the “economic miracle” a considerable liberalization of sexual habits, the relative routinization of drug use, the incorporation of a portion of the poor — precariously — into mass consumption, as well as the great deal of progress made by commercialization in the area of culture, with the corresponding desacralization of the latter. The dictatorship was authoritarian, but not traditionalist, nor did it scorn Machiavellian calculations, non-traditional in their own way. It is possible, for example, that it became “liberal” in taboo areas, until then unconnected to politics, while it suppressed, through policing and terror, essential public liberties. Caetano Veloso pointed out the problem from another perspective, in observing that tropicalist poetry had as its backdrop the convergence between the height of the counterculture and the worst authoritarian period.⁹

Be that as it may, the capitalist reactivation of liberatory aspirations, which until then had belonged to the anti-bourgeois tradition, had also begun in Brazil, deactivating at several points the system of alternatives that had inspired socialist commitment. The certainty of the Left, according to which it was the party of historical progress, while its adversary would be *conservative and traditionalist*, lost its footing in reality (and only maintained itself alive at the cost of its words losing all meaning). Capital’s victory was less complete than in the countries of the center only because among the forces that called for democratization was the new independent trade unionism, which would soon provide a foundation for the Partido dos Trabalhadores [Workers’ Party]. For several years, atypical in view of what was happening in the “advanced” world, the antagonism between capital and organized labor appeared to command the Brazilian stage in the classic manner foreseen by the Left. The idea of progress did not exhaust itself in mere change and

remained linked, as though to an evident prerequisite, to the more or less inevitable overcoming of historical iniquities — until here, too, trade unionism lost its initiative, beaten by the new supremacy that globalization, and the concomitant threat of crisis, conferred to capital. The latter proved itself through the quasi-fated and quasi-automatic nature of its course of accelerated changes, which were costly not to follow (more costly for some than for others); and while the resulting devastation no longer finds a plausible correlative in the notion of progress, neither does it in that of traditionalism. The supranational sphere of investment decisions, which is little influenced by socio-historical debts, reserves for its representatives the apparently exclusive use of relevant speech, or of speech with access to financing, which is the same thing. The sincere grievances of globalized and *progressive* capital’s proxies, who oppose the *unpatriotic conservatism* of unions and other always-defeated defenders of nationality, express the new system of illusions and the new set of forces. The questioning of capital now no longer seems to be the business of the workers, but rather of its own contradictions, which evolved unchecked by a worthy opponent. The innovative impulse — blindly enough, and following the rhythms of a technology expo, in which denaturalization acquires a somewhat excessive quality, like that of a natural catastrophe — resides with money. In comparison, there is nothing more *moderate* than the Brechtian desacralization of social inequality.

Although he considered himself the creator and theoretician of a new theater, Brecht insisted on the antiquity of epic theater. It had been practiced by the Chinese and Japanese, by Elizabethans and Spaniards of the Golden Age, not to mention the medieval *autos-da-fé* and the didacticism of Jesuit priests. Thus, his anti-illusionist representational techniques were not original, or rather, they became modern in a strong sense only when they were taken up again — as they were — within the revolutionary horizon around World War One, with its anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist labor movement, which made the difference. Under those circumstances, several societies — perhaps we should say cities — were endowed with a *political theater*. It happened to be a peculiar institution, which had as its premise a popular movement that was powerful, emancipatory, and capable of defending itself against adversaries, in addition to taking an interest in the free examination of its vital questions with an eye towards practical transformations. Pointing out the uncommon quality of that creation, Brecht recalls that the majority of great nations did not tend to examine their problems on the stage, and that London, Paris, Tokyo and Rome maintained their theaters with completely different ends, remaining on the margin of innovation.¹⁰ — But let us return to the affinity between social revolution and the set of anti-illusionist methods. Staging that is equally concerned with

substantive material and with questioning itself on all levels, including its material conditions — as if denaturalizing the relations between these aspects — is analogous to a society on its way to explaining and transforming its very foundations. More or less consciously, the modernist cultivation of self-reference alludes to this Promethean, self-creating virtuality, which lends the former its *radical* vibration. Brecht's political clarity in this regard helps us to see the originary connection between the two, while forcing us to reflect on the course of their subsequent disconnection. The inviability of that critical theater in fascist countries and, from a certain moment on, in the USSR, requires no further commentary. It is more useful today to consider the redefinitions that have occurred in our own society, in which, until further notice, the point of view of the commodity has acquired an unprecedented primacy.

It is easy to note the use advertising has made of the most sensational discoveries of avant-garde art, among them the resources of the Brechtian actor. The gain in intelligence represented by the estrangement effect, formerly conceived as a means of stimulating criticism and liberating social choice, changes meaning against the new background of generalized consumerism, helping, say, to promote a new brand of cleaning product. You may remember the excellent actor who advertised Bom Bril scouring pads on television. The estrangement effect not only ceased to estrange, but on the contrary both gave life to and rendered palatable our semi-capitulation, the awareness that between competing brands of cleaning products there can be no great difference, though we nonetheless think of ourselves as “choosing.”¹¹ On another level, one can observe at the beginning of any television newscast that the Brechtian focus on the material infrastructure of ideology — on the didactic inclusion of the wings in center stage scenes — has also changed meaning, functioning as a prop for the authority of capital, and not as a critique. The cameras and cameramen film other cameras and other cameramen, who film the studio, the gigantic logo, and the anchormen. There it is, so as not to be ignored, the industrial-commercial apparatus behind the lies and inept reporting that we will hear shortly, whose seriousness becomes — due to the impressive volume of technology, work, and money involved, which certainly deserve credit — impossible to doubt. Thus, the very materialism of Brechtian self-referentiality seems to allow apologetic uses. Having once been a call to emancipation, the insistence on the social and non-natural character of the mechanism that conditions us came to function, paradoxically, perhaps due in part to a matter of scale, as a dissuasive.¹²

In other words, artistic distancing appears disabled by circumstances: what more could the materialist want, if there are commodities to choose from and if the gears of commerce integrate everyone? That objection, which

has (or had?) the support of the day-to-day in countries where wages and social welfare integrated the working class, is behind Brecht's transformation into a classic, that is to say, into a brilliant writer from another era. In Brazil, where we once again live a moment of *updating*, that is, a modernity defined by a globalized standard, which are the standards of the countries on which we are dependent, we wholeheartedly believed that we were in the same situation or, at least, on the same path. But would that be right?

In the realm of theater — which is not decisive in this episode — the renewed interest in Brecht points in a different direction. As far as I can tell, and you will tell me if I am mistaken, the lesson sought in his anti-illusionism is more on the order of a question than an answer, although the inquiry has collective commitment as its horizon. Not because the solution could be found there, readymade, but because in light of the proportions and history of Brazilian inequality the “up-to-date” and pro-market idea of renouncing collective intervention, or of remaining within recommended limits — of spectator, of consumer, and of voter — doesn't seem particularly adequate, implying rather the atrophy of forms of consciousness already developed. I apologize for the schematism, but we might imagine that until 64-68 Brechtian denaturalization functioned as a useful slogan, tailor-made to remove the varnish of eternity that protected, beyond the stage, latifundio and imperialism. Soon afterwards, with the industrial swell that took place during the “miracle” years and with the emergence of a modern working class, the moment would seem favorable to the anti-capitalist component of that slogan. Yet, the extra-national dimension weighed far more, as was moreover natural, and the period's dominant note was provided by the bankruptcy and defeat of the socialist camp, emptying the point of departure proper to the Brechtian conception, which is practical. The 1990s witness a new turnabout, when the official Brazilian ideology coincides with the point of view we included as an epigraph, according to which “the rules of the global economy are like the law of gravity,” a new nature that benefits all who do not disrespect it. In its wake, the veracity and appropriateness of the denaturalizing and estranging program have everything they need to re-emerge on a new level. And in fact, a small part of the theatrical world works exhaustively to assimilate Brecht's techniques, betting on them as the superior school of training: it hopes that this excellence in artistic orientation will deepen the notion we have of ourselves and of the deformed and intolerable quality of the present *social normality*, or of the present *modernity*.

For the purposes of our commentary, let us take the estrangement effect as the epitome of the *Brechtian attitude*, which we have discussed by examining its high and low points in recent history. We leave aside for the moment the great dramatic works themselves, in which the glory of the artist

is seated, the fate of which however involves many other factors. Brecht would not have considered this truncation wrong, since he in fact recognized a separate value in a certain personal type, which he had cultivated and perfected like a kind of left-wing dandyism: a mix of provocation and impudent distance, whose reach was not exhausted in the literary field. He ascribed to it a para-political function, like an anti-ideological vaccine, tailor-made for the deceptions of the bourgeois order. Indeed, in making the interference with empathy — brought about by estrangement — into the dialectic of his productions, on or off stage, in submitting the fascination for the individual to contradictory materialist causalities and collective realities, with their altogether different logics, Brecht explored a new form of consciousness, in tune with the *proletarian* overcoming of capitalist society. It was a matter of mobilizing the relativization of the individual, of which theoretical and aesthetic reflection had long been full, and above all of responding to the teratological nature of the spectacle offered by the society of capital once it was seen from a distance, through an antagonistic class-prism. However, if this effective process never took a victorious form and the course of things, still to be deciphered, was entirely different — then the prediction built into that posture becomes in turn a dubious proposition, to be taken as part of the problem, rather than as a lesson.

At a certain point in his capital essay on committed literature, Adorno observes — changing the terms of the debate — that in Brecht's theater the primacy of doctrine acts like an element of art; or that didacticism, in this case, is a formal principle. Although it smashed the bell jar of the aesthetic sphere, the militant relationship with the spectator would itself function as a law of composition, constructing a game that suspends simple transitivity. Thus, against claims to the contrary, the truth of the plays would not lie in the lessons passed on, in the theorems concerning class conflict, but rather in the objective dynamic of the whole, in which they and the didactic attitude itself would be a part of what is to be interpreted, and not the last instance. The essay, which knows and critiques Brecht's political-aesthetic positions, places greater emphasis on the work than on the theory, or rather, it sees the role of the latter inside the former. Notwithstanding many incisive objections — in my opinion all well-aimed — the rectification Adorno brings about helps the admirer of didactic theater to understand why lessons with a modest scope can interest him so much.¹³ It also opens our eyes to the formal elegance of Brechtian literature, obscured by the prominence of political questions, which are easier to discuss. We might look for examples to the dissonant mixture of brutalism and intellectual perceptiveness, or of heavy-weight materialism on one hand and, on the other, a delicacy of procedure and reasoning that verges on arabesque and abstract variation. The oblique

and wavering correspondences with class conflict make these unexpected combinations indefinitely contemplable by way of the contradictory suggestions they bear. In other words, after being disregarded up front, in avant-garde fashion, formal immanence restores itself elsewhere, with a more ample compass and without conventional guarantee, by reason of the immeasurable care taken with the composition. This care is subordinated to the political rejection of artistic insipidness — or vice versa? — in a manner that it falls to the stage production itself to shape. It is said, I don't remember where, that Brecht thought about reserving a room in his theater, in socialist Germany, for the production of scandals. It is a plausible story, which renders palpable his particular idea of literary commitment, related to the transformation of culture's techniques and practical procedures, to jolt the spectator, didactically, a little beyond aesthetic contemplation, but with his consent and under institutional protection.¹⁴

We have just finished seeing, on stage, that *Saint Joan* is a splendid work. Does this annul the questions we raised? A simple response would only do more harm than good. Before commenting on some of the extraordinary truths of its composition, which however are no less historical than the aesthetic-political theory in which they are bound up, we should note — in order to consider the matter — that here, too, we find those features which historical experience has made hard to accept.

You will have noticed that in comparison with other characters, contrary to what the author intended, the communist leader's language is not very interesting. It is true that he distinguishes himself by understanding the essential: he explains the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation and speculation, the connections of these to unemployment and to wage suppression, besides knowing that the workers are strong only when they act collectively, and that the push toward a general strike and toward the use of violence lies within the logic of that action. His theoretically informed intellect greatly contrasts with a general meanness and credulity. Or rather, his hard and objective reasons are advantageously counterposed with the grandiloquence of liars, which falls into ridiculousness, as is underlined by the dramaturgy. *However, his words, even so, do not inspire a vibration on the level of a prevailing and inaugural upheaval that they seem to promise*, which does not fail to propose an enigma. In spite of saying *what is*, and of acquiring the corresponding authority, the words are gray and *bureaucratic*, forming in fact an exception in the interior of the drama. It is as if the truth — or certainties — of the Bolshevik position were unable to give off that light the artistic composition expected of them. Or, inverting the terms, it is as if the composition were asking its content for that which it could not give...¹⁵

Let us recall that *Saint Joan* was written before Stalinism had taken root in the Left, and that the Brechtian attempt to find *poetry* in partisan language — anonymous, standardized, and authorized — expressed a historical sentiment and a wager: the outlawed militants, with their discipline and abnegation, would be among the key figures of the fight for the new age of freedom. Now, the proximity of this sentiment to Stalinist absolutism, which had begun to occupy the field, is absolutely clear today, rendering the complete separation of waters difficult. See in this regard the terrible panegyric to the heroism, or sacrifice, of professional revolutionaries.

- FIRST: Who are those men?
- SECOND: None of those men
Thought only of himself.
Never resting, they ran themselves ragged
For the sake of other people's bread.
- FIRST: Why never resting?
- SECOND: The unjust man walks the streets openly
The just man hides.
- FIRST: What will become of them?
- SECOND: Although they
Work for little pay and are useful to many
Not one of them lives out his natural life span
Eats his bread, dies with a full belly and
Is buried with honours. All
End before their time. They are
Struck down, trampled, and buried in shame.
- FIRST: Why do we never hear about them?
- SECOND: When you read in the papers that some criminals have
 been shot or
 Thrown in jail, it's them.
- FIRST: Will it always be like this?
- SECOND: No.¹⁶

Informed by the half-century that has passed and by the revelation of the other side of the medal of heroism, in particular the unconditional discipline and Soviet-nationalist appropriation of class struggle, it is hard to imagine welcoming these *just men* as the messengers of a new era. Taking into account the maze of interests excused in war, which is now generally known, the strong *activist* figures that gaze at us from the past acquire an ambiguous note. And what if on the contrary they are the temporarily reprieved *victims*, now generous, now authoritarian, now sinister, of States and of political police — the enemy's as much as that of the socialist camp itself? The interrogation of these hallucinatory ambiguities, to say nothing of duplicities, and of the expressive deficit that goes along with them — which itself reflects an immense historical upheaval — is perhaps the greatest challenge facing any responsible staging of the play.

In everything it says regarding the life of capital, on the other hand, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* shines incredibly. Our very universe, from the moon to our genetic patrimony, tends at the moment to be quoted on the stock market, which lives on the verge of collapse, exactly as in the play, whose timeliness could not be grater. Even though the experts swear that the crash of '29 will never repeat itself, the wailing of the "small speculators," crushed by the speculations of the big ones, or the misery of the workers, who are left unemployed by the healthy competition between industries, seem as if they were taken from today's headlines. That said, this extraordinary impression is not merely the result of immediate similarities. Equally important is the resonance which the new and decisive issue — the cycle of capitalist crisis — finds in canonical cultural forms, which take part in the justification of the bourgeois order.

As is known, *Saint Joan* is the product of the Marxist studies to which Brecht dedicated himself during the second-half of the 1920s in order to understand the real movement of contemporary society and transpose it to the theater. Fredric Jameson correctly refers to a Balzacian aspect in work of the playwright, who was well-versed in all sorts of trade secrets, such as, for example, the workings of class conflict, the subtleties of money, the mechanisms of the Stock Exchange, the ruses of fascist rhetoric, the calculus involved in organized mendicancy, etc.¹⁷ This currency of artistic intelligence represents an achievement in itself, even more so if we recall the individualistic and anachronistic presuppositions of bourgeois drama with which a man of the theater had to contend. The inclination to bring into the world of letters the *realism* carried by the Marxist vision, or furthermore to avoid building on an obsolete foundation, brings among other innovations the substitution of the collective, mass axis for the individual axis in the composition. Around

this mass axis, the narrative arranges itself according to capital's cycle of crisis, with stages of prosperity, overproduction, unemployment, crash, and new economic accumulation, against which individual aspirations are smashed. That said, *Saint Joan's* singular stature, among Brecht's work as well, depends on the acceptance of another unexpected point of view, which — today — makes the difference.

It's easy to imagine that the confirmation of materialism, on the overwhelming scale provided by World War One and by the Russian Revolution, signified an ideological disqualification of the previous period. From that point of view, anything that smelled of idealism, patriotic pabulum, the authority of national classics, bourgeois insularity or remnants of feudal life, would acquire a grotesque or odious tonality. However, despite this sense of liquidation, different aspects of materialist criticism can perhaps be distinguished. On one hand, the millions of dead soldiers and the hunger of populations permit one to see that between economic interest (the arms industry) and cultural and nationalist indoctrination there is an alliance that makes war possible, and it is a class alliance. On the other hand, the same catastrophe shows that everything is an illusion save for the economic survival of the person himself, thus reproducing bourgeois individualism, or universal antagonism, on a new level. In each case, the ideological *corpus* of pre-war civilization undergoes a radical demoralization, be it in the name of the suffering masses (the Left's version), or in the name of naked and raw economic interest (capital's new realism), which a prior bourgeois culture politely hid. *Saint Joan* incorporated both meanings in their most contemptuous and well founded elements, *but without accepting their "reductionist" corollary*, tossing said culture in the dustbin for its lack of substance.

Rather than make a *tabula rasa* out of the past, Brecht, whose position in this respect was unique, tried to assemble a strategic anthology of the tradition's greatest texts, to which the characters' language systematically alludes. He did not abandon consecrated culture altogether, although he stressed its specious quality, which time had brought to the surface. Relying on his exceptional gift for pastiche, he presented the vicissitudes of class conflict and the calculations of the canned-goods cartel — new material — in verses imitative of Schiller, Hölderlin, *Faust II*, expressionist poetry, or Greek tragedies (perceived as German *honoris causa*). The most celebrated literary resources of national literature, or, by extension, the best and most sublime of bourgeois culture, shared the stage with economic crisis. To emphasize the affront, we see the latter in the satirical and bloody setting of the meat-packing industry, where slaughter, financial reasoning, and hunger naturally coexist, creating a metaphor for the times and establishing the lessons produced by the war.

The novelty was not in the artistic contrast between the modern world and the classical tradition. After all, the comical difference between the Homeric hero and the top-hatted and fat-bellied bourgeois was a commonplace in the 19th century. In another sense, several of the principal modernist writers tried to give their contemporary episodes a semblance of the mythical, either to attenuate their contingency and provide them with generality, archetypal dignity, eternity, etc., even if ironically, or on the contrary to accentuate their sordidness. One needs only think of Gide, Proust, Mann, Kafka, Joyce, Eliot and others. In Brecht's work, which pertains to almost the same years, that distance between illustrious models and the tone of the present assumes its own distinct shape, steeped in Marxism, that is to say, in class analysis and in the search for unity of process. The cold — yet mocking — concatenation of the rawest economic interest and the loftiest philosophical and lyrical idealism (the German classical tradition), under the sign of capitalist crisis, gives rise to a Frankenstein. Even today, the fierceness of that caricature sends a chill down the spine. Both outlandish and accurate, Brechtian montage annulled the passage of time and obliged the initial, as well as greatest, aspirations of bourgeois civilization to mingle indiscriminately and in public with its present manifestations. The products of that civilization in terms of degradation and class injustice provoke a dispiriting paraphrase of that same human dignity and social harmony which, at an earlier moment, philosophers and poets had idealized. Thus, what this dissonance puts in play is an *internal* historical relation, satirically compacted.¹⁸ The enormity of the effect says it all, but it is not easy to spell out.

Take the ingenious variations with which the canned-meat magnates formulate their distress — caused by unfulfilled contracts — in the majestic terms of a Hölderlinian sense of destiny: like water, which knows no rest, human beings (or would that be capitalists?) tumble from crag to crag down to the unfathomable depths of the abyss (the lack of solvent customers).¹⁹ Or take the vegetarian compassion — tinged with expressionist lyricism — which Mauler, the king of the meat packers, uses to justify the sale of his portion of the canning business at the right time:

Remember, Cridle, that big blond steer
Looking so dumbly skyward as the blow
Descended. I felt as if that blow had fallen on me.
Oh, Cridle. Oh, what a bloody business we are in!²⁰

What is the idea behind these *sarcasms of composition*? The deeply farcical tone is brought about by the ridiculousness of the capitalist as lyric figure, since by definition he defends particular and class interests alike,

which require cunning — the opposite of poetic abandon. In spite of the perfect stylization, which would appear pointed and unrevelatory, the farce could not be more ambivalent: to make a joke of capital through poetry, and of poetry through capital: nothing more sordid than capital, nothing more laughable than poetry. We find ourselves on the terrain of the political cartoons of the Weimar period, or of Grosz's paintings, with his capitalists with thick necks, pig snouts, impeccable frock coats and bulletproof cynicism, crossing the street with those mutilated by war, malnourished proletarians, and starving dogs, all crowned by clichés of official humanism, in an atmosphere of everyone-for-himself. The disgust and hatred concentrated in those images possess a range of significance, for the Left as much as for conformism or the Right. Unfolded by the theatrical plot, on the other hand, these same stereotyped figures will lash out during the crisis, when their ridiculous quality and their harsh humor are complicated even further, entering a dynamic of another order. Here the exploiters are confounded and the exploited cannot find the way out; previous moral classifications are put out of commission even while they go on to contribute to the chaos. In various ways, the contemporary relevance of this mode is related to this configuration.

Brecht wanted to stress — and assimilate? — the profligate shamelessness with which the bourgeoisie deals with the supreme values of its own civilization, according to the condition of the economy and the state of class conflict. In that sense, it can be observed that the brazenness of the moguls is not only denounced but also carefully examined, as if it were some kind of natural wonder, or a lesson on the modern function of ideas, which is to destroy the ingenuous, *but which even so cannot hold back the crisis*. The writer didn't come here to moralize — which he thought useless — but to sharpen critical intelligence in its class dimension. From his perspective, what the camp of the exploited lacked was not the disposition to understand, but rather a capacity to formulate and sustain new interests, capable of responding to the times, with the force of historical affirmation.

Although a bit formulaic, the coupling of lyrical-philosophical pastiches to the brutalities of economic competition and of class antagonism comprises a technique of great reach, due in particular to the marked breadth of scope that accompanies it. In what it says about the world of workers, for example, this formula avoids the cultural segregation in which they found themselves trapped, additionally giving expression to the divergence, to be overcome, between cultural excellence and the standpoint of the working class. Against the sentimentalization of working class culture, Brecht knew that their experience, despite having justice on its side, gains density only if it leaves behind its insularity and gets the better of its antagonist thanks to a superior

and generalizable perspective, which may or may not be worked out in detail. In order to have its full scope, approximating "possible consciousness," as Marxism called it at the time, the historical standpoint of the exploited depended on cultural accumulation and sophisticated formulation, as well as on the confrontation with hegemonic points of view, which are fiercely hostile to it.²¹ For that reason, working toward the mobilization of working-class language, the playwright rejected the existing framework, which demanded that the life of workers be confined to their immediate environment and to the naturalist register or else suffer a loss of authenticity. He sought, on the contrary, to see that life through the real (and rarely assumed) dimension of a structural force in the present, contending with other classes and with the entirety of contemporary culture. The realities of work and unemployment, of hunger and of the cold, of organized struggle and military massacre are presented in their direct and decisive reciprocity with the strategies of capital, with aesthetic conventions and economic theories, with the propertied classes' sense of themselves, with the lessons of morality and of religion, with the new means of production, etc., causing an extraordinary amplification and intensification of the present, which the antagonistic mirrorings stamp with an unparalleled literary and polemical quality. In breaking with an immediate verisimilitude sustained by the homogeneity of environment and discourse, *Saint Joan* arms a stage of superior scope, unique in Brecht's work as well. Later on we will comment on the final scene's incredible proto-fascist apotheosis, with its operatic multiplication of literary resonances — all significant in their depravity — which represents a high point in modern literature, unthinkable without the very truthful notion of class conflict within the realm of culture.

With regard to these processes of the social recalibration of forms, observe the change the romantic cult of simplicity undergoes, in the manner of *Lied*, in view of the homeless caught the middle of a snowstorm. The verses are written on a drop-curtain and serve as a mute finale to the episode in which the machine-guns triumph over the strikers:

The snow's blowing this way
So who would want to stay?
The same as stayed before
The stony soil and the very poor.²²

Analogously, what does tragic conciseness — borrowing from the Greek chorus — indicate when utilized by the working masses, waiting in front of the closed gates of the factory? And what do we make of the unintentional Leninist inflection that emerges from the indignant preaching of the young

woman from the Salvation Army? There is nothing less verisimilar than these montages and combinations never before seen (save for in student sketches), in which the modern situation of labor is nevertheless projected and discovered by reevaluating in its own terms the lyric detachment of the romantics, the sobriety of the Greek tragic accent, the Christian commitment to poverty. To appreciate the counter-intuitive daring of these solutions, one must remember that they force into contiguity that which history separated, and that they overcome, without failing to register, the disparity between erudite forms and social conflict, as well as the mutual preconceptions that correspond to them.

For those who have some conception of German literature, the play's most daring literary form lies in its system of images, a sort of lyrical topology, appearing as a collection of literary tics, which Brecht took from the final scenes of *Faust II* and from Hölderlin's song of Hyperion. The allusion to the most celebrated poems of the language functions as a ground bass. There they are, in numerous variants, the elevating aspiration of human beings, the tragedy of downfalls, the idolatry of summits and gorges, the glory of unities, the divine ether composed of heights, light, purity, immateriality and transcendence, the sententious harmonization of opposites, redeeming a past division, etc. Well then, in order for that parody to do its damage, those quasi-religious schemas of idealist set design and choreography need only be brought near the realm of the capitalist exploitation of labor, where they then become the structural — and completely plausible — correlative of the contempt for that which lies below, in the dark, in disorder, hungry and working hard. As we can see, reductionism and vulgar materialism also have their own moments of explosive intelligence.... Having drawn the parallel between the mountainous landscape through which lyrical ascension moves and, on the other hand, the social topography of capitalism, equally steep, the rest is automatic. Stirred to insinuations, puns, malice, critical perceptiveness, social resentment, etc., there is no way of stopping the process of reciprocal contamination. The mountaineering of the poetic soul can be translated to the vernacular of free enterprise, with its inexhaustible greediness, super-profits, bankruptcies, fraud and general cannibalism, not to mention the altruistic anxiety of not sinking into poverty. Inversely, the day-to-day competition on the market can find an advantageous version of itself in the destiny of eagles.

The demystification of class, which is devastating, in this case is connected to a work of extraordinary invention and *knowledge*. Among the play's objectives, Brecht listed the fixing of "the present evolutionary state of Faustian man."²³ That said, the satire has an expiration date. You all know that the initial scandal caused by materialist criticism — the crime against

humanity which Marx committed in the middle of the 19th century — was in affirming that capital, which is a class relation, is the secret of and key to bourgeois society, including its laws, state, morality, and culture. Far from being unconditioned and from promoting the human universality it proclaimed, these spheres would mesh systematically with an economic exploitation whose days would be numbered once it was recognized by the exploited as a mere fact of class, without divine or natural guarantee. The virtuosity with which Brecht makes us laugh at capital, presented in the very act of cross-dressing as something else, more universal and less objectionable, belongs to the same cycle.

Now, one has only to think for a moment to realize that the picture has changed and that economic determinism today functions as the explicit ideology of the dominant classes, who justify their own hegemony and social inequality itself through that ideology, which has changed sides. Thus, what used to be a skeleton in the closet has become a public banner, creating the mystery specific to the new phase: how can this banner be celebrated? If the so-called ideal reasons had previously hid material interests, understood to be particularist and indefensible, economic reasons now legitimate or critique the others, without having lost — if I am not mistaken — that same particularist character. Let us say, in order to exemplify, that an up-to-date government allocates funds for the arts thinking of the benefits that these bring to tourism, in the same way it conducts its educational reforms with an eye to the eventual gains in productivity, or explains the absurd distribution of income as among the contingencies of capital. *The proof of seriousness is provided by the obedience to economic considerations*, the very same ones whose anti-social tenor Marxism in another period denounced as an obscene secret of class. The reversal imposed itself in jolts, and World War One, which brought with it both the bankruptcy of bourgeois civilization and socialist internationalism, was one of its moments. The viciousness of the ideological denunciation in *Saint Joan* attests to the ensuing shock. The process was completed sometime after the following war, when the necessities of capital became to all intents and purposes the equivalent of reason, and when the abundance of commodities turned into capitalist society's ideology and reasonable justification, respected even by the working class. Returning to *Saint Joan*: what becomes of its relevance under those circumstances? Indeed, why still laugh — as we do, in fact, laugh — at the precedence of the economic motive over all others, if we are tired of observing it all day long, in everything and in ourselves, without great surprise and not always with a feeling of loss? Did demystification, fixated on the hidden place of the economy in the order of things, become an empty gesture?

When *Saint Joan* was written, resorting to the clichés of idealism as if it were a living force of the present would already have been somewhat strange, coming from a leftist and avant-garde writer. Why restore to life that which the war had buried? The Brechtian resurrection was naturally unique, emphasizing to the utmost the damage that the tradition had suffered, to the point of transforming it into a deformed and ridiculous figure — nonetheless endowed with reality. In the last scene of the play, for example, poor Joan is canonized against her will and promoted as the patron saint of capital in its new phase, all underneath flags, bathed in rose-colored light and accompanied by Goethean verses. The impudent and cynical proto-Hollywood *kitsch* provided a critical version of the cheap falsifications and mythicizations with which Nazism was beginning to construct its grandiose idea of the national past and of itself. From another perspective, there was a commitment to making class conflict and canonical literature commensurable, so as to undo the conservative unctuousness that accompanied the latter and, therefore, *return it to life* — which does in fact occur. In spite of the irreverence, or because of it, the investigation of the implications that working class struggle and materialism had for the modern physiognomy of the literary represented a critical verification of the first order.

In its own way, the cheek in dealing with bourgeois civilization's most prestigious ideas and formulations outlined the threshold of a new era, detached from its previous commitments, seen now as contemptible antiques. The obsolete protocol of the idealist tradition is complementary, in this case, to the superlative cunning of the men of capital, who on the subject of demystification — if the term suggests the precedence of money over all else — do not retreat before anything and represent the vanguard of the process. That said, the historical threshold of *Saint Joan* is another, more contemporary one. *Since it nurtures and deepens the crisis, the capitalist's extraordinary cleverness changes meaning, in turn becoming obsolete and pernicious.* What is on the stage, under the sign of crisis, is the transformation of the cunning of capital into reflexes that are counterproductive, one would almost say antediluvian. The contrast between the gambling that takes place in the stock exchange and everyone's panic facing the ups and downs of the economy recalls in fact a loss of judgment on a species-wide scale.

Clearly, in the Brechtian structure that negative progression — idealism overcome by the cunning that is revealed as blindness — is complemented by a positive movement: becoming unsustainable, the crisis ferments the proletarian revolution, and with it the overcoming of the impasse. Today's reader, made wary by the fate of revolutions, does not easily concede to this schema and looks for something more precise within the internal constitution of the play that would represent an advance. On my reading, this reader will

say that there is more evidence in the configuration of the impasse and of its deepening than of the revolutionary exit, which is limited to the determination to win, or to resist and perhaps even die so that other workers will win later on. Let us say that there is a lack of specific substance in the overcoming perspective — a lack which, however, neither undoes nor attenuates the irrationalities to which it responds, irrationalities which, in the absence of a tangible alternative, take the shape of (to borrow an expression from Walter Benjamin) permanent catastrophe. And let us even say that, at least until further notice, it is this that we retain from the play when we decant it today. The working class of the 1930s, in soft focus, seems to be the material of historical reconstruction, while the other class, well on its way to monopolizing the initiative, is the protagonist of an already-contemporary slapstick, with two modern emphases: one, shameless capitalist interest, running blindly; the other, the cynicism with which old and celebrated ideas, which nobody believes in, are adapted to circumstances. It is a matter of a simile of the historical present, of its triumphs without triumph, of continuous excess and of the tendency towards anything-goes.

In its time, I imagine, without denying the interrelation between the two innovations, which is obvious, that the incorporation of the cycle of crisis to the theatrical form had been a modernizing achievement of greater weight than the economic-political pastiche of the classics. Nevertheless, you observe that between then and now the changing role of economic determinism has altered this relationship. As ingenious as they may be, the interconnections and shocks of the economy do not open greater perspectives, beyond deepening the same thing, and they differ little from their equivalents in the daily press, whose restlessness constitutes part of the static of our time. Meanwhile, the grotesque reflexes couched in classical language live fully. Why?

The laughter that greets the coups of the capitalists in *Saint Joan*, especially when they come dressed as illustrious allusions, might be of a new kind. It is not a matter, as it was previously, of detecting the questionable interest behind a respected formula. On the contrary, anti-social interest is the notorious point of departure, and the joke is on the naiveté of those who still are unaware of this, and above all in the cheekiness with which national culture is placed in the service of business — not because the latter needs protection or because the former is credible, but rather because we are on the verge of coming to blows. In this sense, the disfigured classical citations are a kind of analogy for the disposition for reorganizing the notion of legality for one's own cause. And rather than laugh at the ingenuity of the coups, we laugh at their inexorable regularity. It is as if there existed an imperative, or a constitutional defect, demanding that nothing be done in which cunning does

not have a hand. The coups become a second nature — much more terrible, at this point, than first nature — which nothing, however, stands in the way of changing, except for itself.

We all know that today the one who accumulates forces, runs risks, spans the seas, agonizes, learns, bites the dust, etc., is capital, whose pale executives are businessmen and rulers, while the rest — to exaggerate a little — are its perplexed victims, actual or potential. In Marx's terms, it is a question of commodity fetishism, which gives things human attributes, and makes humans relate to each other as things. In other words, capital summoned to itself the alternatives and destinies that had been the subject-matter of literature and, correspondingly, transformed into a cheap lie the literature that had insisted in ignoring the hollowing out of the poor devils that we are. In saturating the world of wheeling-and-dealing with the classics, however, Brecht preferred to situate himself at the penultimate stage of fetishization, a step this side of the complete delegation of social energy to the market. Since the citations are deliberately disfigured, it makes little sense to imagine that they should introduce their own, different heading, one of resistance. Brecht wanted to demonstrate that something of Mauler already existed in *Faust*, but not that the grandeur of the Enlightenment continued to live in speculations on the stock exchange. Let us say, then, that the universe of idealism is a presence that tends towards the exotic and only in part adheres to characters. It exists within the space of the social, where it is used by various and sundry people, with effects that always exceed their immediate intention. The result is a skewed illumination, which reveals the non-commercial face of business, which isn't pretty, and which does not allow fetishism to complete itself, or rather, does not allow capital to appear only as capital. Thus, the mocking proximity of the present with the defunct glories of the bourgeois order continues to question us, not because it might propose a return or a solution, but because of the evidence of fraud that it supplies.

Notes

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 38.

² Bertolt Brecht, *The Exception and the Rule*, in *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*, ed. Ralph Mannheim and John Willett, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Arcade, 2001) 35-60.

³ For a more detailed explanation, see Roberto Schwarz, "Culture and Politics in Brazil, 1964-1969," *Misplaced Ideas*, trans. John Gledson (London: Verso, 1992) 126-159.

⁴ The paradoxes of Teatro de Arena were analyzed in the heat of the moment, with sympathy and perceptiveness, by Anatol Rosenfeld: "Heróis e coringas," in *O mito e o herói no moderno teatro brasileiro* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1982).

⁵ These various intersections are richly described in Caetano Veloso's writings, *Alegria, alegria* (Rio de Janeiro: Pedra Q Ronca, n. d.), and *Verdade tropical* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997) [*Tropical Truth: A Story of Music and Revolution in Brazil* (ed. Barbara Einzig, trans. Isabel de Sena [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002]).

⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1974) 270.

⁷ Commenting on the conditions of existence of a real political theater, Brecht notes with sardonic parsimony: "After World War One, there was theater in four countries: the first had endured a complete social cataclysm; the second, half of a cataclysm; the third, a 1/4; the last, an 1/8. — The third was Czechoslovakia, and the fourth the United States, after the great crisis." Needless to say, the first had been Russia, and the second Germany. Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal* 315.

⁸ Iná Camargo Costa, *Sinta o drama* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1998) 19-26; Anatol Rosenfeld, *Teatro alemão* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1968) 120-3.

⁹ Veloso, *Verdade tropical* 363 (*Tropical Truth* 229).

¹⁰ See "Can Epic Theater Be Played Anywhere?" in John Willet, ed. and trans., *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) 75-76, and "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect," *Brecht on Theater* 136-147. [Some relevant passages of this latter essay appear in this edition only in "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," 91-99. — Trans.]

¹¹ For an example of this campaign, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iywV9R69YhI>. [Trans.]

¹² Commenting on North American radio and cinema, Adorno observes that "They call themselves industries; and when their directors' incomes are published, any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed." Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1972) 121. There is an interval of more or less ten years between Brecht's formulations and Adorno's, which emerge at the beginning of the 1940s.

¹³ T. W. Adorno, "Commitment," *Notes to Literature* Vol. II, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia, 1992) 76-94. By the same author, also on Brecht's position, see *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 247. For a less favorable account of the essay on commitment, see Iná Camargo Costa, "Brecht, Adorno, e o interesse do engajamento," in *Sinta o drama*.

¹⁴ Peter Bürger sought to point out Brecht's specific place on the map of modern art. More lucidly than the "avant-gardes," Brecht did not intend to undo the difference between art and life, nor did he want to dissolve the "artistic institution." Yet, he would not concede to leaving it untouched, in the way "modernist" writers did, either. For Brecht, who was inspired by Marxism, everything depended on not on contributing to such and such an institution, but on transforming it. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 89. Also see José Antonio Pasta Junior, *Trabalho de Brecht* (São Paulo: Atica, 1986), which gives deserved importance to the role of scandal in the playwright's conception.

¹⁵ Brecht, *Saint Joan* 71.

¹⁶ Brecht, *Saint Joan* 101.

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2000), 13, 154-55.

¹⁸ Praising *Threepenny Opera*, in 1935, Walter Benjamin observes that until recently the *modern* figure of the gangster had not been not well-known in Germany. "For only at a late stage does barbarism in the exploiters take on the same drastic form that already characterizes the poverty of the exploited at the beginning of capitalism. Brecht is concerned with both; he therefore draws the epochs together and assigns his gangster type to quarters in a London that has the rhythm and appearance of the age of Dickens. Private life is subject to the earlier conditions, the class struggle to those of today. These Londoners have no telephones, but their police already have tanks." "Brecht's *Threepenny Novel*," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978) 193.

¹⁹ The verses written by Hölderlin that serve as a motif are the following, taken from "Hyperion's Song of Destiny":

But we are given
No place to rest;
Suffering men
Falter and tumble
Blindly from one
Hour to the next,
Like water from crag
To crag, hurled down
Year after year into the Unknown.

The stanza is opposed to earlier ones, where "blessed spirits" walk the "soft earth" or repose in innocent sleep, happy like children at the breast, when they are not "looking out with still / Eternal clearness." Note the Promethean tone in the nobility attributed to the "Unknown," to dissatisfaction, to suffering, which contrast with the quiet plenitude of the divine.

In what follows, I describe the main ways in which this framework is reused in *Saint Joan*. The reader should subsequently have an idea of the scope of the Brechtian process.

The first allusion to the poem refers to the decision made by Joan, who wants to know and combat the cause of the workers' misery. The warning comes from Martha, a fellow Black Straw Hat. [In Ralph Manheim's translation, the line is spoken by the Black Straw Hats. – Trans.]

In that case, Joan, your future looks black to us.
Don't get involved in earthly strife.
It will engulf you
Your purity won't last, and soon
Your bit of warmth will perish in
The all-pervading cold.
Goodness departs from those who leave
The comforting hearth fire.
Striving downward step by step
In search of an answer never to be found
You will vanish in the muck!
For muck is what gets heaped upon those who
Ask incautious questions. (13).

In place of Hyperion's fall, we have the deliberate descent of Joan, who wants to know the misery that reigns down there, in the "Unknown." A heroic descent and, in that sense, an ascension. This is not the opinion of Martha, who is afraid that Joan will disappear in muck, suggesting the affinity of the Unknown with the lower classes; or worse, who fears that the muck will be used (by whom?) to shut her up. If this were the case, however, the descent would no longer represent a promethean destiny, but a liquidation inflicted by those on top. In this case, would the gods be the dominant class?

This schema reappears in the language of Criddle, one of the meat kings, who takes the lockout as an opportunity to clean his yards, to oil the knives and buy

...some of those new
Processing machines that save a pretty penny
In wages. New contraption. Pretty fancy.
The pig rides up on a conveyor belt
Of wire netting to the topmost floor
And there the butchering begins. The pig
Plunges almost unaided, landing on
The knives. Not bad, eh? See, the pig
Butchers itself, converts itself to sausage.

From floor to floor descending, first forsaken by
 Its hide, to be fashioned into leather
 Then parting with its bristles, used for brushes
 And lastly casting off its bones — which give us bone meal —
 It's forced by gravity into the can
 That's waiting down below. Not bad, eh.? (16)

Here are the very gods (the industrial capitalists) that slaughter the mortal (the hog) and precipitate the course toward the Unknown (the can of meat). Technical intelligence is associated with cruelty toward animals and suggests that the victim, who continues to be skinned by a simple natural effect — gravity — is in some way indicative of the working class.

Convinced of the injustice suffered by the workers, Joan goes to join them in the stockyards, where the communists preach the use of force and the general strike, as the army begins to use machine-guns to clear the area. Assailed by fear, by hunger and by the horror of violence, Joan understands that her place is not there and she decides to go away. Taking a didactic distance from herself, she explains to the public:

For three days Joan was seen
 In Packingtown, in the swamp
 Of the stockyards, going down
 Lower and lower, hoping to transfigure the muck
 And be a light to the poorest of the poor.
 For three days striding downward
 She weakened on the third day and in the end was
 Engulfed by the swamp. Say:
 It was too cold. (83)

The descent Christian undertone and a salvational purpose, yet the pressure of misery and of the powerful prevails. At first glance, to disappear in the swamp means to confuse oneself with the exploited in their anonymity. At second glance, bearing in mind that Joan goes away, it might suggest a return to her former petty privileges.

Making use of "the complex / Tergiversations of" his "great brain" (92), Mauler signs large contracts with the meat packers, while at the same time buying on the side all available livestock on hand. To fulfill the contract, the meat packers are obliged to buy the meat from Mauler himself, whose agents raise the price higher and higher, causing the industries and market to collapse:

Like water hurled from crag to crag, the prices
 Fell from quotation to quotation, plumbing

Unfathomable depths. They stopped at thirty. (94, translation modified)

The subject of the descent here is the price of commodities, which falls from the heights of heaven and disappears into the Unknown of the loss of value. For the beasts, the disaster means freedom:

... And at that very moment
 Sighing as with relief, because no contract
 Compelled its purchase, beef went down
 And down and down. (94)

The unfathomable, appropriately enough in this instance, is the suppression of the commodity form.

With the general strike crushed, the economy begins to function once again, now with fewer employees. The Black Straw Hats — the Soldiers of the Lord — prepare the soup, the music and the prayers in order to snare the unemployed.

Here we are! There, they're coming down. They are coming down!
 Misery drives them in our direction like beasts at bay!
 Look, they must descend!
 Look, they are descending, they're descending!
 (Here they can't escape. For here we stand!)
 Welcome! Welcome! Welcome! Welcome down to where we are! (99,
 translation modified)

The descent into the Unknown in this case ends in the webs of unemployment, religion and charity.

²⁰ Brecht, *Saint Joan* 3.

²¹ In an essay from 1920, Lukács distinguished between the workers' psychological or empirical consciousness, delimited by circumstances, and the class consciousness that would be "possible" for them by virtue of the key position they occupy within modern production. See "Class Consciousness," in Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971) 46-82.

²² *Saint Joan* 84.

²³ Bertolt Brecht, *Werke*, vol. III, (Berlin-Frankfurt/M.: Aufbau-Suhrkamp, 1989) 451.