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Diane M. Kirkpatrick, Series Editor

Professor, History of Art
The University of Michigan

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The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde

by

Dana B. Polan

Assistant Professor

Department of English

University of Pittsburgh

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The Politics of a Brechtian Aesthetics

In reality, the critical attitude is the only productive one, the only one worthy of a person. It signifies collaboration, continuation, and life. Without a critical attitude, true artistic pleasure is impossible.

Bertolt Brecht, "The Critical Attitude"

A reader-coming (as I did) to Brecht's critical writings only after encountering the use made of Brecht in recent critical theory of art may well experience a kind of alienation-effect, a disparity between the current interpretation of Brecht, and what his words can seem to be saying.¹ Many current readings of Brecht employ a formalizing interpretation whereby one perspective—for example, his emphasis on a separation of elements—of Brecht's theory is extracted from the whole, and then peremptorily declared to be the whole of what Brecht was saying.² For example, in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1979), Colin MacCabe reads the Brechtian aesthetic as one concerned essentially with rejecting traditional forms, in support of his claim that "Joyce's writing produces a change in the relations between reader and text, a change which has profound revolutionary implications" (p. 1). This version of Brecht is invoked continuously throughout MacCabe's book; Joyce's refusal to make reading easy is likened by MacCabe to Brecht's estrangement of the audience, and his defense of non-Aristotelean epic theatre: "[In Joyce,] deprived of a unitary position of dominance, the reader's discourses distance themselves one from the other as they declare their contradictions. The distances thus opened up provide the space for new things to be said. These methods of subverting the reading subject suggest that Joyce's texts can be considered as the novelistic equivalent of a Brechtian drama" (pp. 102-3). Brecht's concerns with popularity (not in the sense of success necessarily, but rather that of relevance), with realism, and, most importantly, with the subordination of any formal technique to a social technique—of a formal estrangement to an estrangement in and of the social—disappear as MacCabe constructs the Brecht he needs for his argument.³

In this, MacCabe's book is typical of a certain use in criticism,⁴ a utilization that is directly connected to the schools and approaches criticized in previous chapters as potentially blocking an engagement with the complexity of a text's situation in the social. The formalist takeover of Brecht is a culmination of the formalist project. Understanding their adversary as the monolith of representation and narrative, formalist approaches have simply argued for an art that would reject or "subvert" these characteristics. Narrative and illusionism are seen by such theory to work together to banish, or suture, contradiction.

Illusionism, for example, supposedly does this by putting the spectator in fictive contact with a world reflected in the work of art, thereby hiding the work of the artistic text as a mediating force. Illusionism depends upon a conception of the subject-object duality as automatically—or, at the very least, inevitably—bridgeable in an act of passive contemplation or observation.⁵ The world manifests, presents, truth and all one must do is contemplate that world—or its embodiment in those transparent conveyors that are works of art—to gain insight into that meaning.

The ideas of André Bazin clearly epitomize the application to film of this optimistic theory of the possibilities of meaning; indeed, new theories often begin with what is perceived to be a necessary critique of the imputed dominance of the Bazinian aesthetic. With such notions as the close-up as window to the soul, as the destructiveness of conscious artistic intervention, and of film as the revelation of the *vie intérieure* of the world, Bazin becomes the target for many, if not most, newer theories which see film as a production of meaning, as a site of work in the viewer's consciousness.

The problem with the critique of illusionism is not that illusionism doesn't exist; indeed, a requisite for any developing theory of film, including a political one, is the need to grapple with the virtually mythic dominance of the Bazinian aesthetic in thinking about film.⁶ What polarizes the opposition to Bazin, prompting it to adopt an either/or position, with no room for other approaches, is the peremptory quality of Bazin's own approach, its claim to an understanding of the "ontology" of film, a claim against which opponents react with their own offers of an alternative ontology. Bazin's aesthetic presents one vocation for the cinema; it moves beyond description of an option to argue that illusionism is fundamentally the essence of cinema.⁷ Consequently, in critiques of Bazin, a confusion of Bazinian theory with the Bazinian object occurs; in an unintentionally ironic way, the critique of reflection theory starts by believing that Bazin's theory reflects the cinema he examined because of a virtually iconic or even indexical connection between the two—in fact, Bazin's reading is no more than a reading.⁸ That the classical American cinema is more than a representational cinema, and that Bazin himself found his theory straining at several points of contact with the Hollywood film,⁹ seems to remain

unrecognized by anti-illusionist critics who accept Bazin's argument at face value as a description of a real object: the whole of dominant cinema as an illusionist cinema.

Narrative and its ostensible canonization in Hollywood also become a target of recent criticism. For example, Noel Burch, in an interview in *Women and Film* (5/6), declares linearity—i.e., narrative progression—to be an, if not the, inherent code of what he sees as dominant cinema. In part, narrative is understood in such theory as little more than a form of illusionism; in line with Levi-Strauss's understanding of narrative in myth as that which is actually synchronic taking on the guise of the diachronic, the critique of narrative understands narrative development as the unveiling in time of what is really a continuity of space; narrative is seen as a fundamentally conservative form in which newly revealed moments are caught up by what has preceded them.¹⁰ The story becomes, in such an approach, a fundamentally idealist form; a story unveils space: the depths which lie behind appearance. The narrative is a new example of a phenomenology, displayed like Hegel's across time, in which subjects and objects meet but only after a journey through dislocation.

Their connection to narrative explains why Barthes sees the hermeneutic and the proairetic codes—the codes of suspense and of action, respectively—as the most determined and determining codes of fiction. With both codes, a kind of narrative illusionism is seen to be at work. At a first narrative point, the text proposes an incomplete term which it promises at some later point to complete, to give a sense to. The hermeneutic and proairetic codes are (for Barthes) the only codes caught up in this game of incompleteness/completeness; while the symbolic code, especially, provides a plurality, a place where the text can be opened up, the hermeneutic and proairetic codes are committed by a force of logic to closure.

Against narrative and against transparency, critics and artists suggest a whole range of deconstructive practices. Many of these strategies are based on a notion of work, the necessity of an expenditure of labor in the reading of a text, so as to counteract the supposed ease and passivity of reading that narrative and transparency allow. Many recent critics push for a difficult art, an art that forces its audience into an active, interpretive response. The problem of passivity further provides the impetus for the rediscovery of Brecht, who has become, for recent critics, the master of deconstruction, the champion of formal subversion. Noel Burch, for example, in *Theory of Film Practice*, adopts Brecht's theory, but only after declaring it necessary to eliminate Brecht's concern for content.

Those elements (and, as I hope to demonstrate, they are no more than elements, altered when they are pulled out of context, and not the whole of the theory) which aid in a critique of illusionism and narrative are emphasized as

the center of Brecht's theory. In *To the Distant Observer*, Burch valorizes the nonmatched cutting in many Japanese films (for example, the many cuts in Ozu's films *across* a 180-degree line) by an invocation of Brecht's theory of *gest*. In Burch's reading, the disjunctive editing of Japanese film subverts meaning by separating scenes from each other, an activity which Burch reads as parallel to the Brechtian understanding of the scene as a kind of tableau which foregrounds a *gest*. It is in such a reading that we can see the distorting powers of formalism. As Brecht describes the gestic effect, it is not simply a formal separation of scenes into tableaux but a separation so that each scene can present, in bold relief, a socially typical action. In Brecht's aesthetic, formal techniques are always in the service of social criticism, human comportment in everyday life held up to examination in light of the particular critical qualities of art. Roland Barthes suggests that the tableau effect—the cutting up of a narrative—may reconfirm specularly and containment; the individual scene can function like the “partial object” that is singled out from the whole body in acts of fetishism (Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” *Image/Music/Text*). (The way stills and eight-by-ten glossies can become partial-object substitutes for the experience of a film might serve as partial confirmation of Barthes's point.) Barthes's recognition that there is nothing inherently subversive about a tableau effect is an important one. For example, Lindsay Anderson's film *O Lucky Man!* (1975) demonstrates that an emphasis on tableaux can have variable meanings in a film. *O Lucky Man!* breaks up narrative flow in two different ways and to two different ends (although a formalism like Burch's would have to efface this difference). On the one hand, the film incorporates an often arbitrary usage of black frames inserted throughout the film. But far from calling into question the identificatory pleasures of the film, the black frames help confirm a pleasure in the film as film. That is, part of the pleasure of the text of *O Lucky Man!* is the way it confirms the magic of cinema (the characters who can pop up at any moment, the music that can start to play at any moment)—the sense of film as an ever-increasing offer of new experiences to the viewer—through a number of techniques including a disjunction played across technique (the black frames) as well as story (the hero, Mick Travis, goes from one adventure to another). On the other hand, certain scenes have a gestic force in their isolation from the body of the film; one such scene occurs for me when, having pronounced sentence in Mick's trial on trumped-up charges, the venerable judge returns to his chambers and strips down to participate in a flogging, in a scene set off from the film by black frames. Here the black frames isolate a particular action; the scene reflects back on the judge's venerability, qualifies it.

Brecht's theory is not an endorsement of a separation of elements or of the gestic technique or of epic construction *as such*; he continually emphasizes the particular ends to which theater must direct its craft and the need to remain open toward the value (or dis-value) of any particular means to those ends.

Brecht's oft-quoted example of a political gestic scene is that of a quarrel among the members of a working class family. A narrative of sorts is established: where will the quarrel lead, what kind of actions will ensue? The father begins to turn violent. Just then, a social worker enters, and the quarrelers freeze in the middle of their actions. This for Brecht is a social tableau. The fact that the action has stopped as such matters less than the fact that it has stopped in such a way as to pinpoint specific actions—that it has stopped to single out, amplify, demonstrate, the typicality of certain social gestures. In its capacity for social demonstration, such a scene would be very different from the formally similar freezing of action in, say, *Torn Curtain* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1966), where the fact that a ballerina recognizes a fugitive couple in the audience is indicated by freeze frames of the ballerina in her performance. The freeze frames jarringly disturb the narrative flow (and they disturb any *vraisemblable* of the scene); more than that, they offer up images of typical moments in a dance. But such a freeze is not a *gest* in Brecht's sense, since, here, typicality is not directly connected to the expression of a social attitude, to the political place and meaning of the character.

Brecht is not a formalist (nor is he a realist, pure and simple). Rather, as he explicitly argues, his goal is a *social* realism (in a sense of realism far different from, say, the social realism of Lukács); as he suggests in his essay, “Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth”:

It is not at all true that it is easy to find the truth. It is already not easy, first of all, to determine which truth it is worth writing about. It is true that at this moment, for example, all the great civilized nations are falling one after the other into barbarism. . . . This is undoubtedly a truth but there naturally exist many other truths. For example, it is not a falsity to say that chairs are made for sitting on and that rain falls from high to low. There are many writers who write about truths like that. (*Realisme*, p. 14)

Brecht clearly sees political art as a particular use of technique to bring out a particular social representation; one implication of this concern with such a specification of aesthetic processes is that a Brechtian art is programmatically political (although not dogmatically so). Political art does not simply come into being, but must be worked for, must be made. As Fredric Jameson explains:

Brecht's aesthetic, and his ways of framing the problems of realism, are intimately bound up with a conception of science. . . . for Brecht, science is far less a matter of knowledge and epistemology than it is of sheer experiment and of practical, well-nigh manual activity. . . . it puts knowing the world back together with changing the world, and at the same time unites an ideal of praxis with a conception of production. . . . The spirit of realism designates an active, curious, experimental, subversive—in a word, *scientific*—attitude towards social institutions and the material world. (“Afterword,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, 1977)

This kind of understanding of Brecht is very different from that which Burch uses in his reading of Japanese cinema, whereby artists can make a revolution without realizing it (and often in works whose subject matter is reactionary) simply by creating non-narrative, non-illusionist works. Formal innovation, legitimated in the aesthetic dimension, is easy to find, easy to describe, and so, at the cost of a repression, Brecht is enlisted in this operation. A new Brecht—Brecht the formalist—arises.

But there is also, and foremost, Brecht the social realist. Based on a reading far different from, and in many ways opposed to, the formalist reading of Brecht, I believe Brecht's aesthetic contains an important dialectical model for a political cinema, a cinema that would measure and represent the spectator's place in relation to that of art.

It is necessary here to anticipate a possible objection: namely, the potential distortion that could result from applying a theory of theater to the semiotically different art of film. Brecht's own attitude toward film—an attitude permanently shaped by the vicissitudes of his contact with the art—is indeed an ambivalent one. In his text on *The Threepenny Opera* lawsuit, Brecht sees cinema as *the* modern art, which the modern artist can avoid only at the cost of remaining a mere artisan, no longer in touch with the age: "Anybody who advises us not to make use of such new apparati just confirms the apparatus' right to do bad work. . . . At the same time he deprives us in advance of the apparatus we need in order to produce, since this way of producing is likely more and more to supercede the present one" (*Theatre*, p. 47). Brecht concludes that, "for film the principles of non-Aristotelean drama (a type of drama not depending on empathy, mimesis) are immediately acceptable." But almost ten years later, as he works in Hollywood on screenplays, Brecht directs what he refers to as a "fundamental reproach" to cinema. Writing in his *Arbeitsjournal* on 27 March 1942, Brecht argues that the cinema, in its inherent form, in the material nature of its signifying matter, is doomed to block critical intervention by the spectator:

i don't believe that all technical problems are soluble in principle. in particular, i think that the effect of an artistic presentation on its spectators is not independent of the effect of the spectators on the arts. in the theatre, the audience regulates the performance. the film has monstrous weaknesses in detail which seem unavoidable in principle. . . . we only see what one eye, the camera, saw. this means that the actors have to act for this eye alone. . . . the mechanical reproduction gives everything the character of a result: the audience no longer has any opportunity to change the artist's performance. it is not assisting at a production, but at the end result of a production that took place in their absence. (Quoted in Ben Brewster, "The Fundamental Reproach," p. 44)

Brecht here joins with an essentialist way of seeing the cinema as an art inevitably consigned to encouraging spectator passivity, but the inadequacies

of this reified view of the cinema and its supposed inability to involve spectators in anything more than a distant, specular relationship, have been recognized, not least by Brecht himself. Two factors, moreover, modify the initial intensity of Brecht's fundamental reproach. First, the fact that Brecht writes this particular entry while in Hollywood is not only a sign of his disaffection with Hollywood, but also, and conversely, a mark of his seriousness in posing the question of cinema as a question, not merely something to be dismissed. Significantly, Brecht makes a number of suggestions as to how that cinema can serve productive ends. He suggests as one possibility that *Hangmen Also Die*, a film he wrote for Fritz Lang in Hollywood, include gestic actions embodied in typical scenes which could be clipped out from the film, and used on their own for their (non-narrative) politically illustrative value. Second, Brecht's theory as a whole is directly opposed to any form of essentialist thinking. For Brecht, an art like cinema is fundamentally both regressive and progressive; that is, it is a material practice whose place in the social is never determinable in an a priori fashion. It was indeed the tendency to view the theater in reified terms that Brecht found so constraining in other critics and theorists of theatrical art. Theater, the theater Brecht holds up against cinema in his journal entry, is itself no essence, no unproblematically progressive form. As the bulk of his writings show, Brecht's own engagement with the politics of theater, with its materials, was an activity, a work, in which a matter (indeed, a resistant, reactive matter—the old theater; the moribund, bourgeois stage) had to undergo a reworking, a transformation, an alienation from its own alienating effects. Similarly, a Brechtian theory of cinema (present in fragments in Brecht's own writing) would view the cinema not as an essence but as a form, historically determined, which new kinds of cinema could change.

In his essay "The Fundamental Reproach (Brecht)" (*Cine-Tracts*, 1977), Ben Brewster suggests at least three different practices of a Brechtian aesthetic in cinema, all of which find explicit theoretical foundation in Brecht's writings. First, Brewster suggests that cinema can be made a critical form, one that truly involves spectator intervention, by a kind of literarization similar to that which Brecht calls for in his essay "The Literarization of the Theatre" (*Theatre*, pp. 43-47). There Brecht argues that what matters for political theater is not necessarily a mutual interaction between spectator and actor but an interaction *in* the spectator between two attitudes that he/she holds toward social comportment. Where such comportment usually passes unrecognized, epic theater has as its function, through the role of the actor, to add a voice to (i.e., to literarize) actions that are usually voiceless: "[This theatre] is a kind of report on life as any member of the audience would like to see. Since at the same time, however, he sees a good deal that he has no wish to see; since therefore he sees his wishes not merely fulfilled but also criticized (sees himself not as the subject but as the object), he is theoretically in a position to appoint a new function for the theatre" (p. 43). The actor here is little more than a kind of stage prop,

surrendering psychological depth to facilitate criticism in the spectator's consciousness; indeed, Brecht's notion of the actor as influenceable by the spectator, which he uses to oppose theater to cinema, is one that plays little part in his developed aesthetic. (It is strongest in his early discussion of the *Lehrstück*, the learning play, which the actors performed for themselves with no audience or in which the actors became their own audience.) In the essay "The Literarization of the Theatre," Brecht even goes so far as to suggest that certain kinds of plays might as well be read as seen; in this practice, one which would obviously banish the voice and presence of the actor, the spectator might be able to bring critical faculties to bear on the text in a way that the spectacular functions of performed theater might repress.

A literary cinema, similarly, would not be a cinema that one simply watched for the pleasure of sights and sound, but one that added a critical discourse to qualify those images. For theater, "literarizing entails punctuating 'representation' with 'formulation'; it gives the theatre the possibility of making contact with other institutions for intellectual activity" (pp. 43-44). One target here is spectacle. The *spectacle form* is a peremptory form which asserts to its spectators that all that is *worthy of attention* are *signifiers on a screen* and that the way such *signifiers* should be attended to is through a mere watching, a nonintellective acceptance of the meaningfulness of the spectacle image. In opposition to *spectacle*, *literarization* works to make *art a discursive form*, an arena of intellection and investigation. For example, in the film version of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (Michael Dibb, 1972), there is a constant literarization of two forms of art—painting and cinema. The film, which deals with the political functions of art, and attacks the Kenneth Clark type of documentary about art, does so not merely by talking about such art but by playing off the noncommunicability of art or the ambiguity of images against a discourse separate from *but juxtaposed with and against* those images. Berger argues at one point that oil painting helped the aristocracy to see their possessions, their success in power depicted. It is not just the narrator's distant voice which explains this but a direct intervention against such art; by means of a dissolve, the film adds to a Gainsborough portrait of a rich couple in their field the words "No trespassing." This addition of words to an image, brute though it may be, is a situating of the painting, an act of making the painting say something its appeal to mere spectacle had kept hidden. At the same time, the film deals with the potential danger of its own inclination as cinematic form toward spectacle; its solution is to offer itself as a kind of spectacle which the film then reveals to be a sham. Early sections of the film present Berger in extreme close-up against a neutral blue background, serving as narrator and doing so in the confident, convincing manner of an authority. Suddenly, the camera jumps back about fifty feet, to show Berger surrounded by film technology—lighting equipment, a false backdrop, sound equipment. The moment works to qualify Berger's

authority, to indicate where that authority comes from. A film about aura, *Ways of Seeing* critiques the tendencies of film toward aura.

Brewster goes beyond literarization to suggest, as a second kind of audience/film dialectic, the work of various filmmaking groups that accompany their films at showings in order to turn the event of film watching into an event of film discussing. Here again, the cinema gives itself over to a kind of literarization, a speaking of its concerns, in which the film itself becomes no more than an object for qualification and examination. Work in video with its ease of recording and playback suggests a further development in this direction; Shirley Clarke's experiments in which groups record actions and then immediately look at and discuss what they have seen implies a kind of literarization that is every bit as nonpassive as that of theater.

Finally, and most suggestively, Brewster argues that to fully realize its goal, Brecht's *gest* would have to have recourse to the recording capabilities of film. Brecht imagined the most efficient use of *gest* to be what he called the *Pedagogium*, a museum that would store socially significant *gests*. This showroom of useful actions would be one that people could draw from to learn how to conduct their everyday lives. *Kuhle Wampe* (Slatan Dudow, 1932), the film Brecht worked on most fully, suggests a kind of primitive version of the pedagogium. An acted film, and thus more controlled at the pro-filmic level than a documentary, *Kuhle Wampe* nonetheless compiles a number of typical gestures of the German worker of the thirties: acts of despair (at not having a job); love and courtship; sports and cooperative endeavor. Indeed, as Brecht's report of the production team's unfavorable meeting with the German censor demonstrates, it is the nondocumentary quality of *Kuhle Wampe* that makes it typical, for the film is able to concentrate, to amplify, to pick out details (for example, a close-up that infuriated the censor shows a worker taking off his watch with an automatic and habitual gesture before committing suicide by leaping from a window).

The construction of the film, moreover, allows the filmmakers to include scenes in which significant attitudes will bluntly appear (for example, in the final scene, members of all different classes and with all sorts of political positions find themselves in the same tram car discussing international politics). Brewster argues convincingly that a fully developed pedagogium could only be a *film museum*—a repository of actions indelibly recorded on celluloid. Indeed, the possibilities for film distribution and infinite replay of the same action give film certain advantages over theater in providing a wider audience for its epic procedures.

Given the dominance of misreadings of Brecht, it is perhaps necessary to specify what a Brechtian aesthetic is not. As I've suggested, the formalist reading of Brecht is based on a reading of dominant art as an art of illusionism and narrative closure. In an extreme version of this reading, the structural filmmakers argue that any film that includes filmed events is illusionist since it

presents as present that which is really absent (the events filmed exist only in an anterior relation to the act of projection). Even when theorists do not go to the minimalist extreme of the structural filmmakers, their theories necessarily tend in a direction that valorizes a showing of the materiality of film. If illusion and narrative are repressive regardless of what is shown, regardless of what narrative developments occur, then the cinema itself as institution becomes the enemy. Whereas in earlier formalist critiques of cinema, certain types of film practice, which were supposedly alone in effecting a particular audience response (namely, passivity and uncritical receptivity), were singled out for critique, now the project of representation as a whole comes under scrutiny. In this view, the very structure of film viewing—audiences sitting before a screen and watching from a particular point of view or perspective—contributes to the constitution of the individual as a viewing subject—that is, as a subject safely elevated by self-confidence in a world reflected and represented on a screen, to a privileged, unchallenged position vis-à-vis the screen world. This rejection of representation suggests that attacks on the institution of cinema would have to come from totally nonrepresentational films; hence, the admiration of Le Grice or Burch for a film like Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainier* (1957), a film of flickering black-and-white frames that would seem to allow little investment of the spectator's emotion. Anti-representational critics and artists push for new artistic experiences that call the traditional boundaries of the arts into question. But a set of overriding questions remains: in what ways is this undermining of accepted practices (if it is indeed an undermining, and if indeed these practices are the only accepted ones) a progressive, political one, and, more specifically, reflective of a Brechtian politics?

In part, of course, an answer depends on what we take the terms of the questions to mean. For example, Brecht understands political art as that which concerns itself with analyzing and then proposing strategies to deal with the contradictions of a particular historical situation. Obviously, formalist critics might claim that this is precisely what the art they support is doing. In the 1972 postscript to *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*, Peter Wollen declares that a new art would cause the spectator to "produce fissures and gaps in the space of his own consciousness (*fissures and gaps which exist in reality but which are repressed by an ideology, characteristic of bourgeois society*, which insists on the 'wholeness' and integrity of each individual consciousness)" (p. 162, my emphasis). Wollen partially covers his tracks by declaring that such a repression is *characteristic* of and not necessarily omnipresent in bourgeois society, but the disclaimer itself is uncharacteristic of the radical formalist approach, which repeats any number of arguments about the passivity that popular art supposedly induces. The new aesthetic bases itself on a belief that texts lead to a domination of their subjects by placing those subjects in a particular position, physically, formally, perhaps ideologically. A text, in this sense, is an ensemble of codes that rationalize a particular way of relating to the

world and then make this rationalizing attractive by not interfering with the fetishistic or voyeuristic perspective of the viewing subject. In his essay, "The Politics of Separation," Colin MacCabe goes so far as to call this seduction "the bribe of identity," thereby situating textual persuasion in the realm of crime.

This sort of position leaves many points unanswered or at least ambiguous. Before we can assess the validity of certain subversive strategies as answers, we need to make sure that the problem has been correctly understood. We need to examine the notion of textual domination. Such a notion rests on two fundamental points: that texts confirm the world and blind us to contradictions, and that submission to a text means submission to an ideological practice. The belief in a bribe of identity sees the text as a complicity of codes, a rhetoric that hides its own rhetorical nature. Thus, critics like MacCabe see the text as a force of domination over spectators.

But all texts dominate. Without a degree of code sharing between art-makers and art-receivers, the artwork would become a kind of noise. To alter MacCabe's economic metaphor (which he obviously doesn't intend as a metaphor), texts aren't bribes; they are contracts in which spectators or readers willingly agree to relate to codes in a certain way and, I would contend, usually with knowledge of the workings of many of these codes. The signs of the contract appear throughout the texts; they may become familiar to us precisely because they are signs. We have to learn them to be able to read or to view. And yet submission to a contractual promise is only one side of the working of a text. As information theory suggests, communication ceases not only without a certain adherence to codes; it also, in contrast, ceases if there is nothing but redundancy, repetition of the initial communication: there must be a certain (controlled) transgression. Art, all art, bases itself not just on confirmation but also on a necessary contradiction of forms. Frank Kermode has described this interplay alternatively as one between credulity and skepticism (in *The Sense of an Ending*) and one between recognition and deception ("Novels: Recognition and Deception," *Critical Inquiry*, 1974). To a large extent, the self-reflexivity that new criticism valorizes in certain texts represents no more than one strategy in the interplay of a process intrinsic to *and actually defining the aesthetic dimension*. One sort of pleasure comes from precisely this interplay of credulity and skepticism; part of the appeal of self-reflexive art is that it heightens this intrinsic interplay.

If we survey the development of the literary and dramatic arts, we continually come across examples of art which signal awareness of their own artifice. Literary critics often point to *Tristram Shandy* as a highpoint in the conscious use of artifice; in a revealing comment, Viktor Shklovsky called it "the most typical novel in world literature." Such a comment does not so much indicate the uniqueness of the book, its separation from the mass of the literature, but the ways in which it makes explicit, foregrounds, a *nature* of literature. Indeed, as an eighteenth-century novel, Fielding's *Tom Jones* goes

almost as far as Sterne's book in uncovering the codes that a reading of literature depends on. Fielding, for example, explicitly invokes the model of a contract by comparing the novel to a meal where there is a certain interplay between the fixed, promised order of courses and the changing identities of the foods in that order. The difference between *Tristram Shandy* and *Tom Jones*, at the level of their play with codes, is one of degree, not of kind; it is a modification, not a break. Invocations of the classic novel in formalist criticism construct a mythic version of such a novel in which many of the qualities of that literature are repressed or ignored.

The development, to continue this example, of the English novel from Sterne to Joyce (and beyond) is a development (in a far from linear fashion) of a tendency and characteristic in the novel as an aesthetic form. But formalist criticism, by its very premises, can have little room for a recognition of degrees; its thinking is in terms of breaks. Barthes, for example, has suggested that modernism was not really a possibility for art until 1850; he thereby ignores the fact that every artistic period is necessarily an interplay between tradition and artistic revolution.

Revealingly, humanist literary and art criticism has long been able to accommodate transgressions of the rules of the communication act.¹¹ The usual approach is to see such transgressions as necessary to a progress that otherwise would stultify. Establishment critics have long been able to situate modernism in a nonrevolutionary aesthetic. One can cite many examples of this accommodation. Two books of literary analysis—Robert Alter's *Partial Magic* (1975) and Albert Guerard's *The Triumph of the Novel* (1976)—have as their goal to read a tradition of literature in an antirealist way (Guerard, for example, includes Dickens in a tradition of Dostoevski and Faulkner, against the traditional reading of Dickens as painter of society). Both authors celebrate what they coincidentally call "the Great Other Tradition," thereby expanding the canon beyond the limits prescribed by Leavis. Both Guerard and Alter (and these are only two examples) transform aesthetic disturbances into positive, humanist values. More precisely, they recognize literary or formal innovation for what it often is: a nonthreatening, typical component of art and of its appeal. Guerard, for example, refers to the novel's powers of "illuminating and imaginative distortion," thus recognizing qualities that formalist political criticism can only find in a few, select works. Literature can introduce an imbalance for the purpose of establishing a higher balance; the term *avant-garde* literally suggests nothing more than an advance force.

Viktor Shklovsky argued for art as *ostranenie*, a making strange of the world. And indeed if art confirms, it also makes strange the normal order of things. Suspension of belief accompanies suspension of disbelief. All art is distanced. This is as true of Hollywood as of Laurence Sterne or Aristophanes. We learn to read through this distance, but we also learn to want new distances.

Hollywood not only presents unreality as reality; it openly acknowledges its unreality. In his book, *America in the Movies* (1975), Michael Wood goes so far as to suggest that unreality can become the condition of Hollywood film. Campiness, he argues, is not an aspect of some entertainment films, but the very condition of entertainment; as he says, "Hollywood is the only place in the world where anyone says, 'Santa Maria, it had slipped my mind!'"

The Hollywood cartoon—a staple of Hollywood production—embodies many of the formal techniques claimed to be deconstructive. And yet if any *political* concern can be claimed for most of these cartoons, this is so only in the etymological sense of political as that which deals with the *polis*, with "universal" relations of people to each other: the stories of the cartoons reject history (except for moments which intrude like a veritable return of a repressed), and their formal innovations work not to "produce fissures and gaps" but to reconfirm the spectator's faith in the entertainment value of cinema.

Brecht argues that artworks differ not so much in their degree of formal complexity as in their representation of political attitudes, in their use of form to highlight certain attitudes about the world. An analysis of a typical cartoon will bear this out. *Duck Amuck* (Chuck Jones, 1953) is a virtual culmination of the experimental possibilities of the Hollywood cartoon. The subject of the cartoon is the nature of animation technique itself. In *Duck Amuck*, Daffy Duck undergoes victimization at the hand of his animator, ultimately revealed to be none other than Bugs Bunny. Bugs tortures Daffy by playing with such film coordinates as framing, background, and color. In an article on *Duck Amuck* in *Film Comment* (1975), Rick Thompson rightly notes that the film manifests a high degree of emphasized formal complexity: "the film is extremely conscious of itself as an act of cinema, as is much of Jones's work. . . . *Duck Amuck* is a good example of Noel Burch's dialectic idea of film elements: foreground and background, space and action, character and environment, image and soundtrack are all in conflict with one another. . . ." Yet Burch's dialectic idea, as he himself admits (*Theory of Film Practice*, p. xix), is far from a Marxist dialectic, and so is *Duck Amuck*. If *Duck Amuck* becomes a metaphor for the confusions of life (as Thompson suggests) it is a disengaged metaphor at best, since it suggests only certain forms of this confusion, and certain causes. Indeed, the source of Daffy Duck's angst reveals itself to be none of the agents of social domination in a real world, but merely Bugs Bunny—another fictive character, whose power is tautological in source. The film opens up a formal space, and not a political one, in viewer consciousness, and so ultimately does not subvert but confirms. *Duck Amuck* closes in on itself, fiction leading to and springing from fiction, the text becoming a loop that effaces social analysis.

We may approach this issue from another direction if we examine those theories that deal with traditional art's supposed function vis-à-vis the daily

workings of the everyday world. Recent critics contend, as the earlier quote from Peter Wollen suggests, that bourgeois art works to instill a complacency in the viewer, a complacency both about the art object itself and about the world outside of art. But there is nothing necessarily consoling or optimistic about bourgeois art. Nor is life under capitalism necessarily one of complacency and isolation from an awareness of contradiction. It depends on what kind of contradiction and what kind of awareness we're talking about. That our day-to-day expectations can be thwarted is a normal and accepted possibility of everyday life. The conventional work of art does not banish contradiction; rather, it works by divorcing contradiction from its social context and cause. Everyday life is often little more than a continual succession of disappointments, of subversions, all of which fissure our self unity and social unity as acting subjects. Art does not deny this malaise; it merely hides and denies its roots in historical forces. This is why contemporary culture can well accommodate formally subversive art; as long as such art does not connect its formal subversion to an analysis of social situations, such art becomes little more than a further example of the disturbances that go on as we live through a day. And a work of art that defeats formal expectations does not lead to protest against a culture that deals continually in the defeating of expectations. This may help to explain the morbid underside of fan fascination with Hollywood—an underside of scandal magazines and, ultimately, of the elevation of trash books like Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*, with its photos of Jayne Mansfield's car crash and of Judy Garland strung out on drugs, to coffee table respectability. We are used to having our realities deconstructed to such an extent that we may even ask for such a deconstruction, and so too, it does not bother us to see the reality of the movie screen world deconstructed. In her article *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* in *Socialist Revolution* (1976), Barbara Ehrenreich suggests that the TV series represents the triumph of contradiction: a show that attacks the consumer world is sponsored to sell the very sort of products its content disdains. And it succeeds. Ehrenreich presents this plenitude of contradictions as a stumbling block to leftist theories of popular culture, which in the past took the form of a manipulation theory. If it were merely a question of art inspiring blind optimism, criticism would be easy, as it has been for formalism. Shows like *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* have made pessimism, discontent, and irony marketable. What a radical aesthetics needs to deal with is this realm of contradiction which obscures political contradictions.

And here we return to Brecht. Brecht also sees a difference and distance between art and political art. Art, he argues, automatically embodies a distancing, a making strange. But there's nothing yet socially distancing about that. Brecht continually emphasizes the ways in which bourgeois theater has become acceptable to audiences despite its strangeness to them; in the bourgeois theater, for example, the worker sees images of life that have little to

do with his/her life. This is the destiny of art under capitalism. In opposition to this "natural" destiny, Brecht argues that to be progressive art has to be made so; what has become habitual—the marketability of alienation—has to be disturbed.

In his essay "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," Brecht uses the example of opera to present his conception of art as possessing *intrinsic* qualities of distance from reality, to which the artist can *add* a sense of political engagement. As is well known, Brecht's theory of art reception emphasizes conscious knowledge over intuition. So does his theory of art creation. Like his teacher, Erwin Piscator, Brecht sees art as filling a *programmed* function. This implies conscious attention to form and to content.

Brecht reportedly discovered the alienation effect when actors at a rehearsal for *Edward II* began to get tired and to approach their roles with a distanced, uninvolved attitude. But, even if its roots are in accidents of this sort, Brecht's aesthetic is a constant attempt to develop control of art, to merge art and the rational, indeed to make the production of art a rational activity. Political art, for Brecht, is not just a matter of formal innovation (a potential he sees open to all artists) but of a particular view of society that is not available by intuition or accident but only by work and investigation, a scientific attitude. Summing up the problem of nonrationalistic theories of artistic production, Brecht puts the matter bluntly: "[According to intuitionist aesthetics] the act of the artist happens unconsciously, he is somnabulistic, he doesn't even know his own motivations, he obeys inspirations, and he doesn't demand that one understand him but merely identify with him. This is the famous definition of art according to which an artist can be great while being an idiot" ("Self-Criticism," *Réalisme*, p. 78).

This emphasis on planning probably most separates Brecht from Lukács's position, which seems to favor an intuitionist approach to literary creation: "Lasting typologies based on a perspective of this sort [i.e., based on the "selection of the essential and the subtraction of the inessential"] owe their effectiveness not to the artist's understanding of day-to-day events but to his unconscious possession of a perspective independent of and reaching beyond his understanding of the contemporary scene" (*Realism in Our Time*, p. 57). Lukács's belief in unconscious awareness leads Brecht to call him a formalist, for it is precisely a belief like Lukács', that the nineteenth-century masters had the answers and that these answers are still relevant to the twentieth century, which keeps literary production in the realm of accident and signals a refusal to situate such production within the actual workings of history.

In fact, Brecht's aesthetic suggests that we need to expand and clarify the notion of realism. Significantly, Brecht refers to his own artistic project as a realism. Realism, he suggests, is no more (and no less) than a type of attitude toward the world. Brecht's theory most significantly distinguishes between realism—which he saw as the overriding impulse of his art—and unrealism, the

setting up of false or limited or reified attitudes toward the world and toward worldly possibilities, whether these be attitudes of a formalist art or a naturalist one. In his essay "The Popular and the Real," Brecht defines realism as "discovering the causal complexes of society unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who rule." Realism is thus a form of knowledge, a picturing of reality. To judge the efficacy of a particular realism, "one must compare the depiction of life in a work with the life that is being depicted." Like the Lacanian theory of the subject that formalist criticism draws upon, Brecht's theory depends on a notion of positioning, of the subject's place in the circuit of communication. But Brecht diverges from this theory in an important way. For Brecht, the attitudinal position of the viewing subject springs from an attitudinal position in the work (in the social content and form of the work and not just in its systems of address, as Colin MacCabe's reading of Brecht would have it); the political artwork embodies a difference between the way things are and the way they can be. Brecht's formal experimentation depends on subject matter in two ways. Form must change in relation to changing subjects; otherwise, Brecht argues, the formalism of a Lukács, in which a certain form of the novel works in all times, will result. Second, Brecht's political theater is a theater of possibility—a theater showing that life doesn't only have to take on the forms that it generally does. Theodor Adorno suggests that this opens a Brechtian aesthetic up to the danger of a voluntarist attitude toward political engagement: it is finally up to the artist to decide what is real, what isn't, what is changeable about reality, what isn't. Adorno declares:

Brecht wanted to reveal in images the inner nature of capitalism. In this sense his aim was indeed what he disguised it as against Stalinist terror—realistic. But this burdened him with the obligation of ensuring that what he intended to make unequivocally clear was theoretically correct. His art, however, refused to accept this *quid pro quo*: it both presents itself as didactic, and claims aesthetic dispensation from responsibility for the accuracy of what it teaches. ("Commitment," *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 183)

But what Adorno presents as a shortcoming of the Brechtian aesthetic has to be seen as a problem and an issue: the relation of any artwork to social action will always have a certain voluntaristic or indeterminate quality. Indeed, Adorno's aesthetic—the negative dialectic in which the work of Beckett or Schönberg or Joyce, among others, takes a distance from the loss of social life under capitalism, and so becomes a negation of negation—can only present itself as an objective, true politics of art by ignoring a whole set of historicizing questions (for example, the question of reception, which Adorno can only read in terms of a high art/low art split).

If there is a certain formalism to Brecht's project—an attention to techniques first, and only afterwards attention to the ways techniques might engage with history—this is the inevitable formalism of any art, the edge of unpredictability of certain effects when they enter into real historical situations.

Brecht's interest in experimentation, his strictures against any too rigidly constructed theory of political art, are so many attempts to minimize unpredictability and keep art open to the changing demands of history.

If there is one characterization of political art which does not change throughout Brecht's writing, it is his definition of a political art as one that compares an image of human beings as "unalterable" to an image of them as "alterable and able to alter" ("The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre"). As such, the new theater shows that formal arrangements of life can change. We can do things we never thought possible, not the least of these being to challenge the universality of bourgeois thought and practice. But not all possibilities are equally valid. Brecht defers (at the point that Adorno would see as voluntarist) to extra-aesthetic criteria: what is valid is what will lead to a worker's socialism. Indeed, if there is an idealist side to Brecht's aesthetic, it is not so much in his voluntarism, but in his conception of the worker as a full individual, able to recognize progressive art when he/she has the chance. Brecht's theory often defers to an unexamined, undialectical vision, not unlike Lukács's, of the worker as the virtually automatic carrier of history:

The workers judged everything as to the truth of its content: they welcomed every innovation which helped the representation of truth, of the real mechanism of society; they rejected everything that seemed theatrical, technical equipment that merely worked for its own sake. . . . There will always be people of culture, connoisseurs of art, who will interject: 'Ordinary people do not understand that [experimentation].' But the people will push these persons impatiently aside and come to a direct understanding with artists. ("The Popular and the Real," *Brecht*, pp. 110-11)

Brecht's theory, then, is ultimately a theory with ambiguous connections to practice: his conception of the worker, for example, lacks a necessary understanding of psychology, of the ways one might go against self-interest and conscious intent. Again, though, this is not so much a full criticism of Brecht as a recognition of the inevitable incompleteness of any theory of art in the face of historical applications of aesthetic practice. Brecht's theory, though inspired and influenced by his practice, is precisely a theory, a generalization.

For Brecht, political art plays off of a political redefinition of credulity and skepticism. If the new world of social possibility is not to appear as nothing but noise, a too-new newness, the artwork must also make use of the old world as a standard. Meaning, and its realization in action, comes from the differences between the two worldviews present(ed) in the artwork. Political art defamiliarizes the world. But it can only do so by playing off of our connections to that world. As a realism, the Brechtian aesthetic uses formal techniques, a play with the specific codes of art, in the service of encouraging comment on and criticism of a given social reality. The function of distantiation techniques is not so much to remind the spectators that they are watching a play or a film

(since they already are aware of that) but to break down the socially unquestioning way that people watch spectacle. The separation of elements (for example, of actors from their roles, of *mise-en-scène* from story, of props from the setting, directs attention to aspects of a performance, of a spectacle, which are missed when all elements are working together. As in the notion of *ostranenie* so dear to Russian formalism, a separation of elements makes those elements strange, pinpoints them, but since art itself is already strange, a kind of disengagement from the real complexity of social phenomena, Brecht argues that it is ultimately, but primarily, social comportment that should be made strange in art, through a kind of negation of the negation that the aesthetic dimension is.

As Brecht's writings reveal, the need to quote acts of social comportment, to frame them, as it were, and make them available for criticism, can take on two different forms. On the one hand, the theater can serve as a place where comportment in everyday life outside the theater can be criticized. The estranging devices will, in this case, work to pull social actions from their habitual framework, a framework that because it is habitual allows these acts to pass unremarked or unexamined. At the same time, in its new context, the action must still bear signs of its original context; the audience must recognize that the action they are seeing on the stage is not just an action that occurs in the fictive world of the theater but one that has an extratheatrical referent. Robert Nelson's *O Dem Watermelons* (1965), a film acted by the Brechtian San Francisco Mime Troupe, is a Brechtian film in this sense, using its techniques to make comportment by whites toward blacks criticizable (the film was used as an organizing tool during NAACP marches in the 1960s). Through its chronicle of watermelons, which late in the film are associated with blacks, the film works to first encourage a seemingly innocent spectatorial pleasure—the film starts out as an eccentric oddity allowing destructive fantasies to play themselves out. The function of the film's progression is to increasingly politicize this innocence, to qualify it.

But, at the same time, since art consumption—for example, theater-going—is itself a form of social comportment, Brecht's aesthetic also suggests a making strange of aesthetic events themselves. A Brechtian art of this sort would distance the normal conditions in which art is received to suggest the social implications of the ostensibly normal reception. It is this direction in Brecht's writing—the concern with self-reflexivity—that formalist interpretations of Brecht have latched onto. However, as I've tried to suggest, their interpretation fails, due to a reductive and restrictive misunderstanding of what "normal" spectating conditions are; these readings consequently end up valorizing as exceptional that which is really and finally acceptable as part of tradition. Contrary to formalism, Brecht understands progressive formal art not as a polyphony or a complication of perspective, but as a cutting through of obfuscations—whether the complications of modernist art or the simplicities

of naturalism—to put into art that which it tries to cover up: a representation of the values and meanings of social acts. In this sense, we can well imagine a combination of Brecht's two approaches to political art, since it is its refusal of political subject matter—of nontheatrical, socially typical *gests*—that is the social typicality of the theater.

In this sense, a film like Bruce Conner's *Report* (1963-65) can seem a Brechtian film, revealing myths about the Kennedy aura but also including cinematic presentation itself as one of the forms of that aura. After CBS refused him footage of the Kennedy assassination, Conner made a film about the film by editing together footage of everything but that event. We see Kennedy arriving in Dallas; we see the car driving toward Dealy Plaza; we see the funeral procession after the death. This is a diachronic slice in which the central element is absent. At the same time, Conner presents a synchronic picture, alternating events from Dallas with pop images culled from American life; we see a refrigerator commercial, a telephone operator, clips from an old war movie. At the moment of the assassination (heard on the soundtrack, which is composed entirely of radio broadcasts), the screen goes blank and then into a flicker-effect (alternating black-and-white frames). With images of anything but the assassination, and with the total absence of images, *Report* plays on our customary attitude, our desire to see an event like an assassination. Conner's film suggests that we can never know the event but only media presentations of it; as if to show how reality is constructed by media, several scenes are loop-printed and run over and over again to suggest that an event can be postponed, effaced, by the way it is presented. *Report* takes a typical moviegoing desire and quotes it through a critical stance. In one loop-printing, the car moves toward its destination but is bounced back by the editing. The next shots are from the synchronic presentation; this, *Report* shows us, is the real event, not the documentary payoff our habits of viewing have led us to want from films promising to be "about" the Kennedy assassination.

This reading of Brecht has two important implications for our discussion. First of all, the fact that political art plays off of pre-political art suggests that if the political text invites production from the spectator, this production is a source of pleasure. Significantly, pleasure and the importance of artistic popularity come under attack in much of the new radical criticism (see, for example, Martin Walsh's defense in *Jump Cut* 4 of the theoretical rigor and difficulty of the films of Straub and Huillet). In this work we witness the rise of a break or gap between criticism and popular reception, a break that is a misreading of Brecht's theory as a theory of difficulty. It is in this misreading of Brecht (as in MacCabe's comparison of Joyce and Brecht) that all of the values that Brecht upholds for political art, except formal experimentation, disappear. In reading the use a writer like MacCabe makes of Brecht one would never imagine that Brecht supported realism (the theater as a demonstration of something);

pleasure (the theater as a joyous confirmation of the changeability of the world); popularity (a theater that works for the working classes). Significantly, Brecht constantly argued that the mass audience had to decide the validity of a formal experiment. Moreover, he displayed a continued faith in a mass audience's ability to accept—and more than that, to demand—new forms for the theater: “The means must be asked what the end is. The people know how to ask this. . . . The workers judged everything by the amount of truth contained in it; they welcomed any innovation which helped the representation of truth. . . . ‘You can't mix theatre and film': that sort of thing was never said” (“The Popular and the Realistic,” *Théâtre*, p. 110).

Although the new readings of Brecht situate themselves in opposition to humanist criticism, they paradoxically invoke a division of taste parallel to the high culture/mass culture distinction so beloved in humanist criticism. From Ortega y Gasset's dehumanization of art to Susan Sontag's erotics of art to Roland Barthes's distinction between pleasure and bliss, there is little change in the formalist endeavor. Recent critics present themselves as possessing a heightened aesthetic understanding while the masses supposedly stumble along in realist and narrative naivete. At worst, this approach refuses history; it regards a certain popular sort of viewing practice as debased and quotidian, and so dismisses it, refusing to examine the contradictory stance of mass culture.

Brecht's examination of pleasure and popularity suggests that we need to distinguish between at least three sorts of aesthetic pleasure. There is the pleasure of familiarity. This is the pleasure of uncritical, reified realism, the seeing of the world in the ways it has always been seen. Then there is the pleasure that comes from art's dehumanization or from forced self-reflexivity, which I've suggested is little different from the first register of pleasure. This is the pleasure of art as form, as aesthetic emotion in the Kantian sense. This is a pleasure that, as Barthes contends in *Pleasure of the Text*, derives its force from its avoidance of history, by aestheticizing or textualizing it. Then there is the pleasure argued for by Brecht, the pleasure of an art that finally realizes the dream of Horace in his *Ars Poetica* (which Brecht continually refers to): to please and instruct; to please through instruction; to instruct through pleasure. This is an art whose content is a combination of the world and a better version of that world.

As a consequence of this attitude toward pleasure, Brecht's theory raises a second implication for political art. Insofar as Brecht's political art includes the presence of the familiar world and yet presents a more attractive world, Brechtian art is initially an art of identification. The spectator must identify with the old for its criticism by the new to have any force. In analyzing Brecht's theory, critics have too often declared that the theories allow no place for identification. In fact, Brecht distinguishes several types of identification (just as he distinguished several types of pleasure): there is an empathetic and

unquestioning identification—the one connected to a reified vision of the world and a reified art (whether realist or modernist), and a critical one—a new perspective of knowledge from which the old way is scrutinized. In his essay “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” Brecht is emphatic about the need for identification in political theater: “the audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on” (*Theatre*, p. 93). As Brecht emphasized in his writings, there is no one form that best meets the requirements of progressive art. Concentrating on ways to unveil what is representative in real social relations, never disdaining the need for widespread appeal and for the pleasure that audiences can feel in realizing the relativity of what they had assumed to be permanent, the Brechtian aesthetic is an important and vital one. But a necessary first step, one that I have tried to provide here, is simply to understand that aesthetic, to extract this theory so opposed to the stasis of formalism from a new formalism that in claiming to understand Brecht, ironically threatens to freeze the Brechtian approach in a stasis of its own.

5. See, for example, the reading of *Grease* by the Manchester Society for Education in Film and Television reading group in *North by Northwest* 8 (1980).
6. For a general theory of the avant-garde's adversarial stance, see Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1971).
7. Also of interest in this respect is Benjamin's essay "Surrealism," collected in *Reflections* (1978). Arguing that Marxism has to concern itself with the progressive as well as regressive elements of a movement like surrealism, Benjamin adopts a position similar to the Russian formalists. He suggests that surrealism's concern with processes of "illumination" was not a form of romantic escapism but a *profane* illumination, a process by which objects of everyday life are made strange: "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution—this is the project about which Surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises" (p. 191). "Circles" implies both distance from and connection to, and Benjamin's goal is to emphasize the connection. Central to this task is the study of surrealism as an art of imagery, rather than metaphor—that is, an art which is always about something, even in its most distanced forms ("to organize pessimism [as did the surrealists] means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images"—p. 191, my emphasis). In an almost throwaway line, Benjamin argues that "an action puts forth its own image" (p. 191); in my own analysis of the avant-garde in this chapter, my purpose will be to read, through metacommentary, some of the actions which put forth the images of the American avant-garde cinema.
8. For an introduction to this aggressive moment in the avant-garde, see the discussion of "agonistic" and "antagonistic" avant-gardes in Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*.
9. On the placement of the artist into the text of *Act of Seeing*, see Daniel H. Levoff's essay on the film in *Film Culture* 56-57 (1973).
10. For an extended criticism of Sitney's approach, see Chuck Kleinhans, "Reading and Thinking about the Avant-Garde," *Jump Cut* 6 (1975).
11. See Manfredo Tafuri, *Projet et utopie* (1979).
12. Unfortunately, Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1964), which sounds like the paradigmatic film of this type, was unavailable for screening. For a suggestive essay on the film, see Susan Sontag, "Flaming Creatures," in *Against Interpretation* (1969).
13. This sense of menace is present in earlier, non-American city symphonies such as Ruttman's *Berlin*, in which the physiology of the city includes an inevitable death.
14. On the use of color in Ackerman, see Mary Jo Lakeland, "The Color of Jeanne Dielman" (*Camera Obscura* 3/4, 1979).

Chapter 4

1. The reading that follows is not an attempt to claim the truth of Brecht, to read Brecht *à la lettre*, but to uncover a Brecht that has been repressed in dominant discourse on Brecht.
2. For example, Colin MacCabe's influential essay "The Politics of Separation" (*Screen*, 1975/76) makes it seem as if Brecht were nothing but an investigator into the aesthetic effects of formal separation.
3. At times, MacCabe's reading of Brecht approaches the novelistic. For example, on p. 103, MacCabe imagines an intersection of Brecht and Joyce in which there is a perfect meeting of the minds: "One can . . . indulge for a moment in fantasy—*Exiles* produced by Brecht while in Denmark in 1938, in exile and working on novels—that indeed might have been interesting."

4. See also the work of Janey Place on John Ford (in *Wide Angle*, 1978); Martin Walsh on Straub and Huillet (*Jump Cut* 4); and the general theoretical approach toward the deconstructive film in *Screen*.
5. On the ideological equivalence of philosophies of surface (the immediate coincidence of subject and object) and of depth (the eventual coincidence of subject and object), see the critique of empiricism, broadly defined, in Pierre Macherey, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (1966).
6. See, for example, the final chapter of James Roy MacBean's *Film and Revolution* (1975) which calls for the dismantling of the Bazinian aesthetic as the first priority of a radical theory of film.
7. On the ways in which Bazin's approach turns out to be only one theory of film language among many, see Peter Wollen, "The Semiology of the Cinema," *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1972).
8. Peter Wollen's analysis of *Citizen Kane* ("Semiotics and *Citizen Kane*," *Film Reader*, 1975) is an important essay in this respect for the ways in which it polemically reads one of the films that is a cornerstone of the Bazinian approach in a way directly opposed to Bazin's reading of the film.
9. This, I would argue, is the case in several essays in *What is Cinema?* in which, unable to defend the Western on the grounds of realism, Bazin resorts to a number of alternate criteria: the Western's mythic force, for example.
10. For this argument, see (among others) Stephen Heath's influential "Narrative Space" (*Screen*, 1976).
11. Indeed, as Renato Poggioli points out (in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1971, pp. 33-34.), even as politically conservative a critical movement as American New Criticism can be considered an avant-garde criticism in its emphasis on *contradiction* and *tension* as central components of artistic structure.

Chapter 5

1. For a summary of this and other Oshima films, see the appendix. I should note that all my comments are based on a screening of approximately half of Oshima's prodigious output. I have tried to view everything available in this country and in France.
2. For a representative critique of the film's supposed "theatricality," see Pascal Bonitzer, "Le cercle de la famille" (1980).
3. See, for example, the testimonies running through *Les femmes, la pornographie, l'érotisme* (ed. Hans and Lapouge, 1978) by women who have found in *Realm of the Senses* the triumph of an erotic, nonpornographic cinema. None of these testimonies refer to disjunctions in editing style.
4. For one general presentation of the post-structuralist valorization of the death-drive in conjunction with a general theory of textuality, see Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition* (1977).
5. On the textualization of death in a fiction film like *Meet Me in St. Louis*, see Robin Wood, "The American Family Comedy: From *Meet Me in St. Louis* to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*" (*Wide Angle*, 1979).
6. An illuminating text in this respect is Oshima's "Banish Green" (available in French in Oshima, *Écrits*, 1980). Oshima explains that he has consciously tried to banish the color green