

affirmation of technology, as it is elaborated in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (SW IV: 251-83).

6. The connection between food and knowledge in the story of Eden occurs in the play when Galileo teases the little monk who is eagerly reading his manuscript: "An apple of the tree of knowledge, he can't wait, he wolfs it down" (85).
7. In a section of his "What is Epic Theater?" entitled "The Untragic Hero" Benjamin writes: "Plato long ago recognized the undramatic quality of that most excellent man, the sage. In his dialogues, he took this figure to the threshold of the drama; in his *Phaedo*, to the threshold of the Passion play" (SW IV: 303).

Works Cited:

- Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin*, Vol.1- 4. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1996-2003.
- *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London: NLB, 1977.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Galileo*. Trans. Charles Laughton. New York: Grove Atlantic P, 1991.
- *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. Trans. John Willett. London: Methuen, 1965.
- *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and Trans. John Willett.
- Plato. *The Collected Dialogues*. Ed. Edith Hamilton. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961.
- Willett, John, ed. and trans. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.

Assaph: Studies in the Theatre
vol. no. 19-20
"Bertolt Brecht Issue"

Interruptions in Brecht and Benjamin: The Case of Brecht's Radio Plays

Ilit Ferber

In his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Edward II*, Brecht states that he preferred Schlegel and Tieck's "stumbling" and almost unreadable German translation over Roth's more fluent and eloquent version. He admires "how much better it expressed the tussle of thoughts in the great monologues! How much richer the structure of verse!" (Willett 115). Brecht describes the choice of translation, and the changes he had to make in it in order to create the rhythm of "the jerky breath of a man running" and the feeling of "swimming against the current"¹ as very significant. He thereby protests against the smoothness and harmoniousness of conventional poetry (Willett 115-16). In these descriptions, Brecht emphasizes the immense weight and significance he ascribes to the irregular and discontinuous rhymes. He also stresses the far-reaching implications of speaking in an interrupted rather than fluent and eloquent language. An appreciation of Brecht's attraction to irregular, broken-up, and fragmented forms, and his preference for the stumbling and seemingly flawed translation, is essential in many respects for an understanding of his theatrical conception.

In his book *The Origin of the Sorrow Play*,² written fourteen years before Brecht's aforementioned text, Walter Benjamin too uses the metaphors of breathing and of swimming against the current. In his discussion of philosophical thought and writing, he maintains that the "continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation" (28). Regarding the second metaphor,

he expounds on the concept of *Origin*, describing it as a whirlpool in the midst of a stream, disrupting its natural flow and drawing peripheral debris into the eddy (45-6). One could claim that there is always a temptation to breath regularly and swim with ease along with the flow, yet, Benjamin and Brecht both prefer the irregular and stumbling breath which cannot easily be stabilized as well as the strained and laborious movement against the current. Benjamin and Brecht's respective affinity for these particular metaphors manifested itself long before the acquaintance and friendship between the two thinkers, who were later perceived by some of their closest friends to be complete opposites of one another.³

In this essay I will argue that the concept of interruption is central to both Benjamin and Brecht's thinking. It is the essence of the above-mentioned images, by means of which both thinkers present a new way to view writing and presentation, philosophy and theatre. I shall discuss how each of them develops the notion of interruption, and will examine what implications this might have on their philosophical and political agendas. In the second part of the article, I will examine some of Brecht's radio plays as special cases of interruption, and will show how they exemplify in many ways his theatrical conception.

In his book on the German Sorrow Play, Benjamin presents a conception according to which philosophical truth can reveal itself through interruption, discontinuity, pausing, and fragmentation. Hence, according to Benjamin, the crux of philosophical writing should entail performing a disruption in the continuum rather than creating it. He writes that "tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation" (Benjamin, *Origin* 28). It is in these caesuras, from these cracks and hindrances that emerge from within the wholeness of the argument, the hiatus which Benjamin calls a "pause for breath," which are almost as essential to him as breathing itself, in order that truth will be able to present itself. From within what is present, amidst what there is, truth will be exposed from absence rather than presence.⁴

It does not seem to be Benjamin's intention to require the reader to fill the gaps created by his interruptions, since these pauses do not replace anything previously omitted. Rather, Benjamin renounces the idea that philosophy is able to formulate intelligible conceptual claims which together form a unified and valid argument (Frey 140). For Benjamin, this fragmentary and non-linear



The Lindbergh Flight, a radio feature. Berlin, 1929. Directed by B. Brecht, conducted by Otto Klemperer.

writing is not merely a stylistic preference, but rather constitutes an essential part of his conception of philosophical truth.⁵ These caesuras are the openings through which truth can reveal itself, provided that they allow the reader to pause for further contemplation and doubt what he or she is encountering. Benjamin claims that too flawless an argument does not allow for any such gaps and is constructed as such in order to avoid any risk of doubt which could undermine it.

Almost fifteen years later, Benjamin wrote about Brecht's theatre in this same spirit. In his article "What is Epic Theatre?,"⁶ he discusses two different kinds of interruption in Brecht's theatrical oeuvre: first, the discontinuity in the actual written text, and second, its fractured and interposed adaptation to the stage. These two aspects of interruption, the textual and the visual, remain intertwined in Benjamin's thought and are extremely important for an understanding of his overall conception of truth and its presentation. Perhaps what Benjamin found so interesting in Brecht's theatre was that it seemed to be the realization of his own exclusively theoretical demands of the philosophical text.

According to Brecht, every textual and theatrical moment should be received in itself. Every episode on the stage should be accorded its presence and should therefore be performed as a whole, independent, and distinct unit. This self-containment and even closure of every moment, produces a caesura between it and other textual or performative moments. According to Benjamin, "This leads to an important conclusion: the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in an action, the more gestures we obtain. Hence the interrupting of action is one of the principal concerns of epic theatre" (*ETI* 3). Such fractured moments are both the basis of Brechtian theatre and the source from which it derives its meaning. Benjamin notes that "its main function is not to illustrate or advance the action, but, on the contrary, to interrupt it" (*ETI* 3). Such an interruption frames the actions, and thereby reveals the whole in each of the parts, and in the fissures that emerge between them (*ETI* 3-4). Benjamin emphasizes the gesture, which is one of Brecht's main concerns, and claims that every episode in the play should structurally echo the gesture. That is, a gesture represents

a whole movement and serves as a hint for the whole containing it, in a form similar to that of a metonym.⁷

The hiatus is not merely a break in the continuity, but rather an interruption which turns this continuity into an array of single autonomous scenes, each of which should maintain its own episodic value, in addition to the value it bears for the whole (ET1 6). Benjamin quotes Brecht's comparison of interruptions and pauses to footnotes, which are also interruptions in the text, similar to philosophical and theatrical interruptions. "Footnotes, and the habit of turning back in order to check a point, need to be introduced into playwriting too" (Qtd. ET1 7). By placing the spectator in a situation which requires active and deliberate contemplation, Brecht forces him/her to think critically. Benjamin compares the interruption to the technique of montage, and claims that "it is enough to point out that the principle of Epic Theatre, like that of montage, is based on interruption... it brings the action to a halt and then compels the listener to take up an attitude towards the events on the stage and forces the actor to adopt a critical view of his role" (Benjamin, *Collected Writings* Vol. 2, 584-85).⁸

Benjamin does not believe that interruptions are goals in themselves for Brecht, but rather a means to cause the spectator of the play to develop his own critical abilities. Brecht's visual or rather physical interruptions on the stage use songs, textual titles, screened images, silences, and the gesture, all of which incorporate one common trait, namely, the desire to interrupt the performance and force the spectator to think about what he is seeing instead of merely letting him become a part of it. According to Benjamin, these intervals "impair the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy" (ET2 20). In other words, the disruptions in the continuity allow the observer the space he or she requires in order to pause and think about the play. By intensifying the tension between the scenes at the expense of the continuity of the plot, the play turns the passive and "sleepy" viewer of the Aristotelian dramatic theatre (as Brecht puts it) into an active and critical spectator. "The public is no longer a collection of hypnotized test subjects, but an assembly of interested persons whose demands it [the Epic Theatre's stage] must satisfy" (ET1 2).

In his "On Rhymeless Verse with Irregular Rhythms" Brecht quotes Luther's version of the biblical verse "if thine eye offends thee, pluck it out." He points out the manner in which the pause between the two parts of the sentence constitutes an inner hiatus in which the speaker expresses bewilderment right before presenting the "devastating proposal" (Willett 117). The discontinuous quality is that which can better allow the gesture and the intervention emphasizing

the disturbing aspect of the second part of the verse. In this example, Brecht emphasizes the intervals and the in-betweens. He suggests that what should be revealed is not in fact present in the actual text spoken on the stage, but rather dwells in that which is not present, namely, in the absence and gaps through which Brecht fulfills the task of stimulating the spectator's critical feeling and independent thought. Instead of identifying and empathically relating to the characters in the play, the audience should be trained to be astonished by its circumstances and conditions, and thus emerge as new critical subjects. Regarding the Epic Theatre, Benjamin notes that "in one who is astonished interest is born," and by that he is referring to a Socratic practice by means of which individuality and critical thought are evoked in the audience. According to Benjamin, a salient characteristic of Brecht's theatre is that it attempts to reveal the necessary conditions and state of affairs to the audience, rather than to provide them with sophistic resolutions (ET1 4; ET2 18).

In his article on the alienation effect, Brecht discusses the way in which the actor should develop the relationship between himself and the character he is playing. The vital point is that the actor should retain the surprise that struck him when he first read the text of the play. Moreover, Brecht believes that the actor should function as a reader as long as possible, treating the text as an "exercise" before he becomes absorbed in his role (Willett 137; 31). This primary reaction is the most genuine one, since it has not undergone any processing, and has not had the chance to conceal itself or change due to various external factors, and thus, in Brecht's view, it is this reaction that the actor should adhere to, since it succeeds in revealing a salient element in the specific relation between the actor and his part, and, in addition, reveals something fundamental concerning theatre in general. By retaining the sense attained in the first moment of reading, the actor establishes a new pattern of relationship between himself and the role he is playing. Rather than minimizing the gap between himself and his character, he retains it, and develops a distance characterized by the quality of interruption.

Brecht stresses that the actor should always present his rendition of his part as merely an interpretation, and demands that this aspect be emphasized and clearly apparent on stage. The actor should thus realize the interpretational aspects of his or her own role as an actor. He notes that

when the actor ... appears on the stage, besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing ... he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to

be inferred and only represents one out of possible variants. (Willett 137)

In other words, the actor should also present the options he did not choose in his interpretation and so realize the character together with its unfulfilled possibilities (allowing for absence and not only for what is actually there).⁹ Hence, not only does the interruption open up and unveil unrealized possibilities, but it also presents the conditions of possibility of epic theatre, and in many respects, life outside the theatre as well. According to Benjamin, this exposure of conditions is directly related to the technique of interruption, since uncovering conditions, rather than producing them, only comes about by means of interruption (ET1 4).

An interesting example of such conditions of possibility is produced by Galy Gay from Brecht's *A Man's a Man*, who is the character who cannot refuse any identity he is asked to take upon himself. Benjamin presents him as a man who, within his own body, seems to demonstrate an infidelity to his identity and a continual readiness to assume new essences. His body presents a manifold of interchanging possibilities, repeatedly posing and realizing the question of his unified, stable identity, with the various traits he takes upon himself and the internal interruptions he actively takes upon himself (ET1 9). The bodily gestures and *Haltung* Galy Gay adopts, collapse and reassemble him time and again, using an interruptive quality which is essential to understanding human nature in general according to Brecht, a quality which is intimately connected with Benjamin's understanding of modernity.¹⁰

In his "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for Epic Theatre" (Willett 121-29), Brecht describes a performance on a street corner. It is carried out by an amateur actor for a street audience. Brecht describes the conditions for this street performance as natural conditions, stressing the amateur and non-meticulous character of the show. The performer is an eyewitness who is trying to reenact a car accident, which earlier took place nearby, to a crowd of people who had not been present at the time. The performer does not identify with the characters, nor does he attempt to bridge the gap between himself and the victims of the accident he is describing to the audience. He is not aiming at a theatrical illusion or at representing an enclosed exclusive world. He merely tells the bystanders what has happened by reenacting the events to them. He does not identify with the events but remains himself, namely, a man on the street telling a story. Hence, he creates a gap between himself as an actor, and the events that took place, and thus establishes a fertile dissociation with the audience. Brecht stresses the

fact that the performer should not be too perfect, for his act will be spoiled if the crowd is attracted to his acting abilities or "powers of transformation" instead of being concerned with the story itself (Willett 122).

In other words, the man on the street avoids the main feature of theatre, that of engendering an illusion, and does not pretend to be anything other than himself. In the same manner, "the theatre will stop pretending to be theatre" (Willett 122) and "drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall separating the audience from the stage and the consequent illusion that the action on stage is taking place in reality and that there is no audience" (Willett 136). In recognizing the absence of the fourth wall, an idea Brecht had borrowed from Chinese theatre, he acknowledges the fact that the stage is exposed to the audience, and presents itself as what it is, namely, a theatre-stage, thus giving up its pretentious aspirations to present itself as reality. The absence of such a wall creates an interruption in the dramatic course of events of classic theatre, as one which creates the illusion of reality on stage. Brecht suggests that the model of the street scene served to represent his own idea of the theatre in which the actor is there to inform, to report and to tell the audience about the events, and not to create an illusion of reality. Failure is essential to the street performer, who should fail as an actor, and fall short of producing illusions and empathy. Failure interrupts the smooth course of things, allowing what is homebred and raw to reveal itself.

It is important to note that Brecht does not regard his epic theatre as opposed to dramatic theatre as formulated by Aristotle, but rather as parallel to it. Benjamin suggests thinking of the relationship between the two theatre forms by means of the relationship between Euclidean geometry and Riemann's non-Euclidean geometry. In other words, there is no competition between the two forms; rather, they are based on different premises and constitute alternatives for one another (ET2 18).

Thus, both Benjamin and Brecht place what is absent from the stage at its center, or the gaps in what is presented, with the absence intertwined in what is actually present on the stage. According to Brecht, the play can fulfill its critical part only from the caesura between the breaths, and not from breathing itself; according to Benjamin, it is only in this way that philosophical truth can manifest itself.

Benjamin regards Brechtian theatre as responsive to the technological developments of his time, especially to radio and film. In epic theatre, he writes,

"there is no such thing as a latecomer" (ETI 6). According to Benjamin, the form of epic theatre allows its spectator to enter or exit at any given moment without losing grip of the play, just like the listeners to the radio, who can turn it on or off anytime, and switch channels back and forth without losing track of things. I would like to develop Benjamin's suggestion regarding the mutual relations between epic theatre and radio, and rethink the notion of interruption through this relationship.

Radio confronts us with a special state of affairs in which not all of our four senses are required, in which we are only required to listen and are denied visual or other sensory experience. How could we even begin to consider theatre in such a flawed and deficient mode of presentation? Is radio theatre possible? Moreover, how can we think of interruption when we think of radio, which is the medium virtually based on discontinuity and interruption? In contrast to the total and overwhelming experience of the theatre hall, radio provides its listeners with something which cannot be further from the unmitigated and overwhelming encounter. In contrast to theatre, one can listen to the radio while in motion or engaged in other activities such as smoking a cigarette,¹¹ having a conversation or simply being by oneself. Radio puts its listeners in a non-enchanted position without any illusion or totality, in the position of "reporting" and not "being in," just like the witness in the street scene. As I shall demonstrate below, the unique "viewing" conditions of radio provide its listeners with a new experience of theatre; that is, radio presents a compelling and significant opportunity to assume the critical obligation which Brecht demands from his viewers or listeners.

Brecht wrote several plays for the radio, and I shall now examine how they reveal and express the principles of his Epic Theatre. Moreover, I will ask why it is precisely in Brecht's radio plays that the importance and prominence of interruption are most evident. *The Trial of Lucullus* is a radio play from 1938 which was written especially for Swedish radio and was broadcast in 1940. It later served as the basis for the well-known opera *The Condemnation of Lucullus*.¹² The play begins with the death of Lucullus, the famous Roman general, who is carried around town on his catafalque on his way to the land of the dead (or the "realm of shadows" as Brecht calls it). The play describes the trial of the general, in which a biased jury accuses him of various war crimes and moral sins against his people. The jury consists of five shadows who were once a farmer, a slave and teacher, a fishwife, a baker, and a courtesan, and who were called to listen to various witnesses and testimonies about Lucullus's life and deeds. There are several important aspects of interruption in this somewhat

neglected radio play. First, the trial is comprised of a sequence of five scenes which begins in the ninth scene of the play, entitled "the hearing." This first scene of the sequence is followed by "Rome," after which "the hearing is continued" appears again, and then "Rome once again," and so on. I would like to suggest that it is precisely this specific structure in which the titles repeatedly replace one another which allows the listener (or "audio-spectator") not to be late, regardless of when he or she happens to turn on the radio. In his choice of words too, Brecht seems to be referring to the medium of radio; Lucullus has a "hearing" (*Verhör*), and the guard at the entrance to the world of shadows is named "the hollow voice" (*eine fahle Stimme*).

A second example of interruption lies in the fourth scene where Lucullus is left in an incoherent state, so to speak, after his philosopher "with a wise saw on his lips" is denied entrance into the world of shadows. "Stand back, Philosopher. Behind this wall / No-one heeds your sophistry," (*Trial of Lucullus* 275) says the "hollow voice" at the entrance to Hell. From this moment on, it seems that the absence of the philosopher, of the voice that represents understanding and eloquence, leaves the play in a state of interruption, and disrupts the linear and continuous course of things.

Third, Lucullus is being tried in the underworld. His trial consists of a series of testimonies from his men, soldiers, enemies, servants, and other people. Each such testimony is a discrete component which is entirely separate from other testimonies. The trial seems to begin anew every time a new witness enters the courtroom. Repeatedly, the general's relations with the witness are thus exposed. The judges assess the new material and respond to it. Time and again, Lucullus protests against the unfairness with which he feels he is treated.

Another facet of the interruption that characterizes the play is inherent in the way in which the people talk about Lucullus after his death, during the funeral procession in which his coffin is carried around the town. The people voice their laments for their sovereign interspersed with their very opinionated views on market prices; they express their view on his glorious victories and the victims he should be held to account for, while complaining about the high prices of cheese and tuna.

A DRIVER. Can/ I go through here? / SECOND WOMAN. No, it's closed off. / FIRST PLEBEIAN. When we bury our generals / Ox carts must have patience. / SECOND WOMAN. They dragged my Pulcher before the judge: / Taxes due. / FIRST MERCHANT. We can say / Except for him Asia would not be ours today. / FIRST WOMAN. Has

tunnyfish jumped in price again? / SECOND WOMAN. Cheese, too.
/ *The noise of the crowd increases. (Trial of Lucullus 273)*

In this inspiring scene, Brecht again disrupts the usual flow of events, in order to uncover the content which is really significant to those parting from the ruler—their daily concerns surface above this almost inconsequential death.

Another noteworthy moment of interruption appears at the end of the play (in its original radio version) when the jury exits in order to discuss the fate of the defendant. The plot is not resolved, and the play terminates a moment before the decision is made, thus leaving Lucullus's fate unknown. The play ends without providing what the spectator most expected—a definitive end and clear resolution for its hero. Not only is the play internally interrupted, its dialogues and scenes broken up again and again, it is also not brought to an end in what seems to be the greatest interruption in the usual dramatic course of things.

One of the interesting questions that Brecht's radio plays raises pertains to the status of the moments of silence in these plays. How can a moment of silence in a monologue be perceived by listeners to a medium whose only means of communication, namely, voice, is suddenly removed. The listener's feeling in such a moment is undoubtedly exceptional. The audience in a play that takes place on stage, has eye contact with the silent characters, and can always have recourse to the setting or décor which sustain the action. In a radio play on the other hand, in which the listener has nothing external to cling to, s/he can only resort to silence.

Such moments of silence can often be experienced in *The Trial of Lucullus*. The hiatus they create or the uncomfortable interruption they perform on the ear of the sense-less listener are particularly intense. In a long monologue as he passes through the gate of the world of shadows, and is waiting to be judged in the court of the underworld, Lucullus laments his aching downfall into a place in which his former status has become meaningless. Not only has his name lost its former glory, but the judges mispronounce it, calling him "Lakalles" instead of "Lucullus." His protest is to no avail, and his name is brutally deformed in an act similar to what has befallen him throughout his lifetime. The following is an excerpt from the monologue:

There is no one to receive me. Outside my war tent
Seven kings once waited for me.
Is there no order here?
Pause.

I demand to be conducted from this place.

Pause.

Must I stand here among these people?

Pause.

I object. Two hundred armoured ships, five legions

Used to advance at the crook of my little finger.

I object.

Pause. (Trial of Lucullus 277)

The pauses in the above dialogue serve to create gaps, by means of which Brecht achieves a profound effect. This effect is enhanced when the play is performed on the radio. I would like to suggest a distinction between the text that is explicitly articulated on the "stage," and the caesuras between utterances, which also have a significant communicative function. When these caesuras occur on the theatre stage, this results in less of a void for viewers than in a radio broadcast, since the spectators can attend to other aspects of the performance. However, when a play is performed on the radio, the effect of these pauses is far more intense and seems to have a more profound impact on the listener, since there is nothing to fill the void created by these pauses. The interruptions here were meant to establish the required conditions for the spectator not to be absorbed in the play but rather to create his or her own position, a critically assessed and "interested one," in Brecht's words. Such a position is not captivated in an emotive reaction and an attraction to catharsis, but succeeds in forming its own critical opinion regarding what takes place on stage. A listener who is enthralled in empathy cannot form a real opinion.

Another fascinating example in which the concept of interruption is realized can be found in Brecht's radio play *The Lindbergh Flight*. The play, which is an adaptation of one of Brecht's writing workshops, was written under the influence of Chinese and Japanese theatre. The play revolves around a character called "the Flyer," created after Charles Lindbergh, who thrilled the world when he flew solo across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. The play describes his flight over the ocean. He must overcome the challenges presented by nature—the snow, fog, and wind that try to subdue him—while maintaining a special relationship with each of these challenges. In addition to nature, the flyer also has to face far more grueling internal struggles that challenge his ability to complete the flight successfully, from unbearable exhaustion, on the one hand, to his quasi-internal conversation with the plane engine on the other. In his notes to the play, Brecht indicates that it should be read mechanically in such a way that

a pause is made at the end of each line of verse (Willett 31). He further notes the importance of the play for the medium it was written for, indicating that it was "not intended to be of use to the present-day radio *but to alter it*" (Willett 32; emphasis added). Brecht stresses here the active part of the play regarding its medium—it is not used by the medium, but changes the medium itself, or in other words, it does not serve the limitation of the medium, but alters the way in which such a medium could be conceived.

The structure of the scenes in *The Lindbergh Flight* remarkably resembles the structure of the scenes in *The Trial of Lucullus*. Just as the general's witnesses replace one another in a continuous chain in which the trial begins over and over again, so too is every scene in *The Lindbergh Flight* dedicated to one of the challenges facing the flyer, where every possible obstacle receives its own independent position.

There is another important element in the play which refers to the medium for which it was written, and which brilliantly emphasizes the motif of interruption. In the play Brecht incorporates several excerpts from radio reports supposedly broadcast on American and European radio. That is, the listener will hear a radio broadcast within a radio broadcast. These broadcasts describe the flyer's whereabouts and estimate his chances of landing safely,¹³ whereby emphasizing Brecht's attraction to reporting theatre rather than to seemingly realistic illusory theatre. Radio is a reporting medium *par excellence*, and in this play this defining characteristic is exploited in that radio is used within radio.

The interruptions between the flyer's struggles, in the form of the radio reports become even more profound when they are heard on the radio in a strange sort of reduplication of the medium. In choosing to use a radio broadcast within a radio play, Brecht opens up endless possibilities for manipulations, including the special noises and technical faults that characterize radio broadcasts. Is it not plausible to assume that Brecht would inlay such technical shortcomings and noises as interruptions which are not only structural as I described them so far but are also actual audible disturbances, where these interruptions, according to Brecht, would induce resistance by the listener (Willett 32). Or, as Benjamin puts it, "here we would be well advised to put all touchiness aside and simply affirm that, in comparison to the theatre, radio represents not only a more advanced technical stage, but also one in which technology is more evident" (Benjamin, *SW* 2, 584). It is important to add here that this manifestation of technology is always more evident when technical flaws are clearly apparent.

The choice to base the leading character on Charles Lindbergh, a man who must overcome his own human limitations and triumph over the challenges posed by nature, and fly over the ocean in the most advanced technological apparatus, is of no minor importance. Such a choice is another expression of the great power people have allowed technology to acquire, even when it is at their own expense. It is interesting to note that in the later version of the play, the character of Lindbergh almost disappears, and the emphasis shifts to the act of flying itself. With regard to the absence of the human figure from radio, Benjamin writes that

the Epic Theatre returns with a fresh approach to the grand old opportunity of theatre—namely, to the focus on the people who are present. In the center of its experience stands the human being in our crisis. It is the human being who has been eliminated from radio and film—the human being (to put it a little extremely) as the fifth wheel on the carriage of its technology. (*SW* 2 585)

Another vital question that arises when one examines Brecht's radio plays is whether and in what way this medium contributes to Brecht's political goals. Brecht uses interruption in order to create the proper conditions which facilitate independent and critical thinking in his audience. The spectators should be able to avoid being swept away by their feelings for the characters (empathy, pity, etc.) and should understand the consequences of the play for their own lives, while establishing their own modes of critical thinking. In other words, in addition to Brecht's attraction to the power of crowds usually attested to in literature, one can see that he also ascribes an important role to the individual's independent status. The listener needs to be an individual in order to shape his or her own agenda, without being driven to it by the crowd.

Benjamin distinguishes between the theatre audience which is always a collective, and the reader of a book who remains alone with the text (*ET* 2 144). In line with Benjamin's suggestion, I would like to consider the single reader as parallel to the secluded radio listener, and thus claim that not only does the interruption create a gap between the spectator and the stage before him, but it also breaks off his relationship with his fellow audience members. This is to suggest that a different way of considering interruption is to think of it as an instrument used to make sure that the spectator's reaction to the play will not be affected by his fellow audience members, but only by his own personal encounter with the theatre piece. Listening to a play on the radio with the special conditions which this medium entails immensely enhances the listener's

independent encounter with it. The observer is no longer trapped amongst his fellow spectators in an overwhelming collective, and does not create his agenda only by responding to them. Rather, he is there, as an individual, beside his radio set, creating his own critical responses from within this distinct position. The radio thus creates a critical individual that could never have evolved in the theatre hall. It fulfills Brecht's theatrical-political aspirations by using its special traits in order to create the ideal conditions for listening and being attentive to the epic theatre.¹⁴

In the later adaptation of *The Trial of Lucullus* into an opera (titled *The Condemnation of Lucullus*, with music by Paul Dessau), just before the final verdict, the Judge of the Dead turns to Lucullus and says:¹⁵

Lakalles! Our time runs out. You do not make use of it.
 Anger us no more with your triumphs!
 Have you no witnesses
 To any of your weak points, mortal?
 Your business goes badly. Your virtues
 Seem to be of little use.
 Perhaps your weaknesses will leave some loopholes
 In the chain of violent deeds.
 I counsel you, shadow
 Recollect your weaknesses.
 (*The Condemnation of Lucullus* 411)

Lucullus enrages the judge with his long list of victories which had resulted in 80,000 casualties. The judge asks him to look back on his life, from a different perspective, namely, that of failure. Weakness and failure are the only hope left for Lucullus, and only through them, through finding those "loopholes," can he eventually be redeemed. The general does not respond to the judge's request, and in the later version of the play he condemns himself to death, and incites the jurors and judge to cast him into oblivion: "Yes, into oblivion with him! For / with all this violence and conquest / only *one* realm is extended: / The Realm of the Shadows."

The theme of failure is echoed in one of Brecht's short stories which describes an imaginative encounter between Lucullus and the poet Lucretius (Brecht, "Lucullus's Trophies" 170-77). In "Lucullus's Trophies," the General tells Lucretius about a dream he had had, in which he is standing in front of his army ready to fight, giving them a speech about the exceptional opportunity to

destroy the enemy. In his dream, the general points at the mighty river which has been filled by the gods to protect them and nearly destroys the enemy's dyke. While talking, he "paused for effect," while the soldiers stood looking at the dyke which was about to disintegrate and destroy the enemy. During his speech, much to his horror, he sees the soldiers leaving the scene one by one after spotting a farmhouse in danger of being flooded by the very same river Lucullus had been pointing at. They leave him, and run to aid the peasants waving their hands for help. When he runs through the crowd to call them back to the fight, they do not recognize him and continue running to help the farmers. Lucullus thus confesses to Lucretius that anxiety over losing his authority and the profound understanding that power and victory are an "extremely shaky business," are his greatest fears (174).¹⁶ It is interesting to note that Lucretius's advice to Lucullus near the end of the story, according to which he should not be afraid of being forgotten, but rather of being famous, closely corresponds to the judge's words to him at his trial.

Through this story, which is a sort of counter-story to the play, one can examine the concept of interruption on two levels. On the first level, Lucullus turns to his dream as a place in which one's profoundest fears, which can never be directly revealed, are expressed. Here the dream is the place which constitutes an alternative sphere that undermines and interrupts the usual course of events. On the second level, one can rethink the notion of interruption in Brecht and Benjamin's texts, as one which attempts to bring the issue of failure to the fore. The judge's demand that Lucullus account for his own failures in the play, and the importance Lucullus comes to ascribe to such an admission, alludes here to a discussion of the failure of the linear, continuous and coherent. It can be regarded as a collapse of the total illusion of theatre, together with the failure to produce a coherent and often too-eloquent a philosophical claim.

Both Brecht and Benjamin tend to think of such failures not as futile acts, but rather as fertile ones. Benjamin's claim presented in his book on the Baroque theatre, according to which philosophy should continuously stop and ask itself questions, halt and breathe in at every step and turn of the way, produces a model in which it is crucial to acknowledge one's own inability to succeed. In pausing for breath, Benjamin decelerates his pace, but nonetheless ensures real depth and ample thinking. These gaps allow the text to continuously create new beginnings and a layered structure of meaning, which is created by the gradual and thorough reexamination and reinterpretation of the object of contemplation. Brecht's discontinuity functions in the same manner; it too, wishes to undermine the theatre's ability to create an illusion and to evoke

profound feelings of empathy. The success of epic theatre is only revealed through its failures: the failure of the actor who should not be "too perfect" or professional, the failure of the stage which should not form a complete and enchanting illusion, and finally, that of the text which fails to create a continuous plot which comes to an end when the curtain descends. It is only through a series of such failures that Brecht's spectators can achieve the full potential of their individuality and critical abilities. Thus, radio which is in a constant state of interruption to the usual course of receptivity, and in which the listener becomes blind so to speak, fails to endow us with a perfect illusion. Radio only reports and never imitates, and it is an apparatus that allows us to be alone. It is also the one that best embodies the theoretical framework of Brecht's epic theatre. Radio then hinders a complete and overwhelming theatrical performance due to the flaws noted in this essay. It nevertheless endows its listeners, through its continuous interruptions, with the ability to transfigure into critical subjects.

Notes

1. Translation altered in order to retain the literal sense of the original version. The original German is: "Gegen-den-Strom-schwimmen."
2. Translation altered. The original title of the book is *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. This title bears within it the important distinction Benjamin makes between Greek tragedy and baroque *Trauerspiel*, specifically distancing the baroque theatre from tragedy. Using the term "tragic" in the title thus misses one of the main pivots of this book.
3. The relationship between Benjamin and Brecht was never entirely accepted by Benjamin's close friends Adorno and Scholem. Each of them, for his own reasons, thought that the relationship was asymmetric and even a bad influence on Benjamin. Despite that, it seems that Benjamin found something of an older brother in Brecht under whose influence he developed important elements of his political consciousness. In this article, I will examine their relationship beyond the similarity in their political goals, which is usually to be found in Benjamin's later writings, and will try to see how his earlier writings and metaphysical concerns intertwined with Brecht's.
4. Benjamin also describes this in "One-Way Street," where he writes "A period that, constructed metrically, afterward had its rhythm upset at a single point yields the finest prose sentence imaginable" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 1, 457). This phrasing is remarkably similar to Brecht's claim for the translation, which, by being interrupted and stumbling, presents its profoundest meaning. Benjamin continues by saying that "in this way a ray of light falls through a chink in the

wall of the alchemist's cell, to light up gleaming crystals, spheres, and triangles" (457-58). Thus, the ray of light does not only bring its own glow, but also creates an alchemical reaction within the other materials. A certain composition of material can constitute the appearance of truth in an instance, even if it is momentary. The mission of philosophical writing is therefore to create these interruptions, gaps and by-passes, in order to reveal the truth-content of the material. Hence, truth, the underlying order which is not clearly apparent on the surface, can only be disclosed by means of interruption.

5. For the romantic influences on Benjamin in this matter, see Howard Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," especially 53.
6. This article was written in two versions, both published in Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*. First version (hereafter ET1) 1-14; second version (hereafter ET2) 15-22. The second version of the article is also published in Benjamin, *Illuminations* 147-54.
7. On an elaboration on the concept of gesture in Brecht and Benjamin, see Eli Friedlander's article in this volume.
8. Other similes used by Benjamin compare the epic playwright to a ballet teacher (ET1 8) and describe the space between the gestures as a printed text with spaces between its letters or words (ET1 11).
9. See Jameson's illuminating discussion of the relationship between theatre and allegory in his *Brecht and Method* 122-24.
10. For a stimulating and learned discussion of the character of Galy Gay in Brecht's *A Man's a Man*, and a compelling argument regarding the place of gestic and *Haltung* in Brecht, see Brigid Doherty, "Test and Gestus in Brecht and Benjamin."
11. Brecht wished to allow the audience to smoke while watching his plays.
12. For some details on the history of the play, see Hans Peter Obermayer's "'Yes, to Nothingness!' The Condemnation of Lucullus—An Opera of Peace by Bertolt Brecht and Paul Dessau." See also Brecht, *Collected Plays* 382-3.
13. The Americans report the flyer's unquestionable chances of ending his flight successfully, while the Europeans declare they shall never see him again.
14. I would like to thank Ira Avneri for our helpful discussion of this problem.
15. See note 12.
16. It is interesting to see that other stories by Brecht deal with peripheral and insignificant moments which are outside the usual framework of the winner's narrative (to use Benjamin's terms). See, for instance, Brecht's beautiful story about Giordano Bruno and his coat ("The Heretic's Coat," *Short Stories* 162-70) which presents the marginal and somehow trivial and intimate moments that make up the story of Bruno's execution. In his article on radio and theatre, Benjamin writes that events are alterable not in their peak moments, not through virtue or decisive instances (like in the Aristotelian account of tragedy), but rather in normative and routine processes. The meaning of epic theatre is thus to take the minutest of details of human behavior and to use them in order to construct Aristotelian "action." The

emphasis should thus be on small and peripheral moments, and not on grandiose and successful ones. See Benjamin, "Theatre and Radio: The Mutual Control of Their Educational Program" 585.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. "What is Epic Theatre?" *Understanding Brecht*. Trans. Anna Bostock. London: NLB, 1973.
- "Theatre and Radio: The Mutual Control of Their Educational Program." *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2. Trans. Rodney Livingstone and others. Ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999. 583-86.
- *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. J. Osborne. London: Verso, 1998.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and Trans. John Willett.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "An Example of Pedagogics." In *Brecht on Theatre*. Ed. Willett. 31-2.
- "On Rhymeless Verse with Irregular Rhythms." In *Brecht on Theatre*. Ed. Willett. 115-20.
- "The Street Scene." In *Brecht on Theatre*. Ed. Willett. 121-29.
- "New Technique of Acting." In *Brecht on Theatre*. Ed. Willett. 136-47.
- "The Trial of Lucullus." *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays*. Ed. Kuhn and Willett. Vol. 4. 270-95.
- "The Condemnation of Lucullus." *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays*. Ed. Kuhn and Willett. Vol. 4. 391-15.
- "Lucullus's Trophies." *Short Stories 1921-1946*. Ed. J. Willett and R. Manheim. London: Methuen, 1985. 170-77.
- "Der Ozeanflug: Radiolehrstück für Knaben und Mädchen." *Gesammelte Werke in 20 Bänden*. Suhrkamp. Band 2. 565-85.
- Doherty, Brigid. "Test and Gestus in Brecht and Benjamin." *MLN* 115 (2000): 442- 81.
- Eiland, Howard. "Reception in Distraction." *Boundary 2* 30:1 (2003): 51-66.
- Ferris, D. S., ed. *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*. California: Stanford UP, 1996.
- Frey, Hans-Jost. "On Presentation in Benjamin." In *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*. Ed. D. S. Ferris. 139-64.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Brecht and Method*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Kuhn, T. and J. Willett, eds. *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays*. Trans. H.R. Hays. London: Methuen, 2001.
- Obermayer, Hans Peter. "'Yes, to Nothingness!' The Condemnation of Lucullus: An Opera of Peace by Bertolt Brecht and Paul Dessau." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 8.2 (2001): 217-33.
- Willett, John, ed. and trans. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

A German's Reading of Brecht in 2004: Gestus, Dialectic, Productivity

Joachim Fiebach

Gestus and Dialectic

Gestus, or "gest" as Willett preferred to translate it,¹ is one of Brecht's key aesthetic notions. He insisted on regarding poetic and theatrical language as "gestic," and even on requiring gestic music.² It had to be the "gestic material" (*gestisches Material*) (Brecht, "Short Organon" 64) that the actor must interpret (*auslegen*) in order to convey the "narrative" or "story-line(s)." In the 1940s/1950s, he considered the narrative line to be the main business of any theatrical event (*Veranstaltung*) ("Short Organon" 65). In his "Short Organon," he termed that narrative line "Fabel." I would like to translate it as "fable." The fable, as he posited it, is the entirety of "all gestic activities" that make up the composition of a play as produced.

It is his reading of fables as "coherent compositions" giving insights into societal structures and processes that has greatly contributed to the understanding of his theatre as a closed system and to treating his approach to society and the arts as one-dimensional and essentialist.

Tracing what I consider essentials of the philosophical, moral, political, and aesthetic stance that Brecht took since the mid-1920s, I wish to argue the opposite. Brecht was in his time one of the most "modern" and relevant intellectuals and artists, and has remained so up to the present, given the permanent conflict-ridden, extremely dangerous and "unclear" condition of