The Role of Theatre in Society: A Comparative Analysis of the Socio-Cultural Theories of Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno

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Abstract This article analyzes the socio-cultural theories of Adorno, Benjamin, and Brecht through the lens of the theatre, most especially as it pertains to the work of actors. It explores the forces of capitalism that determine how art is produced, distributed, and consumed. Following Adorno’s reading of Marx, actors are here posited as commodities whose labor is separated from the product they create for public consumption. This commodification raises various questions: How does a market economy shape the production and consumption of art? What is technology’s function in the commodification of art? What is art’s sociopolitical role and how does it apply to theatre? To address these questions I juxtapose the cultural theory of Adorno and Benjamin with Brecht’s epic theatre. This comparison exposes the ritualistic potential of the theatre to bring an audience together as a community through sharing a socially enriching event.

In a letter to Walter Benjamin in the autumn of 1934, the aesthetic and social theorist Theodor Adorno cautions his friend and colleague: “I confess that the whole difficult problem is connected with Brecht and with the credence you are willing to give him.” Benjamin was a great admirer of Brecht as documented by his laudatory analysis of epic theatre in his text, Illuminations. Benjamin and Brecht, like Adorno, were among the numerous artists and Marxist intellectuals who sought refuge from their native Germany in the years leading up to World War Two. The rise of fascism, coupled with unprecedented industrial progress, significantly influenced how these men perceived society and art’s role within it. However close Benjamin and Adorno might have been personally, it is clear that they had different ideas about art’s social function. Adorno disdained technology’s impact on aesthetics and criticized Benjamin’s famed essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” for using a binary opposition to make a predominantly political argument. In brief, Benjamin theorizes two oppositional concepts that he terms “exhibition value” and “cult value,” associating the latter with an artwork’s aura, a “cult” of sensation if you will, and the former with its ability to “exhibit” intellectual ideas for political purposes. “The total function of art is reversed,” he states, “instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.” As such, Benjamin juxtaposes stage acting—wherein its ritualistic practice is identified by its “cult
value”—with acting for the camera, thereby defining art’s social function as political. Although Benjamin uses this methodology to criticize the Fascists for using film and photography to manipulate the masses, he ultimately sees art’s “exhibition value” as a means to “emancipate [it] from a parasitical dependence on ritual.”

Adorno disagrees with his colleague’s understanding of art’s role in society and uses Brecht as a foil to make his point. If Benjamin and Brecht see art as a political tool, Adorno regards it for its phenomenological possibilities. It has the potential for achieving the beautiful and sublime, which, Adorno argues, can enrich society in ways that transcend the didacticism of Benjamin and Brecht. In his view, making art for a sociopolitical purpose negates its spiritual essence, and insofar as the artwork is technologically mediated and mass-produced, it is a commodity produced for “exchange value.” According to Adorno, the forces of capitalism render an artwork a commodity for consumption, and therefore its value is no longer determined by its beauty and uniqueness but by the amount of money it can fetch in the marketplace. Adorno thus argues that Benjamin’s cultural theory and Brecht’s theatrical practice are antithetical to the artwork’s defining attribute: its potential for “spiritualization.”

I will examine Adorno’s aesthetic theory by comparing it to Brecht’s theatrical theory and practice. I will also use Benjamin’s binary opposition of exhibition and cult value, as seen through stage and on-camera acting, to argue that the forces of capitalism have compromised the work of stage actors. How, for example, has the actor’s craft fared since the development of film? And how has the rise of technology and the concurrent valuation of art along economic lines affected the theatre? Finally, what are the social ramifications when art becomes a commodity? I will begin with the socio-historical context of Adorno, Benjamin, and Brecht before presenting Adorno’s theory of cultural commodification in conversation with Benjamin’s seminal essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. I will then posit Brecht’s epic theatre as a didactic aesthetic that is squarely committed to sociopolitical change.

Adorno famously and cryptically declared that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” While this statement exemplifies his penchant for rhetorical histrionics, it reflects a time fraught with unprecedented human destruction. For Adorno the attempted annihilation of European Jews at the hands of the Nazis was emblematic of a different—albeit far less significant—example of humankind’s degradation: the commodification of culture in modern society. Along with Benjamin and Brecht, Adorno belonged to the Frankfurt School of Social Research, an organization founded in 1923 with the purpose of producing a Marxist critique of modern society. Under the auspices of its founder Felix J. Weil, the Frankfurt School was instrumental in revitalizing Western Marxism, most especially during the years immediately following World War Two. Its members wanted to affiliate themselves with Frankfurt University and were dedicated to connecting theory with practice, which distinguishes them from the great majority of intellectuals throughout history who failed to address the two in tandem. The Institute was formed during the Weimar Republic and later directed its criticism against Fascism and the Nazis, as one of its members, Alice Maier, wrote: “We were all possessed, so to speak, of the idea we must beat Hitler and fascism.” From Brecht’s dramas like Fear and Misery of the Third Reich to Benjamin’s essays dismantling fascism, this unique group of intellectuals and artists
responded to their moment in history by generating social and cultural criticism that examined and challenged modern society’s multiple spheres of dehumanization.

While Fascism was the initial target of the Frankfurt School, after many of its members fled to America from Nazi persecution they turned their critical focus to capitalism. Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleague and fellow émigré Max Horkheimer coined the term “culture industry” to demonstrate how the capitalist superstructure uses art to determine and uphold a hegemonic social order. The so-called culture industry posits the artwork as a material good that is mass-produced, distributed, and consumed according to its exchange value. Expanding on Marx’s depiction of the commodification of labor, Adorno demonstrates how artists and their works become cultural goods bought and sold at the expense of uniqueness, the artwork’s defining attribute. Adorno argues that the standardization of culture causes the total degeneration of individuation that transcends any given artwork and ultimately has a homogenizing effect on society at large:

The sacrifice of individuality which accommodates itself to the regularity of the successful, the doing of what everybody else does, follows from the basic fact that in the broad areas the same thing is offered to everybody by the standardized production of consumption goods. But the commercial necessity of connecting that identity leads to the manipulation of taste and the official culture’s presence of individualism, which necessarily increases in proportion to the liquidation of the individual.8

A composer and musicologist himself, Adorno primarily addresses the culture industry’s “regressive” effects on music. Yet his theoretical argument can also apply to theatre and the work of actors. My aim is to use Adorno’s commodification theory to argue that the culture industry has had a degenerative effect on actors and the art of theatre. Adorno depicts how the forces of capitalism cause musicians and their music to become fetishized or idolized to the point of becoming disassociated from that which they create. Just as Benjamin depicts the on-camera actor being perceived for his image and not for his corporeal being (e.g., his body movement, voice and speech, in short, his presence), Adorno sees musicians being likewise divorced from their music: “All contemporary musical life is dominated by the commodity form; the last pre-capitalist residues have been eliminated” (37). He describes modern music as a fetish by which the schism between the musician and the listener detaches the artist from the materials of his labor. He uses NBC’s broadcasts of Arturo Toscanini’s concerts to illustrate how the radio detaches the artist from the production and reception of his work by repackaging him as an idolized commodity: “Toscanini, like a second-rate orchestra leader is called Maestro immediately after he was promoted to Marshall of the Air with the aid of the radio” (35). At no point is there a “pure” tangible connection between Toscanini, his work and the listener, as his music is mediated through the medium of radio for the purpose not of creating art but of attracting advertisers for NBC. Toscanini’s music is thus measured by its “exchange value,” which is contingent on his popularity among NBC’s listeners. The dynamic of cultural production, distribution, and consumption is defined by the fetishization of an artistic object—in this case Toscanini and his orchestra—as a commodity that has precious little to do with the creative process or the essence of the artwork itself. This degenerative socio-cultural dynamic led Adorno to posit art consumers as
“slaves” who blindly succumb to the effects of the culture industry (39). He argues that they fail to appreciate the nuance and specificity of a given artwork’s ritualistic or spiritual properties, and are drawn instead to the popular perceptions surrounding its production, such as the reputation of a conductor or musician, the cultural capital of a given composer or composition, or the appeal of hit songs.

Adorno demonstrates how the production and distribution of the so-called “pop song” negates aesthetic individuality and uniqueness. He dialectically identifies the creation and marketing of artistic goods by arguing that the composer of a hit song produces a “standard” that feigns originality yet adheres “to the regularity of the successful, the doing of what everybody does” (40). He then coins the term “pseudo-individual” to pejoratively describe twentieth-century popular music (14, 52–53, 195). In popular music a basic and proven form is established (e.g., the syncopated rhythms of jazz), yet at the same time the composer also attempts to contrive elements of originality and inventiveness, and Adorno here refers to the improvisatory character of jazz. Although many have questioned Adorno’s understanding of jazz, his contention that modern music lacks uniqueness is compelling and can be applied to other art forms, especially theatre and acting. Once this analogy is drawn, the demise of the stage actor’s craft can be likened to the declining virtuosity of vocalists. Similar to his criticism of Toscanini’s NBC broadcasts, Adorno describes how the fetishization of singers occurs at the expense of their artistry: “Musical fetishism takes possession of the public valuation of singing voices” (36). The singer’s technical virtuosity and craft is eclipsed once they are mediated as a marketable commodity whose image and music fit the formula for success, which is ultimately defined by the singer’s exchange value. This process can be identified in many pop artists today, from Madonna to Lady Gaga, the cultural products that have more to do with the public’s consumption of the singer’s abstracted image than with their musicianship and vocal technique.

Once musical production is fetishized, as Adorno suggests, marketing plays an ever greater role in musical culture: “Regressive listening is tied to production by the machinery of distribution, and particularly by advertising” (47). Similar to the likes of Lady Gaga, celebrity actors have also become culturally constructed icons by having their images mass distributed to a target audience that desires the image and what it symbolizes. From screen stars such as Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise to the stage-trained Meryl Streep, an actor’s fame translates into exchange value, the measure of professional worth and success. By using media tools like the recording industry, iPods, popular periodicals, the Internet (e.g., Twitter and Facebook), and, of course, film and television, these celebrities are marketed as products for consumption before a doting public that is drawn to their image and would-be artistic praxis. The actual artwork, however, tends to get lost in this process. The consumer wants to have an experience of someone and something with which they are familiar and can relate to, yet conversely, they want to “produce the belief” that this very experience is altogether unique. Thus, Lady Gaga’s formulaic music is accompanied by her outlandish costumes and highly contrived iconoclasm. Her symbolically constructed idolatry serves as a commercial complement to her ersatz musicianship. A similar analysis could be made of her predecessor, Madonna, whose “success,” as John Fiske asserts, was “due at least as much to her videos and her personality as her music.” In
tracing Madonna’s fame to her socially constructed image (as opposed to her music). Fiske reminds us that her first album, *Madonna* (1983), was initially a commercial failure, and that it wasn’t until the “Lucky Star” video that her career began to take off. The secret of her breakthrough, he argues, was to deploy mythical signifiers through the mass media that evoked Madonna as a sexually empowered figure that became a pop icon for young girls, who largely comprised her fan base during much of the 1980s. Like the current case of Lady Gaga, this “fine example of the capitalist pop industry at work” built a singing career that had little to with “what she sounded like.” As such, both icons exemplify what Adorno refers to in “On the Fetish Character in Music” as the “totalitarian” result of “the star principle.” Thus the fetishization of music results in what he calls a “regression of listening” (35; see also 28–60).

Adorno’s theory is of course based on Marx’s description of how consumers become alienated from the production of material goods, most especially as it pertains to labor. We can apply this concept to the mass reproduction, distribution, and consumption of the film actor’s work, as explained by Adorno’s colleague Walter Benjamin. Benjamin sees photography and film as the most prominent examples of cultural reproduction in the modern era. In the case of film, he explains how actors are mediated by the camera and are thereby disconnected from the spectator: “The audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera.” The actor’s presence, or what Benjamin calls his “aura,” is lost in favor of an image that will be deployed as a mass commodity. Like Marx’s laborer, the film actor is divorced from the production of his work as his performance is contrived through the director’s editing, whereby he forfeits his artistic agency. Whereas the stage actor’s work is measured by his presence, as identified by his corporeal being, including its manifestation in voice and speech work, the film actor is shown as a series of images mediated through the camera lens. The stage actor also experiences numerous weeks of rehearsals before palpably revealing his work to a live audience, a ritualistic exchange that is characterized by the ephemerality of live theatre. Contrarily, the film actor is detached from that which is being presented, a disconnection bearing similarity to Adorno’s theorization of Toscanini’s radio broadcasts. Like Toscanini (or the case of Madonna), the film actor is a fetishized cultural good whose success is measured by his exchange value. We certainly can see how this theory applies to celebrities today, insofar as one’s fame is constructed not only by the mass distribution of one’s image in movies and television but also by other mass media forms such as magazines, talk shows, and the Internet.

Benjamin’s description of the actor’s aura also applies to theatre. Unlike film, theatre is live and ephemeral and does not lend itself to being reproduced and distributed as a commodity. While it is clear that theatre has been used for commercial purposes throughout history, its liveness ensures that each performance provides a unique experience that cannot be standardized. From the sheer size and demographics of the audience to the individual moments constituting a performance, every night invites a different show with the potential for a ritualistic encounter between actors and spectators. Actors facilitate theatrical ritual through phenominal encounters with the audience, in which they enable the spectator to transcend what Adorno calls “empirical reality,” otherwise defined as the workaday world. Adorno claims that an
artwork reaches a mystical state of spiritualization through a dialectical process by which its constituent elements, or what he terms its “thing-like” properties, allow it to transcend that which constructs it: its form. The artwork’s spirit is its defining attribute, yet it is contingent on its formal properties, just like the dialectic between the sounds of a sonata and the musical notes on the page, or the scripted drama that is transformed by the actors into a theatrical presentation. The result is a phenomenal encounter shared by a community of people in a public forum. This encounter marks the very essence of theatre and its social function. By bringing people together to share in what is literally a “once in a lifetime” experience, theatre builds social and personal identities in ways that can perhaps be best compared to a religious ritual. As such, theatre’s ritualistic essence has always remained its defining attribute.

The Polish stage director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski likewise sees art as a spiritual experience shared by the performers and their audience. With the actor functioning as a “high priest” of sorts, Grotowski argues on behalf of what he terms a “Poor Theatre,” wherein locating the actor–spectator connection at the core of live theatre. The stage actors forge a “holy” contact with their audience by integrating their psychic and physical energy to create a transformative “encounter” that jointly affects the spectators and themselves. This encounter is decidedly ephemeral and must be experienced without the accoutrements of the Rich Theatre that is marked by a confluence of superfluities that negate the actor/audience connection: “By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor–spectator relationship of perpetual, direct, “live communion.” Grotowski faults the Rich Theatre for attempting to compete with the technological prowess of film and television, mediums that use the actor not as the center of a live event but as a tool to serve a “mechanical function.”

Like Antonin Artaud, his predecessor and occasional muse, Grotowski seeks to make theatre that is ritualistic and that transcends the everyday world, or Adorno’s “empirical reality.” Artaud’s call for a Theatre of Cruelty greatly influenced Grotowski’s actor-driven aesthetic, as he writes: “When Artaud speaks of release and cruelty we feel he’s touching a truth we can verify another way. We feel that an actor reaches the essence of his vocation whenever he commits an act of sincerity, when he unveils himself, opens and gives himself in an extreme, solemn gesture” (124). Artaud indeed argues for a theatre in which the actor and spectator undergo something akin to a spiritual transformation. Likening it to the medieval practice of alchemy, he describes a process that is fraught with “chaos” and “heat” and that results in an altered state of being for both the performer and his audience. He uses eastern performance traditions, most particularly Balinese theatre, to depict a “metaphysical” aesthetic that can be compared to a religious ceremony. In contrast to the text-oriented theatre of the West, which with Modernism became increasingly psychological, Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty is based on a visceral exchange between the actor and spectator, where the former serves as a kind of shaman, creating a mystical and mesmerizing encounter with the latter. He metaphorically describes this phenomenon as “alchemy” where the performer/spectator bond transcends pedestrian reality and reaches a spiritual “efficacy analogous to the process which in the
physical world actually turns matter into gold."20 This unique bond has the potential of forming a “holy” communion that is both inherently spiritual and definitively social, thereby underscoring the principles of Adorno’s aesthetic theory.

In discussing the work of actors, Artaud acknowledges the rigorous and codified training regimen of Balinese theatre and its ultimate effect of “overwhelming the mind” of the spectator through a visceral experience.21 Unlike most western actors at the time, who during the 1950s were being taught a strictly psychological approach to their craft (e.g., vestiges of Stanislavsky’s system), Artaud’s aesthetic is based on the training principles of what he conceived to be eastern performance. As Grotowski notes, however, his project is entirely theoretical and lacks a practical system to ensure its implementation: “Artaud presents an indisputable stimulus where research is relative to the possibilities of the actor, but what he proposes are in the end only visions, a sort of poem about the actor, and no practical conclusions can be drawn from his explanations.”22 Thus despite his influence on occidental actor training, Artaud never devised a methodology to enact his ideas. A large part of Grotowski’s genius was precisely the creation of such a system.

Grotowski’s system, an amalgam of eastern and western performance techniques, is designed to incorporate the actor’s entire being into a performance.23 From Kathakali facial exercises and Japanese Noh to Meyerhold’s biomechanics and Stanislavsky’s Method of Physical Actions, he continuously explores ways to engage and express the actor’s psychophysical essence. This essence is defined by a reciprocal connection between the actor’s mind and body as facilitated by his gestures, movements, speaking, and the relationship they each have with his thoughts, imagination, and emotional expression. The result is a self-induced “trance” that transcends empirical reality and approaches what Adorno calls “spiritualization,” what Benjamin terms “cult value,” or what Artaud refers to as the “alchemical theater.”

Seeing theatre as a form of ritual is of course nothing new. Dating back centuries to ancient Greece and the European Middle Ages, it is clear that theatre has oftentimes functioned as a religious exercise with the actor at its center. However, the advent of industrialized capitalism and its consequent commodification of labor—especially the work of artists—has increasingly produced theatre and actors as material goods to be consumed at the expense of what Benjamin refers to as “cult value.” In his famed essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin equates an artwork’s aura with uniqueness, and he demonstrates how the forces of commodification, manifested through technological progress, eradicate it. The mass reproduction of an artwork negates its spiritual essence, which Benjamin identifies as “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”24 He describes his paradigm through the binary opposition between a work’s “cult value” and its “exhibition value.” In the former case, the work is imbued with a ritualistic essence that is defined by its aura. Such a work possesses a palpable if evanescent presence and must be experienced live. Theatre, of course, fits this rationale. On the other hand, exhibition value refers to the technological transformation of art into mass produced objects. This system of standardization cancels the cult value of art, as Benjamin claims: “When the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult the semblance of its autonomy disappeared.”25
To Adorno's dismay, however, Benjamin did not construct his model of the actor's aura to argue for the spiritualization of art. Indeed, Benjamin saw technology as an opportunity to mass produce and distribute art for political purposes. While he is clearly opposed to the Fascist's use of film, he nonetheless sees remarkable, if destructive, potential in their methods: "They are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art."²⁶ His hope was to use film as a propaganda tool for Marxism. Adorno saw this matter quite differently, as seen in his 1935 letter to Benjamin in which he defines film as a cultural commodity that forfeits its "use value" for its "exchange value," which leads him to conclude that the "promise of immortality" rests "in commodities and not [in] people."²⁷

Like Benjamin, Brecht sees art as a political tool intended "to develop the means of pleasure into an object of instruction... into organs of mass communication." His Epic Theatre addresses current sociopolitical issues to be critically analyzed without empathy. Brecht's method for distancing the audience emotionally is of course known as the Verfremdungseffekt, a system of techniques that negate the spectator's emotions by foregrounding the theatrical elements to underscore the drama's sociopolitical message. One such alienating technique is what Brecht calls Gestus, in which a social attitude is signified by an anti-realistic gesture to promote a political theme.²⁸ Everything from a production's sets and costumes to Brecht's episodic use of headlines can be understood as Gestus. For example, Helene Weigel's famous "silent scream" as Mother Courage is Gestic insofar as it signifies how war functions as a business, even at the expense of one's family. The dialectic of the music and lyrics of the "The Ballad of Mac the Knife" in The Threepenny Opera also functions as a Gestus. Kurt Weill's jazzy musical language juxtaposes the atrocities the Street Singer describes in this opening number, thereby setting up the protagonist Macheath as a lovable murderer. The sociopolitical attitude of government corruption is thereby underscored by the ballad's portrayal of Macheath as a hero whose illegal actions are ultimately supported by the Chief of Police (Tiger Brown).

Brecht's retreat from ritual is also demonstrated by his views on acting. Positing actors as instructors, he insists that they serve the drama by understanding and communicating its ideas for the purpose of effecting social change.²⁹ His didactic aesthetic precludes a spiritual connection between the performer and the audience by locating the former as a signifier, a living Gestus, who communicates social attitudes that are relevant to the current historical moment. Brecht opposes a psychological approach to creating a character, arguing that the actor must externalize his or her emotions in an artificial manner, as if his performance were constituted by "quotation marks" bearing sociopolitical meaning. Unlike Adorno, Grotowski, and Artaud, who contend that an artwork should induce a transformational experience in the beholder, Brecht wants the spectator to be alienated from the actors so as to become intellectually engaged with the narrative.

Brecht likewise instructs the actor to avoid transforming himself or herself into the dramatic character, but to instead maintain a critical distance from it. He makes this point in his essay "The Street Scene," where he uses a thought experiment to illustrate his view on acting. He asks the reader to imagine that a bystander is assigned the task of reporting a traffic accident that he recently witnessed. He then contends that the bystander, who stands for an actor, "must remain a demonstrator" who
refrains from "transforming" into the various characters that were involved in the accident. Thus the audience does not experience the "demonstrator" as any of the roles he presents, for he does not adopt their respective views regarding the accident (e.g., the victim’s versus the driver’s). The actor’s work does not aim at anything akin to a "spiritual experience," but is a didactic commentary on a character’s attitude towards realizing the theatre’s social function, which is to invite the "spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view."⁴³

The most fundamental principle of Brecht’s theatre is its commitment to social change. In this regard he can be compared to his Frankfurt School contemporaries. Like Adorno and Benjamin, he was a Western Marxist who believed art and society were mutually inclusive, each having a reciprocal influence on the other. In the case of art, however, Brecht’s didactic approach contrasts with Adorno’s aesthetic spiritualization. If Adorno subscribes to art that possesses spirit or an "aura" capable of transcending "empirical reality," Brecht sees theatre as a form of "sport" that ought to have widespread public appeal. Indeed, he contends that cultural elitists—a criticism often leveled against Adorno—"are always telling us that we mustn’t simply produce what the public demands," thereby ceasing to have any viable influence on society. He sees theatre as a source of education, insofar as it can make a difference in the world by addressing current and relevant sociopolitical matters. A sampling of Brecht’s dramas exemplify this point: *Mother Courage and Her Children* (the commerce of war), *The Roundheads and Peakheads* (racial purity), *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (the peril of fascism), *Galileo* (religious hypocrisy), *Man is Man* (the dehumanization of modern society), *The Rise and Fall of Mahagonny* (a critique of capitalism), and so on.

Adorno, in contrast to Brecht, did not believe that art should be political but rather that it should demonstrate a creativity that is entirely unique, devoid of the trappings of commodification, and capable of "spiritualization." Indeed, Adorno contends that the politicization of art is regressive, insofar as it privileges the content of any given work at the expense of its form. This explains his criticism of Brecht, whose plays and productions were largely contingent on their epic narratives. Although epic theatre has a distinct form, this form is inextricably bound to the content of the drama, a conceit that was not lost on Adorno:

The montage effects which Brecht introduced into drama implies the almost complete interchangeability of time and the explicit captioning which refers to "Life" and "Rise," for example, in the titles of his plays seems to deprive the dramatic characters of action and transform them into experimental objects of a predetermined thesis.⁴³

Instead of crediting Brecht for practicing a unique form of theatre, Adorno conflates Epic Theatre with mass culture by claiming that both bear a reciprocal connection: "epic theatre is both a response to mass culture and mass culture's own reversed consciousness of itself."⁴⁴ Whereas Adorno eschews the commodification of culture, Brecht endorses theatre for the masses, from "river-dwellers to fruit farmers," in favor of a proletarian aesthetic.⁴⁵ Ultimately, Adorno posits Brecht as a product of the culture industry and not a challenge to it. Despite Brecht’s lofty claims of founding a theatre for the masses, one would be remiss to argue that his oeuvre fostered any sort of sociopolitical revolution. He was, in fact, far more of a revolutionary in the realm of theatre than in politics and society. Although the content of his dramas and the
didacticism of his aesthetic propagate Marxist themes, the fact remains that Brecht was a contradiction onto himself insofar as his cultural and social capital grew in conjunction with his career and therein made him a commercial success. The trajectory of his life and career suggests the shrewd opportunist whose artistic prowess was used for personal gain rather than the public servant who attempted to promote social change.36

But whereas Adorno was critical of Brecht’s didacticism, Benjamin embraced it. In Illuminations, Benjamin dedicates an essay to Epic Theatre and glowingly speaks of its attributes. In addition to addressing Brecht’s call for a plot-centered rather than characterological-centered aesthetic, Benjamin praises the theatrical negation of the spectator’s empathy, of having actors use “quotable gestures” to mark their work, and the need to didactically deliver a play’s political message. His most salient endorsement of Epic Theatre is the requirement of a “relaxed audience” that critically considers the events or actions of the plot to arrive at an emotionless understanding of a work’s sociopolitical themes.37 The drama is a teaching tool for society, and the function of Epic Theatre is to illuminate it as such. After seeing a London production of The Roundheads and Peakheads, he expresses his admiration for how Brecht’s drama effectively addresses the issue of racial purity:

I did not even write you about The Roundheads and Peakheads, which I consider uncommonly important and a complete success.... I think that the importance of this is self-evident in view of the fact that there is no more enlightening, interesting, and comprehensible description of the subject for the public than the one you provide.38

Benjamin was very much a student of history who continuously examined aesthetics within a socio-historical context. Just as he acknowledged how the invention of film had transformed the work of actors, and by extension marked the declining role of theatre in modern society, he demonstrated how the mass circulation of novels had displaced the bardic tradition of storytelling. In his essay “The Storyteller,” he seems to strike a whimsical tone in depicting storytelling as a lost art form that was “coming to an end.” The epic narratives spawned by the likes of “peasants and seamen” for the members of a particular community, during the preindustrial age, were eventually replaced by the private experience of reading novels, or attending the cinema, a far more individualistic form of reception than watching a stage performance. The moral values communicated through a tale narrated around a camp fire or in the public square helped to define a community. This practice resembled the ancient Greek theatre of Athens or the morality plays of the European Middle Ages in that the storyteller functioned as an actor speaking to a congregation of citizens in a public space for the purpose of both entertaining and enlightening his audience. Although the spectators would have been almost entirely illiterate, they would nevertheless be able to understand the story’s content, linguistic nuances, and moral values. Indeed, the art of storytelling functioned as theatre in the richest sense, insofar as it was contingent on a “community of listeners” who shared in “the art of repeating stories” and thus nourished their personal lives within the context of a community.39

As he does with stage acting, Benjamin identifies the storyteller as a gifted artist who possesses an “aura.”40 Despite his lamenting the loss for the art of storytelling and the “cult value” of the stage actor, Benjamin appears resigned to the fact that the
modern age and the mass reproduction of cultural goods is a reality that must be embraced. This is apparent in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in which he argues that the technological mediation of art, most especially with the advent of film, functions as an “apparatus” that democratizes culture, thereby providing an opportunity to form a proletarian revolution. Though he admits that making art strictly for its “exhibition value” eradicates its “presence in time in space,” its “cult value,” and therein surrenders the work’s “aura,” he endorses its potential for sociopolitical change.41 The ritual, spirit, and “mystery” of an artwork is forfeited so as to didactically convey sociopolitical issues to more people, which may, in theory, cause social change. Whereas this view can be likened to Brecht’s aesthetic, it contrasts with the cultural criticism of his friend and colleague, Adorno, whose work reads as a polemic that repudiates the mass production, distribution, and consumption of art. In condemning the commodification of art as the “monopolization” of cultural goods for economic gain at the expense of “spiritualization,” Adorno contends that art’s role as a source of ritual is erased in favor of mass culture’s “production of synthetic modes of behavior,” its deterministic influence on society.42 Thus, from the fetishization of music to the social stereotypes reinforced by film and television, modern society’s industrialization of culture has resulted in the demise of art’s defining attributes: its inherent uniqueness, its distinction from pedestrian reality, and, most crucially, its spiritual essence.43

Adorno’s aesthetic of spiritualization clearly positions him against the theories of his Frankfurt School colleagues, Benjamin and Brecht, who both see art as inherently political. According to him, using art for political purposes is reductive. It detaches the spectator from experiencing a work’s aura, its defining attribute, which cannot be reproduced for commercial consumption precisely because it is ephemeral. Theatre squarely fits Adorno’s rationale, as throughout its history it has functioned as a ritualistic medium that is altogether communal. It cannot exist without an audience that shares in the live performance of actors. From Thespis’ departure from the dithyrambic Chorus to the yugen of Japanese Noh, the actor has served audiences by accessing something extraordinary—something eternal—that simply cannot be captured on film or a photograph. While Brecht’s theatre was decidedly theatrical and original (the latter trait must have somewhat appealed to Adorno), his aesthetic fails to meet theatre on its most basic terms: its potential for a mutual transformation of actor and audience. This is what Jerzy Grotowski referred to as a “holy” encounter, or what Antonin Artaud metaphorically described as “alchemy.”44 Brecht may have been right in claiming that theatre can induce social change, but perhaps it can do so only by affecting one individual at a time within a communal framework. This is so because bringing a group of people together to share in a ritualistic encounter resonates beyond the political ideas any drama may happen to promote—the human encounter can actually begin to shape society instead of merely commenting on it.

NOTES

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Abolish Aesthetics?: Brecht’s Use of Sociology,” co-chaired by Dr. Heinz-Uwe Haus and myself.


6. Adorno, Prisms, 34.


8. Adorno, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” in The Culture Industry, 40; subsequent references to this chapter are cited in the text.


11. According to FameCount.com, a site that uses Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube to measure a celebrity’s popularity, Lady Gaga has over 20 million fans. This site identifies her as the most popular individual in America. http://www.famecount.com/all-platforms/Worldwide/Musician (accessed 2 August 2010).


17. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 83.


19. Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 48–52. Despite Artaud’s endorsement of eastern performance traditions, his analysis should be met with a degree of skepticism given the exoticism of these traditions. His citation of Balinese theatre is particularly questionable in that he spent a mere afternoon in 1931 viewing a performance at a Parisian exposition. For more on Artaud’s appropriation of Balinese theatre/dance, see Nicola Savarese and Richard Fowler, “Antonin Artaud Sees Balinese Theatre at the Paris Colonial Exposition, The Drama Review 45.3 (Fall 2001): 51–77.


23. Grotowski, Towards a Poor Theatre, 133–73.


29. Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, 57.
30. Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, 125.
32. Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, 6–7.
34. Ibid.
35. Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, 185.
43. See Adorno, “How to Look at Television” and “Transparencies of Film,” in The Culture Industry, 158–97.