

Vulgarity Squared: Marxism and the Interest of Taste

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Brecht

I'd like to begin by paraphrasing Terry Eagleton: the problem with Kant's disinterestedness, Eagleton suggests, is that you have to be interested. As with many of Eagleton's one-liners, this one contains a trenchant bit of theoretical truth--or better, what I'll call in this paper "realism." It not only highlights the subjective foundation of Kant's universalist dictum concerning taste; it points to a material foundation for such subjectivity--something more fully explored in Bourdieu's work. In this paper, I will explore the place of interest in relation to art more generally; for I believe that one way of approaching a Marxist critique of taste would be to start from the following question: What happens to taste when it becomes a matter of interest?

To begin to answer this question, I'd like to turn to the work of a Marxist theorist whose work is in many ways dedicated to addressing this problem, Michael Sprinker. Sprinker's 1987 book, *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism*, seeks to articulate the beginnings of an Althusserian contribution to aesthetics based on the few fragments Althusser devoted to the subject of art. After

providing a historicization of aesthetics--from Schiller, Kant and Marx, to Ruskin, Nietzsche and the Chicago School--Sprinker attempts to extract the rational kernel, so to speak, from the mystical shell of this fundamentally bourgeois category. Sprinker's aim is not to break from aesthetics, but instead to work through it. It is not that art should be discarded because it is interested; however, because it *is* interested, Marxist critique may be able to play a role in better understanding this ever-battled-upon ground of enquiry. This is not all. It may turn out, according to Sprinker, that a critique of art can play a role in Marxist thought. "What is often dismissively termed 'bourgeois aesthetics,'" says Sprinker, "may well contain the key to a properly materialist theory of art" (*Imaginary* 15).

So, bourgeois aesthetics, Marxist aesthetics: what we get, in fact, are two "horizons" of the aesthetic. In the first, Paul de Man's work is described as "the horizon from which materialist aesthetics will perforce have to advance" (5). In terms of a materialist approach, however, it is Althusser's work which, at least in 1987, represented "the current horizon of Marxist aesthetic theory" (269). The end of *Imaginary Relations* was to render the latter commensurate with the former--to claim the "scientificity" of de Man's allegories of unreadability for Marxism's critique of art.

What this has to do with the question of taste is this: I asked initially what happens to taste when it becomes a matter of interest--when interest replaces disinterest as the ground for judgment. The answer I will posit in this paper, following Sprinker's work on the subject, is that the question of taste becomes instead one of realism. That is, the question becomes one not of whether something or other is good, or agreeable, or even true; but whether it is correct. This is what I think Sprinker is getting at in *Imaginary Relations* when he privileges the empirical rather than the formal potential of art.

Take, for example, the book that followed *Imaginary Relations*, *Proust and Ideology*. In *Proust and Ideology*, Sprinker looks to the work of the 20th century's quintessential aesthete in order to find out about class relations in the Third Republic. Starting from what he calls "the first task of any consequent materialist criticism . . . to study the social conditions under which individual works of art have been produced" (3), Sprinker eventually concludes that Proust's *A la recherche* offers "a theory of society in the strong sense" (13). That is, Sprinker begins by asking how the social conditions of France's Third Republic produced Proust's great work (a work that has often, as Sprinker explains, been treated very much out of--that is, away from--history). But while his study is devoted to just such a social reconstruction, his conclusion goes a step beyond this: Proust's book itself, it turns out, can help us understand something about France's Third Republic--and especially about relations between the bourgeois and aristocratic classes. To the question "is Proust right concerning class relations in France during the Third Republic?" Sprinker's study answers with a qualified "yes."

At the moment of his untimely death last year, Sprinker was at work on a project that continued his theorization of a Marxist approach to the aesthetic via the writings of Brecht. This work was to show Brecht's "usefulness" (to use Jameson's word) for "aesthetic and political practice today" ("Matter" 2).¹ On the one hand this involves

reasserting a Marxist Brecht--strange as this may sound--against the various other Brecht's hanging about the critical scene: a postmodern Brecht, for example, or a Brecht of identity politics. (In a recent essay for *New Left Review*, "The Grand Hotel Abyss," Sprinker does the same for the work of Walter Benjamin--that is, he asserts the priority of a Marxist Benjamin.) But on the other hand, this involves reasserting the claim of a certain realism within today's post-everything theoretical arena. This claim follows less from the centenary celebration of Brecht's work by Fredric Jameson--*Brecht and Method*--with which Sprinker begins his essay, than from a comment made by Jameson some 20 odd years ago, in his concluding essay to the so-called Brecht-Lukacs debate. "There is some question," says Jameson,

whether the ultimate renewal of modernism, the final dialectical subversion of the now automatized conventions of an aesthetics of perceptual revolution, might not simply be . . . realism itself! For when modernism and its accompanying techniques of "estrangement" have become the dominant style whereby the consumer is reconciled with capitalism, the habit of fragmentation itself needs to be "estranged" and corrected by a more totalising way of viewing phenomena. ("Reflections" 211)

The problem, in other words, is that modernism has become a thing of the past (and not only that, it has become a respectable thing--a *good old thing*, as Brecht might say). For Jameson this fact provides a rationale for his own reassertion of a certain Lukacsian approach to literature and culture against postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of totality and the "real"--critiques that, according to Jameson, simply recapitulate a modernist impetus but without the radical impact that formerly accompanied it.

But Sprinker takes a different path. For Sprinker, the call to reinvent a realism for the present hearkens not to Lukacs' attendant dismissals of modernist experimentation, but to Brecht himself. In "The Matter of Art, or Reinventing Brecht in the Society of the Spectacle," Sprinker turns to the films of Ken Loach to show "how a realist aesthetic can be made to function now as an efficacious mode for political intervention, viz., as a renewal of Brechtian practice in art appropriate to the current era" (24). Films like *Riff Raff* and *Raining Stones*, Sprinker argues, do not abandon the legacy of Brechtian estranging devices but instead refunction them "to meet the requirements of a different aesthetic environment and a new socio-historical conjuncture" (26). We might thus slightly rephrase Jameson's claim and say that the question for Sprinker is whether the ultimate renewal of Brechtianism, the final dialectical subversion of the now automatized conventions of an aesthetics of perceptual revolution, might not simply be realism itself. Such a rephrasing renders the motivation behind Jameson's dialectical reversal slightly--but significantly--different.

This is not the place to ask whether or how Brecht's literary or theoretical work should be renewed. But with regards to the question of interest and taste--as a way of opposing what Jameson has elsewhere called a return to Kant's "the beautiful" ("End of Art" 86)--I think that the present-day invocation of Brecht is anything but fortuitous. Both Jameson

and Sprinker arrive, so to speak, at Brecht. And perhaps even for very similar reasons. But their paths differ greatly--a fact attested to as far back as Sprinker's critique of Jameson's historicism following the publication of *The Political Unconscious*.² I will not have time to discuss Jameson's path from Lukacs to Brecht, but I do want to give some indication of how and why Brecht's work might have come to be so important for Sprinker--for his attempt to bring Marxism more to the fore of aesthetics, and vice versa.

Brecht is usually understood to espouse the modernism half in the realism-modernism debate. But as Sprinker explains, this familiar opposition "does not stand up to inspection." In his essay "The Popular and the Realistic," where he responds to Lukacs' critique of modernism (in the essay, Lukacs also praises *Brecht's Fear and Misery* for its "new realistic tone"), Brecht explains that "realism" is an old concept, one that needs a bit of spring cleaning. "Our conception of realism needs to be broad and political," says Brecht, "free from aesthetic restrictions and independent of convention" (109). Brecht effectively releases realism from its specific literary connotation. As opposed to Lukacs, it is not to a genre that Brecht offers his allegiance. To posit a Brechtian realism, then, is not to place Brecht in a line of realist writers like Balzac, Tolstoy, or Thomas Mann--that is, such writers as Lukacs championed against the solipsistic modernisms of Joyce, Beckett, or Kafka. Instead it is to see Brecht's experimentation, modernist aesthetic techniques, and "anti-Aristotelian" drama as so many tools to be used in the service of thwarting reification--including, of course, the reification of realism itself. "Realism is not a pure question of form," Brecht explains: "copying the methods of these realists [Balzac and Tolstoy], we should cease to be realists ourselves" (110). Brecht's theatre is about refunctioning, rebuilding, breaking down and building up. This goes for the materials of art as well as for the category of art itself. The first step toward a realist portrayal of the world is to recognize the very artifice of realistic portrayal.

It is true, says Brecht, that the theatre is understood generally as a place for "generating dreams" and that to that end the "miserable deceivers" (that is, actors) "use / Incidents from the real world." But in his poem "The Theatre, Home of Dreams," Brecht challenges this use:

Anyone, it is true
Who came into this with the sounds of traffic still in his ears
And still sober, would hardly recognize
Up there on your stage, the world he had just left. (*Poems* 340)

Conventional theatre uses incidents from the world in order to transform them on stage. But Brecht's theatre does just the opposite: it uses the stage to transform the world. In "Sur Brecht et Marx," an essay that focuses specifically on this aspect of Brecht's theory, Althusser explains that just as Marx did not do away with philosophy, but instead initiated a new practice of it, so Brecht did not do away with theatre: "Brecht does not kill theatre," says Althusser, "theatre exists; it plays a determining role." "What Brecht revolutionizes," Althusser explains, "is theatrical practice."³ According to Althusser, Brecht's drama effects a new *practice* of theatre.

In the place of what he called "culinary" art, Brecht offers an artistic practice that understands the question of describing the world to be a *social* one. In doing so, he privileges less the judgment of the aesthetician than that of the sociologist:

The sociologist knows that there are circumstances where improvement no longer does any good. His scale of judgment runs not from "good" to "bad" but from "correct" to "false." If a play is "false" then he won't praise it on the grounds that it is "good" (or "beautiful"); and he alone will remain deaf to the aesthetic appeal of a "false" production. ("Shouldn't We Abolish Aesthetics?" 21)

The terrain of judgment is shifted from the disinterested ground of aesthetics to the economic and social foundations crucial to sociological analysis.

But what does it mean to say "correct" or "false" in relation to a dramatic or literary production, we might ask? And is this just another standard of taste, one as unattainable as that described by David Hume in the eighteenth century? Must the aspiring bearer of such a standard now study Durkheim and Weber as opposed to Addison and Pope?

If I can go back for a moment to a classic statement concerning taste, in 1815, Wordsworth claimed that "every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed" (408). Brecht's art too is dedicated to the pedagogical, to the teaching of what Wordsworth calls "taste." But Brecht's plays teach not so much a kind of taste by which *they* are to be judged as a way of apprehending the world and thus of judging *it*. When we read, say, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, or *Mother Courage and her Children*, we are asked in effect not whether Brecht manages to cull the beauty from the life of a meatpacker or whether Mother Courage exhibits a poignant humanity in the face of long, drawn-out suffering. Instead, we are asked whether or not Brecht's is an accurate portrayal of the world. Like the bystanders gathered in "The Street Scene," we can say "yes, it happened just like that"; or we can say "no, that's not the way it happened at all: this is." Brecht's art challenges us to agree with its portrayal of life under capitalism. If we agree, we can hardly stand by, disinterested. But if we disagree, if we say "that is not how it happened at all," then we must give our own picture; we must say how it is. Contra Kant, the art object, then, *does* have a purpose, an end; and that end is, as Brecht himself attests, ". . . to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view" ("The Street Scene" 125).

The reception of Brecht's own work can help us see the difference between an aesthetic and a sociological judgment: for Brecht has been judged more by an aesthetic than by a realist criteria with regards to taste. Even some of his own champions and translators have suggested that Brecht was a great artist *in spite of* the political implications of his work. "Brecht's worst nightmare may now be all too real," says Sprinker: "he has been rendered respectable, a canonical figure" ("Matter" 14)--a claim, incidentally, that Jameson makes about modernism more generally. As both Sprinker and Jameson would agree, renewed interest in Brecht has come at the cost of rendering him

disinterested. Many critics, spectators, or readers would certainly concede that Brecht's plays are *good*, that his poetry is *beautiful*, or even that he was a *true* genius. But such a conclusion requires keeping silent about that kind of judgment Brecht tried to inculcate via his plays: that is, are they correct? If so, then by Brecht's own teaching we should hardly be worrying about whether or not they are good.

Sprinker argues that Brecht's works are indeed correct, just as he argues that Proust was correct concerning class relations in the Third Republic. But in Brecht Sprinker finds something more than a realistic rendering of class relations: he finds a concept for understanding how class relations can be exposed in art--namely, *Verfremdung*: the estrangement effect. Thus in Brecht Sprinker finds a way of moving beyond the limitations of Althusser with regards to the aesthetic. Althusser's discussion of "internal distancing" (from "Sur Brecht et Marx") provides "a schematic effort to establish the necessary concept for a properly materialist theory of art" what Sprinker calls "its special modality, as distinct from the different modality of ideology" ("Matter" 4). Brecht's theory and practice, though, help Sprinker to flesh out this concept, to develop it, and to render it useful and productive of knowledge. Where Althusser saw art as being somewhere between science and ideology, and more likely closer to the latter, Brecht "believed in the power of the theatre to produce scientific knowledge in the spectator" ("Matter" 21). This may be the "popular mechanics version of science" that Jameson highlights in *Brecht and Method* (2), but in the toolshed of Brecht's theatre we find not just a certain approach to the real, but also the production of specific concepts for a *science* of the real.

To conclude, and without wishing to sound too vulgar or teleological myself, I would thus suggest that Brecht offers a fitting culmination for Sprinker's approach to the aesthetic, as well as a fitting start for taking up the question of Marxism and taste. In moving beyond (or through the detour of) Althusser, the materialist theory of art comes closer to the horizon of what Sprinker called in *Imaginary Relations* "bourgeois aesthetics," and which was characterized by de Man's work on allegory.⁴ Significantly, in his later essay on "The Matter of Art," Sprinker concludes that it is "Brecht's dramaturgy, in all its variety and scope, [that] continues to stand at the *outer horizon* of materialist aesthetic practice" (17, my emphasis).⁵ Whether this means that Marxist aesthetics still has some way to go in advancing upon the horizon of aesthetics generally or whether the latter has in fact been worked through (like Althusser) en route to a properly materialist theory of art is impossible to say for sure. Materialist aesthetics, however, does seem to have advanced a good bit in Sprinker's estimation.

In his reading of Brecht and in his renewed attention to realism, Sprinker manages to square the circle of vulgar Marxist critique and the production of scientific knowledge. Indeed, for Sprinker Brechtian "crude thinking" is anything but simplistic. Those who have seen the work of Ken Loach will agree that this "aesthetic" may not always be pretty. But as good readers of Brecht we know too that such is not without pleasures of its own.

Notes

[1](#) See Jameson's *Brecht and Method*, 1. I would like to thank Modhumita Roy for providing me with a copy of Michael Sprinker's unpublished essay, "The Matter of Art, or Reinventing Brecht in the Society of the Spectacle."

[2](#) See Sprinker's "The Part and the Whole" in *diacritics* 12 (Fall 1982), and the revised and extended version of the argument in *Imaginary Relations*, chapter 6.

[3](#) "Sur Brecht et Marx," 545-46, my translation.

[4](#) In many ways, Sprinker's work on Brecht offers, finally, a Marxist equivalent to de Man's work on allegory--for as Sprinker argues in *Imaginary Relations*, de Man's allegory, as opposed to his characterization of symbol, is akin to the "internal distancing" discussed by Althusser. See *Imaginary Relations*, 28.

[5](#) Jameson too talks of horizons--most famously in the first chapter of *The Political Unconscious*. But Sprinker's "horizons" are closer to Jameson's "just what we need today" statements that attend much of his work on major Marxist figures. See my "Jameson and Method," *minnesota review*, 52-53 (2000).

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