Brecht in Brechtian Cinema

This essay examines an aspect of Brechtian cinema which has been passed over by scholarship to date: the direct quotation of Brecht in Brechtian films as a signal of allegiance to a particular kind of anti-illusionistic, politically engaged filmmaking. Focusing on selected films of Jean-Luc Godard, Alexander Kluge and Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet, the function and significance of these quotations and expropriations is considered. A shift from aesthetic to political allegiance can be dated to around 1968, culminating in two overtly polemical films from 1972: Godard’s Tout va bien and Straub-Huillet’s Einleitung zu Arnold Schoenbergs Begleitmusik für eine Lichtspielscene. In conclusion it is noted that a “double gesture” – the adoption of a Brechtian critical method and the direct citation of the author – goes hand-in-hand with an overtly didactic approach; and this means that these examples of “hardline” Brechtian filmmaking are also primers of one kind or another.

In recent years both Brecht’s involvement with and his influence on film have begun to receive the critical attention they deserve. Wolfgang Gersch’s landmark book Film bei Brecht, published in 1975, remains the standard work in charting Brecht’s own turbulent relationship with the film industry – from his productive collaborations with Karl Valentin (Mysterien eines Frisiersalons, 1923) and Slatan Dudow (Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt?, 1932) through the Dreigroschenprozeß to the frustrations in Hollywood (with Fritz Lang) and the GDR (with Wolfgang Staudte).1

Brechtian cinema has also been examined in numerous articles and essays, although a comprehensive study remains to be written.2 Of particular note here are a number of detailed and searching studies of the filmmakers whose work is most frequently labelled “Brechtian” – co-directors Jean-Marie Straub

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Indeed the first of their two Brecht adaptations, Geschichtsunterricht (1972) based on Die Geschäfte des Herrn Julius Caesar, has probably been the subject of more critical study than any other single Brechtian film.

What has undoubtedly made Geschichtsunterricht a canonical film is the simple fact that it is as Brechtian in its style as it is in its source material; it is, according to Karsten Witte, “jener Film in der langen Reihe mißglückter Brechtverfilmungen, die Brechts Vorstellungen […] am nächsten kommt”. Martin Walsh, in a stimulating analysis, concludes that “just as Brecht liberates us from the normative image of Caesar, so Straub-Huillet free us from the visual/aural chains of cinematic illusionism” – “it is a pity [Brecht] never lived to see History Lessons”. Geschichtsunterricht is in many ways, and consciously at that, the model Brechtian film, and it served for some years as a yardstick against which other leftist “counter-cinema” films were measured.

Its much-vaunted antagonism to “visual pleasure and narrative cinema” highlights an important characteristic of Brechtian film which distinguishes it profoundly from Brecht’s own Epic Theatre and, in the case of Kuhle Wampe, his Epic Cinema. Brechtian cinema, during its prime in the ’60s and ’70s, was generally cerebral, experimental and, despite protestations to the contrary by its

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6 Walsh: The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema (n. 3). P. 71 and p. 61.

7 The debates about Brechtian cinema in Screen magazine coincided productively with the controversy following the publication of Laura Mulvey’s seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in: Screen 16 (1975). No. 3. Nr. 3. Pp. 6–18.