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Aesthetics of Sensualism: Brecht on Pleasure

An entire minor mythology spun out of philosophy's impeded attempts to address the notion of pleasure has made pleasure into something of a singularly rightist notion. It is a principle that the right accepts openly and willingly as it meanwhile shoves everything abstract and political to the left, keeping pleasure proudly on display. And on the left, the image of Bertolt Brecht's cigar incites a fervent morality that disdains any residue of hedonism. This is all happily welcomed by the right, where pleasure is bred, nurtured, and allowed to flourish as the champion against intellectualism, the hero in the myth of heart against head; warming sensation against cold and sterile reasoning. The left takes no offense to this, furthering the work in the trenches, widening the ideological expanse to the delight of those on both sides. Roland Barthes writes, "No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion,"¹—these policemen employed with singular focus, always standing by in observation of only a single crime. Resilience, commitment, and sacrifice serving under the aegis of knowledge are drawn up against the all-too-grateful adversary that stands on the grounds of singular sensual delight. It is an extremely convenient war to wage in which both sides are happy and willing participants; both with worlds to gain in defense of and against this war on pleasure. All of this made possible because, on both sides, it is believed that pleasure is singular and simple—a wicked delight.

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (Macmillan, 1975), 57.

Walter Benjamin notes, in the at-times seemingly rare first-person of *The Arcades Project*, that “Saint-Simon points with satisfaction to the fact that precisely those men who benefited humanity most decisively—Luther, Bacon, Descartes—were given to passions. Luther, the pleasure of eating; Bacon, money; Descartes, women and gambling.”² Pleasure appears as good and attractive with such ease that it furnishes its own very simple justifications for why there are reasons to pursue pleasure and just as many reasons to reject it. This simple appearance of pleasure has been taken and carried away by philosophers and ideologues alike, on both the left and the right, for claims both normative and psychological, to reduce pleasure under the guise of hedonism. It takes pleasure’s attractiveness and pain’s averseness to formulate all of human value as the substrate of phenomenological existence. Pleasure and pain, both left and right would happily accept, are the only legible criteria—the good- and bad-making standards—of human life and the only actual ends—as both pursuit and avoidance—of experience. Pleasure, as a strategically simplified strand of sensorial experience, is a generative force in its most thoughtless yet powerful form.

This is all to pose the question on what pleasure might reveal if one were to pull back the curtain. What if pleasure were to be narrowed, refined, and located; its masked to be pulled off and its figure presented once stripped of the role it was cast to play? Take pleasure’s ally, comfort, as an exemplary case. In English, the word must have once meant ‘consolation’ as in the epithet of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 9:31, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in *the comfort of the Holy Spirit*, it multiplied,” the relation is explicit. Its valences then multiplied,

² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 599.

giving the effect of ‘well-being’ and eventually, as it appears in the contemporary moment, to designate nothing more than a rational convenience.³

Which is the valence on which the image of Brecht, with a cigar clamped firmly to his physical being, registers on the dramatic stage of his own making? The eminent aptitude for pleasure on the part of a Brecht (or a Luther, Bacon, or Descartes, as Benjamin recalls) has little to do with any sort of coziness belonging to a comforting dimension. The optics of this iconic Brechtian pose already furnishes one immediate distinction: the fundamental incompatibility of sensual pleasure with warmth, coziness, comfort, and good cheer—that is, *Gemütlichkeit*—opens up a culture of the senses. The aesthetic belonging to this domain and based entirely on this authenticity of sensualism is perhaps the piece of the Brechtian system most frequently forgotten and cannibalized by Brecht’s more audible repudiation of culinary affections.

The Brechtian program’s foundational incompatibility with culinary delight partly restores pleasure’s importance through an internal distinction, differentiation, and negation of Aristotelian appeal to pleasure-as-consumption. At stake in this elaboration of an aesthetic of sensual pleasure is a disruption to the entrenched and mutually-serving line between left and right. It is about making possible the physical, sensual pleasures as neither something immoral nor atopic. Brecht sketches an aesthetics based entirely on the sensualism of the body, to whoever’s head it may be supporting, whoever he may be; to whatever class, whatever group he may belong, without respect to cultures or languages. It begs the crowd to think what, why and how bodies and pleasures are a source of resistance for the future to come.

In correspondence with Benjamin, Theodor Adorno writes:

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 225.

“For all those points in which, despite our most fundamental and concrete agreement in other matters, I differ from you could be summed up and characterized as an *anthropological materialism* that I cannot accept. It is as if for you the human body represents the measure of all concreteness.”⁴

Adorno calls into question a purported undialectical ontology of the body. The faith in the human body’s ability to function as the fulcrum of revolutionary forces is equated to the threat against dialectical thinking. While Adorno’s appraisal of Benjamin’s methodology—and the exact contours of the “anthropological” within it— necessitates a moment for its own meditation, the skepticism that Adorno shows towards the importance (or unimportance) of corporeality in the politico-theoretical program continues to be thematically relevant to the present reading of Brecht. In Adorno’s cautionary advice to his friend you can almost hear the lingering suspicion, disgust, and fear of Brecht’s corrupting influence on the otherwise seemingly prodigious Benjamin. These terms that he deems immediately unacceptable are not only pointed items of feedback for Benjamin, but an indirect polemic aimed at Brecht’s bodily theater. Adorno’s steadfast rejection of the anthropological seems here, in fact, premised upon a conflation of several bodily ontologies that strategically confuse the organic corporeal body with the closed sense of embodiment—embodiment, specifically, of the subject.

The leftist crusade against singular pleasure embellishes as well this repudiation of a Subject in history or goal towards which human being may be thought to be slowly and surely guiding history. The absence of any trace of a subject or a teleology from the concept of structural causality bears an important motif in a strand of Marxism often levied against

⁴ Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 146.

Brecht—namely, a rejection of methodological individualism and voluntarism, what Adorno calls “anthropological materialism,” from within the Hegelian tradition. Despite where this critique aims, and where it ultimately misses, it cannot be taken as having any implications for the Brechtian system. Brecht, after all, can hardly be considered humanist, and neither can he be charged as being teleological. Brecht, the poet, writes in *A Bed for the Night*:

“It won’t change the world
 It won’t improve relations among men
 It will not shorten the age of exploitation
 But a few men have a bed for the night
 For a night the wind is kept from them
 The snow meant for them falls on the roadway.

[...]

A few people have a bed for the night
 For a night the wind is kept from them
 The snow meant for them falls on the roadway
 But it won’t change the world
 It won’t improve relations among men
 It will not shorten the age of exploitation.”⁵

signaling a program that is neither humanist nor deterministic. Yet, neither should the pursuit of this bodily pleasure defined in the retreat from wind and snow be dismissed as engaging in the play of futility. That sensual pleasure can occupy such a place in history is itself as well the

⁵ Bertolt Brecht, “A Bed for the Night.” In *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht* (Liveright, 2018), 433.

absolute renunciation of the myth of man. The appeal to sensual pleasure constitutes a positive knowledge of the human world and of its practical transformation that does not have to be infringed upon by the speculation of origins and ends. Moreover, Brecht maintains this position throughout his poetry and theatre. A similar sentiment pervades his tribute to Benjamin.

“(for Walter Benjamin)

I am told that you raised your hand against yourself

Anticipating the butcher.

After eight years of exile, observing the rise of the enemy

Then at last, brought up against an impassable frontier

You passed, they say, a passable one.

Empires collapse. Gang leaders

are strutting about like statesmen. The peoples

Can no longer be seen under all those armaments.

So the future lies in darkness and the forces of right

Are weak. All this was plain to you

When you destroyed a torturable body.”⁶

Brecht’s poetic response to the news of Benjamin’s suicide seems to understand the choice that his friend had made. The human body, up until the moment of its destruction, is haunted by the specter of death. This short tribute to his friend seems to furnish two opposed readings of Brecht. Benjamin, raising a hand against himself, seems to express the anthropocentricity of history. Once faced with a future in darkness—of people hidden in military

⁶ Bertolt Brecht, “On the suicide of the refugee W.B.” In *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht* (Liveright, 2018), 835.

arms—the human being has a choice only between occupying the opposing position or no position at all. That is, there is no prospect of dialectical synthesis—the rationalist science of history meets its end in the violence of fascism. The idea that the human body must function as the agent of resistance, else cease to function altogether, is the premise of the essentialist contention that ‘Man makes history.’ Brecht is situated in this general problematic, but as I attempt to show, his aesthetics of the body have no real place in this polemic.

Suicide depicted here is not a sacrifice for the future. The emphasis on the present tense of empires collapsing and gangs strutting is hardly displaced by the promise of a futurity. Even where that futurity appears it is empty rather than messianic. Suicide as a force upon the body is not sublated into the process of history, and concurrently, there is no indication that it may be taken up as the basis of any type of production—especially not for the sake of wisdom. Brecht indicates that violence produces nothing. The dead bring no knowledge. It is thus not that the body is figured as the centerpiece of a rejection of the dialectic, but rather that there is no dialectical possibility in this regime— that these are not mutually exclusive fates.

The “torturable body” is construed as everything most threatened by this butchery. It is toil, pain, appetite, and thirst—the body is the metaphor for those irreducible sensations of embodied flesh. It is in this regard that the body may be torturable; it is torturable insofar as it is the site of the immanent sensualisms. Note that the antithesis of sensualism is not ‘non-sensualism’; rather, it is torture. But these depictions do not precipitate a crisis of reason; on the contrary, it reinforces claims to human finitude as it puts emphasis on the domain of sensual pleasure that cannot be subjected to absolute knowledge.

The body as an object threatened by torture thus distinguishes mere sensualism proper from hedonic reactionism. It allows for a body that does not hinge on the presupposition of an

interiorized subjectivity. History, therefore, remains without a subject, but bears indeed a motor: the transposition of struggle as individualized, bodily effect—the sensual toils and indulgences of the human body.

An important point must be made here. The disappearance of the philosophical category of the subject and his recurring emphasis on the immanence of the physical body as suggestive of an undialectical ontology of the body as the real agent of history does not empty human practice of either its complexity or its capacity to transform society. As we shall see, the aesthetic of sensual pleasure and its palpable connection to the materiality of the world is both compelling and contradictory. Sensualism does not merely function as the only basis of truthhood; rather, the empirically existing and material human being both acts and thinks in specific historical contexts. The revolutionary dimensions of corporeality and sensuality are obviously pertinent to the construction of Brecht's eponymous *Galileo*. Insofar as sensual pleasure attenuates the relation of the flesh to the flow of history, it leaves available the possibility of a fully-lived present tense as the aim of a revolutionary future.

The first scene of *Life of Galileo* opens with Galileo bearing his naked torso, puffing and cheerful, scrubbing down to the waist. He washes his torso, orders Andrea—the child—to deliver his milk, dries himself, throws Andrea the towel for the boy to dry his bathed back, laughs, and roars. This sets the stage for the central contradiction of the play as Galileo's sensuality is the first to be implicated in light of what happens and criminalized, further, by laughable contrast to the Cardinal Inquisitor's bloodless asceticism. In an almost extended act of bathing and drying, Galileo carousels Andrea around in a demonstration of the earth's revolution, with the washstand figuring centrally into his performance cast in the role of the sun. In Scene 12, a relatively abbreviated episode, Cardinal Barberini—now Pope Urban VIII—is being robed in the full view

of the audience. Receiving the Cardinal Inquisitor whilst dressing, he decides by the time that he is fully robed that Galileo should at the very most be shown the instruments of torture.

In these differing presentations of the bare body, the premise is laid for the central contradiction of the play and the driving force of conflict. It is significant that Galileo should first be received in this light—as whilst bathing—concerned first and foremost with the conditions of his bodily flesh. This is the Galileo that Brecht introduces: Galileo first seen splashing water from his bath, asking the boy Andrea to dry off his back. He is staged as a human being, who also happens to be a scientist; and as well, perhaps more precisely, a scientist, whose work cannot be separated from his mortality as a human being. And it is not yet the reality of the Church's authority that is well-documented in the historical story of Galileo Galilei. The Church will eventually figure into the contradiction of the plot, but here even in the moments before his great discovery, the stakes are already set. That is, whatever Galileo's actions as a scientist, they will necessarily put into question the human being that Brecht insists on introducing in the first narrative sequence.

The sensual pleasures on display in this opening scene, however, need to be characterized more precisely, because there is the overwhelming lure to accept the contrast between the Cardinal Inquisitor's general asceticism vis-à-vis what intuition may suggest to be Galileo's hedonism. In this design, the outsized role of milk in the first scene is anything but vapid. Andrea enters, before being tasked to dry Galileo's back, under the task of bringing Galileo his morning milk. As banter becomes lesson, the only breakages in Galileo's otherwise focused lecturing are offered by various preoccupations with the milk. "You'd better drink up your milk, because people are sure to start arriving soon,"⁷ the young Andrea directs. Moments later, interrupted by

⁷ Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1966), 8.

Mrs. Sarti, Galileo bellows, “Let me at least finish my milk!”⁸ The question is, of course, why milk and not instead the alcohol that flows so abundantly elsewhere in Brechtian theatre? Galileo has an entire exchange with Mrs. Sarti that underscores, with unyielding emphasis, the absolute necessity of having his morning milk. Galileo proudly remarks, “A new time has begun, a time it’s a pleasure to live in,” to which Mrs. Sarti dismissively says, “Let’s hope your new time will allow us to pay the milkman, Mr. Galilei. Just do me a favor and don’t send this man away. I’m thinking of the milk bill.”⁹ The unrobed Pope, quite perceptively, picks out the specificity of Galileo’s preoccupations with these points of identification. The Pope distills quite accurately the sensual emphases of Galileo’s chosen pleasures. “He gets pleasure out of more things than any man I ever met. Even his thinking is sensual. He can never say no to an old wine or a new idea.”¹⁰

There is a resounding sympathy, if not a sliver of admiration, here for the scientist whose very outward affirmations of life rival only his equally intense pleasures of scientific discovery. Galileo’s choice of milk rather than alcohol reaffirms exactly this principle of living in and of itself. It is not about the pleasures of excess named hedonism. It is, quite differently, the absolute necessity of bodily and earthly nourishment which milk provides in many regards without the peripheral attachment to surplus, glut, and indulgence. These images of Galileo half-naked, bathing, drinking milk operate in unison. Milk ushers in the beginning of his day on earth in an utterly primal and genial fashion. He similarly remarks to Ludovico in the ninth scene, “Young man, I do not eat my olives without a thought (rudely).”¹¹ Food and drink are not fetishes; they

⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1966), 10

⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 80.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 79.

are pleasurable in their rational functionality. It signals an immanent sense of simply being alive as a physical body with practical, essential, and in disciplinary terms, biological needs.

This strand of bare-chested thinking on display from both Galileo and the relatively unrobed Pope presents both men in the terms of shared affinities— though a basis from which they will eventually deviate— for earthly, sensual pleasures. In fact, the representative act of methodically dressing the Pope in his full ornate attire gradually replaces his initially-bare body with multiple layers of representative garment until he is eventually delivered, by the end of the short scene, to a point in which he exploits, with full understanding, the vulnerability of the flesh. The opening in Galileo's armor, and the threat that he poses to the sovereignty of the Church, are one and the same; they derive from his astute recognition of his own sensual needs, the affirmations of the sensual pleasures, and his own mortality. The sadistic equation between the mortification of the flesh and the suppression of Galileo's revolutionary (vis-à-vis Church doctrine) impulse is not so much the act of psychological terror exercised by power that may be expected. The (threat of) barbarous recourse to Galileo's scientific pursuits anticipate very apparently the need to threaten the body as a way of threatening utopian impulse. That is, Galileo's revolutionary consciousness is vulnerable to the mortification of his body because the flesh is what harbors revolutionary and utopian aspirations and ultimately what is able to act in the service of those ends. Only the flesh can be that latent but lethal agent of change.

The seventh scene, taking place in Cardinal Bellarmine's home, maps out a polyvalent gap between life and death. Galileo engages several cardinals in bouts of bitter, yet playfully restrained, back-and-forth on divisive theological and scientific prompts. This intellectual sparring is interrupted in the flow of the narrative in two instances prompted by business taking

place on the periphery of the stage. In the first case, non-diegetic voices are heard singing Lorenzo di Medici's famous poem on transience from an adjacent ballroom:

“I who have seen the summer's roses die
And all their petals pale and shriveled lie
Upon the chilly ground, I know the truth:
How evanescent is the flower of youth.”¹²

Again, as Barberini and Bellarmine corner Galileo on the business of the Church, the same voices are heard reciting a further verse of the madrigal:

“I said: This lovely springtime cannot last
So pluck your roses before May is past.”¹³

This *carpe diem* poem cuts the exchange between Galileo and the cardinals into distinct fragments of montage that augment the Church's threat to take life with the ironic vitalization of the pleasures and appetites of the body both defining and defined by the fact of living. It dramatizes, at least situationally, the dialectical relationship between idea and matter. It provides two registers—that is, an alternative to the conceptual framing of the cardinals—on which to consider Galileo's brand of 'bodily' thinking. The cardinals' admonition to pursue pleasure, which in Galileo's case stands under the sentence of death, reverses the hedonism of the right and exposes the polyvalence of human sensualism.

Galileo's most transparent remark, “To Hell with the pearl, give me the healthy oyster. Virtue is not bound up with misery, my friend,”¹⁴ is the protocol essence of this entire aesthetic. Galileo situates himself fully within the revolutionary potential of the present in an active and

¹² Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1966), 56.

¹³ *Ibid*, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 66.

anticipatory relationship with what exists as doctrine. The indispensable principle of this forward-looking, but also immediate, relationship with immanence is the physical contact with the materiality of the corporeally-experienced world. This is significant because it exposes the ambivalence between Galileo's deconstruction of the theological view of human-centeredness and his revolutionary praxis more generally. There are moments in which Galileo very feverously runs against the protocol declaration in another Brecht play, *Mother Courage*, which is simply, 'stay alive'. As long as the human body persists, change remains possible and the revolutionary and utopian spirit lives on with it.

Mother Courage, even at the expense of all of her children, guards her livelihood—her literal ability to live—at all encountered costs. She lives, not because she is heroic, but because she understands the immanent utopia of life and body—she is at once a purveyor of human needs and the purveyor to human weaknesses. If torture is the antithesis of sensualism, is it necessarily that sensualism is the antithesis of torture—or is it perhaps survival? When Galileo refuses to leave the plague-threatened city, and in doing so sentences Andrea and Mrs. Sarti to likely death, he does so in the name of his scientific work. It is ambiguous whether his motivations are underscored by his own self-awareness of the revolutionary promise of his work vis-à-vis the secular authority of the Church, or, if he defines it according to the revolutionary promise of the sensual pleasure that he derives from intellectual discovery. As such it might be tempting to draw a sharp distinction between Mother Courage's insistence upon her own life and Galileo's voluntary wagering of his life under these circumstances. This is further complicated when, in contrast, he seemingly reneges his findings—to Andrea's knowledge, at least—succumbing to the threats of the Church and positioning his stance in closer unison with Mother Courage.

These episodes attest very chaotically to the contradictions of Galileo's life but they as well serve a very productive function of helpfully articulating the difference between the sensual pleasures within this Brechtian system, and living. They are presented as varying, perhaps indeed clarifying the singular notion of survival in *Mother Courage*. In simplest terms, Galileo likes his pleasures. He chooses a position in Catholic-infested Florence over the political security of subdued Venice. "I need leisure, old friend. I need proofs. And I want the fleshpots [...] I am forty-six years old and have achieved nothing that satisfies me."¹⁵ He unstintingly maintains again in Scene 11, "I can't see myself as a refugee. I love comfort."¹⁶ In this regard, the connections between pleasure and rationality in *Galileo* are indissociable. In multiple moments Galileo is presented with the choice between utopian sensualism and revolutionary science. And when he chooses Florence over the Republic of Venice, he stakes his claim to both. Utopian sensualism only teases the claim to revolution. For as long as Galileo was able to preserve his life, broadly, and his ability to feel sensual pleasure, more narrowly, he ultimately misses his opportunity to overhaul the system. He recants because he is afraid of the instruments—because he fears the affront to his bodily senses. When this is revealed to be a huge misappraisal on Galileo's part, not only in his inability to call the Pope's bluff in showing but never using the instruments, but to misrecognize what the Pope realizes: that unspeakable terror of bodily pain is the only means of opposing the utopian potential of the immanent body.

The central contradiction for Galileo is that he is a sensualist in an unfree society. It is the same contradiction posed by the experience of living and of sensual pleasures as mediating a type of revolutionary or utopian immanence where there is no actual utopia. He fails to

¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1966), 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 88.

accomplish what he sets out to do because he eventually finds himself turning his telescope from the distant stars to the immediately felt materiality of the earth. This is not an indictment of Galileo's wavering devotion to his own cause. What purpose does the goose cooked with apple and thyme delivered to the exiled Galileo in the final scene serve but to remind of the body just when it may seem to be a play about the mind.¹⁷ In presenting the contradiction and the limits between which Galileo is able to act, Brecht has already reversed the terms of the original problematic of singular pleasure. Brecht, in fact, has animated the entire backdrop against which both left and right find it productive to advance a singular notion of pleasure in its most atopic form. Galileo is instead paralyzed by two different sensual pleasures: the immanent sensualism of experience and the existential sensualism of living, both of which carry revolutionary implications, but in conflicted ways.

This articulation of the system suggests that the narrative dream of proletarian revolution has an uneasy relationship with the sensual affirmations of life. These are changed terms from the reductive formulation that revolution flourishes only when protected by ascetic restraint—that virtue is bound up with misery. Brecht, through Galileo, directs contemplation at this almost laughable contradiction in the Marxist revolutionary scheme. This effort goes beyond attempting to reclaim the sensuous human being that Marx writes about in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. It elaborates Mother Courage's privileging of individual life above all else by clarifying it not as the supreme advocacy of being a sensualist in a non-utopian world but of the repeated forces in *Mother Courage* in alliance against the sensualist. *Galileo* is not a case study in the compatibility of sensual indulgence and revolutionary aspiration; he is a case study in their concurrent failures and the social contradictions that make unthinkable the alliance of these two ideas. Brecht draws

¹⁷ Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1966), 100.

the outlines of this contradictory system that poses the opposition between and the mutual exclusivity of either the pursuit of sensual pleasure and the pursuit of social change. There is melancholia in the recognition of historical forces which press towards a differently-than-envisioned future.

The Brechtian aesthetic of sensual pleasure clears away a world where life lives poorly and makes room for what human beings may yet become. Neither does it render compatible the enjoyment of sensual pleasure with revolutionary praxis nor does it refute the abstract ideology of revolutionary promise in the pursuit of immediate, graspable bodily satisfaction. The Brechtian stage elaborates on the question of why pleasure must appear as singular and why both sides curiously encourage an understanding of pleasure in its most compressed form despite its many obvious valences. The aesthetic opens up the visible field to the contradictions that pit pleasure and revolution against each other, in the very artificial separation of left and right on either side of the readily-accepted idea of pleasure as singular, heart-infused hedonism—a wicked formulation of pleasure acting in the sort of role theorized by a repressive hypothesis. The Brechtian aesthetic of sensual pleasure makes visible the limits and contradictions in the only space in which the notion of pleasure is allowed to be situated. In this regard, the aesthetic already promises to teach more than does the teacher Galileo.

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