
A Thorn in the Body Politic:
**A transatlantic dialogue on the aesthetics of commitment
within modernist political theatre.**

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Declaration

I, Ourania Karoula, declare, that except for all citations referenced in the text, the work contained herein is my own.

Abstract of Thesis

This thesis investigates the transatlantic manifestation of the debate regarding the aesthetics of commitment in the modernist literary and theatrical tradition. Within the debate theatre occupies a privileged position since (because of its two-fold roles both as theory and performance) it allows a critique both of performative conventions and methods and also a dialectical consideration of the audience's socio-political consciousness. The debate, often referred to as form versus content – schematically re-written as 'autonomy' versus 'commitment' – and its transatlantic evaluation are central to modernist aesthetics, as they bring into question the established modes of perceiving and discussing the issue. A parallel close reading will reveal the closely related development of the European and the American traditions and evaluate their critical strengths and shortcomings.

The first part of the thesis discusses the positions of Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin in tandem with those of the New York Intellectuals, especially as expressed in the latter's writings in the *Partisan Review*. The second part extends this transatlantic dialogue through a consideration of the theatrical works of the New York Living Newspaper unit of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in the USA and Bertolt Brecht's vision of and relationship with 'Americana' as revealed through such plays as *In the Jungle of Cities*, *Man Equals Man*, *St Joan of the Stockyards* and the 1947 version of *Galileo*. The Federal Theatre and Brecht's respective dramaturgies demonstrate differences in the articulation and application of the aesthetics of commitment and politics of engagement. A close reading of four plays by the Living Newspaper unit will not only reveal the influence of the Russian Blue Blouse groups and Meyerhold's theatrical experimentations, but also how the unit's playwrights and administration attempted to re-write this aesthetic. Hallie Flanagan (the director of FTP), recognising the limitations of Broadway and having sensed the audience's need for a new kind of theatre, realised early on the importance of 'translating' the European aesthetics of commitment to conform with the American New Deal discourse. Brecht's plays manifest not only the differences with respect to the European aesthetics of commitment, but also its highly complicated development. His American experiences revealed that the failings of the FTP's attempt to establish a viable national theatre with a social agenda prohibited a more powerfully theatrical connection (theoretical and performative) between the two traditions.

Both the European and the American modernist aesthetics are informed by Marxist cultural and literary theory, particularly by the writings centred on the political efficacy of a work of art with respect to its reception and its modes of production. The politico-aesthetic encounter of the Marxist tradition of engagement with a commitment to aesthetic formalism (often associated with the autonomy position) led to a confrontational and polemical rather than dialectical argumentation. However, this thesis maintains that the arguments were not simply articulated by theorists at opposing ends of the political spectrum. At the same time, Brecht and the Federal Theatre Project's interest in the advancements of the European avant-garde and fascination with the notion of 'Americana' demonstrate the necessity to examine the issue of commitment in a more dialectical manner. While their notion of the aesthetics of commitment differed, this thesis argues for the necessity, not only of revisiting some of the fundamental premises regarding the role and function of this aesthetics in modernist political theatre, but also of reading the two traditions in conjunction.

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Abbreviations

AAA	Agricultural Adjustment Act
FTP	Federal Theatre Project
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
MGM	Metro-Goldwyn Mayer
SDP	Social Democratic Party
WPA	Works Progress Administration

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Introduction

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the actions take place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.¹

Theatre has always functioned as a space where the negotiation of human relationships in relation to historical moments of crisis has taken place. However, as Brecht's comment implies, theatre also employs an almost metatheatrical technique that allows it to draw attention to its own powers of representation and helps it transform itself. In order to achieve such a transformation, the social, economic and specific historical conditions along with the current technological and formal experimentations come into play. The dialectical encounter of all these elements allows theatre not simply to re-invent itself, but also to undertake a critical examination of the audience's social conditioning or state of being. Such an encounter has transformed the artists' and people's preconceived notions of the function of the theatre; theatre is no longer a space of passive entertainment and escapism from daily life, but becomes a *topos* where their conditioning is critically reflected through new ways of performance and where new discourses are offered.

The history of modern aesthetics has manifested that Marxist aesthetics, through their dialectical approach to Marxism and culture, became the primary locus of negotiation between the artists' ideological background and formal experimentations. This negotiation, not without its controversies, informed many of the debates on the role and function of art within a capitalist and highly industrialised cultural order. Among them was the aesthetic conflict between 'form' and 'content' (or 'Modernism' versus 'Realism'). The debate, older than Marxism itself, became prominent in the 1920s and 1930s and highlighted the different, and often conflicting among Marxists, approaches to the aesthetics of commitment. Renouncing the nineteenth century doctrine of 'art for art's sake' as ineffectual and parochial, the writings of that period aimed at redefining the artists' status and the considerations of their produced works.

¹ Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre'. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 179-205 (p. 190).

The purpose of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to re-address critically the terms of engagement concerning the aforementioned debate by conducting and voicing the ‘transatlantic dialogue’ that was never fully articulated since both sides systematically (whether consciously or unconsciously) excluded each other. On the other hand, it also intends to extend this dialogue to the realm of the theatre, which has been excluded from a serious consideration within the general scope of transatlantic literary studies, and highlight the importance of bringing to centre stage the theoretical approaches to the aesthetics of commitment in relation to theatrical representation. By critically positioning the views and works of both critics and theatre practitioners involved in the debate opposite each other, the thesis argues that their lack of engagement with each others’ positions led to the creation of polarised (even teleological) opinions that reinforced the then ever-increasing restrictive and paranoid spirit of Cold War cultural politics. At the same time though, through this transatlantic dialogue, this thesis anticipates a newly informed theoretical method that transcends older models of critical thinking and instead allows a more critically engaging comparative approach to the aesthetics and politics of modernist theatre.

Before expanding further on how the thesis will perform these two tasks and why the specific texts have been chosen, it is important to examine what is meant by ‘transatlantic dialogue’ as stated in the title of the thesis. The use of the term ‘transatlantic’ has been heavily influenced by the discipline of Transatlantic Studies, which (in general) involves a reconsideration of cultural, political and economic forces between all continents. It is as Kaufman and Macpherson have argued ‘an intricate web of history, literature, art, technology, dialogue, warfare, human migration – a true diaspora that transcends the boundaries of separate area and disciplinary studies’.² Transatlantic Studies mark a vast discipline with different subcategories within it; however, their main purpose and object remains ‘to locate the common issues and concerns that necessarily move us beyond disciplinary and monocultural perspectives’.³ The discussion of all these issues is no longer locked within the polarised powers of Europe and America but rather involves all the previously excluded national and cultural voices from around the world. And

² Will Kaufman and Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson (eds.), *Transatlantic Studies*. (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000), p. xix.

³ *Ibid.*, xix.

similarly the issues discussed are not limited to already canonised texts within the Anglo-American curriculum but rather involve a plurality of literary, postcolonial, comparative, travel and translation texts to name but a few.⁴

Therefore, this new discipline of Transatlantic Studies enriches the way one is to reconsider such important issues as the ones mentioned above within a globalised social reality. More importantly, however, and for the purposes of this thesis it also opens up new paths of approaching critically and dialectically literary texts and ideas that have been instrumental to cultural politics and in particular those ideas and texts that tended to exclude each other. A large part of the bibliography on transatlantic literary studies tends to focus on the particularly challenging Anglo-American connection and on such authors as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Edgar Allan Poe and T.S Eliot to name but a few who excelled in literary prose and poetry and whose influence on each other was acknowledged.⁵ This thesis would like to extend and enrich this Anglo-American connection in relation to the modernist aesthetics of engagement and commitment both in terms of the theoretical debates and in terms of theatrical representation and performance. For this purpose, it will approach dialectically in the first two chapters the theoretical positions of Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and the New York Intellectuals respectively and in the last two the theatrical examples of the Federal Theatre Project in the United States and Brecht's 'American' plays and his attempts to conquer the American stage. Although Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno nationally do not belong to the 'Anglo' part of the equation, their texts have become canonical in our understanding and critical approach of modernist aesthetics and are an integral part of any literary academic curriculum. Moreover, their inclusion further challenges the narrow perception of Transatlantic Studies as 'Anglo-American' by arguing for the use of the broader term 'European' especially in relation to the aesthetics of commitment. Such a shift would broaden the spectrum of Transatlantic Studies as it would allow a more critical consideration of such aesthetics in relation to the (now) more inclusive European and American literary contexts. As a result the

⁴ See Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor (eds.). *Transatlantic literary studies: a reader*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 5

⁵ See for example Janet Beer and Bridget Bennett (eds.). *Special Relationships: Anglo-American Affinities and Antagonisms, 1845-1939*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730-1860*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

dialectic reading of both traditions would be extended, the debates would be enriched and critics and theorists would be allowed (with renewed interest) to develop new ways of engaging with texts and theories.

Since the thesis concentrates on a transatlantic consideration of the theatrical modernist aesthetics, it is expected that it would involve participants from both sides of the Atlantic. However, the choice of the aforementioned ones was not by accident. As mentioned earlier, it is primarily through the prism of Marxist aesthetics that the artists and critics' negotiation of the modernist politics of engagement and commitment took place. Within Europe the debate involved a heated exchange of views and accusations among Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno, whose writings performed (and still do) a variety of strong and critical pronouncements on the commodification of the cultural industry, its modes of perception, reception and performance. The debate, apart from dealing with the original issue of the continual influence of German Expressionism among writers of the left, soon involved the problems of popular art, of the avant-garde, of the new technological media and their revolutionary application, of the audience's new responsibilities and of art's revolutionary potentialities within a modernist setting (both political and non-political). Two positions developed from their exchange: on the one hand, Adorno argued for the 'autonomy' position; within it, modernist works of art (such as Beckett and Kafka's) that were free from any political or ideological commitment could also be pronounced as a politically valid alternative. On the other hand, Benjamin and Brecht affirmed the relative autonomy of literary works but emphasised how the technological experimentations enriched the revolutionary potentiality of art. The existence of a dialectical relation between formal elements and the manifestation of the audience's struggle could afford an aesthetics of commitment that rendered essential the introduction of literary praxis to the realm of life praxis. Concentrating on the theatrical medium, Benjamin's endorsement of Brecht's epic model reflected their different views on the role of politics in aesthetics.

In the United States the same debate was realised around the same time. From the multiplicity of authors and critics dealing with the issue I have chosen the self-proclaimed group of the New York Intellectuals and their writings through the *Partisan Review*. The group aspired to bring European cultural perspectives to challenge and enrich the American art and literary scene through Marxist aesthetics. However, in their debate they constantly omitted a consideration of the opinions of

their aforementioned European counterparts and a critical response of the debate in relation to theatrical aesthetics. It is of high interest that, for example, although both that group of intellectuals and that of the Frankfurt School (of which Adorno was an important member) were based at Columbia University at the same time any intellectual activity or relationship was nonexistent.⁶ Similarly, the majority of the New York Intellectuals were indifferent towards Brecht's presence in the United States (both in the 1930s and 1940s) and those that acknowledged him (such as Clement Greenberg) concentrated on his poetry rather than his theatrical theory and innovations. Moreover, the group's complicated relationship with Marxist aesthetics as enfolded in the *Partisan Review* not only exhibited a very selective interpretation of such aesthetics through their choice of authors and critics that led to an academic canonisation of such chosen authors but also enforced a specific cultural attitude that created a steady and mostly unchallenged aesthetic continuum (as seen in the revisiting of the ideologically instrumental 1952 symposium 'Our Country and Our Culture' both in 1984 and 2002).

The failure of both the aforementioned European and American critics to acknowledge and critically engage with each other has not, to my knowledge, been discussed in the prolific bibliography concerning them. Instead, it tends to focus on the strengths and shortcomings of each group individually and rather concentrates on the intellectual battles fought internally. For example, David Pike and Eugene Lunn offer excellent critical approaches to the European aspect of the debate and delve into a close examination of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno's intellectual (and sometimes personal) conflict.⁷ Similarly, Terry Cooney, Alan Wald, Alexander Bloom and James Burkhart Gilbert present us with a historically accurate account of the lives and oeuvres of the New York Intellectuals along with their intellectual conflicts and overall cultural contributions.⁸ Although these sources are valid and are

⁶ It is also interesting to note that any faint traces of a relationship disappeared after a lecture Horkheimer delivered in 1944 in which he strongly attacked and misinterpreted John Dewey's pragmatism (a professor emeritus at Columbia at the same time and very much admired by the New York Intellectuals). For a more detailed discussion see Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁷ David Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile, 1933-1945*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: an historical study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

⁸ Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle*. (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*. (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York*

indeed quoted within this thesis, they are nonetheless continuing the intellectual stand-off exercised by the respective critics they are discussing. Therefore, rather than continuing this trend of mutual denial on the aesthetics of engagement and commitment, this thesis intends to re-address these issues in terms of a mutual transatlantic dialogue. In this way it anticipates not only a more informed method of critically approaching such theoretical issues but also a more dynamic method of understanding the impact of these issues in relation to the modernist aesthetics of theatre.

The theatrical examples chosen to be critically discussed next to the aforementioned theoretical positions are the Living Newspaper Unit of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in the United States and a selection of Bertolt Brecht's plays that exhibit his early fascination and later revision of his notion of 'Americana' (*In the Jungle of Cities* and *St Joan of the Stockyards*), his reaction to the American acting style (*Man Equals Man*) along with the American productions of *The Mother* and *Galileo*. I believe that these two theatrical examples can further the transatlantic dialogue on the aesthetics of commitment exposed in the first two chapters because on the one hand they reveal how their different appropriation of such aesthetics was conditioned by the ways the theoretical debate was realised in each continent. On the other hand, unlike the theorists, there are a very few instances where they both acknowledge each other. However, even such acknowledgements are fiscal and very reluctant and such reluctance can be seen as a result of the continuously self-imposed critical posture exercised by the theorists and not simply of creative differences.

The Federal Theatre Project represents an exciting example of an engaged theatre within the theatrical American space that was up to the moment it appeared represented exclusively by Broadway. By employing new methods of representation and production and by encouraging the creation of theatrical groups all over the United States, the project wanted to address the whole nation, alert them to new performative styles already used in European theatre and present more socially involved plays. Of all these groups, it was predominantly the New York Living Newspaper group that staged some of the most exciting and challenging performances (such as *Triple A Plowed Under*, *Injunction Granted*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Power*

Intellectuals and their World. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); James Burkhart Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968).

and *One-Third of a Nation*) and caused the most controversy. The Living Newspaper's formal experimentations and social content aimed at educating and empowering the audience by showing it a social problem, presenting possible solutions, reflecting on them and encouraging the audience to take action to solve it. The group was greatly influenced and in a sense continued the experimentations set by Meyerhold, the Blue Blouse group and Brecht in Europe and attempted to translate them for the American audience. Although initially it was more comfortable addressing such influences, it soon became uncomfortable in acknowledging them. Being accountable to its financial patron, the U.S. government, the Living Newspaper form remodelled itself to fit into New Deal's social principles by emphasizing participatory democracy and identifying the government with the audience, using settings conventional in their realism and producing an empathetic and emotional audience response. The negotiation of theatrical experimentation and socially informed theatre with an ever increasing political anti-leftist paranoia proved difficult for the project and it was the Living Newspaper group that has been credited with the whole project's downfall.

Brecht's participation in the theoretical debate allowed him to further expose and explore his theories on modernist theatre. In particular, his epic theatre, through its fragmented narrative and use of the V-effect, assaulted the bourgeois modes of representing reality, exposed his audience to their reified condition and proposed a new theatrical model that would initiate a new model of human social praxis. Having made his model available to Europe, Brecht wanted to also take it over to America. As chapter four will reveal, even as a young dramatist, Brecht had fostered a fascination with America; however this image was translated into a puzzling mixture of both attraction and repulsion; of audacity, enterprise and mysticism but also of chaos, brutality and materiality. The inherent tensions in Brecht's vision of America were never completely resolved as his two experiences of living and working there reveal. In a sense, Brecht's unresolved image of America anticipates America's confused reaction towards his theories and his plays but it does not account for the hostility and their uncritical rejection. Although his complicated relationship with America was seen as a way of rejecting a critical engagement on the theatrical aesthetics of commitment with his American counterparts, this thesis proposes that his crude account of 'America' was a deliberate aesthetic gest, a way of actually engaging

with it though his theatrical method and dramaturgy, as the discussion on the productions of *The Mother* in New York and *Galileo* in Los Angeles will reveal.

In attempting to perform a transatlantic dialogue between the two aforementioned theatrical examples, this thesis uses a multiplicity of sources. Although there is a plethora of criticism on Brecht, his theories and his plays, the same cannot be said about the FTP. As chapter three will reveal, the most complete history of the whole project remains still Jane de Hart Matthews' *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics* published in 1967.⁹ There are also a handful of more recent published books that seem to concentrate on specific regional aspects of the project. In terms of the Living Newspaper Unit the sources available are either unpublished PhD theses (by Stuart Cosgrove and Caroline Anne Highsaw for example) or a few articles written by people involved with the unit published sporadically.¹⁰ However, the majority of sources, such as the original scripts of the plays, theoretical manifestos on the unit's techniques of performance, photographs from the actual productions and interviews with those involved with the unit have not been published and have only become available to the author of this thesis through original research conducted in the Special Collections and Archives at George Mason University in Virginia. The secondary bibliography mentioned above complements aspects of the original material discussed in chapter three but it still does not perform a transatlantic dialogue on the aesthetics of commitment. By positioning dialectically the social aspirations and performative techniques of the Living Newspaper with both its American predecessors and European contemporaries, it will expose how, although practically silent, a transatlantic dialogue on the aesthetics of commitment, on the social praxis of theatre, the dialectical consideration of the audience's legitimate representation on the political stage and performativity took place.

In terms of approaching Brecht's theories and plays, the thesis relies on John Willett's translated collection of Brecht's writings entitled *Brecht on Theatre* which serves as a valuable tool to accessing his writings, especially for non-German

⁹ Jane de Hart Matthews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

¹⁰ Stuart Cosgrove, 'The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form'. (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Hull, 1982); Caroline Anne Highsaw, 'A theatre of action: The Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project'. (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 1988); Morris Watson, 'The Living Newspaper'. *New Theatre*, (June 1936), 7; Arnold Goldman, 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit'. *Theatre Quarterly*, 3.9 (1973), 69-83.

researchers.¹¹ Similarly, James K. Lyon's *Bertolt Brecht in America*, although published in 1980, is still considered the most informative and complete account of Brecht's experience of living and working in the United States.¹² At the same time, the thesis also refers to a variety of articles written both by European and American critics on Brecht to reflect not only on how Brecht's aesthetics of commitment were perceived differently by these groups of critics but also, hopefully, expose how they refused – through their silence – to address such aesthetics in a more constructive transatlantic way (following in a sense the path already laid by Lukács, Adorno, Benjamin and the New York Intellectuals). The thesis, although indebted to such criticism, wishes to see these arguments dialectically and conduct the transatlantic dialogue that they refused to actively voice. By addressing near the end of chapter four Fredric Jameson's approach to Brecht's oeuvre in *Brecht and Method*, this thesis highlights that traces of approaching the aesthetics of commitment through the prism of transatlanticism are finally emerging.¹³ Jameson serves as an example because he not only firmly voices the importance of such dialogue by choosing to approach Brecht, especially after the collapse of Cold War cultural politics but still within a very sceptical and anti-communist rhetorical situation, but also because he proposes new intellectual ways of escaping parochial cultural attitudes and rather engaging critically with the debate at hand.

In order to address the silence and mutual refusal of all the aforementioned authors and theatre practitioners to critically engage with each other, the structure of this thesis mimics their original disengaged stand-off position. Through a parallel chapter structure, this thesis aims to present their views, engage with them critically, challenge their perceptions (or lack thereof) of the 'other' side and slowly flesh out what should have been an engaged and informed transatlantic dialogue on the aesthetics of commitment. Therefore, chapter one will present the theoretical debate of form versus content among Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno and the importance of this debate in relation to politically radical theatre but it will also introduce the New York Intellectuals' initial response to the same debate. This reaction will be fully discussed and placed within a historical and political context in chapter two. This chapter will reveal more fully their critical assessment of American

¹¹ John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. (London: Methuen, 1990).

¹² James K Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*. (London and New York: Verso, 2000).

culture, their tendency towards formalism but also their almost complete disregard towards their European counterparts, with the exception of one essay by Lukács. Apart from critically assessing the different ways the theoretical debate was manifested among these two groups of critics, chapter two will also highlight the absence, on the part of the New York Intellectuals, of a dialectical consideration of the aesthetics of commitment in relation to the theatre. The fact that they did not critically engage with their home-grown Federal Theatre Project not only expressed their desire to promote specific literary forces and tastes but also did not allow a constructive debate on the emergence of a socially engaged theatre on the American stage to take place. As the critical consideration of the Living Newspaper unit of the FTP will reveal, the debate of form versus content (initially realised in Europe) had reached the American stage as well; but the lack of a serious consideration of its social status by the American critical forces, of engagement with those European theatre practitioners that partially influenced it and its strong links with its governmental patron proved detrimental both for the project and for such theatrical aesthetics. By addressing Brecht's theories and plays in the last chapter, this thesis performs almost a circle, since Brecht had originally participated in the aforementioned debate. However, by examining his theoretical positions in relation to his early vision of America and then his two experiences of living, working and collaborating in the United States, the chapter will explore how 'America' functioned within these plays but also how it was incorporated in his overall aesthetic dramaturgy.

Chapter One outlines the theoretical background for a discussion of the modernist aesthetics of commitment through the debate of form versus content as manifested in Lukács' dispute with Brecht over realism, in Benjamin's with Adorno over the revolutionary impact and possibilities of the new technologies and in the New York Intellectuals' uneasy relationship with political radicalism. An understanding of this debate is essential as it demonstrates how the original debate was re-written as 'autonomy' versus 'commitment' with certain Marxists arguing the first position. Although Lukács' position centred on the novel, Brecht attempted to discuss the issue at hand in relation to the theatre. Reacting against Lukács' emphasis on the literary genre of the novel, on his proposed form of Realism (to counterbalance Modernism) and on his nineteenth-century literary examples, Brecht argued that the new theatrical

experimentations, through fragmentation and the use of film and montage, could offer a more compelling presentation of the audience's daily existence. By emphasising that realism was no longer merely an aesthetic form, but a rather complex political and philosophical concept, Brecht demonstrated the interdependence of a work of art's modes of production with its modes of reception and its historical framework. Benjamin extended Brecht's argumentation and reflected on the reproducibility of a work of art. Through this act, the work of art challenged the audience's traditional modes of perception. For Benjamin Brecht's epic theatre manifested the success of such a challenge and highlighted the importance of turning a theoretical concept into a literary praxis that would expose the audience's reified conditioning. Adorno's main objections targeted Benjamin's views on technology and Brecht's dramatic works; he criticised Brecht's theatre as being ineffectual and too politicised and instead proposed Beckett's theatre as a new model. In Beckett Adorno perceived the possibility of producing a fragmented work of art which could retain its autonomy by not succumbing to ideological means. Adorno's views were shared by the New York Intellectuals. As exemplified in Phillips' writings, they felt uneasy negotiating an aesthetics of commitment that would consider a work of art both for its formal experimentations and political radicalism. Citing as their literary examples Eliot, Joyce and Kafka, the New York Intellectuals emphasised the need for a more formalistic approach to literature that would be able to resist the crudely aestheticised politics of engagement.

Chapter Two extends the discussion of the New York Intellectuals' aesthetics of commitment as they were manifested particularly in their writings in the *Partisan Review*. The group attempted to remodel an American culture and literature that could stand equally next to and engage itself critically with the European one. Having initially flirted with Marxism, they soon abandoned their ideological aspirations and turned to the political discourse of liberalism. The chapter first discusses the inception of the journal and its turbulent first few years along with the intellectuals' initial views on engaged art. It will then draw on two essays from Lionel Trilling's seminal book *The Liberal Imagination* and Clement Greenberg's essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' as both exemplify the group's ideological switch and the way it reformed the

European debate as autonomy versus engagement.¹⁴ In Trilling's essays one witnesses an attempt to remodel liberalism as a complex political and philosophical idea that could challenge what was an ideologically strong Stalinist discourse among certain American intellectuals. Trilling argues for an American culture and literature that would espouse high modernism, the ideals of liberalism and abandon any leftist ideological alliances. Greenberg's essay further reinforces this paradigm of a high, politics-free modernism, by arguing that Abstract Expressionism could represent a new American avant-garde by reflecting an almost apolitical formalistic position. Such views were echoed in the 1952 symposium organised by the *Partisan Review*, entitled 'Our Country and Our Culture'. In it, the participant intellectuals restated their allegiance to the re-modelled political and aesthetic liberal discourse and emphasised the prominence of form over content. However, as the chapter demonstrates, their positions were not without a political agenda and also led to the establishment of a binary structure of criteria that polarised American cultural criticism and interpretation. Their problematic identification of the European aesthetics of commitment with Stalinism, their espousal of liberalism as the only viable discourse to encourage artistic freedom and the new formalistic aesthetics of commitment permeated American culture and influenced both politically and aesthetically an already fragile social order. The revisiting of the 1952 symposium twice, in 1984 and 2002, and the reaffirmation of their aesthetics, further reiterates the impact of the group's political positions within the American cultural world and emphasises how differently the aesthetics of commitment were negotiated on the two continents.

Chapter Three extends the theoretical debates presented in the two previous chapters in the realm of theatrical representation, concentrating on the works of the Living Newspaper Unit of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). The Federal Theatre Project represents the United States' only attempt to establish a national theatre and thus presents an alternative to Broadway's established theatrical scene. As part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Roosevelt's New Deal plan the Federal Theatre attempted to combine its relief status with new theatrical experimentations.

¹⁴ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955); Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. *Partisan Review*, 6.5 (Fall 1939), 34-49.

The case of the Living Newspaper Unit is intriguing as not only did it attempt to appropriate new techniques of performance (borrowing heavily from the European models of the Blue Blouse group, Meyerhold and Brecht) and make them relevant to the American context, but also infused its theatrical discourse with a social and political agenda. The study of the early Living Newspaper productions will reveal the influence of the European avant-garde and the American workers' theatre of the 1920s. However, such an inheritance proved problematic, since it was identified by the WPA and the government as 'red' propaganda and the unit was thus faced with censorship. The unit's next few productions present the appropriation of the New Deal political discourse and a less polemical confrontation between the unit and its federal patron; in terms of performance and stylistic representation there were still some innovative attempts, but most of the plays adopted a more realistic mode of representation that appeared in tune with the government's politics. The adoption of the New Deal's 'cultural democracy' influenced the unit's attempt to create a new audience; although classes and races previously excluded could now participate actively, the conflation of their struggles with those of the middle-class produced an all-encompassing classless audience. The Federal Theatre and the Living Newspaper unit's original revolutionary social aspirations were soon replaced by a commitment to the democratic aesthetics of the New Deal. The project became the first victim of an increasingly anti-Stalinist stance within American life that culminated in the prosecution of any politically committed artists of the left by Senator McCarthy. Although the Federal Theatre Project preceded the writings and formulation of the New York Intellectuals' liberal aesthetics of commitment, its short-lived existence represents the difficulties and failures experienced by American writers and intellectuals in attempting to appropriate the European aesthetics of commitment and translate them into liberal ones. Its prosecution also marks the incompatibility of a socially committed theatre within the limits of American cultural liberalism.

Chapter Four completes this transatlantic examination of the aesthetics of commitment through a reading of Brecht's 'American' plays *In the Jungle of Cities* and *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, his response to early Hollywood acting styles through *Man Equals Man* and his two experiences with the American theatrical establishment through *The Mother* and *Galileo*. Brecht's epic theatrical models have formed the basis for examining how the European aesthetics of commitment were

manifested through a theatrical medium. Similarly to the Federal Theatre Project, Brecht's aesthetic commitment was against the bourgeois theatrical establishment that enforced a specific world view. However, unlike the Federal Theatre, his commitment was not tied to a specific geographical locus or governmental patron. The development of his 'scientific method' accompanied by 'crude thinking', represents his attempt to present a new model for theatre that would be informed by technological experimentations and involve a specific social agenda. Through it Brecht aimed at awakening the audience to their reified social conditioning, at instigating their critical understanding and prompting them to act. Brecht attempted to cross his models over the Atlantic, firstly in New York and then in Los Angeles. Both experiences revealed the different attitudes towards political theatre adopted by European and American playwrights. The predominantly disappointing receptions of *The Mother* and *Galileo* exposed not only how differently artists of the American Left perceived the role and function of theatre, but also how unreceptive the audience was to his politically committed and dialectical theatrical models. The new social models presented in his plays not only questioned the audience's established views on reality, but also presented an alternative way of approaching such reality. The theatrical space therefore became a new *topos* whose renewed cognitive quality and function allowed it to actively participate in the praxis of life and demand change. It was those qualities of Brecht's works that caught the eye of the McCarthy committee and created much controversy among Marxist thinkers alike.

Through this transatlantic exploration of the aesthetics of commitment, this thesis aims at revealing the close development of such aesthetics both in the European and the American tradition. At the same time it seeks to emphasise how these aesthetics informed, but were also further elaborated within, modernist political theatre. Such aesthetics may indeed be considered a thorn in the body politic but their continual renegotiation could enrich our critical appreciation of a politically informed theatre.

Chapter One

Reconsidering the aesthetics of commitment within the European and American modernist literary theory.

I. Entering the labyrinth.

I was in a labyrinth of stairs. This labyrinth was not entirely roofed over. I climbed; other stairways led downstairs. On a landing I realized that I had arrived at a summit. A wide view of many lands opened up before me. I saw other men standing on other peaks. One of these men was suddenly seized by dizziness and fell. The dizziness spread; others were now falling from other peaks into the depths below. When I too became dizzy I woke up.¹

I dreamed of being lost in a labyrinth
of stairs, climbing towards a narrow tower;
all of Europe receded beneath me.
Others there stared down in the castle's depths,
and, in visible distress, plunged over
the precipice. Then I was awakened.
Having survived the dream, will I survive
the night?²

The image of the labyrinth and the experience of the dream have been central motifs within modernist literature and literary theory. As manifested particularly in the act of reading *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin's use of the labyrinth transcends its ancient symbolic use of rebirth, as metaphorically describing a character's psychological journey or simply a moment of enlightenment. The labyrinth is no longer seen as an archetype of which people can have a direct experience;³ rather, it becomes a medium through which their experiences are negotiated. Within modernism, the structure of the labyrinth appears to exceed its representation of a singular structure with one potential exit. Its re-interpretation portrays a structure that has acquired a topological function which offers multiplicity and infinite polysemic possibilities. At the same time, its intricate structure of winding and bewildering passages, not unlike a narrative text or work of art, emphasises the plethora of experience. Therefore, the modernist

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*. (London – New York: Verso, 2003), p. 114.

² James Atlas, 'Words for Walter Benjamin'. *Poetry Nation*, 4 (1975), 6-8 (p. 8).

³ The act of walking the labyrinth can be considered as a metaphor for life's journey (usually with religious implications). Thus, the experience becomes subjective and aims at a deeper self-knowledge; at the same time the labyrinth becomes a symbol signifying a sacred place for the individual.

text (as a new type of labyrinth) refuses to be resolved in one singular interpretation. Within this structure possibilities become actualities and vice versa. One could argue, therefore, that all art could be conceptually realised in the structure of the labyrinth, as it cannot be contained and can lead the artist to different *topoi*.

The modern experience of the labyrinth encompasses the complex relationship between reality, its representations and its living experience by an audience. As such the image of the labyrinth becomes pertinent to the debate on the aesthetics of commitment in modern theatre. The modernist labyrinth offers a multiplicity of verbal and spatial presence to different structures of meaning, thus reinforcing its ambiguity and allowing it to escape the charges of self-referentiality and autonomy. At the same time, it allows the artists to reach a multiplicity of possible exits, thus discouraging only teleological readings. Within this modernist labyrinth, theatre's function of mediating 'the tensions between social ideology and cultural reality' can also be performed.⁴ The seductive idea that 'pure' art theory can appropriately discuss the aesthetics of a work of art is abandoned; instead, the cultural, historical and social realities are seen in conjunction with the new theatrical experimentations that can also afford a multiplicity of representations. The labyrinth becomes the nexus of the new aesthetics of commitment. By abandoning its traditional representation as a 'unicursal' structure, it postulates an openness to new forms of approaching the relationship between social realities and their representation. It allows the artist's social, political and aesthetic problematizations or affinities to function dialectically before and during the creative process. For Atlas (re-writing Benjamin's quote) such commitment is marked by a sense of loss, agony, suffocation and despair. However, for Benjamin it represents a fragmentary experience, refusing a teleological conclusion, as the artist reaches an indefinite landing instead of a definite 'the'.

At the same time, as Benjamin's quote seems to imply, what is of great interest is not only the labyrinth that the artist enters and exits, but the 'awakening' that follows this process. The artist has found himself/herself already situated within a labyrinth of aesthetic, societal and economic conditions. Reaching a summit, a certain level of understanding the reified reality, results in that feeling of dizziness. The

⁴ Michael Hays, 'Declassified Documents: Fragmentations in the Modern Drama. *boundary 2*, 17.2 (1990), 102-128 (p. 110).

emphasis is on awakening: 'the now of recognizability is the moment of awakening'.⁵ The image of awakening from the dream is connected to the image of awakening to the possibilities of the present. The dream (past – thesis) and the present (antithesis) are placed in a dialectical position that leads to remembering (synthesis), thus to an un-reified realization of the present social, economic and political conditions artists are exposed to. And that, in turn, could ultimately lead to a new aesthetic and social praxis.

Through the modernist experience of the labyrinth, a negotiation between a work of art's social and political agenda and its formal elements took place. Within the modernist period it was primarily the Marxist writings on culture that focused on the political efficacy of a work of art, both in terms of its reception and its modes of production. Through these writings the old aesthetics of commitment were contested. Influenced by Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, a commitment to aesthetic formalism became the basis for the aesthetic appreciation of a work of art (leading to the nineteenth-century doctrine of 'art for art's sake'). Such views stressed the existence of form as a priori, as imposed on the content of a work of art, and as the singular event of art; however, this led to the problematic conceptualisation of content as contained within form and thus as excluded from the realm of human praxis. Ellison has argued that 'because the labyrinth inside of a work of art is threatening in its very indirection, the philosopher/theorist *re-configures* the work of art, presenting it as an aesthetic object and emphasizing its form rather than its dangerous content'.⁶ Whereas the existence of the labyrinth within a work of art prompted certain artists and theorists to accentuate the importance of a work's formal characteristics, it allowed others to underline the necessity of embarking on a more critical and dialectical re-conception of the constitutive relationships between form and content and of the modernist aesthetics of commitment.

What is of great interest is that the debate over form and content, although prominent among the European intellectuals and artists, was also realised in the United States. Although the debate occurred simultaneously on both continents, it is intriguing that a continuous transatlantic dialogue was absent. This section of the thesis will attempt to discuss the debate concerning the aesthetics of commitment as

⁵ Gary Smith, *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*. (London: MIT Press, 1991), p. 80.

⁶ David R. Ellison, *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature: From the Sublime to the Uncanny*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 11.

realised in Europe by Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno; it will be followed in Chapter 2 by a critical exposé of the same debate as realised through the writings of the American New York Intellectuals. All of them looked ‘to art as a means of uncovering social contradictions’.⁷ They were all involved in a debate over the function of literature as an agent of political critique, personal and civic awakening. Within this debate the issue of the autonomy or engagement of a work of art was initially exposed from a Marxist perspective that aimed at revealing the inherent contradictions of societal order and the degree of reification and commodification of human relations, while underlining the need for resistance. Although the aforementioned European intellectuals expressed diametrically opposing positions, their argumentation was rooted in a Marxist discourse. However, the New York Intellectuals soon abandoned their Marxist rhetoric and turned towards a more conservatively liberal discourse that is still apparent within American cultural and literary theory.

It is my belief though that the aforementioned European debate was more rigorous than its American counterpart. All of the artists and intellectuals (unlike their American counterparts) experienced firsthand both socio-political events that altered the power structures of Europe and a perpetual state of self-exile as the menace of Nazism threatened both their livelihood and intellectual freedom. At the same time, the expressionism debate (as it came to be known although some refer to it as the ‘realism debate’ or the ‘modernism debate’) not only allowed a plethora of critical responses from a more varied range of artists, philosophers and critics but more importantly, it was the outcome of the legacies of the historical avant-garde.⁸ The avant-garde artists, influenced by the recent socio-political events in Europe, strove to negotiate the effect of such events in the realm of art and bring about a new form that would be appropriate for the new historical and political content that had been created. As Walter Benjamin noted, artists ‘must rethink the notions of literary forms or genres if [they] are to find forms appropriate to the literary energy of [their] time’.⁹ The avant-garde influenced the way art was conceived and practised within the realm of Western thinking. It questioned the institution of art and tried to situate art and

⁷ Christine Kiebuszinska, ‘Brecht and the Problem of Influence’, in *A Bertolt Brecht Reference Companion*, ed. Siegfried Mews. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 47-69 (p. 50).

⁸ As used by Günter Berghaus in *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Peter Bürger in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

⁹ *Understanding Brecht*, p. 89.

literature within the political world. The avant-garde was fuelled by radicalism and determination to bring about emancipation. The re-inscribed aesthetics of commitment and the political engagement of the artist were not considered an embarrassment within the avant-garde movement.

The avant-garde artists attempted to distort the bourgeois image of organic reality with works of art that emphasised reality's fragmented nature and thus establish a critical distance 'to the reified and alienating life-praxis in middle-class society'.¹⁰ At the core of the avant-garde's social and political mission was its ambition to turn 'artistic creativity into an emancipatory social praxis'.¹¹ To achieve this, art, which up to that moment simply mirrored the reified bourgeois social reality, aimed at destroying the existing bourgeois institution of art and highlighting the degree to which art as an institution determined the social effect of a work of art. This destruction would allow art to escape its association with the image of a sanctuary separate from the social, political and economic changes; instead, art would merge with life. Since art would no longer have to function within the prescribed bourgeois cultural institutions, it could form the basis for a new social praxis. As Bürger has argued, 'art was not simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form'.¹²

Expressionism, being part of the avant-garde movement, tried to negotiate such changes. Although it is difficult to define what ultimately unified all artists involved with Expressionism, its influence within the German avant-garde was eminent. As Rumold has argued 'the history of the German literary avant-garde is in many ways a story of the legacies (there is not a simple legacy) of expressionism'.¹³ Expressionism's aesthetic diversity – expressed in such art forms as literature (Ernst Stadler and Georg Heym), theatre (Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller), painting (the Blaue Reiter and Die Brücke groups), film (Robert Wiene and F.W. Murnau) and music (Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern) –, its experimentation with language, its strong opposition to World War I and its generalised attack on bourgeois modes of living were never really welcomed by the majority of the German intelligentsia. What further complicated the situation was Expressionism's dual desire at the early stages

¹⁰ Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde*, p. 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹² *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 49.

¹³ Rainer Rumold, *The Janus Face of the German Avant-Garde: From Expressionism toward Postmodernism* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p. ix.

of the movement on the one hand, to follow its political impulses and become more actively and socially involved with, on the other, its bohemian aspiration of total seclusion from society. Such conflict was initially resolved with the outbreak of the war, forcing the Expressionists towards political involvement (flavoured by Marxism and communism) but the intellectual struggle between them and their opponents was further intensified.¹⁴ What further intensified such animosity towards Expressionism was its ambiguous position with the 1920s German cultural establishment as the Expressionist movement became assimilated to the same bourgeois cultural taste it originally criticised and mocked. Both the bourgeoisie and its cultural institutions spent large amounts of money to acquire Expressionist paintings either for their private collections or the museums and galleries. On the other hand, Expressionism was familiar only to a few leftist artists but it never found an audience amongst the rising working class. And it was the latter that seemed to be at the epicentre of social and political change, which the modernist assault on the bourgeoisie never reached or was not allowed to reach.

Although the Expressionist movement was short-lived, its influence persisted among German artists of the left even during the 1930s. By that time though Fascism's increased power and possible presence within other European countries (Italy primarily) led to an allied communist anti-fascist front that centred on realism as a cultural policy and practice. Leftist intellectuals were aware of Fascism's self-portrayal as a 'charismatic' and populist form of political and cultural ideology. They had witnessed its appropriation of leftist intentions, 'while switching political direction, and giving the impression of a new aesthetic terrain'.¹⁵ Fascist movements claimed to be as anti-bourgeois as their left-wing opposition and at the same time very sympathetic towards the working class. On a cultural level, they disapproved of the artistic merits of modern culture; instead they opted for mass spectacles aiming at communicating a universal binding belief to the participants that would, in turn, stimulate an emotional response and cause mass mobilisation. As Klaus Jedzek argued 'people are not a proletariat class. People are not the bourgeois upper strata of

¹⁴ For a detailed historical discussion of the events leading to the Expressionism debate see David Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile, 1933-1945*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

¹⁵ John London, *Theatre under the Nazis*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 16. [italics my emphasis].

society in tails and dinner jackets. People are the *unity* of feeling, of language, of piousness/uprightness, of sadness, of humour and of happiness'.¹⁶

Faced with such a performative aesthetic, many leftist intellectuals and artists felt that the radical modernist assault on the bourgeoisie (with its experimental provocations on subject matter, modes of representation and artistic boundaries) was no longer appropriate to combat Nazism and was perceived as decadent. What was needed instead was a new cultural policy that would employ the most progressive characteristics of the bourgeois culture to create a new aesthetic culture that would reply to the political and economic threat of Fascism and realistically represent the new struggle of the proletariat. This culminated in the notion of a Popular Front as represented by the surge of leftist but not necessarily pro-Soviet intellectuals to the first International Writers' Congress for the Defence of Culture in Paris in 1935 and the establishment of Socialist Realism by the Soviet Writers' Union in the 1934 congress as the predominant cultural aesthetic.¹⁷ Socialist Realism was defined as 'the basic method of Soviet imaginative literature and literary criticism, [which] demands from the artist a truthful, historically concrete description of reality in its concreteness' accompanied by the 'task of ideological moulding and education of the working people in the spirit of socialism'.¹⁸ Socialist Realism was therefore presented as the historical and aesthetic answer to Fascism that endeavoured to establish a realistic aesthetic that would promote Communism as the only viable ideological system. Its ruthless enforcement however, soon disclosed Stalin's political and cultural intentions which aimed at the liquidation of modern aesthetics and open artistic terrorism. It was within such a political and cultural atmosphere that the Expressionism debate took place.

Although the Expressionism debate involved many intellectuals and artists the next two parts of this chapter will attempt to explore and reconsider Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno's different and quite often rigorously opposed approaches on the issue at hand.¹⁹ The aforementioned

¹⁶ Quoted in London, *Theatre under the Nazis*, p. 17.

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of the Paris congress see David Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile, 1933-1945*, pp. 107-115.

¹⁸ Herman Ermolaev, *Soviet literary theories, 1917-1934: the genesis of Socialist realism*. (New York: Octagon Books, 1977) p. 197.

¹⁹ For the purposes of this thesis and chapter I will not discuss or analyze the views of all the artists and intellectuals involved in the debate. These include Ernst Bloch, Alfred Kurella, Herwarth Walden and Hanns Eisler to name but a few. For an in-depth presentation of the debate through the pages of *Das Wort* see Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile, 1933-1945*, pp. 286-299.

Expressionism debate initially (and officially) took place between 1937 and 1938 through the pages of the monthly literary journal *Das Wort*, published in Moscow by German intellectual émigrés (with Bertolt Brecht acting as one of its three official editors and Willi Bredel and Leon Feuchtwanger being the other two), although Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno's replies never appeared on its pages. The lasting influence of the debate ensured its continuation into the 1940s and 1950s, long after *Das Wort* had ceased publication. Through a comparative presentation of the positions of the four aforementioned intellectuals and artists, one is exposed to the persistent pivotal issue of the exchange: what is the relationship between art and social reality? This issue is further complicated as the four authors include in the debate questions concerning the experimental nature of 'revolutionary' art, the social impact of cultural products and whether art should opt for an autonomous position or for a politics of engagement. When considering their positions one realises that they have come to represent the successes and limitations of the European modernist and avant-garde tradition.

II. The dispute between Brecht and Lukács: form versus content.

The heated debate between these two theorists that began in the 1930s with Lukács' ideological denunciation of Expressionism has formed the basis on which any discussion of the new aesthetics of commitment could be approached, as it encompasses 'several fundamental issues of aesthetics such as the nature of the aesthetic effect, the definition of form and content, subjectivity vs. objectivity and the question of art's social mission'.²⁰ Unfortunately though, for both Brecht and Lukács, much of the secondary literature criticising and appreciating their oeuvres tended (and still does nowadays, as John Fuegi's books reveal²¹) to approach their figures from unilateral positions. On the one hand, Lukács' valuable contribution to establishing

²⁰ Bela Kiralyfalvi, 'Georg Lukács or Bertolt Brecht?' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 25.4 (1985), 340-348 (p. 340).

²¹ John Fuegi, *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics and the Making of the Modern Drama*. (New York: Grove Press, 1994) and Fuegi, *The Life and Lies of Bertolt Brecht*. (London: HarperCollins, 1994). It needs to be noted here however, that Fuegi's claims have been heavily criticized and discredited by many Brechtian scholars. In particular, John Willett, James K. Lyon, Siegfried Mews and Hans Christian Nørregaard of the International Brecht Society published in the *Brecht Yearbook* a list of 452 distortions and omissions found in Fuegi's *Brecht and Company* and offered a negative response to Fuegi's whole book. See John Willett, James K. Lyon, Siegfried Mews and Hans Christian Nørregaard, 'A Brechtbuster Goes Bust: Scholarly Mistakes, Misquotes and Malpractices in John Fuegi's *Brecht and Company*', *The Brecht Yearbook*, 20 (1995), 259-367.

Marxism as a unified, effective and viable method in the field of aesthetic theory has been discredited by such critics as Victor Zitta who considers him morally responsible for the excesses of Stalinism.²² On the other, Brecht's commitment to Marxism and his desire to further explore it through his plays, has been seen as an eccentricity and treated only as a mere symptom to his development as a playwright. Eric Bentley voiced a collective view when he commented that Brecht 'would be a better writer if he gave up Marxism'.²³ Such readings have created a monolithic and uncritical understanding of their works that denied readers the complexity of their philosophies and aesthetic theories. Through the critical re-examination of their opposing and polemical contributions to the Expressionism debate one is exposed not only to their differing historical sensibilities but also how such sensibilities informed their conflicting aesthetics of commitment within modernist literature.

The debate between Brecht and Lukács over the question of realism and expressionism began in 1934 with the latter's publication of the essay 'Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline' in *Internationale Literatur*. The publication occurred just one month prior to the First Soviet Writers' Congress which established Socialist Realism as the official policy. In this essay, Lukács' main preoccupation resided in his criticism of Expressionism as a literary form whose mystical representation had unconsciously facilitated the spread and empowerment of Fascism.²⁴ At the same time he wanted to emphasise the need for opposition on a cultural level based though on a Marxist analysis and aesthetics of classical realism, thus discrediting the pseudo-leftist experimentations (as he believed) of the European avant-garde. Lukács was aware of the early support that Expressionism had received from National Socialism. As National Socialism attempted to establish itself, it sought 'to translate [its] political creeds into a theatrical language that drew heavily on the traditions of ritual and mysticism'.²⁵ Lukács considered Expressionism a movement that mystified rather than clarified social problems and objected both to its ideological

²² Victor Zitta, *George Lukacs' Marxism: alienation, dialectics, revolution. A study in utopia and ideology*. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

²³ Quoted in Dave Riley, 'Review of John Fuegi, *The Life and Lies of Bertolt Brecht*'. *Green Left Weekly*, 20 March 1995.

²⁴ 'For expressionism is undoubtedly only one of the many tendencies in bourgeois ideology that grow later into fascism, and its role in the ideological preparation for fascism is no greater – if also no less – than that of many other simultaneous tendencies'. Lukács, 'Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline'. *Essays on Realism*. Ed. Rodney Livingstone. Trans. David Fernbach. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), pp. 76-113 (p. 87).

²⁵ Günter Berghaus, *Fascism and theatre: comparative studies on the aesthetics and politics of performance in Europe, 1925-1945*. (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), p. 4.

reasoning and its creative methods. He argued that the abstract nature of Expressionism's critique of middle-class values and its failure to connect them to an economic conditioning (thus tolerating a perpetually abstract dispute between bourgeois and anti-bourgeois forces) allowed its appropriation by National Socialism. He further emphasised his point by arguing that the Expressionists uprooted the bourgeois social norms they wanted to criticise from their original historical context, thus rendering any representation abstract and obscure to the masses. Similarly, he felt that its stylised presentation of social issues offered only a subjective representation and an abstract form of universal humanism (present in such theatrical characters generically entitled 'The Mother', 'The Son' or 'The Father'). Therefore, language became self-referential rather than expressively and clearly presenting the conflict between the classes. As a result, what Expressionism offered was an accumulation of experimental fragments rather than a social totality and thus it introduced an emotional and exaggerated rhetoric that could be manipulated by the rising Nazi one.²⁶ He clarified his point by referring to Goebbels' assessment of the expressionist distortion 'as a method of portraying reality [and thus] an adaptable means for fascist propaganda'.²⁷

He considered the collapse of Expressionism as the collapse 'of the attempt to master the 'new reality' (the reality of imperialism, the epoch of World War and the world revolution) from the standpoint of the bourgeois intellectuals, in thought and in art'.²⁸ Therefore, the Expressionists' failure to connect reality with social problems, their superficial abstractions and their subjectively perceived experiences not only alienated them from the world but also impeded an understanding of reality in its objective entirety. Lukács' defamation of Expressionism coincided with National Socialism's denouncement of the movement as the true representation of the German mystical spirit, its persecution by the 'Degenerate Art' campaign and its substitution by the 'völkisch' ideal. Although such a move might have weakened Lukács' argument, his views on Expressionism and his fervent support of the nineteenth-century literary aesthetics of realism were gaining strength among left intellectuals,

²⁶ '[...] for [Expressionism's] extraordinary poverty of content stands in crying contrast to the pretension of its delivery, to the exaggerated and over-intense subjective emotionalism of its presentation'. Lukács, 'Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline', p. 87

²⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 76.

with his disciple Alfred Kurella furthering Lukács' views and provocatively asserting that expressionism and its aesthetics had led directly to fascism.

Ernst Bloch and Hanns Eisler immediately responded to Lukács' attack on Expressionism but their opinions did not deter Lukács from continuing to further the causes of realism within Marxist aesthetics. In his seminal essay 'Realism in the Balance', published in 1938 in *Das Wort*, Lukács resumed his arguments against the subjective (as he believed) and experimental practices of the avant-garde and modernist movements and charged modernist writing with formalism because of its use of fragmented narrative, interior monologues and montage. It had become evident by that time that the debate over realism was not centred on its development as a trend or style, but was rather concerned with realism as a methodological problem.²⁹ In the essay Lukács reiterated that modernist artists had developed a new mode of self-expression, but that 'both emotionally and intellectually they all remain frozen in their own immediacy; they fail to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate their experience to the hidden social forces that produce them'.³⁰ Accusing their endeavours of being abstract and one-dimensional, Lukács argued that modernist works of art tended to emphasize the fragmentation experienced by the masses in their social relations, which in turn intensified the process of estrangement. Rejecting the aesthetics of art for art's sake, focusing on the form of the novel and the act of narration, Lukács embraced the view that art's function was to reflect any revolutionary changes. He commented that the artist's task was 'a portrayal of objective reality, its actual motive forces and its actual trends of development'.³¹ He used the examples of Balzac, Tolstoy and Mann as artists whose works should serve as models of narrative and form for new artists. For Lukács their respective works encompassed a sense of totality as they not only penetrated the objective reality through their narrative, but also resisted the fragmentary stream of experience present in Joyce and Zola's works. Balzac, Tolstoy and Mann had achieved what he called 'the artistic dialectic of appearance and essence' that allowed

²⁹ Bela Kiralyfalvi, 'Georg Lukács or Bertolt Brecht?', p. 340. As mentioned earlier, what further complicated the debate was the official by then enforcement of Socialist Realism as the necessary aesthetic means for battling fascism on a cultural level. Lukács had already been living and working in Moscow since 1931 and his dubious response to the practices of Socialist Realism has been of great interest to many critics.

³⁰ Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance'. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Translation Editor Ronald Taylor. (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 28-59 (pp. 36-37).

³¹ Georg Lukács, 'Propaganda or Partisanship?' *Partisan Review*, 1.2 (1934), 36-46 (p. 44).

them to produce a narrative that exceeded immediacy and fragmentation and instead proposed a realistic account of the societal living contradictions.³²

Where the aforementioned authors succeeded was in their constant struggle to always retrieve the socially permanent objective human tendencies revealed over historical periods and ‘present social institutions as human relationships and social objects as the vehicles of such relationships’.³³ Where the modernists failed was in the false ‘dialectical portrayal and literary re-creation of reality’ which would be ‘inconsistent with objectivity’.³⁴ As a result, the modernists’ dismissal of realism, their crude oversimplification of the dialectical relationship between aesthetic and social conditioning under capitalism and the disruption of the organic unity of dramatic content and form through the use of montage and other experimental techniques hindered ‘the cognition and creative portrayal’ of a social ‘totality’ of class relationships that could disclose the false objectification humans suffered under capitalism.³⁵

Among the artists Lukács considered as modernists and disagreed with over realism was Bertolt Brecht. Lukács perceived Brecht’s early plays (such as *Baal* and *Drums in the Night*) as allegories that ‘never inhabited a merely subjective void’ but attacked fiercely his *Lehrstücke* as they expressed his undisguised ideological rhetoric and employed a new range of formal devices that seemed to accentuate the emphasis on the ‘abstract’ understanding of experience, thus refusing to provide the totality that he wished for.³⁶ Lukács found Brecht’s criticism of the ‘entire dramatic tradition’ and his use of the ‘alienation effect’ problematic and considered the latter as ‘a disruptive and inhibiting factor’ of objective reality.³⁷ He considered Brecht’s use of the alienation effect ineffectual; by comparing his work to Chekhov’s and arguing how the latter successfully portrayed society’s contradictions without using any ‘alienation effects ... [to dramatise] the contradictions of a given social order’, Lukács criticised Brecht’s dramatic theory and its effectiveness within a Marxist aesthetic theory. However, he appeared more appreciative of Brecht’s later plays, such as *The Life of Galileo*, since they marked ‘the abandonment of the entire theory of the didactic drama (*Lehrstücke*)’, ‘an authentic dramatic representation’, Brecht’s rejection of his

³² Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, p. 39.

³³ Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*. (New York: Universal Library, 1964), pp. 92-93.

³⁴ Lukács, ‘Propaganda or Partisanship?’, p. 44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁶ Georg Lukács, ‘On Bertolt Brecht’, *New Left Review*, 110 (1978), 88-92 (p. 92).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

‘embittered and one-sided polemics’ and his return to a more classical realist form.³⁸

He further commented that

where Brecht’s characters had once been spokesmen for political points of view, they are now multi-dimensional. They are living human beings, wrestling with conscience and the world around them. Allegory has acquired flesh and blood; it has been transformed into a true dramatic typology. Alienation-effect ceases to be the instrument of an artificial, abstract didacticism; it makes possible literary achievement of the highest order. All great drama, after all, must find means to transcend the limited awareness of the characters presented on the stage. [...] The mature Brecht, by overcoming his earlier one-sided theories, had evolved into the greatest realistic playwright.³⁹

The above quote not only represents Lukács’ sentiments concerning Brecht’s work but also demonstrates that his views on the aesthetics of commitment within Marxist cultural politics differed considerably from Brecht’s. He repeats his disapproval of Brecht’s earlier political and didactic plays (which he equated with oversimplified propagandistic literature as mentioned earlier), but acknowledges the ‘totality’ the more mature ones display as they encompass a ‘proper’ dialectical relationship with the represented reality. As such, he feels that Brecht’s new dramatic representation (found in *Galileo*) both transcends the limitations set out by propaganda literature and moves towards a more complex and objective representation of reality. Brecht’s artistic reflection on social changes offered by his later plays affords, according to Lukács, more accessibility to the reified reality and thus allows the audience to achieve a comprehensive experience of their social conditioning.

Brecht’s response to Lukács’ critique of his work and views on realism were written during 1938-1939 but were only published after his death in 1967. Brecht was aware of Lukács and other intellectuals’ views as expressed through *Das Wort* and also their strong intellectual position within Russian circles. Their strong views troubled him especially when seen in connection to Socialist Realism and he confessed to Walter Benjamin in July 1938 that

They are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is the unforeseeable. You never know what’s going to come out. And they themselves don’t want to produce. They want to play the *apparatchik* and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., p. 91.

³⁹ Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. (London: Merlin Press, 1963), pp. 88-89.

⁴⁰ *Understanding Brecht*, p. 118.

As the above quote reveals, for Brecht artistic production in general did not signify subservience on the artists' part to a pre-given form arbitrarily decided by a party or ideologists but rather represented a process through which new artistic models and forms could challenge established artistic patterns and their proposed specific descriptions of reality and in turn propose new ways of social engagement. Brecht was not afraid of the intellectual debate over expressionism and realism but feared an ideological prosecution (as did indeed occur) of modernism and the avant-garde primarily based on the accusation of 'formalism'. The latter had become an all-encompassing term used to describe texts or forms of art that were deemed to deviate from the official line of Socialist Realism. Modernist and avant-garde texts were seen as falling into the category of 'formalism', due primarily to their use of new experimental techniques and their questioning of established literary forms of representation. The existence of traditional literary forms does not preclude the further development of new means of representation nor does it offer exclusivity to one over the other.

In his essay 'Popularity and Realism', Brecht criticised Lukács for descending into formalism himself by privileging the outmoded nineteenth-century form of the novel and not really engaging in his theoretical work with the poetic and dramatic genres. Brecht found problematic Lukács' attempt to deduce a specific literary model for representing reality through a specific literary tradition regardless of their historical context. As he commented

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society/ unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who rule it/ writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught/ emphasizing the element of development/ making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.⁴¹

Thus realism was not merely an aesthetic form but a complex political and philosophical concept that attempted to 'see' the world from a new perspective specific to the class struggle, emphasising the audience's material struggle and also promoting the need for change and social praxis. Brecht furthered his argument by commenting that changes in the mode of representation were essential, since reality in itself was constantly changing. Balzac and Mann's realistic models were specific to

⁴¹ Bertolt Brecht, 'Popularity and Realism'. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Translation Editor Ronald Taylor. (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 79-85 (p. 82).

their time's historical, economic and social conditions, but they could not possibly be as effective in presenting or questioning the contemporary social 'totality' in an objective mode. As a result, Brecht argued, the introduction of new formal devices that could disturb the established reified reality would not only enhance an objective exposition of the material struggle, but also force the audience into a more critical speculation on that reality.

Brecht's familiarity with the creative process (unlike Lukács') allowed him to be aware of the failures that could occur when experimenting with new aesthetic forms. However, he considered such failures to be intrinsic to a politically engaged literature, as they would eventually allow the artist to find the appropriate formal devices to accompany the content of his work. He argued that 'literature cannot be forbidden to employ skills newly acquired by contemporary man, such as the capacity for simultaneous registration, bold abstraction or swift combination'.⁴² The equal importance given to the form and content of a work of art in Brecht's committed theatre enabled him to respond to Lukács' charges regarding the scientific approach present in new theatrical works. Brecht maintained that a scientific approach provides the 'energy' required to examine 'how the artistic adoption of these skills [simultaneous registration, bold abstraction or swift combination] has worked out'.⁴³ Rather than emphasising a continuity between a specific bourgeois realist novel and the conditions developed out of it, a scientific approach, through a more systematic and methodological means of approaching reality, would allow a reconsideration both of the specific and other genres, their means of production and also propose new means of renewing that reality. It could be argued therefore, that Brecht's scientific method aimed at challenging the functional relationship between stage and public life, narrative/text and performance, audience and actor in an attempt to expose the existence of a concrete social narrative; at the same time, it systematically revealed the ideological and social contradictions inherent but well concealed within society, thus enabling people to 'see' through the layers of subjective reality and awaken them to the need for change.

By rejecting Lukács' literary nostalgia, Brecht's aesthetics of commitment proposed a more dynamic approach to social reality. Although he had been criticised

⁴² Bertolt Brecht, 'On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism'. *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 70-76 (p. 75).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

for uncritically rejecting old aesthetics, Brecht was careful to emphasise the need not for undoing old techniques, but for developing these further. He argued that ‘man does not become man again by stepping out of the masses but by stepping back into them. The masses shed their dehumanization and thereby men become men again – but not the same men as before’.⁴⁴ Brecht’s argument echoed the theme of his early play *Man Equals Man* (discussed in detail in chapter four) in which Galy Gay ‘exits’ society as a porter only to ‘re-enter’ it as a soldier under the name Jeraiah Jip. Gay’s transformation occurs within a militarised society and is presented as a product of specific societal conditions. Brecht allows the audience to consider the implications behind Gay’s transformation and dehumanization in relation to the political, historical and economic conditions; at the same time, however, he allows the audience to consider Gay’s loss of individualism and gain of a new identity as a member of a collective in a dialectical manner. The play does not offer one answer and its ambiguity urges the audience to consider the events unfolded in a critical manner.

The play’s ambiguities were accompanied by new methods of presentation, thus allowing a seamless correlation of its form and content. As Brecht argued, the reinforcement of a dichotomy, ‘formalism on the one side – contentism on the other’, could hinder the potentialities of political praxis as it would not allow a dialectical consideration of the perceived reality.⁴⁵ The emphasis on the possibility of political praxis and the ability of theatre to function as a *topos*, where alternative models of reality would be revealed and questioned, determined Brecht’s aesthetics of commitment. Similarly to Lukács’ theoretical writings, his dramatic theory and presentation were concerned with the philosophical question of people’s perception of reality and its critical manifestation in the aesthetic realm. Unlike Lukács, however, Brecht aimed at dealing with this question within the space of the theatre and thus at experiencing the problems or dilemmas framing its aesthetic representation. Whereas Lukács’ theoretical and primarily philosophical reflections on reality or ‘realism’ excluded the consideration of a scientific method, Brecht’s realist aesthetics were bound to such a method for it annulled ‘the separation between physical and mental activity and the fundamental division of labor’.⁴⁶ The reunion of a scientific method with theatre’s practical aspects allowed Brecht to expose the contemporary social and

⁴⁴ Bertolt Brecht, ‘The Essays of Georg Lukács’. *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 68-69 (p. 69).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1978*, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1988), II: *The Syntax of History*, p. 140.

political relationships in an unfamiliar context, reveal their interrelation and continual existence within the historical space and criticise the audience's perceptual numbness. The plays' intentional directness enabled the audience to 'see' behind the facets of capitalist reality and distrust their false sense of comfort, and instigated an actively critical engagement with their reality.

Lukács and Brecht's ideological dialogue on the aesthetics of realism revealed the different and sometimes conflicting positions of artists and theorists within a broadly Marxist tradition. Their debate, in which they were soon joined by Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, was concerned with the imposed forms of aesthetic experience that formulated and prescribed the realms of knowledge and praxis. Through their conflicting theories, both Lukács and Brecht presented alternative ways of penetrating these realms and thus allowed a more reflective deliberation. However, their approach to the realist/modernist controversy also revealed the shortcomings inherent in their positions. On the one hand, Lukács' belief in the possibility of exposing a work of art's political and ideological positions purely through its formal properties (as it would escape the charge of being propagandistic) promulgated the chasm between the work's form and content. On the other hand, the revolutionary potential of science/technology in artistic expression and reflection that Brecht advocated was soon assimilated within the capitalist modes of production. Their dialectical controversy informs the manner in which their aesthetics of commitment, although both rejecting the aestheticist position of art for art's sake, were engaged differently with the realms of social and artistic activity and thus helped to formulate some of the contours (ideological and aesthetic) of Marxist cultural politics.

IV. Extending the debate: Benjamin and Adorno.

The realist/modernist debate was further extended with the participation of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, who not only further developed the arguments presented by Brecht and Lukács, but also reflected on their possible failures. Brecht found an ally in Benjamin's writings and their dialectical relationship helped both of them to reinforce their arguments concerning their aesthetics of commitment. Benjamin's essays 'What is Epic Theatre?', 'The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction' and 'The Author as Producer' have outlined how his desire to find a materialistic aesthetic was realised in Brecht's theatre of political praxis. In

all three essays Benjamin set out not only to oppose Lukács' disregard for new avant-garde artistic techniques, but primarily to concur with Brecht's arguments on the increasing importance of technology, the transformations it induced in the modes of production and perception and the increasing need for a new political aesthetic discourse that would alter the function of art and the relationship between a work of art, its producer/author and the audience.⁴⁷ Although this chapter will not discuss these essays in detail, it is pertinent to highlight Benjamin's major arguments to which Adorno reacted.

According to Benjamin, the new technologies could destroy the work of art's auratic quality (both in time and space) that deemed it unique, authentic and autonomous. He argued that the 'mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual', thus demystifying its mode of production, liberating it from the pre-existing bourgeois prerogatives and allowing its communal use.⁴⁸ He further commented that

The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced.⁴⁹

Because of its mass reproduction the beholder's perception of a work of art was no longer influenced by its auratic quality; s/he was no longer drawn in a contemplative passivity by its uniqueness and originality or its specific historical and social enactment. The authority of the artistic object was questioned as the audience was exposed to a multiplicity of copies. Therefore, the work of art was unable to 'command' the audience's gaze in a specific historical, social and aesthetic direction. Benjamin maintained that this lack of 'command' could allow the political employment of art as it generated a new space where a critical understanding of a work's modes of production could take place. By allowing 'the original to meet the beholder half-way', the mechanically reproduced work participated actively in the creation of a new social praxis.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: a re-presentation*. (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 76.

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. (London: Fontana Press, 1992), p. 224.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 223

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

In his essay on Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin argued that ‘technology, however, is not a pure scientific fact. It is at the same time a historical fact’.⁵¹ By placing technology within a historical frame, Benjamin acknowledged that a work of art has always lent itself to the process of reproduction. However, what interested him was not simply the act of reproduction but a work’s ‘possibility of *being reproduced*, reproducibility as a mode of being’.⁵² As Weber further argued ‘what [Benjamin] considers historically ‘new’, is the process by which techniques of reproduction increasingly influence and indeed determine the structure of the art-work itself’.⁵³ By approaching reproducibility as a mode of being, Benjamin endowed a work of art with an inherent structure of resistance to its commodification by the bourgeois established modes of production. Part of a work of art’s authenticity and lasting power/influence rests on its relationship with history – its relation to a specific cultural locus and time. The previously held idea of a work’s uniqueness and permanence that had enforced ‘its parasitical dependence on ritual’ is destroyed by its reproducible nature and it instead proposes its newly afforded value as an exhibition object.⁵⁴ At the same time, its reproducibility allowed a work of art to challenge the audience’s structured modes of perception. Whereas the ‘original’ work of art possessed a single meaning, specific to its social, historical and political moment of production, a reproducible work allowed a dialectical consideration of the original moment of creation with the reproducible one. Whereas the first was bestowed with an eternal quality, the latter would be viewed in terms of transition. The reproducible work of art has now acquired a revolutionary potential that allows it to cheerfully destroy and liberate itself from the pre-existing bourgeois prerogatives and open itself up to communal use.

In ‘The Author as Producer’ Benjamin attempted to approach dialectically the debate as to whether the political tendency or the artistic quality of literary works was of principal importance. Rather than seeing these at opposing ends, he argued instead that ‘the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency’.⁵⁵ Benjamin based the interrelation of these two

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian’. *New German Critique*, 5 (1975), 27-58 (p. 33).

⁵² Weber as quoted in Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 42.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. pp. 224-225.

⁵⁵ *Understanding Brecht*, p. 88.

instances on what he called the literary *technique*. By this term, Benjamin characterized ‘the concept which makes literary products accessible to immediate social, and therefore materialist, analysis’ and one that could also represent ‘the dialectical starting-point from which the sterile dichotomy of form and content can be surmounted’.⁵⁶ The literary *technique* was directly concerned with the function of a work of art within its contemporary modes of literary production and not simply with regard to them. Citing Brecht’s epic theatre, film, Soviet journalism and Tretyakov as his examples of employing and producing advanced artistic techniques, Benjamin argued that their works ‘ensured the ultimate concordance between political tendency and literary quality’.⁵⁷ Therefore Benjamin’s analysis of the modernist debate was based on the presupposition that the use of technologically advanced means of production would ultimately have positive effects for revolutionary art.

In the same essay he also discussed the issue of the artist’s political commitment. Having established that art should first be seen as a social practice and activity – as *action* – rather than as an object available to academicism, Benjamin argued against those artists that transform their political struggle into an article of consumption. He cautioned them that ‘commitment is a necessary, but never a sufficient, condition for a writer’s work acquiring an organizing function. For this to happen it is also necessary for the writer to have a teacher’s attitude’.⁵⁸ Benjamin’s comment echoed Brecht’s belief that an artist should not ‘exploit [his] talent in a supposedly uncommitted way’, that he ought to be an educator, an agitator, even a politician.⁵⁹ To achieve his type of commitment, the artist should challenge the traditional way intellectual practice is perceived and instead

learn to think crudely. Crude thoughts belong to the household of dialectical thinking precisely because they represent nothing other than the application of theory to practice; its *application* to practice, not its *dependence* on practice. Action can of course, be as subtle as thought. But a thought must be crude in order to come into its own action.⁶⁰

By appropriating Brecht’s crude thinking, Benjamin translated aesthetic commitment from a theoretical concept into an effective literary praxis that would serve the process of art’s social demystification and introduce the advent of its functional

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 88-89.

⁵⁷ Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) p. 155.

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 98.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Walter Benjamin, ‘A Radio Talk on Brecht’. *New Left Review*, 123 (1980), 92-96 (p. 92).

⁶⁰ *Understanding Brecht*, 81

transformation. Through crude thinking the artists would acquire clarity of thought, consider art as a form of production (rather than a mystical entity) and approach dialectically the relationship between the function of a work of art and its recipient audience.

Benjamin's polemical aesthetics of commitment maintained that 'the trick which conquers this world of things [...] consists in exchanging the historical view of the past for a political one'.⁶¹ He believed that, by substituting an epistemological approach with a politically committed one, the artist would experience dialectically his/her cultural past which would result in a more clarifying view of the present. Thus, the present became the site of historical experience par excellence, as it was within it that the social contradictions and false consciousness would be revealed, where construction presupposed destruction. This particular temporal mode of experiencing reality would awaken the artist to the necessity of redefining art's social function. Through technology new modes of production and perception would surface that would eradicate the doctrine of aestheticism and the bourgeois notion of autonomy.

However, his faith in the democratization of art through technology concealed dangers that Benjamin was not able to explore further. One could argue that he took for granted that a change in the relations of production would automatically follow the change in the means of production.⁶² Benjamin assumed that an enlightened consciousness would triumph from the immediate effects of the new technology, but failed to perceive the level of commodification the popular forms of art endured (film, photography) and the long-term side effects it had on the realm of popular art in general. At the same time, his problematic notion of destruction of old traditions ran the risk of turning itself into another tradition, 'whence the *paradox of destruction*: the more tradition is destroyed, the greater the risk of destruction itself becoming a tradition through repetition'.⁶³ Benjamin's aesthetics of commitment, his re-enactment of the political in art and his close association with Brecht's politics were however, challenged by one of his closest friends, Theodor Adorno.

Adorno's attack on committed art and literature was opposed to Benjamin's views on politicised art and to Brecht's theatrical model. He particularly disapproved

⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter. (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 230.

⁶² Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: a re-presentation*, p. 79.

⁶³ Garcia Alexander Düttmann, 'Tradition and Destruction: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Language'. In *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*. Eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne. (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 32-58 (p. 41). [*italics my emphasis*].

of Brecht's influence on Benjamin's philosophical and political thinking and commented to the latter that 'our theoretical disagreement is not really a discord between us but rather, that it is my task to hold your army steady until the sun of Brecht has once more sunk into exotic waters'.⁶⁴ Adorno's work and critique addressed the position of art within society, but they mostly concentrated on the tensions inherent within a work of art as he felt that resistance could arise within its space. Through his elaborate theory of 'negative dialectics', he set out to develop a new mode of thinking that could be applied both to the work of art and to society without affirming the false consciousness of the capitalist modes of production. As such, it could preserve the tensions inherent in both art and society, offer a new form of engagement and provide a valid critique of the existing social order and the veiled structures of aestheticism.

With regards to Benjamin's enthusiastic acceptance of the emancipatory potential of technology and reproducibility and his emphatic rejection of all autonomous art as counter-revolutionary, Adorno argued that his views were inhibited by 'a sublimated remnant of certain Brechtian motifs'⁶⁵ and maintained that

The principle that governs autonomous works of art is not the totality of their effects but their own inherent structure. They are knowledge as non-conceptual objects. This is the source of their mobility. It is not something of which they have to persuade men, because it has been given into their hands. This is why today autonomous rather than committed art should be encouraged... The notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world.⁶⁶

For Adorno, autonomous art is neither equated with the bourgeois aestheticization of art nor with the kind of art that is in the service of any prevailing political or power structure. At the same time, he did not 'transfer the concept of the magical aura to the 'autonomous work of art'' since he recognised that this could lead to the illusionism and aestheticism of art for art's sake.⁶⁷ Instead, he placed autonomy within the specific historical moment of bourgeois advanced capitalism and discussed how its magical quality was in an inherently dialectical relation with a sense of freedom. By rejecting a sense of totality (that Lukács argued for), an autonomous work of art embraced fragmentation, constant change and open-endedness.

⁶⁴ Theodor W. Adorno & Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*. ed. Henri Lonitz. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 130.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁶⁶ Adorno, 'On Commitment'. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Translation Editor Ronald Taylor. (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 177-195 (p. 193).

⁶⁷ Adorno, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, p. 128.

The autonomous work of art was produced within a society that had established the principle of exchange value as the one that determined its social relations. However, the existence of autonomous works of art that bore within them tensions – thus having a life of their own – undermined ‘a society where nothing is allowed to be itself and everything is subject to the principle of exchange’.⁶⁸ The fact that such works appeared within a society that functioned within a certain established mode of production, presupposed the existence either of alternative conditions of production or that a change in the established economic production could materialise. Therefore, the dialectical relation of the ‘aura’ of a work of art ‘with a certain freedom’ revealed ‘a self-reflexive understanding of its own production process’.⁶⁹ Adorno maintained that the auratic element of an autonomous work of art was declining not because of its technological reproduction, but due to its immanent defensive mechanism against any ideological appropriation.

Adorno also disagreed with Benjamin’s emphasis on the change brought about by mechanical reproduction. He was very sceptical of the revolutionary potential offered by technological advancements and the new modes of production that could affect reception and consumption. In his letter to Benjamin, Adorno commented that ‘it is precisely the film which [possesses an auratic character now], and to an extreme and highly suspect degree’, since it tends to rely more on realistic effects.⁷⁰ Benjamin’s overestimation of the technical character of ‘dependent’ over ‘autonomous’ art marked Benjamin’s enthusiastic view that the proletariat would be affected by the perceptual changes in reproduction.⁷¹ Adorno, however, felt that modernist and popular art ‘both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change (but never, of course, simply as a middle term between Schönberg and the American film). Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up’.⁷² Unlike Schönberg’s atonal music, which could not only resist commodification but also the cultural industry’s illusions of harmony and totality (due to its inner dialectics), Chaplin’s films simply nurtured an uncritical narrative of reality due to its political investment in technology.

⁶⁸ Lambert Zuidervaart, ‘The Social Significance of Autonomous Art: Adorno and Bürger’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48.1 (1990), 61-77 (p. 64).

⁶⁹ Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: a re-presentation*, p. 81.

⁷⁰ Adorno, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, p. 130.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Adorno's aesthetics of 'autonomous' engagement were deeply contrasted with Brecht's attempt to propose a politically infused aesthetics of commitment. In his essay 'On Commitment' Adorno was openly sceptical and critical of the effectiveness of Brecht's epic theatre and his plays and found the latter aesthetically and politically flawed. Not only did they perform an oversimplified representation of reality, but they also infused such representations with mere didacticism. Citing *The Mother* and *The Measures Taken* as examples of glorifying the Party, and *Saint Joan* and *Arturo Ui* as trivializing the social and economic conditioning, Adorno argued that Brecht's plays reduced any political effect they could have since 'the substance of [his] artistic work was the didactic play as an artistic principle'.⁷³ Accusing Brecht's method of resulting in mere formalism and propaganda, Adorno reiterated his belief that he sacrificed the revolutionary potentiality of the aesthetic to the political; 'for the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialised'.⁷⁴

Brecht's evident political commitment and the composition of plays fuelled with political themes urged Adorno to argue that the imposition of a specific ideological discipline (communism) on his aesthetic creations turned Brecht into 'a panegyrist of its harmony', thus exposing a mere didacticism and portraying a 'stylized regression to archaic and provincial forms of expression'.⁷⁵ As such, Brecht failed to portray reality and his theatrical developments, instead of becoming tools for his audience's intellectual liberation, turned into tools of a specific ideological apparatus. Adorno felt that Brecht's texts were lacking any inherent tensions and that it was the absence of a 'proper' dialectic between the work's content, formal elements and external realities that gave 'substance to crude calls for commitment'.⁷⁶ As Harding has argued, Adorno perceived Brecht's oeuvre as an attempt 'to adjust the social whole by protesting society's aberration from preconceived guidelines or values, [but] such art fails to recognize that these same values are intrinsically structured by the dominant social discourse which they ostensibly oppose'.⁷⁷ By refusing a work of art its renewed sense of autonomy, Brecht dismissed the presence

⁷³ Adorno, 'On Commitment', p. 185.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁷⁷ James M. Harding, 'Historical Dialectics and the Autonomy of Art in Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 50.3. (1992), 183-195 (p. 188).

of a new *topos* where the negative tensions of a work of art could be sustained and where resistance could become effective.⁷⁸

Adorno believed that Samuel Beckett's plays, unlike Brecht's committed theory and practice, succeeded in presenting the crisis in meaning and the 'restructuring of meaning as a problem of its form'; they were works of art that responded to the social and historical conditions of modernity.⁷⁹ Their self-referentiality rendered them the status of autonomous works of art. In Beckett's plays 'thought becomes both a means to produce meaning in the work, a meaning which cannot be rendered directly in tangible form, and a means to express the absence of meaning'.⁸⁰ In his essay entitled 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', Adorno discussed how Beckett's play, filled with fragmented speeches, clichés, absurdity or meaninglessness and use of parody, depicted the reified residues of culture. By refusing to offer a rational meaning and a sense of resolution, the play recreated in that catastrophic event (end) – that never actually visibly occurred – the vortex of the capitalist modes of production and consumption human relations were placed in. Within this vortex, language escaped meaning and a stable referent and invited its beholder into a means of non-identity thinking.

HAMM: We're not beginning to ...to...mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that's a good one!⁸¹

Watching the play, the beholder realized that 'ontology comes into its own as the pathology of the false life. It is presented as a state of negative eternity'.⁸² The absence of resistance on the part of the characters in the play is manifested in the regression and amputation of their bodies. Through the use of non-identity thinking, Adorno aims at resisting this kind of regression and at revealing where the bourgeois project has failed. This kind of regression, however, cannot be achieved through action, as is seen in the senseless repetition of the same actions within the play. The rules and structure of language have been broken down and communication cannot hold; everything becomes a repetition without ending or beginning.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁷⁹ Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978), p. 129.

⁸⁰ Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*'. *Notes to Literature*. ed. Rolf Tiedemann. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 241-280 (p. 242).

⁸¹ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: a play in one act. Followed by, Act without words; a mime for one player*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 27

⁸² Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 247.

HAMM: The end is in the beginning and yet you go on'.⁸³

Adorno's aesthetics of engagement, represented by the works of Kafka and Beckett, was presented as an 'antidote' to Brecht's aesthetics of commitment. His severe criticism of Brecht's work aimed at revealing the shortcomings of such a position within a Marxist discourse and within the complex structures of the capitalist culture. Adorno maintained that Brecht's overt inclusion of politics as such and his belief in the revolutionary potential of technology allowed his plays to fall victims to a specific ideology (reducing their effectiveness to a mere propagandistic didacticism) and also stained his overall 'aesthetic form'.⁸⁴ Kafka and Beckett's works, however, through their difficulty in form and expression of the non-identical, could resist assimilation by bourgeois thinking and also expose the latter's subliminal structures of reality. Adorno insisted that 'this is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead'.⁸⁵ Therefore, he endows Kafka and Beckett's apolitical literary and theatrical discourse with an inherent political quality since they can resist the bourgeois reified experience of reality. However, Adorno's study of these authors' intellectual praxis did not develop into a study of how it is related to social praxis. Unlike Adorno, Brecht's aesthetics of commitment aimed at an almost 'realistic' portrayal of action so that the audience would achieve a new understanding of its socially reified conditioning and thus demand social change. By questioning the traditional relationship between the author/producer and the audience, distancing the actor from his/her character, disrupting the linear narrative through the use of film and direct address to the audience, Brecht hoped to engage the audience in a dialectical reading of the imposed bourgeois realities, reveal alternative possibilities for critical thought and underline the need for continuity between the on stage aesthetic praxis and the actual social praxis.

The modernist debate between Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno on the aesthetic and political efficacy of modernist art to produce alternative means of viewing and challenging reality within bourgeois ideology has informed much of the subsequent literature and cultural theory (as exemplified in the works of Howard Brenton, John McGrath, Heiner Müller, Jacques Leenhardt and Fredric Jameson to

⁸³ Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 44.

⁸⁴ Adorno, 'On Commitment', p. 186.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

name but a few). Their contradictory views, expressed in a polemical manner in many instances, offered different critical appraisals exposing the multiplicities of bourgeois ideology and the dangers of the phenomenon of reification. Brecht and Lukács, through their dispute over form and content, exposed the different ways of viewing reality and of acquiring a relationship with it. Lukács felt that the foundation of a revolutionary consciousness lay in the continuation of the nineteenth-century progressive novels of Mann and similarly, that a work of art that presented harmony, unity and coherence could be truly accessible to the masses. Brecht's epic theatre, with its strong political argumentation, aimed at re-working the aesthetic structures of realism as perceived by Lukács, revealing in the process the contradiction between the way social forces appear and actually work and thus forcing his audience to confront political and moral choices. Benjamin, who was in favour of Brecht's experimental theatre, felt that the destruction of the auratic quality of a work of art would liberate it from the burden of tradition. Such destruction could occur only through technology which would not only change the relationship of the artist with his/her object, but also the means and modes of production and reception. Adorno was very sceptical of Benjamin's optimism regarding the democratising promise of technology; instead, he felt that technology helped increase the auratic quality of a work of art. He was in favour of works of arts that through their self-referentiality could expose the tensions inherent in them and retain a certain level of autonomy. As revealed particularly through Adorno and Brecht's writings, the original debate on form and content was schematically re-written as 'autonomy' versus 'commitment', thus exposing two different dialectics regarding the relationship between aesthetics and political reality. Although the debate concerning the aesthetics of commitment and autonomy occurred firstly within the European Marxist cultural writings, it very soon crossed over to the USA where the New York Intellectuals extended the debate, reinforcing the autonomy position.

V. Crossing the Atlantic: The aesthetics of commitment within the USA.

By the early 1940s, after both Brecht and Adorno moved to the USA, escaping the political, aesthetic and intellectual fascist threat, the power and influence of the American Left had diminished and the intellectuals' social commitment to change and radicalism had shifted towards the defence of American liberal democracy and its

governmental agencies. The history of the American Left is filled with a series of complicated but intriguing ideological and political appropriations but as its history has proved, even at its peak it was never allowed to break the American political dichotomy of Democrats and Republicans. By 1901 the Social Democratic Party (SDP) merged with the Socialist Labour Party to form the Socialist Party of America whose membership grew from 13,000 in 1901 to 118,000 by 1912. The party included both moderate and radical socialists but their opposition to World War I, as expressed through their magazine *The Masses*, even after the USA had abandoned its neutral position and declared war against Germany and Austria-Hungary, led to its prosecution. Fearing the growing popularity of the American Left and its anti-war activities, the attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer and his assistant John Edgar Hoover used the Espionage Act (1917) and the Sedition Act (1918) to launch a campaign against the radical left, which resulted in the imprisonment of such political figures as Eugene V. Debs, Philip Randolph, John Reed, Max Eastman, and Emma Goldman and the latter's deportation to Russia.

However, even among the party itself there were growing disagreements. In 1919 the more conservative leadership declared its opposition to the Russian revolution and expelled those contesting its decision. Among those were John Reed, Michael Gold and William Z. Foster who decided to form the American Communist Labour Party, signifying through the substitution of 'socialist' by 'communist' its intention to join the Communist International (Comintern). What followed such a declaration was not only polemical disputes between the parties but the menace of Palmer's raids and the red scare (1919-1920). Palmer feared that the success of the Russian Revolution would ultimately lead to the overthrow of the American government by the American communist and socialist parties. He also feared that their proposals to improve working conditions, housing, welfare and extend the vote to people otherwise excluded would re-shift the political dynamics. Foster's declarations that 'the disillusionment of large masses with the two traditional parties of American capitalism remains the biggest political fact today', that "“Democracy” under the capitalist system is a set of forms to mask the dictatorship of the capitalist class' and his urge that the party needed 'to organize the disillusioned workers into the Workers Party as well as to unite them for the immediate struggle upon as wide a

basis as possible' alarmed Palmer.⁸⁶ What complicated matters even further for Palmer was the political endorsement of these parties and their policies by such intellectual figures as John Dos Passos, Clifford Odets, Howard Da Silva, John Howard Lawson and Samuel Ornitz. Eventually though the power of the American left parties diminished as a result both of their persecution during the 1920s and the 1930s policies of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal plans to manage the depression caused by the Wall Street crash in October 1929.

One of the intellectual groups that reflected on the political, social, economic and aesthetic changes and influenced American cultural politics was that of the so-called New York Intellectuals. The group was comprised by Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, William Phillips and Dwight Macdonald among others and the *Partisan Review* became their medium of expression and debate.⁸⁷ The group initially attempted to integrate literary theory with Marxism as expressed in the first editorial statement of the journal in 1934 and a few subsequent volumes (until 1936), but soon abandoned this objective and resorted to the development of an anti-Stalinist rhetoric that permeated all aspects of cultural analysis and appreciation. Such tendencies became apparent in the editorial statement of 1937, when the *Partisan Review*, after a brief period of suspension, reappeared. By that time their initial desire at proposing an aesthetics of commitment (similar to Brecht and Benjamin's) that would consider a work of art as a result both of formal experimentations and political radicalism was translated into a discomfort that was carried over into the 1950s. The 1952 symposium entitled 'Our Country and Our Culture' represented the complete abandonment of any previously held leftist or revolutionary positions and the consolidation of an aesthetics of liberalism.

William Phillips, revisiting in 1962 the political and cultural conditions of the 1930s in America, commented that 'despite the fact that the radical movement [...] addressed itself to the major issues of modern life, in America it always seemed alien and off-beat, like some avant-garde tendency that had not yet become respectable'.⁸⁸ Expressing the sentiments of most New York Intellectuals, Phillips rejected the relevance of radicalism within a modernist American cultural scene due to the incongruity between its 'relevance, centrality, universality, and the sectarian crudity

⁸⁶ William Z. Foster, 'The Workers Party to the Fore'. *The Workers Monthly*, 4.1 (1924), 9-11 (p. 9).

⁸⁷ A more in-depth consideration and discussion of their positions will follow in chapter two.

⁸⁸ William Phillips, 'What Happened in the 1930's'. *Commentary*, 34.3 (1962), 204-212 (p. 205).

of almost everything it said and did'.⁸⁹ Phillips' comment reflected the common misconception of the American Left's literary-political world adherence to a single particular cultural line. At the same time, he emphasised the state of alienation and 'sectarian crudity' of the American Left that highlighted (in his mind) a lack of critical nuances and conflicts, a lack of authenticity and an uncritical appropriation of a dogmatic ideology. Phillips lamented the oversimplified correlation of the American Left and the Communist Party and was convinced that the determination of American radicalism's literary course by the party impeded Marxism from taking on 'a native accent'.⁹⁰

Phillips believed that the resistance to Marxism within the USA resulted from the artists' choice to employ a simplistic literary form and language when addressing their audience, 'entangled with the free-wheeling, grass roots tradition', instead of relating themselves to the 'most advanced [...] most radical' figures of Joyce and Kafka.⁹¹ Although Adorno and the Frankfurt School were never academically related to the New York Intellectuals, the intellectual semblance between Phillips' position and that of Adorno is evident. Similar to Adorno, Phillips believed that the uncritical association of politics with art (performed by the American radical left) was 'populist, insular, anti-intellectual' and led to the employment of 'crude aesthetics [...] and populist slogans – like the idea of art as a weapon, or that of proletarian art'.⁹² Both men's antipathy to the ideological subordination of art to politics led them to the critical examination of works by Eliot, Joyce, Kafka and Beckett that could provide a valid resistance to the ever-increasing popular art and to the literary crude aesthetics of power. At the same time, this proximity of views reveals that the development of the aesthetics of autonomy as an alternative to the aesthetics of commitment occurred on the same continents almost simultaneously, although the participating intellectuals were never in contact.⁹³

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 205.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 206.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 208-9.

⁹² Ibid., pp. 208-9.

⁹³ According to Peter U. Hohendahl, the aesthetics of autonomy was not the only common position developed between Adorno and the New York Intellectuals. 'For example, Horkheimer and Adorno's retreat from a Marxist-socialist position, which occurred during the 1940s, is paralleled by a significant shift within the American left from a socialist to a liberal position with strong nationalist overtones. In 'The Displaced Intellectual? Adorno's American Years revisited'. *New German Critique*, 56. Special issue on Theodor W. Adorno (1992), 76-100 (p.78).

The New York Intellectuals, 'in the spirit of Enlightenment, thought of themselves as public intellectuals' that could reach out to an educated audience and inform it of the contemporary political and cultural issues.⁹⁴ Detesting the cultural populism of their contemporary literary academic discourse, they decided to bring European cultural perspectives to American literature and art, thus infusing it with a cosmopolitan validity. On the debate over form and content, they advocated that it was through the 'writer's sensibility' that a proper approach to their dichotomy could emerge.⁹⁵ Because of a writer's sensibility, form and content could be perceived as two aspects of a unified vision; thus the one does not exclude the other or prevail upon each other. Instead, Phillips argues, 'since any suggestive idea of *form* would have to include the elements which give shape and quality to content, form should be defined as a *mode of perception*'.⁹⁶ Drawing on the avant-garde's technical innovations and experimentations, Phillips comments that the new formal devices become 'the method of verbalizing a sensory approach to experience' of a specific literary content.⁹⁷ As such form offers a 'structural embodiment of the content' and their equal fusion within a work of art is an illustration of dialectical unity.⁹⁸

Although Phillips does not clarify what he means by 'sensibility', he adamantly argues that it is 'the agent of selection and perception. The writer's grasp of intellectual and emotional currents and his feeling for prose and poetic forms as instruments which have already expressed some phases of these currents constitute a single quality.'⁹⁹ By approaching a work of art as the organic result of the artist's sensibility (and providing as his examples Eliot, Joyce and Shakespeare), Phillips postulates that the artist's commitment would be neither to the production of a didactically propagandistic work (emphasising content) nor to an unintelligible formalistic experiment. Rather, the artist's commitment would be to his/her artistic consciousness identified as 'some pure vision that was not only revolutionary but also messianic, and was rooted in the assumption of a moral and intellectual elite'.¹⁰⁰ Phillips' almost utopian notion of 'sensibility' might have provided a nexus between

⁹⁴ Eugene Goodheart, 'The Abandoned Legacy of the New York Intellectuals'. *American Jewish History*, 80.3 (1991), 361-376 (p. 372).

⁹⁵ William Phillips, 'Form and Content'. *Partisan Review*, 2.6 (1935), 31-40 (p. 39).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.34-35.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁰ Phillips, 'What Happened in the 1930's', p. 211.

form and content, but at the expense of a highly moralistic, elitist and ritualistic conception of the work of art. It would seem then that a work's 'sensibility' would not expose its inherent contradictions, as it would be 'continuous with a common experience' rather than competing with it.¹⁰¹ At the same time, the artist is extolled as the *topos* where a proper cognitive, literary and social unity would take place; the author becomes the content of the work and his individuality is re-emphasised. Thus, the artist's author-ity (challenged by the avant-garde) would be reinstated and the dialectical *agonas* among the work of art, its author, its modes of production and its reception by the audience would be hindered. The emphasis on the individual identity of the artist and his 'sensibility' aimed at re-introducing the realm of subjective experience that had been affronted by the prominence of social praxis.

The New York Intellectuals usually omitted from their discussion on form and content the importance and relevance of the debate to the theatrical space (thus excluding any 'dialogue' with Brecht). However, their emphasis on the medium of the novel brought them in contact with Lukács' work, albeit at least thirty seven years after the publication of his seminal work *The Theory of the Novel* in 1920 and twenty years after *The History of the Novel* (1936-1937). Influenced by Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, Irving Howe commented that

the political novel – I have in mind its "ideal" form – is peculiarly a work of internal tensions. To be a novel at all, it must contain the usual representation of human behaviour and feeling; yet it must also absorb into its stream of movement the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology. The novel deals with moral sentiments, with passions and emotions; it tries above all to capture the quality of concrete experience. Ideology, however, is abstract, as it must be, and therefore likely to be recalcitrant whenever an attempt is made to incorporate it into the novel's stream of sensuous impression. The conflict is inescapable: the novel tries to confront experience in its immediacy and closeness, while ideology is by its nature general and inclusive. Yet it is precisely from this conflict that the political novel gains its interest and takes on the aura of high drama.¹⁰²

In the above quote (resonant of Adorno and Lukács' theories in parts), Howe is producing an 'ideal' form for the political novel within the American context; in this complicated definition, Howe comments on how a novel's aesthetic evaluation and historical perspective were different but not mutually exclusive. In the case of the political novel, their dialectical co-existence could offer a concrete experience

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁰² Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel*. (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), pp. 20-22.

(reminiscent of Lukács' 'totality') that escaped immediacy and ideological identification. Since art could expose the abstract process of dehumanization within ideology, a political perspective could also reveal certain aesthetic limitations. For the New York Intellectuals, the spectre of ideology and the realm of art should be in a constant dialogue, collaboration or antagonism, but culture should never become the creature of (revolutionary) politics. Therefore, as Phillips concurred 'a radical literature and a radical politics must be kept apart. For radical politics of the modern variety has really served as an antidote to literature'.¹⁰³

As the following chapter will present in detail through a closer reading of their writings in the *Partisan Review*, the New York Intellectuals initially (1934-1936) proposed a more revolutionary and polemic cultural politics predicated on Marxist aesthetics, but by 1937 they had committed themselves to the study of a selective modernist literature (almost excluding a consideration of modernist theatre) that offered a specific didactic reading of the texts to their distinctively middle-class audience. Their aesthetics of commitment, although still predicated on European modernism, revolved around the forging of an American culture that would resist any ideological subordination and would display the double capacity of appreciating the literary value of a work of art and its political significance at the same time. However, their commitment soon turned into an adherence to formalistic principles (further extended by the New Critics), which they hoped would ensure art's individual authority and autonomy from any form of politics. Their commitment to this new type of literary appreciation hindered a more dialectical encounter between the works of art and the artist's political engagement. As such, it proposed an aesthetic that would be more 'humanistic', provided ideas central to the individual's moral behaviour and was attuned to the principles of liberal democracy. As the next chapter will demonstrate, their re-invented aesthetics of commitment –conforming in many cases to the cultural discourses of the Cold War – became the prescribed aesthetic model within American culture; in particular, the revisiting of the 1952 symposium 'Our Country and Our Culture' both in 1984 and 2002 reiterated the New York Intellectuals' politics of reform (as opposed to revolutionary politics) and their attack on the academic and cultural left. Their ever increasing importance and popularity underline a continuity in

¹⁰³ Phillips, 'What Happened in the 1930's', p. 212.

themes and literary attitudes on the part of many American artists, critics and intellectuals within contemporary American cultural politics.

Chapter Two

‘The myth and the powerhouse’: Liberalism, Cold War and the *Partisan Review* .

I. Introducing the New York Intellectuals.

Tobin Siebers’ claim that ‘modern criticism is a Cold War criticism’ summarizes the powerful correlation of Cold War politics and the cultural events that unfolded predominantly during the second half of the twentieth century.¹ The spirit of Cold War cultural criticism was defined in the United States during that period. However, during the 1920s and 1930s the American intellectuals hoped that Marxism could prove to be a useful mechanism for a constructive criticism of American life, culture and institutions. They acknowledged the reality of American society as ‘material, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable and unpleasant’ and the way to resist such a reality was through the notion of Marxist revolution.² The appeal of communism was remarkable; it offered a fresh view of politics, a sense of expectation, possibility and active participation. Terry Cooney has suggested that ‘as a ready-made critique of the present system [and] as an incentive to art through its vision of the future, socialism was intellectually very useful’. It is no wonder that many intellectuals not only used Marxist thinking in their writings but were also members of the American Communist Party.³ However, with the Nazi-Soviet pact, the Moscow Trials, the sterility of the American Communist Party and the active involvement of the United States in the Second World War, leftist politics suffered a great blow. At this stage the revival of high modernism (combined with Cold War politics) was enacted ‘by a self-conscious cosmopolitan intelligentsia – a group of anti-Stalinist intellectuals associated with the *Partisan Review* and Columbia University’.⁴ This group was known as the ‘New York

¹ *Cold War criticism and the politics of skepticism*. (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. vii.

² Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955), p. 13.

³ Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 21.

⁴ Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 60.

Intellectuals' and was comprised of Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, William Phillips, Clement Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald, to name but a few.

The New York Intellectuals were a group of men and women of mostly middle-class and Jewish origin working and living in New York City during the 1930s. Most of them were educated at and identified with Columbia University at which they also held academic positions. They became prominent and influential cultural and social critics of mid-twentieth-century American thought and remained active contributors to intellectual debates until their deaths. The members of this group formed a tight party (penetrable to those young intellectuals that were sympathetic to the group's attitudes) whose allegiance was towards intellectualism, the defence of modernist attitudes against popular ones, the revival of American culture and the restitution of liberalism. At the same time, most of the intellectuals had participated (either as contributors or editors) at some point in such journals as the *Partisan Review*, *Commentary* and *Dissent* with which they were identified throughout their careers. Although the group never named itself 'The New York Intellectuals', they were always referred to as such in the plethora of critical writings on the group and its cultural influence.⁵ The name most probably came about because of their city of residence but also identifies the strong ties among all participants (whether through marriages and love affairs, strong friendships or relentless and bickering antagonisms).

The intellectual development of the New York Intellectuals started near the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. In addition to the stock market crash of 1929, the memories of the depression and the New Deal plan were vivid in their minds and they attributed the economic state of the United States to the failure of capitalism. In their minds capitalism had given rise to excessive consumerism in the early 1920s, which had in turn fed an unquestioning faith in prosperity that had a devastating effect on the people after the events of 1929. The American Communist Party and Marxist ideology became the Intellectuals' political utopia, since they

⁵ See Aaron Daniel, *Writers on the Left*. (New York: Harcourt, 1961); James Burkhardt Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968); Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and their worlds*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Terry Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Also more information can be found in the memoirs and autobiographies by members of the group such as Mary McCarthy. *Intellectual Memoirs: New York, 1936-1938*. (New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

embraced a new revolutionary spirit that they believed might prove useful for the reconstruction of American life and culture. The major theme in the development of the New York Intellectuals was the quest to find and remodel an American culture and literature that would engage itself with the current social and literary issues of the country, one that could stand as equally rich and complex next to the tradition of Europe. As Terry Cooney suggested, the group aimed at contributing to American intellectual life by putting forward ‘a concern with identity and a need to establish a place for themselves; a belief in their own centrality and in that of New York City; a commitment to Western culture, to secular thought, to critical intelligence; and an eagerness to engage the world that their worst detractors could hardly find appealing’.⁶

Throughout the early stages of their careers, the New York Intellectuals occupied an ambivalent, complicated and sometimes confusing standpoint. They were intrigued and fascinated by Marxism and leftism and aimed to include it within their model of literary theory and criticism; at the same time though, their thought was rooted in the tradition of American pragmatism, its models of analysis and the spirit of liberalism that it endorsed. Their attempt to combine the two led (as the chapter will expose) to two different and polarised attitudes: the eager partisanship and endorsement of Marxist socialism during the early 1930s and the more cautious (sometimes even calculated) and conservative application of liberal cultural principles in the 1940s and 1950s. It was the latter that influenced most prominently American literary thought and criticism and that paved the way for the neoconservative attitudes of the twentieth century. My choice of texts to discuss in this chapter aims at reflecting such a change and critically evaluating how it influenced American literary thought in relation to its predecessors and European counterparts. At the same time, it aspires to highlight how their discussion on culture seemed to constantly omit an in-depth and critical consideration of theatre (bearing in mind the highly successful and popular presence of the Federal Theatre Project’s productions during the 1930s) and also highlight their selective consideration of the serious debates concerning modernism and its aesthetic/political impetus occurring in Europe (as presented in Chapter One).

⁶ *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals*, p. 18.

From the vast amount of writings by the members of this group, I will predominantly concentrate on their writings in the most influential journal they were associated with, the *Partisan Review*. The first part of the chapter will deal with the inception of the journal, the intellectuals' infatuation with Marxism as exposed in the journal's editorial statement and their initial thoughts on proletarian literature and engaged art. However, within the space of two years, the intellectuals gradually abandoned Marxism as a cultural theory, were very soon working from within liberalism, wanting to reinforce the notion of complexity within the literary clique and became fierce proponents of an anti-Stalinist discourse. This discussion will be followed by the examination of Lionel Trilling's seminal book, *The Liberal Imagination*⁷ and Clement Greenberg's 'new' version of the avant-garde within an American context, as expressed in his article 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' published in the *Partisan Review* in 1938. This discussion will expose more clearly how their initially proposed avant-garde culture (working from within a 'radical' liberal context but able to resist mass culture) and hope to create a new independent Left that would be free of any Stalinist or communist innuendoes failed. The failure of such an ambitious scheme not only occurred because of their frustration towards the simplifications that the Stalinist ideology represented but also because the intellectuals had always worked from within liberalism. Throughout their work, their main aim was to reinvent and rectify liberalism, to restore its 'great primal act of imagination', its variousness, possibility and awareness of complexity, not to create a new revolutionary aesthetic movement within American culture.⁸ Such aspirations will be fully revealed in the third part of the chapter where the consideration of the symposium 'Our Country and Our Culture' organized by the *Partisan Review* in 1952 – regarded as the hallmark of the acceptance and establishment of cultural Cold War politics – will take place. A discussion of a selection of views put forward at the symposium will expose that their distaste for the cultural and political manifestations of Stalinism (an argument running throughout their writings) served as a pretext for their complete repudiation of any leftist politics and for their complete identification of that politics with Stalinism. The New York Intellectuals' criticism of the role and status of political art within social reality affected the perception and practice of

⁷ I intend to focus on the preface to the book (pp. ix-vi) and the chapters 'Reality in America' (pp. 3-21) and 'The Meaning of a Literary Idea' (pp. 281-303).

⁸ Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, p. xiii.

modernism within the United States. Their theories were soon in tune with Senator McCarthy's anti-Communist pursuits and their views, as I hope to expose, not only led to a depoliticised cultural Marxist and leftist politics, but also fortified the sterile Cold War ideas of the status and purpose of literature and culture. Their writings became some of the most accomplished expressions of American cultural Cold War politics and the extent of their influence can be seen even in contemporary criticism. As discussed at the end of the chapter, the revisiting of the original 1952 symposium in 1984 and 2002 reinforced the popularity of their cultural and ideological discourse and the continuity of their liberal theories.

II. The 'new' New York Intellectuals, *Partisan Review* and Marxist thought: a (dis)engaged relationship.

It was the 1776 Declaration of Independence that first publicly expressed within both political and intellectual circles the desire of the newly founded American state to disengage American politics from the ongoing process of 'Europeanization'. Although primarily influenced by the ideas of the English political theorist John Locke and European Enlightenment ideals, the declaration indicated a departure from the governmental processes and structures of the time, favouring a more republican system of representation as opposed to the European monarchical schemes. Up until World War I and its involvement during the last years of conflict, the United States had to deal predominantly with internal affairs, aiming at stabilising its status as a new republic and creating a coherent American identity for its citizens. Therefore, it had chosen a more isolationist position towards Europe and was thus able to deflect the surge and influence of European political ideologies. However, the Russian October Revolution and the triumph of modernism in the 1920s and 1930s initiated a new stage in the Europeanization of American thought, both in aesthetic and political terms. What further emphasised such an influence was the presence of many American intellectuals and authors in Europe, who had witnessed first hand all the major political and aesthetic changes taking place within the Old World and reported them back to their own country.

One such person was John Reed, whose first-hand account of the October Revolution in his book *Ten Days that Shook the World* empowered the presence of Communist ideology and led to the creation of many John Reed Clubs aimed at

disseminating this ideology within the United States.⁹ Many of the New York Intellectuals came of age within such a political and aesthetic atmosphere, were inspired by the existence of an alternative radical political ideology, and some of them, like William Phillips and Philip Rahv, became members both of the American Communist Party (albeit briefly) and the John Reed Clubs. Being dissatisfied with the prominence and monopoly of the *New Masses* (that had become an official publication of the American Communist Party by the 1930s) and its restrictions to discussing mainly political and industrial issues, both Phillips and Rahv wanted to create a new independent journal that would allow new writers and critics to explore their ideas and that would deal predominantly with cultural and literary issues.

In February 1934 Phillips and Rahv launched the *Partisan Review* (which ceased publication in April 2003) that was to become the group's intellectual home and which also became from the late 1930s to mid 1950s the voice of extensive debates on American intellectual life. The work of the intellectuals, as expressed in the journal, is marked by a dialectic between social reality and literary imagination. In the first few volumes (1934-36), they acknowledge the reality of society defined in terms of class struggle, the existence of institutions one needs to resist, the growing need for systematic discussions of literature and criticism and the need 'to concentrate on the theoretical implications of the new critical system', that is, the Communist version of proletarian literature.¹⁰ In the editorial statement in 1934 the New York Intellectuals commented on how the economic and political crisis of capitalism and 'the successful building of socialism in the Soviet Union have deeply affected American life, thought and art'.¹¹ They went on to define the political and cultural role of the new magazine:

We propose to concentrate on creative and critical literature, but we shall maintain a definite viewpoint – that of the revolutionary working class. Through our specific literary medium we shall participate in the struggle of workers and sincere intellectuals against imperialist war, fascism, national and racial oppression, and for the abolition of the system, which breeds these evils. The defence of the Soviet Union is one of our principal tasks. [...] We shall combat not only the decadent culture of the exploiting classes but also the debilitating liberalism, which at times seeps into our writers through the pressure of class-alien force.¹²

⁹ John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*. (London: Martin Lawrence, 1932).

¹⁰ James Burkhart Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*. (New York: John Willey and Sons, 1968), p. 120.

¹¹ 'Editorial Statement'. *Partisan Review*, 1.1 (February-March 1934), 2 (p. 2).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

The magazine and the intellectuals' affiliation with communist ideology and the proletarian literary movement were openly declared. With this declaration they placed emphasis on publishing literature and criticism from a revolutionary working-class perspective and, at the same time, avoiding the middle class liberalism that had dominated the American critical tradition. By also identifying the *Partisan Review* as an organ of the John Reed Club, they placed the magazine and themselves within a tradition of radically leftist cultural, literary and social politics. The strongly political and ideological discourse they applied represented the Soviet Union as the vanguard of a worldwide revolutionary movement 'of which the project to create a new and revolutionary art in the United States was a part'.¹³ The perception of the group's presence in the intellectual movement as the 'growth of the new within the old'¹⁴ clearly affirmed the more actively critical role political art assumed in American cultural life, a role that it could perform from inside the society and one that would be in touch with the revolutionary changes occurring so rapidly.

William Phillips and Phillip Rahv, who were from the start the main editors of the magazine, regarded proletarian literature 'both [as] a literature for and about the working class, which grew out of an emerging revolution, and literature that would answer the problems of the modern intellectuals'.¹⁵ They hoped that the alienation experienced by the artist during the 1920s could be overcome by proletarian literature, as it offered the American artist a new vision for his/her country and thus a reconciliation. The artist could feel more 'at home', since middle-class liberalism and capitalism were no longer as powerful and could not regulate either literary tastes or literary criticism. However, although they pledged their alliance with the communist cultural movement, there were from early on traces in their writings of the issues that would later separate them from the proletariat and influence their ideological considerations of the role of literature and culture. They were ambiguous about what 'tradition' could mean within the context of the *Partisan Review* and also expressed their reluctance about the agitational nature of proletariat culture. As Gilbert observes, 'the word 'tradition' in the early pages of the magazine implied little more than respect for past standards of literary performance'.¹⁶ The New York Intellectuals

¹³ Harvey M Teres, *Renewing the Left: politics, imagination, and the New York Intellectuals*. (New York, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 131.

¹⁴ Editorial statement', *Partisan Review*, 1.1 (February-March 1934), 2 (p. 2)

¹⁵ Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, p. 121.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

attempted to minimize the contradictions within the movement as experienced in the United States, by arguing that a dialectic relationship should exist between the two opposing traditions of the avant-garde and bourgeois liberalism. They claimed that the critic and artist ought to be aware of their literary bourgeois past, as it informed proletarian literature. Through this contradiction, a new improved tradition would emerge that would openly challenge and more effectively criticize the unfolding social, political and literary scene since it would be aware of its ideologically bourgeois past. However, 'this Marxian theory camouflaged an ambiguity about the past'¹⁷ and an ambivalent position towards the avant-garde. The New York Intellectuals never really embraced or understood the avant-garde as materialised in Europe through such movements as Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism and the Bauhaus. Instead, their notion of the avant-garde was epitomised by a literary modernism found in the writings of such authors as T.S. Eliot or Thomas Mann that represented a more conservative and traditional practice of literature and its relationship with politics. As a result, the New York Intellectuals used the terms avant-garde and modernism interchangeably during the first years; in their subsequent writings though the use of the term modernism was crystallised, thus clarifying their preference of an Anglophone literary tradition and their unfortunate conglomeration of these two distinctive terms. For them, Eliot and Mann's works represented a 'sensitivity' that was necessary for the creation of a proletarian sensibility.¹⁸ The proletarian artist's function was not to completely reject bourgeois tradition, but to acknowledge it as its working past, re-evaluate it, revise the attitudes towards it and set the new standards for a proletarian culture. This ambiguous attitude towards 'tradition' and their reluctance to engage in a critical encounter with bourgeois aesthetic theory did not allow the New York Intellectuals' early writings to clearly express their criteria for a proletarian culture and a workable theory of radical left culture; moreover, it emphasised that American radicalism (as opposed to contemporary European radicalism) was more estranged from the proletariat and the working-class party than the Intellectuals wanted to admit.

This proposition of a dialectical relationship between the avant-garde and bourgeois culture advocated that proletarian literature ought to cease being primarily propaganda. The question of the relationship between art and propaganda was

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁸ William Phillips, 'Form and Content'. *Partisan Review*, 2.6 (1935), 31-40 (p. 36).

discussed extensively within the *Partisan Review* and it aimed at disputing ‘leftism’, a term coined by Phillips and Rahv to denote the critical tendency to deny the bourgeois heritage, promote a propagandist conception of literature, and encourage overt didacticism’.¹⁹ In this discussion of propaganda, the journal also invited contributions from leading European Marxist theoreticians. One such instance was Lukács’ article on ‘Propaganda or Partisanship?’ It is therefore, interesting to note the absence of any response from the three remaining theorists mentioned in chapter one. There is no evidence to suggest that Benjamin, Brecht or Adorno were aware of such a debate or the existence of *Partisan Review* but there is also no evidence of any attempt on the editors and magazine’s part to print any of their responses or writings (apart from the odd review of their work) throughout the magazine’s whole existence. Hence, it rested on Lukács to offer a European perspective on the debate, but it was a one-sided argument, lacking the complexities and polyphony of a more engaged debate as revealed in chapter one. In his article, Lukács claimed that the revolutionary work ought to be ‘a portrayal of objective reality, its actual motive forces and its actual trends of development’.²⁰ Thus, the way to eliminate the distinction between art and propaganda was by recording objective reality, since it could depict a valid vision of class struggle and thus validate the call for revolution. As Lukács argued, ‘correct dialectical portrayal and literary re-creation of reality presuppose partisanship on the writer’s part’ rather than propaganda or agitation.²¹ Lukács’ article provoked a response from Rahv; although he expressed admiration for the article, he felt that Lukács’ use of the term ‘propaganda’ was problematic given that people do not always mean his meaning when they use the word’.²² Rahv maintained that the term ‘propaganda’ should be reserved as a derogatory characterization of the kind of literature produced by the ‘leftists’, a group of ‘primitives’ that aspired ‘to hypostasize their lack of talent and to repudiate the cultural heritage’.²³ It could be argued then that Rahv’s response not only represented the Intellectuals’ unwillingness to educate their audience of the nuances that Lukács’ term ‘propaganda’ unveiled but

¹⁹ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 141. James Murphy has also commented that Phillips and Rahv used the term ‘leftism’ to include ‘disregard for aesthetic values, the limitation of literary criticism to sociological analysis, and the demand that proletarian literature be narrowly agitational in character’ (as quoted in Foley, p. 141).

²⁰ Georg Lukacs, ‘Propaganda or Partisanship?’ *Partisan Review*, 1.2 (1934), 36-46 (p. 43).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²² Phillip Rahv, ‘Valedictory on the Propaganda Issue.’ *Little Magazine*, 1 (1934), 2 (p. 2).

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

also their reluctance to explore such a debate further and undertake a more rigorous, inclusive and extensive debate on the matter.

Thus, from very early on, the *Partisan Review* encouraged the proletarian artist to stop producing ‘propaganda art’ and consequently reinforcing didacticism, which was a characteristic of ‘leftism’. For the journal ‘literature reflected politics only when it depicted social forces as a part of a general perception of reality. Only in this sense was literature a part of the radical movement: a work of art could never be judged merely by its agitational effectiveness’.²⁴ The New York Intellectuals felt that this was last manifested in the United States by the 1920s literary movement of social criticism, which although powerful, was not satisfying in their minds. As a result, they aspired to instigate the resurgence of a new literary movement that would focus on social reality and issues but at the same time serve as excellent examples of ‘good’ and powerful modernist literary values. This early tendency of the journal to attempt to discuss the relation of literary form and content led to its final rejection of proletariat literature and of the direct relation between political ideology and literature; for the *Partisan Review*, revolutionary literature was part of a revolutionary culture and not solely part of a political movement.²⁵ Moreover, as both Rahv and Phillips strongly argued, literary criticism was not a weapon of politics; it was there to guide literature.²⁶ The disillusionment with the cultural revolution ‘promised’ by the Communist movement marked the retreat of the New York Intellectuals and the journal itself from proletariat literature and the radical left movement.

A few months after the circulation of the first volumes, both William Phillips and Philip Rahv decided to suspend the publication of the *Partisan Review*. By that time the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the Spanish Civil War and the Moscow Trials had taken place and the discussion had shifted from literary subjects to politics, thus making the differences of opinion with the American Communist Party more evident and irreconcilable. The editors did not want the journal to be considered as an active organ of the American Communist Party, but rather as an independent literary magazine, disengaged from any ‘organized political expressions’, and felt that the emphasis on practical politics resulted in the decline of the radical spirit of

²⁴ Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, p. 128.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²⁶ Philip Rahv and Wallace Phelps [William Phillips]. ‘Criticism’. *Partisan Review*, 2.7 (1935), 16-25 (p. 17)

literature.²⁷ They maintained that a more philosophical relationship between literature and politics should exist, one that would strengthen the radicalism of art without submitting to any ideological ends. Feeling betrayed by the Marxist consciousness, Phillips and Rahv argued that the uneasiness between ‘consciousness and domestic stasis’ could only be resolved ironically ‘through the Europeanization of American literature’,²⁸ albeit a selective Europeanization.

The American social and cultural values of pluralism, liberalism and rationalism had been Europeanized by the adoption of Marxism. However, Phillips and Rahv felt that very few American writers (such as James Farrell) had been able to escape the ‘dogmas of the proletariat aesthetic [and thus expose] themselves to the materialist spirit of Marxism and to its dynamic reading of history’.²⁹ They also attributed the failure of American proletarian literature of the 1930s not to its Marxist elements, but to ‘the pragmatic patterns and lack of consciousness that dominate the national heritage’.³⁰ For the two editors, the Europeanization of American literature signified the meeting and struggle of the old and new values in the consciousness of the artist/intellectual and the artist’s ability to convey this moral struggle; they felt that European writers like Kafka, Malraux and Silone should serve as valuable examples for the American writer. The new American artist ought to be aware of and avoid the ‘false Europeanization’ that occurred in the literature of the 1930s that turned Marxism into a scholastic formula and hid its political agenda in old literary values.³¹

With this article published just a few months before the reappearance of the *Partisan Review*, Phillips and Rahv called attention to the issues and themes that would inform the resurfaced journal. It would be in the consciousness of the intellectual (rather than the proletariat) that politics would meet with art and the intellectual’s discussion of art would remain divorced from any ideological involvement with practical politics. Thus, the intellectual became politically estranged from society, but because of his dual status both as an artist and a citizen,

²⁷ ‘Editorial Statement’. *Partisan Review*, 4.1 (December 1937), 3-4 (p. 3). By 1935 the American Communist Party’s literary movement had withdrawn its active support of revolutionary culture and was more interested in creating a more flexible approach to literature so as to accommodate sympathetic members of the middle class. (Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*, pp. 133-4)

²⁸ William Phillips and Philip Rahv. ‘Literature in a Political Decade.’ *New Letters in America*. Ed. Horace Gregory. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1937) pp. 170-180 (p. 178).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

s/he was able to exhibit the appropriate sensibility and sensitivity to deal with the relationship between art and politics and reunite them so as to serve the purposes of a revolutionary culture. At the same time, they commented on the emergence of a new 'radical' class, that of the intelligentsia, which would inform modern art and would become the central figure of modern society 'through [its] successive phases of assertion, alienation, and survival'.³² Thus, the notion of the proletariat as the radical, revolutionary man was replaced with that of the intellectual and the American intellectual assumed the 'new' role of an alienated being, living within a society s/he opposed and fighting against both the bourgeois mass culture and the didactic aesthetics of 'leftism'. But in order for all these changes to take place, the Europeanization of American literature had to materialize. As Philips and Ravh claimed, the United States could no longer 'superficially [politicize] its local thought. It [could] only be done by subjecting the native reality to the full consciousness of Western man'.³³

Thus, when the journal reappeared in December 1937, there was a distinct refocusing of its spirit and ideas. As Jackson Lears has commented, by that time the editors held the belief 'that the intelligentsia had awakened from the sentimental dreams of the thirties to 'life's tragic complexities', that is, Soviet totalitarianism and the global responsibility to combat it'.³⁴ In the editorial statement they proposed that

Any magazine that aspires to a place in the vanguard of literature today, will be revolutionary in tendency; but we are also convinced that any such magazine will be unequivocally independent. [...] There is already a tendency in America for the more conscious social writers to identify themselves with a single organization, the Communist Party; *with the result that they grow automatic in their political responses but increasingly less responsible in an artistic sense.* [...] *Our reappearance on an independent basis signifies our conviction that the totalitarian trend is inherent in that movement and that it can no longer be combated from within.* Our editorial accent falls chiefly on culture and its broader social determinants.³⁵

This editorial statement (as opposed to the 1934 one) eagerly declared its political and literary independence, attempting in this way to refute its Communist past. The Soviet

³² William Phillips, 'The Intellectual's Tradition.' *Partisan Review*, 8.6 (1941), 481-490 (p. 482).

³³ William Phillips and Philip Ravh, 'Literature in a Political Decade.' *New Letters in America*, pp. 178-9.

³⁴ Jackson Lears, 'A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society'. *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*. Ed. Lary May. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989) pp. 38-57 (p. 40).

³⁵ 'Editorial Statement'. *Partisan Review*, 4.1 (December 1937) 3-4 (pp. 3-4) [my emphasis].

Union was no longer the magazine's geopolitical Utopia and it shifted its allegiance from the Communist Party (identified with sterility and compromise) to 'independent' socialism. In this new version of socialism, the cultural modernism of Eliot, Joyce, Proust and Kafka had become the magazine's intellectual model. The intellectuals no longer saw literature as part of a revolutionary culture, but rather as 'a medium steeped in sensory experience, [which] does not lend itself to the conceptual forms that the socio-political content of the class struggle takes most easily'.³⁶ The idea of the Marxist revolution it had held a few years back was translated into that of literary revolution carried out by modernist writers such as Eliot, Yeats, Joyce and Lawrence. The critical celebration of the artistic accomplishments of these modernist writers was significant, because in the minds of the Intellectuals, they were not contaminated by capitalism or Stalinism. The New York Intellectuals thus brought two opposing ideas in tension: 'an avant-gardism drawn from leftist revolutionary political expectations but kept exclusively in the area of literary imagination and liberal ideas drawn from leftist ideology but transformed in accordance with the bourgeois aspirations of the character's adherents'.³⁷

As mentioned above, with the exception of Lukács' article in 1934, no other writings by Brecht, Benjamin or Adorno themselves ever appeared in the magazine. And although the New York Intellectuals seemed aware of their theories and opinions, they were never really engaged in a critical consideration of their work. Had they done so, especially since all four European theorists were major representatives of Marxist thought and both Brecht and Adorno lived in the United States for some time, were influenced by the American culture and produced works of outstanding value, the Intellectuals would have observed their different attitudes towards the aesthetics of commitment and the autonomy position. And they would have also realised that in the process of Europeanizing American culture, the inclusion of their debate would have allowed a richer understanding of Marxism and shown how Marxist intellectuals and artists on both sides of the Atlantic faced similar dilemmas. Their failure to do so, however, has allowed a clearer understanding of how the European debate on the politics of commitment was so differently transliterated in

³⁶ Philip Rahv, and Wallace Phelps [William Phillips]. 'Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature,' *Partisan Review*, 1.3 (1934), 3-10 (p. 9)

³⁷ Grant Webster, *The Republic of Letters: A History of Postwar American Literary Opinion*. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 232.

American intellectual life and how the New York Intellectuals attempted to claim and canonise their own, eclectic version of modernism.

The major differences between the four European theorists and the New York Intellectuals stem from their different perceptions of literary tradition and the notion of the avant-garde/modernism. As mentioned earlier, the New York Intellectuals constantly complained during the late 1930s and early 1940s of the lack of a mature intellectual tradition within America, blaming primarily the cultural provincialism of the 1920s and 1930s American literature and the absence of intellectual continuity. In this way, not only did they discard their literary past but at the same time disregarded altogether the cultural products of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration units, such as the performances of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) and its director, Hallie Flanagan's, extensive articles on the new position of theatre and performance within the American cultural and social establishments (discussed in detail in the following chapter). And unlike Brecht's position that traditional literary forms should not be completely overlooked but rather form part of a debate over the development of new means of representation, the New York Intellectuals saw modernism in a state of perpetual danger because of such past traditions. Such attitudes revealed the Intellectuals' monopolistic claims on modern tradition and modernist aesthetics and communicated their intentions of redefining tradition.

Disillusioned and not able to escape the fear of official party radicalism, the Intellectuals saw as their prime task the safe-guarding of modernism and appointed themselves the guardians of modernist culture. They believed that in their attempt to Europeanize American literary life they were the most promising group as their European ancestry would allow them to integrate successfully both traditions. However, in order to do so, they needed to engage with only such aspects of modernism and the cultural avant-garde that would ensure their autonomous status from both established political and aesthetic prescriptions. In the absence of a viable revolutionary movement, the New York Intellectuals saw themselves as the new intelligentsia that would ensure the progress of modernism and allow the development of a new literary force within American culture. Seeing themselves as the partisan advocates of modernism they claimed that

To speak of modern literature is to speak of that peculiar social grouping, the intelligentsia, to which it belongs... Regardless of their specific historical meanings, most of the typically modern literary tendencies...could not have become articulate save through the support,

through the necessary social framework, provided by this relative detachment of the intellectuals.³⁸

[M]odern art...could not have come into being except through the formation by the intelligentsia of a distinct group culture, thriving on its very anxiety over survival and its consciousness of being an elite.³⁹

What the above quotes reveal is not only the displacement of a radical political avant-garde into avant-garde 'modernist' literature but also the association of modern literature's viability with a specific, small, alienated elite group of artists and intellectuals (such as themselves). The New York Intellectuals, almost like an American Bloomsbury group, proposed a new direction for American literature and were obliged, in a sense, to embellish the significance of such authors and critics whose views corresponded to theirs. But even in that process they were further eclectic in the representation of such authors. One such case was T.S. Eliot, who massively influenced the group's aesthetic attitudes. Not only was Eliot a member of an intellectual elite that influenced the production of Anglophone literature but he also possessed, in their opinions, a truly universal sensibility and consciousness since 'only an American, cosmopolitan and alienated could have seen Europe as it is seen in *The Waste Land*'.⁴⁰ Therefore, Eliot served for the Intellectuals as the modernist artist and critic par excellence whose work and contribution helped promote modernism. But even in their depiction of Eliot the Intellectuals chose to ignore his conservatism, Anglicanism and anti-Semitic views. Their selective representation and treatment of Eliot, Kafka and Joyce (among others) and their refusal to consider seriously the works of Brecht, Benjamin, the FTP and other American modernists (such as Ezra Pound) demonstrated their narrow conception of modernism, ignoring its contradictions and diversity in artistic impulses and practices and their attempt to reform modernism so as to correspond to their own personal aesthetic and political preferences.

Furthermore, the isolation of the Marxist concept of alienation from its theoretical context not only romanticised the use of this term but also distanced the Intellectuals from a further understanding of the European and American (represented by the FTP) avant-garde and modernist aesthetics of praxis. Their representation of

³⁸ Philip Rahv, 'Twilight of the Thirties'. *Partisan Review*, 5 (1939), 3-15 (pp. 10-11).

³⁹ Williams, 'The Intellectual's Tradition', *Partisan Review*, p. 482.

⁴⁰ Delmore Schwartz, 'T.S. Eliot as an International Hero'. *Partisan Review*, 12 (1945), 199-206 (p. 201).

Henry James and T.S. Eliot's works as massively affected by their alienation from conventional political, aesthetic and social attitudes aimed at proposing a new directive for American writers. Following the examples of such modernists entailed avoiding simplistic judgements that can be the result of a close association with dogmatic politics (such as communism) and instead aiming for a more subjective and independent social outlook, the cultivation of a discerned voice and the nurturing of a complex literary sensibility. Therefore, the call for action or praxis in ideological, social and aesthetic terms that Brecht and other European avant-garde artists advocated was translated into a call for abstinence from such terms and into one of moral consciousness. Armed with their re-found interest in liberalism as an antidote to their failed leftism, having reduced Marxism to a mere theory (stripped of political radicalism) that would facilitate the development of a new forceful literary movement and having chosen Henry James and T.S Eliot as the messianic figures that would allow the carrying over of moral sensibility in American thought, the New York Intellectuals and the *Partisan Review* embarked on an ambitious journey to redefine American literary life and rebuff both European and American aesthetics of engagement.

III. 'It's complicated. ... It's much more complicated. ... It's very complicated'⁴¹ Liberalism, the avant-garde and the complexities of Cold War cultural politics.

'In the beginning of the world, there was America', declared John Locke in 1690 in his effort to put forward his theory of the mind as the *tabula rasa*.⁴² The new continent offered the blank space where the hopes and aspirations of the Enlightenment project could reside. America did not at first let down the Enlightenment promise of emancipation as experienced by the American Revolution in 1776; but very soon the Enlightenment precepts were miscarried in the same continent, as in the name of 'freedom and reason' most of the native Indians were exterminated to accommodate the 'new' nation and its 'new' American identity. Locke's phrase signified the introduction of a new era during which the creation of

⁴¹ Trilling as quoted in Jacques Barzun, 'Remembering Lionel Trilling.' *Encounter*, 47 (1976), 85 (p. 85).

⁴² John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*. Ed. C.B McPherson. (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), p. 51, section 49.

the mythical dimension of the 'New World' and its potentials occurred and were inscribed in the experience and consciousness of generations to come.

The myth of America as the land of the free and the unconditioned was fostered by the political theory of liberalism. Liberalism has been described as 'the political theory of modernity' and was part of the Enlightenment project that was developed differently in the French, Scottish and American intellectual traditions.⁴³ Although it is very difficult to assert with certainty what constitutes liberalism, many of its commentators have agreed that it is individualistic, in that it affirms the 'moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity'.⁴⁴ R.G. Collingwood, prefacing Ruggiero's book on *The History of European Liberalism*, identified as the main principle of classical liberalism the following:

Liberalism begins with the recognition that men, do what we will, are free; that a man's acts are his own, spring from his own personality, and cannot be coerced. But this freedom is not possessed at birth; it is acquired by degrees as a man enters into a self-conscious possession of his personality through a life of discipline and moral progress. The aim of Liberalism is to assist the individual to discipline himself and achieve his own moral progress.⁴⁵

Liberal theory thus appears to rely on the notion of acquiring individuality through a progressive life and whose main characteristic is freedom. When Collingwood speaks of freedom, he refers to it in relation to the idea of the individual as an agent of subjective thinking, whose sense of the world would derive from an established awareness of moral traditions prior to any commitment to social institutions or engagements. At the same time, liberal thinking supports a dualistic way of perceiving reality since, as Robert Unger has suggested, the individual is faced with 'antinomies'⁴⁶ such as public/private, fact/fantasy, reason/feelings. The negotiation of these antinomies is important, but it can take place in the individual's mind only if a moral sensibility and consciousness are registered.

As Guerra has remarked, Trilling found in the political fundamentals of classical liberalism the grounding ideas to foster his political and aesthetic principles.⁴⁷ It was this version of liberalism that Lionel Trilling aspired to reinstate to

⁴³ John Gray, *Liberalism*. (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995), p. ix.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xii

⁴⁵ R.G. Collingwood, 'Translator's Preface' in Guido de Ruggiero. (*The History of European Liberalism*, London: Humphrey Milford, 1927), pp. vii-viii (p. vii).

⁴⁶ As quoted in Gustavo Guerra, 'Trilling's James: Liberalism and selfhood in *Princess Casamassima*'. *Papers on Language and Literature*, 34.4 (1998), 388-419 (p. 396).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

its rightful place within Cold War American culture. He was disappointed by the way liberalism was practised in the United States, as he felt it was reduced to an insulting rhetoric of communist ideas (Stalinism) and propaganda, especially present within works of fiction. Identifying himself as a ‘cultural and moral arbiter’, Trilling wanted to reinforce a richer awareness of literature and appreciation of moral values in fiction that would, subsequently, foster a sensibility acquitted of any ideological and political constraints (leftist in particular).⁴⁸ He felt that ‘the artistic, political, and moral extremism of the modernist avant-garde’ could not achieve this moral complexity, as it was infected with a communist literary and aesthetic taste; instead, he chose to examine the works of John Keats, William Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Matthew Arnold and Henry James, all representing ‘the moral sobriety and maturity of writers of domestic realism and refined sensibility’.⁴⁹ Trilling’s version of political liberalism was deeply affected by the way he perceived Stalinism and the impact it had on American intellectual life. Guerra has observed that, ‘using the most conservative premises of liberalism as a philosophical background for his literary theories, Trilling managed to recast the literary in the light of the political’.⁵⁰ But in doing so, he proposed a literary agenda that voiced his political anti-Stalinist concerns and biases and reinforced the adherence to the liberal idea of the individual, thus ostracizing any valid interpretation of modernism in social, historical or political terms.

Trilling, as opposed to the other members of the New York Intellectuals, came of age intellectually in the 1920s, not the 1930s.⁵¹ During that decade he ventured to be part of two worlds: on the one hand, he was writing articles for the *Menorah Journal*, dedicated to Jewish tradition; and on the other, he was eager to infiltrate those institutions of high culture (such as Columbia University) that were still off limits to Jewish people. Trilling’s successful admission to Columbia, the completion of his undergraduate and postgraduate studies and his appointment at the same university (where he taught most of his life) signified his allegiance to the ‘conservative Arnoldian humanism [that] held sway [at Columbia]’ and with the

⁴⁸ Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*, p. 64.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵⁰ Guerra, ‘Trilling’s James: Liberalism and selfhood in *Princess Casamassima*’, p. 389.

⁵¹ As Thomas Bender suggests, Trilling was influenced mostly by the Greenwich village intellectuals such as Van Wyck Brooks and Edmund Wilson, the commitment to liberal humanism professed by Columbia University and his association with a group of Jewish writers publishing the *Menorah Journal*. (‘Lionel Trilling and American Culture.’ *American Quarterly*, 42.2 (1990), 324-347 (pp. 330-331).

genteel tradition of high modernism.⁵² Because of such intellectual affiliations, Trilling became a severe critic of the literary and cultural criticism of the 1930s. He always viewed with mistrust the intellectuals' affiliation with the American Communist Party (such as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck to name but a few) and the Party's political and cultural agenda of bridging the gap between liberals and radicals. This mistrust became more evident in the late 1930s when the Party, attempting to increase its power within the intelligentsia, changed its political and cultural priorities. As Krupnick has commented 'in the early thirties the Communist program had been sectarian and extremist, emphasizing class struggle and social revolution. [...] In the late thirties, [...] instead of agitation for revolution, or even socialism, Western European and American Communist parties shifted to presenting themselves as the vanguard of democracy in the struggle against fascism'.⁵³ This political shift was complementary to the cultural one, as the party abandoned its proletarian literary movement and instead focused on the importance of traditional American culture, thus encouraging the intellectuals to abandon the alienation of the 1920s and become members of a collective society.

Very soon Trilling became associated with the dissenting intellectuals of the *Partisan Review* who, after breaking away from the influence of the Communist Party, were committed to an independent left, to international modernism, and privileged the alienated intellectual. As opposed to many of those intellectuals (such as William Phillips, Philip Rahv or Dwight Macdonald), Trilling never exhibited any commitment to Marxist politics or its cultural ideas; his main concern became the re-evaluation of liberalism and its function within American society as an active, complex and morally strong divergent power against the Stalinist cultural influence. For Trilling 'Stalinism' came to represent politically an ideology he strongly opposed because it proposed in utopian terms the Soviet Union to be the state that had managed to resolve all its political and social ambiguities.⁵⁴ Thus, it offered a totalitarian discourse that excluded complexity and contradictions. Culturally,

⁵² Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 384.

⁵³ Mark Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1986), p. 61.

⁵⁴ Lionel Trilling, *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p.140.

Stalinism appeared in the literary and historical writings of Vernon Parrington and the Old Left, in the middlebrow literature of Dreiser and Steinbeck and, as Cornel West has suggested, in ‘their latest forms and manifestations – the New Left and black revolt, rock ‘n’ roll, drugs and free love’.⁵⁵ According to Trilling, Stalinism and communist propaganda were responsible for a ‘sentimentally mindless and brutally repressive’ liberal culture, and therefore, ‘all my essays of the Forties were written from my sense of this [Stalinist] dull, repressive tendency of opinion which was coming to dominate the *old ethos of liberal enlightenment*’.⁵⁶ In order to resist Stalinism, Trilling attempted to deepen liberalism; he espoused the complexity of literature as opposed to ideological thinking and hoped that through this process one could resist the corruptive influence of all leftist political and cultural ideas.

In the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling outlined both his political and literary agenda. In it he claimed that

The job of criticism would seem to be, then, to recall liberalism to its essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty. To the carrying out of the job of criticizing the liberal imagination, literature has a unique relevance, not merely because so much of modern literature has explicitly directed itself upon politics, but more importantly because *literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty*.⁵⁷

Trilling’s antidote to the imminent communist cultural and ideological threat was the liberal imagination, which was a ‘tendency’ rather than a ‘concise body of doctrine’ and as such, it necessitated an awareness of difficulty, complexity and variousness.⁵⁸ He felt that literature, in order to be appreciated and offer a strong awareness of the socio-political changes occurring within American society, could no longer afford to be tainted by ideological thinking that was synonymous with leftist politics. One should separate the aesthetic and moral realm from the exclusively political and in a sense separate the individual’s subjectivity from a social collectivity. In this way, the individual would no longer surrender to the will of a totalitarian mass since, by expressing himself using *ideas* as opposed to *ideology* (‘the language of non-

⁵⁵ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 177.

⁵⁶ Krupnick. *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, p. 62; Trilling. *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75*, p. 141 [italics my emphasis]

⁵⁷ Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, p. xv [italics my emphasis]

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. x-xi.

thought'), he would acquire a fuller understanding of the complexities of reality.⁵⁹ However, Trilling's notion of the liberal imagination could become problematic because, in confronting ideas with ideology, it created a dichotomy that could not be overcome, as it presupposed that the individual would perceive reality via one or the other. This dualistic pattern of thinking could end up creating fixed positions (both ideological) that would not allow for a more dialectical argumentation. Trilling introduced his essays in *The Liberal Imagination*, not as political but, as 'essays in literary criticism', only to contradict himself in the following line by admitting that 'they assume the inevitable intimate, if not always obvious, connection between literature and politics'.⁶⁰ He wanted to present himself as an enlightened critic of liberalism with a cultural (rather than political) agenda but, in the process of doing so, he created a type of criticism that was based on his literary interests reinforcing his political ones and vice versa.

Thomas Bender has suggested that Trilling aimed at challenging liberalism in its two broad patterns of usage: the first was its political implication (in which he concentrated mostly on the cultural perspectives determined by political ideology), and the second was 'tied more closely to a tradition of humanistic learning than to modern American political allegiances'.⁶¹ Both patterns of liberalism described above are intertwined and they reflected Trilling's intended use of liberalism as a cultural rather than an ideological movement. In this way he hoped that his use of liberalism, free from political discourses, would allow the existing and new American writers to pursue a deeper understanding of literary and cultural modernism. And this idea went hand-in-hand with his belief that as an 'enlightened' critic, he ought not to become actively engaged and thus avoid direct political and social references in his work. In the chapter entitled 'Reality in America', he advanced a severe critique of the writings of Vernon Louis Parrington and Theodore Dreiser, which represented for him the 'socially, economically, and politically Progressive' school that was responsible for liberalism's fascination with leftist politics and its exploitation by it.⁶² Parrington's

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 285.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. xii.

⁶¹ 'Lionel Trilling and American Culture', p. 325. As Bender also claims, it is quite difficult to distinguish what exactly Trilling termed as 'liberalism' (Ibid., p. 325); although Trilling had always tried to be very precise in his discussion and criticism, the term liberalism escaped a stable definition. It seems that Trilling could define liberalism only when opposed to its twin Stalinist discourse.

⁶² Russell J. Reising, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature*. (Methuen: New York and London, 1986), p. 94.

writing indicated for Trilling the narrow scope of the American liberal left (almost similar to the ‘blindness’ of the fellow travellers to the Stalinist discourse), which valued content as opposed to form, life to intellect and certainty to ambiguity. He reckoned that the depiction of Henry James as a cosmopolitan aesthete who could not come to terms with American reality reflected Parrington’s intellectual inability to appreciate James’ imagination and creativeness and reaffirmed his intellectual limitation in not realizing the dialectical nature of American culture.⁶³ This dialectic was what Trilling appreciated in the nineteenth-century writers he discussed. He believed that their texts encompassed aporias and illusions that required an awakening of the reader’s critical abilities as they precluded a teleological reading of the text.

His main difficulty with Parrington’s writings was his allegedly pronounced belief in an ‘immutable’, ‘reliable’, ‘fixed and given’ material reality which stemmed from his association with the Progressive movement.⁶⁴ Progressivism, a school of international social and political philosophies, firstly emerged in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century (spanning all through the twentieth century as well) in an attempt to oppose the increasingly conservative social and economic policies, pursue social reforms attuned with the new social conditions and include in the political arena the previously excluded voices of the middle and lower classes. Politicians such as Theodor Roosevelt, William H. Taft and Franklin Roosevelt furthered the movement’s aims for social justice, economic stability and the establishment of workers’ unions. The political realization of progressivism in the USA and its desire to describe American reality in broader economic, political and social terms found many allies in the cultural arena as well, Parrington among them. In his influential three-volume book entitled *Main Currents in American Thought*, Parrington set out to present the history of American letters as one of inherent debate and struggle, of multiplicity of all discursive practices, of ideological complexity and of socio-political development. The counter-Progressive or consensus school, of which Trilling was an early proponent, was not satisfied with such a representation (seen as being too close to leftist politics) since it celebrated a cultural climate that ‘regarded the democratic affirmation of populist and proletariat social realism as a

⁶³ Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 5, 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

sublime aesthetic achievement'.⁶⁵ For Trilling, the Progressives offered a resolved view of reality that did not account for complexity. As Reising has suggested, the counter-Progressives were not interested in 'the materialistic emphasis on economics and politics for an analysis of culture', but in how people 'felt' about their culture.⁶⁶ Thus, cultural reality came to signify the individual's awareness of paradox and ambiguity. By defining culture in such privatistic terms, Trilling initiated an aesthetic re-evaluation, which proclaimed the death of 'the particular intellectual effort in which we once lived and moved' and the birth of the 'primal imagination of liberalism'.⁶⁷

In the light of this re-evaluation, Trilling discussed the work of Theodore Dreiser, whom he considered in connection to Henry James. In his reading of Dreiser and James, however, he failed to consider the pair dialectically; instead of proposing a vision of reality and culture that could accommodate both writers' modes of perception, he opted for a more polemical rhetoric. Krupnick has argued that 'his mind works dialectically, not as the Marxists understand the dialectic – to bring about historical change – but to keep the culture on a steady course and maintain an always threatened equilibrium'.⁶⁸ Trilling's 'dialectic mind', however, did nothing but arbitrarily defame Dreiser's work without offering serious consideration of any of his novels, exalt James' oeuvre (turning him into a messianic literary figure) and question the validity and need for a 'threatened equilibrium'. If one takes the notion of dialectic to represent ideas in tension, Trilling's dialectics were empty of this quality. As seen in his treatment of both Dreiser and Parrington, he rejected their socio-political cultural reality in favour of his interpretation of a Jamesian model. Thus Trilling's counter-dialectics could not maintain a 'threatened equilibrium' as they accommodated a more conservative ideological and cultural consideration.

In Trilling's view, James represented the complex, difficult and sophisticated literature 'through a complex and rapid imagination and with a kind of authoritative immediacy', whereas Dreiser epitomized the ideological, crude and simplistic writing that negated aesthetic quality.⁶⁹ Trilling observed that 'with that juxtaposition

⁶⁵ Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*, pp. 60-1.

⁶⁶ Reising, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature*. (Methuen: New York and London, 1986), p. 95.

⁶⁷ *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 263, p. xv.

⁶⁸ *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, p. 58.

⁶⁹ *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 14.

[between the two writers mentioned formerly] we are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet. One does not go there gladly'.⁷⁰ Trilling acknowledged that art and politics were entangled, but he wished to approach them using different terms, especially, as he believed, after the deformations liberalism had suffered during the 1930s under the influence of Marxism. Dreiser's novels, such as *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *An American Tragedy* or *The Bulwark* were, according to Trilling, deprived of quality and such moral values that could address the then current issues American culture and tradition faced. Trilling did not offer his readers a study of Dreiser's works; rather he resorted to a list of characterizations (he perceived him as crude and vulgar), and without any textual evidence denounced Dreiser's approach to American reality as simplistic. The main charge Trilling directed at Dreiser was that he was a victim of ideological thinking; or as Reising has commented 'that is, he never had any ideas that were genuinely *literary*'.⁷¹ Trilling perceived such ideological thinking to be a plague destroying American culture. In 'The Meaning of a Literary Idea' he claimed:

But to call ourselves the *people of the idea* is to flatter ourselves. We are rather the *people of ideology*, which is a very different thing. *Ideology is not the product of thought*; it is the habit or the ritual of showing respect to certain formulas to which, for various reasons having to do with *emotional safety*, we have very strong ties of whose meaning and consequences in actuality we have no clear understanding. The nature of ideology may in part be understood from its tendency to develop the sort of language I parodied, and scarcely parodied, a moment ago.⁷²

This quote exemplified the degree to which Trilling's own critical thinking worked with binaries and did not always possess the complexity and possibilities he expected from literary texts. He juxtaposed ideas with ideology, thought with emotions, conscious with unconscious understanding; although Trilling attempted to recognize the complexities of American reality, this formula of binaries had a political reference. He wanted to emphasize how ideas, once invested with a writer's social responsibility, could submit to ideological ends, thus reducing variousness and contradictions, and endangering American culture. This was what occurred in the literature of the 1930s, when authors like Dreiser, Steinbeck and Hemingway, attempting to offer answers to social problems, submitted to serve the ends of a

⁷⁰ Ibid., 11

⁷¹ Reising, 'Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, and the Emergence of the Cultural Discourse of Anti-Stalinism.' *boundary 2*, 20.1 (1993), 94-124 (p. 99).

⁷² Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 286. [my emphasis]

Marxist ideology. For Trilling society and literature should be separated if social problems were to be treated as non-literary, and the writer's commitment should be to literary ideas rather than political ideologies. As such, he left his readers with no 'uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts' about his views and rather offered them those kinds of 'formulated solutions' he so much depreciated in the writings of the political left.⁷³

Lastly, when examining Trilling's views on Dreiser, one can discern Trilling's uneasiness about the effect Dreiser's literature could have on his audience. Dreiser was one of the first American writers at the beginning of the twentieth century who aimed to challenge the large majority of middle-class Americans, their dependency on consumerism, and to expose the arbitrary, moralizing values that defined their lives. He contested the American idea of the 'self-made man' and 'of the rugged individualism that would supposedly lead to a newly successful start in a world elsewhere'.⁷⁴ The desire to pursue her own American dream using primarily her sexuality in *Sister Carrie*, and the issues of abortion, religion and capital punishment presented in *An American Tragedy*, disturbed and exposed middle-class Americans to the dangers of the established social and economic systems, highlighting the need for reforms if Americans were to avoid the fate of the novels' characters. But this middle class comprised, in 1950, Trilling's audience; it was the middle class that mostly attended the universities and was educated to appreciate 'serious' literature, not simplistic representations of American life. It was they who could afford time and money to cultivate a strong sense of individuality. Dreiser's novels challenged such a middle-class relationship; however, Trilling's harsh treatment of Dreiser's novels, his dismissal of the validity of the novels' themes and his advocacy that only 'proper', 'serious' and 'complex' literature (like James') could deal with the actualities of their life and existence, reinstated the importance of such a relationship, prescribed the literature read by such a group, and led to a prolonged neglect of Dreiser's works.⁷⁵

⁷³ Ibid., p. 299.

⁷⁴ From Lee Clark Mitchell's introduction to Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. xxix

⁷⁵ For a more detailed and very interesting discussion on Trilling, Dreiser, Parrington and Stalin see Russell J. Riesling. 'Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, and the Emergence of the Cultural Discourse of Anti-Stalinism.', pp. 94-124.

Boyers has argued that Trilling was 'scrupulously fair and responsive to rival points of view'.⁷⁶ In the cases of Parrington and Dreiser, however, this was not apparent. Trilling's critique of Dreiser was not restricted to the use of language and the reality Dreiser portrayed. While being a member of the Columbia committee that developed guidelines for congressional witnesses, Trilling wrote a letter to the *New York Times* explaining his reasons for recommending the banning of teachers on the grounds of their political affiliations. Among other things he commented that

It is clear to us (the committee) that membership in Communist organizations almost certainly implies a submission to an intellectual control which is entirely at variance with the principles of academic competence as we understand them.⁷⁷

Trilling's statement reflected his strong disapproval of anyone who, politically, affiliated themselves with a leftist cultural ideology. Dreiser's desire, for example, to join the American Communist party in 1945 and his 'naïve' notion of reality (as portrayed for example in his novels *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*) represented for Trilling the downfall of liberal culture and its accommodation in Stalinist literary criticism. One could then argue, as Reising suggested, that 'literary criticism and literary texts served as pretexts for Trilling's anti-Marxism'.⁷⁸ For, although he wished for an a-political literature, his criticism resulted in the ideological politics of anti-Communism, as expressed in *The Liberal Imagination*, his contributions to the *Partisan Review* and to the CIA-sponsored journal *Encounter*.

Faced with Stalinism (both in its political and cultural forms), fearing the decline of ideas into ideologies and having to deal with the naïve, as he perceived it, optimism of American liberals, Trilling focused on the works of Henry James and developed John Keats' notion of negative capability.⁷⁹ Keats had defined negative capability as the stage 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.⁸⁰ In 'The Meaning of a Literary Idea', Trilling repeated Keats' notion. He respected the works of such authors that 'are not under any illusion that they have conquered the material upon which they

⁷⁶ Robert Boyers, *Lionel Trilling: Negative Capability and the Wisdom of Avoidance*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1977), p. 1.

⁷⁷ Lionel Trilling, 'Letter'. *The New York Times*, 26 November 1953, p. 30

⁷⁸ Reising, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature*, p. 101.

⁷⁹ Keats was an important figure for Trilling not simply because of his poetry and notion of negative capability but also because, although he was involved in politics, 'this strong liberalism had little effect on his poetry' [E. C. Perret, 'Keats's Romanticism.' *Critics on Keats*. Ed. Judith O' Neil. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), 26-32 (p. 27)].

⁸⁰ John Keats, *Letters*. Ed. M. B. Forman. 2 vols, I. (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 77.

direct their activity' and those who displayed a 'willingness to remain in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts [...]'.⁸¹ It was through negative capability that, according to Trilling, ideas could acquire the status of living things, could expand and develop and could come into being 'when two contradictory emotions are made to confront each other'.⁸² It was negative capability that would allow ideas to become independent of ideology and thus enable a text to be free of finalities and political connotations. Negative capability – as registered in texts by Keats and James – exposed the intelligence and complexity of these writers' subject matter and thus summarized Trilling's project of resisting liberalism's moral weaknesses, that ranged 'from the absolutes of the Stalinists, to naïve fellow travellers, to formulaic liberals'.⁸³

Trilling believed that literature could benefit the nation's political life but in a very indirect way, since active involvement could lead to the fostering of a criticism and literature similar to that of the 1920s and 1930s. In order to demonstrate this point, he revived an interest in the works of Henry James (whom, as mentioned earlier, he contrasted with Dreiser). Trilling's version of James became canonical in the 1950s and 1960s and is only recently being re-examined as many critics feel that Trilling's reading has misrepresented both James' aesthetics and his politics.⁸⁴ James was very important to Trilling's literary politics of complexity, as James himself was a great advocate of difficulty. In a letter to his niece, James declared

I hate American simplicity. I glory in the piling up of complications of every sort. If I should pronounce the name of James in any different or more elaborate way I should be in favor of doing so.⁸⁵

James did not perceive complexity simply as a way of complicating ideas and concerns, but also as a source of enjoyment which art 'all comes back to'.⁸⁶ He deeply mistrusted modernity and felt that the bureaucracy it imposed on the people offered a scheme of homogeneity in all aspects of life, reduced the possibility of any kind of

⁸¹ Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 297, p. 299.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁸³ Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of the Intellectual Life in New York City, From 1750 to the Beginning of Our Own Time*. (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 336.

⁸⁴ For a detailed and interesting discussion of Trilling's version of Henry James and the reactions towards these views see Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*.

⁸⁵ Henry James, *Letters*. Ed. Leon Edel. Vol. 4. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974-1984), p. xxxi.

⁸⁶ James, *The Art of the Novel*. Ed. R. P. Blackmur. (New York: Scribner's, 1962), p. 345. See also Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*, p. 54. My reading of James' notion of the self and identity was greatly influenced by Posnock's treatment of James' texts.

resistance from the people and enforced a mythic view of life as simple, concrete and natural. Simplicity was glorified as the ‘natural’ way of life, whereas complexity was associated with abstraction and arbitrariness. James’ advocacy of complexity was not greatly welcomed in the United States in the early twentieth century, as it posed a threat to the notion of the self. James perceived the self as a heterogeneous entity that chose to ‘theatricalise’ different aspects of its identity on different occasions, thus escaping the monotonous repetition of similar gestures fostered by modernity’s mechanisms. He did not believe in the existence of one centered self beneath all these layers of social roles the individual performed. With his notion of the heterogeneous, theatrical self he deconstructed the myth of a stable, referential self and opened up the space for playfulness and ambiguity.

Trilling’s use and reading of James was influenced by James’ use of complexity and his notion of the self. However, Trilling chose to interpret James’ idea of identity differently. According to Trilling, liberalism allowed this notion of the theatrical self to exist as ‘somewhere under all the roles there is Me, the poor old ultimate actuality. [...] When all the roles have been played [this core self] would like to ... settle down with his own original actual self’.⁸⁷ Trilling’s reading of James’ idea reduced it to the more conservative and Puritan view of the self as having a core identity that one can refer to and is accountable for all our actions. This version reinforced the static, monotonous and homogeneous identity, deprived the social self of internal differences that could be in a dialectical correspondence and did not question the self’s mimetic quality. Trilling chose not to distinguish the complexity that James granted to the social self and it was with such a failure of discrimination that he read James’ texts.

Trilling’s discourse in *The Liberal Imagination* constantly oscillated between binaries: art and politics, imagination and ideology, complexity and simplicity, liberalism and Stalinism. These polarities created an even more static and stale criticism that could not provide for the dialectical analysis Trilling hoped for. His favourite term ‘complexity’ was so much fetishized as the ultimate value in literary writing that it lost its resonance. His view that the individual could stand dialectically among contradictory influences without deciding ideologically failed him, because he himself fell victim of ideology. Although he tried to propose a new critical

⁸⁷ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 10.

understanding of American reality, he ‘usher[ed] into American literary criticism an entire array of values and priorities that mirror[ed] those of a culture nearly paralyzed by McCarthyite paranoia’.⁸⁸ His work in *The Liberal Imagination* created a new ‘anti-Leftist’ ideology that read any texts with political implications or themes in mind as dangerous, Stalinist and reductive of the complexities of American life.

Trilling did attempt to create a new radical way of approaching and dealing with literary and critical issues. The reason he failed, however, was that although he could work from *within* the literary establishment, he always needed a political and ideological opponent to work *against*.⁸⁹ Although he did work within the space of liberalism and accommodated its ideas, it was his anti-Stalinism and anti-communism that were the determinant of Trilling’s work. The assumption seems to have been that if he wanted to ‘revolutionize’ liberalism, he first had to fight any radical political ideology that could stand in the way of modernizing American culture. It is fair to assume then that Trilling’s liberalism did not involve simply a literary and cultural agenda but had a political vision at its heart. Trilling always believed that literature was useful to the nation’s political life, as long as it was used implicitly. His choice of literary texts and specific authors tied literature firmly to the nation’s political life and led to the institutionalised reading of his own writings. How ‘thoroughly Trilling’s views have infused American literary and cultural thought’⁹⁰ is evident in Edith Kurzweil’s statement that ‘the editors’ [of *Partisan Review*] adamant anti-communism was eventually vindicated’, used in her introduction of ‘Our Country, Our Culture’ conference organized by the *Partisan Review* in 2002.⁹¹ Almost half a century after Trilling first openly attacked leftist ideology, the un-deconstructed fear of communism still dwells in the discourse of some American intellectuals.

Bender has claimed that ‘the politicisation of art in the 1930s has made literature and criticism less able to supply the nourishment liberalism required’, suggesting that it was left to people like Trilling to challenge this condition.⁹²

⁸⁸ Reising, ‘Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, and the Emergence of the Cultural Discourse of Anti-Stalinism’, p. 119.

⁸⁹ R. P. Blackmur has suggested that Trilling needed a pattern to work *within*, not *against* but I have reversed his comment here. R. P. Blackmur as quoted in Bender, ‘Lionel Trilling and American Culture’, p. 342.

⁹⁰ Reising, ‘Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, and the Emergence of the Cultural Discourse of Anti-Stalinism’, p. 119.

⁹¹ Jon Westling and Edith Kurzweil, ‘Our Country, Our Culture’. *Partisan Review*, 69.4 (2002) 501-506 (p. 506).

⁹² Bender, ‘Lionel Trilling and American Culture’, p. 327.

However, although Trilling promised to engage in a pluralistic discussion over liberalism, he reduced the debate to the same polarized static dichotomies that had already dominated American criticism. Trilling did not manage to contain the contradictions of his culture within himself and his writing and proposed a new liberalism with an anti-leftist, pro-McCarthy conservative ideological and political agenda. His writings were institutionalised, providing an 'appropriate' anticommunist vocabulary for the American people that led to the 'deradicalization of twentieth-century American intellectuals'.⁹³ By promoting the works of Henry James as non-political and complex and discrediting those of Theodore Dreiser and Parrington as political and simplistic, Trilling offered his middle-class audience a literary model for evaluating American culture and taste. How deeply this pattern entered the American cultural consciousness is evident in Lola Roger's comment, as she turned down a role for her daughter Ginger in the film version of *Sister Carrie*: 'Dreiser's novel was open propaganda for Communism'.⁹⁴ Anything political is communist and anything communist is propaganda. It is as if the entire leftist political thought is nothing more than a false ideology that embodies a false consciousness. If, as Bender suggests, Trilling urged critics and intellectuals to go beyond nostalgia, 'politicized group identities, and specialized academic autonomy for the creation of a public culture', what he ended up proposing was a conservative nostalgia, a strongly anti-communist politicised group identity and an even more specialized academic group of intellectuals that complied with and promoted the existing political regime in the United States, reinforcing a decayed, static and artificially homogeneous embodiment of American culture, tradition and life.⁹⁵

At the same time that Trilling was re-inventing liberalism and was approaching American culture from a more conservative literary outlook, Clement Greenberg, another New York Intellectual, was re-working the notions of the avant-garde and modernism in an attempt to propose modernism as the definitive cultural ideology within the United States. Greenberg became a member of the group and a regular contributor to the *Partisan Review* almost from its very beginning and acted also as an editor of the journal from 1940 till 1943. As an art critic with social and

⁹³ Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*, p. 4.

⁹⁴ David Cate, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 493.

⁹⁵ Bender, *New York Intellectual: A History of the Intellectual Life in New York City, From 1750 to the Beginning of Our Own Time*. (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 344.

political anxieties in mind, he dealt predominantly with American culture from a theoretical and aesthetic point of view in an attempt to provide meaning and interpret culture. He was also the leading New York Intellectual whose essays considered the avant-garde and set the terms by which it was to be perceived and used within an American cultural context. Greenberg presented a formalist analysis for modern art, which aimed at the creation of a distinctly American avant-garde art, respected both nationally and internationally and one that was also distinctively different from the notion of formalism associated with Socialist Realism. He could sense the disillusion of the American artist and intellectual with the American left, the crisis in Marxist thinking and a desire for a new culture that would conform to the new social and aesthetic order. He (along with Harold Rosenberg) was the first that brought into view and promoted the group of Abstract Expressionists (such as Jackson Pollock and William de Kooning), making them the most successful artistic export of the USA during the Cold War era. A prolific writer and critic, Greenberg was consistent in his views on modern art as an individual enterprise. As the running argument throughout his essays 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), "'American Type' Painting' (1955) and 'Modernist Painting' (1965) reveal, Greenberg championed individualism in art as the future of a successful culture and abstract art as the only progressive force within American culture.

In materialising his formalist theory, Greenberg was initially influenced by Marxist thinking and Leon Trotsky's views on art. It is quite ironic to note here that Trotsky's views, which influenced American art critics in the 1940s, were banned from the Stalinist discourse in the USSR; his interest in surrealism during the 1930s in which he saw revolutionary potential and appreciated the need to experiment with new forms were instead replaced by Lukács' views which found such movements to be counter-revolutionary and corruptive of a Marxist literary tradition. Trotsky, in his article to the *Partisan Review* and while commenting on the capitalist conditions out of which the American artist performed, suggested that

Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of Bourgeois society. To find a solution to this impasse through art itself is impossible. It is a crisis which concerns all culture, beginning at its economic base and ending in the highest spheres of ideology. Art can neither escape the crisis nor partition itself off. Art cannot save itself. It will rot away inevitably – as Grecian art rotted beneath the ruins of a culture founded on slavery – unless present day society is able to rebuild

itself. This task is essentially revolutionary in character. For these reasons the function of art in our epoch is determined by its relation to the revolution.⁹⁶

For Trotsky, it was the bourgeoisie that was responsible for the cultural crisis and it was the artist, free of partisanship but involved in politics, that could carry out the resistance. Greenberg agreed with Trotsky on the bourgeoisie's responsibilities, but did not see the active political involvement of the artist as a viable means of resistance. Rather, it was the aesthetics of the avant-garde that could provide an alternative culture and although he kept a Marxist vocabulary in his early writings, he completely ignored the revolutionary aspirations he had espoused a few years earlier. Instead, he articulated a formalist avant-garde, whose values 'were in accord with those of the progressive liberal ideology'.⁹⁷

In 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', Greenberg began to examine the relationship and co-existence of the avant-garde and kitsch both aesthetically and historically. He argued that this relationship should be examined as 'the aesthetic experience met by the *specific* – not generalized – *individual* and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place'.⁹⁸ Once again the theme of individuality performed a central role, not only in examining cultural issues, but identifying with them; it was as an individual that one should perceive oneself and as an individual that one should approach art. It was only revolutionary individuality that could resist the regressive mass. Greenberg reached such a conclusion because for him kitsch (defined as 'popular, commercial art and literature' and 'product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy'⁹⁹) was closely connected to the regressive and totalitarian regimes of Germany, Italy and Russia that employed kitsch culture as a means of controlling and manipulating the masses. The antidote was an avant-garde culture whose artists represented the 'true' revolutionary spirit in art; this spirit had nothing to do with promoting revolutionary politics but with being able to freely express

⁹⁶ Leon Trotsky, 'Art and Politics in Our Epoch'. *Partisan Review*, 11.2 (1938), 61-64 (p. 61).

⁹⁷ Serge Guilbaut, 'The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the *Vital Center*'. Trans. Thomas Repensek. *October*, 15 (Winter 1980), 61-78 (p. 62)

⁹⁸ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. *Partisan Review*, 6.5 (Fall 1939), 34-49 (p. 34 [italics my emphasis])

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

themselves, ‘detaching’ themselves from regressive artistic tendencies, recognizing the need for change and offering a means of developing such a consciousness.¹⁰⁰

The notion of individuality was also extended to the way art was to perform. Greenberg reckoned that the avant-garde artist ought ‘to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point’.¹⁰¹ This idea was still prevalent even twenty six years after ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ when Greenberg, continuing the same thread of argument, suggested that the artist should use ‘the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence’.¹⁰² His argument suggested then that each field of art should retain a separate nature (he was particularly displeased with literature’s influence on painting), with characteristics peculiar and exclusive to itself. By this separation, he concentrated the artist’s concern to the medium of his art, as it was the medium that could ensure art’s ‘purity’, ‘quality’ and ‘independence’.¹⁰³

Apart from establishing the primary importance of the medium, Greenberg also wanted to establish a continuity of artistic tradition in his readers’ mind so as to preserve the past principles of excellence that continued in the present avant-garde. He claimed that the avant-garde was developed as a result of a historical criticism that used scientific thinking in examining any society and because of the emergence of Marxist thought. The avant-garde did employ revolutionary ideas in the beginning, but it did so in order to define itself as a non-bourgeois group of artists. As he also restated in 1955, the dismantling of tradition had not occurred only for revolutionary effect but ‘in order to maintain the level and vitality of art under the steadily changing circumstances of the last hundred years – and that the dismantling has its own continuity and tradition’.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, for Greenberg the avant-garde had become an apolitical entity; he disregarded the degree to which European avant-garde artists were practically involved in politics and, on the contrary, alleged their indifference towards politics and ideological struggles. And he always maintained through his writings ‘that the *true and most important* function of the avant-garde was not to

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁰² Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’. *Art and Literature*, 4 (Spring 1965), 193-201 (p. 193).

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 194.

¹⁰⁴ Greenberg, “‘American Type’ Painting”. *Partisan Review*, 22.2 (Spring 1955), 179-196 (p. 179).

‘experiment’, but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence’.¹⁰⁵ Greenberg stripped the avant-garde of its experimental and political identity. He seemed to overlook the fact that the European avant-garde attempted not only to question the way art was perceived and practised within Western thinking, but also to align art and literature with the political world.

It becomes therefore clear for the reader of his articles that Greenberg aimed at presenting an ‘American’ version of the avant-garde. The European avant-garde was never individualistic in the way Greenberg suggested; one had only to look at the writings of Meyerhold who, in his attempt to create a new theatre for the people, aimed ‘not to put a finished artistic product before an audience, but to make the spectator cooperate in the creation of the work. The current must not only flow from the stage to the audience, but in the reverse direction as well’.¹⁰⁶ The spectator was, for Meyerhold, not a single individual, but one who represented and formed part of a larger socially, historically and politically conditioned society and class. Meyerhold and other European avant-gardists wanted to reinforce the bond between art and social life and create a critical appreciation of avant-garde art. But for Greenberg, the affiliation of art with life denied art’s position as an independent value; rather, it was the avant-garde’s inward critique, its absorption in its medium that could secure both its independence and its quality. Within this scheme, the individual was not involved in any way in the workings of artistic creation, but was merely there to appreciate aesthetically the final product of a work of art. At the same time the artist, who a few years back had been addressing the public through social programs like the WPA, was now addressing an educated elite through the private sector.

Another distinct difference between Greenberg’s version of the avant-garde and the European one was his insistence that the avant-garde’s search for the absolute led to ‘abstract’ or ‘non-objective’ art. Abstract or non-objective art signified an art deprived of any political concerns and focused exclusively on aesthetics. According to this view, aesthetic concerns must always have a non-political nature, and this was achieved when ‘content [dissolves] so completely into form that the work of art or

¹⁰⁵ ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, p. 36 [italics my emphasis]

¹⁰⁶ Meyerhold as quoted in Henri Arvon. *Marxist Esthetics*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 63.

literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself'.¹⁰⁷ One is faced with the choice between form and content and Greenberg's loyalty lies with form. For Greenberg, form encompassed all the qualities required for a work of art to be pure and independent; what mattered was not what a work meant, but how it worked as art. Form offered art a blank canvas where its disciplines and processes were revealed unobstructed by any social, political or historical concerns. Avant-garde art became 'the imitation of imitating', an abstract process that was not, however, accidental or arbitrary.¹⁰⁸ It imitated art's processes and attempted to depict them rather than imitate art's effects on social or personal realities. At the same time, by suggesting that all modern art (both American and European) had more formal criteria, Greenberg seemed to completely ignore one of the avant-garde's main concerns, that of bridging the form-content divide.

One could be tempted at this stage to equate Greenberg's position with that of Adorno's on the autonomous nature of art. It is true that both critics desired the separation of politics from the realm of art and wished for an a-political representation of social reality. But at the same time they also invested political imperatives (whether consciously or unconsciously) in their respective views on art. Adorno, on the one hand, wished for a formal autonomy in a work of art that would perform simultaneously an intellectual study and expose its audience to the reified residues of a capitalist culture. Adorno never forgot that art is a social fact, hence a commodity, and that art ran the risk of either being submerged in the cultural industry or resorting to the 'art for art's sake' doctrine. Through his position on autonomy, he hoped to offer a different alternative to these two options that would allow art to function on a different level of representation. Greenberg, on the other hand, wished for a non-objective art that would oppose the regressive cultural ideologies, free itself from the realm of other artistic disciplines and outpace the vulgarities of everyday existence. His argument, however, relied heavily on the development of an individualistic consciousness on the artist's part. Only by turning to a realm of one's own experience could the artist escape the cultural regressions and achieve a non-objective representation of reality. Therefore, Greenberg resorted to the creation of a mythic quality that his representative artist ought to have. Instead of concentrating on the tensions inherent in a work of art that would subsequently allow its resistance to

¹⁰⁷ 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', p. 36.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

reification (like Adorno), Greenberg chose to invent a new type of non-objective art that would serve his idealistic views on art.

The avant-garde comprised, for Greenberg, a formal gesture and Abstract Expressionism was its representative par excellence. He admired the Abstract Expressionists' desire to 'break out of provinciality', their preoccupation with the medium (the canvas), their rebellion against the regionalism and folksy subject matter of previous painters and espoused the idea that through their art they could express their individuality free of any ideological constraints.¹⁰⁹ Freedom was a key word in the liberalism of the Cold War era and the American political life of the 1940s and 50s was infested by this notion; it became its new ideology. Freedom, then, had to be portrayed in all aspects of life. Abstract expressionism became the perfect expression: the 'freedom to create controversial works of art, the freedom symbolized by action painting, by the unbridled expressionism of artists completely without fetters'.¹¹⁰ It was no coincidence then that Abstract Expressionism became, for Greenberg and the New York Intellectuals, the supreme example of the essence of American freedom and was used as a cultural weapon against totalitarianism. But as Frances Stonor Saunders has commented, 'it is hard to sustain the argument that the Abstract Expressionists merely happened to be painting *in* the Cold War and not *for* the Cold War. Their own statements and, in some cases, political allegiances, undermine claims of political disengagement'.¹¹¹ Although such points are very valid, what is of great importance is how their art was used not simply by the CIA or the American government, but by intellectuals who presented those artists as the embodiment of freedom and individuality and their art as the only pure and 'politically correct' form that could exist.

¹⁰⁹ "'American Type" Painting', p. 195. One example of Greenberg's and the New York Intellectuals' admiration of Abstract Expressionism can be seen in the denigration of Thomas Hart Benton's murals of the 1920s-1930s with their regionalist pictures of an energetic America of workers and a social and political subject matter and, on the other hand, the aesthetic appreciation of Jackson Pollock's modern and non-objective art that was used as a cultural weapon against totalitarianism

¹¹⁰ Serge Guibant as quoted in Erika Doss, 'The Art of Cultural Politics: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism'. *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*. Ed. Lary May. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 195-220 (p. 198).

¹¹¹ Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. (London: Grant Books, 1999), p. 277, 457. David Caute has remarked that both Clement Greenberg and Jackson Pollock became members of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF) that operated during the Cold War. (*The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War*, p. 713). Recent debates among art historians have also considered the degree to which the Abstract Expressionists' stylistic choices were directly linked to the Cold War ideology (see Saunders and Caute for further discussion).

Greenberg's elevation of Abstract Expressionism was at the expense of what he called kitsch. Kitsch was identified with academicism, the mass-produced culture and conformity that came with it. In Greenberg's words:

Kitsch is mechanical and operated by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time.¹¹²

He identified kitsch with the art produced by many governments, the United States included, but it mostly represented the art of totalitarian regimes, that of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia in particular. The presence of kitsch in American culture could be countered by the high cultural values of the avant-garde, but in the case of Stalinist Russia this was not the case, he argued. In order to demonstrate this point, Greenberg used an example found in Kurt London's *The Seven Soviet Arts*.¹¹³ In it, London questioned why a Russian peasant should prefer Repin to Picasso and concluded that it was the Russian totalitarian regime that had conditioned the peasant's choice. Greenberg argued, however, that the peasant's choice was not so much a result of conditioning, but of education. He claimed that the peasant could more easily accept and appreciate Repin because in his painting there was no 'discontinuity between art and life, no need to accept a convention'; Repin painted 'so realistically that identifications are self-evident immediately and [require no] effort on the part of the spectator'.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, Picasso's painting did not offer the peasant a full story that he could relate to and his technique caused a feeling of estrangement that he could not fully comprehend. The difference between Picasso and Repin rested not only in their style, but in their intent as well; and for Greenberg the peasant could never appreciate Picasso's art. Repin's art was kitsch because '[he] predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art. Repin, or kitsch, is synthetic art'.¹¹⁵

Greenberg's argument as to why avant-garde art (identified with abstraction) was of higher value than kitsch focused on the education of the audience. By using the example of a Russian peasant, however, his argument contained a political agenda

¹¹² Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', p. 40.

¹¹³ Kurt London, *The Seven Soviet Arts*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1937).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

that he refused to acknowledge. Consider how, if the Russian peasant was substituted by an American, he might have displayed the same attitude; he would more readily appreciate a mural by Benton, which represented a full story, than one of Pollock's paintings. Greenberg's distinction between the avant-garde and kitsch suited the needs of the emerging American middle-class, which had acquired a university education and had thus been taught which kind of art to appreciate. The preservation of the American avant-garde and the resistance to kitsch relied on the existence of this educated middle class. By resisting kitsch culture, Greenberg argued, one resisted the injection of effective propaganda in a nation's cultural life; by effortlessly accepting it, however, one could become the victim of a dictator.

Greenberg's discussion and equation of kitsch with academic realism and the avant-garde with abstract painting could prove problematic from another point of view also. For Greenberg, the discontinuity between art and life was a necessary precondition for the 'agreement [which] rests on a very constant distinction made between those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere'.¹¹⁶ Whereas avant-garde art kept this distinction, it was kitsch that challenged and eliminated it. In this way, the Russian peasant admiring Repin's painting blurred artistic values with the ones he perceived in life. However, the same could be applied to an avant-garde art devotee; s/he would admire an Abstract Expressionist painting representing freedom of creativity and individuality, since these were the values cherished within American society at that specific political and social moment. However, this suggestion could challenge the rhetoric of purity and quality of modernist art and Greenberg's formalist theory, based on the centrality of the use of medium and independent of any other values than its own, would prove vulnerable to such a critique. This criticism would not intend to level modernist with popular art, but rather to highlight that the distinction between life and art values could be more ambiguous than Greenberg proposed.

Although Greenberg attempted to present a formal version of the avant-garde, he could not but resort to a political discourse in the end. His means of approaching the subject were not exclusively aesthetic, as he could not define American Abstract Expressionism without drawing a comparison with Stalinist 'kitsch' or 'propaganda' art. Barbara Rose has argued that 'the nature of the relationship of the avant-garde to

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

its audience defines the type of protest available at any given time'.¹¹⁷ Greenberg defined this relationship as political rather than aesthetic; the American audience's response to Abstract Expressionism would have been positive, as a means of protest against Russian art rather than as a 'pure' appreciation of the paintings themselves. The 'action men' of Abstract Expressionism would stimulate a reaction in their audience, but not the aesthetic one that Greenberg so desperately desired.

Greenberg's formalised position in 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' offered a new hope for the American artist and a renewed interest in American culture. However, for those few Marxist intellectuals, the article did not propose the revolutionary solution they anticipated. Greenberg's scheme aimed at fighting kitsch (identified with totalitarian authority) on the artistic level rather than the political or economic level and thus offered the avant-garde artist 'the illusion of battling the degraded structures of power with elitist weapons'.¹¹⁸ He finished the article by claiming that 'today we no longer look towards socialism for a new culture [...] Today we look to socialism *simply* for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now'.¹¹⁹ Greenberg, having abandoned his political principles of previous years, referred to socialism in an attempt to reinforce the continuity within the modernist tradition. For Greenberg, there was no cultural crisis as perceived by his European counterparts, since bourgeois art was not replaced by that of the proletariat, which was destroyed early on by the cultural policies of the Communist party; rather, he felt that there was a need for an avant-garde that would be informed by the successes and failures of its previous manifestations, thus marking the continuity between the past and present.

Greenberg's reading of the avant-garde and the cultural situation was incorporated in the discourse of the New York Intellectuals as it fell within the treatise of liberalism they were attempting to reinvent. This discourse established the sharp distinction between high/avant-garde and middlebrow/mass/kitsch art. High or avant-garde art had to remain apolitical, otherwise it ran the risk of becoming an instrument of mere propaganda as displayed by mass culture. However, divorcing modernism from its political potential and insisting on the autonomy of the artistic/literary object, avant-garde art was reduced to an ornament suitable for an institution (museums,

¹¹⁷ Barbara Rose, 'Protest in Art'. *Writers and Politics: A Partisan Review Reader*. Eds. Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips. (London-Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 235-246 (p. 238).

¹¹⁸ Serge Guilbaut, 'The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the *Vital Center*', p. 67.

¹¹⁹ Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', p. 49.

galleries, public buildings) or for the private eye of a collector; it became a commodity that was aesthetically deprived of critical content.¹²⁰ Greenberg (in his politics of aesthetics) seemed to ignore that the richness and complexity of early avant-garde art rested not only in its medium, but also in other values (social, political, historical). T. J. Clark has commented that ‘art wants to address someone, it wants something precise and extended to do; it wants *resistance*, it needs criteria’.¹²¹ The criteria that Greenberg proposed (art as being apolitical, displaying insistence on the medium, quality and purity) offered a new perspective to the American artist and elevated American culture from its regional status. But, for a culture that vowed to remain apolitical, it became a most resilient apparatus of propaganda; it appears then, that Greenberg’s formalistic cultural theory created an oxymoron since, during the 1950s, ‘for art to be politicized it had to be apolitical’.¹²²

Greenberg and the New York Intellectuals’ reinvention of the avant-garde tended to reflect quite acutely the new political aspirations of liberal America. Abstract Expressionism, with its discourse of freedom, individuality and non-conformity, represented the difference between good art and propaganda, between autonomy and totalitarianism. However, this supposed aesthetic of freedom and pluralism was not without restrictions. For example, Picasso’s *Massacres de Corée* (painted as a reaction to the American atrocities committed during the Korean War) caused a reaction within the American intelligentsia, since it represented a new *Guernica* in which, however, the United States had been substituted for Germany.¹²³ Picasso, who up to that point had been received as a ‘freedom lover, a depoliticised naïve genius whose love for peace had been exploited by the rapacious Communist Party’, had become a vehicle for propagandistic art.¹²⁴ The American intelligentsia, who never questioned *Guernica*’s validity in such terms, could not accept the validity of Picasso’s painting since it so openly criticised American policies. For the American

¹²⁰ As indeed happened when the avant-garde helped in a sense to create the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. See Michael FitzGerald, *Making Modernism: Picasso and the Creation of the Market for Twentieth-Century Art*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), p. 120.

¹²¹ T. J. Clark, ‘More on the Differences Between Comrade Greenberg and Ourselves.’ *Modernism and modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*. Eds. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin. (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), pp. 169-187 (pp. 186-7).

¹²² Guilbaut, ‘The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the *Vital Center*’, p. 75.

¹²³ For a more detailed discussion see Serge Guilbaut, ‘Postwar Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick’. *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945-1964*. Ed. Serge Guilbaut. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 30-84 (pp. 67-68).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

intellectual, modern art had withdrawn from any explicitly political activities (especially where the USA's activities were concerned) and within this context Picasso's work was recognized as propaganda that betrayed the modernist rhetoric of non-conformity.¹²⁵ The reaction to Picasso's painting was caused not simply because of his criticism of American foreign policies but also because the painting was released at a time when everyone in the USA was promoting American Abstract Expressionism in Europe in an attempt to consolidate its influence in the artistic world. However, Picasso's painting highlighted that the creative leadership of the School of Paris was still standing and delivered an alternative to expressionism. As a result the reactions towards any French or French-influenced painting intensified, as demonstrated by Sam Kootz's refusal to include in his 1949 show Holty and Brown's work, who were inspired by the School of Paris tradition.¹²⁶

Such attitudes reflected the limits of tolerance and freedom within the spirit of liberalism in American culture and its desperate attempt to establish a uniquely abstract American modern art, which complied with its beliefs and structures. But even within the circle of Abstract Expressionists there were reactions towards such considerations. Fearing the interpretations and application of meaning or objectives different to the ones he intended, Mark Rothko wrote to Betty Parsons in 1948 asking for his paintings not to be shown either in public or to any art critics; 'my contempt for the intelligence of the scribblers I have read is so complete that I cannot tolerate their imbecilities, particularly when they attempt to deal with my canvases. Men like Soby, Greenberg, Barr, etc.... are to be categorically rejected. And I no longer want to show them to the public at large, either singly or in group'.¹²⁷ Rothko's claims could reflect the fear the Abstract Expressionist artists felt as their work would be largely interpreted according to the doctrines and attitudes of a certain group of powerful art critics that would present as valid only those aspects of the work they endorsed. For a group of artists as powerful and successful as the Abstract Expressionists, it was significant that they could not prevent their art from entering the Cold War political debate and becoming assimilated in its propagandistic apparatus.

¹²⁵ In a correspondence between Alfred Barr and Thomas Hess (directors of *Art News*) on Picasso's painting, Hess wondered whether his work was a 'piece of communist propaganda'. Barr replied that 'Yes, anti-American propaganda, though Picasso might dismiss this as he dismissed the fact that the painting *Guernica* was political' (ibid. 67-68).

¹²⁶ Guilbaut, 'The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the *Vital Center*', p. 74.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Guilbaut, ibid., p. 72.

Greenberg and Trilling's aesthetic rhetoric established two binary structures of criteria for cultural criticism and interpretation. For Greenberg, on the one hand, there was the avant-garde representing freedom, individuality and quality and on the other there was mass culture (kitsch), identified with Communist totalitarianism, assimilation and avoidance of complexity. For Trilling, the complexities and anti-Stalinist politics of the re-invented liberalism and the parochial sentimentality and false representation of reality by the literature of artists belonging to the Progressive School. This rigid formation of polarities did not allow much space for diversity and also restricted the degree of political resistance on the part of the audience; any resistance that bore traces of leftist politics would have readily been identified with communist or Stalinist politics and thus dismissed as harmful propaganda. The aesthetic and political rhetoric of these two intellectuals, reaffirmed by the rest of the New York Intellectuals in the 1952 symposium 'Our Country and Our Culture', influenced an already politically fragile social order, which easily accommodated the anti-Stalinist discourse proposed by the CIA, the American government and the intellectuals themselves. Even the *Partisan Review*, their cherished forum of ideas and independent criticism, had 'become the chief organ of a new intellectual orthodoxy'.¹²⁸ Instead of proposing a new, fresh and constructively critical discourse, the New York Intellectuals had fallen victims to their own desires.

IV. 'Our Country and Our Culture' or 'Our Country, Our Culture'? The New York Intellectuals and the age of consensus.

Two years after Trilling published *The Liberal Imagination*, the resonance of his criticism was still very evident among the New York Intellectuals, whose central concern was the juncture between politics and culture, especially in relation to avant-garde art. In 1952, at a high point of the Cold War, the *Partisan Review* (the forum for the expression of the group's ideas) organized a symposium to examine the intellectuals' relationship with their culture and to demonstrate their unified front against the cultural and political evils of Stalinism, which quickly became identified with leftist politics in general. However, the New York Intellectuals were not always

¹²⁸ John Aldridge, *In Search of Heresy: American Literature in an Age of Conformity*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), p. 38.

hostile towards revolutionary Marxist thinking, evidenced by their early writings in the journal, and thus needed to re-address this issue as well.

Both the avant-garde and the liberalism that the Intellectuals envisioned initially had their origin in the realm of leftist ideology and practice, which encompassed a spirit of radicalism (both political and aesthetic) and social inclusiveness. However, their notion of the avant-garde was limited to the aesthetic and literary appreciation of a work of art and aimed at excluding any serious preoccupation with politics. Marxism, on the other hand, was never considered an ideological force that would take over the American sensibility and transform it into a propagandist tool. Therefore, they argued that the main error of Marxists and many political critics of literature had been to concentrate predominantly on propaganda and thus to ignore the importance of the medium, on which they and the *Partisan Review* would concentrate.¹²⁹ Liberal ideas were useful but they had to be placed into the new frame of the bourgeois mentality and ideology to which they aspired.¹³⁰ Their main enemy was no longer America's capitalist democracy and its institutions, but Stalinism, and, as James Burnham commented in 1945, 'Stalinism was Communism'.¹³¹ The Intellectuals realised that in order to oppose Stalinism, the new liberalism they espoused (no longer defined in terms of economic progress, prosperity or a political utopia) had to be informed by a combination of art and political ideology, mainly anti-Stalinism. As a result, they reverted to a tactic they had once critically rejected: the employment of an ideological force (anti-Stalinism) that informed their writings and attitudes towards literature. But within this new liberalism the once important aspect of radicalism, both in art and within the intelligentsia, seemed to become a marginal attitude. The tension between these ideas shaped the Intellectuals' attitudes towards the emergence of an American culture and tradition, marked the beginning of the cultural Cold War and increased their vulnerability to conformity and institutional appropriation. The *Partisan Review*, although they claimed was an independent journal, became the medium of their literary and political attitudes.

¹²⁹ Edith Kurzweil, and William Phillips (Eds.). *Writers and Politics: A Partisan Review Reader*. (Routledge and Kegan Paul: Boston, 1983), p. 11.

¹³⁰ I use the term 'bourgeois' to describe the new ideology of the Intellectuals because of their target audience. The New York Intellectuals addressed the new middle class that had money, time and the 'proper' state of mind (since they were educated in the universities) to appreciate modernism. Thus, one can claim that the middle class described above was the new American bourgeoisie of the 1950s.

¹³¹ James Burnham, 'Lenin's Heir'. *Partisan Review*, 12.1 (1945), 61-72 (p. 72).

When they first appeared, the New York Intellectuals attempted to challenge the relationship between European and American culture. European taste and tradition still served as their cultural past, but they desired to create a more critical and dialectical relationship. By the time the symposium 'Our Country and Our Culture' appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1952, however, their attitudes towards European and American culture had changed. The symposium aimed at examining and reinforcing the transformed way in which American intellectuals were viewing their country and its institutions. The editorial statement, written both by William Phillips and Philip Rahv, asserted that 'politically, there is a recognition that the kind of democracy, which exists in America, has an intrinsic and positive value: it is not merely a capitalist myth but a reality, which must be defended against Russian totalitarianism'.¹³² By applying the term 'politically' the statement not only qualified democracy in America as opposed to Russian totalitarianism, but also defined it as the only enduring space where independent and constructive criticism could be revealed. This political democracy had become a reality since it made allowances for cultural development and for the American people to enjoy economic prosperity and stability. The Intellectuals' view of American reality was contrasted with its contemporary European counterpart; they no longer considered Europe as the sanctuary to which Eliot and James had once escaped, since they believed it did not possess the rich cultural experience that had once inspired a criticism of American life.¹³³ They strongly disapproved of the European intellectuals' experimentation with existentialism and political adventurism, which they identified with Stalinism.¹³⁴ By the fifties the New York Intellectuals' political and cultural allegiances had shifted from radical Marxist revolutionary politics, to 'independent' socialism, to the 'politics of liberal anticommunism'.¹³⁵

The participant intellectuals were invited to answer four questions put forward by the editorial statement: a) whether the American intellectuals had changed their attitudes towards America and its institutions; b) whether they should adapt to a rapidly forming mass culture; c) since Europe could no longer perform as their cultural paradigm, from where should the American artist and critic seek a basis for

¹³² 'Editorial Statement', *Partisan Review*, 19.3 (1952), 282-286 (p. 284).

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

¹³⁵ Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left: politics, imagination, and the New York Intellectuals*. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 132.

renewal and recognition; and d) whether the tradition of critical non-conformism could still be maintained as strongly as ever.¹³⁶ In the first of these questions, the issue of the intellectuals' transformation of their attitude towards America is related to the theme of alienation. Although a few years back they had claimed that the artist and intellectual ought to be politically alienated, by 1952 they 'no longer accept[ed] alienation as the artist's fate in America; on the contrary, they wanted very much to be part of American life'.¹³⁷ Within the symposium, they identified alienation entirely with the social criticism and artistic practices of the 1920s and 1930s and with the American artists' escape to Europe. Rahv maintained that American intellectuals no longer felt alienated within their country's reality and thus were no longer attached 'to the attitudes of dissidence and revolt that prevailed among them for some decades. As their mood had shifted from opposition to acceptance, they had grown unreceptive to extreme ideas, less extracting and 'pure' in ideological commitment, more open to the persuasions of reality'.¹³⁸ Rahv's comments suggested that the New York Intellectuals viewed the politically involved intellectual life of the 1930s as tainted by ideology because of its direct involvement with socialist and Marxist thinking (to which, however, they themselves had once aspired). They also considered their predecessors' quest for a meaningful subject matter, tied up to social and political reform and available to the masses, as ineffective. The rural and regional character of the art created during the 1930s (with political elements included) caused additional frustration since, in their minds, that kind of art (exemplified by Thomas Hart Benton's murals) prolonged the provincial status of American culture and was in complete opposition to the cosmopolitan values they hoped to inspire. The New York Intellectuals hoped that the cosmopolitan ideal, in connection with their national hopes, would lead to an inclusive, culturally vital and diverse American art that would be, however, indifferent to any political claims and ideology.

Although the 1920s and 1930s formed part of the American cultural tradition, the decades were condemned as immature, sterile, psychopathic and in constant adolescence by the majority of the intellectuals. Newton Arvin suggested that this habit of exacerbated alienation should be abandoned, since 'anything else suggests too strongly the continuance into adult life and the negative Oedipal relations of

¹³⁶ 'Editorial Statement'. *Partisan Review* 19.3 (1952), p. 286.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹³⁸ Phillip Rahv, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review*, 19.3 (1952), 304-310 (p. 304).

adolescence – and in much of the alienation of the twenties and thirties there was just that quality of immaturity’.¹³⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr also emphasized that ‘the critical attitude of American intellectuals towards American culture in the nineteenth and the early part of this century was rooted in adolescent embarrassment’.¹⁴⁰ The discourse of ‘illness’ and ‘adolescence’ used by certain intellectuals was characteristic of the Cold War psychiatric rhetoric that attempted to reduce difference. The New York Intellectuals hoped to diminish the rigor of 1920s and 30s’ criticism and justify as ‘unfortunate’ those critics’ choice of writing with leftist political expectations in mind. By characterizing them as ‘insane’, the New York Intellectuals not only placed them in exile but, as Susan Sontag has commented, ‘the notion of a sufferer as a hectic, reckless creature of passionate extremes [represents] someone too sensitive to bear the horrors of the vulgar, everyday world’.¹⁴¹ At the same time, the experiences of the American intellectual of the 1930s within the Communist movement ‘became lessons to instruct American radicalism’.¹⁴² Since Russia had become such a great power and thus a real threat to the United States, anyone who defended or espoused it was a liability to American political and cultural life. The political atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s would not allow the survival of a civic literary culture that still bore traces of depression radicalism, since it was not applicable to the capitalist reality of American institutions (the New York Intellectuals were themselves in the process of becoming one of these). The stigmatisation of the intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s as ‘insane and ill’ placed them on the margins of society and resulted in the silencing of their dissenting voices.

Many of the intellectuals were concerned with the role politics could perform in the realm of art and in the production of a constructive social criticism; they shared Sidney Hook’s idea that ‘too many intellectuals are irresponsible, especially in politics’ and agreed that ‘the lowest form of intellectual life is led by left bank American expatriates who curry favor with Sartrean neutralists by giving them the lowdown on the cultural ‘reign of terror’ in America’.¹⁴³ Any kind of leftist politics were promptly identified with communism and qualified as corrupt, destructive and a

¹³⁹ Newton Arvin, ‘Our Country and Our Culture.’ *Partisan Review*, 19.3 (1952), 286-288 (p. 287).

¹⁴⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, ‘Our Country and Our Culture.’ *Partisan Review*, 19.3 (1952), 301-303 (p. 301).

¹⁴¹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), p. 36.

¹⁴² James Burkhart Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*. (New York: John Willey and Sons, 1968), p. 260.

¹⁴³ Sidney Hook, ‘Our Country and Our Culture’. *Partisan Review*, 19.5 (1952), 569-574 (p. 573).

threat 'to the life of the free mind'.¹⁴⁴ Hook's comments not only expressed the aversion of most intellectuals towards any leftist politics, but also proposed the dichotomy of America-liberalism and Europe-left politics (communism for the New York Intellectuals). It was Europe's experimentation with left politics primarily (especially in France) that led to some harsh judgements at the symposium.¹⁴⁵ Jacques Barzun argued that it was Europe that was provincial since, after its destruction by the Second World War, it had left the space of 'the world power, which means the center of world awareness' to the United States;¹⁴⁶ moreover, the European intellectual was 'dissipating' his energy towards 'political adventurism'¹⁴⁷ rather than on cultural issues and was overrun by 'self-pity and nostalgia'.¹⁴⁸ The intellectuals were attempting to introduce a new discourse for the construction of American identity, which was, however, based on the negation of its past criticism and cultural association with Europe. Barzun made a strong claim by stating that 'culture, becoming a weapon in the struggle ceased to have any meaning as criticism of life'.¹⁴⁹ Culture, however, became the most efficient and committed weapon for the New York Intellectuals against the whole sphere of leftist ideology.

Lionel Trilling's contribution to the symposium was one of the most eloquent and argumentative defences of America's newly founded intellectual independence. Trilling's positions towards literature and criticism had led him

to see literary situations as cultural situations, and cultural situations as great elaborate fights about moral issues, and moral issues as having something to do with gratuitously chosen images of personal being, and images of personal being as having something to do with literary style.¹⁵⁰

It was this dialectical affiliation of self and moral issues, of literature and culture that informed his thinking. In his contribution, he acknowledged that there had been a definite improvement in the American cultural situation, one that enabled America to avoid being considered as 'the vulgarest and stupidest nation of the world' and one

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 574.

¹⁴⁵ This attitude is exemplified by the French Existentialists and especially by the writings of Sartre who was attacked in almost every issue of the *Partisan Review*, but who also continued to write for the magazine.

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Barzun, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review*, 19.4 (1952), 424-431 (p. 426).

¹⁴⁷ Rahv, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review* 19.3 (1952), p. 306.

¹⁴⁸ Leslie A. Fiedler, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review*, 19.5 (1952), 294-298 (p. 294).

¹⁴⁹ Barzun, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review* 19.4 (1952), p. 427.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Nathan A. Scott, *Three American Moralists: Mailer, Bellow, Trilling*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), p. 155.

that allowed the rise of a new class of intellectuals.¹⁵¹ He concentrated his discussion on the status of the intellectual and commented on how impossible it was for the American intellectual to have a strong artistic and intellectual affinity with Europe and Stalinist France. He also accused the American intellectual of submitting to Europe and thus allowing his views of American reality to be influenced by the biased Marxist ideas constructed by the French intellectuals.¹⁵² It was because of the relationship with the French Marxist intelligentsia that the American intellectual 'did not direct [impatience, contempt, demand and resistance] where they should have gone, [but] that he was general and abstract where he should have been specific and concrete'.¹⁵³ For Trilling, the dismissal of Marxism and French art's influence on American cultural life revealed the new intellectual elite that would look at its culture with 'the precise critical attention it must have' and would cultivate a critical interest in the literary mind, following the non-conformist tradition of Melville and Thoreau.¹⁵⁴

However, a number of the participant intellectuals were more dissenting. William Barrett remarked how intellectual alienation was expressed as a 'widespread [noticeable] drift towards conformism' and how American literary criticism 'boil[ed] down to a defence, or rediscovery, of bourgeois values'.¹⁵⁵ Barrett was one of the very few intellectuals to voice the dominant relationship between conformism and the liberal bourgeois mentality that was prevalent and thus questioned whether the spirit of radicalism was still shaping the American intellectual's consciousness. Norman Mailer similarly observed that

everywhere the American writer is being dunned to become healthy, to grow up, to accept the American reality, to integrate himself, to eschew disease, to re-value institutions. Is there nothing to remind us that the writer does not need to be integrated into his society, and often works best in opposition to it?¹⁵⁶

Mailer questioned one of the assumptions of the symposium: that the American intellectual needed to work from within the society and its institutions, since working outside it or in the margins could be interpreted as mechanical leftism. He also

¹⁵¹ Lionel Trilling, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review*, 19.3 (1952), 318-326 (p. 319).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 323-324.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 323-324

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

¹⁵⁵ William Barrett, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review*, 19.4 (1952), 420-423 (pp. 420-1).

¹⁵⁶ Norman Mailer, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review* 19.3 (1952), 298-301 (p. 299).

commented on how the intellectuals' need to rediscover America from within its own society and institutions was associated with 'the curious space relations of politics which equates right to within and left to without'.¹⁵⁷ Although the avant-garde's political aesthetics could be found in American cultural life, they were not being effectively publicized. This attitude could suggest a restriction to the discourse of independent intellectual development that most of the New York Intellectuals seemed to advocate and could also be seen in relation to James Burnham's observation that their desire to re-discover American culture was mostly political and military, for fear of Soviet totalitarianism and its expansive policies.¹⁵⁸ Marxism and socialism once formed the utopian, literary and driving forces of these intellectuals, but now the fear of them had become the basis on which the 'new' American cultural and aesthetic identity was being built.

Both Irving Howe and William Phillips asserted that the rediscovery of America had been primarily economic and political.¹⁵⁹ Howe was the only intellectual who confessed that 'my political views play a part in determining my response to the questions put by the PR editors'.¹⁶⁰ He criticised the liberal belief that America was 'uniquely a land of social vitality' and argued that society 'must be engaged, resisted and – who knows perhaps still – transformed'.¹⁶¹ He acknowledged that Marxism was in crisis, but perceived it as the only available method for a fruitful criticism of American life and culture. He was very critical of Stalinism, but concentrated mostly on liberalism (celebrated by most of the intellectuals). Liberalism put forward an image of a strong and developed America, but what lay beneath this image was a war economy. Howe was disturbed by the fact that 75 per cent of the American national budget was dedicated to the military. The way this war economy affected the construction of liberal discourse or influenced this new affirmation of American institutions was not questioned at the symposium. Instead, a war economy was seen positively since it allowed the United States to prosper, a prosperity which 'at long last effected the absorption of the intellectuals into the institutional life of the country'.¹⁶² If they intended to approach American life and culture with the attention

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 299.

¹⁵⁸ Burnham, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review* 19.3 (1952), p. 290.

¹⁵⁹ Irving Howe, 'Our Country and Our Culture', *Partisan Review*, 19.5 (1952), 569-581 (p. 576); William Phillips, 'Our Country and Our Culture', *Partisan Review*, 19.5 (1952), 585-590 (p. 589).

¹⁶⁰ Howe, 'Our Country and Our Culture'. *Partisan Review* 19.5 (1952), p. 577.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 575; 'This Age of Conformity'. *Partisan Review*, 21.1 (1954), 7-33 (p. 10).

¹⁶² Rahv, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review* 19.3 (1952), p. 306.

it deserved, the issue of a war economy should have been examined.¹⁶³ By evading this subject, the intellectuals chose not to approach American reality as critically as they desired. It is no wonder, then, that Howe claimed that this affirmation or acceptance of America 'is largely a product of the will, a forced march of intellect'.¹⁶⁴

Phillips was equally concerned with the political rediscovery of America. He feared that there had been an uncritical acceptance of everything 'American' and also that, if this rediscovery was not extended to the realm of art and social criticism, it could lead to a new movement of regionalism in art ('chauvinist platitudes' as he commented) that he found constrictive and damaging.¹⁶⁵ He observed that the spirit of an avant-garde was still necessary for American culture and that the American literary taste was still influenced by the more classical imagination of Kafka, Proust, Eliot and Faulkner. Through these comments Phillips did not advocate an avant-garde aesthetics similar to either Europe's or the one present in 1930s America. Instead he wished for a home-grown avant-garde (similar to Greenberg's Abstract Expressionism) that would be distinctively American, could relate to American life and be simultaneously international in scope. And although he still admired the oeuvre of Kafka, Eliot or Proust, Phillips wanted American literature to move forward and succeed where these authors had failed. As a result, although a few years back he would have openly proclaimed the need for radicalism in art to be represented by the avant-garde, in the symposium he was more open to 'the indigenous and homely strains' of American culture.¹⁶⁶ What Phillips seemed to suggest was that a marriage of American national experiences with those advocated by European avant-garde artists was needed to inform American culture and literature (so that American culture could still retain its cosmopolitan character), but that the American author and intellectual should not lose sight of his own identity and culture. These indigenous strains, not to be confused with regionalism, represented for Phillips an attempt for the American author to finally realise his national identity and reconcile it with cosmopolitanism, adopt modernist art created in his own country, be aware of the country's intellectual tradition and learn to work with and within the opposing forces

¹⁶³ Trilling, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review* 19.3 (1952), p. 324.

¹⁶⁴ Howe, 'Our Country and Our Culture'. *Partisan Review* 19.5 (1952), p. 579.

¹⁶⁵ Phillips, 'Our Country and Our Culture'. *Partisan Review* 19.5 (1952), p. 587, p. 589.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 587.

of American culture ('tradition and revolt, nationalism and internationalism, the aesthetic and the civic, [...] belonging and alienation').¹⁶⁷

Phillips went on to observe the tendency among the intellectuals to affirm their identity as anti-Stalinist and 'to accommodate themselves to any form of thinking so long as it is anti-Communist', which was 'another way of losing one's identity'.¹⁶⁸ Phillips (a disillusioned Marxist supporter of the 1930s) ventured to be equally critical towards liberalism and claimed that it was the intellectual's and the artist's role not to conform to the status quo. However, by ending his contribution with a reference to both Keats and Trilling's version of negative capability, he emphasized the notion of the artist as working within binaries. He commented that 'the artist [should keep] a balance of opposing forces, which gives him the appearance of a suspended man', thus portraying the American artist as performing between liberalism and Stalinism, between aesthetic and civic culture, between belonging and experiencing alienation.¹⁶⁹ However critical he attempted to be, Phillips' thinking could not escape the strict structure of polarities put forward by Cold War policies; on the contrary, he reinforced them.

Most of the participant intellectuals seemed satisfied with the defeat of the left-wing movement, as in their mind it had depoliticised literature. They could then approach literature as 'deeply embedded in the historical process, yet not to such an extent that it would become mere simulacrum of 'real' social or historical forces. It would provide a common ground where an eminently social self might be explored'.¹⁷⁰ Literature and culture, free of any ideology, had to creatively displace their political motive by 'a root-idea of a different order'.¹⁷¹ Satisfied as they might have been with the establishment of political democracy, they feared that of cultural levelling; the cultural capital that had enabled them to enter American political and social life more rigorously and effectively had also enabled popular culture to enter the consciousness of the American people. Echoing the same concerns as the Frankfurt School, but from a sometimes radically different perspective, the New York Intellectuals saw the function of popular culture as alienating and as cultivating an unenlightened awareness of meaning and thinking. In opposition to this alienation,

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 589.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 589

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 589

¹⁷⁰ Teres, *Renewing the Left: politics, imagination, and the New York Intellectuals*, p. 147.

¹⁷¹ Rahv, 'Our Country and Our Culture', *Partisan Review* 19.3 (1952), p. 309.

they proposed the aesthetic of the avant-garde, because they appreciated in this ‘advanced’ culture a vitality for criticism. Although wary of its elitism, they envisioned in the avant-garde a sense of historical continuity and integrity and in the avant-garde artist the ability ‘to convert [his] consciousness of that unhappy state [alienation] into an imaginative resource’.¹⁷²

The impact of the legacy of the New York Intellectuals on American cultural life was so profound that the 1952 symposium was revisited by the *Partisan Review* firstly in 1984 (to celebrate the 50 years of the magazine’s publication) and subsequently in 2002 under the title ‘Our Country, Our Culture: The Changing Role of Intellectuals, Artists, and Scientists in America 1952-2002’. In the 1984 issue, many of the 1952 contributors did not participate and Philip Rahv was long dead, but William Phillips (still the editor of the magazine) attempted to defend the ideas expressed at the original symposium. For Phillips, the danger was posed by the misinterpretations of the 1952 symposium’s views, proposed both by a part of the Left and the neo-conservatives within the United States. He started off by proposing that one should re-read the editorial of the ‘new *Partisan Review*’, reprinted after his contribution, in order to discover that their principles and literary values had not changed over the years. By the ‘new’ editorial, Phillips referred to the 1937 one.¹⁷³ The first few issues of the magazine (printed between 1934 and 1936) were not mentioned in his paper as they could not represent the ‘new’ aesthetic and literary sensibility of the disillusioned Marxists among the New York Intellectuals. Phillips’ contribution offered a summary of the questions submitted by the original symposium, defended its positions on mass culture and re-asserted the intellectuals’ commitment to keeping a balance between traditional and avant-garde values. Phillips, attempting to represent the missing intellectuals, used the pronoun ‘we’ to establish the continuity of ideas within the intellectuals’ circle and the strong union of their group. He concluded his paper by emphasizing that ‘we are still opposed to political reflexes, cultural cant, and literary obfuscation. Our history, we feel, has demonstrated that we are committed to publishing those works that best represent the creative and critical intelligence of our time’.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 310.

¹⁷³ Phillips, ‘*Partisan Review: Then and Now.*’ *Partisan Review*, 51.4 (1984), 491-493 (p. 491).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 493.

The first revisiting of the symposium took place in a similar Cold War climate to that of the original one. Phillips referred to the growing power of the Soviet Union, 'its terrorist allies' and the increasing sentiment of 'anti-Americanism'. Although he was still critical of liberalism, he perceived in it a more balanced attitude towards social and aesthetic concerns, whereas he felt that the Left was 'a complex of outworn Marxist notions, vaguely progressive ideas', overwhelmed by 'the more popular radical tide'.¹⁷⁵ Phillips believed that this outworn Left, with its collage of Marxist ideas, its necessity to talk about politics and culture, its discourse on the mass production of art and its alliance with mass culture, produced 'a new kind of kitsch' that had led to a culture of instant assimilation and conformity. Phillips regarded that the aesthetics of kitsch were consistent with the unfolding political situation, as it had led to 'kitsch politics', identified as pseudo-revolutionary and neo-conservative in content and form, which was responsible for the international rejection of American culture as 'bourgeois, or masculine, or racist'.¹⁷⁶ This article did not offer the same feeling of euphoria and fervent optimism that was offered by the 1952 symposium. Although America had established its position as the land of freedom, democracy, progress and creativity, it seemed to be suffering on a cultural level. Mass and popular art, which the New York Intellectuals had feared so much, had become American culture's trademark. The notion of the avant-garde was nowhere to be found in the intellectuals' writings and the American avant-garde (Abstract Expressionism in particular) could not serve a continuing American Cold War cultural politics; Pollock's paintings could no longer compete with Hollywood or Coca Cola's appeal, either nationally or internationally.

To deal with all these cultural and aesthetic changes, Daniel Bell suggested that 'we need a new public philosophy, rooted in liberalism, a liberalism which has the 'negative capability' of not reaching for closure on all issues'.¹⁷⁷ Bell (developing Trilling's views on negative capability), was attempting to reinvent the notion of complexity within liberalism so as to challenge its depiction as synonymous with individuality, subjectivity or neo-conservative politics. By referring to Tocqueville and Montesquieu, he wanted to emphasise the organic unity that should exist between a political movement and the different social communities. Since socialism was

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 492.

¹⁷⁶ Phillips, 'Our Country and Our Culture'. *Partisan Review*, 51.4 (1984), 773-780 (p. 779).

¹⁷⁷ Daniel Bell, 'Our Country - 1984'. *Partisan Review*, LI.4 (1984), 620-637 (p. 637).

politically dead, liberalism's idea of "republican virtue" ... that a society could be maintained by constitutionalism, comity, and civil discourse' offered this unity.¹⁷⁸ Bell's liberalism, similar to Trilling's, could encompass all these values so as to become once more a strong and complex force within American cultural and political life. Writing in 1984, under the Reagan administration, having proclaimed the end of ideology and socialism dead, Bell allowed for liberal capitalism to be recognized as the only viable means of political life. It was in the hands of the anti-communist intellectual to recognize 'how complicated the world is, when seen without an all-explaining ideology'.¹⁷⁹ However, it was still the reinvented, complex, all-explaining liberal ideology that would provide a political discourse to contend with the pluralistic aspects of political and cultural life and with the traces of cultural Stalinism; it was still liberalism that could 'defend elitism or the establishment ... the guardian of morality' against a levelling popular culture.¹⁸⁰

The New York Intellectuals' and Trilling's refashioning of liberalism would become an influential origin in the formation of a neo-conservative ideology, although most of them never aspired to it themselves. This change was manifested in the second reconsideration of the 1952 symposium, organized again by the *Partisan Review* in 2002. The old ensemble of intellectuals was substituted by a more neo-conservative group headed by Norman Podhoretz (the self-proclaimed 'spiritual son' of Trilling), David Pryce-Jones and Hilton Kramer, and by a group of intellectuals that reacted strongly against postmodern culture and identity politics including Sanford Pinsker, John Patrick Diggins and Robert Brustein to name but a few. The symposium took place just a year after the terrorist attacks in the United States; although the country had not yet come to terms with the events, the feeling and rhetoric of nationalism appeared very strong and it was in the light of it that these intellectuals returned to the issues proposed by the 1952 symposium. The welcoming speech to the symposium was given by Jon Westling, the president of Boston University which also served as the journal's major sponsor. Westling, a professor of history, did not belong to any of the intellectual groups mentioned above. As a historian, he invited the participants to 'step back and reflect on whether these

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 637.

¹⁷⁹ Michael Kimmage, 'Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey* and the Complicated Origins of the Neo-Conservative Movement'. *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 21.3 (2003), 48-63 (p. 63).

¹⁸⁰ Bell, 'Our Country - 1984', p. 633.

apparent changes are real, whether, if real, they are deep, and whether, if deep, they are durable'.¹⁸¹ As he commented, 'America, whose political and cultural challenges of the Cold War sharpened its self-understanding as the nation that led the fight for freedom' was now faced with the prospect of an even more resilient cultural and political anti-Americanism, both domestic and international.¹⁸² The underlying question of Westling's thought (reminiscent of the New York Intellectuals) was whether the American artist and intellectual was still interested in the survival of his country, in its democratic social values and cultural history; or in Phillips' words, did he still think himself as 'internationalist rather than nationalist?'¹⁸³

The symposium renewed its attack on the cultural and political left; it began with the affirmation that 'the [1952] editors' adamant anti-communism was eventually vindicated. We continue to remain open to the avant-garde and allergic to its kitschy reproductions, and to use the word culture in its larger sense rather than in the current parlance to designate specific groups'.¹⁸⁴ Most of the contributors recapitulated the positions and findings of the New York Intellectuals: the survival of a complex modernist tradition was still threatened by the all expansive policies of popular culture and the intellectual's cosmopolitan position (although endangered) was still essential, as a result of the plethora of new academic and ethnic cultures. The major threat to American culture was anti-Americanism, a political and aesthetic attitude that the participant intellectuals felt was cultivated within the European literary elites, especially that of France, which still bore traces of a leftist ideology. Their attitude towards the French intelligentsia might not have been unjustifiable, but where they differed from their predecessors' attitude was in the overt use of political arguments to support their positions. Phillips, Rahv or Trilling were faced with the same anti-Americanism and wanted to reinforce American national culture, but they attempted to do so from a predominantly modernist aesthetic realm. The 2002 contributors (Diggins, Jones) were critical of the effects of French structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, existentialism on American academia and life, but did not attempt to argue against it in terms of aesthetics. Rather they resorted to an exclusively political rhetoric which was further intensified by the French intellectuals'

¹⁸¹ Jon Westling and Edith Kurzweill, 'Our Country, Our Culture'. *Partisan Review* 69.4 (2002), p. 501.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p.501.

¹⁸³ Phillips, 'Our Country and Our Culture'. *Partisan Review*, 51.4 (1984), p. 773.

¹⁸⁴ Jon Westling and Edith Kurzweill 'Our Country, Our Culture'. *Partisan Review* 69.4 (2002), p. 506.

strong opposition and rigorous debates on the American intervention in Iraq. This climate of Francophobia in the USA can be clearly seen in David Pryce-Jones' comment that 'France has replaced the defunct Soviet Union as the main source of anti-Americanism in the world, more dramatic in its scope and consequences even than Islamism'.¹⁸⁵ Pryce-Jones located this sentiment of anti-Americanism among the French to the end of World War II and the figure of Charles de Gaulle. He argued that the French never accepted the strong role and leadership of the USA which replaced their own both in Europe and worldwide and that French culture suffers from a regression to provincialism. His argument, resonant of the New York Intellectuals' views against the 1920s and 1930s American culture, and his almost delirious attack against anything French, signalled the establishment of neo-conservative attitudes within the American intelligentsia which, it seems, is capable of conducting 'dialogue' only with such countries and intellectuals that do not openly criticise American politics. At the same time, by juxtaposing France with Islamism, Pryce-Jones is again working within binaries; this juxtaposition also signifies, within the minds of American intellectuals, that the enduring spirit of opposition and questioning within the French intelligentsia could prove more harmful than the ever-rising rhetoric of Islamism. In a way, Pryce-Jones is trying to avoid a serious consideration of the issue of Islamism, thus precluding a debate on the issue among the American intellectuals, and instead focuses all his energy on combating the French intelligentsia and reinforcing the sterile argument of cultural envy among the USA's 'allies'.

Such polemical views revealed the attitude that American national culture and tradition had to be defended by the intellectuals not only on the grounds of artistic appreciation and creativity, but on the grounds of political identities as well. Whereas the 1952 intellectuals talked about the Europeanization of American literature, the 2002 contributors commented on the 'Americanization of Western Europe'.¹⁸⁶ They identified this tendency with the salvage of democracy in Europe after the end of World War II, which prevented the French, Italian and Portuguese Communist parties from rising to power, and with the influential introduction of American culture and taste in the European domain. According to Pryce-Jones, the European countries, although appreciative in the beginning and supportive of such efforts as the Berlin Air Lift or the Marshall Plan, soon retreated to anti-Americanism. It was America's

¹⁸⁵ David Pryce-Jones 'View from Europe'. *Partisan Review*, 69.4 (Fall 2002), 636-643 (p. 638).

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 636.

political status as the defender of freedom and democracy, with an advanced culture and a strong economic status that encouraged this feeling: 'Taking their intellectual and political supremacy for granted, European elites have long been accustomed to setting the standards in taste and culture, as well. For them, Americanization has been a challenge to their autonomy'.¹⁸⁷ His comment had an element of truth in it, but rather than examining why European intellectuals reacted so fiercely to America's dominant status, he retreated to a defensive rhetoric of generalizations, claiming that 'the arts as a whole in Europe are reduced to transgression'.¹⁸⁸ Pryce-Jones' contribution was characteristic of the 2002 symposium's attempt to defend America as a political power. At the same time, there was no in-depth problematization of the status of American culture, whose tradition was defined only when opposed to the hostile representation of its 'degenerate' European counterpart.

The debate on anti-Americanism was extended to include the domestic front as well. Norman Podhoretz' paper reflected a nostalgia for the 1952 symposium and its intellectuals who were radical enough to embrace American culture and support it politically, as they recognized that 'political support was also engendering a new appreciation even of the country's cultural values'.¹⁸⁹ However, he did not approve of their fascination with the 'tradition of critical nonconformism', since it was because of this traditional role of the intellectual that the rediscovery of America did not encompass unconditionally all its aspects (political, economic, social or cultural) and thus led to anti-Americanism within America itself.¹⁹⁰ For Podhoretz, some American intellectuals were misguided in not accepting capitalism as part of the USA's politics of freedom; capitalism allowed for economic plurality and diversity and was the precondition for political liberty. Those intellectuals were responsible for domestic anti-Americanism, and he counted among them Irving Howe, Norman Mailer, Noam Chomsky and Susan Sontag. He attacked those intellectuals because of their decision to critically oppose America's doctrine of the 'war on terrorism'. Podhoretz commented that

To them, America was not 'our' country and 'our' culture; they were resident aliens who prided themselves on opposing the evils that had putatively created the suicide bombers. To them, these evils were the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 637.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 640.

¹⁸⁹ Norman Podhoretz, 'Intellectuals and Writers Then and Now'. *Partisan Review*, 69.4 (Fall 2002), 507-541 (p. 508).

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 509.

unholy offspring of an incestuous coupling by American political power with American popular culture. To them, it seemed never to occur that they themselves, through a trickle-down process, had been the chief shapers and propagators of the popular culture the Islamic fascists attacking us *really* regarded as decadent and degenerate.¹⁹¹

This comment is problematic because of the manner in which, putting aside any political reasons behind the terrorist acts, he accuses certain intellectuals of propagating a decadent popular culture that is held responsible for the attacks. Although Podhoretz did not develop these accusations, he seemed to imply that it was Chomsky, Sontag and Mailer's critique of the relationship between American politics and capitalism that created the false image of a corrupted and self-indulgent America. Their writings and the hostility expressed by 'their acolytes in the major media of news and popular entertainment' towards capitalism and bourgeois America were to blame.¹⁹² In Podhoretz's mind, these intellectuals' misrepresentation of American life and values and their unwillingness to side unconditionally with the new political rhetoric, was a betrayal of America. Fifty years on, his reasoning is reminiscent of McCarthy's Cold War policies; if one opposes the political and cultural guidelines, one automatically becomes an enemy of the state.

Fifty years separate the two symposia contending with the issues of American tradition, its institutions and the question of their acceptance by the American artist and intellectual. The re-affirmation of the 1952 symposium's 'apparent fact that American intellectuals now regard America and its institutions in a new way' encouraged the intellectuals to embrace and reclaim American life and tradition.¹⁹³ America became 'their country' and 'an avowed aloofness from national feeling [was] no longer the first ceremonial step into the life of thought'.¹⁹⁴ Trilling and most of the 1952 intellectuals praised the nation's cultural, political and economic freedom, since it offered 'the not inconsiderable advantages of a whole skin, a full stomach, and the right to wag his tongue as he pleases'.¹⁹⁵ The New York Intellectuals' acceptance of American culture was based on the post-war economic affluence and the euphoria that liberal democracy had defeated Stalinist totalitarianism. Although they claimed that the rediscovery of American values would be accompanied by the 'tradition of critical

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 512. [italics my emphasis]

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 511.

¹⁹³ 'Editorial Statement'. *Partisan Review*, 19.3 (1952), p. 282.

¹⁹⁴ Trilling, 'Our Country and Our Culture.' *Partisan Review* 19.3 (1952), p. 318.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 319.

non-conformism', it was the tradition of conformism that prevailed, thus limiting and undermining the few dissenting voices, even within the symposium.¹⁹⁶

Within this new tradition of conformism, European culture and politics could no longer act as the ideal moral and artistic paradigm since they had become vulgar and corrupt through their active involvement with leftist politics (identified in 1952 with Stalinism). Because of a decadent European culture, the New York Intellectuals felt that it was their function as intellectuals to oppose, both in the national and international realm, the fast rising popularity of 'mass' culture and reinstate high modernist art in its rightful place. However, in their effort to do so they proposed a formalist notion of avant-garde art that embodied their polemical attitude towards kitsch (equated with both popular and Stalinist art) and their rejection of any political content. The work of art became a symbol of freedom, resisting any external references, such as social, political or historical progress. With such a stance, however, the New York Intellectuals created an aestheticism in art equal to the doctrine of 'art for art's sake'; they defined the relationship of the avant-garde with the world and its audience as elitist, and rendered as politically ineffective any available type of protest and resistance.

The participants in the 2002 symposium, relying heavily on this tradition, reaffirmed their commitment to American culture and endorsed more enthusiastically capitalist economic freedom. In view of the terrorist attacks, the need for consensus and national unity was prioritized. By omitting 'and' from the original title of the 1952 symposium, the neo-conservative intellectuals rejected the more dialectical examination of American culture with American life; for them American culture was America. Because of this holistic identification, their attitude towards European culture became even more antagonistic as revealed in the comments by Pryce-Jones, Westling and Wood. The American intellectuals would still impose the label 'anti-American' on any of their fellow critics who cultivated a more anti-conformist position (especially if containing leftist politics) towards American reality. In the aesthetic realm they strongly condemned popular culture. The intellectuals in 2002 had witnessed more thoroughly than their predecessors the expansion of mass media, television and Hollywood. They blamed postmodernism (especially Derrida, Foucault and Chomsky's theories on language, reading and interpretation) for allowing

¹⁹⁶ 'Editorial Statement'. *Partisan Review*, 19.3 (1952), p. 286.

everything to be considered a 'text', depriving readers of a critical engagement with complex modernist ideas. Sanford Pinsker lamented the loss of Trilling's "moral realism"... a way of reading that required close attention to the nuances of style and the subtle shifts of an author's sensibility', whereas Cynthia Ozick observed how 'modernism as a credo seems faded and old-fashioned, if not obsolete, and what we once called the "avant-garde" is now either fakery or comedy'.¹⁹⁷

For many of the 2002 participants, their predecessors' fears had been realised, as exemplified in the predominance of a popular and postmodern culture. Although they discussed extensively the effects such a culture had on high art and its audience, they did not propose any aesthetic politics of resistance. For the 2002 intellectuals, the notion of the avant-garde had lost its radical spirit. One could not depend on it for the promotion of a critical social and artistic consciousness. Even the term avant-garde or modernism was scarcely applied, as opposed to its frequent use in 1952. The American intellectual felt that s/he could no longer rely on the aesthetics of an avant-garde but on 'high art' and taste, which 'is the only path to quality, to aesthetic pleasure in art, music, poetry, and literature. As taste develops, so does one's pleasure, one's aesthetic pleasure'.¹⁹⁸ The participant intellectuals argued that 'a hatred for our traditions, for the institutions that support our democracy and a hatred for excellence' was responsible for the celebration and production of demeaning art, such as Damien Hirst's half cow, Robert Rauschenberg's stuffed goat and Jasper Johns' American flags.¹⁹⁹

It was only Robert Brustein who attempted to discuss critically how the cultural aesthetics that the New York Intellectuals passed on resulted in an almost unanimous consensus, rather than cultivating non-conformism. He commented that the original symposium called for 'an embrace of American values and an end to alienation. The result was the absorption of many artists and intellectuals into the mainstream of American life'.²⁰⁰ For Brustein, the docile absorption of the intellectual, which began with the New York Intellectuals' institutionalization (especially their economic endorsement from governmental institutions, universities and the publishing industry), was in part responsible for the American cultural

¹⁹⁷ Sanford Pinsker, 'Intellectuals and Writers Then and Now.' *Partisan Review* 69.4 (Fall 2002), 507-541 (p. 516); Ozick, Cynthia. 'What happened to the arts?' *Partisan Review* 69.4 (2002), 606-635 (p. 620).

¹⁹⁸ Olitski, Jules. 'What happened to the arts?' *Partisan Review* 69.4 (2002), 606-635 (p. 606).

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 609.

²⁰⁰ Brustein, Robert. 'What happened to the arts?' *Partisan Review* 69.4 (2002), 606-635 (pp. 616-617).

situation. Their institutionalization, prompted by an unmediated continuity between criticism and Cold War politics, informed an intellectual tradition that had lost touch with public engagement and still persisted in 2002.

The cultural and ideological politics expressed by the intellectuals in the 1952 symposium were fundamentally integrated within the American cultural consciousness, as illustrated by the 2002 symposium. In it the participants acknowledged their debt to their predecessors' criticism and to their resolution to embrace American culture and tradition. Although a few of them attempted to take a critical stance towards the 1952 positions, most of the 2002 participant intellectuals reaffirmed their commitment to individualism, capitalism and political consensus. While in 1952 there were at least three intellectuals who disagreed with the majority of them, but still had their responses published, in 2002 there are no dissenting voices; and those dissenting voices that appeared critical of the American situation in other symposia or in their writings were being reprimanded for their anti-Americanism. The liberal political and cultural reality that the 1952 version proposed had been deeply inscribed in an American tradition as something to be protected at all cost. It was only the face of the enemy that had changed; Stalinism was replaced by 'the Islamic fascists'.²⁰¹

V. Reconsidering the New York Intellectuals' legacy.

The New York Intellectuals' aesthetic and liberal discourse zealously demonstrated in their writings during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, was developed from the dialectic relationship between their perceived social reality and their modernist tastes. However, their notion of social reality had undergone a major change from the early 1930s, when the group first appeared. During that decade, they thought of themselves as leftists and as such they embraced Marxist thinking, recognized the American Communist Party as a new political force that could deliver political change and the proletariat literary movement as 'a visible edge of the future[']s]' extensive debates on literature and criticism.²⁰² Within a few years, however, their commitment to the Communist party and radical leftist literary politics had disappeared and they turned to the more compelling anti-Stalinist liberalism that ensured a viable space for an

²⁰¹ Podhoretz, 'Intellectuals and Writers Then and Now', p. 512.

²⁰² Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, p. 121.

intensive examination of the problems faced by the modernist artist and intellectual. As Phillips had commented, 'to be a socialist in America was to be a utopian without power'.²⁰³

Because of their disenchantment with proletariat literature and leftist politics, the New York Intellectuals were sceptical towards the validity of relating avant-garde/modern art with political radicalism and Bohemianism. Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* eloquently articulated this concern and the book's literary/political program altered the historiography of American literary thought. Trilling, both politically and culturally, deplored the 'totalitarianism' of the Soviet Union and social realism; he concluded that liberalism was so much affected by leftist literary politics that it had lost 'its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility'.²⁰⁴ Because liberalism was presented as the only intellectual tradition the American artist could rely on, its spirit of complexity had to be restored. The writings of Parrington and the novels of Dreiser and Anderson, which exemplified the reified ideological thinking that had led to intellectual complacency and passivity, needed to be differentiated from the critical spirit of liberalism. Thus Trilling praised James, Melville and Hawthorne who, unlike Dreiser, did not succumb to ideological pressures.²⁰⁵

Trilling's treatment of the liberal ideal, with 'its visions of a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction of human life' rendered American reality practically inscrutable.²⁰⁶ If one attempted to contradict such a reality, one would engender one that was irrational, totalitarian and constrictive, all the epithets Trilling used to describe Stalinism. By juxtaposing liberalism with Stalinism, he reinforced an already prevalent dual pattern of thinking that did not leave room for negotiation, as the individual would have to choose one or the other. What was problematic with this scheme was that Trilling, illegitimately, reduced the whole range of leftist thinking to Stalinism and thus created an anti-leftist vocabulary that prevailed in American everyday life. His work delivered a rhetoric which reinforced the American Cold War ideology of the West defending freedom as opposed to the East promoting totalitarianism. However, by identifying all leftist ideology with an

²⁰³ Phillips, 'What Happened in the 1930's'. *Commentary*, 34.3 (1962), 204-212 (p. 209).

²⁰⁴ Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, p. xv.

²⁰⁵ Reising, 'Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, and the Emergence of the Cultural Discourse of Anti-Stalinism', p. 101.

²⁰⁶ Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, p. xiii.

authoritarian discourse, Trilling rejected liberalism's pluralism; instead of advocating a literary critical vocabulary that would be able to 'distinguish literary and cultural criticism from immediate political pressures', Trilling turned liberal thinking into a mouthpiece of American Cold War anti-communism.²⁰⁷

Trilling's emphasis on freedom, individuality and American democracy was represented in art by Abstract Expressionism that 'symbolized the independent, critical role of the artist in democratic society'.²⁰⁸ For Greenberg, this kind of painting exemplified the artist's detachment from everyday life and the portrayal of a subjective reality free from any ideological subject matter. The artist's concentration on the medium fostered an authentic art that could avoid the kitsch tastelessness of totalitarian regimes and was 'uninflated by illegitimate content – no religion or mysticism or political certainties'.²⁰⁹ Greenberg, who a few years back had also emerged from a Marxist political background and argued for the importance of discussing modernism in relation to politics, had by the early 1950s resorted to an apolitical discourse. However, his apolitical views were infused with the new liberal ideal and were influenced by the political events occurring during that decade. Centred on the notions of freedom, individuality and self-expression, Greenberg's apolitical aestheticism reflected the anti-communist liberal sentiment and, at the same time, asked for the deserved protection of American art when confronted with totalitarian kitsch vulgarity. Greenberg's articles heralded Abstract Expressionism as the new avant-garde force that had broken away from the influence of the Parisian school (tainted by communism in Greenberg's eyes), offered a new appreciation of the medium and self-proclaimed its essential status 'to the vitality of Western culture'.²¹⁰

Greenberg's version of the American avant-garde disregarded one essential aspect of its European counterpart: its aspiration to reconcile the debate over form and content. By insisting on the primary importance of the medium, Greenberg advocated a more formalistic view of art that ignored the social, economic and political

²⁰⁷ Reising, 'Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, and the Emergence of the Cultural Discourse of Anti-Stalinism', p. 119.

²⁰⁸ Geraldine Murphy, 'Romancing the Center: Cold War Politics and Classic American Literature'. *Poetics Today*, 9.4 (1988), 737-747 (p. 738).

²⁰⁹ Greenberg as quoted in Cauter, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War*, p. 547.

²¹⁰ Guilbaut, 'The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the *Vital Center*', p. 73.

conditions influencing it and, instead, focused on art's inward oriented critique. Thus, a work of art could become autonomous because it rejected a set of values that were identified with communist ideology. At the same time, however, this kind of art endorsed another set of values (individualism, freedom of expression and power) that were specific to the liberal ideology. As such, Greenberg's views on Abstract Expressionism did not present an autonomous field of art, but one that complied (consciously or unconsciously) with the status quo. His influential theory, which began as a new examination of the social and aesthetic conditioning was soon converted into a dogma that rejected aesthetic pluralism in favour of an abstract, purely American modern art.²¹¹

Both Trilling and Greenberg's judgments were part of a major shift in the American literary and cultural field. The 1952 symposium, which reinforced both critics' attitudes, portrayed the American intellectual as no longer alienated, but part of the centre. One had to be moderate, pragmatic and free of any utopian illusions in order to defend American democracy against fascism and Soviet totalitarianism. The New York Intellectuals had 'a belief in literature's relative autonomy from dominant systematic belief but also a belief in the power of this literature to destabilize dominant habits of mind'.²¹² They wanted to preserve literature and art's autonomy from any ideologies but, in their attempt to do so, what they achieved was to re-establish new dominant modes of thinking. Their emphasis on liberalism and its deployment in their cultural examinations led to a new aestheticism that emphasised national uniqueness and homogeneity that still pervades American social thought, as seen in the symposium's re-examination in 2002. At the same time, they rendered the historical avant-garde's critical status ineffective by disassociating its affinity with social powers. Their discourse's political empathy with the status quo promoted a conservative imagination that found itself willing to reiterate what had already been produced and to accommodate its individuality to a political mass consensus of anti-Communism.

F.O. Matthiessen had commented that the American intellectual must always 'work to keep our precious birthright of individualism and freedom'.²¹³ Individualism had become an intellectual impulse within American tradition and the New York

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 74

²¹² Teres, *Renewing the Left: politics, imagination, and the New York Intellectuals*, p. 137.

²¹³ F.O Matthiessen, *The James Family*. (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 633.

Intellectuals defended it as the cultural embodiment of American life; it was better to be a free individual than a member of a totalitarian collectivity. At the same time, they became responsible for the aesthetic idealism surrounding the word ‘freedom’, since they introduced it as the ‘masterword’ in the 1940s and 1950s’ critical discourse on the arts. ‘Freedom’ was used both as an ideological and aesthetic term that ‘helped sustain the ideology of the Cold War’.²¹⁴ The resilience of their rhetoric on individuality and freedom was demonstrated in the 2002 symposium; the participant intellectuals (mostly belonging to the conservative to centre liberal circles) embraced the accomplishments of their predecessors and proclaimed their dismissal of the academic and cultural left, which was held responsible for further promoting the spirit of anti-Americanism among Western and Eastern countries. The symposium was permeated with stereotypes of the left evocative of the Cold War discourse and failed to apply the same scrutiny to the conformist positions of the right that they espoused. All three symposia were held by the *Partisan Review*, which was the intellectuals’ principal forum. As its history had demonstrated, what started as an independent journal, free of ideological blinders and receptive to diverse and (many times) conflicting aesthetic writings, gradually compromised its position and began to propagate a certain conservative liberal ideology. From being a journal infused with the spirit of radicalism, experimentation and free from ideologies, it soon became one of conformity, sterility and political partiality.

The *Partisan Review* was born in a difficult intellectual, theoretical, cultural and economic time for the United States. Published in the midst of the depression era and at a time when Marxism held a powerful ideological position that asserted the urgency of new social policies, the magazine and the New York Intellectuals embarked on a mission to create a new literary force within the cultural American establishment. Their oeuvre was marked by their utopian desire to disassociate critical criticism in the aesthetic realm from any political content and hoped that an autonomous, apolitical modernist culture was feasible. Very soon, however, they abandoned their apolitical aspirations and intellectual independence, succumbing to an enthusiastically involved political Cold War rhetoric that aspired to defend American individualism, democracy and freedom against Soviet totalitarianism. Their writings shaped a new vocabulary that was consumed during the Cold War

²¹⁴ Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of the Intellectual Life in New York City, From 1750 to the Beginning of Our Own Time*, p. 339.

decades and informed every aspect of America reality. The New York Intellectuals abandoned Hawthorne and Melville's tradition of non-conformity and surrendered their individuality to the endorsement of the status quo, which recognized them as the dominant cultural discourse that regulated, and still regulates, cultural appreciation; and the 2002 symposium is the living proof of their conformity's influence.

The *Partisan Review* and the New York Intellectuals themselves were responsible not only for the direction and further development of American culture but also for the reception, appreciation and (absence of) discussion of both European writers such as Adorno and Brecht and of native cultural expressions such as the FTP. Although they aimed at Europeanizing American literature and thus proposed a new cultural outlook based on the best values of each world, their plans failed as, consciously sometimes and unconsciously at others, they refused to engage themselves in a critical dialogue with both their European Marxist counterparts (facing similar dilemmas on the relationship between art and politics) and with the FTP. This failure marks a selective process of discussing such issues and also a selective outlook on both native and international literary theories that influenced the formulation of subsequent American literary tastes. The fact that most of the articles published in the journal systematically excluded a serious consideration of the theatre and dramatic practices (with the exception of reviews and chronicles) demonstrated the New York Intellectuals' chosen indifference towards the theatrical achievements of both Bertolt Brecht and the Federal Theatre Project.

Chapter Three

‘The Living Newspaper is as American as Walt Disney, the *March of Time*, and the *Congressional Record*’.¹ National theatrical representation and political radicalism in the Federal Theatre Project.

I. The Federal Theatre Project and its transatlantic connection.

‘I see, together with the re-making of American citizens, the making of a theatre which bears unmistakably the mark “Made in America”’.²

The group of the New York Intellectuals was very interested in casting a critical eye on both home-grown and European cultural, political, social and literary tendencies with the ultimate ambition of assisting American culture to grow equally strong in importance and influence as its European counterpart. However, as chapter two clearly demonstrated, the group was very selective in its promotion of specific literary forces that endorsed such a cause and also excluded any careful consideration of opposing attitudes to that of its own. As a result it was eager to promote Henry James and the Abstract Expressionists for advocating a political modernist aesthetics and also eager to reject literary figures such as Theodore Dreiser whose work was immersed in an uncritical appropriation of political ideologies. Such teleological approaches became part of American cultural criticism, especially as the force and influence of the group grew and precluded a more constructive comparative approach to modernist aesthetics. What is of interest though in this chapter is to pursue further this examination to include modernist theatrical aesthetics, especially within the American context, as they were consistently ignored by the aforementioned group. And as the transatlantic examination of the Federal Theatre Project will prove, a dialectical consideration of different positions (when applied critically and carefully) would permit a much needed comparative approach to the aesthetic expressions that

¹ Hallie Flanagan, ‘Introduction’ in *Federal Theatre Plays* (Living Newspapers, *Triple A Plowed Under*, *Power*, and *Spirochete*), ed. Pierre de Rohan. (New York: Random House, 1938), p. ix.

² Hallie Flanagan, ‘Opening Statement Containing Detailed Answers to Charges Made by Witnesses who Appeared Before the SPECIAL COMMITTEE to Investigate UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES, House of Representatives’. Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection in the Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University Library, Fairfax, Virginia, p. 24.

not only defined different nations but also both transcended and re-enforced a spectrum of cultural traditions between the USA and Europe.

Paul Giles' influential reading of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and American cultures against each other clearly exposes how both cultures would 'traverse each other and become uneasily aware of their own potential reversibilities'.³ It was probably the possibility of this reversibility that the New York Intellectuals feared from early on which resulted in their strong opposition to external and internal 'left' tendencies and the reinforcement of American liberal principles. Before though these intellectuals came to realise and promulgate their specific literary tastes, both the USA and Europe had moved well into the twentieth century, experienced the fruits of the industrial revolution and had fully embraced the capitalist system. Unlike Europe, which had suffered extreme economic and emotional deprivation and alienation after the end of World War I, the USA surfaced from the war to face an economic boom. The American industry had expanded by producing mainly artillery needed in the war and continued expanding during the 1920s and the government offered large cash subsidies to the industry to boost its production.⁴ Due to this thriving economy, the prices of mass-produced commodities decreased, the American people earned higher wages and could afford more luxuries than earlier, creating a boom in consumerist behaviour. The economic affluence of the 1920s was also visible in the entertainment world, as Broadway theatres and cinema halls were packed with people enjoying vaudeville or jazz acts and the new Hollywood releases. Hollywood became the capital of the popular entertainment industry.

The expanding wealth and moral, social and emotional complacency of the average American did not go unnoticed by the literati and as the publication of Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922) demonstrated, some artists were critical of the lack of social criticism. This era of economic affluence was abruptly interrupted on the October 24, 1929 when the Wall Street stock market collapsed and the Great Depression set in. Within a decade the United States found itself within a desperate economic state and the social groups that suffered the most were the lower middle class and the workers. The public felt that they were let down by President Hoover and substituted him with Franklin Roosevelt. In his annual address to the

³ Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730-1860*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 3.

⁴ The 1920s are usually referred to as the 'Roaring Twenties'.

Congress on January 4, 1935 Roosevelt was critical of his administration's first-term ventures; at the same time, however, he highlighted the liberal vision behind his New Deal plan.

We have...a clear mandate from the people, that Americans must forswear the conception of the acquisition of wealth which, through excessive profits, creates undue private power over private affairs and, to our misfortune, over public affairs as well. In building toward this end we do not destroy ambition, nor do we seek to divide our wealth into equal shares on stated occasions. We continue to recognize the greater ability of some to earn more than others. But we do assert that the ambition of the individual to obtain for him and his family a proper security, a reasonable leisure, and a decent living throughout life is an ambition to be preferred to the appetite for great wealth and great power.⁵

Roosevelt's New Deal policies inspired the public, as they aimed at stabilizing the economy, offering new prospects and jobs to the millions of unemployed and promised to work towards the improvement of social and living conditions. Among the unemployed was a large group of actors, musicians, writers and journalists that were particularly influenced by the Depression, since 'as economic conditions worsened, private patronage virtually ceased, as did those peripheral odd jobs on which artists depended for subsistence'.⁶ The New Deal involved several cultural programs to rehabilitate all these professionals, not in the private sector, but in state-funded schemes. During Roosevelt's second term, on May 6, 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a massive employment relief program, was established under the direction of Harry Hopkins (one of Franklin Roosevelt's closest advisors and one of the key architects of the New Deal) and aimed at employing artists on its relief rolls. In this way, the artists would be involved with projects closer to their expertise.

Under the wing of the WPA the Federal Project Number One was initiated and was comprised of five major divisions: the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers Project and the Historical Records Survey and each division had its own director. It was however, only the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) whose appointed director was a woman: Hallie Flanagan was a close friend of Harry Hopkins and a well established experimental theatrical director and playwright at Vassar College. The project ran from 1935 to

⁵ Quoted in Basil Rauch, *The History of the New Deal*. (New York: Creative Age Press, 1944), pp. 146-7.

⁶ Jane de Hart Mathews, 'Art and the People: The New Deal for a Cultural Democracy'. *The Journal of American History*, 62.2 (1975), 316-339 (p. 318).

1939, the shortest time as opposed to the other four, and proved to be the most controversial. Similarly to the other projects, the FTP's main intention should have been to employ most of the unemployed theatre artists on relief until the economy recovered. However, from early on Flanagan clearly outlined that

It is not a relief project in which artificial jobs are dealt out to people of inferior talent, but rather a plan which begins by saying: in rethinking theatre activity in terms of the art and economics of 1935, we need theatre enterprises which will supplement our already existing splendid New York stage.⁷

Flanagan's comment presents a different interpretation of the project's relief status; the project would employ unemployed actors, writers or technicians (as opposed to already established 'stars') but in this process it would not compromise on quality, innovation or versatility. The FTP's productions would complement the ones already produced by Broadway but it would attract a different audience. Through its relief status, the FTP would also acquire an almost socially engaged status, as it would strive to represent the so far unrepresented people and stimulate a social and theatrical response through its plays' subject matter. All this would occur under the auspices of the American government. Such a social transformation of the theatre's function represented the first attempt within American cultural life at launching a theatre which united American politics with the theatre of its time. In this way, the American theatre was no longer linked exclusively with the private sector and its prescribed aestheticism and was instead seen as an aspect of national politics.

The FTP attempted to create branches all over the country and in this way managed to draw on an audience that had never before experienced a theatrical production. In its attempt to claim a space for itself and become an entity disengaged from Broadway practices, the FTP appropriated new techniques of performance and created sub-groups of theatrical groups (such as the Yiddish group and the Children's Theatre) in an attempt to be more inclusive and simultaneously critically mobilize the different audiences both aesthetically and socially. From the vast amount of groups and performances, the aim of this chapter is to concentrate primarily on the Living Newspaper as produced by the corresponding New York group as the best example of socially and politically involved American theatre (without attempting to minimize the vast importance of the other regional Living Newspaper productions). The Living Newspaper productions of this group were not only among the most vibrant,

⁷ Flanagan, 'Federal Theatre Project'. *Theatre Arts Monthly*, 19.11 (1935), 865-868 (p. 865).

experimental, innovative and socially celebrated but also proved to be equally controversial. As the chapter will explore further, such productions as *Triple A Plowed Under*, *Injunction Granted*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Power* and *One-Third of a Nation* by the New York group were a sensation among their audiences but in their creative process faced censorship and enraged many American politicians with their overtly political and social subject matter and presentation. Although the Living Newspaper productions formed 10 % of the overall productions by the FTP (the remaining 90 % had a non-political content), they were considered responsible for the suspension of the whole Federal Theatre Project.

Although an interesting and diverse subject, the history and performances of the FTP have been of some interest to a limited number of researchers and academic authors, predominantly on the American continent. Most of the existing bibliography dates back to the 1970s and 1980s, with a few exceptions being published in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century. Not all of this bibliography treats the project as a whole since such an effort would involve going through a mammoth amount of primary sources. A large part of this bibliography remains unpublished PhD theses that do not treat the project as a whole. The most comprehensive analysis of the whole project's history and relief status remains Jane de Hart Mathews' *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics* published in 1967.⁸ Although written more than forty years ago, Mathews' book was the first to offer a history of the project's attempt to become a national institution. Mathews' attempt remains a historical account and does not delve into a critical or literary analysis of the project's performances. Other books, such as Fraden's *Blueprints for a Black federal theatre, 1935-1939*, Gill's *White grease paint on Black performers: a study of the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* and Witham's *The Federal Theatre Project: a case study* concentrate on specific theatre units within the FTP (Fraden and Gill deal with the Negro unit) or specific regional manifestations of the project (Witham concentrates on the Seattle units).⁹ Some books on the political aspects of modern theatre dedicate one chapter of their work to the FTP, usually discussing its history and briefly concentrating on some of

⁸ Jane De Hart Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

⁹ Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black federal theatre, 1935-1939*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Glanda Eloise Gill, *White grease paint on Black performers: a study of the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*. (New York: P. Lang, 1988); Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: a case study*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

its productions (both Living Newspapers and others).¹⁰ Apart from the sporadic appearance of articles in academic journals published at least 20 or more years ago, the other source of information on the FTP and in particular the Living Newspaper units remain some unpublished PhD thesis such as Stuart Cosgrove's *The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form* (1982) and Caroline Anne Highsaw's *A theatre of action: The Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project* (1988).

All the aforementioned material constitutes an important amount of work surrounding the history of the FTP and one can establish some common threads of analysis and approach amongst most of them. However, such work and research does not represent a consistent and substantial school of thought. I believe that a more systematic approach is needed when considering the vast material available and a more rigorous attempt in publishing criticism and original findings of the project. The aim of this chapter is not as ambitious, primarily because of the limitations set by the parameters of this thesis in the introductory chapter. This chapter is indeed indebted to Mathews, Kruger, Cosgrove and Highshaw's original work but aims at addressing more critically and rigorously the issues surrounding the performances of the New York group's Living Newspapers. Whereas the aforementioned material either saw the project in terms of its historical value (Mathews), as an instance of national theatre and cultural legitimation (Kruger), as an aspect of the whole history of the Living Newspaper (Cosgrove) or examined the productions of all the Living Newspapers by the FTP (Highshaw), this chapter aims to see the New York Living Newspapers primarily as aesthetic, performative, social and (unconsciously) political agents of change. Drawing on primary sources (including the original play scripts, the audiences' reactions to the performances, the authors, set designers and actors' views on the creative process of a performance), this chapter will reveal the project's attempt to reconcile the expectations of its newly-found state patron with the new socio-political conditions and the new experimental theatrical aesthetics advocated by many of its participants. In this way, a new opportunity arises of critically relating how the American Living Newspaper both relied on already established forms of

¹⁰ Examples of such books are: Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*. (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Gerald Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

theatre (practised by the Theatre Union) but was also acutely aware of the theatrical experimentations professed by Meyerhold, the Blue Blouse group, Piscator and Brecht. Through this presentation, this chapter aims to extend the discussion on aesthetic and literary theory offered in the first two chapters so as to include a more robust consideration of modernist theatre and in particular of this new American venture. Drawing parallels between the European-leftist theatre and the American (semi-)realisation of an autonomous and engaged theatre, this chapter will extend the transatlantic dialogue between them. It will also examine their often uncomfortable relationship regarding the European aesthetics of commitment, which they ‘translated’ in order to make it fit the new American social reality.¹¹

The first part of the chapter will reveal the link between the European experimentation of Meyerhold, Brecht, the Blue Blouse group and the early American workers’ theatre with the early productions of the Living Newspapers *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Injunction Granted*. At the same time, by referring to earlier Living Newspaper productions (apart from the two aforementioned) it will highlight how from the project’s very beginning the people involved were not a homogenous group, how the project itself was faced with an uncomfortable question of how much experimentation was allowed (being under the aegis of the USA government) and with the struggle between socialist aspirations and the inherent liberal mentality (mirroring in this way both the political shift and the intellectual changes the New York Intellectuals underwent). The second part will critically consider the place and education (or propaganda) of the project’s target audience and also discuss, through the productions of *Power* and *One-Third of a Nation*, both the ideological and performative shift of the Living Newspaper. Lastly, the final part will consider the political prosecution of the whole FTP project (being the first victim of an increasingly anti-communist paranoia and using the New York group’s Living Newspaper as main evidence of political ‘leftism’ within the project), assess the importance of such a theatrical scheme within the USA and pave the way for a consideration of similar issues by Brecht’s aesthetic theory and plays. Through the study of the Living Newspaper, its European and American predecessors and the embodiment of economic and social concerns in its subject-matter, one can achieve an

¹¹ The aim of this chapter will be further complemented by the consideration of Brecht’s work in the USA and his fascination with Americana in chapter four.

in-depth understanding of the successes and failures of the political and social function of American theatre and in particular of the Federal Theatre Project that Hallie Flanagan has claimed was ‘made in America’.

II. ‘A Theatre is Born’¹²: European experimentation, American workers’ theatre and the Living Newspaper.

The economic breakdown of the 1930s and the disillusionment with capitalism brought forward the search for social alternatives. This attitude was shared both by the American working class and the middle class intelligentsia. As Rabkin has commented ‘the role of the intellectual [and the artist] was no longer seen as one of detached contemplation; he was duty-bound, by virtue of his role, to act. [...] The writer felt compelled to commit himself, to involve himself in the social issues of the age to which he belonged’.¹³ The intellectuals and artists of the 1930s were greatly influenced by Marxism and its call for radicalism and social change; its appeal was considerable during the Depression and was intensified by the fascist threat (up until 1939 when the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was signed). It was within this atmosphere of social unrest that the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) embarked on its difficult role as both a relief agent and as a producer of socially committed art.

Before this section embarks on an in-depth discussion of the FTP and the prominent role of the American Living Newspaper, it is imperative to introduce and critically assess the project’s problematic inheritance of both the American and Russian workers’ theatre. In this way one forges a transatlantic link between specific performative practices that transcended physical boundaries and ideologies but at the same time also highlights the FTP’s desire to incorporate such traditions and practices within the context of liberalism in an attempt to legitimise itself as an independent, innovative and critical theatrical agent. The main link between the FTP and such theatrical traditions was Hallie Flanagan. Flanagan, before becoming the director of the project, was working at Vassar College and soon became the director of the Vassar Experimental Theatre. She was also the first female academic to be awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1929 to study the theatrical development in Europe.

¹² Taken from Hallie Flanagan’s article with the same title; ‘A Theatre Is Born’. *Theatre Arts Monthly* 15.11 (1931), 908-915.

¹³ Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties*, p. 22, 28. The parenthesis is my comment.

Her book *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre* offered a very detailed account of her trip to England (where she met T. S. Eliot), France, Russia, Ireland (where she visited Yeats) and Italy (where she collaborated with Gordon Craig). The largest part of the book was devoted to the experimentations taking place in Russian theatre and thus many academics and theatre artists were informed of the new techniques, the more active social function of the theatre and the necessity of the people 'for legitimate representation as protagonist on the political stage'.¹⁴ Flanagan commented that 'it was impossible to tell where audience leaves off and drama begins'.¹⁵ Her comment here is reminiscent of Meyerhold's strong belief in the interrelation between the creative process and the audience and is in direct contrast to Greenberg's aestheticism as presented in chapter two of this thesis. While in Russia, she was surprised to find how enthusiastic the people were about theatrical performances and how 'alive' they seemed within the theatrical space.¹⁶

Flanagan visited Russia almost ten years after the October revolution and the overthrow of the old Tsarist regime. The revolution had forced the artistic world to an apocalyptic vision of the world and rendered necessary the renegotiation of the practices and ideologies it had employed up to that moment, especially as with the establishment of the Bolshevik government, there was a growing need to establish 'a vast apparatus of information, news, education and propaganda'.¹⁷ It was the theatre that responded quickly to the revolutionary call to combat illiteracy and to propagate collectivisation and regional politics. The new ways of performing included the living newspaper, mass spectacles re-enacting recent historical events (such as Mayakovsky's re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace), theatrical trials and literary montage combining slogans, poetry, speeches and other texts. In this way the audience became as much a part of the performance as the actors were, since the issues represented were dealing directly with their daily livelihood.

The new revolutionary theatre in Russia was greatly influenced by Vsevolod Meyerhold's constructivist experimentations and his theory of bio-mechanics. Meyerhold was Stanislavsky's student and an actor in the Moscow Art Theatre but

¹⁴ Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*. (New York: Coward – McCann, 1928), p. 99.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁷ Stuart Cosgrove, *The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form*. (Unpublished PhD Dissertation. University of Hull, 1982), p. iv.

very soon became disillusioned by Stanislavsky's version of psychological Naturalism that precluded the close and interactive relationship between the actor and the audience. For Meyerhold, the theatre was a place 'where author, actor and spectator are magically fused'.¹⁸ He wanted to break down the barrier created by illusionist pre-revolutionary theatre, which left the spectator a passive agent, trapped in the human emotion of the performance, constantly reminded that s/he was not in a theatre and that what s/he was watching was irrelevant to his/her daily life.¹⁹ At the same time, their role as an audience was extended to that of an 'actor' as well since they would not only participate in mass spectacles but they would also 'act' by simply becoming engaged in the whole dialectical process that Meyerhold was inviting them to join.

Meyerhold was attracted to antirealism, symbolism, experimentation and the revolutionary politics that gave emphasis to a social and popular discourse. In constructivism Meyerhold foresaw a new means of exposing his audience to his notion of theatre. He redefined the usage of the stage by abolishing the front curtain and cyclorama and minimising the distance between the stage and the auditorium. Therefore, as soon as it stepped in the theatre, the audience was exposed to all the lights and machinery that made a production feasible and was extremely close to the actors. His stage dispensed with any unnecessary decorations and props; instead it was filled with steel girders, steps, swings, bars and bridges across the width of the stage.²⁰ As designer Nikolai Asimov had commented, constructivism 'considers the stage as a known quantity of space, the dimensions of which are in no way hidden from the audience'.²¹ One of Meyerhold's most famous productions, in which his notion of the stage was manifested, was Crommelynck's *The Magnificent Cuckold*. As Slonim reported 'the stage was completely denuded, no curtains, no rafters, no backdrops. It was occupied by a milk-like construction with platforms, stairs, wheels, rolling discs, windmill sails, a trapeze, a viaduct, and inclined surfaces'.²²

¹⁸ Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*, p. 112.

¹⁹ 'For Meyerhold a performance is theatrical when the spectator does not forget for a second that he is in a theater, and is conscious all the time of the actor as a craftsman who plays a role. Stanislavsky demands the opposite: that the spectator become oblivious to the fact that he is in a theater and that he be immersed in the atmosphere in which the protagonists of the play exist' (E. Vakhtangov as quoted in Marc Slonim, *The Russian Theater: From the Empire to the Soviets* (London: Mathuen, 1963), p. 172).

²⁰ Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*, p. 99.

²¹ As quoted in Mordecai Gorelik, *New Theatres for Old*. (London: Dennis Hobson, 1940), p. 358.

²² Slonim, *The Russian Theater: From the Empire to the Soviets*, p. 247.

In accordance with the new development of the stage, Meyerhold proposed a new theory of acting called bio-mechanics. The constructivist structures were no longer suitable for Stanislavsky's realistic style of acting. For Meyerhold, the actor was no longer an imagined character with psychological depth or an abstract idea. S/he had a purely functional value that would communicate organically with the other elements of the performance. The emphasis was on the body since he believed that the essence of humanity is expressed not by words but by bodily gestures and attitudes. Meyerhold had remarked that 'the mute eloquence of the body [can do miracles], word is but an embroidery on the canvas of movement'; for him the ideal actor would display acrobatic and athletic qualities and be a mime, acrobat, dancer, juggler and comedian.²³ Meyerhold's bio-mechanics freed acting from exerting an emotional impact on the audience; instead the actor was seen as a machine, part of the revolution and 'he [was] a worker, a part of the social order he illustrate[d] on the stage'.²⁴

Meyerhold's theatrical experimentations placed emphasis on the political function of the theatre. By 'the merging of cinema, radio, circus, music hall, sport, and comedy', by fusing modern design with political content, by redefining the relationship between actors and audience (having his actors enter through the audience and placing the theatrical action in any part of the auditorium), Meyerhold created a theatre that challenged already established stage theories, served the needs of a new audience and of a new ideology.²⁵ In this committed theatre, Flanagan saw the effectual conditioning of a mass audience to a new social order, the accommodation of the desires of a long-forgotten public, the fusion of the dramatist, actor and audience and the development of new exciting techniques that could be appropriated by the American stage.²⁶

Therefore, Meyerhold's constructivist approach towards the theatrical space, his assault on traditional conventions of representation and his emphasis on the more active participation of the audience found allies not only among American practitioners but also Europeans such as Bertolt Brecht, whose formal experimentations, use of montage, desire to create a dialectical open-ended relationship between the performance and its audience and emphasis on the possibility of political praxis echoed Meyerhold's ambitions. At the same time though, the

²³ As quoted in Slonim, *ibid.*, p. 247; *ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁴ Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*, pp. 115-116.

²⁵ Slonim, *The Russian Theater: From the Empire to the Soviets*, p. 258.

²⁶ Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*, pp. 114-115.

aesthetics of the avant-garde were under attack in Europe as related in chapter one of the thesis. Lukács' furious assault on Expressionism and his bitter feud with Bloch and Brecht over realism could have easily been directed towards Meyerhold's stylised theatre. According to Lukács' views on realism presented in chapter one, Meyerhold's theatre could be charged as anti-realistic and formalistic. Similarly, his theories and experimentations stand in direct opposition to the apolitical experimentation advocated by Greenberg in his re-invention of an American avant-garde just one year before the FTP was ceased. Meyerhold, who provided a working formula for Flanagan's vision of an experimental and socially conscious theatre, was deemed a formalist by the Soviet regime for not complying with the aesthetics of Socialist Realism and as a result lost his life over such an accusation. Meyerhold's experimental aesthetics and political commitment excluded him from a serious consideration by the New York Intellectuals. They deployed the term formalism differently, viewing it as an essential element of their newly proposed apolitical 'American' version of the avant-garde.

Biggsby writes that in 1923 Mayakovsky and others announced through their magazine *The Left Front of the Arts* 'that art should be functional, that it should aim at reportage, that it should model itself to some degree on journalism, that truth lay in a vitalised documentary'.²⁷ In the same year the first Blue Blouse group (probably inspired by Mayakovsky's comments) was formed in Moscow by a group of students of the Institute of Journalism, under the direction of Boris Yuzhanin.²⁸ The group was influenced by the tradition of the 'spoken newspaper'²⁹; during the revolution and because of large scale illiteracy, the newspaper was read out aloud in front of the public. By acknowledging this past oral tradition, the influence of Constructivism and the close relationship between theatre and journalism, the Blue Blouse was set up as a 'living newspaper' group that would present the news but, at the same time, employ both popular and new avant-garde techniques. When asked what the Blue Blouse was, its official magazine (*The Blue Blouse*) replied that

it was a living newspaper, a presentation in 'agit-form' of reality, a 'montage of political facts'; it was adaptable to widely different conditions of performance; it was created by the working class; it used all the means of theatrical expression, especially those derived from the work

²⁷ C. W. E. Biggsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-century American Drama*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1, 1900-1940, p. 215.

²⁸ Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*. (Routledge: London and New York, 1994), p. 169.

²⁹ František Deák, 'Blue Blouse'. *The Drama Review*, 17 (1973), 35-46 (p. 40).

of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Nikolai Foregger; and its texts aimed for the qualities exemplified in the work of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Nikolai Aseev and Sergei Tretyakov – brief, precise, and compelling; it was derived from ‘popular forms’; and it sought out its working-class audiences in their own locations’.³⁰

The main aim of a Blue Blouse performance was to inform the illiterate public about actual social and political events reported in newspapers and magazines. Thus their performances were direct and agitational and their political content was accompanied by a montage of satirical songs, acrobatics and posters.³¹ The importance of all these elements was stressed in their ‘Simple advice to the participants’, in which they claimed that ‘words in BB are everything, movement, music, acting add to them, make them more expressive, more meaningful, able quickly to organise the feelings and will of the audience – content and form are equally necessary’.³² This statement seems to be a direct comment to the form-content debate related in chapter one. It seems that for the Blue Blouse group both content and form were integral elements of their performance and their views appear closer to Brecht’s than Lukács’. The group, being directly involved with the creative process and performative aspects of the production (like Brecht), felt that by striking a balance between the formal experimentation of the avant-garde and the popular means of presentation on the one hand and then relating those to the political content of their work, they would achieve a more powerful performance. By relying both to new aesthetics and critically re-appropriating old techniques, the Blue Blouse group reinforces Brecht’s views on the aesthetics of commitment.

A Blue Blouse performance would not last longer than an hour. The presentation would usually take place in a local theatre and would start with the actors’ parade through the public, thus instantly involving the audience in its performative process. The parade would be followed by the dramatization of international and national news, usually presented in a satirical manner, enveloped by

³⁰ Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, p. 169.

³¹ It is important to note that the Blue Blouse groups were also much influenced by Eisenstein’s propositions in his ‘Montage of Attractions’ in which he stated that ‘an attraction (in relation to the theatre) is any aggressive aspect, that is, any element of it which subjects the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact, experimentally regulated and mathematically calculated to produce in him certain emotional shocks which, when placed in their proper sequence within the totality, are the only means whereby he is enabled to perceive the ideological side of what is being demonstrated – the ultimate ideological conclusion’ (as quoted in Deák, ‘Blue Blouse’, p. 42.)

³² Blue Blouse. ‘Simple Advice to Participants (1925)’. *Twentieth-Century Theatre: A Sourcebook*. Ed. Richard Drain. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp 181-183 (p. 182).

folk and jazz music, acrobatics, dancing and bio-mechanic gestures. Hallie Flanagan, who while in Russia observed some Blue Blouse performances, commented that,

These actor/acrobats take possession of Russia's free, high stage, they leap upon the bare boards or upon the machines. They need no curtain to separate them from the audience for they have no illusion to maintain. They never pretend to be imagined characters, they remain members of the society which they illustrate on the stage.³³

Flanagan's comments emphasised that the Blue Blouse's staging of the Living Newspaper was stripped of all these elements that could create an illusionist effect for the public and avoided the conventions of naturalist presentation. The combination of popular and avant-garde techniques aimed at assaulting realism in the theatre, but also at offering a continuity between popular performing traditions and new experimentations. By bringing the actor and the feeling of the theatrical stage closer to the destitute and illiterate Russian people, the group succeeded in entertaining, satirizing, but also informing them about the political changes that affected their lives.

The Blue Blouse movement thus succeeded in proposing a revolutionary dramaturgy both in form and content that could reach large audiences. The theatre became a kind of social expressionism and problematization. Although it was a form of agit-prop theatre, its aims were to create a Soviet type of play with actuality as its subject, one that would express the benefits of socialism/communism but, at the same time, expose the defects of the system (or of the people around the system).³⁴ The Moscow correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor*, had commented that

The theme of one of their satirical pieces is the unfortunate plight of a poor Soviet Citizen whose existence the bureaucrats in various institutions refuse to recognize, because he has somewhere mislaid his indispensable 'document' or passport. The familiar types in state institutions with preoccupied faces and the inevitable bulging portfolios are hit off neatly, while a huge red pencil in the hands of the 'bureaucrat' adds a further element of the grotesque and the ludicrous.³⁵

Through this example one can see how the Blue Blouse's living newspaper attempted to theatricalise society and its own methods and expose its audience to the absurdity of the bureaucratic system. In the theatre of the Blue Blouse, the combination of avant-garde aestheticism, satire and socio-political concerns (receptive to a significant audience) contributed to political debates. It challenged the new order that was in the process of being established by Stalin and offered a fresh, accessible view of the

³³ Flanagan, 'The Soviet Theatrical Olympiad'. *Theatre Guild Magazine*, (September 1930), 10.

³⁴ Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, p. 168.

³⁵ Deák, 'Blue Blouse', p. 36.

complexity of the social, economic and political engagements to an audience with no formal education.

Meyerhold and the Blue Blouse's collective expression of the performative action provided a new model for the configuration of the aesthetic and the political in theatre. This model was further disseminated in the autumn of 1927 when the Moscow Blue Blouse left Russia to start a tour of performances in Germany. Many German theatrical groups were influenced significantly by this new form of theatre and, subsequently, many 'Blue Blouse' type groups were set up there. Through the spread of the workers' theatre the Living Newspaper became an international mode of politically involved theatre that aimed at mobilizing its audience and also at presenting it with new experimental forms of production.

The experimentation in the Russian and German workers' theatre happened almost simultaneously with both Piscator and Brecht's work on the epic theatre. A more detailed analysis of the latter's work will follow in chapter four; it is, however, interesting to note at this point that both Piscator and Brecht emphasized the importance of the theatre as a medium that not only represented life, but could situate itself as a model of life. They both stressed the architecture of a class-struggle based theatre, of the anti-illusionism and anti-expressionism of a play's performance, the factual representation of themes, the use of musical scores, film projections and the constant interaction of the actors with the audience. The aim of the play was to present a theme in such a way that the audience would not become totally absorbed by the action but would rather be invited to witness all the unfolding events both critically and dialectically. As Brecht had commented

The epic theatre is chiefly interested in the attitudes which people adopt towards one another, wherever they are socio-historically significant (typical). [...] The idea is that the spectator should be put in a position where he can make comparisons about everything that influences the way in which human beings behave. This means ... that the actors' social gest becomes particularly important.³⁶

The prominence given to the dialectical aspect of the performance discloses a continuity between the work of the Russian avant-garde and that of Piscator and Brecht. By directing and educating the audience to act and change the world and by allowing new techniques of performance to re-address the relationship between the

³⁶ Bertolt Brecht, 'On the Use of Music in the Epic Theatre'. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willet. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 84-90 (p. 86).

actor and his/her role, the epic theatre complemented the new aesthetic of political theatre.³⁷

The American Living Newspaper was moreover influenced by the American workers' theatre of the 1920s and early 1930s. After the collapse of the national economy, many writers became preoccupied with Marxist philosophy and proletarian literature. The concept of political commitment and the artist's conscious involvement in social issues informed the new theatre and the intelligentsia. W. H. Auden reflected this attitude when he wrote

Yesterday, the belief in the absolute value of Greek;
The fall of all curtain upon the death of a hero;
Yesterday the prayer to the sunset,
And the adoration of madmen. But today the struggle.³⁸

During the 1920s groups of worker-players were formed and performances were staged in labour meetings, strike rallies and in parks to entertain but also inform their public. The Proletbühne (a German workers' group founded in 1925), Artef (Yiddish Workers Theatre, 1926) and the Workers Laboratory Theatre (1928) modelled themselves on the Russian agit-prop Blue Blouses and their performances had 'a hard-hitting directness of statement. [...] Satirical rhymed verse and powerful rhythmic refrains characterised most of their work'.³⁹ They also employed vaudeville acts, circus techniques, minimal lightning, choruses to dramatise the conflict between two opposing groups (usually one being the workers and the other the capitalists) and direct addresses to the public. Because of the lack of funding and time to train themselves professionally, these groups also employed Meyerhold's biomechanic technique and the documentary themes from Piscator's theatre. The equal importance given to the form and content of their performances appealed to the workers' theatre. As John Bonn commented, 'it is not enough to bring our message to the masses. ... A production with the best political content is worthless if this content is not presented in a form which is interesting for a worker audience. Propaganda and entertainment

³⁷ A more thorough analysis of Brecht's alienation effect, which precluded any tendency of total identification on the part of the audience with the characters, will be explored further in chapter 4.

³⁸ W. H. Auden, 'Spain 1937', *Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden*. (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 182.

³⁹ Ben Blake as quoted in Heinz Bernard, 'A Theatre for Lefty: USA in the 1930's'. *Theatre Quarterly*, 1.4 (1971), 53-56 (p. 54). Bernard also mentions how the groups mentioned and many more joined together in 1932, to form the League of Workers' Theatre.

must be interwoven in a worker theatre performance'.⁴⁰ Bonn's comment, reminiscent of the Blue Blouses' manifesto and Brecht's didactic plays, manifested the extent of the European theatre's influence on the development of its American counterpart. Because of the speed and dexterity of their performances and the clarity of their political message, the American workers' theatre captured their audience's attention and imagination.

Their target audience was the masses of workers and their aim was to propagate the idea of the theatre as the space where class-struggle could take place and thus agitate the workers into social action.⁴¹ Their performances were very polemical, directly reflecting the Marxist ideology and Communist ideals. Goldstein has quoted how the ending of one such play, entitled *Unemployed*, presented one individual (attempting to fuse himself with the mass of workers) proclaiming in front of an audience of workers that

Yes, I am an agitator – an agitator for the fight against exploitation and oppression, an agitator for the freeing of the working class, an agitator against all misleaders who under the mask of friends of labor betray us to our exploiters. Yes, I agitate for the defence of the Soviet Union, the only country in the world where there are no more exploiters, the only country in the world where the workers are free, the only country in the world where the worker rules.⁴²

The militant discourse of this excerpt reflects how the American workers' agit-prop groups accommodated the mythical dimension of the Russian worker as an all-

⁴⁰ Quoted in Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, p. 145.

⁴¹ For a more detailed study of these groups' objectives, see John Bohn, 'Drambuoro Report'. *Workers Theatre*, 1 (1931), 1 (p. 1).

⁴² Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 34. Hallie Flanagan also mentions this play in her article 'A Theatre is Born' when discussing the workers' theatre and the importance of the political content of their plays. The play begins as such:

(The stage is empty. One worker walks slowly across. His head is bowed. After a moment another worker follows him. One after another the whole group of workers comes out and walks to and from on the stage).

1 WORKER: I am hungry.

2 WORKER: My family is hungry.

3 WORKER: I want to work.

4 WORKER: I want a job.

5 WORKER: Won't somebody give me a job?

1 WORKER: I am hungry, why can't I have food? I see lots of food in restaurants. I am cold, why can't I have a coat? I see many coats in clothing stores.

(Capitalist comes in, sits in chair, takes up phone, listens, laughs).

CAPITALIST: There isn't anyone can have a better yacht than I. I've got to have the best little yacht in the world. I want special attention paid to the bar. ... what's that damn noise out there?

SERVANT: Master, it is the unemployed complaining... (quoted in Flanagan, 'A Theatre is Born', pp. 913-914).

powerful individual, who is part of the all-powerful class of workers, to represent the American worker's struggle for social justice. It is no coincidence that their attempt to represent the American worker's struggle did not take place within the legitimate and capital-supported space of Broadway that was inimical to their political values. These groups partly funded themselves and also received some financial support from local organizations, thus creating a new public *topos* where their struggle for political, cultural and social representation could take place.

As the Depression intensified in the early 1930s, theatrical groups such as the Theatre Union, the Group Theater and the Theater Guild were established. These groups were influenced by the experimental performances and themes of the workers' theatre but chose to abandon the overtly agitational character of their plays' content. These new groups aimed at creating a new theatre with multiple origins that would be represented as fundamentally American. As they no longer aimed at explicitly gaining support for Russia and the Communist cause, their target audience was no longer the mass of workers, but the middle class. The works of major playwrights of this decade – such as Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice and Malcolm Cowley – manifested an active concern for social and political issues centred, however, on the main issue of livelihood of the American people. The most well-known play was Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* that gave an intimate insight of the life of taxi drivers. The play was not totally free of a militant discourse, but it was free enough for Broadway to allow it to run for 78 performances.⁴³ *Waiting for Lefty* did present the conflict between the agents of political and economic power and the rights and needs of the deprived class of taxi drivers but, unlike previous plays, it did not entail an agitational call for a general public strike. As Kruger has commented, the play offered instead 'an exemplary *imitation* of agitation (complete with plants in the house) for an essentially disengaged audience'.⁴⁴ With this new theatre the *topos* that the workers' theatre had created was exorcised; this new theatre accommodated itself within the space that Broadway offered in an attempt to entice the support and participation of the middle class.

This new attitude in theatre was followed by the re-branding of the League of Workers' Theatres as the *New Theatre League* and its magazine, from *Workers'*

⁴³ One could argue that Odets' play did not have the vigour of the workers' theatre performances, as it appealed to those already converted to social ideals. It is also very interesting that during Joseph Losey's trip to Moscow in 1935, he staged an English version of Odets' play for a Russian audience.

⁴⁴ Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, p. 150.

Theatre to New Theatre.⁴⁵ The new theatrical dogma dictated that ‘a theatre greater than the labor movement but drawing its inspiration from the latter and continuing the new social outlook on a broader social scale’ should exist.⁴⁶ Through the establishment of a theatre that aimed at creating a broader socially-based theatre, the workers’ theatre was ostracised once again from any legitimate space of representation. The working class that had attempted the creation of a new experimental and socially-politically involved theatre not only failed to be decentralized as Bonn suggested, but instead was in the heart of the theatrical metropolis and had suffered a serious facelift.⁴⁷ The shift in the new theatre’s target audience and its approach to social and political issues signalled a slight but steady rejection of its radical programme in favour of a more liberal, ‘naturally American’ one.⁴⁸

The shift in the focus of the American theatre of the 1930s was similar to the changes taking place in Russia. Stalin had risen to power, the Five Year Plan was underway and both Meyerhold and the Blue Blouse’s ventures were abruptly seized by the establishment of socialist realism as the new mode of theatrical expression. Similarly, in America, the influence of the Popular Front that proposed an inclusion of Broadway’s professionalism, of the middle-class audience and the by then failed workers’ agitational theatre, paved the way for the formation of the Federal Theatre Project and partly foreshadowed the mood of its operation.⁴⁹ Hallie Flanagan was aware of the developments in the American theatre. In an article entitled ‘A Theatre is Born’ she acknowledged that it was ‘a theatre of workers’, whose object was to create a national culture by and for the working class of America.’⁵⁰ She recognized this theatre as a weapon in the class struggle and as a means of reorganizing society. In Flanagan’s article the fusion of the aesthetic and political function of theatre was

⁴⁵ The *New Theatre* counted among its contributors Hallie Flanagan. [italics my emphasis]

⁴⁶ Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties*, p. 48.

⁴⁷ See Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, p. 145.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145. For a more detailed and in-depth discussion of the theatre of the 1920s and early 30s see Malcolm Goldstein *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression*, Gerald Rabkin *Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties* and Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*.

⁴⁹ It could be argued that the Federal Theatre virtually replaced the workers’ theatre as it both offered employment and allowed the production of socially conscious plays. For example, the Theatre Collective and the Theatre of Action (previously the Workers’ Laboratory Theatre) were assimilated into the FTP. Also John Bonn, the director of the Proletbühne, became the director of the Federal Theatre Project’s German Unit.

⁵⁰ Flanagan, ‘A Theatre is Born’, p. 908.

evident. She insisted that the new theatre should be detached from the elaborate stylistics of Broadway and that their style of acting should escape the illusionism of realist theatre, as the workers needed to represent themselves and their cultural background. She insisted that

The workers' theatres intend to shape the life of this country, socially, politically and industrially. They intend to remake a social structure without the help of money – and this ambition alone invests their undertaking with a certain Marlowesque madness.⁵¹

Her anti-capitalist observation (later referred to during her hearing in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee [HUAC]) reiterated the policy of the workers' theatre. Unlike Broadway, Hollywood and the radio that had accommodated themselves within capitalism and thus rendered their critical appropriation problematic, the workers' theatre's economic autonomy offered a new space where both formal experimentation and social commentary could occur.

For Flanagan, the new theatre's ability to survive outside the capitalist economic system and Broadway's established aesthetic modes of representation offered a key to its revolutionary potential. Through this act, the theatre would be free 'from the non-essentials which have become synonymous with it – divorced from expensive buildings, stage equipment, painted sets, elaborate costumes and properties, made up plays' and would become instead 'a place where an idea is so ardently enacted that it becomes the belief of actors and audience alike'.⁵² Flanagan thus believed that the economic autonomy of the workers' theatre could ensure its aesthetic autonomy and serve both as an educational and propaganda agent. By appropriating the theatrical art of Gordon Craig and Adolpho Appia on the workers' terms, the new theatre could produce a form of theatre that would engage critically and dialectically with its audience. Her emphasis on the theatre as a *topos* of social struggle and formal experimentation would later materialize in the Living Newspapers' fascination with the relationship between art and politics and the different approaches to this relationship.

For Flanagan the Federal Theatre represented American theatre's chance to 'wake up and grow - - wake up to an age of expanding social consciousness'.⁵³ She abandoned the notion of the stage as a place 'where sophisticated secrets are

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 915.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 908-909.

⁵³ Flanagan, 'Federal Theatre: Tomorrow', p. 6

whispered in a blasé initiate' and instead wanted playwrights to produce plays that would 'include such economic facts as unemployment, taxation, the obligation of government to the unemployed and to art, the values and dangers of organization to the theatre worker, the effect of trade unionism on art, the spending of federal funds in relation to censorship, the value of the theatre to recreation, education and therapeutics'.⁵⁴ Within an environment of economic and social unrest, it is noteworthy that it was up to a government sponsored institution with a nationwide scope to mobilize the public and awaken their awareness to issues that influenced their daily routine.

Up until the establishment of the FTP, Broadway monopolized the theatrical world. The plays offered by Broadway were restricted in themes and in access to the public. There was also the belief that the arts and theatre in particular had become an expensive enterprise (a luxury and thus dispensable) and the property of the few.⁵⁵ Thus, the FTP became an agency representative of the people's needs, frustrations and demands. In order that the FTP could perform its task there it needed theatres 'experimental in nature, specializing in new plays of unknown dramatists, with an emphasis on regional and local material'.⁵⁶ Its repertoire would include the works of canonical playwrights such as Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw, but these texts alone could not stimulate the awakening of the American people's social consciousness. For this reason Hallie Flanagan and Elmer Rice (the director of the New York FTP branch) proposed the creation of the Living Newspaper unit, after securing the sponsorship of the Newspaper Guild and placing Morris Watson in charge of the staff of journalists and playwrights on relief rolls. So, instead of simply standing in line every day to receive a free meal, all these artists would be given jobs within this new theatrical project and receive a wage. In this way not only would they still be employed, doing jobs they both loved and were trained for, but they could also contribute towards the production of some of the most exciting American theatre of the mid-twentieth century. Within the project actors, playwrights and journalists would work together to produce plays that would dramatize the social, political and economic conditioning of the American people. As Flanagan had commented

⁵⁴ Flanagan, 'Theatre and Geography'. *American Magazine of Art*, 40 (1938), 464-468 (p. 468); 'Federal Theatre: Tomorrow', p. 6.

⁵⁵ Mathews, 'Art and the People', p. 320

⁵⁶ Flanagan, 'Federal Theatre Project', p. 865.

The staff of the living newspaper, set up like a city daily with editor-in-chief, a managing editor, city editor, reporters and copyreaders, began as Brooks Atkinson later remarked 'to shake the living daylight out of a thousand books, reports, newspapers and magazine articles' in an attempt to create an authoritative dramatic treatment, at once historic and contemporary of current problems.⁵⁷

The Living Newspaper unit was attributed a collective status in which all the members involved were responsible for the dramatic outcome. There was not one single person bestowed with an 'official' authorship of the text, although this changed by 1937.

Both Flanagan and Rice believed that the Living Newspaper should present new experimental plays, both in subject matter and in technique (experimenting with light and sound and using acrobatics and cinematic methods), in order to create a socially and theatrically conscious public.⁵⁸ This desire for experimentation was a direct result of Flanagan's awareness of the American workers' socially provocative theatre and its subsequent demise and also of her trip to Europe as mentioned previously and her first-hand experience of the experimentations of the Russian Blue Blouse group and Meyerhold. Moreover, many members of the Living Newspaper unit and the FTP (such as Joseph Losey, Morris Watson, Marc Blitzstein, Elmer Rice, John Bonn and Hallie Flanagan) were familiar with these groups and individuals' experimentations and views on the political expression of the theatre; they had travelled individually both to Russia and Germany and had attended many of their performances and seminars that greatly affected their views on American theatre.

With the Depression troubling American society and the WPA established to assist in the employment of artists, Flanagan's belief that 'it is time that the theatre is brought face to face with the great economic problems of the day' became a reality.⁵⁹ As the already established theatrical canon could not offer plays dealing with the new social reality, a need for new and socially involved plays was generated.⁶⁰ Partly to employ as many artists and journalists as possible, but also attempting to fill this gap for new plays, the Living Newspaper unit was set up. Echoing the Blue Blouse's belief that 'the repertoire of the Living Newspaper cannot be prewritten and laid down

⁵⁷ Flanagan, *Arena*. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), p. 65.

⁵⁸ Flanagan, 'What Are We Doing With Our Chance?', *Federal Theatre*, 2.3 (1936), 5-6, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Flanagan, 'Federal Theatre Project', p 868.

⁶⁰ The need for new plays was noted as early as 1927, when Verona Pilcher commented that 'the medium thus made is so different from the usual theatre form that plays written for the old manner are hardly more fitted to this stage than any play is fitted to the screen' (271).

from any central agency. ... On the contrary it must be the collective work of the local group' and so emphasising the need for a decentralized theatre that would be accessible to all the public, the Living Newspaper established units all over America.⁶¹ However, it was the New York productions that caused an immediate sensation among their audience but at the same time caused such controversy which resulted in both censorship and the suspension of the whole project.

By the time the Living Newspaper was incorporated in the FTP, its dramatic form and theatrical modes of representation were already developed. The Voice of the Living Newspaper introduced the time, place and location of the dramatic action, interrupted and commented further on the events staged, addressed the public directly, presented different perspectives on the issues discussed and often sided with the disadvantaged. The stage was deprived of all the ornaments that could disrupt the audience's attention from the action and the use of ordinary objects in ways different from their customary significance defined a more symbolic and simple approach to the new audience. The use of a series of different devices (such as puppetry, visual projections, shadow acting and crowd scenes) offered a more dramatic momentum to the presentation of facts. Lastly, the experimentation with lighting (by isolating characters on single spots) proposed a new appropriation of the theatrical space that was complemented by the new style of acting. As Mike Gold commented, it was the American Living Newspaper's responsibility to inherit this tradition and employ it within the socially awakened theatre 'in a new way and [to] do it well'.⁶²

The Living Newspaper unit resembled its European antecedents in structure; that is, there was a proper editorial staff with reporters, sub-editors and editors that researched each topic in depth and were not permitted to invent anything. They were also committed to using new and political forms of stagecraft. They commented that

...it is the job of modern theatre to break through the technological barriers of decadent stagecraft as well as the ideological barriers of decadent thought. Modern theatre has already broken through many of these barriers – both in the technical and ideological sense, but ... the theatre is still dominated by characters pitting 'one psychological trait against another psychological trait,' with each conflict taking place inside a more or less traditional atmospheric shell of wood, canvas and paint.

The Living Newspaper, on the other hand, can confidently say that it has attempted – and more often than not succeeded – in transcending these limits. It has peopled its stage with interesting characters but they are the

⁶¹ Cosgrove, 'The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form', p. 15.

⁶² Quoted in Flanagan, 'A Theatre is Born', p. 910.

physical, human manifestation of forces that are longer and more important than individual psychology. They are individuals whose psychology is, in fact, the product of these forces.⁶³

By acknowledging its past tradition, the American Living Newspaper aligned itself with the modern theatre's practice of agitation, experimentation and engagement with social issues. But unlike its antecedents, the American Living Newspaper soon abandoned theatrical eclecticism in favour of a more detailed form of investigating theatre, centralised over one issue. As Arthur Arent stated, 'the Living Newspaper is the dramatization of a *problem* – composed in greater or lesser extent of many news events, all bearing on the one subject and interlarded with typical but non-factual representations of the effect of these news events on the people to whom the problem is of great importance'.⁶⁴ The Living Newspaper staff decided that the emphasis on one subject and its multiple representations would enable them to communicate multiple solutions to the immediate problems and thus allow the audience to rethink a specific issue in a variety of circumstances. Thus, almost every Living Newspaper followed the same pattern: the play would begin with a recent, shocking event that would expose the problem and, through its representations, the protagonist would be forced to recognize the need for a solution. They also reached that decision after one of the first Living Newspapers produced, called simply *1935*, was not received as successfully as they had hoped. *1935* presented many events that had occurred during 1935 in a highly satirical manner directed not simply at the representatives of capital but at the public itself. As Goldman commented '*1935* is ultimately about the public and public opinion, and comprises a series of mordant challenges to its ignorance and wilful wrongdoing'.⁶⁵ *1935* was very close in structure to its European predecessors, but the Living Newspaper staff felt that it was impossible to effectively research the news every day so as to revise the script. At the same time, because of the large amount of events and since only one scene could be devoted to each of them, they deemed that this style of play, although it was exposing the problems, never moved to the stage of reflective thinking on the audience's part.

The Federal Theatre's desire to offer free, uncensored and adult theatre was faced from the start with bureaucracy and political intrigues consequent with it being

⁶³ 'Techniques Available to the Living Newspaper Dramatist'.

⁶⁴ Arthur Arent, 'The Techniques of the Living Newspaper'. *Theatre Quarterly*, 1.4 (1971), 57-59 (p. 57).

⁶⁵ Arnold Goldman, 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit'. *Theatre Quarterly*, 3.9 (1973), 69-83 (p. 74).

a government-sponsored theatre that aspired to bring on stage plays dealing with international politics. The first Living Newspaper production, entitled *Ethiopia*, aimed at presenting the conflict that had arisen in the African state after its Italian conquest (under Mussolini's orders) by quoting speeches made both by Haile Selassie and Mussolini himself. Although Watson and Flanagan assured the government that the play contained carefully documented and factual material, did not caricature anyone and was politically unbiased, its material was deemed dangerous and its representation of any foreign politician was forbidden.⁶⁶ The play never reached its audience; it was only performed once in front of critics and reporters, who reacted widely the next day to the first censorship incident by the Democratic government. The most disturbing comment (especially for Flanagan's belief in an autonomous state-subsidised theatre) came from Brooks Atkinson, an American theatre critic for *The New York Times*, who commented 'how utterly futile it is to expect the theatre to be anything more than a 'sideshow' under government supervision'.⁶⁷ The *Ethiopia* incident revealed the uncomfortable and dubious relationship between the Living Newspaper unit, the government and WPA officials (especially since the first wanted socially relevant plays and the latter two 'safe' ones) and also contributed to Elmer Rice's resignation from the project.⁶⁸

Rice's resignation shocked all involved with the Living Newspaper, as it signified that the unit was not free from governmental criticism and censorship when attempting to present controversial issues. At the same time it offered some breathing space for Flanagan, who did not want the Federal Theatre to become a 'spokesperson' for any workers' party or the Communist party itself. It was also welcomed by the WPA, since it occurred in connection with a production dealing with international politics rather than a more contentious one of domestic social and radical politics. However, with Rice's resignation, the attempt to produce another Living Newspaper called *South* (and a subsequent one named *Money*⁶⁹) was abandoned as its theme was

⁶⁶ Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 63-4.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁶⁸ For a detailed discussion on the *Ethiopia* incident and Rice's resignation see Mathews (*ibid.*).

⁶⁹ Flanagan had condemned the script for *Money*, claiming that 'it is just an adolescent, anti-capitalist scream of hate, and I will not have such nonsense done on our stage' (as quoted in Mathews, 1967: 117). Also, she disapproved of the script for another newspaper called *Russia*, documenting Lenin's role within the revolution. The project was abandoned before its completion 'on orders from above' (Arent as quoted in Goldman, 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit', p. 81).

regarded 'too hot'.⁷⁰ Rice's reaction was fierce and he claimed that 'we are confronted here not only with an evidence of the growth of fascism which always uses censorship as one of its most effective weapons, but with the resolute determination of the Democratic Party to be re-elected at all costs'.⁷¹ This first evidence of censorship from a democratically elected government, occurring simultaneously with the rise of fascism in Germany, challenged the Federal Theatre's status as an autonomous and politically engaged theatre. It was not long before many artists shared Watson's views that the FTP should be divorced from the WPA since 'so long as it is part of the WPA, it will be subject to petty and unfair attacks from those who see red in every letter of relief. Is it too much to ask that the Government grant a straight subsidy for something for which the community is hungry?'⁷² Watson's concerns would later be fully realised but for that moment and after the *Ethiopia* incident, it seemed that every Living Newspaper would be criticised for its proclamation of politics, whether domestic or international.

Philip Barber replaced Elmer Rice as the New York director (with Bill Farnsworth as his assistant) and the Living Newspaper unit, although shaken, continued its plans for new productions. The next two productions, *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Injunction Granted*, established the FTP's international reputation for experimental theatre but, at the same time, were reminiscent of its capacity for controversy. Both productions were directed by Joseph Losey and Arthur Arent was their chief-editor. *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936) presented, in twenty-six stylised scenes, the history of the agricultural depression up until the then recent invalidation of the New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) by the Supreme Court. However, the curtain of this production did not go up without difficulties. Many veteran actors reacted to the documentary style of the production, as they felt it minimised their roles as performers. Furthermore, they disagreed with its theme as they felt nobody in New York would be interested in the farmers' life. Rumours that the Federal Theatre Veteran League, a self-proclaimed group combating any Communist tendencies in the theatre, considered the play unpatriotic and planned to storm the performance and have it closed, reinforced the feeling that the play was 'too

⁷⁰ It needs to be pointed out here that according to Rice it was the intended production of the *South* and not *Ethiopia* (although the controversy surrounding the latter did influence his decision) that resulted in his resignation.

⁷¹ Elmer Rice, 'Statement of Resignations'. *New Theatre*, (February 1936), 2 (p. 2).

⁷² Morris Watson, 'The Living Newspaper'. *New Theatre*, (June 1936), 7 (p. 7).

dangerous' to be allowed on stage. Only after the intervention and reassurance of its success by both Flanagan and Barber, the play finally opened on March 14, 1936.

The play's portrayal of the simplicity and honesty of the farmer-worker and the problems s/he went through during the 1920s and early 1930s was deeply effective. The audience witnessed the farmers' contribution during the First World War, their unfair treatment after the end of the war when their mortgages were foreclosed and farms auctioned, the deliberate destruction of crops to keep the prices up (while the unemployed were starving), the devastating effects of the 1934 drought, their organization into cooperatives and the creation of AAA. They also witnessed how the Supreme Court deemed unconstitutional the creation of AAA and how the farmers, workers and unemployed decided that only united and organized could they contest the power of the middleman. Whereas the theme and dialogue were quite simplistic, its stylistic theatrical representation caused a sensation. The stylised characters (representing classes rather than individuals as such), the use of projections, lighting and shadows, the visual documentation of events, the episodic treatment, the unforced didacticism and the agit-prop ending were unified organically

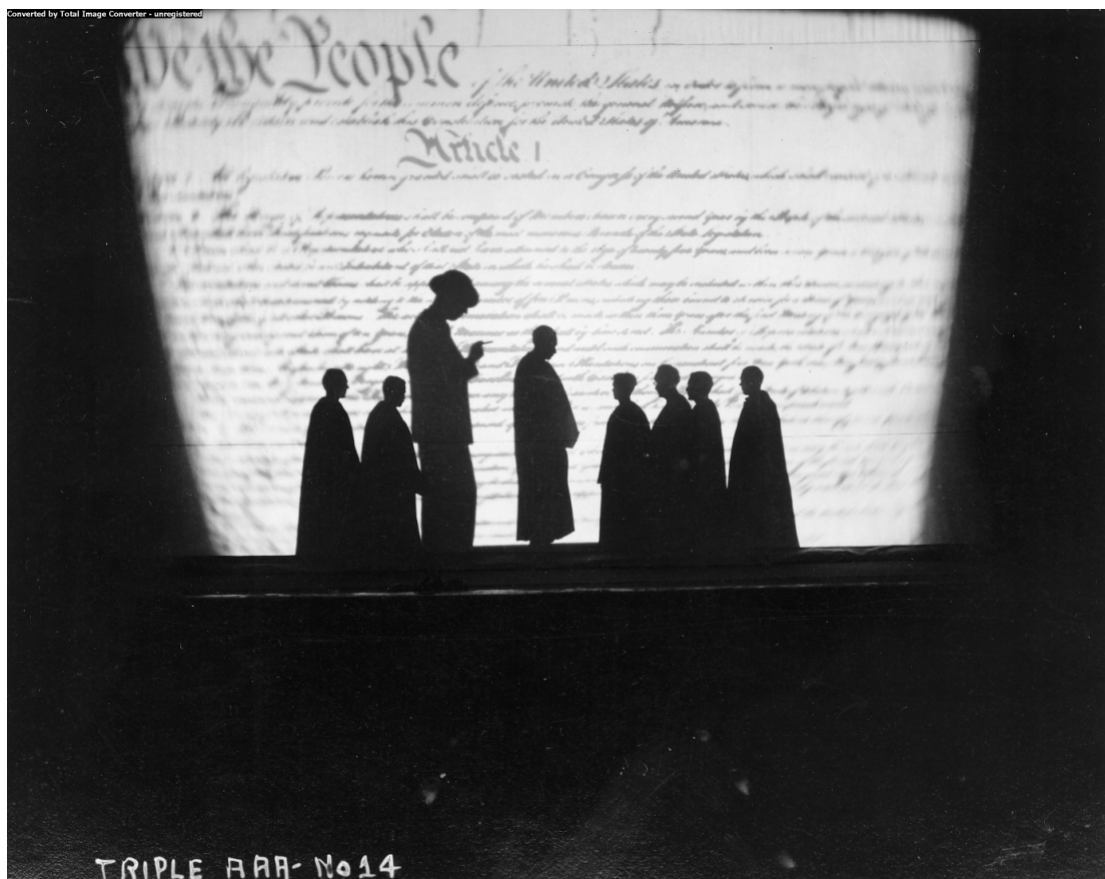


Figure 1. *Triple-A Plowed Under*. Directed by Joseph Losey. New York, 1936.

and offered the audience a new theatrical experience. As the director Joseph Losey commented, in the play ‘there were a lot of little vignettes. It was approaching a movie technique: parts on the stage on different levels were picked up by spots – like film cuts’.⁷³ One such example was scene 16, subtitled ‘Drought’, which began with the Voice of the Living Newspaper announcing over the loudspeaker

Summer, 1934: Drought sears the Midwest, West, Southwest.⁷⁴ (*Lights up center, upon a tableau of a FARMER examining the soil; a sun-baked plain, stretching away to a burning horizon. From the loudspeaker two voices are heard, one crisp, sharp, staccato; -- the other sinister and foreboding. The VOICES are accompanied by a rhythmic musical procession that grows in intensity and leaps to a climax of shrill despair.*)

FIRST VOICE (over loudspeaker): May first, Midwest weather report.

SECOND VOICE (over loudspeaker): Fair and warmer.

FIRST VOICE: May second, Midwest weather report.

SECOND VOICE: Fair and warmer.

FIRST VOICE: May third, Midwest weather report.

SECOND VOICE: Fair and warmer.

FIRST VOICE: May fourth, Midwest weather report.

SECOND VOICE: Fair and warmer. Fair and warmer. Fair and warmer.

Fair and warmer.

(*The FARMER who is examining the soil straightens up, and slowly lets a handful of dry dust sift through his fingers.*)

FARMER: Dust!⁷⁵

By using agit-prop techniques such as direct address and short dialogues to represent (rather melodramatically) a specific reality and by changing the status of the Voice of the Living Newspaper from a broadcaster to an editorial commentator, the scene offered a powerful representation of a reality that, up to that moment, the audience was uninformed of. The stylistic representation of events and the play’s montage staging encouraged André van Gysegheem to describe the play as ‘typically Russian in creative imagery’.⁷⁶ The play concluded with a multiple repetition of the phrase ‘we need you’, coming both from the farmers and the unemployed, thus emphasizing solidarity between the classes and reinforcing their belief in the democratic process. In this way the play, for all its documentary and experimental techniques, incorporated an emotional component that generated a more empathetic response on the audience’s part to the farmers’ plight and a more sympathetic stance towards the New Deal policies.

⁷³ Michel Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*. (London & New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 47.

⁷⁴ In the original script there is a footnote indicating that the source of this comment was the *New York Times*, August 12, 1934

⁷⁵ *Triple-A Plowed Under*, 17.43.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Goldman, Arnold. ‘Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit’, p. 73.

Triple-A Plowed Under closed on May 2, 1936, less than two months after its opening night. The play was received well by the public, but caused much controversy with politicians and theatre critics. It was characterised as ‘bearing a propaganda message’ for the AAA, as being a representative of ‘the flower of American Brain Trust Communism’ and ‘the most outrageous misuse of the taxpayers’ money that the Roosevelt administration has yet been guilty of’.⁷⁷ These critics and politicians were not the least impressed by the Living Newspaper that followed *Triple-A Plowed Under*. *Injunction Granted*, written by the Living Newspaper staff under the guidance of Arthur Arent, supervised by Morris Watson and directed by Joseph Losey once more, was closer both in dramaturgy and tone to the American workers’ theatre and the experimentations of Brecht, Meyerhold and the Blue Blouses. Unlike the symbolic presentation of *Triple-A Plowed Under*, with the projection in scene 23 of the Constitution on a screen against coinciding shadows of the founding fathers, judges, politicians and nameless farmers (see figure 1), the use of vignette scenes and the more economical/minimal use of stage and props, *Injunction Granted* is more editorially selective in the information used, its scenes are longer and follow a historically progressive line and the stage is not simply seen as a space for presentation as it allows – with its ‘system of runways, platforms and hatches [...] [and] complicated lights’ – each scene to converge in the finale’s thematic intent.⁷⁸ At the same time, its use of farce and satire and particularly its introduction of the figure of the Clown (as discussed further on) are reminiscent of elements found both in a Blue Blouse performance and in Brecht’s plays (such as *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*).

The play was a chronological presentation of labour history, from its negligible establishment to its biased treatment by the American courts (quoting actual cases) and to the final formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. For Losey, this play represented an ideal opportunity to stylistically materialize what he had learnt and witnessed during his trip to Moscow in 1935. While there, he had met Meyerhold, had long discussions with Brecht and witnessed Okhlopkov’s experimentation with the use of space. Losey commented how Okhlopkov ‘had a completely flexible theatre which was something I had always dreamt of’ and claimed

⁷⁷ Quoted in Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, pp. 72-73. Those critics disapproving of *Triple-A* would not have been happy by the fact that, according to Losey, Brecht saw the performance and ‘was impressed by it’ (Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, p. 48).

⁷⁸ Arnold Goldman. ‘Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit’, p. 74.



Figure 2. *Injunction Granted*. Directed by Joseph Losey. New York, 1936.

that although it was a collective effort, the development of the performance's style was designed primarily by him and Arent.⁷⁹ Losey's staging brought together elements used in European theatre and American folklore. The stage had an element of plasticity to it, reminiscent of Okhlopkov's experimentation, in an attempt to create a fluent stage area. There were runways and platforms that created ten areas where action could take place and which would be selected by lighting. For Losey, it was important to create a continuity among all the scenes; thus while a scene was being acted and highlighted by spots of light, the rest of the stage remained dark with the actors still on stage. This flow of scenes created some extraordinary tableau moments that the audience would have found unusually fresh and exciting (as it had never been offered a similar experience before by the Broadway theatre) and, by the end of the performance, it would have been able to link all the events it witnessed.⁸⁰

Losey also employed projected headlines and placards either held by the characters or worn by them.⁸¹ In this way, techniques associated with a written

⁷⁹ Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, p. 37, 47.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47; Goldman, 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit', pp. 74-75.

⁸¹ Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-century American Drama*, p. 225.

newspaper were used in a new way to clarify or exemplify events and people related to the action. Although such techniques (extensively in German agitprop theatre during the 1920s) were indeed employed in the production of Brecht's play *The Mother* by the Theatre Union in 1935, they could not have reached the masses of audience that an FTP production could. Losey's cleverly brought together all these new experimental forms and used them in such a way that the audience did not feel merely as spectators but became active players of the happenings on stage. However, the play is mostly remembered for its use of the muted clown-figure (on top of the Voice of the Living Newspaper) as a mediator and visual commentator of the action. The clown figure was improvised during rehearsals and was acted by Norman Lloyd. The muted clown was based on the character of Harpo Marx, he was wearing tennis shoes, a long and wide-sleeved jacket and patched trousers.⁸² The Clown hit himself over his head with a diploma (scenes 12 and 18), wore placards commenting on the event taking place (scene 14), mocked real characters (scene 15 and scene 23 in which he entered with a blue eagle mounted on a stand, covered with a hood and when he unveiled it he revealed a caricature of General Hugh Johnson mounted on the blue eagle), blew horns and balloons in disapproval of what a character proclaimed (scene 18), stroked them with a slapstick (scene 24) or would present them with questionable gifts (scene 18, the clown presented John Rockefeller Jr. with a large dime and Howard Heinz with a large pickle).⁸³

The figure of the clown reinforced the satirical and farcical elements of *Injunction Granted* (for example, at the end of scene 19 and after their speeches both Heinz and Rockefeller lock arms, turn their backs to the audience and bow; at the sound of music they dance off the stage cheerfully) and as Goldman commented it approached 'the caricature aspects of certain agitprop and satirical cabaret sketches'.⁸⁴ The reverberation of the phrase 'Injunction granted!' by every court openly ridiculed the judicial process. If one reads this repetition in relation to the ending of the play, where John L. Lewis declared

My voice is the voice of millions of men and women employed in America's industries, heretofore unorganized, economically exploited and

⁸² Goldman, 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit', p. 75.

⁸³ *Injunction Granted*, 12.102, 14.106-109, 15.109, 18.115-117, 23.125-126, 24. 126-130.

⁸⁴ Goldman, 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit', p. 75. Kruger also commented that this treatment of serious matters 'echoed similar agitprop plays like the Proletbühne's lampoon of the AFL in *I Need You and You Need Me* (1932)' (*The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, p. 164).

inarticulate. These unions, comprising the Committee for Industrial Organization, adequately reflect the sentiment, hopes and aspiration of thirty million additional Americans who heretofore have been denied by industry and finance the privilege of collective organization. This statement issued by the Iron and Steel Institute is designed to be terrifying to the minds of those who fail to accept the theory and the financial interests behind the steel corporations shall be regarded as the overlords of industrial America. That statement amounts to a declaration of industrial and civil war. It contravenes the law. It pledges the vast resources of the industry against the right of its workers to engage in self-organization of modern collective bargaining. Organized labor in America accepts the challenge of the overlords of steel (*At the word 'challenge' all signs are lifted up*).⁸⁵

one can witness the difference in tone and in its final message from the production of *Triple-A Plowed Under*. However, Losey and Watson's conscious decision to use comedy and satire to deal with the contentious issue of labour unionization and uncover the fallacies of the New Deal patronage and the more open endorsement of the CIO did not go down well with the WPA, politicians, critics and Flanagan herself.

Barber and Farnsworth, after attending a rehearsal, objected strongly to the tone of the play and advised Flanagan to consider cancelling it, despite its highly experimental theatrical scenes and the quality of acting.⁸⁶ Flanagan initially wrote to both Losey and Watson and asked them to 'clean up the script and make it more objective', but both of them disregarded her.⁸⁷ After the play's opening night performance, on July 24, 1936, though, Flanagan was so enraged by the production that she wrote a lengthy and angry letter to both Losey and Watson. In it she commented how

- 1) The production seems to me special pleading, biased, an editorial, not a news issue. (Witness the one-sided treatment of the C.I.O. rally; the voice reading Hoover; the scene showing judges asleep, etc., etc.) Whatever my personal sympathies are I cannot, as custodian of federal funds, have such funds used as a party tool. That goes for the communist party as well as the democratic party. To show the history of labor in the courts is appropriate; to load that document at every turn with insinuation is not appropriate.
- 2) The production, in my opinion, lacks a proper climax, falling back on the old cliché of calling labor to unite in the approved agit-prop manner. [...]

⁸⁵ *Injunction Granted*, 28.139-140.

⁸⁶ Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 110; Goldman, 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit', pp. 75-76.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

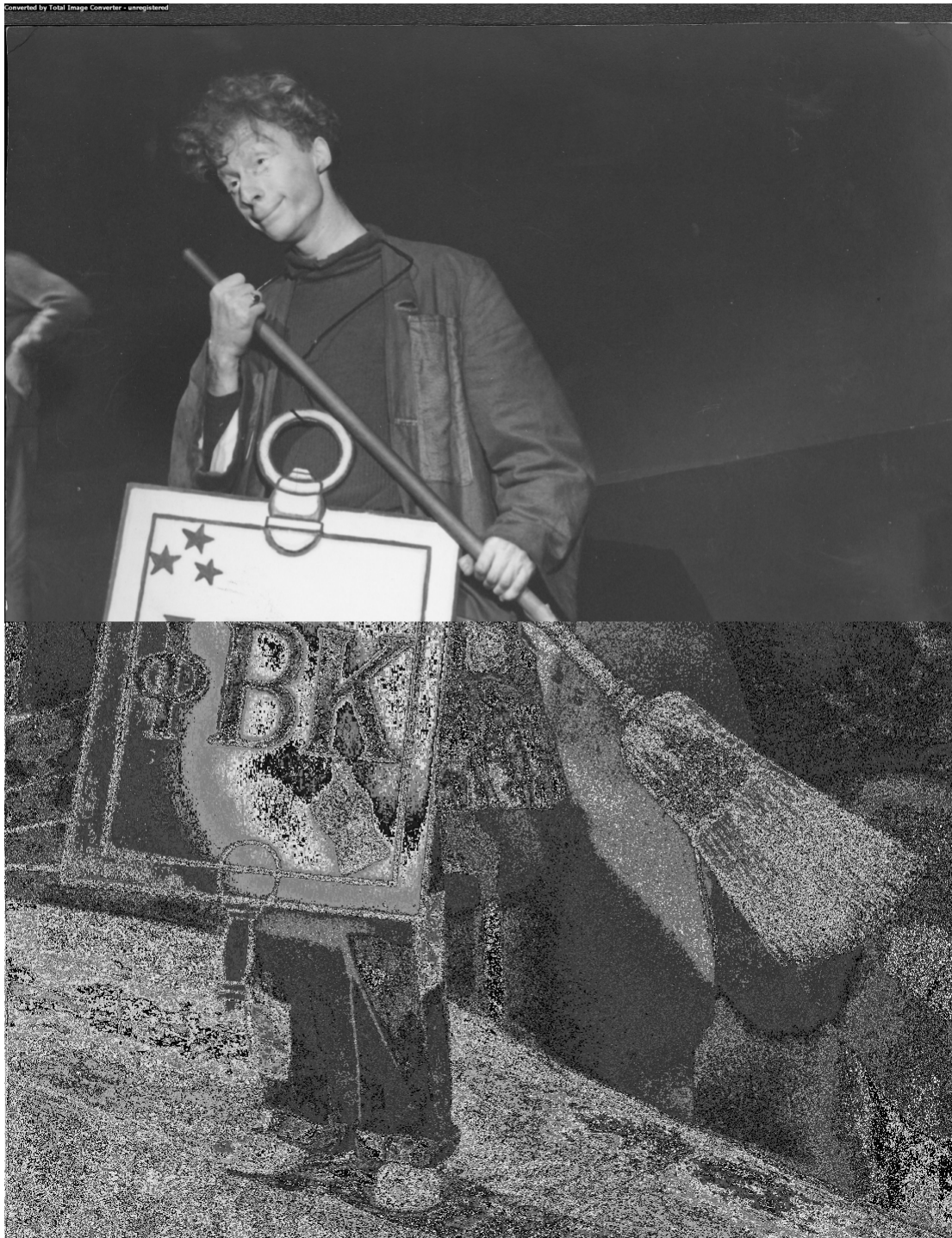


Figure 3. *Injunction Granted*. Directed by Joseph Losey. New York, 1936. Norman Lloyd as the muted clown.

- 4) ... [The] production uses too many devices, too much hysteria in acting....
- 5) The production is historical drama and hence, by reason of comprehension, is open to the charge of superficiality. I think we should consider whether history should not rather be used, as it is in

Triple-A, to illuminate the present, not lead up to it in the chronological manner.⁸⁸

Flanagan's reservations and fierce reaction were primarily a result of her role as the director of the whole FTP and secondly of her own aesthetics of politically engaged theatre. Flanagan had already experienced the power of censorship (as the first Living Newspaper, *Ethiopia*, had been ordered to close right after its preview) and at the same time was aware of her responsibilities towards all the artists the project employed. She was made aware from early on that many conservative senators did not approve of Roosevelt's plans and the FTP would be among the first projects to be scrutinised both for its finances and its performances. The fact that *Injunction Granted* attacked politicians in such a personalised and satirical way met with Flanagan's opposition. At the same time, her previous status as a director enabled her to express some criticism on the aesthetics of the play. She had already claimed that 'this consciousness that we are part of the economic life of America, that we are one with the worker on the stage and in the audience is the very core of the Federal Theatre'.⁸⁹ For Flanagan, each worker needed to be made aware of the labour movement but the play failed to present the struggle of the working class and instead resorted to an anachronistic historical approach and presentation of its subject. Whereas *Triple-A Plowed Under* ended with the repetition of the phrase 'We need you', asking the audience to support the new Farmer-Labor Party and thus initiate a process of solidarity, *Injunction Granted* ended with an invitation towards the audience to endorse the Committee for Industrial Organization, engage in self-organization and challenge the existing plutocrats. The challenge that this performance presented, both in terms of formal experimentations, presentation and social mobility, was one that Flanagan did not want to take up.

Her fears concerning the production were not unfounded as very soon it was unfavourably criticized by the daily newspapers' critics, especially since the play included a direct quote from Earl Browder, the leader of the Communist party in the United States. One of the first to comment on the play was Brooks Atkinson, who suggested that 'the Moscow stylisation ... has been adopted', thus supporting Flanagan's view of Losey and Watson as both aesthetically and politically biased.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Quoted in Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, pp. 110-111.

⁸⁹ Flanagan, 'Federal Theatre: Tomorrow', p. 26.

⁹⁰ Goldman, 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit', p. 81 [endnote 21].

Losey's past association with the Communist party theatre groups, his influential trip to Russia and his appropriation of modern revolutionary techniques made him an easy target for political criticism. Watson, on the other hand, was a well-known union activist and his close collaboration with Losey seemed to portray the Living Newspaper unit as a political sympathiser of Communism. As both rejected Flanagan's pleas for a revision of the play's content, more negative criticism sprang up. Granville Vernon, through the pages of *Commonweal*, denounced the play one month after its opening night, since 'as propaganda it has no place in the taxpayers' theatre, and as art it has no place in the theatre at all'.⁹¹

Unlike *Triple-A Plowed Under*, which was dismissed as a 'pink play', *Injunction Granted* was portrayed as a 'red play'. Flanagan, aware that the negative criticism was intensifying and that the controversy over *Ethiopia* was still in the air, was eager to suppress any immediate association of the Living Newspaper with revolutionary communism, especially since her appointment as national director of the whole project was not unanimous. She was openly criticised during a hearing in the Senate, when Senator James J. Davis disapproved of the WPA's decision to allow 'money meant for relief to be spent by a woman infatuated by the Russian Theatre and the U.S.S.R'.⁹² Faced with such hostility and, in a last attempt to salvage the reputation of the Living Newspaper, Flanagan wrote another letter to Watson and Losey denouncing the production as 'old-fashioned Union Square shouting' and emphasising that 'I will not have the Federal Theatre Project used politically. I will not have it used to further the ends of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party or the Communist Party'.⁹³ Pressured both by internal and external criticism and despite the support received by the audiences and unions, *Injunction Granted* was closed prematurely in October 1936. The Living Newspaper suffered another blow as Losey resigned in protest against this decision and the unit lost a director with theatrical vision.⁹⁴ The four months between the closing of this performance and the opening of the next Living Newspaper, *Power*, proved difficult for the unit since it was faced

⁹¹ 'Injunction Granted. Latest Edition of the Living Newspaper is Out and Out Propaganda of the Left'. *The Commonweal*, 24 (August 1936), 407.

⁹² Quoted in Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 78.

⁹³ Quoted in Mathews, *ibid.*, p. 112.

⁹⁴ 'I broke with the Living Newspaper over the withdrawal of *Injunction Granted*. I was not fired and at no time was I under any pressure from Morris Watson. I was under considerable pressure from Flanagan and Barber which was disagreeable... Flanagan found my political militancy increasingly inconvenient...' (Losey as quoted in Goldman, 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit', p. 76.)

with cuts in its budget, did not attract paying customers and had to reject bookings from trade unions wanting to see *Injunction Granted*.⁹⁵

The first two years of the Living Newspaper's existence were also marked by a constant controversy between the creative staff and the administration of the FTP and WPA. Flanagan had repeatedly requested playwrights to produce plays that would encompass the changing society, any social, political and economically unresolved issues and thus give a voice to unrepresented social groups. She also believed in Hopkins' claim that the FTP would be free and uncensored; she hoped that under those conditions a new theatre with its own terms would be created (unlike the established Broadway), which would address not only the professionally trained spectators, but a 'vast new audience'.⁹⁶ However, her reaction to the productions of *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Injunction Granted* voiced the awkward relationship between a politically engaged theatre and its federal patronage. This awkward relationship was not simply the result of the 'inherent' discrepancy between the FTP's relief status and its theatrical evolution as Mathews has suggested.⁹⁷ It was also the result of the administration's unwillingness to acknowledge and tolerate a narrative discourse that did not comply with that of the liberal New Deal, but with the more militant discourse of Marxist ideology. As a result, the Living Newspaper and the FTP were faced with censorship, the very thing that Hopkins had pledged would never occur in the democratic American arena. *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Injunction Granted* were not the only cases. To the relief of the WPA, two other Living Newspapers with the working title *War and Taxes* and one concerning the socialization of medicine (that reached the stage in 1940 in an altered form called *Medicine*) were never performed. The main issue, however, arose in 1937 with the production of Marc Blitzstein's opera *The Cradle Will Rock*. Blitzstein had discussed his play with Orson Welles and John Houseman, the two accomplished directors of Project 891, an independent unit, funded by the FTP, which presented new experimental productions of canonical plays.⁹⁸ The play took place in the fictitious

⁹⁵ Cosgrove, 'The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form', p. 86.

⁹⁶ Flanagan, 'Federal Theatre: Tomorrow', p. 6.

⁹⁷ Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 122.

⁹⁸ Welles and Houseman were the directors of the Harlem unit (Lafayette theatre) that produced the well-documented *Macbeth* (1934) with an all-black cast, set the action in Haiti instead of Scotland and enhanced it musically with voodoo rhythms of a troupe of African drummers. They also produced *Dr. Faustus* in 1937 in the Maxine Elliot Theatre. When they later left the FTP, they created the Mercury Theatre where they produced *Julius Caesar* and *Danton's Death*.

city of Steel Town U.S.A, dealing with the real political confrontation between the CIO and Bethlehem Steel Corporation and employed a very sarcastic and witty tone. Its caricature of capitalists (like the character of Mr. Mister) and policemen, its sympathetic depiction of heroic union agitators, workers and the prostitute with a heart of gold emerged as a critical representation of American society. Welles and Houseman wanted the play for the FTP and when Flanagan heard the opera's score dramatised by Blitzstein himself, she agreed unconditionally. She commented that 'it took no wizardry to see that this was not a play set to music, nor music illustrated by actors, but music + play equalling something new and better than either'.⁹⁹ The play's main issues, however, became more topical as rehearsals progressed. The Steel Workers Organizing Committee was successfully persuading the labour force of U.S. Steel to join the CIO and many strikes sprang up around the country resulting in the injury and death of many strikers in clashes with the police (one such example was the strike near the Chicago plant of Republic Steel, where twelve strikers were killed on Memorial Day May 30, 1937).

These events occurred simultaneously with rumours of cuts to the FTP personnel, which were actually realised on June 10, when Flanagan received instructions to reduce the New York project's personnel by 30%. She was also instructed to delay the opening night of any new productions until after the beginning of the new financial year, that is July 1, 1937. Such a decision clearly affected the scheduled preview of *The Cradle Will Rock* for June 16 (after having sold fourteen thousand tickets) especially since the WPA reviewed the play as politically explosive and biased. Flanagan, with the help of Archibald MacLeish and Virgil Thompson, attempted to persuade the WPA to allow the production of the play, but was unable to reverse the decision. Welles and Houseman found the Maxine Elliot Theatre locked, guarded by the police and were unable to access the production's costumes, scenery and props. Defying the orders of the WPA, Welles instructed the crowd already assembled outside the Maxine Elliot to proceed to the old Venice Theatre that had been rented after frantic phone calls.¹⁰⁰ This single performance of *The Cradle Will Rock* still remains memorable, not simply for its defiance of censorship, but for its

⁹⁹ Flanagan, *Arena*, p. 201.

¹⁰⁰ All the above information can be found in Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 124.

enthusiastic reception by the audience.¹⁰¹ The only prop on stage was a piano and Blitzstein playing and performing. The original cast was scattered in the audience and was prohibited from participating in an unauthorised production following orders from Equity. However, as Blitzstein started playing the prostitute's song, Olive Stanton (the actress in that role) stood out and started singing; many other actors who had decided to defy Equity's order also joined her on stage.¹⁰² This 'forced' method of presentation, with the actors progressing to the stage through the audience and the audience's active participation (cheering or mocking the characters), had a close resemblance with the more agit-prop presentation of a Blue Blouse performance. However, the play's emphatic working-class politics appalled both the WPA and the middle-class Americans that could not accept the function of the theatrical space as a *topos* where the legitimization of the working class struggle could materialize.

The events surrounding the productions of *Triple-A Plowed Under*, *Injunction Granted* and *The Cradle Will Rock* indicated that the American Democratic administration, its middle-class voters and the established Broadway stage could not tolerate the form of the Living Newspaper as a socially and politically agitational drama. The aforementioned productions offended the political sensibilities of the WPA and politicians from both ends of the spectrum but, as Flanagan anticipated, they offered pleasure to audiences that could appreciate their political satire and whose social struggle was represented on stage. Nonetheless, two further Living newspapers, *Power* (preceding *The Cradle Will Rock*) and *One-Third of a Nation*, represented a change in the Living Newspaper's dramatic form, as its agitprop influence diminished and its discourse became more ideologically associated with the politics of the New Deal. In terms of formal experimentation, this change did not signify a rejection of its progressive objectives as it still proposed social change and justice. But as Cosgrove argued, 'it had forsaken its revolutionary heritage in favour of the political expediency of social reformism'.¹⁰³ What this shift represented was not only Flanagan's desire to produce 'safer' plays that would not rely so exclusively on political agitation and 'leftist' political ideology (as she considered *Injunction Granted* to do) but also the fact that liberalism (both politically and culturally) was

¹⁰¹ Wolfe Kaufman, 'Actors and Audiences All Mixed Up as WPA goes Commercial'. *Variety*. 23 June 1937, p. 62; John Houseman, *Entertainers and Entertained*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 25.

¹⁰² See Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 124.

¹⁰³ Cosgrove, 'The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form', p. 86.

ultimately embedded within the theatrical aesthetics of American artists. Such a shift is reminiscent of the one the New York Intellectuals underwent and the fact that they both coincide chronologically only serves to reinforce the uncomfortable relationship between the aesthetics of engagement and the politics of liberalism.

III. 'A People's Theatre': The creation of a new audience.

The audience was fresh. It was eager. To anyone who saw it night after night as we did, it was not the Broadway crowd. ... one had the feeling every night, that here were people on a voyage of discovery in the theatre (Orson Welles).¹⁰⁴

Brooks Atkinson had commented in his article 'National Theater' that culturally American society had never moved beyond the nineteenth-century view of art as a respectable activity that rich people can enjoy and sponsor; because of the persistence of such views 'art has not yet been absorbed into the democratic way of life'.¹⁰⁵ Atkinson's comment revealed an aspect of American culture that Flanagan, Hopkins and Arent aspired to challenge. Inherent in the American dream's faith in the nation's economic and social betterment was the idea of cultural enrichment of the people. This cultural enrichment would not be restricted to the affluent classes but would encompass the most deprived masses. By fusing together elements associated with 'high' art and folklore tradition, the Federal Theatre proclaimed its adoption of the politics and aesthetics of the New Deal's cultural democracy. Its desire to create a theatre 'national in scope, regional in emphasis and American in democratic attitudes' reflected this faith.¹⁰⁶ Adopting the term the 'People's Theatre' and both the public and the government as its new patrons, the FTP challenged the presence of a hegemonic literary elite (subsidising Broadway and Hollywood) and acknowledged that its strength rested with the problems caused by the social and economic distress of the Depression era and experienced by the majority of people.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in John O'Connor, 'The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience'. *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980*. Eds. Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel Friedman. (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 171- 183 (p. 182).

¹⁰⁵ Brooks Atkinson, 'National Theater; Congressman Javits Proposes That the Stage, Opera and Ballet Draws Plans'. *New York Times*, 30 January 1949, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Flanagan, 'A Brief Delivered by Hallie Flanagan, Director, Federal Theatre Project, Works Progress Administration before the Committee on Patents, House of Representatives, February 8, 1938'. The Library of Congress: The New Deal Stage – Selections from the Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939. Washington, D.C, pp. 1-15, (p. 5). It is also interesting to note that Flanagan repeated the exact same phrase in her HUAC hearing when questioned by both Chairman Dies and Congressman Thomas.

¹⁰⁷ 'Editorial Statement', *Federal Theatre Magazine* 1.6 (1936), 5 (p. 5).

As already discussed in the first part of this chapter, the first two years of the Living Newspaper's existence revealed a conscious exploration of socially and politically sensitive subjects, experimentation with performative elements and the inclusion of the underrepresented classes that, although enthusiastically received by the public, caused much distress both to the FTP and WPA administrations and to its governmental patron. Near the end of 1937 and after having suffered a cut of 30% of its New York personnel, Flanagan, Barber, Hopkins and Arent realised that two things had to change. Firstly, they needed to readdress the issue of the audience; up to that moment, it was the lower classes that were aptly represented in the Living Newspaper's productions and that filled the theatres. It was time to make theatre relevant to the middle class, by awakening it to the social conditioning of the working class, especially since the middle class could form part of its public patronage. Secondly, they had to reject the more militant and agitational character of the previous performances (minimizing simultaneously the influence of its international, crucially mostly socialist and communist, antecedents) and endorse the aspirations of the New Deal program that served as its second and financially most important patron. These two changes influenced the dramatic form of the Living Newspaper, its autonomous status as a politically uncensored genre and the ways in which it could engage with the current social problems. Seldes' observation that the theatre's new patrons (the public and the government) would eventually make demands that the artist had to meet was very soon realised and the FTP's adjustment to those demands denied the Living Newspaper its exciting avant-garde character.¹⁰⁸

By referring to itself as a people's theatre, without however clearly defining who the people were, the FTP wanted to include groups previously excluded or marginalised, such as people from rural communities, workers, children, blacks and foreign-language speakers. All these groups then served as important constituents in its attempt to establish itself as the new national theatre. Labour organizations constituted the largest percentage of the FTP's audience, since their struggle was so vividly represented on stage. However, after the first two years, the FTP consciously reduced the tickets available to such organizations, especially after being criticised for promoting communism and revolution. The need to address the middle-class, as well as the working and lower classes that the Living Newspaper became committed to

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Leland Lemke Zimmerman, 'The Federal Theatre: An evaluation and comparison with foreign national theatres'. (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1955), p. 114.

was firstly emphasised by Kenneth Burke in his address to the first American Writers' Congress in 1935. In it, Burke confronted his audience with the structure of an American society that was engulfed with a desire for commodity consumption by 'our economic mercenaries' (advertisers and sales organizations) and questioned whether 'the symbol of the worker [is] accurately attuned to us, as so conditioned by the reactionary forces in control of our main educational channels'.¹⁰⁹ Burke found the symbol of the worker, the proletarian, inadequate and negative and proposed the more positive one of 'the people'.

In suggesting that 'the people' rather than the worker, rate higher in our hierarchy of symbols, I suppose I am suggesting fundamentally that one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary thought among the lower middle class without using middle-class values... [...] I think the term 'the people' is closer to our folkways than is the corresponding term, 'the masses', both in spontaneous popular usage and as stimulated by our political demagogues.¹¹⁰

Burke's proposal to replace the key term 'worker' with that of the 'people' within the leftist intellectual discourse signified a change in the American intellectuals' approach to the class struggle. Burke alleged that the term 'people' was more inclusive and embraced plurality, as it contained the '*ideal*, the ultimate *classless* feature', offered a unity that the already politically defined class of workers could not and served as a more powerful symbol of commitment.¹¹¹ It seems that Burke had sensed the gradually diminishing power of the working movement and leftist ideology within the USA. Through the appropriation of middle-class values within the symbol of the 'people', Burke seemed to advocate the need for criticism and engagement to appropriate and reframe the language of the dominant cultural attitudes of the time, those being middle-class ones. This reframing would not be uncritical though; rather, with the emphasis being on culture rather than economics, the American intellectual would approach such values with caution, allow his/her existing values to dialectically interact with the dominant ones and attempt to re-adapt past meanings to the emerging ones. In this way, the intellectual would not appear as a self-absorbed figure, dogmatically trapped by political and cultural ideologies but rather as an enlightened one who constantly works towards a culture that is critically considering all cultural

¹⁰⁹ Kenneth Burke, 'Revolutionary Symbolism in America'. *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*. Eds. Herbert W. Simons and Trevor Melia. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 267-273 (p. 269).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 269-270.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

elements at work within society. Therefore, the role of the intellectual is not one of merely satisfying a specific audience but one of reaching and communicating with a broader one. Burke went on to comment that

In the last analysis, art strains towards *universalization*. It tends to overleap imaginatively the class divisions of the moment and go after modes of thought that would apply to a society freed of class divisions. It seeks to consider the problems of *man*, not of *classes of men*.¹¹²

He acknowledged that the emphasis on the universal symbol of ‘man’ instead of ‘classes of men’ was resonant with his class (‘the petty bourgeois’), but strongly believed that only through this process could the American intellectual and writer approach the complex structure of propagandistic writing; by employing the symbol of the ‘people’ he could conduct ‘propaganda by inclusion’ (unlike the symbol of the proletariat that suggested ‘propaganda by exclusion’) and thus ‘propagandize his cause with as full a cultural texture as he [could] manage’.¹¹³

By appropriating the term ‘people’ Burke wished to inform the middle class of the struggles the working class faced. In doing so, Burke hoped that the middle class (a potential proletarian ally) would awake from its lethargic state of self-absorption and join the anti-capitalist struggle. Cultural democracy in the American artistic arena would be all-encompassing, since the symbol of the ‘people’ could incorporate not only the economic classes but also the literary ones; in this way the class of the writers, whose work was regarded as effortlessly distinguishable from industrial labour and direct revolutionary action, would not be considered as too divergent. His approach towards the revolutionary potential of American culture has not been one that critics (Marxists or not) felt comfortable implementing. His use of symbolism appeared (and still appears) problematic, especially when seen in relation to the set of complex forces (including McCarthyism) that developed in the 1950s and 1960s. The appropriation of the term ‘people’ blurred the implied anti-capitalist dialectic of the symbol of the ‘worker’, especially at a time when labour was still fighting for its right to organize and marked a rejection of a more militant and agitational discourse. At the same time, his belief that the intellectual had to rearticulate existing leftist symbols using a middle class rhetoric as a way of furthering the revolutionary movement caused concern among other Marxists who believed that if such a plan succeeded then

¹¹² Ibid., p. 272.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 272-273.

proletarian literature would become a petty bourgeois movement.¹¹⁴ The term's classless feature, unity and inclusiveness proposed a more homogenised and universal category that placed the individual and the all-embracing 'we' at its core, regardless of one's political, economic or social conditioning. More poignantly, however, Burke's thesis created an antithesis between the 'worker' and the 'people' that represented the worker as antipathetic to the 'good of the people'. Allen Porter rightly observed how this antithesis had been used both in the United States and in England during general strikes to represent the class of workers as 'holding up the people', thus separating the interests of the workers from those of all the remaining classes and creating a resentful antagonism between them.¹¹⁵

The use of the 'people' was also reminiscent of Hitler's use of the myth of *das Volk* and many participants commented on the use of the term in the discussion that followed right after the end of Burke's speech at the congress. Friedrich Wolf remarked how its symbolism rendered 'a picture of society that [was] not merely un-Marxian but one which history has proven to be necessary for the continuation of power of the exploiting class'.¹¹⁶ At the same time, Joseph Freeman emphasised the need for the existence of the symbol of the 'worker' not because it could become a political myth but because, unlike the ambiguous and vague symbol of the 'people', the worker had an active and visible role within the American reality.¹¹⁷ The idea that the 'worker' could be seen physically and ideologically working would help uncover the social reality and thus allow change. Burke's utopian belief in the American writer's ability to write for the 'people', who enlists 'our *ambitions*' (instead of the 'worker' who enlists 'our *sympathies*') after encompassing numerous aspects of his/her cultural heritage in order to interweave 'antipathy towards our oppressive institutions' created an oxymoron as it stripped the proletarian artist and worker of his/her dialectic struggle with the middle class, obliterating thus their economic and ideological differences and placing them, instead, side by side as allies.¹¹⁸ At the same time, his rhetoric occurred at a time when some American intellectuals (as in the case of the New York Intellectuals related in chapter 2) were progressively averting their

¹¹⁴ Michael Gold in 'Discussion of Burke's Speech at the Congress.' In *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*. Eds. Herbert W. Simons and Trevor Melia. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 274-280 (p. 275).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

¹¹⁶ Friedrich Wolf, *ibid.*, p. 277.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹¹⁸ Kenneth Burke, *ibid.*, p. 279.

interest away from the leftist ideology and were instead investing their energies on enriching American culture with a renewed liberal perspective. Burke's views allowed (indirectly) such intellectuals to rid themselves more easily of the earlier endorsed Marxist politics and instead concentrate more firmly on re-inventing and re-introducing middle class liberal cultural notions. At the same time, the symbolism of the 'people' and its implied identification permeated the American cultural arena of representation and became quite visible in the Living Newspapers produced by the FTP in the last two years of its existence. It is interesting therefore to note that Burke's argument was ignored by the staff of the Living Newspapers as exemplified by the earlier performances mentioned above. The decision to ignore this revised view on the revolutionary potential of American culture does not seem out of context if one considers it in relation to its theatrical past and affiliations (American workers' theatre and the European experimentations of Meyerhold and the Blue Blouse) and to its claim of allowing the representation of the social concerns of the rising class of new workers to take place.¹¹⁹ But as the political pressures from conservative voices within both the Republican and the Democratic Party intensified because of such a representation, as the whole project was soon faced with cuts to its budgets and as the structure of the Living Newspaper itself was changing from relying to a collaborative writing process to a one-man author, the emphasis of the Living Newspaper shifted from that of the 'worker' to that of the 'people'. *Power* and *One-Third of a Nation* remain prime examples of such a change.

Both productions remained the most popular with the administration of the FTP and critics as they still engaged themselves with socially pertinent issues, but had abandoned the more sharp social edge of *Injunction Granted*. Harry Hopkins, the WPA administrator, called *Power* 'a great show' and encouraged Flanagan to go ahead with the project about housing, *One-Third of a Nation*;¹²⁰ Brooks Atkinson commented how 'It (the Living Newspaper) has learned how to use the theatre brilliantly as a medium of expression... They have turned 'Power' into one of the most exuberant show n town' and of *One-third* how 'none of the others (former Living Newspapers) has been so brilliantly produced. [...] Most people will want to

¹¹⁹ See Flanagan, 'A Theatre Is Born', pp. 908-915.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Flanagan, *Arena*, p. 185.

see it because it is alive'.¹²¹ The dramatic form of the Living Newspaper had undergone many significant changes in-between the four months that separated the closing of *Injunction Granted* and the opening of *Power*. *Power* was first produced at the Ritz Theatre, New York City, on February 23, 1937. Although this Living Newspaper was performed before *The Cradle Will Rock* (July 14, 1937) discussed in the previous part of the chapter, it did not face the kind of censorship *Cradle* did. *The Cradle Will Rock* still aimed at exposing the social and economic injustices faced by the working class and presented a direct confrontation between the strikers of its fictitious town and the capitalist enterprise. *Power*, on the other hand, shifted its interest to a representational 'little man', whose personal questions (and answers received) were the main focus. At the same time, this production was much closer to the reformist politics of the New Deal and President Roosevelt's plans, thus abandoning the more agitational and provocative presentation of social issues that *Injunction Granted* and *The Cradle Will Rock* used. It seems that – starting with *Power* – the Living Newspaper unit had decided to abandon the representation of the 'worker' and at the same time try to redefine itself within the new economic climate.

One of the first changes noticeable in the productions of *Power* and *One-Third of a Nation* is the abandonment of the policy of attributing authorship to the entire unit. Instead, Arthur Arent was credited as the 'author' of both plays. The shift from collaboration to individual authorship signified the Living Newspaper's attempt to disassociate itself from its avant-garde European predecessors and its appropriation of their radical discourse, especially in light of the recent cases of censorship. At the same time, however, it represented the Living Newspaper's adaptability to the Broadway model of play that associated the word play with a dramatic text written by an individual playwright and offering a unambiguous narrative. Up to that moment, the Living Newspaper incorporated both the theatrical and journalistic modes of productions. The inclusion of journalism was what helped the Living Newspaper transform its methods of dramatic production and also what allowed it to engage itself in depth with political issues. By assuming the individual imprint of the playwright instead of that of a group of people both in its textual and performative realization, the new dramatic form of the Living Newspaper renounced the importance of the

¹²¹ Brooks Atkinson, 'Power Produced by the Living Newspaper Under Federal Theatre Auspices'. *The New York Times*, 24 February 1937, p.18; 'Living Newspaper of the Federal Theatre Reports the Housing Situation'. *The New York Times*, 18 January 1938, p. 27.

collaborative system of script writing. In doing so, it negated the reflection of the politically articulated consciousness and problematizations of a group of creators and thus emphasised the more traditional notion of individual creativity.

The introduction of the ideological authority of individual authorship influenced the structure and exposition of theme in *Power* and *One-Third of a Nation*. Arent considered there to be two techniques of presentation, the montage and the episodic. He rightly considered that *Injunction Granted* employed almost exclusively montage (especially during the first act), but found the act ‘dull and repetitious’ and felt that, through this kind of presentation, the performance was asking too much of the audience.¹²² Instead, he preferred the episodic structure as it could employ fewer scenes that were self-contained and had three primary functions: ‘1. to say what has to be said; 2. to build to the scene’s own natural climax; 3. to build to the climax of the act curtain and the resolution of the play’.¹²³ Through the episodic structure Arent wanted to create scenes that would each individually dramatize completely one aspect of the problem and the next would move to another aspect (unlike *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Injunction Granted*, where one idea could unfold in two or three scenes). He hoped that this kind of structure would facilitate a clearer understanding of the problem and the possible solutions on the part of the audience.

Arent, by setting out these three steps, put forward his own views on dramaturgy that came to define the American Living Newspaper, especially as all three were implemented in the 1938 production of *One-Third of a Nation*, which became the unit’s most celebrated one. What Arent proposed was an abandonment of the more experimental montage technique and instead an emphasis on a progressively episodic revelation of the problem exposed in a climactic last scene. Although the Living Newspaper was committed to the exposition of the problem through the use of experimental formal techniques, Arent’s three stages seem to rely heavily on the dramatic realism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. With the emphasis on the episodic structure of the play and the now use of a single representational character (as opposed to many different representatives of the same/different class), the dramatic action lies heavily on the authorial voice of a single author and shifts the emphasis from the exposition of an overall social problem to one faced by a single person. The latter, in turn, could lead to an empathetic response from the audience;

¹²² Arent, ‘The Techniques of the Living Newspaper’, p. 59.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p.59.

rather than approach critically what occurs on stage, the audience's response might instead be limited to its identification with the character's overall plight.

At the same time as revisiting earlier theatrical movements, one could argue that Arent is also attempting to rework aspects of Brecht's ideas on the epic theatre, from a different perspective though, so as to make his newly proposed ideas on dramaturgy more accessible and viable for the American stage. Arent's insistence on the integrity and economy of each scene (function 1 and 2) could remind one of Brecht's emphasis that each scene should unveil a new aspect of the issues involved and that it should speak for itself. However, unlike Arent who rejects the use of montage within the scenes but allows it to be used only between scenes, Brecht lists montage as one of the main elements of epic theatre. Not only are the episodes supplemented by formal devices that disrupt any emotional connection the audience might establish (projected slides, charts, direct address to the audience or use of songs) but this *mélange* of formal styles within each scene forces the audience to consider each scene in relation to the ones already seen. Thus, the use of montage allows Brecht to disrupt any signs of empathy on the audience's part but at the same time montage acts as invisible link to all the elements of the play.

Unlike Brecht's episodic structure, where each scene ought to be self-contained, Arent's notion of the same structure seems to imply that the existence of each episode can be legitimised if it can lead to the climactic end scene and the resolution of the play. This idea is in direct opposition to Brecht's notion of autonomy, according to which each scene exists to 'comment' on the other (often being contradictory) and thus provoke thought and insight, not engulf the audience in the play's aesthetic totality. For Brecht, there is no room for resolution within a play; what the play should do is provoke critical reflection and present its content in unanticipated ways. Arent, by not fully developing his views on episodic structure and by uncritically rejecting the use of montage (already employed in *Injunction Granted*), influenced radically the dramatic form of the following Living Newspaper productions. Although still dealing with the then current social and political issues, the remaining performances made less use of formal experimentations, resorted to a more realistic use of the stage and props (as seen in the almost real-life size structure of a house tenement in the 1938 production of *One-Third of a Nation*) and ultimately legitimised the representation of a more 'personal' or 'human' problem as opposed to

one of social interest. In this way, the Living Newspaper lost its main contribution to American theatre that was its representation of social conditions and need for action.

Burke's discussion of the symbol of the 'people' ideologically framed Arent's symbolic use of a representational character in both productions. Whereas the juxtaposition of scenes in *Triple-A* and *Injunction Granted* established the development of a common problem experienced by different classes, the scenes of *Power* and *One-Third* discussed the problem in relation to the symbolic character of the 'little man'. The creation of a representative individual character, which substituted the classes of workers and farmers of the previous productions, 'whose personal questions [were] addressed by the almost paternal Voice [of the Living Newspaper] now drove the action and motivate[d] particular scenes'.¹²⁴ Kruger's remark manifests how the change in dramatic form affected the level of social analysis available to the audience. If the Voice of the Living Newspaper, instead of interrupting the action, commenting and criticising, tended towards a more patronizing and instructive approach, then the level of social analysis was not simply minimised; rather the audience's response was transformed from a more active consideration and understanding to a passive, receptive comprehension of the events dramatised.

Power's subject was the growth of the electricity industry in America and the conflict between private and public ownership. In Flanagan's words, the play represented 'the struggle of the average citizen [the Consumer] to understand the natural, social and economic forces around him, and to achieve through these forces, a better life for more people'.¹²⁵ The play began in a very theatrical manner. Following the interlude and the projection announcing the play, the curtain rose, there was a power cut and the audience was faced with the stage manager and two electricians carrying switches. Then the voice of the loudspeaker was heard commenting on the importance of electric power: 'this is the switchboard of the Ritz Theatre. Through this board flows the electric power that amplifies my voice, the power that ventilates the theatre, and the power that lights this show'.¹²⁶ What followed this introduction was a series of small tableau moments (the characters' faces lit up by flashes but put

¹²⁴ Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, p. 167.

¹²⁵ Flanagan, 'Introduction'. *Federal Theatre Plays: Triple A Plowed Under, Power, Spirochete*. 1938, p. 4.

¹²⁶ *Power*, 1.1.1.

out immediately after speaking) based on an actual power cut on December 28, 1936 in Newark, New Jersey that exemplified for and to the audience how electricity had become a daily necessity and how any supply disruption affected all aspects of life for all classes. These sketches included an operation being performed using flashlights, a bakery owner's frantic call to the operator assessing a loss of four thousand dollars' worth of bread, a mother pleading for the heat to come on as her baby is sick, a theatre manager commenting that his theatre is dark, an airport radio operator assessing the difficulty of landing the planes safely and a driver having just killed a woman crying 'My God, I didn't see her, I tell you it was dark. ... I didn't see her'.¹²⁷ The scene ends with the multiple repetitions of the words 'operator' and 'light(s)', reminiscent of expressionist theatre. *Power*'s opening scene forced the audience to respond quite emotionally, as almost everyone could identify with a mother's agony, a patient's dependency or a driver's accident. The repetition of the words 'operator' and 'light(s)', representing the characters' anguish, were delivered in a rhythmically monotonous manner, creating an almost hypnotic atmosphere. Although the scene did highlight the importance of electricity, it requested from the very beginning an emotional response on the audience's part.

The second scene examined historically the development of electricity by presenting on the stage the personas of William Gilbert, Michael Faraday, Georg Simon Ohm, Zenobe Gramme and Thomas Edison, all commenting on how their scientific developments would make life easier for people. This humanitarian discourse was then juxtaposed with that of businessmen and the stage was filled with the echoing sound of the words 'corporation', 'money', 'profits', 'investment' and 'thousands, millions, BILLIONS!'.¹²⁸ At the end of the scene, the audience's attention was focused on the enigmatic figure of the financier declaring that the establishment of one big corporation would economically benefit all businessmen and would dissolve any competition. Arent chose at this stage to explore the monopolising status of electricity that affected the audience economically through the new figure of the consumer. He saw the figures of the consumer and the Voice of the Living Newspaper as 'complementary, the former "creative", and the latter "technical" – the subjective response and the "collective consciousness" of inquiry'.¹²⁹ The consumer was initially

¹²⁷ Ibid., 1.1.4.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1.2.3.

¹²⁹ Goldman, Arnold. 'Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit', p. 77.

represented as confused, naïve and ignorant but meant to appear sympathetic to an audience that could easily identify with his plight. The consumer, under the constant watchful eye and assistance of the Voice that had assumed an educational role, began to understand what a kilowatt hour was, realised the absence of different competitive companies offering electricity and reached a level of awareness that required resistance to the existent monopoly.

Burke's positive symbol of the 'people', the unity and definition of a new 'we' was realised in the play when the consumer acquired a name, Mr Angus K. Buttonkooper. Although the name was reminiscent of a vaudevillian or Commedia dell'Arte character, the character of Mr. Buttonkooper was not developed psychologically, but rather remained a generic type of consumer, an identifiable representative of the audience present in the performance. He became 'one of us', one that could equally belong to the middle or working class and it was his compatibility with the 'us-we' that made his character accessible, believable and agreeable when he decided to act (Act 1, scene 11). Through this character, Arent wanted the audience to approach their life within their social roles, awaken their identity as citizens within a democracy and encourage their commitment to the social and economic issues confronting American society. However, unlike *Triple-A* in which the dramatization of the farmers' exploitation took the form of juxtaposing 'a series of confrontations between farmers (or urban workers) and middlemen', *Power* emphasised a series of duologues between the naïve consumer and the authorities.¹³⁰ *Triple-A*'s exposition of the problem involved not only one individual worker, but raised awareness of a series of affiliated local groups, thus requiring an active response from all and attempting to create an alternative public *topos* where social struggle and debates could materialize. In *Power*, the public agency was present, especially in most scenes of Act 2. However, the emphasis was not so much on the action taken by social groups but on the endorsement of New Deal policies, which faced resistance from hegemonic institutions such as the Supreme Court. The first act ended with the TVA song, sang ironically by workers, which championed the governmental effort. Although the play, as it is further down argued, ended with an endorsement of the New Deal plans one can see in the beginning of the play an initial scepticism towards the New Deal. Such a scepticism can be seen as a result of the slow but steady disappearance of the

¹³⁰ Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, p. 167.

workers as agents of social reform and of their substitution by the American government as the legitimate agent of social change.

All up and down the valley
They heard the glad alarm;
The government means business
It's working like a charm
Oh, see them boys a-comin',
Their government they trust,
Just hear their hammer ringin',
They'll build that dam or bust.¹³¹

The shift from socially motivated action to action proposed by the Democratic government's principles reinforced the presence of an already identifiable public sphere and prohibited its evolution as more polemical and class-based. This was further emphasised by the fact, that although the consumer became socially aware of the importance of electricity and took action (thus exemplifying the double sense of the play's title¹³²), the play ended with the government fighting the people's battle. Unlike *Injunction Granted*, which portrayed the government as a capitalist institution, little better than the industry or the courts, *Power* 'present[ed] the Roosevelt administration as the friend and champion of the people'.¹³³ The play does contain a social agenda but, by ending the play with governmental representatives arguing the case and the unanswered question 'WHAT WILL THE SUPREME COURT DO?', it seemed to rely on the government to deliver it and the court to legitimize it. A take on political action as something available to every citizen such as that proposed by *Injunction Granted* was still present in *Power*, but the degree of that participation was minimized and was, crucially, affiliated with the elected government.

This notable change in the Living Newspaper's narrative was attuned to the disillusionment of the public and the intellectuals alike (reminiscent of the one experienced by the New York Intellectuals as related in chapter 2) regarding the socialist discourse and communism, especially after the Moscow Trials and the rise of Stalinism. Recognizing the continual need for representation of social issues, it was soon realised that such a representation had to be conducted through a different narrative. The emphasis placed by Flanagan on the FTP's character as American in its

¹³¹ *Power*, 1. 15. 8.

¹³² Caroline Anne Highsaw has claimed that 'the Consumer's effort to understand electrical power leads to his conviction that his power belongs to the public. He then seeks to place more political, as well as electrical, power in the hands of the people', 'A theatre of action: The Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project'. (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 1988), p. 245.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

democratic attitudes signified the importance of a more liberal discourse, easily accessible to the consciousness of the American people and one that could translate the social angst of European political theatre into a more 'democratic' one. Within this revised discourse, propaganda acquired a more acceptable status. Speaking to the cast, just after the opening night of *Power*, Harry Hopkins declared

I want to tell you this is a great show. It's fast and funny, it makes you laugh and it makes you cry and it makes you think – I don't know what more anyone can ask of a show. *I want this play and plays like it done from one end of the country to the other.* ... People will say it's propaganda. Well, I say what of it? It's propaganda to educate the consumer who's paying for power. It's about time someone had some propaganda for him. The big power companies have spent millions on propaganda for the utilities. It's about time the consumer had a mouthpiece. I say more plays like *Power* and more power to you.¹³⁴

As commented, the play had abandoned the more militant narrative of the previous Living Newspapers. However, by adopting a more pro-New Deal attitude (at the same time questioning some of its policies) its propagandistic discourse became more acceptable from the WPA administration's point of view, since it served an educational purpose. The play's social edge was still present, but it could not be accused of adopting a narrative associated with an oppressive regime. If the play was propaganda, as Hopkins suggested, it was a kind of propaganda that could spring from a democratic country that allowed freedom of expression and had its people's best interest at heart. Unlike the negative criticism of *Triple-A* and *Injunction Granted*, the critics were less resistant to the democratic propaganda of *Power*. Ironically, Atkinson praised it as 'the most indignant and militant proletarian drama of the season ... staged with government funds', *Life* as 'WPA public ownership propaganda ... exciting and unique' and *The Nation* as 'a unique piece of art'.¹³⁵ The emphasis placed on the plight of the everyman that anyone could identify with, the endorsement of governmental policies that aimed to improve people's life and the experimentally scenic presentation of its theme made *Power* the first successfully accepted Living Newspaper, both for its theatrical experimentation and for its social agenda, although it was at the same time uncritically characterised as 'proletariat' by Atkinson. However, the performance also received negative criticism, particularly from Republican congressmen and representatives of a corporation that capitalised on

¹³⁴ Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 115. [italics my emphasis].

¹³⁵ Quoted in Mathews, *ibid.*, p. 114.

electricity. Thus the play not only served as a pro New Deal example but also as one of anti-Republican propaganda. Arent's new liberal narrative discourse was more compatible with Flanagan's aspirations for a dynamic and democratic American theatre and was further exploited in the production of *One-Third of a Nation*.

According to Flanagan, the idea of a new Living Newspaper dealing with the housing problem in New York started after the opening night of *Power* and was further developed during the Federal Theatre's Summer Theatre School (June 21 to July 31, 1937) at the Vassar Experimental Theatre, on the campus of Vassar College where Flanagan was once a drama lecturer. Forty authors, actors, dancers, designers and directors from Federal Theatre units in seventeen states gathered there and formed one collective group; they attended seminars, made costumes, built sets, took all the roles in the productions and critiqued the production or direction of the play. As Flanagan commented, the main function of the Summer Theatre was experimentation, especially since many people felt that the Federal Theatre had become complacent with its achievements and was reluctant to go beyond the techniques of *Triple-A* and *Injunction Granted*.¹³⁶ Within that environment and after six weeks of collaboration, discussion and rehearsals the group was ready to produce a play. Arent had only completed the first act of a Living Newspaper called *Housing* and the second was still in synopsis. He and Harold Bolton (the director) decided to stage it as a one-act play. There are conflicting views as to who proposed the new title, but the Living Newspaper was renamed *One-Third of a Nation*, taking its title from Roosevelt's second inaugural speech.¹³⁷

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished. It is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope – because the Nation seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out. We are determined to make every American citizen the subject of his country's interest and concern; and we will never regard any faithful law-abiding group within our borders as superfluous. The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Pierre de Rohan, *First Federal Summer Theatre ... A Report*. (New York: Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937), p. 1.

¹³⁷ According to Flanagan it was Pierre de Rohan, the editor of the *Federal Theatre* magazine, who suggested the title (*Arena*, p. 211), but Cosgrove has suggested that it was a collective decision ('The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form', p. 16).

¹³⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, 'Second Inaugural Address January 20, 1937'. *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States from George Washington 1789 to John F. Kennedy 1961*. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), pp. 240-243 (p. 243).

By appropriating a phrase from Roosevelt's speech, the Living Newspaper grew closer to the policies of the elected government in its representation of the slum housing conditions. In the New York production of the play this became more evident. The Federal Theatre Summer production, however, differed considerably in its scenic and directorial presentation.

Harold Bolton produced a plan of the production, after discussing it with Arent and Howard Bay (the stage designer) that used visual projections, episodic scenes and fragmented quotations from actual speeches and documents. He rejected the idea of a realistic set that would reproduce a tenement on stage and instead used a series of objects, such as pipes, trash cans, fire escape ladders, broken toilets and old beds, which were suspended from the ceiling, above the actors' heads. The use of these suspended objects signified how they overbore the



Figure 4. *One-Third of a Nation*. Federal Theatre's Summer Theatre School at Vassar Experimental Theatre, June 21 to July 31, 1937. Stage design by Howard Bay.

people's daily life and underlined the fact that they did not really have a home of their own. Bolton commented that by not employing a conventional setting, the group would

[...] attempt instead to stimulate the imaginations of our audience so that they can accept the play's premises and complete the syllogism in their own minds. The first step in this direction is to discard conventional scenery and props and substitute an 'objective background' equivalent to the subjective psychological material used by a surrealist painter. Each object in this background has a direct bearing on some phase of the play, and as each in turn is spotlighted, mental connotation will be established in the consciousness of the people.¹³⁹

Bolton viewed the whole production as an organic unit and wanted acting, lighting, stage movement, music and costume designing to be simple, explicit and direct and approach the play from the same perspective.¹⁴⁰ He also placed emphasis on the function of the Loudspeaker, whom he wanted to be more versatile (as a member of the cast, as the voice of the audience or by playing the role of an ominous Greek chorus unlike the 'wise-cracking prompter of *Power*'¹⁴¹) without, however, overshadowing the actors' performance. The play contained both naturalistic and stylized scenes and the absence of the properties of a realistic set proved challenging for the actors, who had to produce convincing performances. In the stylized scenes, Bolton advised them to 'register a complete scene with a few gestures, an intonation, a posture or a pause'.¹⁴² Lastly, he emphasised how the production needed to be a product of collective effort rather than individuality.

The anti-realistic staging of *One-third of a Nation* at Vassar – drawing the emphasis away from the physical structure of a tenement to which the 1938 New York production resorted – achieved its end result which, according to Howard Bay, was 'through the logical process of audience analysis, a compilation of inevitable objects that further the content of the play'.¹⁴³ The pilot Vassar production was not reviewed by the press, but for the positive review of *Variety* magazine. *Variety* approved of the 'frankly non-realistic and tremendously effective style of production' and thus ranked the play as equally effective, if not slightly better, than *Injunction Granted* and *Power*.¹⁴⁴ The stylized production also impressed Langdon Post, the

¹³⁹ Harold Bolton, 'Production Plan' in *First Federal Summer Theatre ... A Report*. Ed. Pierre de Rohan. (New York: Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937), pp. 16-19 (p. 18).

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18. He further commented on the same page that 'there is no place in this production for any department or individual to attract attention by unrelated novelty, or experimentation for experimentation's sake'.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁴³ Quoted in de Rohan, *First Federal Summer Theatre ... A Report*, p. 29.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Highsaw, 'A theatre of action: The Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project', p. 361.

chairman of the Municipal Housing Authority of New York who, according to Hallie Flanagan,

had often been impressed by the fact that when he talked about tenements and threw pictures on the screen, no one was impressed. 'The houses look large, and in America size means comfort'. Consequently he said that the sight of people moving as '1/3 of the Nation' actually does move, under the pressure of garbage cans and filthy walls and broken fire escapes gave a truer sense of reality than any number of tenements erected on the stage. [...] Langdon Post said last night, 'This play performed as it was tonight, can do more to convert people to proper housing than all the shouting I have done in the past three years'.¹⁴⁵

The effectiveness of Bolton's abstract staging of the play was particularly welcomed by members of regional theatres that could not afford the luxury of a complex realistic production; it also highlighted the ability of the audience to appreciate new theatrical modes of production and the importance of the absence of total emotional immersion on its part in the events staged. The emotional distancing proposed was reminiscent of Brecht's theory of the epic theatre but unlike Brecht (who used each scene and the elements within it to comment independently on each other) Bolton adopted an almost organic approach to the performance in which all the formal elements and scenes would comment on the play as a whole. By staging the 'very essence of the slums', Bolton succeeded in rejuvenating the desire for formal experimentation that the Living Newspaper seemed to have lost.¹⁴⁶ However, that success was short-lived; by the time *One-Third of a Nation* opened in New York, most of these areas of experimentation were replaced by a more realistic stage and style of acting.

By the time the play reached the New York stage, Arent had completed both acts. The opening night took place in the Adelphi Theatre on January 17, 1938 and as the curtains rose 'a set that was virtually a masterpiece of stage illusionism' was revealed.¹⁴⁷ Howard Bay again designed the set, but he opted for a more realistic design. He reproduced a four-storey dwelling from actual demolished tenements with narrow hallways, tiny rooms, exposed pipes and dangerous vertical fire escapes that was almost forty feet high and the cubicles functioned as parallel acting areas. The presence of these parallel acting areas created a montage effect, as the action – highlighted by spotlights – could move from one area to the other. This technique

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in de Rohan, *First Federal Summer Theatre ... A Report*, p. 36.

¹⁴⁶ Emmet Lavery, *The Flexible Stage: the sequel to Federal Theatre*. Unpublished manuscript found in the Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University Library, Fairfax Virginia, p. 46.

¹⁴⁷ Cosgrove, 'The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form', p. xvi.

became particularly effective in Act 1, scene 4 where a scenic representation of the devastation caused by cholera took place. They successively briefly lighted and then blacked out one cubicle after the other as each scene exposed people's desolation. The scene ended with the voice of the Loudspeaker announcing a factual account of the victims 'Twenty-five hundred men, women and children lost their lives before that cholera epidemic ended. Five thousand died in the previous one. This was the third time in twenty years that New York was visited by cholera'.¹⁴⁸ Because of this montage effect, Bay believed that this structure could serve as a more authentic reminder of the housing problem and, although realistic, thought it did not belong to the tradition of mature naturalistic drama. Bearing in mind Bolton's suggestions, all the elements in the New York production worked organically in this more realistic depiction of the issue. The costumes designed by Rhoda Rammelkamp differed from the simplicity of the ones used in the Vassar production; they were detailed and realistic, portraying characters from an extensive range of professions, classes and



Figure 5. *One-Third of a Nation*. Adelphi Theatre, New York January 17, 1938. Stage design by Howard Bay.

historical periods. Also, Lee Wainer's music score was complementary of the action taking place. As the play explored the issues surrounding housing conditions

¹⁴⁸ *One-Third of a Nation*, 1.4.50.

historically, from 1850 to the present moment, it also made good use of projections, showing slides and films of New York city during that time-span.

Where *Power* began with a power cut, *One-Third of a Nation* started (and ended) with a fire in the tenement. As the curtain rose, the audience observed the daily routine of the people living there until the voice of the Loudspeaker announced: 'February, 1924 – This might be 397 Madison Street, New York. It might be 425 Halsey Street, Brooklyn, or Jackson Avenue and 10th Street, Long Island City'.¹⁴⁹ As soon as that was heard, smoke appeared from the third floor. A crowd of onlookers had gathered but were unable to help. Panic arose among the tenants and a man, Mr. Rosen, attempted to enter the flaming building as his wife and daughter were inside, but was stopped. Then everybody's attention was drawn towards a man who, hanging twenty-five feet from the ground, attempted to use the fire escape but the ladder gave way, thus shutting off any means of escape. The first scene ended with screaming and the noise of the fire brigade's sirens and a cry of 'Look' directed towards the man still hanging but ready to jump in desperation. At that stage a tableau moment was created, as everybody became motionless and the scene was blacked out.

This introductory scene had a powerfully emotional effect on the audience that witnessed everything and were aghast. V. F. Calverton commented how it made 'the audience squirm and shudder', whereas John Mason Brown called it 'graphic and horrific'.¹⁵⁰ As the search for the causes of the fire began, it seemed that the only participant enquiring and bringing forward the action would be the voice of the Loudspeaker. But Arent again decided to use the generic figure of the 'little man', familiar to the audience from *Power*, Mr. Buttonkooper. Mr Buttonkooper was introduced in Act 1, scene 4, through the auditorium (much to the surprise of the audience), instantly demanding lights, attention and more information on the housing problem. The fact that Mr. Buttonkooper and later on, his wife, emerged from the audience again emphasised the importance of the audience's ability to relate to his character and acknowledge in him a potential mirror image of themselves and their conditioning. The enlightenment of Mr. Buttonkooper, the generic man, became the task of the Living Newspaper, especially after it had abandoned the representation of a class of workers. Thus it was through the relationship between the voice of the

¹⁴⁹ *One-Third of a Nation*, 1.1.37.

¹⁵⁰ V. F. Calverton, 'Cultural Barometer'. *Current History*. XLVIII. 4 (1938), 53-55 (p. 54); John Mason Brown, "'One-third of a Nation' At the Federal Theatre'. *New York Post*. 18 January 1938, p. 8.

Loudspeaker and Mr. Buttonkooper that the spectators became aware and involved in the housing problem. Similarly, the relationship between the audience and the Loudspeaker became one of student and teacher. The Loudspeaker was no longer the editorial or informative agent of previous Living Newspapers but, as in *Power*, became more instructive. In Act 2, scene 2, the Loudspeaker invites the little man to take a trip around New York in 1933, a trip that has already taken place in act 1.

LOUDSPEAKER: How about a trip around New York in 1933?

LITTLE MAN: Wait a minute, wouldn't that be sort of be repeating ourselves? We did that in the first act.

LOUDSPEAKER: Let's try it. You see, that's the whole point of this housing business. *It repeats itself*. It just goes on and on.

LITTLE MAN: Well, how are *you* going to stop it?

LOUDSPEAKER (correcting him): How are *we* going to stop it?¹⁵¹

The repetition of events and phrases was instrumental to the language and action of the play and had a double function. Firstly, since the play aimed to raise the spectators' awareness of the housing conditions and of the need for changes in the housing legislation, important points needed to be emphasised. In Act 1, scene 3, a number of prospective tenants bargained with the landowner one after the other for a place on the small green map that he had unrolled and the repetition of the phrase 'a man's got to have a place to live' reflected every man's human right to have a home when uttered by the tenants, but sounded ironic when uttered by the landowner. Similarly, in Act 2, scene 3, the audience was exposed to a stylised representation of the process the landowner had to go through to construct decent tenements. Going from builder to builder supplier, from one broker to another, from one contractor to another and each time being faced with a repetition of what the previous character had uttered, the audience was suddenly exposed to the complicated structures of a capitalist enterprise and its inherent absurdity. The second function of this repetition was to instigate protest on the audience's part. When, in the excerpt above, the Loudspeaker corrected the little man, turning the 'you' into a 'we', he immediately asserted the responsibility of the audience to participate in the social action taken to improve the living conditions. This all-encompassing 'we' – reminiscent of Burke's 'we the people' and the humanitarian liberal discourse – became symbolic, especially since the play incorporated scenes with people of different religions, nationalities (immigrants) and blacks.

¹⁵¹ *One-Third of a Nation*, 2.2.55. [italics my emphasis].

One-Third of a Nation ended with a repetition of the first fire scene, thus underlining that if the audience remained in ‘inertia’, the reoccurrence of such devastating events was inevitable.¹⁵² Both the introductory and last scenes, an amalgam of trapped and suffering humanity, were symbolic of the emotional tenor that Arent gave the subject. As Goldman had commented, Arent considered that *Power* explored his ‘sardonic’ side whereas *One-Third* explored his more ‘human’, empathetic side.¹⁵³ Arent’s comment can also be seen in conjunction with Harry Hopkins who claimed that ‘with the coming of the Roosevelt Administration, the emphasis of Government shifted from material to human values’.¹⁵⁴ The sense of humanity invested in the liberal New Deal rhetoric was shared by Arent and the FTP administration, hence the appropriation of Roosevelt’s speech. But what this liberal discourse entailed for the Living Newspaper, as a vehicle of social change and justice, was a turn from a socially based criticism to one based primarily on emotional response. Therefore, although the audience was still expected to demand social change, the play’s dramaturgical presentation of its theme anticipated the audience’s predominantly emotional reaction to what it had witnessed. Cosgrove rightly observed that the play’s critique of the slum conditions ‘sent a wave of moral indignation through depression America’ but, by emphasizing an empathetic response, the Living Newspaper abandoned its position as ‘the formal and political vanguard of the depression’.¹⁵⁵ If the earlier examples of Living Newspapers strove towards a more experimental and socially engaged presentation of social issues, aiming at informing the audience and also encouraging them to actively participate, causing controversy and receiving negative reviews in the process, what *One-Third of a Nation* succeeded in, through its more realistic depiction of the slums and the more emotionally engaged relationship it created with its audience, was in re-writing the previously used formal aesthetics and constituting them as parochial or ineffective. In this way, the subjectification of the house as a living ‘being’ (having acquired a voice) and its realistic depiction overwrote the power (and significance) of the people’s actual voices and rendered the critical presentation of social issues through such voices as ineffective.

¹⁵² *One-Third of a Nation*, 2.5. 67.

¹⁵³ Goldman, ‘Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit’, p. 76.

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in de Rohan, *First Federal Summer Theatre ... A Report*, p. 35.

¹⁵⁵ Cosgrove, ‘The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form’, p. xvi.

The emotional reaction sought by the audience compromised its critical approach to the subject and invested more power to the New Deal policies with a social agenda. Those were the implications of Act 2, scene 1, for example, which began and ended with the old tenement speaking directly to the audience. It was to the same effect that firstly Mrs Buttonkooper made a passing reference to Roosevelt's speech and later on the Loudspeaker pronounced in Act 2, scene 3

LOUDSPEAKER: We can't let people walk out of this theatre knowing the disease is there, but believing there's no cure. There is a cure! [...] if you can't build cheap houses – and you've just proved you can't – then let somebody do it who can – and I mean the United States Government – for instance.¹⁵⁶

Following the Aristotelian dramatic principle, Arent presented the American government as a *deus ex machina* that would enforce order and justice. What *One-Third* proposed more clearly than *Power* was that if social change was to come, it would only be possible via the elected government. In a democratic state, the people's power lay in their vote and trust in the government they had elected, rather than in their own political or social agenda. The legitimate social public agency that *Injunction Granted* proposed was challenged by Arent's script. From an autonomous and experimental form, the Living Newspaper's last production showed signs of conformity and, rather than suggesting public ownership and planning as a cure, it proposed another ineffective legislation change.

The play was enthusiastically received by most critics, especially for its use of a realistic set. Flanagan called it 'the most mature and objective of the Living Newspapers'; Atkinson called it 'the most sensational story on the New York stage at the moment'; Richard Watts found it 'invariably forceful and striking' and John Mason Brown wrote that 'seeing *One-Third of a Nation* is something which becomes every good citizen's Duty'.¹⁵⁷ Others found it 'a representation and a symbol of all slum tenements in which life is degraded', 'masterly and eloquent', thought of the fire scene as 'a real triumph of imaginative realism' and 'so realistic, so terrifying [that] it almost sears the spectators'.¹⁵⁸ Whereas the same critics had fiercely attacked

¹⁵⁶ *One-Third of a Nation*, 2.3.63.

¹⁵⁷ Flanagan, 'Introduction'. *Federal Theatre Plays: Prologue to Glory, One-Third of a Nation, Haiti*, p. 4; Atkinson quoted in Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 169; Richard Watts quoted in Kruger, *The National Stage*, p. 233 [footnote 100]; Brown, "'One-third of a Nation' At the Federal Theatre", p. 8.

¹⁵⁸ Lockridge, Anderson, Krutch as quoted in Highsaw 'A theatre of action: The Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project', pp. 367-8 [footnotes 60, 62, 63].

Injunction Granted, not simply for its politics but for its artistic experimentations (calling it ‘hysterical’, ‘ineffective and anticlimactic’¹⁵⁹), they felt comfortable embracing the less agitational and theatrically inventive performance of *One-Third of a Nation*. However, Mary McCarthy, reviewing this production, commented that it exposed ‘a relaxation of standards, a suspension of effort, an aesthetic fatigue’.¹⁶⁰ She went on to criticise the more personalised, stylized and realistic approach (comparing it to David Belasco, a playwright, director and producer, who was responsible for bringing to the American stage new standards of realistically depicting sets and using props), the false illustration of infinite possibilities for self-improvement available under the American system of government, its transformation from an experiment to an institution and its inability to evoke anything other than an emotional response from the audience. She also accused it of being ‘the adjunct of an Administration which has exhausted its political resources, itself becoming superannuated’.¹⁶¹ McCarthy’s criticism becomes justified, especially when seen in relation to the fact that the play attempted to incorporate two audiences: the low-class tenants and the middle-class owners. By representing on stage the problems that each of them faced, the play attempted to generate an understanding between the classes and thus erase the manifestation of social struggle as they knew it. The owners/middle class were no longer part of the problem as such, since their attempt to provide good housing was hindered by the capitalist enterprise and not themselves. Providing the middle class as an ally (and thus appropriating Burke’s views), the Living Newspaper stood between its tradition of subversion and social criticism and its status as an American institution.

The canonical status of this Living Newspaper (which is the one most often quoted and discussed within all the existing bibliography concerning the Federal Theatre Project and the Living Newspaper unit and was also turned into a Hollywood film in 1939) was, as mentioned earlier, reinforced by its sole authorship. Apart from the collaborative effort that characterised previous Living Newspapers productions, the presence of a single author reinstated the ‘dramaturgy of pathos’.¹⁶² Arent’s creative impetus could no longer rest on the more abstract representation of events. As he commented when writing *One-Third of a Nation*

¹⁵⁹ As quoted in Kruger, *The National Stage*, p. 232 [footnote 97].

¹⁶⁰ Mary McCarthy, ‘The Federal Theatre Settles Down’. *Partisan Review*, 4.6 (1938), 43-47 (p. 43).

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43, pp. 45-47.

¹⁶² Kruger, *The National Stage*, p. 168.

[...] the human element was missing. The statements and statistics are flat. We have made no use of the theatre. The next step, then, is the *creative scene*, based on slum conditions as we know them to exist, where instead of one-dimensional characters, speaking the unattractive patois of the politician, we have a man expressing himself in the *warm speech and theatric idiom of a humanity undeterred by the hopelessness of being immortalised in the Congressional Record*. This character represents the one-third of the nation. He is the audience's *identification*, the bridge that leads to an understanding in human terms of the subject of the debate. And the proof of his being is the debate itself.¹⁶³

The emphasis on the representation of the universal concept of humanity becomes problematic, as it obscures a larger understanding of social conditioning by drawing constant reference to the empathetic and emotional identification of the audience with the character. It thus minimises the critical intervention of the 'flat statements' and the representation of social struggle for justice. Arent's belief in the emotive potential of the human plight did not allow the audience to create a critical distance and the use of the alienation technique that was present in previous productions, was eliminated. By disapproving of the representation of social characters as one-dimensional and thus less human, Arent excluded them from his play, thus reducing the amount of social situations author-ized for representation (as opposed to *Injunction Granted* and *Triple-A Plowed Under*). This new aesthetic approach and moral attitude reduced the amount of effective social criticism and rather portrayed the audience as the recipient of its benevolent elected government. Such an attitude was suggested by Roosevelt himself, who in his second inaugural speech affirmed that the 'democratic government has *innate* ability to protect its people against disasters once considered inevitable'.¹⁶⁴ The democratic government's inherent (even 'natural') ability to manage such social and economic issues was meant to reassure the public of the government's policies and at the same time to dissuade the public from adopting a more agitational and revolutionary social praxis that ran the danger of being identified with the now totalitarian Stalinist regime. As Hopkins adamantly believed, with the coming of the Roosevelt administration, 'the emphasis of government shifted from material to human values', thus making the Enlightenment's humanitarian project clearly visible within American democracy.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Arent, 'The Techniques of the Living Newspaper', pp. 57-58 [italics my emphasis].

¹⁶⁴ Roosevelt, 'Second Inaugural Address January 20, 1937', p. 240 [italics my emphasis].

¹⁶⁵ Quoted by Flanagan in de Rohan, *First Federal Summer Theatre ... A Report*, p. 35.

The government's 'natural' ability to provide for the American people became apparent in the structure of *One-Third of a Nation*. After all, the play did not pursue the landowners' responsibilities, apart from showing that they owned the land, and they were completely absent from the second act. The play also suggests that individuals were to be blamed, not the capitalism system as such, and the portrayal of the dangers of slum life again placed the emphasis on the victims, 'rather than those who profit from it'.¹⁶⁶ All these factors helped to reinforce the image of the government as a social agent. Such an approach was further emphasised when Mrs. Buttonkooper, at the end of the play, specified among the people that would 'holler' for decent housing conditions 'you and me and La Guardia and Senator Wagner and the Housing Authorities and the Tenant Leagues and everybody who lives in a place like that!', thus including with the people and their organizations, the mayor of New York, a senator and the representative authorities that forwarded New Deal policies.¹⁶⁷ Undoubtedly, the play's end exposed the insufficiency of governmental agency; at the same time it undermined the audience's agency by suggesting throughout the action a participatory, rather than an acutely critical (perhaps even agitational), attitude within the democratic system.

One-Third of a Nation became the most successful Living Newspaper production, not simply because it ran for 237 performances in New York, but also because its subject matter was suitable for regional adaptations. Most of the regional projects attempted to localize the play by modifying its script to incorporate information about local housing conditions; such productions included Seattle, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Pennsylvania. The fact that the Living Newspaper had finally managed to acquire a nationwide reputation and production by its local divisions manifested Flanagan's ambition of turning the Federal Theatre Project into a national theatre and reinforced her opinion that 'the theatre, when it is any good, can change things'.¹⁶⁸ However, the dramatic change of its politics of aesthetic representation – from displaying a more critical approach to American society's social and economic problems and the governmental agency, into incorporating a more empathetic style of the problems' representation and a pro-New Deal discourse – revealed that the Federal Theatre, in its process of becoming a national agency of

¹⁶⁶ Kruger, *The National Stage*, p. 171.

¹⁶⁷ *One-Third of a Nation*, 2.5.68.

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in de Rohan, *First Federal Summer Theatre ... A Report*, p. 36.

expression, had a tendency to legitimize itself. Flanagan's wish to create an alternative theatrical *topos* that would offer a voice to the underrepresented classes and question more openly the issues that Broadway ignored seemed to be in direct conflict with her ambition to turn it into a national theatre.

The change in the Living Newspaper's dramaturgy eroded the formal 'dialectic between abstract and concrete' and thus legitimized a certain aesthetics of representation and certain audience's perceptions over others.¹⁶⁹ That led to the establishment of *One-Third of a Nation* as the paradigm of the Living Newspaper style production. That essential style disapproved of the more experimental and sometimes politically offensive satire of *Injunction Granted* and turned its back on the inheritance of the workers' theatre of the 1920s and early 1930s. Through that style, the legitimization of a certain audience's struggle took place. The struggle for social justice of the anonymous workers, farmers and unemployed that filled the stage and the pages of *Altars of Steel*, *Triple-A Plowed Under*, *Injunction Granted* and *Dirt*, to name but a few, was replaced by the private suffering of unknown individuals. It was no longer the 'history and social facts' of the problem that mattered, but the 'graphic and personal' depiction of the effects of the problem on an individual that could have been anyone from the audience, anyone who could potentially belong to that one-third of the American nation.¹⁷⁰ By relying mostly on the audience's emotional rather than critical response to the Marys, Sammys or Joes' plight, *One-Third of a Nation* diverted its audience's attention away from the militant unionism of *Injunction Granted* (excluding it from the legitimate public sphere) and closer to the more democratic and humanitarian discourse of the liberal New Deal government.

One-third of a Nation remains an important text and production within the history of the Living Newspaper and the Federal Theatre, both for its merits and shortcomings. It was a production almost unanimously accepted by all social and political groups. The main opposition to the play came from members of the Senate, as some of them took offence to the fact that they were included in its cast of characters, especially as scene 4 of Act 2 presented a dramatisation of the Senate debate over the Wagner-Steagall Housing Bill. Senators Harry Byrd, Millard Tydings and Charles O. Andrews felt that, although not misquoted, their presence after 'scenes portraying the evils and miseries of slum life, were fitted in so as to make them

¹⁶⁹ Mary McCarthy, *Sights and Spectacles*. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy. 1956), p. 28.

¹⁷⁰ Atkinson as quoted in Kruger, *The National Stage*, p. 182.

villains by implication'.¹⁷¹ They further argued that what the audience heard was a collage of different views they expressed during the session. What the Senators' complaint highlighted was the problematics of using such material in a dramatic production, especially by a theatre operating on federal funds. For Flanagan, the critically acclaimed success of *One-Third of a Nation* proved the power theatre had as a means of reform. She commented that 'giving apoplexy to people who consider it radical for a government-sponsored theatre to produce plays on subjects vitally concerning the governed is one function of the theatre'.¹⁷² Although she was confident the play did not ridicule or satirize any senators, their reaction signified, firstly, their growing dissatisfaction with certain New Deal policies and, secondly, their rejection of a federal theatre as a valuable means of education, information and social change. By locating itself politically so close to the government, the Federal Theatre could not escape the inquisitive eye of the Dies committee.

IV. A Theatre Dies: The political prosecution of the Federal Theatre Project.

From the very beginning, the Federal Theatre Project was attacked from several quarters. Firstly, it was the only WPA division that was headed by a woman; secondly, Broadway reacted to Flanagan's appointment as she did not represent the commercial theatre and feared that the poor quality of the FTP productions would 'saturate New York'¹⁷³; lastly, many Congressmen believed that the investment of money on theatre was a waste of valuable funds and that artists should not be a matter of government concern. Flanagan attempted to diffuse all these arguments by stating that the Federal Theatre would not compete with Broadway, as it would 'supplement our already existing splendid New York stage' by offering a repertoire of different subject matters and techniques.¹⁷⁴ To those Congressmen that criticized the idea of a governmentally subsidized American theatre, she replied

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 173.

¹⁷² Flanagan, 'Theatre and Geography', p. 464.

¹⁷³ Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 248.

¹⁷⁴ Flanagan, 'Federal Theatre Project', p. 865; The FTP and the League of New York Theatres reached an agreement which allowed the FTP to operate 'in the city only outside the area bounded by 40th Street on the south, 52nd Street on the north, and Hudson and Easter Rivers'. See Goldstein, *The Political Stage*, p. 248.

Art in a democracy cannot be regarded as a luxury. It is a necessity because in order to make democracy work, the people must increasingly participate [...] Art is of little value in a democracy as long as it remains an esoteric cult appreciated only by the few. It must increasingly be appreciated by many, and thus eventually become the strong rhythmic and natural expression of the free life of a free people.¹⁷⁵

Flanagan's comment expressed similar aspirations for the status of art to those of Meyerhold and the Blue Blouses; all three wished for art to become accessible to all people, increase the people's participation and represent their conditioning. For Flanagan, however, art could only accomplish this function through democracy (rather than through a revolutionary and ultimately communist regime), thus indicating the liberal cultural democracy of the New Deal as the only legitimately apposite *topos* for an effective artistic appropriation.

At the same time, many artists and intellectuals expressed reservations that the productions of the Federal Theatre would be constantly censored, since it was subsidized completely by the American government. In response to this remark Harry Hopkins commented 'I am asked whether a theatre subsidized by the government can be kept free from censorship, and I say, yes, it is going to be kept free from censorship. What we want is a free, adult, uncensored theatre'.¹⁷⁶ Flanagan's emphasis on the 'democratic' right of the people to participate actively in the artistic developments and Hopkins' adamant belief that the American government would not censor any productions silenced, for at least the first six months of the project, both the political opposition and those sceptical artists.

However, by 1938 the political climate in the United States was changing and this in turn influenced the position of many intellectuals as seen in chapter 2. The early 1930s had witnessed the rising popularity of the American Communist Party, the extensive circulation of proletarian literature and the intellectual affiliation with Marxism that seemed to threaten the hegemonic power of liberalism. Both Republicans and Democrats were suspicious of the increasing influence of Marxism and communism and felt that they had to prevent their threatening propaganda from expanding any further. To their aid came the Moscow Trials that re-affirmed their suspicions of Stalin's totalitarian regime and dissolved the intellectuals and public's

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in Alan Kreizenbeck, 'The theatre nobody knows: forgotten productions of the Federal Theatre Project 1935-1939'. (Unpublished PhD dissertation, N.Y.U., Graduate School of Arts and Science, 1979), p. 59.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Flanagan, *Arena*, p. 28.

faith in the communist system as a valid alternative to capitalism. At the same time, Europe was experiencing a growing expansion of Nazism that seemed to have reached America as well. Nazism and Communism became the two major threats for American democracy, especially after the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression pact. America reacted by establishing a special committee for the investigation of un-American propaganda activities on its soil, chaired by the Republican Senator Martin Dies. The Dies committee, from which the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was developed, was appointed

to investigate (1) the extent, character, and objects of Un-American propaganda activities in the United States (2) the fusion within the United States of subversive and Un-American propaganda that is instigated by foreign countries or of a domestic origin and attacks the principle of the form of government as guaranteed by our constitution, and (3) all other questions in relation thereto that would aid congress in any necessary remedial legislation.¹⁷⁷

The committee's work was supposed to concentrate mostly on the German American participation in Nazi and Ku Klux Klan activities within the United States. The committee soon abandoned its investigation of the KKK and instead, as the emphasis laid on the word 'propaganda' in the above manifesto exposed, extended its investigation to the American Communist party. The committee believed, judging from the Living Newspaper productions, that the party had infiltrated the WPA and particularly the Federal Theatre Project.¹⁷⁸

Before the committee actually met in 1938, Senator Parnell Thomas announced that 'it is apparent from the startling evidence received so far that the Federal Theatre Project not only is serving as a branch of the communist organization but is also one more link in the vast and unparalleled New Deal propaganda machine'.¹⁷⁹ The decision to concentrate on the Federal Theatre instead of the other divisions was based on the fact that it had managed to present its productions before a mass audience, and in doing so, had deviated from the aesthetic canon of 'Americanism' and had thus caused a cultural heresy.¹⁸⁰ And it was the Living

¹⁷⁷ *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*, (Washington: Government Printing office, 1938), p. 8.

¹⁷⁸ For a more detailed analysis of all the hearings see Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, pp. 198-235.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁸⁰ Rabkin has commented how 'the ostensible reason for the denial of funds for the Arts projects was economy, but this reason is belied by several facts: all the Arts projects used less than three-fourths of one per cent of the total WPA appropriation, and the appropriation *was not cut one cent* by the

Newspaper productions of the unit, representing though a mere 10% of the overall productions, that caused such reactions from the more conservative politicians of both parties. The reasons for the political prosecution of the project then were the Living Newspaper's social and political agenda and their overt support of the New Deal policies that many senators were opposed to. The individuals invited to testify against the project criticised the productions not for their aesthetic experimentations as such (form) but for their propagandistic nature (content), which they saw as greatly influenced by Flanagan's trip to Russia and the political affiliations of its members with communism and liberalism.

The project had become accustomed to rebuffing charges of communism from different veteran groups of actors and from conservatives at both ends of the political spectrum since its beginning. However, the charges brought over by the committee deeply shocked Flanagan, who remarked in response to Thomas' charges that 'some of the statements reported to have been made by him are obviously absurd'.¹⁸¹ At the same time, however, she realised that such accusations coming from a member of the HUAC could not be discarded easily and she expected that she would be subpoenaed; her offer to testify on August 11, 1938, was rejected by Dies due to the demanding schedule of witnesses. Although Dies had claimed that 'we shall be fair and impartial at all times and treat every witness with fairness and courtesy' his initial refusal to allow Flanagan to testify demonstrated that the committee did not intend to keep an impartial stance.¹⁸² This attitude was further underlined by the committee's refusal to take into consideration the credentials and generalizations of most witnesses, such as Hazel Huffman, Francis M. Verdi or Seymour Revzin (Huffman's husband), so long as they produced 'proof' of un-American, communist activities within the Federal Theatre.¹⁸³

Flanagan was dissuaded by WPA officials to reply directly or indirectly to the red-baiting accusations and by the time she was finally subpoenaed on December 8, 1938 most New York newspapers had turned against the project and were already accusing it of 'doing more to spread Communist propaganda than the Communist

termination of the Federal Theatre; the money was simply distributed among other WPA projects'. *Drama and Commitment*, p. 121.

¹⁸¹ Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 199.

¹⁸² From *Martin Dies' Story* as quoted in Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason: excerpts from hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*. (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. xvii.

¹⁸³ Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: plays, relief and politics*, p. 201.

Party itself".¹⁸⁴ During her testimony, Flanagan was questioned about her trip to Russia, her book *Shifting Scenes* and why she returned to Russia in 1931, her articles in *Theatre Arts Monthly* on Russian theatre and the American workers' theatre; she was also asked about supposed dissemination of communist propaganda through such plays as *The Revolt of the Beavers*, *Injunction Granted* and the appearance of Earl Browder in *Triple-A Plowed Under*. Throughout the session she responded to all questions and accusations with facts, reports and records. It was during her examination by Senator Starnes that the now infamous episode took place.

Mr. Starnes: [reading from her *Theatre Arts Monthly* article]: Unlike any art form existing in America today, the workers' theatres intend to shape the life of this country, socially, politically, and industrially. They intend to remake a social structure without the help of money – and this ambition alone invests their undertaking with a certain Marlowesque madness. You are quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?

Mrs. Flanagan: I am very sorry. I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe.

Mr. Starnes: Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get the proper reference, because that is all we want to do.

Mrs. Flanagan: Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakespeare, immediately preceding Shakespeare.¹⁸⁵

However, it was during her examination by Dies that the opposition to the project on political rather than aesthetic grounds was unambiguously revealed and exposed the desire to represent certain modes of artistic expression as 'American' and others as 'un-American'.

Chm. Dies: Do you think that the Federal Theater should be used for the one purpose of conveying ideas along social, economic, or political lines?

Mrs. Flanagan: I would hesitate on the political.

Chm. Dies: Eliminate political. Upon social and economic lines.

Mrs. Flanagan: I think it is one logical, reasonable, and I might say imperative thing for our theater to do.

Chm. Dies: And for educational purposes, is that right?

Mrs. Flanagan: Yes. [...]

Chm. Dies: You think it is entirely proper that the Federal Theater produces plays for the purpose of bringing out some social idea that is a heated issue at a particular time?

Mrs. Flanagan: It is one of the things that the theater can do. [...]

Chm. Dies: Do you not also think that since the Federal Theater Project is an agency of the Government and that all of our people support it through their tax money, people of different classes, different races, different religions, some who are workers, some who are businessmen, don't you think that no play should ever be produced which undertakes to portray the interests of one class to the disadvantage of another class, even though

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁸⁵ Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason*, p. 25.

that might be accurate, even though factually there may be justification normally for that, yet because of the very fact that we are using taxpayers' money to produce plays, do you not think it is questionable whether it is right to produce plays that are biased in favour of one class against another?

Mrs. Flanagan: I think we strive for objectivity, but I think the whole history of the theater would indicate that any dramatist holds a passionate brief for the things he is saying.¹⁸⁶

Flanagan's testimony was never completed as she was dismissed just after 1:15 pm and she was not allowed to make a final statement. However, her answers in front of the committee pronounced the need for a theatre that would embody a social function and comment on all aspects of life that affected most people hardly represented or heard. But for Dies and the committee such a theatre represented a threat, not simply to its established political power, but to the symbolic significance of public and governmental patronage and to the democratic cultural standards that produced art embodying a purely 'American' perspective. The new aesthetic values that the Living Newspaper appropriated from its Russian predecessors challenged the traditional views on what American art should present and at the same time re-addressed the balance between theatrical formal experimentation and a politically and socially affiliated ideological discourse. Therefore, it was possible within the American theatre for a modern play to exist that acknowledged the importance of new formal devices (such as use of projections, songs, quotations and statistics) and that importance was also reflected in its socially articulated content. In this way, the play not only exposed social issues to its audience but allowed it itself to participate in the dramatic argument acted and critically renegotiate such issues. However, this new aesthetic worldview was deemed 'un-American' as both the political arena and the Broadway theatrical world reacted against any political theatrical creation. Because of the Dies committee, the American artistic and intellectual world were faced with a scheme that opposed social commentary on representational art (as it ran the danger of being wholly identified with communism) and one that accepted or rejected new creations or the artistic prominence of any new movement in art according to the artist's political affiliations. At the same time it was also 'un-American' because, although it was making use of the taxpayers' money, the Federal Theatre rejected the norms of performance established by the legitimate theatre by combining high and popular genres, mixing the audiences, abolishing expensive sets and by refusing to use star

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 34,36.

actors. As it did not use propaganda to put forward the already recognized 'American values', the project was deemed unprofessional and dangerous.¹⁸⁷

Many intellectuals, artists and officials of the project attempted to defuse the image of the Federal Theatre as a 'hot bed' for communism, especially since Flanagan was not allowed to reply to criticism. It was within these circumstances that Arent raised the Living Newspaper to an example of an all-American experiment. Rebuffing any connection with the Russian Living Newspaper he claimed

I don't know where the Living Newspaper began. [...] As a matter of fact, it was only about a year ago that I learned there had been anything like a Living Newspaper before ours. [...] These events certainly took place [he mentions the experiments in Russia, Vassar College, the Political Cabarets of the Left Bank and Chu Teh's propaganda division in China]. Everybody knows so. But, and here's the point, I never seem able to locate anybody who saw one. Nor have I ever seen the script of any such production. And so, while admitting the possibility of a whole avalanche of predecessors, I deny their influence and, for the balance of this article at least, that will be that.¹⁸⁸

Even such bold declarations could not undo the infamy and the hostility against the project that the Dies committee had instigated. The Federal Theatre was killed by an act of Congress on June 30, 1939, almost four years after its beginning. Although many critics cited its inability to reconcile its commitment to its relief status with its commitment to an autonomous and socially viable theatre, one needs to reflect on the politically artistic void it ventured to fill.¹⁸⁹ The Federal Theatre Project never attempted to create a 'revolutionary' theatre like Meyerhold's, but rather aimed at a more 'democratised' version that could be applied within American society. It wished to break the monopoly of the socially detached commercial theatre and present a different theatrical alternative with a social and political agenda. However, such aspirations aimed at forming a new perception of the theatre as an autonomous sphere willing to conduct cultural critique and social representation and as such, it presented a threat to the liberal and conservative political establishment. Although from different political spectrums, the Federal Theatre, Meyerhold and the Blue Blouses fell victims of their regime's unwillingness to accept the new function of theatre that these artists envisioned. All three projects, striving to create a kind of art accessible to the people and one that would respond artistically and socially to a changing world,

¹⁸⁷ Congressman Starnes in Bentley, *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸⁸ Arent, 'The Techniques of the Living Newspaper', p. 57.

¹⁸⁹ See Rabkin and Isaacs (as quoted in Zimmerman, *The Federal Theatre: An evaluation and comparison with foreign national theatres*, p. 146).

were caught up in the web of political interests. The new theatre they were creating was challenged by their utopian belief that the state would allow the cultural revolution to move forward and engage the people more critically with the reality around them.

The political prosecution of the Federal Theatre, the advent of McCarthyism and the growing intellectual distrust of Marxism and the American Communist Party resulted in a decline of intellectual vitality and in the reclamation of a more conservative, still liberal, ideological discourse. Newton Arvin claimed in 1936 that

we maintain that the real meaning of the American social and cultural adventure has been its democratic meaning, and that one of the truest things to be said of American literature is that it has reflected over a period of three centuries, the gradual maturing, rationalization, and deepening of the democratic idea.¹⁹⁰

What Arvin and his fellow New York Intellectuals suggested was the intrinsic link between American culture and liberal democracy. Determining this relationship's lifespan to cover at least three centuries, he underlined the interdependency of the two and the need for a discourse that would include both. Democracy was (and still is) relevant within American culture and, as Fishman asserted, 'so far as literature participates in the life of society, American literature cannot have failed to be marked by democracy'.¹⁹¹ In the two decades that followed the cessation of the FTP, American society experienced the intellectual world's effort to reaffirm this strong relationship between art and liberal democracy as a way of rectifying their previous ideological association with Marxism and in order to enrich and preserve liberalism as a viable American ideology that would engage with the social and political complexities that their country was facing. As the world was experiencing the growing menace of Nazi Germany, the American intellectual did not want to remain associated with the social commitment of Marxism that s/he saw as another form of totalitarianism. The discourse of liberal democracy infiltrated all aspects of social, economic and political life and the artistic world had to abide by it, as nobody wished to be labelled as 'un-American' in the midst of the ideological Cold War. The Federal Theatre's prosecution was still vivid in the artistic world's mind, but whatever his/her previous or current political commitments the artist felt compelled to commit to liberalism. The autonomous and socially active theatre that Flanagan aspired to create

¹⁹⁰ Quoted in Solomon Fishman, *The Disinherited of Art*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953), p. 148.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

would not have been allowed to continue its work within such an environment. The government continued to subsidize art and the film industry that echoed its liberal policies; however, the main thematic interest was no longer social equality and justice, but an embrace of 'Americanism' and the creation of a united front against the new ideological enemy. As a result, the intellectual and artistic world soon abandoned its commitment to a socially enthused agenda and embraced the political fortification of art in the name of liberalism.

Chapter Four

‘Nothing is more important than learning to think crudely. Crude thinking is the thinking of great men.’ (Brecht). Ugliness, knowledge and commitment in Brecht’s materialist aesthetic dramaturgy.

I. Negotiating political commitment and engagement in Europe and the USA.

As I wish to demonstrate with this transatlantic study, political commitment and the aesthetics of commitment were negotiated differently between the intellectuals of both continents. The European intellectual would more eagerly consider Marxism not simply as a positive ‘but a critical science’ that could represent the views and ideology of the class oppressed by the bourgeois society and, at the same time, study and investigate ‘the tendencies visible in the present development of society, and the way to its imminent practical transformation’.¹ On the other hand, the American intellectual was more reluctant to consider Marxism as a viable ideology through which s/he could deliberate any impending social and political issues. Despite such discrepancies, at the beginning of the twentieth century the European intellectual and artist were fascinated by the notion of ‘Americana’, as it represented a new space where technological advancements would unfold the class struggle and thus lead to a revolution of magnitude. However, such utopian aspirations were soon dispelled, especially after the realisation that the notion of exceptionalism was deeply ingrained in the American people and its intellectuals.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s publication of *Democracy in America* and the coinage of the term ‘American exceptionalism’ in 1831 marked the establishment of the perception of the United States as a uniquely ideologically, politically, historically and economically diverse nation, especially as compared to the contemporary European nations. As Lipset has commented, the notion of ‘exceptionalism’ was based on the United States’ qualitative difference to other nations, represented by the five values endorsed by the new state: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire.² These five values constituted the ‘new’ ideology of a newly

¹ Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx*. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1938), pp. 64-65.

² Seymour Martin Lipset, *American exceptionalism: A double-edged sword*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 18. As I deem it outside the scope of this thesis, I will not analyse the importance and influence of Puritanism on the social, political and economic aspects of American

independent state but also exposed ‘America [as] the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed’.³ The ideological disposition of American exceptionalism generated a sense of identity for the new state that was not grounded on a sense of common history and community, but rather in the ideological commitment of being ‘American’.

American exceptionalism and Americanism may be considered to belong to a list of ‘isms’ or ideologies, such as communism, fascism, Stalinism or liberalism that have been endowed with utopian aspirations, thus acquiring a mythological aura. However, in the case of Americanism, these aspirations shaped the national character and reinforced the mythology surrounding the unique status of the USA within the world. ‘America’, the product of the Enlightenment and reason, was a new, unspoiled continent, unrestrained by the myths, tyranny and superstition that had corrupted the Old World, embodying a new set of social, political and economic values for the human subject. This mythology became an integral part of American identity and was endorsed in people’s daily lives. Within the ideology of American exceptionalism the democratic values that the American constitution authorized, the paradigm that equated democracy with liberalism and the emphasis on the value of humanity formed a social order that felt secure and inspired confidence in the unique place that the USA held in the world structure.

Against this ideological background, the idea of ‘America’ as the space for re-inscription, re-invention and re-signification became prominent among both European and American intellectuals and writers of the 1920s and 1930s. Among them Bertolt Brecht, whose fascination with Americana was demonstrated in such plays as *In the Jungle of Cities*, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, *St Joan of the Stockyards* and *The Lindbergh Flight/ The Flight Over the Ocean*.⁴ However, Brecht soon became disenchanted with the USA, especially after both his American experiences, discussed in the following pages, revealed how differently the American literati and intelligentsia had re-written the European Marxist tradition of political engagement and commitment. Within the European Marxist intellectual tradition the issues of political engagement and commitment were heavily discussed as exemplified by the

exceptionalism. For more information and quite a detailed discussion from a neoconservative perspective see Lipset.

³ Chesterton as quoted in Lipset, *ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴ For an in-depth discussion of Brecht’s ‘American’ plays and their connections with the Anglo-American literary tradition see John Willett, *Brecht in Context: Comparative approaches*. (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), pp. 21-58.

debate involving Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno presented in chapter one. For the intellectual the issues of political engagement and commitment did not merely signify the unarguable acceptance of an ideological doctrine, but also a constant questioning of their social and political significance or merit. The Marxist ideology offered the intellectual a new understanding of the workings of a society and more importantly of the essential status of culture and art within it or, as Macherey and Balibar commented, of ‘the objective status of literature as an historical-ideological form’.⁵ For most American intellectuals, as represented by the New York Intellectuals considered in chapter two, any new ideological structures (such as Marxism) had to be considered in conjunction with the tradition of political and cultural liberalism. Such an approach though proved detrimental for any critical consideration of Marxism, as it was soon revealed that the Intellectuals’ primary focus was the restoration and strengthening of the cultural powers of liberalism. As a result, the Marxist ideology was reduced to a stagnant and politically threatening entity (as it was equated with Stalinist politics) and a critical consideration of the politics of engagement through Marxism was deemed polarised, misleading, dangerous and ‘leftist’. Within the American context, the intellectual was elevated to a persona that avoided the didacticism of leftist politics and possessed such a literary sensibility that allowed him/her to offer an independent social and cultural outlook. Therefore, whereas the European intellectual more rigorously negotiated the influence of all socio-political changes and attempted to beget new artistic forms, the American intellectual preferred to accommodate such changes to the cultural politics of liberalism. And whereas it had been the European intellectual’s artistic commitment that had been accused of a parochial and rigid adherence to leftist politics and ideology, it seems that the American intellectual exhibited a more dormant attitude towards socio-political changes manifested in their intellectual prejudice in favour of liberal politics.

It was within the historical, ideological and dialectical materialist discourse of the European intellectual environment that Brecht formulated his own thoughts on engagement and commitment in relation to his theatrical practice and theory.⁶ Brecht’s theatrical experimentation and rebellion against traditional theatrical

⁵ Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar, ‘Literature as an Ideological Form: Some Marxist Propositions’. *Oxford Literary Review*, 3.1 (1978), 4-12 (p. 7).

⁶ Brecht was born in Augsburg, Germany and although, from a bourgeois background, exhibited from an early age an anti-bourgeois mentality. See how Brecht defends the thief after some apples were stolen from the family orchard. In Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, p. 103.

conventions and the necessity for change came as a result both of personal experience and theoretical reflection during the early 1920s. However, it was during the late 1920s and early to mid 1930s that his position on the dialectical, political and historical significance of the theatre was fully materialised.⁷ Writing for the *New York Times* in 1935, Brecht commented how the purpose of the modern stage was to introduce new experimental forms (such as film projections and moving platforms) and how these new facilities allowed the further use of music and graphic elements to complement the written text. At the same time though, he emphasised a new attitude towards dramaturgy. According to Brecht, this new dramaturgy ‘has as a purpose the “teaching” of the spectator a certain practical attitude; we have to make it possible for him to take a critical attitude while he is in the theatre (as opposed to a subjective attitude of becoming completely “entangled” in what is going on)’.⁸ This article, addressed to the American public during his first visit in the USA, reiterates clearly Brecht’s vision of the modern theatre: it would not only employ new forms that would enhance the presentation of themes previously excluded from stage but more importantly it would enable and promote the audience’s critical outlook to what is presented on stage. Therefore, theatre is no longer interested in simply presenting a series of events; by instigating the audience’s critical attitude it creates a dialectical dialogue between stage and audience whose end product should be the audience’s wish ‘to change [the world]’.⁹

Brecht’s aforementioned article was published just five days after the American production of *The Mother* in New York which will be discussed further in the second part of this chapter. However, bearing in mind the play’s radical political content and the fact that it belongs to Brecht’s ‘didactic’ plays (exemplified also by the use of ‘teaching’ in the above comment), it comes as no surprise that it (along with *The Measures Taken*, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* and *The Baden Didactic Play*) added to Brecht’s early infamy, particularly within the Western world, as a committed communist ideologue, a view generously propagated by the literary criticism of the

⁷ During the 1920s Brecht attempted to read Marx’s *The Capital* and Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. His first contact with Marx’s text occurred while attempting to understand the operation of the Chicago wheat exchange ‘which he had read about in Frank Norris’s *The Pit* and wanted to make the theme of a play’ (Willett, *Brecht in Context: Comparative approaches*, p.181). On a more personal level, he had witnessed the devastation caused by World War I, the unsuccessful Spartacists’ rising in 1918 and the Kapp Putsch in 1922.

⁸ Brecht, ‘The German Drama: Pre-Hitler’. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 77-81, (p. 78).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Cold War. At the same time though, the same critics who disapproved of such plays were sometimes also the ones that enthusiastically approved of his new experimental stagecraft. As a result, it could be argued that the early Anglophone theoretical criticism surrounding Brecht has been polarised by critics (such as Martin Esslin¹⁰) who have tried to differentiate Brecht the poet/artist from Brecht the Marxist cultural theorist, favouring the former persona. On the other hand, East German critics such as Werner Hecht had always acknowledged how influential Brecht's work 'as a playwright, producer, and theoretician' had been to modern theatre.¹¹ What the first attitude (Esslin) towards Brecht's work did not acknowledge and what Hecht's did was, as Wolin has commented, that Brecht's 'conception of the epic theatre managed to bring to fruition an artistic technique which combined in equal measure the more advanced tendencies of the twentieth-century avant-garde and a pronounced concern with political content usually associated with the name of *l'art engagé*'.¹² Therefore, Brecht's theatrical theory and dramaturgy proposed a literary praxis that would express both the artistic technical innovations along with a critical and committed form of artistic discourse reaching an enlarged literary public sphere, rather than a small circle of intellectual readers, which would present a valuable alternative to the existing bourgeois literary and aesthetic values.

Brecht's Marxist political convictions led him to propose the theory of the epic theatre as an alternative to the old dramatic theories and styles of performance. The emphasis of this new theatre was on the problem of the aesthetic reception of the play and its relation to its audience, as opposed to the traditional theatre, which viewed a performance in terms of offering the audience an evening of cultural diversion. Brecht commented that

*A theatre which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense. Our theatre is accordingly a nonsense. The reason why the theatre has at present no contact with the public is that it has no idea what is wanted of it. It can no longer do what it once could, and if it could do it it would no longer wish to. But it stubbornly goes on doing what it no longer can do and what is no longer wanted.*¹³

¹⁰ See for example Martin Esslin, *Bertolt Brecht*. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969); Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971).

¹¹ Werner Hecht, 'The Development of Brecht's Theory of the Epic Theatre, 1918-1933'. *The Tulane Drama Review*, 6.1 (1961), 40-97 (p. 40).

¹² Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 145-6.

¹³ Brecht, 'Emphasis on Sport'. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 6-9 (p. 7).

Brecht's comment introduced the issue of whether the theatre actually considered the conditions of its time. For him, the old bourgeois traditional theatre was merely repeating a formula that might have served its public for many years, but did not recognize the new economic, social and political order. By refusing to adapt itself to the new challenges, the old theatre was obstructing the revolutionary social and political consciousness of the people. For Brecht, it was time to make theatre new.

The new theatre, as opposed to the mere representation of moods and feelings, aimed at appealing to the intellect of the spectators and demanded their full concentration and attention; thus the emphasis was both on the content and on the formal elements of the play. Brecht commented that 'there is no distinction at all between form and content, and here too what Marx says about form is valid: that form is good only to the extent that it is the form of its content'.¹⁴ The debate concerning the status and function of form and content within the theatre formed part of Brecht's theory of the epic theatre; through the epic theatre one could comprehend his approach to the issues of commitment and engagement. A more in-depth discussion of his theory and his theatre will follow; it is, however, pertinent to make a few points here. Brecht believed in the social change and action that theatre could accomplish and strongly felt that this was achievable through revolutionary Marxist ideology. However, commitment to this ideology did not simply imply an unrestricted, mechanical or deterministic obedience to the politics of communism and Marxism, but rather a commitment to the challenge of giving 'a social perspective on private experience' through his plays and thus attempting to confront and criticise the social establishment and perceptions.¹⁵ The plays' political and social agenda would be expressed through the process of historicization and accompanied by a commitment to theatrical experimentation.

Brecht's main reaction was against the bourgeois establishment that had created and enforced a specific and unchallenged world view. Bourgeois political economy and theory dealt with the forms of bourgeois society as if they were universal, eternal, and unchanging relationships, rather than historical forms of a system that was full of contradictions and subject to radical transformation. Through his writings, Brecht ventured to encourage the audience to be more critical and

¹⁴ Hecht, 'The Development of Brecht's Theory of the Epic Theatre, 1918-1933', p. 88.

¹⁵ Janelle G. Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre*. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 39.

questioning 'by adopting the cool, investigative attitude appropriate to the scientific age'.¹⁶ His 'scientific age' opposed the bourgeois cultural phenomena and notion of the morality that underpinned their views of the eternal and unchanging nature of humanity. By depicting the social and emotional deprivation caused by the bourgeois social order and capitalism, he revealed to his audience a world view hidden beneath a palimpsest of constructed social narratives and realities. He regarded his art as political, as it did not ally itself with the ruling group and, using Marx's eleventh theorem on Feuerbach, stressed the fact that, whereas the philosophers aimed at interpreting the world, the main point was to change it.¹⁷ It was the latter that he wanted to apply to his new 'scientific' theatre.

Brecht's 'scientific', documentary and epic style of writing did not exclude laughter or entertainment, even though these were presented with a hint of cynicism (as for example Galy Gay's transformation into a soldier in *Man Equals Man*). For Brecht, the emphasis was on the crude development of the scene, including all these elements, rather than on the fixed style of performance that was rooted in the emotional response of the audience. He commented that 'changes are to be provoked and to be made perceptible; sporadic and anarchic acts of creation are to be replaced by creative processes whose changes progress by steps or leaps'.¹⁸ Brecht's theatrical theory liberated theatrical writing, performance and presentation from its sentimental attachment to the tradition of Naturalistic, Realistic and Aristotelian drama. By emphasizing the need for intellectual liberation and for stimulating thinking, acknowledging the relationship between power and knowledge and creating a theatrical language and style that could provoke both reaction and change (from both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie), Brecht proposed a new form of intellectual and artistic dialectics that would be open-ended, full of contradictions, with the ability to transform or challenge reality.

Therefore, for Brecht, art and specifically the theatre ought to be part of the process of social demystification that would allow people to experience the complicated connection of social, economic and political relations and thus instigate the advent of their transformation. As he commented

¹⁶ Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles (eds.), 'Introduction to Part Two'. *Brecht on Art and Politics*. Trans. Laura Bradley, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn. (London: Methuen, 2003), pp. 57-63 (p. 59).

¹⁷ Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre'. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 179-205 (p. 196);

¹⁸ Brecht, 'Masterful Treatment of a Model'. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 209-215 (p. 212).

once the content becomes, technically speaking, an independent component, to which text, music and setting 'adopt attitudes'; once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theatre's social function.¹⁹

Faced with an established bourgeois theatrical aesthetic that precluded social change, Brecht consciously articulated the power held by the theatre's social function. Assaulting the old bourgeois aesthetic of social stasis and freeing the space for his new epic theatre allowed Brecht to reveal to the audience that their daily actions are not simply the result of autonomous desires or needs, but rather the result of complex networks of social relations. By fusing the two actions of entertaining and instructing, he wished to project a world structure, which, if challenged, was susceptible to change.

Brecht's theory of the epic theatre, his politics of performance and his Marxist beliefs have, however, created considerable controversy among intellectuals both in Europe and the USA. The examination of Brecht's theory and plays is essential to the discussion of the reappraisal of the aesthetics of commitment as it brings out the contrasts, but also the shortcomings, of the debates in both traditions. During his lifetime, he featured heavily in European debates over the issue of the political engagement or autonomous status of art. As explored earlier, his theories and theatrical experimentations were greatly opposed by Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno. On the one hand, Brecht's vision of political engagement and commitment did not share the utopian aspirations of Lukács' notion of the world as potentially whole, but instead celebrated the dialectical alliance of textual and new performative elements in a production, of fear and loss, of comedy and non-Aristotelian tragedy and of 'the span of time and the utopian regret that tinges contemplation of a "golden age" that lasted but a season'.²⁰ On the other, it was the sheer legitimacy of a Brechtian politicised theatre that Adorno found extremely problematic. Through his own complex emphasis on the autonomy of modernist art (as developed particularly in *Aesthetic Theory*), Adorno expressed his strong reservations and disdain for Brecht's plays, which he found flawed both aesthetically and politically 'by an instrumentalised political didacticism and oversimplified presentation of the actual

¹⁹ Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willet. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 33-42 (p. 39).

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*. (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p. 162.

realities of the contemporary world'.²¹ For Adorno, Brecht's theory and plays, by emphasising his particular political framework, excluded a valid consideration of Kafka, Schoenberg and Beckett's avant-garde works which, although not politically committed to any ideological aesthetic, revealed a latent problematization on social meaning.

Therefore, Brecht's commitment to a politically engaged theatre divided the European intellectuals, who did not appreciate either his disregard of nineteenth-century realism in favour of a modernist aesthetic attuned to twentieth-century's technological advances (Lukács) or his politics as such, which according to Adorno, poisoned 'the very fibre of his poetic art'.²² It was this emphasis on Brecht's conscious decision to echo the Marxist ideology and the early political history of the twentieth century in his plays that also caused much controversy within the USA. For the American intellectual had re-inscribed differently the Marxist tradition and the aesthetics of commitment. As already explored thoroughly in chapter two through the writings of the New York Intellectuals, the American intellectuals attempted to disassociate the critical potential of the historical avant-garde from its social or political affinities. In its place they introduced their version of modernism that not only worked primarily from within liberalism but also condensed significantly the impetus for change outside the cultural paradigms attached to their vision of modernism.

Working within the principles of liberalism, the American intellectual aimed at allowing himself to approach a work of art without being limited by its ideological content. Having interpreted the European Marxist tradition as one that proposed a type of commitment in which the artist's mind belonged to the 'party', the American intellectual professed a type of commitment in which 'the heart and the mind of the artist belonged to the human race'.²³ By identifying the American type of commitment with a humanist discourse (as opposed to the collective one of the European type) and emphasising the importance of the recognizable human being (as opposed to the personally unidentified and bureaucratic party), the American intellectuals disclosed their insistence on the separation between an artist's leftist

²¹ Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: an historical study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 275.

²² Adorno, 'On Commitment', *Aesthetics and Politics*. Translation Editor Ronald Taylor. (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 177-195 (p. 187).

²³ John Gassner, *Foreword* in Himelstein *Drama was a weapon: The left-wing theatre in New York, 1929-1941*. (New Brunswick-New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1963), pp. vii-xvi (p. xii).

political alliances and his/her literary work. As previously explored, for the New York Intellectuals Marxist thought and ideology had failed to materialise within the American literary scene a modernist cultural revolution. Instead, they succeeded in proposing an agitational leftist culture (experienced in the writings of Theodore Dreiser for example), which, according to the Intellectuals, not only curtailed the critical abilities of such intellectuals but also allowed art and literature's spirit to be overtaken by politics. In order to 'rescue' art from this status, the American intellectual decided that an apolitical and more philosophical approach to art was needed. And in that approach art and literature needed to get rid of any association with the reductive powers of leftist polemics.²⁴

What follows in the next few pages is a critical examination of Brecht's first literary experiences with 'America' and then his two experiences of living and working in the United States (in New York initially and then in Los Angeles). Brecht had developed an early fascination with some of America's cultural exports (such as jazz and boxing) and the American city of Chicago became the epicentre of such plays as *In the Jungle of Cities* and *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*. Gangsters, the new movie industry, Charlie Chaplin, the new capitalist mode and more generally the affluence that the USA was experiencing in the 1920s led Brecht and his contemporaries to assume that America 'stood for a mode of modern experience'.²⁵ Although his vision of America was exaggerated in the plays mentioned above, it nonetheless became an integral part of the development of his theatre since it served as an excellent example of his *Verfremdung* effect. By briefly examining some of these 'American' plays (such as *In the Jungle of Cities* and *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*), one will acquire a clearer understanding of Brecht's initial vision of 'America'. At the same time, by also examining the text and production of *Man Equals Man*, a play not set in the USA but written in the period between the two aforementioned ones both as a response to the early Hollywood acting styles and at a time when Brecht was becoming disillusioned with his utopian view of America, one is exposed more fully to his vision of the epic theatre; at the same time though, this play manifested Brecht's attempt 'at writing a play with a passive, by usual standards "undramatic" hero'.²⁶ This new attempt was further developed when Brecht revised

²⁴ See chapter two of this thesis, pp. 51-53.

²⁵ James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 4.

²⁶ Ronald Speirs, *Brecht's Early Plays*. (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 118.

Galileo (originally entitled *The Life of Galileo*, a title which Brecht restored when he revised the play again after his return to Europe) with Charles Laughton while on exile in the USA during the 1940s. As the discussion of the 1935 production of *The Mother* in New York and the 1947 one of *Galileo* in Los Angeles will reveal, Brecht's theory of the epic theatre and his desire to stage engaged theatre were not particularly welcomed by the American literati and audience. Instead, the reception and reaction towards both attempts, initiated an almost hostile approach towards Brecht's theory and plays within the United States that lasted until the 1960s and 1970s.

Through the critical assessment of all the aforementioned material, this chapter will respond to accusations that consider Brecht's work as 'a Sisyphean labour to reconcile his highly cultivated and subtle taste with the crudely heteronymous demands which he desperately imposed on himself'.²⁷ Brecht's theory and theatrical experimentations attracted both admirers and sworn enemies and his legacy, characterised as 'Brechtian', was both celebrated and rejected, at first mainly for its political value. However, it was Brecht's emphasis on the importance of crude thinking that allowed him to be diverse even when he was working within the parameters of epic theatre.²⁸ Crude thinking is an important aspect of an artist's literary role as it enables him/her to think dialectically about the social praxis of a work of art in relation to its audience as Walter Benjamin has argued.²⁹ At the same time though, it can also be defined as a process that allows a Brechtian audience to think crudely, actively and dialectically about what it witnesses on stage. These three terms should be seen as related rather than as interchangeable. Although crude thinking involves a certain coarseness, it also involves boldness for it allows one to challenge established perceptions and representations of life and social reality. At the same time it creates a dynamic for it allows the audience to think actively and dialectically of such representations; as a result the theoretical concept of crude thinking can actually be translated into a thinking process which can result in social awareness and praxis.

²⁷ Adorno, 'On Commitment', p. 188.

²⁸ For a more detailed discussion on Brecht's diversity see Hilda Meldrum Brown, *Leitmotiv and Drama Wagner, Brecht, and the Limits of 'Epic' Theatre*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) and Olga Taxidou, 'Crude Thinking: John Fuegi and recent Brecht criticism'. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 11.44 (1995), 381-384.

²⁹ For a detailed discussion of Benjamin's approach to Brecht's crude thinking see chapter one of the thesis.

It is crude thinking and his commitment to change that still allows Brecht's work to pose a considerable challenge to the contemporary social stasis. As Jameson has argued, in today's postmodern, vastly professionalized, institutionalised and mobile world, Brecht's method of the theory of the theatre, of acting, of confrontation and of activity or praxis are topical and urgent.³⁰ Since the end of history and ideology has been declared and the monopoly of a single economic worldview has been established, Brecht's adamant demand for creativity, resistance and change is still pertinent.³¹ These theories might need to be modified or challenged, but his commitment to the dialectical relationship between art and politics, theory of the theatre and practice, ideas and ideologies, materialism and change should not be ignored. It could be argued that Brecht was a dogmatic ideologue, whose work was based mostly on plagiarism and on crediting himself as the sole author of a collaboratory work (as John Fuegi argues), but for Brecht the most important issue would not be to refute any of these mythologies or facts; instead he would have invited his audience, smoking a cigar or cigarettes, to the production of his new play, where new theatrical experimentations and more confrontations on social and political issues would have taken place. For Brecht it was important 'to direct my attention to the task of strengthening your appetite in my theatre'³²; and indeed the audience's appetite has been strengthened and, like Galileo's, requires more food for thought.

II. Brecht's epic theatre and his early visions of 'Americana'.

In the young men you
have not corrupted
America awakens.³³

The aforementioned extract, taken from a poem written in 1920, reveals Brecht's early fascination with America. 'America' was a boundless and unfamiliar land and for many Germans, as well as other Europeans, it had acquired an exotic quality represented through films, music and literature. This 'new' land had captured the imagination of many young people in a still recovering Europe (after the end of World

³⁰ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p. 4.

³¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*. (London: Penguin, 1992); Daniel Bell, *The end of ideology: on the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties*. (New York: Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan, 1961).

³² Brecht as quoted in Hecht, 'The Development of Brecht's Theory of the Epic Theatre, 1918-1933', p. 55.

³³ Brecht as quoted in Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 4.

War I) and its economic acceleration and promising future stood in direct opposition to their depleted lives. Brecht, sensing the desperation experienced by his generation, and feeling restricted both by Germany's geographic locality and what he dismissed as its limited imaginative resources, commented

How this Germany bores me! It is a good, medium-sized country, the pale colours and plains are beautiful in it, but what inhabitants! A degenerate peasant class, whose coarseness however gives birth to no fabulous monster, but only to a quiet bestialisation, an obese middle class and a dull intelligentsia! There remains: America!³⁴

This first idealised discovery signified for Brecht and his contemporaries a new age that represented a mode of modern experience within an industrial environment, within the space of a big city and one that promulgated the myth of the machine. At the same time, the sense of vitality that the new continent oozed added to its appeal. The images of skyscrapers and neon lights, of cowboys and buffaloes, of Charlie Chaplin and people dancing the Charleston presented an alternative reality in which confidence, progress and innovation existed.

It did not take long for Brecht's imagination to be captured by the engaging possibilities of 'America'. Although many of his plays were indebted to the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition, others, such as *In the Jungle of Cities*, *Joe Fleischhacker*, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, *St. Joan of the Stockyards* and *The Lindberghs' Flight*, were set in the USA and reflected how his fascination with 'Americana' influenced his political philosophy and aesthetics and how his attitude towards it gradually changed. Initially and similarly to the European avant-garde, his vision had a mythical quality modelled on Al Capone, boxing and jazz music. As Brustein argued, 'Brecht's interest in American cities is [also] inspired by the coarser texture of American society, its mixture of racial types, its shameless materialism, its idiomatic speech and jazz culture, and, especially, its love of sport'.³⁵ As presented in his early play *In the Jungle of Cities*, the USA served as a boundless setting full of opportunities where everything was possible. Therefore, Brecht's early vision embodied a non-geographical *topos* of adventure (escaping thus post-World War I Germany's self-despair and imposed bourgeois idealism and decadence), of refuge and of rebirth. However one should bear in mind that even within this early portrayal

³⁴ As quoted in Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht's America*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981), p. 6.

³⁵ Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*. (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 242.

of America, there is an inherent ambiguity as to the positive nature of such an experience or rebirth, an ambiguity that Brecht was able to resolve once he was exposed to Marx's economic theory and developed his theory of the epic theatre.

Brecht's ambiguous relationship with his concept of America was manifested firstly *In the Jungle of Cities* (1921-1924), whose setting is Chicago. The play is greatly indebted to Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*, which presented a dehumanised picture of the mechanised stockyards and the corruption that prevailed in the American meatpacking industry in the early twentieth century. Brecht, having read the novel, must have been influenced by its presentation of Chicago and the play's 'message of hope through organized labour'.³⁶ When writing the play, by using Chicago for the purposes of dramatic alienation and modelling the play on a boxing match, Brecht not only expressed his admiration for certain elements of popular American culture, but also his aversion to the dehumanizing living experience of a big city, in which one literally has to fight to survive. Through this play Brecht used the myth of 'America' to initiate his audience into a new theatrical experience, as he exposed them to a sequence of actions (resembling the rounds of a boxing match), proposed that they watch the play as they would a sporting event and avoided any hidden psychological characterisations. At the same time, the setting of Chicago, a large developed American city with its seductive way of life run by gangsters who listen to jazz, smoke cigars, date the most beautiful women and are only interested in physical sports represented a new world where rules could be broken. 'America', therefore, represented an extreme civilisation; on the one hand, it involved people in an over-mechanised technological experience and, on the other, it exposed them to a primitive barbaric spectacle. 'America' was translated into an urban and modern myth and both these terms found a synecdoche in the activity of boxing. It seems that Brecht was fascinated by America's modern status and its technical advancement, especially as the country was experiencing the beginning of a new cultural era. However, such an era was characterised by barbarity and as such 'the brilliant incarnation of this paradox is the city Chicago as jungle; the most unnatural city becomes a new kind of nature'.³⁷

³⁶ Tony Meech, 'Brecht's early plays'. *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp. 43-55 (p. 51)

³⁷ Parmalee, *Brecht's America*, p. 47.

Before discussing the play in more detail, one needs to briefly consider the influence and importance of boxing for Brecht. Boxing, along with jazz and movies, was instantly embraced by the European avant-garde.³⁸ For Brecht, boxing presented him with new sources and material for his plays. At the same time, it exposed him to elements of a boxing match, such as the abandonment of motive and emotional identification, which would later exemplify his epic theatre. His close relationship with the boxer Paul Samson-Körner, who was famous for his 'objective' boxing technique, gave him an insight into how boxing could function within his plays and also inspired him to write the boxer's biography entitled 'The Fighting Machine' which was never finished.³⁹ Samson-Körner's style, characterised as 'American' and reliant on 'concentration, mercilessness and toughness' can clearly be seen in the match between the two main protagonists *In the Jungle of Cities*.⁴⁰ At the same time, Brecht was also in admiration of American boxers such as Jack Dempsey, who had visited Berlin in 1922. According to Schoeps, Brecht had also seen 'the world heavy-weight boxing championship between Jack Dempsey and George Carpentier', which ended with the emphatic victory of the former.⁴¹ By surrounding himself with boxers and being exposed to the mentality surrounding the sport, Brecht was made aware not only of the sport's structure but also of its representation of a struggle between two opposing bodies (and forces). This struggle and the sport's re-invention within the American continent, allowed Brecht to unleash both his early mythical vision of 'America' but also offer his audience a new type of theatre that is striped of the petty psychological motivations of bourgeois theatre.

In the Jungle of Cities presents readers and audiences alike with a crude representation of a boxing match between the two main characters free of any motivation; it is 'a fight with no origin'.⁴² The play, although lacking the musical

³⁸ For further discussion concerning the European avant-garde and boxing see Mary Nolan, *Visions of modernity: American business and the modernization of Germany*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: a cultural history*. (London: Reaktion, 2008).

³⁹ Meech, Tony. 'Brecht's early plays', p. 51 and Brecht, Bertolt. 'Conversation with Bert Brecht'. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 14-17 (p. 17).

⁴⁰ Max Schmeling, *An Autobiography*. Trans. George B. von der Lippe. (Chicago: Bonus Books, 1998), p. 19, 22.

⁴¹ Karl-Heinz J. Schoeps, 'Bertolt Brecht and the Weimar Republic: Rebel with a Cause, or Between Bacchant and Bolshevik'. In *Brecht Unbound*. James K. Lyon and Hans-Peter Breuer (eds.). (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), pp. 43-62.

⁴² Brecht, *Collected Plays: One*. Eds. and trans. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. (London: Methuen Drama, 1994), p. 438.

intervals that can be found in later plays, opens with a prologue reminiscent of Brecht's later descriptions of how an audience should approach his plays.

You are in Chicago in 1912. You are about to witness an inexplicable wrestling match between two men and observe the downfall of a family that has moved from the prairies to the jungle of the big city. Don't worry your heads about the motives for the fight, concentrate on the stakes. Judge impartially the technique of the contenders, and keep your eyes fixed on the finish.⁴³

With this prologue, it is immediately established that the setting of the play is in Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century and Chicago is equated with the jungle. At the same time the audience is already told that what they are about to witness: a wrestling match, deemed 'inexplicable', between two men and the downfall of a family. Brecht is keen to stress that the importance of the play does not lie in a psychological interpretation of the characters' actions; the audience's attention instead need to be directed to the 'technique' of the participants and to the finish. At the same time, the play is structured in eleven scenes, reminiscent of the ten rounds of an actual match and an extra scene devoted to the winner. As a result of such instructions, the play disrupts the audience's notions of a linear narrative based on psychological understanding and instead its anti-narrative form challenges the audience's modes of reception and perception. This is further emphasised by the proclamation of one of the antagonists on scene 10, who declares: 'I wanted a fight. Not of the flesh but of the spirit'.⁴⁴

The play begins when Shlink, a fifty-one year old self-made Malayan owner of a timber industry, enters the rental library where George Garga, a poor immigrant from the prairies of Ohio, works. Under the pretence of buying a book, Shlink offers money to Garga in an attempt to buy his opinion on it. His ulterior motive however, is to challenge Garga to a fight (because he has learnt that he is a worthy opponent as he later explains). Garga is willing to 'sell' the opinions of J. V. Jensen and Arthur Rimbaud but refuses to surrender his own. He, therefore, although penniless and with a starving family, seems to still retain a romantic notion of personal freedom. For Garga, whose sense of freedom is closely associated with his origins, 'selling' his opinion would signify the surrender of such freedom and his transformation into a bought thing. Throughout the first scene, Garga is humiliated by Shlink and his

⁴³Ibid., p. 118.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 175.

followers – Skinny, Worm and Babbon. Because of his constant refusal to sell his opinion (counter-balanced by Shlink's continual increase of his offer), Garga is ultimately fired. The first scene ends with Garga feeling powerless and, realising that he has lost his means of livelihood, he is forced into action against his will. He strips himself of all his clothes and exits the scene, claiming that all he wants is his freedom. Round one is over and the fight is on.

As Shlink further pursues this 'fight' between himself and Garga, a reversal of roles occurs and both of them appropriate their new roles. Shlink surrenders himself unconditionally to Garga and Garga in return has access to Shlink's affluent world. What the audience is exposed to as the play unfolds is a mixture of seemingly arbitrary scenes where they witness how the boxing match between Shlink and Garga inevitably influences those around them, in particular the female characters: Jane, Garga's girlfriend, resorts to alcoholism, Mary, Garga's sister, is firstly forced on Shlink by Garga and as a result becomes a prostitute and Garga's mother, Mae, disappears one day into the jungle of Chicago. The outcome of the fight proves also catastrophic for both Garga and Shlink; Garga, after spending 3 years in jail, is released and takes his revenge on Shlink by accusing him of a number of crimes. And although he ends up leaving the jungle of Chicago (to move instead to the jungle of New York), he has lost in the process not only his family but also any prospect of returning to Ohio. Shlink, on the other hand, accused and running to escape the lynch mobs is refused any sense of comradeship by Garga and poisons himself when realising his defeat.

This final show-down is presented to the audience in scene 10. Like the last round of a boxing match, Shlink and Garga face each other for the final time. In this scene, Shlink has lost everything and is almost a shadow of his previous persona seen in scene 1. Garga, on the other hand, has also lost his romantic aspirations of escape and personal freedom but rather than be resigned he comes across as the one who has learned and adapted the most. When Shlink laments that all he wanted was the spiritual fight, Garga replies that 'And the spirit, you see, is nothing. The important thing is not to be stronger, but to come off alive'.⁴⁵ In this almost Darwinist conclusion, Garga's transformation is completed. From an idealistic young man from the prairies, Garga has turned into a cynical determinist who no longer values the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

importance of personal freedom but rather upholds survival (by any means necessary) as a prerequisite of human existence. Garga's response provokes Shlink's wrath, accusing him of being an unworthy opponent but his words no longer have any bearing on Garga. Abandoned by Garga and finally realising that the metaphysical fight he wanted to experience is made unattainable by 'man's infinite isolation', Shlink falls to the floor and awaits his end.⁴⁶ The scene which ends with Shlink's death manifests the end of the boxing match. The winner, regardless of the costs, is Garga to whom the last scene is dedicated. Having sold Shlink's business (along with his father John and Mary), turning his back forever on Tahiti or the prairies and having accepted the consequences of the fight, Garga is ready to face the new jungle of New York.

One could argue therefore that what dominates this match is not only the urban surroundings of Chicago but also the dog-eat-dog mentality of capitalism as a precondition for survival. For Garga and his family, the move to Chicago was probably one of necessity and survival, but what they long for is their home in Ohio. Similarly, the audience is from early on aware of his dream to escape to Tahiti and when this fails he dreams of moving to the idyllic tobacco fields of Virginia. However, as his final choice of further immigrating to New York suggests, Garga has been conditioned to the experiences and effects of a 'jungle' city. And although he has won the fight by coming off alive, Garga has in the process lost control of his fate and has relinquished his dreams. At the same time, their experiences in the dehumanizing city of Chicago have affected their responses towards nature. In scene 6, the only one set outside the city limits and on the shores of Lake Michigan, Mary is unable to experience any sense of connection with nature. Instead she comments how 'the trees look draped in human dung, the sky is close enough to touch, but what is it to me?'⁴⁷ Mary's experiences of the city seem to have also pre-conditioned her responses towards nature; rather than offering a different alternative, this once pastoral scene of the lake becomes another disturbing and oppressive experience.

In *In the Jungle of Cities* Brecht constructs a gigantic Chicago of mythic proportions and one could argue that this crude version of Chicago is primarily used aesthetically to fit in with Brecht's take on a boxing match. On the one hand, his choice of an American setting for this motiveless fight signifies his abandonment of

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 152.

the conditions that permeated the psychologically-based bourgeois European drama. On the other hand, the fight between Shlink and Garga could only take place within the modern experience of an urban city whose immense size and impersonality harness human isolation, dispossession and lack of communication. At the same time though, by employing an American city, Brecht is also commenting on the idea of America as a *topos* of rebirth and one where people's aspirations suffer no limitations. In the new world where opportunities seem endless, technological progress is fast and where man seems in control of his destiny, Brecht proposes a more critical look. Shlink, although of poor background, has turned himself into a wealthy man in control of his business. Garga, although still poor, strongly believes that he is still in control of his freedom. However, the play depicts that both economic status and personal beliefs are not only unstable but also determined by the 'jungle' of the city, the product of a capitalist economy.

Within this jungle, human discourse is also mechanized. In scene eight, a nameless character, described only as The Man, provides in a six-line staccato monologue some information to Shlink and then disappears.

I've got three minutes to give you some information. You've got two minutes to understand your situation. Half an hour ago *The Examiner* received a letter from one of the state penitentiaries, signed by one Garga, showing you've committed a number of crimes. In five minutes the reporters will be here. You owe me a thousand dollars.
*Shlink gives him the money. The man goes out.*⁴⁸

The Man's presence in this scene affords Brecht a chance to criticise the value and exchange rate of information but also allows him to present a mechanised pattern of human speech that can arise from the social conditions of an urban city. The value of The Man as a character or entity is immaterial apart from the information he can provide; he disappears as suddenly as he appears (probably from within the city). His anonymity, his prefabricated speech and the monetary value of his information not only dictate business affairs but are also reminiscent of a consciousness that humans are exposed and subjected to in the modern urban environment. And the fact that this environment is situated in an American city further accentuates Brecht's early criticism (though subtle) of the unnerving social and economic conditioning of humans within capitalism.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 162.

Although Brecht had not been exposed to Marx's writings when he wrote *In the Jungle of Cities*, one can see in it an early awareness of issues that are dealt with in more depth in his *Lehrstücke* plays. In particular, he revisited the city of Chicago in his play *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (1929-1931), which will be discussed later on. Brecht did not abandon his interest on such aspects of 'Americana' as jazz music or the theatricality of boxing (as seen in *The Threepenny Opera* or *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* for example). Unlike the French mime Etienne Decroux, who used boxer Georges Carpentier as 'the motivating image' for his study of 'physical mime', praising his 'vigor and grace; strength; elegance; dazzle and thought; a taste for danger and a smile', Brecht was not interested in turning his actors into any kind of sportsmen.⁴⁹ Rather, his emphasis was on proposing a new kind of acting that would challenge the actors' relationship with their character and, which, at the same time would ask of the audience to critically question its reception and perception of everything occurring on stage.

During the 1930s Brecht was becoming increasingly aware of the further developments in American culture, and particularly in acting and its influence on its European counterpart. Within the new cultural *topos* of 'Americana', Brecht had distinguished the prolific and influential figure of Charles Chaplin. Chaplin, although English, had become a German household name ever since his films arrived there and was eagerly adopted by the German left/liberal intellectuals who considered his work a social and cultural phenomenon.⁵⁰ However, his films, such as *The Rink* (1916), *The Kid* (1921) and *The Gold Rush* (1925) divided German critics along the political lines. Among the conservative critics, the films and his acting style were considered a 'foreign' attack on German culture. In particular *The Gold Rush* was severely criticised as they felt that Chaplin's persona exposed his deliberate rejection of individuality and middle-class humanism.

Other people have an ego consciousness and exist in human relationships; he has lost the ego; thus he is unable to take part in what is usually known as life. He is a hole into which everything falls; what is otherwise connected bursts into fragments as soon as it comes in contact with him.

⁴⁹ As quoted in Boddy, *Boxing: A cultural history*, p. 254.

⁵⁰ Chaplin's very first film shown was *The Rink* in September 1921 in Berlin. *The Gold Rush* reached Germany in 1926.

[...] A human being without surface, without the possibility of contact with the world.⁵¹

On the other hand, Brecht and other modernist artists and intellectuals were intrigued by the new images, swift rhythms and crude entertainment they offered. At the same time, such films reflected how culture could be seen as a cultural intervention and a *topos* for exploring diversity and the possibility of change. Therefore, Brecht saw in Chaplin's exploitation of the new medium of film an attempt to create a new notion of art and this vision motivated him to employ popular means of representation to assault the bourgeois cult of art and its values, which failed to register within the modern world.

Chaplin's films and style of acting were regarded as the embodiment of modernity, an attack on bourgeois values and he himself as a 'figure of reconciliation between art and technology, high culture and mass society'.⁵² His use and representation of the human body exemplified the effects of industrialisation and fragmentation and also the merging of the modern, popular and artificial within the new American culture. Through this kind of presentation, Chaplin proposed a dialectical approach to the human body, as it was not simply a point of reference of the devastating effects of modernity, but also a space that acted out the discourses of modernity and attempted to resist them.⁵³ Brecht was aware of Chaplin's performing mime and was intrigued by his ability to create humour and to criticize through this humour many of the complicated experiences of modern life in big cities. At the same time, Chaplin's acting illustrated for Brecht how comedy could contain violence and brutality and criticise it through the portrayal of grotesque, naïve and inhuman characters (both victims and oppressors). The portrayal of the modern man as escaping his individuality and displaying signs of alienation and fragmentation was an inviting figure to Brecht's theatrical and social imagination. Chaplin's influence can be seen in Brecht's presentation of Galy Gay's political clowning figure in *Man Equals Man* (1924-26), who could 'mime the basic meaning underlying every (silent)

⁵¹ Siegfried Kracauer as quoted in Sabine Hake, 'Chaplin Reception in Weimar Germany'. *New German Critique*, 51 (Special Issue on Weimar Mass Culture) (1990), 87-111 (p. 93).

⁵² Hake, 'Chaplin Reception in Weimar Germany', p. 89.

⁵³ Chaplin's influence can be seen quite explicitly in Brecht's *Man Equals Man*. As Galy Gay's physical body is dressed up with a soldier's uniform and accepts his new identity, he represents the effects of imperialism and at the same time succumbs to its discourse. His body becomes a killing machine, represented by the mechanical movement of the actual body and by his murderous action.

sentence'.⁵⁴ Taking Chaplin's acting style into consideration and simultaneously exploring the alienating devices of his epic theatre, Brecht wanted to expose the actors to a new style of acting that acknowledged the influence of its American counterpart but at the same time developed it further to offer a more engaged approach consisting of 'demonstration, emotional restraint and a critical view of the character'.⁵⁵

Like the title of Samson-Körner's unfinished biography and the previous portrayal of both Shlink and Garga, Brecht exposed his audience further to the notion of a human as a 'fighting machine' in the figure of Galy Gay in *Man Equals Man*.⁵⁶ The play not only exposed Brecht's tendency to include songs, projections, self-reference and presentation of the characters, but also exemplified his early understanding of Marxist theory manifested more clearly in later versions such as the 1931 production of the play. Brecht had commented with respect to this play that 'from what I learnt from the audiences that saw it, I rewrote *Man equals Man* ten times', manifesting thus quite early his tendency to revise and rewrite plays so as to make them more effective and representative both of his political, social and aesthetic ideas.⁵⁷ He started planning the play near the end of World War I but the end product that we can read today is significantly different. The idea for the play was conceived in 1918 and it was called the 'Galgei project'. However, Brecht soon abandoned it but returned to it in the summer of 1920. His 1920 notes indicated that *Galgei* was to be set in the context of post-war Augsburg and that Galgei would be 'a fat Bavarian carpenter, a "reliable worker" compelled to take over the identity and the business of a profiteering local butter merchant named Pick'.⁵⁸ However, after his move to Berlin in 1924, the play changed both its name to *Mann ist Mann* and its setting to the British-Indian colonial milieu. The play was completed in 1926 and resembled its published form a year later. There were two productions in 1926, one in Düsseldorf

⁵⁴ Brecht, 'The Question of Criteria for Judging Acting' in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 53-57 (p. 55).

⁵⁵ Michael Patterson, *Revolution in German Theatre 1900-1933*. (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 171.

⁵⁶ There have been two translations of the original title of the play, *Mann ist Mann*, which are *Man Equals Man* and *A Man's Man*. As I intend to use John Willett's translation of Brecht's play, I will use his translated title. Although speculative, Willett's chosen translation seems to reflect Brecht's idea, as expressed in his diary in 1929, of changing again the title of the play into *Mann=Mann* (in Doherty, 451). For an in-depth discussion of the possible use of the mathematical symbol = in relation to Brecht's social and aesthetic theory, see Bridgid Doherty 'Test and *Gestus* in Brecht and Benjamin'. *MLN*, 115.3 (2000), 442-481.

⁵⁷ Brecht, *Collected Plays: Two*. Eds. and trans. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. (London: Methuen Drama, 1994), p. vii.

⁵⁸ Doherty, 'Test and *Gestus* in Brecht and Benjamin', p. 450.

and one in Darmstadt, but what is of interest for the purposes of this thesis is Brecht's production of the play at Berlin's Staatliches Schauspielhaus in February 1931. In this production Peter Lorre held the role of Galy Gay and his portrayal of the character, under Brecht's directions, provide an excellent example of Brecht's response to the American acting styles developed by Chaplin and early farce films.

The play centred on the figure of Galy Gay, an Irish porter who, as the epigraph of the play commented, was transformed into a soldier in the military cantonment in Kilkoa in 1925. One would anticipate that the play would be an anti-militarist protest against the terrible tragedies of World War I, especially as it attacked militarism and imperialism. However, as the play unfolded, one was faced with an almost vaudevillian and farcical play, full of tragicomic moments, questioning the relativity of human identity and the problem of individuality within a military community, contained by the modern bourgeois society. It also revealed Brecht's development towards his Marxist aesthetic, epic theatre and his political humour. Influenced by Chaplin's characters, Galy Gay resembles in acting, movement and attitude a clown. However, at the same time, the play displayed Brecht's idea of historicisation and distanciation as it takes place in the (for the German audience) exotic setting of Kilkoa in British India. Unlike Chaplin's films where the action takes place within an American environment, Brecht, by transporting the action from the Bavarian background to British India, established an emotional distance so that his audience would experience the unfolding events without empathy and thus be able to adopt a more critical attitude towards them. By defamiliarizing the behaviour he wanted his audience to observe, Brecht used his V-effect even before he theorised it and offered his audience not simply a criticism of modernity and capitalism but exposed them to the importance of theatre as a medium that could present itself as a model of life, thus proposing legitimate change rather than mere representation.

From the very beginning of the play, the audience is faced with a mechanical quality disclosed by the characters' movements and speech and also with Galy Gay's passive opportunistic persona 'who can't say no'.⁵⁹ He decides to take a short trip to Kilkoa to buy some fish not because he desired to eat it as such but because it was 'in accordance with our income'.⁶⁰ The play's opening dialogue between him and his

⁵⁹ Brecht, *Collected Plays: Two*, p. 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

wife demonstrates 'the occurrence of mechanical effects in the characters' speech'.⁶¹ In this dialogue the audience is exposed to a conversation of banal content delivered in an exaggerated manner that instantly draws attention to the artificiality of the issue discussed. It also instantly teases the audience's reception and perception since the formal articulation of the speech is in direct contrast with the one expected from an uneducated worker. At the same time, Galy Gay refers to himself in the third person and presents all his qualities as an objective outsider in statements: 'That would be within the means of a porter who drinks not at all, smokes very little and has almost no vices'.⁶² Through such an economical presentation, Brecht is making his audience aware of the character portrayed by the actor. The emphasis does not lie on an extensive psychological profile of the character but only on such attributes that would allow the audience to observe with a critical eye his imminent transformation. By the end of the first scene, the audience's encounter with the main character should not only be one of laughter because of its farcical presentation but also one of questioning.

By the time Galy Gay is on his way to Kilkoa, four soldiers, Uriah Shelley, Jesse Mahoney, Polly Baker and Jeraiah Jip, are attempting unsuccessfully to steal some money from the temple of the Yellow God; their plan ends disastrously as Jeraiah ends up getting hurt (falling prey to the traps that the monks had set up) and is abandoned by his fellow soldiers in the courtyard, but not before surrendering his paybook to them. As Uriah commented, 'a soldier's paybook must never be damaged. You can replace a man anytime, but a paybook is sacred if anything else'.⁶³ By agreeing to take the place of Jip (already accused of stealing) even temporarily to help his three remaining comrades escape punishment, Galy Gay becomes involved in a chain of events that will alter his persona dramatically. Having unsuccessfully tried to retrieve Jip from the temple, the three soldiers decide to transform Galy into Jip. For Uriah 'people are taken too much seriously. One equals no one' and reassuring Polly, who anxiously asks if one man can be changed into another, he claims that 'yes, one man is like the other. Man equals man'.⁶⁴

Galy Gay's transformation takes place in scene 9. However, just before the scene, Brecht presents his audience with an interlude spoken by Begbick, the only

⁶¹ Ronald Speirs, *Brecht's Early Plays*. (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 137.

⁶² Brecht, *Collected Plays: Two*, p. 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31, 37.

woman of the play and the owner of the canteen in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of Gay's identity occurs. In the interlude Begbick announces that

Herr Bertolt Brecht maintains that man equals man
- A view that has been around since time began.
But then Herr Brecht points out how far one can
Manoeuvre and manipulate that man.
*Tonight you are going to see a man reassembled like a car
Leaving all his individual components just as they are.*
He has some kind friends by whom he is pressed
Entirely in his own interest
To conform with this world and its twists and turns
And give up pursuing his own fishy concerns.
So whatever the purpose of his various transformations
He always lives up to his friends' expectations.
Indeed if we people were to let him out of our sight
They could easily make a butcher of him overnight.
Herr Bertolt Brecht hopes you'll feel the ground on
which you stand
Slither between your toes like shifting sand
So that the case of Galy Gay the porter makes you aware
Life on this earth is a hazardous affair.⁶⁵

Reminiscent of the prelude of *In the Jungle of Cities*, Brecht allows Begbick to briefly summarize all the events that will take place in the last remaining scenes of the play, thus revealing the actual action and dispersing the audience's expectations. By using the image of a car, Brecht explores the aesthetic of the machine and aligns it with the status of human identity as a mere 'function'. Like a machine, Galy Gay will have to transform himself (with a little help from the three soldiers that represent the established order) without changing his components, so as to survive and serve better the needs of the system. At the same time, the audience is offered the end result of the play, in which Galy Gay is turned into a 'butcher', a 'human fighting-machine', killing everyone in the fortress of Sir El-Djowr.⁶⁶ The prelude ends with a note of caution from Brecht that again underlines his fear, that if his audience does not take an acute critical stance towards the established bourgeois order and demand actual change, then the aesthetic perfection and economy of the machine, which represents a power the audience cannot possess, will be appropriated by the bourgeois order; and such a condition can prove extremely dangerous for society. Brecht does not claim that the machine as such is a dangerous thing (since he, Benjamin and Meyerhold had

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 38. [italics my emphasis].

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 75.

all expressed their faith in the positive use of the machine and technology in general), but by having this speech delivered by Begdick, who can be seen as an example of bourgeois unalterable flexibility (manifested throughout the play as she exhibits such agility when it comes to adjust her business and human relationships regardless of the environment she finds herself in), he concentrates on its negative function and appropriation.

This interlude is followed by scene 9, which Lyon had described as a 'montage scene'.⁶⁷ The scene that details the transformation of Galy Gay into Jeraiah Jip resembles in structure and presentation a 'Variété' performance; the scene is divided into five sub-scenes, each beginning with Uriah addressing the audience, announcing the number of the sub-scene and offering a summary of what is to follow. After the three soldiers have decided that the only solution to their problem is to turn Galy Gay into Jeraiah and declared that this is 'an historic moment. Man is in the centre, but only relatively speaking', Uriah announces 'Number One: The Elephant Deal. The MG section transfers an elephant to the man whose name must not be mentioned'.⁶⁸ The first stage of Galy Gay's transformation begins with the elimination of his real name as the three soldiers and Begbick make sure that they never mention it. Relying on his increasing sense of material possession, the three soldiers convince Galy Gay that the artificial elephant they have constructed is real and belongs to the army and use Begbick as a buyer to lure him into selling it. The second part begins again with Uriah announcing 'And now for Number Two: the Elephant Auction. The man whose name must not be mentioned sells the elephant' and results in Galy Gay's accusation and imprisonment for attempting to sell the royal elephant.⁶⁹ In part three is 'the Trial of the Man Whose Name is Not to be Mentioned' in which Galy Gay refutes his name, but also Jip's imposed identity and claims in his defence that 'one man equals no man'.⁷⁰ When his execution takes place in part four, Galy Gay has completely lost control of both his identities and having resigned to the situation, falls on his own accord when the shots are fired. In part five, his reconstruction has been completed and Uriah announces 'Number Five: Obsequies

⁶⁷ James K. Lyon, 'Brecht's *Mann ist Mann* and the Death of Tragedy in the 20th Century'. *The German Quarterly*, 67.4 (1994), 513-520 (p. 515).

⁶⁸ Brecht, *Collected Plays: Two*, p. 42.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47, 49.

and Interment of Galy Gay, last of the personalities'.⁷¹ When he awakes, Galy Gay can only answer to the name of Jip and is confronted with the coffin that supposedly carries the dead body of Galy Gay, a dangerous man as Begbick asserts. In this symbolic image of the empty coffin that does not contain an actual body but his old identity, the audience is exposed to Galy Gay's unconditional embrace of his new identity.

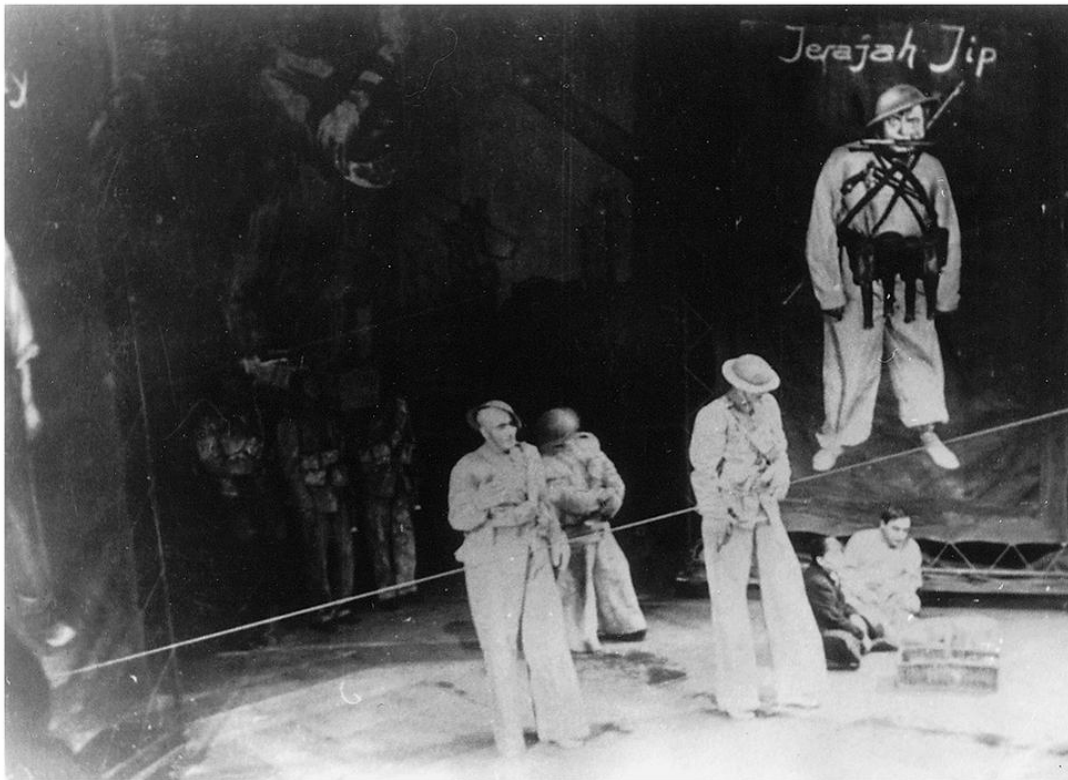


Figure 6. *Man Equals Man*, written and directed by Bertolt Brecht, stage design by Caspar Neher. Staatliches Schauspielhaus, Berlin 1931. Seated figures: Widow Begbick (Helene Weigel) and Galy Gay (Peter Lorre)

The image of Galy Gay as the grotesque result of the evolutionary process described above is further demonstrated when he stands over the coffin containing the dead persona of himself. Although his now fellow comrades are afraid he might look into it, Galy Gay simply stands next to it and delivers a monologue which renders his painful realization of this transformation.

I could not, without instant death
 Gaze into a crate at a drained face
 Of some person once familiar to me from the water's surface
 Into which a man looked who, so I realise, died.
 Therefore I am unable to open this crate
 Because this fear is in the both of me, for perhaps

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 58.

I am the Both which has just come about
 On our earth's transformable top surface:
 [...]

One man equals no man. Someone has to call him.
 [...]

By what sign does Galy Gay know himself
 To be Galy Gay?
 [...]

Moreover in my opinion the difference
 Between yes and no is not all that great.
 [...]

And I, the one I and the other I
 Are used and accordingly usable.
 And since I never gazed at that elephant
 I shall close an eye to what concerns myself
 And shed what is not likeable about me and thereby
 Be pleasant.⁷²

In this speech Brecht presents his audience with the new social conditioning in which the 'new man', instead of demanding real change and excluding himself from the system, turns himself into 'the accomplice of just what is oppressing' him.⁷³ Just as he has refuted his wife in scene 8, Galy Gay rejects himself and the fearful duality of his nature. By using the metaphor of a person's reflection on the surface of water, Brecht signifies why at that moment Galy Gay decided to abandon his realised identity completely (since one's reflection can offer an image of one's individuality) and rather opts for the one that can be 'named' and the image imposed by others. By relinquishing the process of identification at the hands of the other soldiers that name him and by claiming that both his identities are used and usable, Galy Gay negates any sense of individuality and humanity. Galy Gay's transformation is completed in the last scene in which the army attempts to destroy the fortress of Sir El-Djowr. During the scene Galy Gay and his comrades are met by his alter ego, Jeraiah Jip, who demands that his military papers should be returned, that is, his identity, but ends up with Galy Gay's papers. In this way the swap of the two men's identities is completed, but for Galy Gay there is one more stage. As he has become a soldier, he wants to demonstrate the ability to kill. In a comic episode between him and Begbick, Galy Gay learns how to use a cannon so as to destroy the fortress by using only five shots. These five shots that Galy Gay fires remind the audience of the five sub-scenes

⁷² Ibid., p. 60-62.

⁷³ Walter Weideli, *The Art of Bertolt Brecht*. Trans. Daniel Russell. (New York: New York University Press, 1963), p. 21.

that transformed him into the 'human fighting-machine' he became.⁷⁴ Having tasted blood, his transformation is completed: the play ends with Galy Gay listening to a distant voice announcing that seven thousand refugees were killed by his action. He deliberates:

GALY GAY: Oh. But what is that to me? The one cry and the other cry.
And already I feel within me
The desire to sink my teeth
In the enemy's throat
Ancient urge to kill
Every family's breadwinner



Figure 7. *Man Equals Man*, written and directed by Bertolt Brecht, stage design by Caspar Neher. Staatliches Schauspielhaus. Berlin 1931. Peter Lorre as Galy Gay.

⁷⁴ Brecht, *Collected Plays: Two*, p. 75.

To carry out the conquerors'
Mission.⁷⁵

The sense of individuality, identity and humanity that were supposed to be at the centre of the bourgeois order collapses and instead what is revealed is that man is identical with his social function and as such s/he is interchangeable. Brecht's audience was faced with the grotesque scenario of a porter's transformation into a soldier, but the ending of the play revealed that such an event was not as absurd as they had imagined.

The play's borrowed farcical elements are further exposed in Bloody Five/Charles Fairchild's self-castration but once again they are not used so as to cause simply laughter but also allow the audience to reflect critically. He takes great pride in his identity as a stern sergeant and deduces his power from the myth surrounding his pseudonym. For him, the name Bloody Five carries more significance than his actual one, as it identifies his function within the military. Dressing his identity with the uniform of a sergeant, Bloody Five feels in control and powerful. The army is the purpose of his existence as he comments that 'the Infantry Training Manual is a book chock-a-block with weaknesses, but it is the only thing a man can fall back on, because it stiffens the backbone and takes over responsibility towards God'.⁷⁶ His downfall begins once he appears in civilian clothes; without his army uniform Bloody Five becomes simply Charles to his soldiers and to the audience. Having succumbed to his sexual instincts with Begbick, he feels deprived of his fearful identity. Realizing that his action has cost him his military identity, he cries out loud

What have you done to me that I am no longer Bloody Five? [...] What are these clothes I'm wearing? Do you call them suitable? [...] I used to be a big gun. My name is Bloody Five. [...] That is the answer. There we have a rope. There we have a service pistol. That's where we draw the line. Mutineers will be shot. That is plain as a pikestaff. 'Johnny Bowlegs, pack your kit'. No girl in this world will ever cost me a penny again. That is as plain as a pikestaff. And I shall remain cool as a cucumber. I accept full responsibility. I have to do it if I am to go on being Bloody Five.
*A shot is heard.*⁷⁷

Bloody Five attempts through this comic self-sacrifice to re-establish order and gain control once more both over the situation and over the instinct that caused him to jeopardise his identity. However, through his actions, he is disfigured for life. And

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 76.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

although the episode of his castration seems grotesque and farcical, the lack of reaction of most of the characters present to his outburst and Galy Gay's ambiguous one – who on the one hand attempts to stop him from committing the act (by cautioning him not to 'take any steps on account of your name! A name is an uncertain thing, you can't build on it!') and on the other hand, as soon as the shot is fired laughs at Bloody Five's expense – reveal a more disturbing reality as Galy Gay is in the process of becoming a new type of Bloody Five himself.⁷⁸ We are told that Bloody Five acquired his name after killing five defenceless Hindus and, almost in the same manner, Galy Gay will appropriate the same nickname after killing seven thousand defenceless refugees using five cannon shots.

Although *Man Equals Man* is not considered one of Brecht's most famous works, it is an important work as it not only represents his political humour but also his emphasis on theatre's renewed social function. By dispensing with any dramatic narratives that obeyed the bourgeois aesthetics, Brecht was determined that the new epic theatre would expose how humans are bound to the social and economic relations, which are relations of commodities. As Galy Gay 'comes to no harm', but rather 'wins', Brecht wanted to demonstrate how the economic model of capitalism, by targeting the masses, produced a new model for resolving human identity that was still problematic.⁷⁹ By employing a character that belonged to the petty bourgeoisie and bore no resemblance to the enlightened noble hero of bourgeois drama, the play did not present an emotionally recognizable pattern for the audience. Rather, it forced the audience to acknowledge the play's function as a socially critical drama, which aimed at allowing the audience to recognize any social implications of the action presented and to reflect on the social or political conditions that resulted in the human suffering.

As early as 1930 Brecht had commended that the old aesthetics of bourgeois drama 'is intended to produce hypnosis, is likely to induce sordid intoxication, or creates fog' and as such it 'has got to be given up'.⁸⁰ As such, it aimed at presenting an emotional reinforcement of social rules and established truths recognized by the audience that intended to not challenge the status quo. Therefore, the lack of critical and independent thought that was precluded by the emphasis on emotional

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 69.

⁷⁹ Brecht, 'A Radio Speech' in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 18-20, (p. 19).

⁸⁰ Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 38.

identification reinforced the appeal of ‘a universal essence of human nature’ to which the audience would respond.⁸¹ The bourgeois aesthetics of drama assumed an idealised audience that would recognize the essential humanity of the tragic hero, would respond with pity and would identify with his calamities. Brecht argued that such a dramatic practice produced the belief that human suffering was part of man’s universal essence and therefore inescapable. To his epic theatre, which aimed at reinforcing the need for change and the existence of alternative realities through the challenging of social and political institutions, such a belief was restrictive and offered another example of the stagnant bourgeois social and cultural order. At the same time the emphasis on emotional response created a barrier for the audience’s critical reflection on the social issues, especially as it tended to view the play through the eyes of the tragic hero. For Brecht the new epic theatre should ‘regard nothing as existing except in so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself’ and it should allow the audience ‘complete freedom’.⁸²

The play is also important, especially with regards to Brecht’s relationship with ‘Americana’, as it puts forward a new style of acting that is influenced by Chaplin and the early farce films but moves a step forward by becoming socially ‘gestic’ for Brecht’s epic theatre. For Brecht ‘Gestus’, in terms of acting, came to represent a total process of ‘attitudes’, such as body movements and gestures, facial and mimetic expressions, voice and sounds, the speech patterns and the use of make-up and costumes, that an actor utilizes to reveal to an audience the character s/he is performing.⁸³ What makes this process socially ‘gestic’ however is how the character’s social conditioning is revealed through it and, in turn, ‘allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances’.⁸⁴ As mentioned earlier, Brecht was able to implement his ideas and critique in his own directorial staging of *Man Equals Man* in 1931 in which Peter Lorre held the role of Galy Gay. Lorre’s versatile acting style enabled Brecht to present on stage an image of Galy Gay that was grotesque and comical and at the same time displayed a machine-like precision of movement. Although Lorre’s performance was not well received by the Berlin audience as most of it ‘quite rejected it’, Brecht believed that it challenged the accepted criteria for

⁸¹ Angela Curran, ‘Brecht’s Criticisms of Aristotle’s Aesthetics of Tragedy’. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59.2 (2001), 167-184 (p. 169).

⁸² Brecht, ‘A Short Organum for the Theatre’, pp. 193-4.

⁸³ Brecht, ‘On Gestic music’ in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 104-106 (p. 104).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

judging acting.⁸⁵ He defended Lorre's performance by commenting that 'the epic actor has to be able to show his character's coherence despite, or rather by means of, interruptions and jumps ... the various phases [of Galy Gay's transformation] must be



Figure 8. *Man Equals Man*, written and directed By Bertolt Brecht, stage design by Caspar Neher. Staatliches Schauspielhaus, Berlin 1931. Peter Lorre as Galy Gay.

able to be clearly seen, and therefore separated; and yet this must not be achieved mechanically'.⁸⁶ Therefore, for Brecht the epic actor allows his character to grow in front of the audience's eyes and thus attempts to involve them in the whole process, unlike the dramatic actor who has already established an attitude and simply delivers it unchanged and unchallenged.

Brecht's defence of Lorre's performance in his letter to the *Berliner-Börsen Courier* in 1931 manifested his increasing distrust of traditional acting, of the Aristotelian dramatic method and a clearer understanding of what his new epic theory should entail. His new theatre demanded new rules for the art of acting and 'the fact that at one point Lorre whitens his face (instead of allowing his acting to become more and more influenced by fear of death 'from within himself') demonstrated Brecht's idea of allowing the spectator the freedom to observe the character on stage

⁸⁵ Brecht, 'The Question of Criteria for Judging Acting' in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 53-54.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

rather than simply empathising with his misfortunes.⁸⁷ The fact that Lorre whitened his face during the third part of his development into a soldier (that is when he is ‘resurrected’ and being reassembled after the funeral speech) helped Brecht manifest that Galy Gay’s fear of his ‘new’ life did not have to be represented through a traditionally structured and overpowering speech. Instead, this simple gesture accompanied his seemingly contradictory individual sentences and aimed again at letting the spectator make his own discoveries rather than be presented with an end product.

Brecht’s emphasis on the theatre’s social function and Lorre’s ability to adapt to the epic theatre’s acting requirements proposed therefore a new and challenging view of performance. Sergei Tretyakov reported of Brecht’s production that ‘Giant soldiers armed to the teeth and wearing jackets caked with lime, blood and excrement, stalk about the stage holding on to wires to keep them from falling off the stilts inside their trouser legs’.⁸⁸ However, Brecht’s emphasis on a grotesque, clowning-like and satirical performance was not devoid of educational value. By ‘re-functionalising’ the genre of comedy and presenting his play as a parable, Brecht aimed at combining entertainment with a social lesson. Although the more violent scenes of the play are presented as comic instances similar to film slapstick or cabaret acts, the accommodation of violence within comedy exposed the audience to the inhumanity created by social injustice, criticised it and forced the audience to recognize the need for change. For Brecht, the theatrical space could no longer accommodate the old bourgeois order and instead was to become an arena where the exploration of human behaviour in relation to social, political and economic issues would materialize. A theatrical performance was no longer ‘lacking in character’, since it was perceived as a social action that would both educate the audience into experiencing the new epic theatre’s formal elements and content and educe its intellectual, dialectical and critical abilities.⁸⁹ By pronouncing the death of bourgeois aesthetics through the parody of *Man Equals Man*, Brecht announced the beginning of the ‘social restructuring of the theatre’, which would concentrate on the audience’s class consciousness, activate its

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

⁸⁸ As quoted in John Willett (ed.), *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht: a study from eight aspects*. (London: Methuen Drama, 1977), p. 148.

⁸⁹ Brecht, ‘Emphasis on Sport’ in *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 6.

presence, demand its acute intellectual power and present it with the dynamics of social change.⁹⁰

When Brecht revisited his early vision of ‘Americana’ in *St Joan of the Stockyards* (1929-1931), he was already immersed in Marxist theory, had a more clearly formulated idea of the new style of acting required by his epic theatre and his understanding of the element of barbarity inherent within the new American capitalist age was more acute. He was quick to acknowledge that in his early image ‘of this creature of our imagination [America] neither injustice nor cruelty bothered us’.⁹¹ Although the cruelty and injustice of America were exposed in *In the Jungle of Cities*, their strong connection with the capitalist system and human suffering were not explored as fully as in *St Joan*. The later play, deemed Brecht’s great representation of capitalism by Fredric Jameson, not only allows us to revisit the Chicago of the earlier play but also more critically approach the complexities, contradictions and connections of the modern world through the mythical space of ‘Americana’.⁹²

St Joan of the Stockyards marked Brecht’s attempt to write a play originally about the Chicago wheat industry which then changed to the meat industry. Its literary influences are diverse but they include once again Upton Sinclair, whose novel *The Jungle*, as mentioned earlier, dealt with the American meatpacking industry, the corruption inherent in the capitalist system, the extreme poverty and harsh working conditions faced by workers but also with the importance of action and change seen in socialism and organised labour unions.⁹³ In this play, Brecht’s vision of Chicago had lost any traces of exotic aura present in *In the Jungle*, and instead had become more cruel and frightening. It revealed itself as a fully industrialised metropolis whose wealth boom was based on the slaughtering of cattle that was subsequently turned into meat products. At the same time the city is divided as the rich and powerful live ‘up’ in the town of Chicago whereas the poor reside ‘down’ at the stockyards along with the animals. One therefore can grasp the metaphor inherent as Chicago has become a metropolis that not only slaughters animals, turns them into products and profits through this business but at the same time applies the same procedure to the poor. By providing fictional names and faces to those behind the mechanisms of industrial

⁹⁰ James K. Lyon, ‘Brecht’s *Mann ist Mann* and the Death of Tragedy in the 20th Century’. *The German Quarterly*, 67.4 (1994), 513-520 (p. 520).

⁹¹ As quoted in Parmalee, *Brecht’s America*, p. 6.

⁹² Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p. 151.

⁹³ The play is also influenced by Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara* (1905) which examines the role of the Salvation Army and *Saint Joan* (1923) which retells the saint’s story.

society and exposing the unpredictability of the stock exchange, Brecht allows his audience to experience the effects of the actions of a few powerful men on a majority of helpless workers and at the same time encourages them to discern which of the alternative options presented in the play offer viable change.

The play revolves around the character of Joan Dark and the different ideological positions she holds on her quest to find the causes of poverty. In the beginning of the play, Joan is presented as a naïve religious believer and an influential member of the Black Straw Hats. When we first encounter Joan, she embarks on a speech that, at least in the beginning, resembles a critique of the economic status of Chicago:

In a dark time of cruel confusion
Of ordained disorder
Of systematic lawlessness
Of dehumanised humanity
When in our cities the turmoil never ceases:
Into such a world, resembling a slaughterhouse...⁹⁴

However, as she continues her speech, it is made evident that such a critique is not her intention. Instead, she adamantly believes that the answer to such misery is ‘to bring back God’.⁹⁵ Thus, the audience is exposed to her first ideological position, that of religion, which is challenged though when Joan descends to the stockyards in scene 4. Joan is taken to the stockyards to be exposed to the ‘baseness’ and wickedness of the poor but instead what she sees is not only how the brutality of poverty affects the poor but also how the economic model of capitalism is responsible for such poverty as it dictates the actions of people.⁹⁶ When challenged about the wickedness of the poor, Joan refuses to accept it and instead claims that what she has been shown is not

The baseness of the poor but
The poverty of the poor.
Now you have shown me the baseness of the poor
Let me show you what suffering they endure.
Your tales of their debasement you will see
Refuted by the face of poverty.⁹⁷

In this speech, one can see Joan’s first steps towards her disassociation with religion and the Black Straw Hats. As the play progresses, the audience can witness Joan’s complete disillusionment with religion (scene 7) and her gradual identification with

⁹⁴ Brecht, *Collected Plays: Two*, p. 207.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

the poor. She becomes involved in the strikes organised but fails to deliver the letter of support and solidarity she was entrusted with. Similarly Joan initially opposes the strike's organisers' call to fight the police coming to break the strike (scene 9g) but having witnessed the arrest of the labour leaders and realising how her inaction has contributed to the failure of the strike (scene 11a), she reaches a certain level of ideological awakening. By the end of the play Joan has realised that her false response towards human misery and her false understanding of capitalism have not only contributed towards her passivity ('When there was a chance to change it [the world]/ I wasn't there') but have also allowed the system to turn her into 'just what [they] wanted', a false martyr whose story will be disseminated by the now rich, corrupt and powerful Black Straw Hats.⁹⁸

Opposite Joan, Brecht positions Pierpoint Mauler, the meat king of Chicago. Mauler is presented as a mixture of monstrosity and kindness, cruelty and empathy. On the one hand, he is a ruthless businessman, well-connected with the stock market exchange, who welcomes competition and does not hesitate to drive his competitors out of business (regardless of their or his working force). On the other hand, he exhibits an eccentric sense of kindness and guilt. When he first meets Joan, he is amazed that she works for nothing and offers her money (taken out of his opponents' wallets though) to distribute it among the poor. However, when he is faced with the poor themselves (scene 5), he instantly faints and when re-awakened he appears willing to abandon his business (scene 6) claiming that 'it can't go on, this naked buying and selling, with one man coldly tearing the next man's skin off. Too many people are howling with pain, and there will be more'.⁹⁹ Brecht's portrayal of Mauler as a split man who feels guilty for the workers' misery and sponsors the Christian charity of the Black Straw Hats but whom 'the taste of raw meat will bring him to his senses', represents the contradiction implicit within capitalism which allows 'raw' competition to co-exist side-by-side with charity.

St Joan of the Stockyards has been considered as a less successful play compared to the *Lehrstücke* that followed it (and also in particular to the non-*Lehrstück* one *The Mother*) primarily because of the emphasis given to Joan's

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 304-305.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

personal quest as opposed to the more marginalised voices of the workers.¹⁰⁰ Although this might be true, what is of interest for this thesis is the way Brecht's earlier vision of Chicago and 'Americana' in *In the Jungle of Cities* is transformed in this play into an acute critique of the capitalist system. Whereas in *In the Jungle* the emphasis was on the boxing match between Shlink and Garga that leaves them both changed and a critique on capitalism was underlying their fight, in *St Joan* Brecht wanted to expose the merits of such an economic model and of the sharper division between the social classes, and also 'illustrate the fallacy of identifying the forces which keep that capitalism going with reasonable humanity'.¹⁰¹ That is why, throughout the play, the audience is exposed to Joan's gradual learning, understanding and demystification with idealism and religion. At the same time, the play (unlike *In the Jungle*) does not hide the mechanisms of the meat industrial system but instead presents how the representative groups of the meat packers, wholesalers, stockbreeders, brokers, speculators and even journalists perform within that system and whose performance influences the lives of the workers. This is made more evident at the last scene of the play; as Joan is dying a loudspeaker announces a list of economic catastrophes seen as a direct result of capitalism. And although Joan has learned that the importance of personal development stands for nothing unless any action performed has consequences for the society as a whole and can lead to change, this knowledge has arrived too late as she is in the process of being canonised herself into a 'saint' by Mauler and the Salvation Army for further exploitation. For Brecht, the audience of this play has a lot to learn through Joan's belated knowledge.

With *St Joan of the Stockyards* Brecht has abandoned his earlier mythical vision of America as that of jazz, gangsters and Chaplin's silent movies. In this early vision, America represented the genesis of a new age, which although it connoted a duality of brutality and evolution (seen in *In the Jungle*), also represented some hope, especially as new experiments could take place, socio-economic orders could be challenged and the social subjection of human nature changed. It was this imaginary 'America' that allowed him to ignore the social injustice and cruelty inherent within the 'American way of life'. However, through his reading of Marx and the strengthening of his Marxist convictions, Brecht became aware of the USA's

¹⁰⁰ For further discussion see Christopher McCullough, 'Saint Joan of the Stockyards'. *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 96-103.

¹⁰¹ Max Spalter, *Brecht's tradition*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), p.179.

dominant ideology of materialism, the power of the commercial middle class, its worship of success and the alienation suffered by the lower classes. In *St Joan of the Stockyards* America is equated with capitalism, with social and economic bias and with the bourgeois cultural vacuum. His depiction of America in such plays is not a simplistic, narrow or just symbolic representation of the violence and greed inherent within capitalism. Instead it is used crudely, as a deliberate gestic act, which follows his previous vision and narrative of this *topos* 'in a circular process in which each level enriches the previous one.'¹⁰² Through this process one is exposed to Brecht's deliberate strategy of using 'America' aesthetically in order to further his theory but also include the cultural *topos* of 'America' in his dialectical theatrical dramaturgy. Brecht attempted to do so in 1935 in the production of *The Mother* in New York. However this first attempt was faced with rejection and the same occurred six years later when Brecht returned to the USA for a six-year stay during World War II and staged *Galileo* in Los Angeles in 1947. The new age of social, political and theatrical revolution that he had envisioned all these years seemed not to have materialised on the other side of the Atlantic.

III. 'Indeed, I live in the dark ages!'¹⁰³ Brecht's encounter with 'Americana'.

After escaping Germany and the ever rising power of fascism, Brecht found himself in exile in Denmark. Although his early vision of 'Americana' was revised dramatically, it still haunted his imagination. Moreover, the American stage had become an inviting performance space especially as new left theatrical tendencies that challenged the hegemony of Broadway were expressed through the Theatre Union and the Federal Theatre Project (as discussed in chapter three). Up until his first visit in 1935 to the USA, Brecht had remained essentially unknown amongst most theatre practitioners. The only plays performed included *The Flight of the Lindberghs* by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra on April 4, 1931; also a school in Salem, Massachusetts and the Music School of the Henry Street Settlement House in New York produced *He Who Says Yes* in 1933.¹⁰⁴ On April 13,

¹⁰² Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p. 103.

¹⁰³ Brecht, Bertolt. 'To Posterity'. *Bertolt Brecht*. Ed. Denys Thompson. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p. 51.

¹⁰⁴ Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 6.

1933 *The Threepenny Opera* opened in New York City's Empire Theatre but the production was considered a failure and closed after twelve performances. Cy Caldwell's review that 'supposed to be an amusing theatrical burlesque, this peculiar hybrid seldom amused, often bored' reflected the audience's reception of the play and J. W. Krutch's opinion that 'its mixture of styles and its continually broken rhythms was that of a kind of dada or surrealism' indicated the reviewers' misconstructions concerning Brecht's theory and dramaturgy.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Brecht's name and work was scarcely ever mentioned in any of the widely-read (still left at that time) magazines like *The Partisan Review* or *The New Masses*.¹⁰⁶

Brecht's opportunity to visit his imaginary *topos* of 'Americana' came in 1935 to participate in the production of his play *The Mother* (freely adapted by Maxim Gorki's similarly entitled novel) by the Theatre Union (the most socialist theatre at that moment in America). As expressed in his poem 'When the Classic Departed on Monday, October 7, 1935, Denmark Wept', written on board the ship to New York, Brecht acknowledged the technological dominance of the USA and wondered whether the American theatre and its audience were ready to consent to his new style of acting and 'learning plays'.¹⁰⁷ Unlike Europe, where Brecht had enjoyed a reputation as one of the most influential playwrights and where his theories and plays were studied and performed, the American theatre and culture were resistant to his theatrical development and unable to understand them as exemplified by the afore quoted reviews. And although some American theatre practitioners expressed interest in the theatrical developments proposed by Meyerhold and the Blue Blouse group (discussed in chapter three), they seemed more resistant (even hostile) towards Brecht's dialectical infusion of the classical Greek and Elizabethan theatrical traditions with philosophical theories and the socio-economic-political Marxist ideology, towards his defiant questioning of the foundations of the traditional bourgeois aesthetic, which dictated the production and reception of theatre and

¹⁰⁵ Both reviewers as cited in Ulrich Weisstein, 'Brecht in America: A Preliminary Survey'. *MLN*, 78.4 (1963), 373-396 (pp. 381-2). It was not until the famous Broadway revival at the Theater de Lys on March 10, 1954 with Weill's *Widow*, Lotte Lenya, as the prostitute Jenny that the play achieved popular success in America. That production used a translation by Marc Blitzstein (different to the 1933 one by Gifford Cochran and Jerrold Krinsky) that is considered by some critics to be a softened interpretation of Brecht's text. See Lawrence Kramer, *Musical meaning: toward a critical history*. (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2002) p. 226.

¹⁰⁶ Lee Baxandall, 'Brecht in America, 1935'. *TDR*, 12.1 (1967), 69-87 (p. 71).

¹⁰⁷ Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 8.

towards his quest to produce new modes of expression that would be compatible with the new social order.

However, Brecht quickly realised that the American scene had not developed along the same lines as the European, nor had it expressed any revolutionary tendencies. The quite colourful incidents regarding the letter exchange between Brecht and the Theatre Union people prior to his arrival, as well as their problematic collaboration during the rehearsals, have been documented at length by Lyon, Cook, Needle and Thomson and offer a valuable insight regarding the different attitudes towards the new theatrical practices.¹⁰⁸ However, some of those events need to be reiterated at this stage of the thesis as not only do they reveal the expectations that Brecht had on his arrival to New York and Broadway but also how the American stage could not function at that moment as a performative *topos* for Brecht's theatre. According to Mordecai Gorelik (who designed the set for *The Mother* and was also one of the first and few American theatre practitioners to embrace Brecht's theory of the epic theatre), Brecht perceived himself as the 'Einstein of the new stage form', eager to disseminate his theory and new theatre to the New World as well but his first-hand experience left him disappointed.¹⁰⁹

The Theatre Union was a theatrical group dedicated to the production of socially conscious plays, made available at reduced ticket prices and aimed at as wide an audience as possible ranging from simple workers to organized labour unions to upper-middle-class patrons. At the same time, in terms of acting, it expressed the general commitment of American theatre to Stanislavski's method-acting style. As a result, the American socialist scene was still very much indebted to a more traditionally bourgeois theatrical sensibility that influenced its productions in general and fuelled the controversy with Brecht. Paul Peters was responsible for the translation and adaptation of *The Mother* for the American audience but Brecht reacted violently to his efforts. Peters had decided to rename the play *Mother*, dropping thus the definite article, so as to provoke sentiments of warmth and affection

¹⁰⁸ See James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Bruce Cook, *Brecht in Exile*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), and Jan Needle and Peter Thomson, *Brecht*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

¹⁰⁹ As quoted in Katherine Bliss Eaton, *The Theater of Meyerhold and Brecht*. (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 9.

associated with the universal figure of a mother.¹¹⁰ George Sklar has commented how Peters was frustrated by Brecht's text, its fragmentary quality and its 'insufficient dramatization of personal scenes' and Manuel Gomez reiterated that because of Brecht's epic style, Peters' adaptation was moving closer to Gorki's original text and 'striving for some kind of identification of prospective audience and stage characters'.¹¹¹ On top of these remarks, Albert Maltz, recalling a Theatre Union meeting to discuss the play, revealed that they judged Brecht's play 'as we would have judged any play in the western, Ibsen tradition and found it gravely lacking'.¹¹² What is revealed from these comments is that the fears Brecht entertained before arriving in New York were materialised. The Theatre Union people were not only unaware of his epic theory and requirements for performance but even when Brecht



Figure 9. *The Mother*. Final scene in the Theatre Union's production, New York, 1935.

¹¹⁰ For an interesting discussion of both scripts prepared for this production (Brecht and Peter's) and the play's aesthetic appropriation within the American theatrical scene, see Laura Bradley, *Brecht and Political Theatre: 'The Mother' on Stage*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 142-154.

¹¹¹ As quoted in Baxandall, 'Brecht in America', p. 71. Baxandall also quotes Brecht who believed that Peters' text and the revisions the Theatre Union carried out turned the play's historical events into 'atmospheric gags'. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

attempted to explain his method he failed; their complacency with the bourgeois liberal aesthetic left them little room to manoeuvre successfully and thus they became immune for a long time to Brecht's radical theatrical experimentations.¹¹³

Brecht found the end product of his turbulent collaboration with the Theatre Union people disappointing and unsatisfactory. This experience reinforced his belief in the American theatrical commercialism and prompted him to conclude that 'the Theatre Union behaved like any other Broadway theatre that treats a play like goods or the raw material for easily marketable goods'.¹¹⁴ After receiving bad reviews from the commercial press and low ticket sales, the production closed after thirty-six performances and Brecht's first American experiment failed. The mixture of an agit-prop text with a more conventional performance and the rejection of Brecht's requirements resulted in the formation of hostile opinions towards Brecht's dramaturgy. At the same time, the failure of this production proved that the American stage was not ready to understand and implement Brecht's challenging theatrical method. In a way Brecht was faced with the same difficulties that the Federal Theatre Project was experiencing during its first few years as they were both trying to infiltrate a stage permeated by an established mode of aesthetic representation that in turn influenced the audience's reception mode. In Brecht's case however, things were more complicated as not only was he faced with a hostility towards his theory and experiments but also a personal one as he was primarily 'a Communist and a German too'.¹¹⁵

Brecht's first encounter with the American theatre did not bring him many friends or new collaborators within the American left. George Sklar's comparison of Brecht to Hitler, perceiving in him 'the same apoplectic indulgence, the same ranting and shrieking associated with the German dictator' represented the uncomplimentary view of the playwright, his theory and acting method that many American critics and theatre people felt for a long time.¹¹⁶ However, there were a few that were attracted to his epic theory (although they could not fully understand it) and his effort to change the prevailing theatre practices. Among those were Joseph Losey (whom Brecht had

¹¹³ For an excellent discussion of all aspects of the 1935 New York production of *The Mother* and interview material from people associated with the production read Lee Baxandall's 'Brecht in America, 1935'.

¹¹⁴ As quoted in Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 10.

¹¹⁵ G. Vernon as quoted in Weisstein, 'Brecht in America: A Preliminary Survey', p. 383.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, pp. 11-12. The comment is taken from Lyon's personal interview with Sklar.

met a year earlier while both of them were visiting Moscow), Mordecai Gorelik, Eric Bentley (who translated many of his works and helped the better understanding of Brecht within America) and Mark Blitzstein and his wife Eva Goldbeck (who wrote an article for the *New Masses* presenting the Brechtian theory as a new revolutionary practice in touch with the new world changes).¹¹⁷ Brecht deeply admired Gorelik (with whom he kept in touch) and his work; during his collaboration with the Theatre Union, Gorelik remained the only person open to Brecht's ideas on the epic theatre. His attitude prompted Brecht to comment to Piscator: 'he [Gorelik] designed the set for *The Mother* and is both technically more advanced and politically closer to us than any other stage designer'.¹¹⁸ Losey and Blitzstein were also creatively influenced by Brecht and introduced him to the work of the Living Newspaper Unit of the Federal Theatre Project in an attempt to present him with the alternative to Broadway. Although there are no records of any attempts to perform any of Brecht's plays by the FTP, according to Losey, Brecht was impressed by his production of *Injunction Granted*.¹¹⁹ For Losey, Brecht's theatrical importance was immense, as he was 'expounding his enthusiasms, articulating his 'eye' which was our eye too.'¹²⁰ At the same time, it was during an FTP gathering Blitzstein performed his song 'The Nickel Under Your Foot' about prostitution and on Brecht's suggestion decided to write a whole play about all forms of prostitution; the play produced by the FTP was *The Cradle Will Rock* and it was dedicated to Brecht.¹²¹

His discussions with Losey, Blitzstein and other American theatre people, his attendance at performances such as Odet's *Waiting for Lefty* (although he disliked *Paradise Lost* by the same author) and those of the Living Newspaper Unit, revealed to Brecht the existence of technological and dramaturgical innovations within the American theatre. However, after his experience with the Theatre Union, he felt that the American left theatre did not share the same sensibility to Marxist thinking and to his method as the European left theatre. He commented that

As concerns the dramaturgy of the German proletariat, its methods were altered because it recognized that the political effects of a certain kind of drama were inadequate, and for no other reason. In other words: we looked not only at this dramaturgy but at its results. We weren't pleased.

¹¹⁷ Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 18.

¹¹⁸ Brecht's letter to Piscator in 1936. in *Letters 1913-1956*, Eds. John Willett. Trans. Ralph Manheim. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 230-231.

¹¹⁹ Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, p. 48.

¹²⁰ Joseph Losey, 'The Individual Eye'. *Encore*, 8.2 (1961), 5-15 (p. 12).

¹²¹ For more information on the two FTP productions, see chapter three of this thesis.

When we now see the same type of drama in other lands, we must be allowed, following a careful analysis, to expect similar results. And if our suggestions perhaps do not prove interesting in these other lands, at least our warning should be received with interest. We unknowingly made our mistakes. Those following us and aware of us would make them knowingly.¹²²

Brecht's warning implied that within the American theatrical scene the tradition of the bourgeois aesthetic still persisted and he felt that its left counterpart did not attempt to challenge it on a large scale. By still relying on middle-class patrons and aiming to please their parochial taste, the American left theatre (including the FTP as explored earlier) seemed unwilling to fundamentally challenge the theatrical status quo. At the same time, by failing to cultivate in workers a distinct sense of class consciousness (separated from the values of the middle-class), it could not produce any revolutionary portrayals of the workers' social awareness. Resisting the developments of the theatre of the new age, the American left theatre remained closely associated with the more naturalistic style of performance, emphasising thus the representation of a character's emotions, which resulted in the audience's empathetic response. Brecht's notions of dialectical thinking and critical distance were rejected as either 'too difficult', 'too sophisticated' or 'not attractive enough' for the American audience and, as the fate of the FTP suggested, the American theatrical scene soon resorted to the old bourgeois aesthetic it was accustomed to.¹²³

His second encounter with America occurred six years later; Brecht arrived this time in San Pedro, California, on July 21, 1941, a few months before the Pearl Harbor raid and remained there for six years. By the time he arrived Brecht had already been in exile for eight years but he viewed his exiled state as transitory and, as a result his 'resistance to assimilation was particularly strong, leading to tensions' both with the film and theatre industry.¹²⁴ Because of those tensions, he suffered many professional disappointments and realised that his theory of the epic theatre was still not well-received or understood. During this difficult period, however, Brecht was introduced to Charles Laughton in 1944 and this meeting resulted in a three-and-

¹²² Brecht as quoted in Baxandall, 'Brecht in America, 1935', p. 84.

¹²³ As Paul Peters suggested 'For the time being (then and now) Brecht may be too sophisticated, too new, too special for most theatre goers – and for workers'. As quoted in Baxandall, 'Brecht in America, 1935', p. 87.

¹²⁴ Gerd Gemünden, 'Brecht in Hollywood: *Hangmen also Die* and the Anti-Nazi Film'. *TDR*, 43.4 (1999), 65-76, (p. 66). Again for a detailed biographical account of his time in the United States, refer to Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*; Bruce Cook, *Brecht in Exile*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982); Jan Needle and Peter Thomson. *Brecht*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

a-half year collaboration which, in turn, resulted in the translation and adaptation of the *Life of Galileo* for the American audience. The play was originally written in 1938 during his stay in Denmark and not long after the Munich agreement, which epitomized Hitler's early triumph over the rest of Europe, and was first produced in September 1943 by the Zurich Schauspielhaus. Brecht did not see the production himself and as a result his reactions to it are not known but, as Willett and Manheim commented, the play created ambiguity for the audience as it did not know whether Galileo recanted because of cowardice or as part of a plan to complete his *Discorsi* and smuggle it out to the free world. This ambiguity was created because this first version of the play indicated that Galileo had already conspired with the stove-fitter to send his manuscript abroad even before his pupil Andrea appeared in the last scene.¹²⁵ That first version was re-worked by Brecht and Laughton and the end result is now known as the 'Charles Laughton' or 'American' version of the play and was entitled simply *Galileo*. However, Brecht's tendency to continual redrafting led him to revisit the 'American' version in 1953, after he returned to Berlin, so as to expand it in order to include certain scenes that were discarded from the Los Angeles production. The last version was presented to the post-World War II European audience in 1955 in Cologne and Brecht resorted to the original title. However, for the purposes of this chapter I intend to focus on the American version of the play, in order to consider Brecht's outlook on Galileo and the 'new' scientific age and how that was negotiated in its transition to the American stage.

Life of Galileo is considered to be one of Brecht's finest and most dialectical pieces, with a very ambiguous ending and featuring an existing historical figure as its main character. His fascination with Galileo, the father of the first 'scientific revolution', could be resulting from the increasing popularity that the persona of the scientist in general had acquired in recent times, most notably Albert Einstein (also considered the father of the second 'scientific revolution').¹²⁶ At the same time, Brecht's concerns over the relationship between science and knowledge and the use of this knowledge as explored in his text were affected by the scientific experiments that shaped the first half of the twentieth century. Brecht's writing of the first draft

¹²⁵ *Life of Galileo*, Eds. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. Trans. John Willett. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), pp. ix-x.

¹²⁶ Such views have been suggested by Ernan McMullin in 'Empiricism and the Scientific Revolution' in *Art, Science and History in the Renaissance*, ed. Charles S. Singleton. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), pp. 331-369, (p. 341, 345).

coincided with Niels Bohr's successful attempts at splitting the atom, while the second coincided with the dropping of the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and on Nagasaki three days later. Such timing and Brecht's comment in his preface to the American version that 'overnight the biography of the founder of the new system of physics read differently' have received critical attention as they drew attention towards the social responsibility of the scientist.¹²⁷ Therefore it would be interesting to examine how Brecht positions the figure of the scientist within the modern world (and in particular within the cultural context of 'Americana'), how the barbarity he explored in his early America-based plays is related to the barbarity inflicted outside its borders and what attributes the epic theatre asserted as 'the theatre of the scientific age'.¹²⁸

As Lyon has documented, as soon as he had finished the 1938 version of the play, Brecht sent a copy both to Reyher and Piscator who were in America and asked them to try for New York productions. However, both attempts failed as the play was deemed unsuitable for Broadway.¹²⁹ The chance to stage the play resurfaced when Brecht met in 1944 the actor Charles Laughton and together they embarked on a three-year ambitious plan of translating and performing *Galileo* for the American stage. Unlike his previous endeavours, where Brecht was consulted in his play's translations but whose recommendations were not necessarily taken into account, this play marked a collaboration between the two men based on mutual admiration of their respective crafts. Brecht had summarised the process of translating his play as an 'awkward' one since 'one translator knew no German and the other scarcely any English [which] compelled us, as can be seen, from the outset to use acting as our means of translation. We were forced to do what better equipped translators should do too: to translate gestic'.¹³⁰ Both Lyon and McNeill have questioned the accuracy of Brecht's account, since Laughton had received an early translation of the play by Elizabeth Hauptmann and then he himself commissioned Brainerd Duffield and

¹²⁷ 'Preamble to the American Version' in *Life of Galileo*, p. 125. For criticism on the social responsibility of the artist see Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Science on stage: from Doctor Faustus to Copenhagen*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 1-38, Anne Moss, 'Limits of Reason: An Exploration of Brecht's Concept of *Vernunft* and the Discourse of Science in *Leben des Galilei*'. Eds. Steve Giles and Rodney Livingstone. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 134-147 and Terry Holmes, "The suppressed science of society in *Leben des Galilei*". Eds. Steve Giles and Rodney Livingstone. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 148-162.

¹²⁸ Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', p. 179.

¹²⁹ *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 99.

¹³⁰ Brecht. 'Building up a Part: Laughton's *Galileo*', *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 163-168 (p. 166).

Emerson Crocker (two MGM screenwriters) to produce a literal translation of the 1938 version.¹³¹ What is of interest though in relation to Brecht's statement is the emphasis given on 'acting' and gesticulation. It seems that in the process of translating the play, both Brecht and Laughton were actually performing 'Gestus', revising the character of Galileo portrayed in the earlier version and slowly building up all the mannerisms, movements and patterns of speech (or absence of speech where necessary) that made up the new Galileo. Laughton's active participation in the translation process offered Brecht the opportunity to reconsider different aspects of the play's first version and also an insight into how the play could best be presented before an American audience.

Although the textual changes made between the 1938 version and the American one have been documented in detail, it is important to keep in mind some of them as they offer us valuable insight into Brecht's dramaturgy.¹³² Unlike the 1938 version, the American *Galileo* was a shorter piece of work as a few scenes were omitted and some long speeches shortened. Similarly, Galileo's overall physicality, sensuality and his indulgence in food were accentuated in the 1947 version and they will be discussed further. Also it has been argued that *Galileo* offered a stronger historical materialist reading of the class forces present in the play and was keen to expose its audience to the tensions inherent within them. Lastly, the use of placards announcing each scene and the use of songs to comment on the unfolding events and address the audience itself, offered to the American audience of that production an insight into the formal devices employed by Brecht's epic theatre and the way they complement the written text in an attempt to engage such an audience in a critical consideration of the issues presented.

With *Galileo* Brecht introduced more firmly his idea that theatre must be defined in 'historically relative terms' and argued that the theatre of the scientific age should be dialectical.¹³³ By transporting the exposition of the play to the seventeenth century, he invited his audience to negotiate the contemporary issues of knowledge, authority and science from a critical distance and also challenged the myths surrounding Galileo's 'heroic' historical persona. Thus by presenting events that

¹³¹ Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, pp. 171-172; Dougal McNeill, *The Many Lives of Galileo: Brecht, theatre and translation's political unconscious*. (Oxford: P. Lang, 2005), p. 47.

¹³² For the aforementioned changes see McNeill, *The Many Lives of Galileo: Brecht, theatre and translation's political unconscious*, pp. 45-71; Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, pp. 193-198.

¹³³ Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', p. 190.

created an antithesis to the myth of Galileo as the archetypal empirical scientist, Brecht initiated a dialectical situation ‘through which the audience was to develop its critical stance, its “scientific attitude”, toward Galileo’s actions in the play’.¹³⁴ The play begins in 1609 with an adult Galileo in his forty-sixth year, exposing both his healthy body and his insatiable appetite for food (that runs through the whole play) and attempting to question and challenge the already established Aristotelian view on cosmology approved by the Church. In the first scene Galileo offers a demonstration of his methods of scientific enquiry to Andrea and eulogizes the coming of the new age:

GALILEO: [...] The millennium of faith is ended, said I, this is the millennium of doubt. And we are pulling out of that contraption. The sayings of the wise men won’t wash anymore. [...] By that time, with any luck, they will be learning that the earth rolls round the sun, and that their mothers, the captains, the scholars, the princes and the Pope are rolling with it.¹³⁵

The last sentence of this quote is reminiscent of Galileo’s famous theorem that has been mythologized through history. Brecht chose to use these famous words in Galileo’s fervent tribute to the coming of a new age so early in the play as a prelude of the events that were to follow. Because of Galileo’s questioning of the established rhetoric, his appetite for knowledge and scientific experimentation, the old order has been challenged and the new age of query and growing awareness has set everything in motion, but to an end and with consequences unknown to him.

Brecht had noted that the play has two major themes: first ‘that in this societal formation the thirst for knowledge grows perilous to life, since it is developed and punished by society’ and second ‘the decisive difference between ‘pure’ and socially revolutionary science’.¹³⁶ In the persona of Galileo, he combined sensuality, teaching, individuality, knowledge, science and social consciousness in such a way so as to describe the responsibility and revise the role of the scientist within the ‘new’ scientific age. Brecht contests the notion of ‘pure science’ and instead shows how scientific research is dependent both on money and power. This becomes evident

¹³⁴ Patricia R. Paulsell, ‘Brecht’s Treatment of the Scientific Method in his *Leben des Galilei*’. *German Studies Review*, 11.2 (1988), 267-284 (p. 269).

¹³⁵ ‘Galileo’, trans. Charles Laughton. In *Life of Galileo*. Eds. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. Trans. John Willett. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), pp. 201-265 (p. 205).

¹³⁶ Quoted in Darko Suvin, ‘Heavenly food denied: *Life of Galileo*’. *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. Eds. Peter Thompson & Glendyr Sacks. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 139-152 (p. 140).

from the very first scene when Galileo complains to Andrea that he always receives presents from his benefactors but ‘they never send money’ and when Mrs Sastri observes that unless he offers some private tuition to some rich pupils (Ludovico) they will not be able to pay the milkman.¹³⁷ Similarly, Galileo is presented as having no reservation in presenting the telescope as his own invention (although we are told it had already appeared in Amsterdam) so as to pay his bills and ‘earn’ time to do his own research (scene two). Therefore it seems that money offers Galileo freedom to dedicate himself exclusively to research whereas the lack of it becomes synonymous to social oppression and also results in ‘plagiarised’ research. At the same time Galileo the scientist is presented to the audience as not only possessing knowledge that could influence the social structure and oppose the world order imposed by the Catholic Church, but also as having the means and the ability to research further. Interestingly, however, his thirst for ‘new’ knowledge and scientific proof is accompanied by his ever growing desire to eat. Galileo’s appetite develops coincidentally with every new scientific experiment that brings him closer to scientific ‘truth’ and can expand his knowledge (thus leading to the dualism of food for the stomach and food for the intellect). His sensuality therefore is not just an expression of culinaryism but one that is attached to his physicality and by extension to his reasoning and learning.

Galileo gets as much pleasure from food as he does from thinking and early on he declares ‘I don’t think well unless I eat well. Can I help it if I get my best ideas over a good meal and a bottle of wine?’¹³⁸ It is his ever expanding desire for comfort (that would allow him to indulge both with food and thinking) that leads him to abandon the political security of Venice and accept an appointment as a mathematician at the monk-run court of Florence. While discussing his move to Florence with Sagredo, Sagredo points out to Galileo that his revolutionary ideas will not go down well with the religious and political climate there. However, Galileo remains undeterred, insisting that he requires leisure and that he is going to ‘take his share of the pleasures of life in exchange for all his hard work’ as he has no patience ‘with a man who doesn’t use his brain to fill his belly’.¹³⁹ Galileo’s emphasis on leisure and on the fact that his research and knowledge should at this stage of his life

¹³⁷ ‘Galileo’, p. 203, 206.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 215.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 217.

be rewarded with life's pleasures, demonstrates the 'humane' aspect of the character of the scientist as a whole who not only desires leisure to 'feed' his research and knowledge but also food to satisfy his sensual desires. Because of this strong connection between research/knowledge and food/comfort, it has been argued that this duality could expose the audience to the suggestion that Galileo's 'utopian sensualism counteracts the revolutionary thrust of his thinking, simply because he is a sensualist in an unfree society'.¹⁴⁰ However, such argumentation can be problematic, especially as it does not take into account the fact that Galileo's desire for both sensuality and thinking presents an unresolved tension. The tension results from Galileo's ambiguous position between his opportunistic practices and altruistic belief in the social position of science and his responsibility as a scientist. And it was this unresolved tension that Brecht hoped his audience would be able to grasp and reflect on critically especially after Galileo's recantation.

Food (both as a concept and as a physical entity) reappears in every scene and throughout the play there are numerous instances of Galileo's equal interest in food (sensuality) and thinking (knowledge). His consistent dependency on both of them is presented as his weakness and downfall; Galileo seems unaware of his increasing reliance on this equilibrium, which turns into an imbalance as the play progresses. The text indicates that his tastes become culturally mediated and it could be argued that his palate, while it places him higher in the social ladder and allows him to experience luxuries associated with the bourgeoisie, weakens his revolutionary morality. The first scene of the play begins with Galileo offering Andrea his lesson first before consuming his breakfast consisting of a glass of milk and a roll; by scene 8, however, his tastes have somehow changed. In his conversation with Ludovico for example, Galileo ruminates for example extensively on the quality of the wine.

GALILEO: I like this wine. Don't you Ludovico?

LUDOVICO: It's good.

GALILEO: I know the hill where it is grown. The slope is steep and stony, the grape almost blue. I am fond of this wine.

LUDOVICO: Yes, sir.

GALILEO: There are shadows in this wine. It is almost sweet but just stops short. – Andrea, clear that stuff away, ice, bowl and needle. – I cherish the consolations of the flesh. I have no patience with cowards

¹⁴⁰ Wolfgang Sohlich, 'The Dialectic of Mimesis and Representation in Brecht's *Life of Galileo*'. *Theatre Journal*, 45.1 (1993), 49-64, (p. 60).

who call them weaknesses. I say there is a certain achievement in enjoying things.¹⁴¹

The language that Galileo uses to describe the wine (sweet) and the obvious pleasure he gets out of drinking it reinforce the importance of food in his consciousness; moreover, in his philosophy of being such an attitude towards food becomes an achievement. Galileo's extensive knowledge of the vineyard suggests an evolution from a passive consumption of wine to a more cultivated appreciation of *cuisine*. His ceasing the lesson to the Little Monk and Andrea in order to indulge in the appreciation of the wine (in contrast to scene 1) demonstrates a change in his tastes. The intimate knowledge of the vineyard presupposes an aestheticization of the pleasures of the palate, which, in turn, presumes that time and effort were spent in the acquisition of such knowledge. Therefore, Galileo no longer cultivates his culinary tastes but becomes interested in the cultivation of material products. To Ludovico's claim that, when he eats the olives and cheese produced by his family's farmers, he does so absentmindedly and does not consider the amount of trouble it takes for his family to produce them, Galileo answers 'Young man, I do not eat my cheese absentmindedly'.¹⁴² Galileo understands that his food and wine are not fetishes that just appear on his table, but that they are the productive result of the farmers' labour; and he is fully aware of the treatment such farmers receive in order for him to enjoy his cheese as revealed in his question towards Ludovico: 'You would not confine your whippings to dogs to remind your peasants to keep their places, would you Marsili?'.¹⁴³ Through such comments not only does Galileo acknowledge the restrictions of the feudal system and the social distance between workers and consumers but also is aware of the potential accessibility of his theories to the working classes and their impact on social relations. As soon as he proposes this, however, his interest turns again to the telescope and the observation of the sun spots, away from the earth. His latest action therefore completely annihilates his emphasis on the social implications of the production of food and the revolutionary potentiality of his theories when made accessible to the working class.

Galileo's ambivalent relationship with food and thinking does not go unnoticed by the Church. In scene eleven, Cardinal Barberini (in the process of

¹⁴¹ 'Galileo', p. 238.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 240.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 240.

becoming Pope as he is being robbed in the Pope's clothes throughout the scene) is initially reluctant to the Inquisitor's suggestions to arrest Galileo (despite his revolutionary doctrines) because of his social standing as 'the greatest physicist of our time'.¹⁴⁴ However, when the Inquisitor comments that 'he is a man of the flesh', the Pope concurs.

POPE: He has more enjoyment in him than any man I ever saw. He loves eating and drinking and thinking. To excess. He indulges in thinking-bouts! He cannot say no to an old wine or a new thought.¹⁴⁵

Therefore Galileo's dependency on sensual pleasures to provoke his thinking (present throughout the play) is exposed as a means of 'controlling' him. Although Galileo instructs Sagredo that 'the evidence of our own eyes is a very seductive thing. Sooner or later everybody must succumb to it', Galileo seems to be unaware of his excessive reliance on food and drinking to enforce his thinking. And it is his failure to succumb to such evidence unravelling before him that betrays Galileo.¹⁴⁶ For all the empirical 'truths' he wanted to discover and disseminate among the people, it was his lack of observation of his personal behaviour that facilitated the process of his recantation.

After scene twelve, when Galileo's recantation takes place (although not in front of the audience), both his eating habits and his physical status have changed. When the play began Galileo was a middle-aged man, a visionary researcher and in possession of quite a healthy appetite, which he cultivated further. As soon as he recants, the audience is faced with a Galileo still robust (according to Brecht's comment in the text), but whose sight has deteriorated. When Andrea visits him in the prison-house (provided by the Inquisition) in scene thirteen, Galileo is an old man, half blind and his relationship with food has altered. To Virginia's cautious question if he will eat the liver of the delivered goose if cooked with a little apple, Galileo retorts 'I had my dinner. Are you under orders to finish me off with food?'¹⁴⁷ It seems therefore that on the one hand Galileo has become apprehensive of his previous association of earthy food with his intellect and aware of the impact of his previously exhibited sensuality on his life and on the other hand his diet is controlled as it is the liver that he can eat. The difference on his eating habits may signify not simply a restriction on his diet but also his 'fall' from the bourgeois class he almost belonged

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 249.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 250.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 216.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 256.

to and his drift from the bourgeois culinary tastes he could once enjoy. Interestingly however, by the end of the scene, after he has delivered his self-loathing speech and has handed the *Discorsi* to Andrea, Galileo asserts that he still enjoys eating. Therefore Galileo is presented to the audience as a man who has once again not only outsmarted the authorities by finishing his book but also is able to reinstate his engagement with the physical world through eating. His ambiguous relationship with food and his sensuality rests as another engaging aspect of the play that requires the audience's critical attention when considering the persona and role of the scientist within society.

Brecht did not want the audience to feel compelled to sympathize with Galileo, even though we learn that, due to his recantation, he has been able to complete his *Discorsi*. He has commented in 'A Short Organum' on how Galileo

wolfs his food with unrestrained greed, no other idea in his head; he has rid himself of his educational mission in shameful circumstances, as though it were a burden: he, who once drank his morning milk without a care, greedy to teach the boy. But does he really drink it without a care? Isn't the pleasure of drinking and washing one with the pleasure he takes in new ideas? Don't forget: he thinks out of self-indulgence.¹⁴⁸

Galileo's submission to life's pleasures, which generates his thirst and appetite for knowledge, represents his inability to subordinate the sensual side of himself to the intellectual. Galileo was never tortured (unlike other scientists), but the mere sight of the instruments made him reconsider his new scientific theories. It seems, therefore, that the sensual side managed to dominate his desire to unravel the 'truth'.

Brecht's comments on both Galileo's sensuality (as above) and on his act of recantation are valid when considering the play, although as McNeill has rightly observed, they have been used by critics to attack his theatre and theoretical writings.¹⁴⁹ However, McNeill's comment that Brecht 'is more concerned with the ethical implications of Galileo's actions than with the theoretical or formal structure of the play' is not justifiable.¹⁵⁰ Rather, it can be argued that for Brecht both the

¹⁴⁸ 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', pp. 198-199.

¹⁴⁹ On Galileo's recantation, Brecht asks of the audience to consider it in relation to his first act of capitulation, his deceit with the telescope: 'His charlatanry [misleading the Senate by presenting the telescope as his own invention] ... shows how determined the man is to take the easy course, and to apply his reason in a base as well as a noble manner. A more significant test awaits him, and does not every capitulation bring the next one nearer?' 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', p. 200; McNeill. *The Many Lives of Galileo*, p. 68.

¹⁵⁰ McNeill, *ibid.*, p. 68

implications of Galileo's actions (both ethical and political) and the formal structure of the play are interconnected. This can be observed in the revisions taken in relation to the recantation scene. In the 1938 version of the play, Galileo is allowed a long speech on the merits and importance of the scientific method. As soon as Virginia leaves the room, he cunningly admits of the completion of the *Discorsi* (under the noses of the authorities) and even suggests elaborate ways for Andrea to hide and smuggle his manuscript out of the country, especially as he would be carrying 'the truth under [his] coat'.¹⁵¹ By 1947, Galileo has become more aware of the impact of his actions. He welcomes Andrea to his 'gutter', refutes Andrea's justification of his recantation (by claiming that 'there is no such thing as a scientific work that only one man can write') and acknowledges his willing collaboration with and submission to the authorities that can now use and abuse his knowledge 'as it suits their ends'.¹⁵² Such revisions to the text reveal Galileo's acknowledgement of the problematic relationship between the intellectual/scientist and his/hers bourgeois authoritative patrons; at the same time though the changed manner in which he accounts for his recantation shifts the emphasis from a mere judgement of Galileo's character and his recantation to a more critical reflection on the social impact of the events revealed in the play as a whole. And it is within this dialectical context that Galileo's claims to political and revolutionary consciousness should be approached.

Such moments of political consciousness are sporadic but at the same time they are highly problematic, especially since, although Galileo makes many references to how the lower classes could benefit from his discoveries (thus suggesting that a revolutionary potential underlies his research), he seems far too removed from them to either understand in depth their dependence on the world view imposed by the Church or to experience the depth of their alienation and subjection. Although Galileo enjoys spending time in the Venice arsenal and seems to align himself with the peasants (especially as they can experience both the pain of labouring and the end product) he seems unable to show them how the modes of production and their social status are linked and could be challenged or how the implications of his findings could benefit them. In scene seven, during his conversation with the Little Monk, Galileo exposes his frustration over the matter:

¹⁵¹ *Life of Galileo*, pp. 191-2.

¹⁵² 'Galileo', pp. 260-1.

GALILEO: [...] Today the virtues of exhaustion are caused by the exhausted land. For that my new water pumps could work more wonders than their ridiculous superhuman efforts. [...] as much of the truth gets through as we push through! You talk of the Campagna peasants as if they were the moss on their huts. Naturally, if they don't get a move on and learn to think for themselves, the most efficient of irrigations systems cannot help them. I can see their divine patience, but where is their divine fury?'¹⁵³

In this extract the audience is exposed to Galileo's appeal for a socially motivated science, which reveals at the same time his recognition and faith in Enlightenment's humanitarian objective of science. His adamant belief in humans' inherent ability to reason, which will be enabled by science (although disputed by Sagredo in scene 3), becomes the ultimate truth. However, even this ultimate truth is restrictive; Galileo wants to liberate people's abilities to think, but only through his socially involved scientific discourse, which is still tied to its bourgeois patrons. Therefore Galileo's



Figure 10. Charles Laughton in scene 8 of the American version of *Life of Galileo*. Characters from left to right: Federzoni (David Clarke), Galileo (Charles Laughton), Andrea (William Phipps) and the Little Monk (Mickey Knox). Hollywood, summer 1947

scientific method differentiates between the modes of production (accommodated by the financing of the Church and the aristocracy) and the actual end result, aiming at liberating people and allowing them access to knowledge. The gap that exists between the experiences of the body of a bourgeois intellectual and the experiences of the

¹⁵³ Ibid., pp. 232-233.

people, with whom he sympathizes, exposes Galileo's mode of thinking, which 'contains a powerfully conceptual style, that cannot [however] be transferred to a modality of experience'.¹⁵⁴

This discrepancy is further emphasised through Galileo's blindness. The audience becomes aware of his progressive blindness when he appears after his recantation is made public (scene 12). Although such presentation could be read symbolically, it also constitutes a critical stance towards Galileo's act, as his recantation represents for the authorities the submission of his findings, his socially emancipatory scientific 'truth' and reason. Ironically, his hope to open the people's scientific 'eyes' and enable them to acquire new knowledge and challenge the status quo (like he did with his pupils), have failed. The rejection he experiences from his students outside the court is manifested through the physical distance they keep from him, uncovering thus the ever increasing schism between the bourgeois intellectual and the people. At the same time, his ambition to initiate an anthropocentric scientific discipline is hindered by his unwillingness 'to see others as subjects unto themselves with their own needs, interests and views'.¹⁵⁵ Galileo's patience and belief in the empirical evidence produced by his scientific eyes are in complete juxtaposition with any sign of actually 'seeing' people. As Merriam-Paskow comments, Galileo does not seem to meet anybody's *gaze*; he centres his scientific discipline on himself, as the subject par excellence, and treats the rest of the people as 'the *objects* of his desiring or indifferent eye'.¹⁵⁶ Such a view reveals an inherent paradox within Galileo's notions of knowledge and truth, as his epistemological discourse seems to be informed by an ontological dimension. But this ontological dimension is based on only one subject, simultaneously excluding a comprehensive appreciation and appraisal of the people's social and economic conditioning and revealing the weakness of Galileo's political consciousness.

Galileo's gradual blindness could be seen as a result of ageing or as a symbol of his acquiring knowledge (as traditionally manifested by the figures of Oedipus and Tiresias), but it could also be read in relation to the constant textual references to light, thus representing a temporal development of his knowledge and thinking and revealing the implications of his actions. In the beginning, Galileo is presented as the

¹⁵⁴ Sohlich, 'The Dialectic of Mimesis and Representation in Brecht's *Life of Galileo*', p. 63.

¹⁵⁵ Jacqueline Merriam-Paskow, 'Brecht's *Leben des Galilei*: The Modern Scientist as Voyeur'. *Modern Language Studies*, 22.4 (1992), 42-56 (p. 50).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

one who 'offers light', aiming at teaching people to see. Seeing is associated with thinking, using reason and acquiring knowledge based on facts; unlike the authorities, who rely on 'believing' and have portrayed the eyes as a source of illusion, Galileo encourages them not to be 'afraid to use their eyes'.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, the eyes, for Galileo, are not a mere part of the body, but represent the subject based on which his new science of empiricism is founded. However, after his recantation and during Andrea's last visit, the audience is exposed to a Galileo with reduced sight. His myopia could be seen as a result of considering his body as the site of immanent thought. As mentioned above, Galileo cannot differentiate between his sensual and intellectual needs, as one informs the other. Although he strongly advocates a new world order based on scientific thinking and reason, which in turn produces a decentred world in motion, he retracts his position when his corporeal materiality is threatened. Consequently, his blindness depicts, as Suvin argues, a self-imposed imprisonment, which allows him to contemplate on his failure, but at the same time isolates him further from the people.¹⁵⁸ The audience learns that his betrayal of the act of 'seeing' has led Descartes to shelve 'his treatise on the nature of light'.¹⁵⁹ Galileo might have managed to complete the *Discorsi*, but Andrea's coincidental arrival (successfully smuggling the book outside Florence) and his own increasing dependence on Virginia (not allowed to look through the telescope earlier and always expressing her 'belief' to the old order) to inform him whether the night is clear, further manifest the social and political implications both of his recantation and his blindness.

Galileo's recantation, his blindness and his faith that scientific knowledge and reason could alter the world (without strictly-speaking possessing a political agenda as such) are not designed to defame his historical figure. Instead, the play reveals the importance, influence and restraints of the historical conditions surrounding the individual. At the same time though the play highlights Galileo's inability to 'see' and acknowledge such conditions and particularly the power of the bourgeois system and its complexities. His failure can therefore be seen as a historical action that resulted in the relinquishing of science, knowledge and thinking to the hands of the bourgeois authorities once again. Through Galileo's failure Brecht can criticise the humanitarian

¹⁵⁷ 'Galileo', pp. 220-1.

¹⁵⁸ Suvin, 'Heavenly food denied: *Life of Galileo*', p. 147.

¹⁵⁹ 'Galileo', p. 258.

project of the Enlightenment, which attempted to place humans and reason at its centre but the project's inability to cultivate a socially and politically strong consciousness, either within the class of the intellectuals and scientists or within the lower classes, led to a romanticised idea of the whole project. In the exchange of views between Galileo and cardinals Bellarmin and Barberini in scene six, it becomes clear that for the latter two Galileo's theories offer another opportunity to extend their power and influence on the people; after all 'science is the legitimate beloved daughter of the Church'.¹⁶⁰ Not only does Galileo fail to challenge this claim (apart from being infuriated) but also his faith in the Copernican system cannot be substantiated by any societal movement. Galileo may wish to propagate knowledge among the lower classes, but his wish needs to be accompanied by a desire to change the world and provide an alternative societal order. His lack of such a desire and his materialist convictions, in relation to his inability to 'see' the fixity of the existing social and political system (which provides for his appetite) engenders an alienating split within the revolutionary body politic. The intellectual can no longer ally himself with the physical workers and thus weakens the potentially revolutionary effects of a science for the society. What remains is the pursuit of science for science's sake.

It could be argued therefore, that Galileo's 'crime' lies in his utopian belief in a spontaneous union of the senses and reason on his compatriots' part without, however, providing them with a political consciousness or a revolutionary agenda. In his last long speech and encounter with Andrea he admits that his recantation was not designed to allow him to complete the book and that 'I have come to believe that I was never in real danger'.¹⁶¹ Brecht dispels in this way any suggestion that Galileo's recantation could be seen as a heroic act (unlike the ending of the first version). Having experienced the masses' extreme poverty and their delight in acquiring knowledge through this 'new art of doubt' Galileo hoped that they would be able to synthesise their sensual existence with the new scientific knowledge; in this way not only would they have ameliorated their lives, but the figure of the scientist could have existed among them as the new Enlightened persona that could lead them to a new 'revolution'.¹⁶² Galileo finally recognises that he had a unique opportunity of allowing science as a discipline not only to progress further but also to reveal its potentialities

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 261.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 261.

to everyday people, thus allowing them to recognize the new scientific ‘truth’ and subsequently bring the scientist closer to the masses. The failure to materialise this opportunity allows Brecht, through the figure of Galileo, to not only project a critique of the role of the scientist within society but also of how his/her work can be related to the ‘new scientific age’.

Galileo, while accounting for his experience, offers a cautious piece of advice to Andrea, the new scientist, and asks him to carefully consider both his role and the impact of science in general.

For what reason do you labor? I take it the intent of science is to ease human existence. If you give way to coercion, science can be crippled, and your new machines may simply suggest new drudgeries. Should you then, in time, discover all there is to be discovered, your progress must then become a progress away from the bulk of humanity. The gulf might even grow so wide that the sound of your cheering at some new achievement would be echoed by a universal howl of horror.¹⁶³

These words can be seen as a direct comment on the recent use of the atomic bomb but they are also Galileo’s act of realisation of where has failed. As he acknowledges, his discoveries could have resulted in the birth of a new age, free from dogmatic discourses and a passive submission to the absolute power of the authorities. However, the potential permeation of scientific thinking into social relations and the beginning of a ‘new age’ has not only been postponed, but compromised as well. Neither Galileo nor Andrea have realised the importance of nurturing a strong political consciousness within the people. Their discoveries could indeed revolutionize people’s daily routine, but for Brecht it remained problematic that science was still an authoritative apparatus of the bourgeois elites rather than one which could advance the political education of the people. For Andrea, the smuggling of the *Discorsi* symbolises the dissemination of new knowledge but Brecht is left to wonder

Does not everything point to night’s arrival and nothing to the dawning of a new age? [...] What is this talk of a ‘new age’? Is not this expression itself obsolete? When it is shouted at us, it is bellowed from hoarse throats. Now, indeed, it is mere barbarism which impersonates the new age. It says of itself that it hopes it will last a thousand years.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 261.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Foreword’. *Life of Galileo*. Eds. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. Trans. John Willett. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), pp. 115-117 (p. 117).

Brecht becomes very critical of the figure of the bourgeois intellectual especially since the latter's weakness and inability to recognize the power behind the authorities and their ideological discourses have failed to establish a strong basis for the modern aesthetics of knowledge and reason. As a result, not only does the project of the Enlightenment seem ineffective, but its proclamations of its humanitarian and anthropological schema are no longer valid; unlike the petty bourgeois figures of his earlier plays (such as Galy Gay or Begbick), Galileo – as the scientist in general – is a figure of intellectual authority and influence. By failing to complete the social praxis of presenting a science with a societal consciousness, he contained science within the bourgeois prescribed margins and denied the possibility of an intellectual, social and political mobility towards new forms of social praxis.

Galileo is an ambitious play, as it demands from its audience its utmost critical agility to ponder over its dialectics, and especially the theme of the scientist's responsibility over the use of knowledge for or against the society. When the play was first performed in America on August 1947 (Coronet Theatre, Los Angeles), the photographs depicting the use of the atomic bomb in Japan were still vivid in people's minds. But Brecht did not intend for the audience to simply identify with recent events; through the historicization of Galileo's character, which included certain traits of the modern scientist, Brecht revealed the ambiguities resounding its present social task. At the same time, although the people in the play are the passive and silent agents, Brecht wanted his audience to become the active ingredient of the performance. By confronting Galileo's dilemmas, the dialectical relationship between his appetite for food and knowledge, his scientific brilliance and his political naivety the audience is asked not to condemn or praise Galileo but to question the possibility of a new age of reason based on an increasingly aestheticised ethic, criticise the absence of a socially informed intellectual consciousness and demand a new social and literary praxis.

IV. Defying the establishment: Hero or Anti-hero? Brecht's farewell to America.

Andrea (in the door): 'Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero.'
Galileo: No, Andrea. 'Unhappy is the land that needs a hero.'¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ 'Galileo', p. 254.

Brecht's theatrical dramaturgy for a new scientific age echoed Boris Arvatov's comment that

the future proletarian theatre will become a platform for the creative forms of reality; it will develop life-styles and human models; it will be transformed into a single great laboratory for the new public life, and will take for its material every manner of social function. The theatre as production, the theatre as a factory for the skilled man – this is what will sooner or later be inscribed on the banner of the working class.¹⁶⁶

Brecht and Laughton attempted to present such a new social model in their production of *Galileo* in the Coronet Theatre, Los Angeles in 1947. The production was directed by Joseph Losey, who replaced Orson Welles. According to Losey, their production 'was an immense success' and the theatre was packed for the length of its four-week run. The production attracted considerable attention within the circle of European émigré intellectuals who were impressed by it and saw it as an indication of a European sensibility that existed in Hollywood.¹⁶⁷ Among the Hollywood and European artists who attended it were Ingrid Bergman, Charlie Chaplin, Antony Quinn, Lion Feuchtwagner, Igor and Vera Stravinsky. However, the production also invited the wrath of the Hearst press, which described it as 'a harangue- and a fussy, juvenile harangue at that', as an anti-clerical play that put forward 'red propaganda', whereas Laughton was called 'a porcine boor'.¹⁶⁸ At the same time, there were some encouraging reviews in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Daily News* that described the play as 'good theater, exciting theater, provocative theater' and one that would 'unquestionable arouse marked controversial interest'.¹⁶⁹

It is interesting that Brecht's ambitious and controversial play received its American premiere in the metropolis of film that, at that moment, had caught the eye of the McCarthy committee. For Hollywood, which was deprived of experimental new theatrical performances (unlike Broadway), the production of Brecht's play and its use of new theatrical techniques would be placed outside the American mainstream drama and even outside the forms of experimental theatre which emerged in the

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics*. Trans. Charles Rougle. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 73.

¹⁶⁷ Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, p. 68. It is also interesting to note that several people once associated with the Federal Theatre Project were indeed involved in the production of *Galileo*. Among them, Orson Welles as the intended director and Laughton's choice, Joseph Losey that finally directed it (Brecht's choice), John Houseman and Norman Lloyd, whose Pelican Productions company finally produced it.

¹⁶⁸ Paterson Greene's comments in the *Los Angeles Examiner* quoted in Cook, *Brecht in Exile*, p. 175.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Federal Theatre productions. The density of Brecht's writing, the emphasis on scenes exposed in a dialectical manner and the epic method of politicising issues of aesthetics bore little resemblance to the Stanislavsky model that most theatre artists and critics were used to. Although able to appreciate the episodic pattern that Losey's direction introduced in his Living Newspaper productions, it was still considered 'as facile a vehicle for a theme that is less expository than emotional'.¹⁷⁰ Bearing such reactions in mind, Brecht's warning that the audience should not idealise Galileo seemed justifiable. For the American audience and critics the emphasis on the psychologically emotional impact that a play should include was one of the pre-requisite criteria for a successful production. The fact that Brecht's script did not allow for any signs of sympathy as for example when, because of his hunger for research, Galileo ruins his daughter's prospects of marriage or any other similar emotional climaxes was deemed part of the play's failure to appeal to a larger audience. The American critics' suggestions seemed to imply that had Brecht provided the play with such changes it could have been a successful production that could have ran much longer than one-month ; however, Brecht, although he craved success, wanted to achieve it on his own aesthetic terms.

The play received almost similar reviews when it was performed on Broadway, at the Maxine Elliott theatre. Again the main objections were as to whether such an intellectual script that purposefully chose to avoid the invocation of emotional responses, was 'actually great theater or simply a disappointing play', suggesting that the latter was the case.¹⁷¹ The most important review was Brooks Atkinson's for *The New York Times*; Atkinson disliked the production, found its episodic structure inadequate and dismissed Laughton's performance as 'ponderous and condescending'.¹⁷² As Harold Clurman had once commented, Brecht's plays would always cause much controversy, whether literary, theatrical, aesthetic or political.¹⁷³ Brecht's attempt to engage the audience's critical and intellectual abilities and avoid them being hypnotized required both a new style of writing and production that the American audience had not previously been exposed to. At the same time, however, and more critically, Brecht's dramaturgy, his epic theatre and his style were

¹⁷⁰ Gladwin Hill's review of the play for the *New York Times* quoted in Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 198.

¹⁷¹ Review of the play in *The Hollywood Reporter* quoted in Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 199.

¹⁷² Quoted in Cook, *Brecht in Exile*, p. 180.

¹⁷³ 'The Achievement of Bertolt Brecht'. *Partisan Review*, 26.4 (1959), 624-630, (p. 624).

intimately related to his political convictions; unlike Stanislavky's method, Brecht's writing was influenced by his reading and interpretation of Marxism and Communism. This close and strong relationship between the Marxist political ideology and its aesthetic expression caused dysphoria within the American theatrical scene. It was this uncomfortable (for the American authorities) relationship between his political and ideological commitment and his dramatic oeuvre that resulted in his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and his final departure from the United States.

The American authorities were aware of Brecht's reputation and work almost from the time of his arrival and his political views and activities were closely monitored. As was the case with the Federal Theatre Project, Brecht was neither prosecuted because of his unlawfulness towards the United States nor for his aesthetic experimentations, but rather because of the political, propagandistic (=communist) or 'red' content of his works. The American authorities must have been aware of Brecht's intention to depart for Europe soon after *Galileo* closed in Los Angeles and thus subpoenaed him to appear before the Committee on the last day of October 1947.¹⁷⁴ Brecht was aware from his friend and composer Hanns Eisler of the intensity of the HUAC's questioning, which was investigating an alleged Communist infiltration of the Hollywood industry. According to Lyon, Eisler had repeatedly avoided mentioning Brecht's name during his hearing, but the committee was aware of their association.¹⁷⁵ Brecht was the only European émigré among the nineteen Americans (known as the 'unfriendly nineteen', who were then subsequently reduced to eleven people known as the Hollywood Ten) invited to testify on October 1947 and had disagreed with their plan to invoke the Fifth Amendment of the constitution. Instead Brecht, realising the threat to individual freedom and thinking that the committee posed, decided to oppose it by displaying calculated signs of cooperation. Similarly to Galileo's comment quoted in the beginning of this section, Brecht considered 'martyrdom to be folly in any political struggle'.¹⁷⁶ His decision to act in such a way was considered as a betrayal of his political and aesthetic convictions and it left people wondering whether Brecht truly held an ideological agenda that

¹⁷⁴ Such information is now known from the available edited FBI files on Brecht. See Bertolt Brecht FBI files (1943-1956) Part 1d, p. 1. <http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/brecht.htm> [20 October 2006].

¹⁷⁵ Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 315. For a detailed narration of the events leading to Brecht's testimony and the actual hearing see Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, pp. 314-337.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

informed his writings or whether he was just an opportunistic artist following the political and social current as it unfolded at that precise moment.

Brecht, following Losey's advice, appeared in front of the committee on October 30, 1947 smoking a cigar.¹⁷⁷ According to Losey, Brecht took his time to light the cigar and that resulted in an almost tableau moment, as 'here was J. Parnell Thomas with his cigar, and Brecht with his cigar, and it made a kind of "fellowship"'.¹⁷⁸ Brecht's testimony followed the one by John Howard Lawson that had caused a sensation in the hearing room as Lawson and Parnell ended up screaming at each other and Lawson was removed from the room. As Lyon has commented, Brecht seemed to be in control of his hearing all the way through, making good use of Losey's advice to smoke and use an interpreter.¹⁷⁹ From the outset, Brecht intended to control the content of his answers and he was given this opportunity early on, when Stripling made a factual mistake concerning his year of birth. Brecht had to correct him that it was 1898, not 1888, thus undermining the accuracy of the Committee's information, which he had to correct on four other occasions.¹⁸⁰ In this way, Brecht appeared almost as a 'friendly' witness, eager to provide the correct information. Following the identification process, Stripling put forward the main question to Brecht:

MR. STRIPLING: Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of any country?

MR. BRECHT: Mr. Chairman, I have heard my colleagues when they considered this question not as proper, but I am a guest in this country and do not want to enter into any legal arguments, so I will answer your question fully as well as I can. I was not a member, or am not a member, of any Communist Party.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Your answer is, then, that you have never been a member of the Communist Party?

MR. BRECHT: That is correct.

MR. STRIPLING: You were not a member of the Communist Party in Germany?

¹⁷⁷ 'And I said "The one thing the Committee does do is to let the witnesses smoke on the stand. J.Parnell Thomas smokes cigars. You smoke cigars. All the others smoke cigarettes. So make a big point of smoking a cigar. Ask for permission to smoke". He did.' In Ciment, *Conversations with Losey*, p. 70.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁷⁹ *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 327. Brecht's interpreter was David Baumgardt of the Library of Congress, whose English appeared to be worse than Brecht's and whose thick accent confused the Committee to such an extent that Parnell exclaimed 'I cannot understand the interpreter any more than I can the witness'. In Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason: excerpts from hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*. (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 218.

¹⁸⁰ Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason: excerpts from hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*, pp. 207-8.-

MR. BRECHT: No, I was not.¹⁸¹

Brecht, by referring to the other testimonies by American witnesses and emphasizing his status as a 'guest' (repeated in his statement as well), capitalised on the havoc created by the previous testimonies and again emphasised his intention to cooperate with the Committee. This unexpected answer surprised the Committee and this feeling was revealed by the repetition of the same question both by Parnell and Stripling. His testimony was full of



SMOKE SCREEN is thrown up by cigar of German-born Writer Berthold Brecht, an acquaintance of Communist Gerhard Eisler. His thick accent mystified the committee, which excused him after he denied being a party member.

Figure 11. Brecht smoking a cigar while testifying at the HUAC.

similar moments when questions and answers had to be repeated, but Brecht's plan seemed to have worked. Many of his answers, although misleading, were never contested and within an hour his testimony was over, leading Parnell to acknowledge first to Mr. Kenny that 'he is doing all right. He is doing much better than any other

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 209.

witnesses you have brought here' and then to Brecht that 'you are a good example to the witnesses of Mr. Kenny and Mr. Crum'.¹⁸²

Brecht's testimony was well-received by some of the remaining nineteen witnesses; Dalton Trumbo suggested that Brecht's hearing 'struck the right balance between belligerence and passivity' and John Howard Lawson noticed how well Brecht had implemented his dialectical thinking to outsmart the Committee.¹⁸³ Brecht has still been criticized by some scholars, such as Fuegi, who has drawn a parallel between Brecht's testimony in front of HUAC and Galileo's betrayal: 'like Galileo before the Inquisition, Brecht helped strengthen the hand of his inquisitors'.¹⁸⁴ However, such biographical readings of Brecht's work are not simply parochial and do not do justice to the dense dialectical maturity of his writing, but also prolong the longevity of the bias regarding his work and aesthetic principles within the United States. These views were further strengthened, as Brecht's permanent departure from America the day following his testimony (and thus missing the New York production of *Galileo* in the Maxine Elliott Theatre) was followed by his choice of East Berlin as his home and the home of his Berliner Ensemble company. Brecht's bold manoeuvre to move back to his beloved city (with an Austrian passport, however, that enabled him access to Western countries) in the midst of the Cold War fuelled even further the rumours that his work was merely propagandistic and dogmatic and its reception was accompanied by a strong hesitation and bias.

Leaving aside Brecht's personal life, there have been two major questions concerning his work and views on art that are still troubling his critics and reviewers. Are his works mere propaganda or a more complex, dialectical synthesis of politics and aesthetics? Did he manage to achieve Benjamin's objective for an ideological 'politicization of aesthetics' or were his works treated with a neutrality and thus deemed too politically complacent? As Peter Bürger has noted, unlike the

¹⁸² Ibid., pp. 219-20. Some of the misleading information regarded a) his interview with Sergei Tretyakov in Moscow. When asked if he could remember it, Brecht replied that it was written 20 years ago, whereas it was written in 1934 and published in 1937. b) when asked if his writings were based on the philosophy of Marx and Lenin, Brecht insisted that he had to study Marx's ideas on history as he believed that no 'intelligent plays today can be written without such study' (Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason*, p. 214). However, it could be argued that Brecht's plays were deeply influenced by the Marxist philosophy and not solely by his views on history. c) when asked if he had heard of the magazine *New Masses* Brecht's answer was negative; however, he had helped Eva Goldbeck (Marc Blitzstein's wife) to write an article explaining his epic theory that appeared in the 1935 issue.

¹⁸³ Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, p. 335.

¹⁸⁴ John Fuegi, *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama*. (New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 483.

representatives of the historical avant-garde, Brecht never argued for the abolition of theatre; instead 'he proposed to radically change it' and return art to the praxis of life but not as a mere representation.¹⁸⁵ Theatre should become the *topos* where that praxis can be materialised in a dialectical process rooted in critical thinking, not in illusion and dramatic enchantment. In this way theatre could play a central role in the demystification of capitalist social relations and former aesthetic expressions that had accommodated such relations. Brecht's aesthetic and political theory assigned to art and theatre a cognitive quality and function that derived from its ability to present historical situations in a defamiliarized manner, which showed that they were changeable and based on a new experience of the social reality. It was this cognitive quality that could allow a pedagogical dimension, which would facilitate the development of a political culture capable of endowing 'the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system'.¹⁸⁶ Jameson has argued that in Brecht's political project this pedagogy is related to aesthetics as he attempted through his work 'to teach ... to delight ... to move' and that through this triangulation 'there existed a Brechtian "stance" [*Haltung*] which was not only doctrine, narrative, or style, but all three simultaneously; and ought better to be called, with all due precautions, "method"'.¹⁸⁷ Jameson's suggestion of a Brechtian method rather than a style aimed at re-addressing the problematic between aesthetics, politics, pedagogy and representation that has been associated with Brecht's oeuvre, situating it within the current historical conditions and approaching it from a different perspective, thus avoiding certain totalising readings of his work.

It has been suggested that Brecht's positive viewpoint towards the potentiality of social agency and his belief that art's cognitive function could be used to political ends, even after the disappearance of the traditional proletariat, had reduced his works to mere propaganda of a precarious kind within a Western bourgeois society and how 'the demeanour of the didactic drama recalls the American expression of "preaching to the saved"'.¹⁸⁸ Bearing in mind Jameson's view expressed above, one could argue that, whereas for Adorno Brecht's plays seemed to represent a didactic propaganda

¹⁸⁵ Brecht, 'On the Use of Music in the Epic Theatre'. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willet. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 84-90 (pp. 88-9).

¹⁸⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 54.

¹⁸⁷ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p. 3, 132.

¹⁸⁸ Adorno quoted in Neil Jeff Rogers, 'The Brecht Industry: Politics and Avant-Garde in a Divided Germany'. *Communications*, 10.1-2 (2001), 43-47 (p. 46).

with a limited scope and aptness for reification and commodification, for Jameson Brecht's pedagogy was more methodological. He argued that Brecht did not attempt to present a totalising and dogmatic social reality and that his 'method' should be perceived as a kind of *gestus*, free from an interpersonal or dramatic framework and aware of any process of reification especially as 'it is variously staged, mocked, analysed, prophesied and utopianly projected'.¹⁸⁹ Jameson acknowledges in Brecht's work the ability to recognize its own representational practice as a new, different and challenging mode of understanding and exposing the social reality. Assuming Jameson's reading, the dialectical synthesis of politics and aesthetics in Brecht's work does not expose either an ideologically restrictive social reality as the proponents of the Cold War had insisted or a Neo-Romantic attitude that views man as 'an excremental object of no value'.¹⁹⁰ Instead, drawing from this autoreferentiality and ability to 'see' itself, Brecht's work emphasises the need for and delight in learning and thus becomes a mode of teaching, examining the act of showing that is the artistic gesture: 'Teaching is thus showing, as has already been remarked; the dramatic representation of teaching is the showing of showing, the showing of how you show and demonstrate'.¹⁹¹

It is therefore through this new form of pedagogy (rather than didacticism) that Brecht achieved an ideological politicisation of aesthetics. Brecht's aesthetics did not aim at unifying a divided audience, like Aristotle's aesthetics of catharsis. Instead

In calling for an unmediated impact, the aesthetics of the day call for an effect that flattens out all social and other distinctions between individuals. [...] Non-Aristotelian drama of *The Mother's* sort is not interested in the establishment [on the basis of the 'common humanity' shared by all spectators alike] of such a collective entity. It divides its audience.¹⁹²

For Brecht separation and distance are not simply formal elements pertinent to his aesthetic theory, but they actually become allegories of the audience's political conditioning and class division. By emphasizing the aesthetic aspect of the theatre, both in its formal elements and in its content and its political aspect in re-enacting in itself the class struggle (by dividing the audience), Brecht found a way of

¹⁸⁹ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p. 26.

¹⁹⁰ Robert Brustein, 'Brecht against Brecht'. *Partisan Review*, 30.1 (1963), 29-54, (p. 31).

¹⁹¹ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p. 91.

¹⁹² Brecht, 'Indirect Impact of the Epic Theatre'. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. 57-62 (p. 60). The comment in brackets is Jameson's (*Brecht and Method*, p. 72).

understanding and presenting how social relations condition an aesthetic expression that can depict such an alienation, rather than an illusionary unity.¹⁹³ His pedagogical method is not merely an instructive form or a single idea but rather it is an act that presents social relations, economic and political conditions in such a way that their dialectical position or opposition becomes apparent to the spectator and thus engages him/her in a critical appraisal of such an enactment. Simultaneously, Brecht's act of pedagogy is not a totalising experience, as it does not propagate any form of standardised knowledge, but instead relies on constant movement and change.

It is on this level that Brecht's revolutionary impact should be discussed. The biased, dogmatic and many times absolute criticism surrounding his work (both by European and American intellectuals) have presented communism and Stalinism as his work's predicament. The presence and influence of the Marxist ideology and thinking cannot be contested but it should not form the sole basis of criticism, whether positive or negative. Brecht, by infusing his pedagogical method with Marxism, allowed thinking to trespass the barrier of the canonisation of a work of art and thus enable the revisiting of old ideas, with the intention of seeking the new within the old and revealing the old within the new. Such constant movement would keep thinking and critical responses alert and would acknowledge the necessity for change. Jameson concurred that 'running abreast of change, catching up with it, espousing its tendencies in such a way as to begin to inflect its vectors in your own direction – such is Brechtian pedagogy'.¹⁹⁴ One could argue that Jameson's argument is permeated by an almost romanticised or emancipatory narrative, presenting Brecht as an almost Enlightening figure. But even if that is the case, Jameson's revisiting of Brecht's theory and plays (Jameson's own way of 'showing') imparts a new way of reading and approaching Brecht that would allow a more dialectical reading of his ideological and aesthetic positions, an abandonment of the neutrality and polarization regarding his plays (deemed excellent examples of formal experimentations, but politically complacent because of their ideological discourse) and perhaps an incentive for a better understanding of Brecht's aesthetic usage of crude thinking.

¹⁹³ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p. 72.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Conclusion

This thesis started from the premise that the ideological confusions surrounding the aesthetics of commitment have led to a compromising and un-dialectical consideration of these aesthetics, particularly with regards to theatrical representation. In the debates surrounding such aesthetics as realised both in Europe and the United States there is a systematic absence of any critical reflections on the parallel and/or contrasting ways such debates unfolded which in turn has precluded a transatlantic dialogue that would reflect both on the critical strengths and shortcomings of these traditions. The critical and dialectical assessment of this dialogue would reveal the extent to which the aesthetics of commitment have been fashioned as a thorn in the body politic. The literary anxieties caused by their presence compelled many intellectuals and artists to reconsider their position within the cultural discourse, which led, in many cases, to their problematic re-inscription within specific ideologies. However, this act of re-inscription did not entail a consideration of the theatrical medium.

The theoretical transatlantic dialogue performed in this thesis on the issue of form versus content has revealed its problematic rephrasing as autonomy versus engagement. Chapters one and two both presented how this debate was realised by European and American theorists respectively. Whereas in Europe, the participating intellectuals were arguing for and against either side of the debate (presenting though three main positions), in the United States there was an almost univocal attitude. And whereas the European debate included a critical interpretation of the debate in relation to leftist theatre, the American one opted for a liberal a-theatrical approach. The debate among Lukàcs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno was framed by the influence of the historical avant-garde in modernist aesthetics and the different positions they all adopted marked a further development on such aesthetics. At the same time it exposed two different dialectics regarding the relationship between aesthetics and political reality. Even though all four aforementioned participants were working from within the same ideological framework, that did not preclude the variety of critical approaches to the issue at hand. Whether opting for Lukàcs' model of art's revolutionary potential based on nineteenth-century literature, Brecht and Benjamin's emphasis on the influence of technological advancements on art or Adorno's view

that the revolutionary possibilities of a work of art could exclude any authorial ideological energy, all three positions presented themselves as politically valid. Their criticism did not dwell on the realm of aestheticism but aimed at uncovering a plethora of new forms of social and political engagement between art and society.

Modernist theatrical aesthetics were heavily debated among the four intellectuals. Such inclusion not only highlighted the importance of the theatre as a cultural medium that can negotiate such an engagement but also allowed a critical reflection on both its literary and performative aspects to take place. The *topos* of the theatre invited the experimentation with new technological modes of production and at the same time had a direct influence on the audience's modes of perception/reception of a play. The dialectical relationship between a play's formal elements and literary content, its ability to address an audience directly and expose different facets of representation and social reality emphasised the importance of a continuity between intellectually creative and social praxis. And although this continuity was once again argued for differently (with Brecht claiming a more ideologically engaged position whereas Adorno accentuated an authorial autonomy from political ideologies), it still revealed the importance of the theatre as a *topos* that can actively negotiate political social and aesthetic changes and also the relevance of theatrical aesthetics to modernist culture as a whole.

Unlike the plurality of positions expressed in the European debate, the New York Intellectuals formed an almost unanimous position with regards to the aesthetics of commitment. And unlike the emphasis that their European counterparts placed on theatrical aesthetics, the New York Intellectuals' debate was marked by the absence of a critical consideration of the theatre, whether home-grown or otherwise. As chapter two demonstrated, after their initial flirt and subsequent disillusion with Marxism, the New York Intellectuals revamped themselves as the guardians of American culture. They professed the need to separate politics from aesthetics in an attempt to 'rescue' art from ideological fortification and re-invent its social significance within an American context defined by the literary principles of liberalism. By disassociating modernist art from any political radicalism, the New York Intellectuals adopted the position of an aesthetically autonomous, a-political art with the emphasis lying on the formal elements. However, in the process of adopting this position, they not only found themselves working within the prescribed limits of liberalism as they understood it but also (as their lasting legacy has revealed) they

succeeded in exporting both culturally and socially an ideologically framed view on art whose presence is still evident within American intellectual life.

Both the European and the American intellectuals have failed to acknowledge the presence of each other on the debate concerning the aesthetics of commitment although they seemed aware of each others' positions (as exemplified by the publication of Lukàcs' article in the *Partisan Review* and Adorno's presence in Columbia University around the same time that some New York Intellectuals were also teaching there). Apart from the more intellectually engaging debates that would have included a dialectical consideration of such aesthetics in terms of a broader European and American cultural context that might have resulted from such an acknowledgement, we would have also experienced more symmetrical attitudes towards modernist theatrical aesthetics. As mentioned above, for the European intellectuals theatre formed an integral part of their debate whereas the Americans ignored it completely. As a result the two theatrical examples discussed in the thesis, the Federal Theatre Project and Brecht's 'American' plays, were never critically examined by the New York intellectuals, their omission once again highlighting their very eclectic and literarily restrictive views on American culture; on the other hand, the European intellectuals (Brecht included) concentrated primarily on European modernist theatre, thus excluding a critical consideration of the development of such aesthetics on the American stage and the impact they could have had on the debate concerning the aesthetics of commitment in general.

Both these omissions accentuated a subjective reading of culture that excluded theatre as a critical means of negotiating social, political and aesthetic issues. But unlike the theorists discussed in the first two chapters that approached the debate exclusively from a theoretical point of view, the theatrical examples of Brecht and the Federal Theatre Project attempted to reconsider the aesthetics of commitment primarily from within their theatrical narrative and performative elements, concentrating on challenging established modes of performance, representations of social reality and awakening their audiences to a realisation of their reified conditioning. Although both examples were influenced by the European avant-garde as argued in chapters three and four, they developed their views differently. And although they seemed to sporadically acknowledge the presence of each other, they nonetheless refused to engage with each other critically even though they were situated within the same American cultural space for a period of time. As a result,

both examples' theatrical experimentations and productions were rejected by the American intellectuals and the majority of the press and a much needed transatlantic consideration on the theatrical aesthetics of commitment never took place.

The Federal Theatre Project, recognising the limitations of Broadway, attempted to renegotiate the European theatrical experimentations, the interrelation between politics and aesthetics, the legitimate representation of a new audience and the persistent tension between an audience, its social conditioning and the pertinence of actual change. Its radical revision of the theatre's role and function in response to the specific historical moment represented a conscious attempt to "offer a theatre of and for, if not by, the people".¹ Nonetheless, the continued uncomfortable dialectic between its aesthetic and social agenda, its theatrical enactment and its governmental patron firstly precluded a continuation of this attempt, secondly solicited certain dramaturgical modifications (evident in the texts and productions of *Power* and *One-Third of a Nation*) that directed the audience towards a subjectively empathetic response to the issues exposed and thirdly led to the project's problematic political identification both as 'red' and 'New Deal' propaganda.

It is important to also restate how uncomfortable the people involved with the project became with both its predecessor (the American left theatre of the 1920s) and its contemporary European tradition of modernist theatrical aesthetics. Although they initially acknowledged the influence primarily of the latter, they very soon disclaimed it as they deemed incompatible such tradition with the new, more democratically representative theatrical aesthetics they now represented. As a result, although they still advocated social motivation and action, this was to be realised through a liberal discourse that was in tune with the political agenda of their funding source, the US government. One therefore, could argue that the project had undergone a narrative, political and social change similar to the New York Intellectuals. It is ironic however, that despite such similarities, both the project and the intellectuals never acknowledged their parallel development; moreover they both refused to engage themselves with the European intellectuals and the debate concerning the development of theatrical aesthetics. This lack of engagement damaged predominantly the Federal Theatre Project because not only was it dissolved but it also left a void within American political theatre.

¹ Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, p.12.

The failure of the Federal Theatre Project to negotiate the European aesthetics of commitment within the historical context of the New Deal resulted in its political prosecution by the Dies committee and the rejection of such aesthetics within the realm of American culture. At the same time, it foreshadowed the hostile reception of Brecht's dramaturgy as revealed by his two American experiences. Brecht's aesthetics suggested that the dramatic and theatrical advances of modern theatre should not only count as formal techniques. Brecht "visualized the gesture, out from the gesture grew the word, and out of the word grew the character".² It was through this creative process that Brecht aimed at redefining the theatrical space into a new *topos* where (almost like a boxing match) the audience's reified views on reality and habitual modes of perception would be confronted by new dramatic strategies of representation and alternative representations of reality. The theatrical enactment of this confrontation would lead to a dialectical reflection on the audience's part that would ultimately recognize the need to act and the need for social change. Brecht was convinced of the theatre's cognitive ability to negotiate dialectically its political function and its modes of reception and production within a defamiliarised historical locus. When asked whether his theatre would become obsolete as soon as socialism was established: "my dear fellow, you do not know how to think dialectically. My theatre and its theories are valid under capitalism and in a bourgeois society; and they will be valid under the dictatorship of the proletariat, under socialism, communism, in a classless society...and in all societies to follow"³.

As the textual analysis of Brecht's plays revealed in this thesis, he was both fascinated and perplexed with his vision of 'America' and this complicated relationship was never resolved. Although he rejected the established modes of theatrical representation and performance prominent in Broadway, he at the same time admired elements of American culture (such as boxing and jazz music) and incorporated them in his theatre. 'America' for Brecht became a deliberate aesthetic gest that allowed him to critically approach American culture and include aspects of it within his dramaturgy. His collaboration with Charles Laughton in *Galileo* revealed how important 'America' as an aesthetic gest had become. Although 'America' does

² Feuchtwanger, www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/arc/libraries/feuchtwanger/exhibits/Brecht/index.html 10 October 2006.

³ Brecht as quoted in Reinhold Grimm, 'Alienation in Context: On the Theory and Practice of Brechtian Theater'. In *A Bertolt Brecht Reference Companion*. Ed. Siegfried Mews. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 35-46 (pp. 45-46).

not function within the play, it serves as an underlying text that allows a further consideration of the role of the scientist in the modern world (bearing in mind the historical conditions of the time with the use of the nuclear bomb) and in particular his ability to reconcile his aesthetic/creative/scientific aspirations with his social responsibilities. At the same time, Brecht is in a sense incorporating 'America' within his work by collaborating with artists, playwrights and directors previously involved with the Federal Theatre Project. In this way, he was exposed to how the project and the people involved contended with the aesthetics of commitment but he was also able to further show to the same people how his theatrical aesthetics were relevant within the American theatrical scene.

As the first two chapters exposed, modernist theatrical aesthetics were either faced with intense scrutiny when representing a more ideologically and politically involved position (Lukács and Adorno versus Brecht) or with complete lack of acknowledgement. At the same time, the intellectuals' positions on both sides of the Atlantic regarding the aesthetics of commitment seemed to deny the existence of the other and excluded it from their intellectual discourse. As the last two chapters revealed, both theatrical examples never actively negotiated their theatrical positions either with each other or with the intellectual world, with the exception of Brecht's engagement in the European debate only. This lack of engagement discouraged a more critical stance towards the theatrical aesthetics of commitment and a constructive debate among the theatrical practitioners on both sides. As a result the Federal Theatre Project never resolved its complex appropriation of the experiments of the avant-garde within a culturally liberal environment and Brecht's radical theatre (almost in a state of perpetual exile) became entangled within the same environment.

What this thesis attempted to perform was to expose these opposite transatlantic intellectual and critical trends in relation to theatrical aesthetics and subsequently involve them in a dialogue with the aforementioned theatrical examples. As discussed throughout the thesis, these intellectual and theatrical trends refused to voice each other. It is ironic therefore that one has to approach and engage critically with a conversation that did not physically occur. However, as the structure of the thesis reveals, within their original disengaged stand-off position there are elements that point towards an acknowledgement of the 'other' side. What is needed now is to critically and systematically approach both sides not only to reveal their individual positions but to reflect on their influence and importance within a transatlantic

cultural context. By conducting this transatlantic dialogue, one not only allows for a new methodological approach to such theoretical aesthetics but also ‘performs’ new ways of engaging with modernist theatre.

As this thesis demonstrates, the initial absence of a transatlantic dialogue on the aesthetics of commitment needs to be replaced by a critical and dialectical vocalised presence. The existence of such a dialogue necessitates both a theoretical examination of the intellectuals’ positions on both sides of the Atlantic and a critical enactment of both theatrical traditions. The transatlantic framing of the latter will reveal a complicated relationship of simultaneous development, borrowing and constant (re)interpretation that would offer a renewed critical perspective of approaching the theoretical issue as well. Perhaps then, the presence of the aesthetics of commitment as a thorn in the body politic will not be simply acknowledged or possibly diverted to politically authoritarian readings, but rather become critically involved in the consideration and interpretation of a powerfully intriguing transatlantic theatrical connection.

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