Tony Kushner’s Postmodern Theatre
Tony Kushner’s Postmodern Theatre:
A Study of Political Discourse

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This book is primarily concerned with exploring/analyzing the political discourse as dramatized/concretized in the dramas of Tony Kushner who is considered one of the most politically-engaged playwrights in America today. For this reason, my point of departure is the concept of political theatre as developed by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. This theoretical explanation/exploration serves a double purpose; first, it is meant to provide a statement of the definitions and concepts central to this study such as political discourse, political theatre, and postmodern theatre; second, it gives the author the tools of analysis by which to read/analyze Tony Kushner’s postmodern, politically-oriented texts. The aim in view is to try to define the major features of Tony Kushner’s postmodern theatre and to find out how he theatricalizes/incorporates politics.

American drama in the 1980s and the 1990s has witnessed a noticeable thematic shift from exclusively personal plays and musicals that once dominated the American theatre for a long period of time to an increasing number of plays which put greater emphasis on exploring issues and questions of socio-political interest. As a result of this thematic shift, the predominantly private settings and familial character relationships of the traditional family play have been replaced by a great variety of public settings and non-familial characters.

Tony Kushner’s theatre is a pioneering attempt in this respect. In Kushner’s theatre, there is no room for the traditional family plays which have dominated the American stage in the 1960s and 1970s. Kushner has found that there is not enough political discourse in contemporary American Theatre. For this reason, he writes his plays to shed special light on the politics of the American society in the 1980s, the 1990s, and in the beginnings of the 21st century.

In order to explore such thorny issues of socio-political concerns, Kushner has to depart both thematically as well as structurally from the traditional patterns of the family play, which have dominated the American Theatre landscape through most of the twentieth century. His first major play, *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985) draws parallels between Germany in the 1930s and the United States in the 1980s. It is actually a political critique of former U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s America which was mainly characterized by Reagan’s huge record of
political failings, his unprecedented buildup of the U.S. military, and his administration’s blatant disregard of the growing AIDS plague.

Tony Kushner's major breakthrough *Angels in America* (1994) is a tremendous hit which many theatre critics view as one of the most important plays of the twentieth century. In two full-length plays - *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* - Kushner condemns the political corruption which prevailed the political system of the United States in this period. Kushner’s third play "Slavs!" (1994) is about the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under former president Mikhail Gorbachev. In this play, Kushner explores the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ruin left in its wake. Tony Kushner's latest play *Homebody/Kabul* (2002), written before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq that followed, is an ambitious and powerful drama set principally in Kabul under the Taliban regime.
CHAPTER ONE
THEORIZING THE POSTMODERN THEATRE

In 1960, Henri Stendhal argued that "Politics in a work of literature is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one's attention" (Stendhal, 349). Stendhal's image has become one of the most-cited statements on art and politics, because it suggests an intrinsic opposition of two distinct realms: the realm of pleasure on one hand, and the realm of the everyday and social, on the other. Stendhal is hence often quoted in support of the argument that any intermingling of the two realms would mean some sort of intrusion and violation. Art and politics are two totally different worlds that can not be presented side by side to an audience. Such a dichotomous reading has frequently been maintained in an endeavor to theorize the relationship between art and politics in a way which presents the very idea of political art as a contradiction in terms. However, I want to read Stendhal in a different way, proposing to examine the relationship of concert and pistol shot under the contention that all art is political. In this respect, political art is no longer a question of reconciling opposite spheres, but a question of degree. What Stendhal finds shocking is not the intrusion of the political in the aesthetic, but the explicitness and frankness of the intrusion. As Stendhal also points out, the pistol shot might be vulgar but it undeniably attracts our attention. Therefore, it is precisely such blunt manifestations of the political in the aesthetic which I seek to examine in this study of Tony Kushner's postmodern political theatre.

With political theatre, I mean a theatre praxis that explicitly defines itself as a public forum for the discussion of current political events and issues. Moreover, it considers itself not merely as an aesthetic reflection of life but an active social force which tries not only to depict the political reality and the pressing social issues of the time but also to change that reality. In this theatre praxis, concert and pistol shot are not mutually exclusive. Each artistic production is rather designed to function as a pistol shot, startling and alerting its audience by its explicitness and bluntness. In
short, in political theatre, the aesthetic is a function of the political while the political manifests itself aesthetically.

Owing much to the Greeks and the origins of theatre itself, political theatre has a vivid tradition reaching back to the 1920s and the 1930s. During that period, the belief that theatre could be a means of political intervention was particularly strong. It was at this point that the term 'political theatre' was born. In the wake of World War I and under the influence of the revolutionary upheavals in Germany and Russia, a great number of theatre people began to conceive of theatre as a concrete political tool, a means for transforming reality according to a leftist worldview. 'Political' was no longer a mere descriptive attribute employed by theatre critics in reference to socially committed art but became a declaration, a manifesto proclaimed by theatre makers themselves. Political theatre was to be a way of thinking and living. It was to have a radical impact on the audience and on political reality itself through that audience. In other words, the political no longer constituted merely in the interpretive process, but as an intrinsic part of the production. All the elements of the production process including the author, director, designer, technicians, and actors began rigorously to subordinate subject matter and form to the single ultimate objective of affecting the audience politically so as to bring about social change on behalf of the subjugated and marginalized.

Emerging in Germany and Russia in the early 1920s, the concept of political theatre has commonly been associated with European modernism and with avant-garde concepts of art and society. It stands for provocative anti-bourgeois declarations and bold experimentation. In this respect, I refer to this as modernist political theatre. Due to its innovative and revolutionary nature, this theatre has been mostly prominent in the twentieth century theatre histories. However, the preoccupation of theatre scholars and critics with such a kind of political theatre has effaced another form of political theatre, which not only coexisted along with the modernist one but also had a rich tradition of playing an active role in society. That form of theatre could be called vernacular political theatre. The latter was particularly influential on the American stage in the 1930s. Due to the fact that it was less radical and innovative than its modernist counterpart, it had often been considered of lesser political and aesthetic value. Rather than engaging in modernist experimentation, that form of political theatre generally chose to convey its political message via conventional modes of representation such as realism and naturalism. With modernist and vernacular forms of political theatre, we encounter two different cultural objectives and concurrently, two different ways of
realizing them. A preference of one or the other actually was dependent on various historical, cultural, and social conditions. During the 1920s and 1930s, vibrant leftist theatre cultures emerged in Germany and the United States. Yet despite comparable social and economic conditions, the two theatre cultures processed these conditions in radically different ways. This became particularly apparent when the two leading German theatre artists, Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, attempted to transfer their concepts of political theatre onto the American stage. During the Weimar Republic, they had developed a highly modernist approach to political theatre, which they called epic. Epic theatre was very successful in Germany and influenced political theatre aesthetics on a global level for decades. However, when Brecht and Piscator continued their theatre practice during their exile years on the American stage both of them failed miserably. Epic theatre did not succeed with the American public. One of the main reasons for this failure was that it was competing with a strong and popular vernacular tradition; a tradition that could not be embraced by the modernist concept of political theatre. By the early 1930s, leftist theatres in the US had developed their own forms of representation which proved more adequate and efficient in addressing the political concerns and aesthetic sensibilities of the American public of the time.

For the different purposes of this study, my point of focus is on the first model of political theatre, i.e. modernist political theatre. The rationale behind this is that this form of political theatre is particularly influential on postmodern theatre, in general, and Tony Kushner's political theatre in specific. Investigating the origins of the modernist political theatre as represented by Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator constitutes the point of departure from which to explore/analyze the political discourse as dramatized/concretized in the dramas of Tony Kushner who is considered as one of the most politically-engaged playwrights in America today. The fundamental questions that motivate and guide this study are numerous. Some of these questions – which I have attempted to address and answer – are: how does Piscator's political/modernist theatre influence postmodern theatre in general and Tony Kushner's postmodern political theatre in particular? Are there any themes in Brecht's theatre – referred to in this project as modernist political theatre – that initiate the birth of postmodern theatre? In other words, does Brecht's modernist political theatre as a modern avant-garde influence postmodern theatre? If yes, in what way/to what extent does this impact extend to influence the politically-orientated plays of Tony Kushner both thematically and technically? Which is more effective for the dramatic text: to overtly raise political issues and questions or to covertly express such political views in a wider socio-
political and cultural perspective? The aim in view is to try to define the major features of Tony Kushner's postmodern theatre and to discover how he theatricalizes politics. In the following, I attempt to theorize and analyze the model of modernist political theatre in more detail.

It is quite acknowledged that modernist political theatre had been originated by Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator in Germany, Meyerhold and Eisenstein in the former Soviet Union. In fact, the theories and practice of such leading political directors/authors of the first half of the twentieth century are usually situated within the context of European modernism. They are represented as part of a general avant-garde movement. However, such conflation of modernism, avant-garde and political theatre is highly problematic. It cannot go beyond conceptualizing political theatre as part of an overall departure in the modern theatre. Thus it can only account for such basic characteristics as experimentation, provocative anti-bourgeois declarations, and the overarching goal of inciting the audience to action. However, these characteristics are also typical for other modernist movements such as Naturalism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism all of which have been considered avant-gardist in one way or another. In point of fact, it is very difficult to account for the fundamental differences between these distinct movements. Similarly, it is not easy to precisely locate the position of political theatre within modernism and how it relates to the various other modernist strands. If we are to understand the genealogy of political theatre, we need to distinguish carefully between the various moments of modernism, and particularly between the terms 'modernism' and 'avant-garde'. Only then, political theatre could be related to other modernist practices in an attempt to get clear on what ultimately distinguishes a modernist political theatre practice.

One way of drawing this distinction can best be illustrated by going back to Peter Bürger's seminal book *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1984) which is actually considered the most comprehensive and convincing attempt at theorizing and conceptualizing the avant-garde movement. Bürger carefully historicizes the avant-garde as a specific moment and function within European modernism. It is the moment when bourgeois art is first able to recognize and criticize its own status and function in bourgeois society without, however, being able to transcend it. The historical avant-garde is thus not simply synonymous with European modernism but represents a crucial moment within it – the moment of crisis. The question now is: what are the stages leading to this crisis of bourgeois art?
According to Bürger, the evolution of bourgeois art has been characterized by a persistent drive towards autonomy. With the increasing accumulation of specialized knowledge and the concurrent differentiation of the various social spheres in early bourgeois society, art gradually achieved an ever-greater degree of autonomy in relation to society. By the end of the 18th century, art had formed a sphere distinct and apart from the social, but yet relating to it in a reflective and corrective way. Such a status of semi-autonomy enabled art to reflect the relationship of the individual to society. This notion of art as a separate, yet moral and pedagogical force was fundamental in the formation of an emerging bourgeois subjectivity. Over the course of the following century, the process of autonomization continued and was intensified up to a point where the ties of art to the social were completely severed. In the aestheticism of the turn of the 19th century, art expressed its most extreme declaration of autonomy. The dialectic balance between form and content, which had so far characterized the evolution of art, completely tipped towards the former, turning form into its own content. Yet, as Bürger emphasizes, it is precisely at this moment of aesthetic perfect development that the flip side of the persistent drive towards autonomy became fully visible. In this respect Bürger writes:

Only after art, in nineteenth-century Aestheticism, has altogether detached itself from the praxis of life can the aesthetic develop "purely." But the other side of autonomy, art's lack of social impact, also becomes recognizable. (Bürger, 22)

Art wanted to be nothing but art. Bourgeois art decided to be fully autonomous from the praxis of life. In the 1910s and 1920s, the historical avant-garde appeared and specifically at this time bourgeois art became critical of itself. As Bürger puts it, "with the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism" (ibid 22). The Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists recognized the chasm that had opened up between art and the social. Launching a severe attack against the very institution of art in bourgeois society, they attempted to bridge the chasm and to reintegrate the two spheres. Notably they did so not by calling for socially significant art but by boldly proclaiming the aestheticization of life. However, these avant-garde movements failed in retranslating art back into life praxis. Its historical achievement was contained, as Bürger underlines, in the act of voicing a radical critique of the institution of bourgeois art. "It is to the credit of the historical avant-garde movements that they supplied this self-criticism" (ibid 27). Bürger's own argument stops at this point. He cannot
conceptualize a post-avant-garde movement. Hence, Bürger's argument cannot account for the phenomenon of political art, an art praxis that never conceived of itself as autonomous but always as an integrated function of social totality.

Two major criteria in Bürger's Theory of the Avant-garde are particularly useful for conceptualizing modernist political theatre. First, the avant-garde is not simply synonymous with modernism, but represents a specific historical moment in the evolution of bourgeois art and modernism: the moment of crisis. It is precisely at this moment of crisis that political theatre appeared on stage and pointed to a way of overcoming it. Whereas the avant-garde attempted to bridge the gap between art and social reality in aestheticizing life praxis, political theatre proclaimed the need for politicizing art. Art was to be refunctioned by putting it in the service of the subaltern and the working class rather than the dominant class. This insight, however, could only be gained from the failure of the avant-garde. Not surprisingly, a number of the most influential political theatre directors came out of the avant-garde. Piscator was briefly affiliated with the Berlin Dadaists, while Meyerhold and Eisenstein were influenced by Russian Futurism. As Piscator explains in his masterpiece The Political Theatre (1978) regarding the pioneering role of Dada: "These iconoclasts cleared the decks, abandoned the bourgeois position they had grown up in, and returned to the point of departure from which the proletariat must approach art" (Piscator, 23).

Second, Bürger explains the emergence of the avant-garde as both a negation and continuation of its predecessor. Phrased differently, to conceive of the genealogy of political theatre in terms of a series of sublations of previous modes of cultural production enables us to understand a crucial contradiction at the heart of modernist political theatre. For while Brecht and Piscator defined their work in vehement opposition to bourgeois art praxis, they nevertheless inherited a significant amount of its aesthetics. Thus, political theatre sublated not only its immediate predecessor, the historical avant-garde, but also its respective predecessors; the art theatre movement and naturalism. We can thus devise the following genealogy of modernist political theatre covering a period from about 1890 to 1925.

Modernist political theatre is heir to all previous modernist traditions in a dialectic sense, that is, both as negation and continuation. In the following, I attempt to sketch out the details of this genealogy. As a starting point, one can argue that it is 'naturalism' and not realism which actually constitutes the beginning of modern theatre. The distinctions between the two are hard to draw, particularly in the theatre (and this is
not the place to engage in a detailed discussion of them). Both movements, for instance, claim Ibsen and Strindberg as founding fathers. With the term 'naturalism' I refer to a phase in European theatre ranging from about 1890 to 1910, and encompassing the works of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and Gorky, to name only a few. In effect, it is quite obvious that such periodization represents an oversimplification. The early Ibsen, for instance, was clearly influenced by romanticism, while the late Ibsen and Chekhov already anticipated the symbolist movement. Strindberg again became the precursor of expressionism.

Political theatre acknowledges its indebtedness to naturalism because it rigorously pursued George Brandes's famous dictum that "unless art submitted social problems to debate it was meaningless" (Brandes, 383). This is why it is said that naturalism was the first theatre movement to systematically elucidate the social and economic structures of society and to place the working class on stage. At the same time, modernist political theatre strongly opposes the naturalist staging practice. For in its attempt to photographically reproduce the reality of life as accurately as possible on stage, naturalist theatre had ironically moved farther away from its audience. That is in order to create the perfect illusion of actual life, naturalism insisted on a strict separation of stage and audience. As Brecht himself explained, the naturalist stage "create[s] such an impression of naturalness that one can no longer interpose one's judgment, imagination and reactions, and must simply conform by sharing the experience and becoming one of 'nature's' objects (Brecht, Brecht on Theatre 219). In this respect, one can argue that the naturalist staging practice embodies at its best not only the audience's inability to feel that it is part and parcel of what it sees on stage, but also its inability to take action to change that reality. Thus, the naturalist stage, and consequently, theatre itself epitomizes the very condition of the separateness of art from life. In short, the art theatre movement that was most committed to relating art to life by reproducing it as accurately and minutely as possible on stage, paradoxically found itself removed from the reality of the spectator and consequently from the very praxis of life it tried to create.

Art theatre movement, on the other hand, had also its enormous influence on modernist political theatre. As a matter of fact, the emergent art theatre movement was much indebted to naturalism with the plays of Ibsen and Strindberg exerting a particularly formative influence because of their provocative anti-bourgeois politics. Around 1900 there was, however, a decisive rupture between the two. Theatre artists and practitioners began to increasingly resist naturalist staging practice since they tended to 'naturalize' the theatre experience and did not challenge the perception of
the audience. They consequently developed various non-mimetic forms of representation in order to tear down the fourth wall and reach out to the audience. One of the most important and pioneering attempts in this regard was presented by the Russian stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold through his famous concept of 'Stylized Theatre'. Meyerhold overtly opposed the naturalistic theatre. He found that by photographically recreating life on stage down to the minutest details, theatre denied the spectator any imaginative participation in the theatrical event. Providing a high degree of artifice and stylization, Meyerhold's form of 'Stylized Theatre' attempted to ignite and challenge the imagination of the spectator. According to him, the spectator should be encouraged – at least imaginatively – to participate in the dramatic action. Meyerhold sees a theatre production split up into four dimensions: author, director, actor, and spectator. When brought together, actor and spectator can freely develop their creativity. He also proposed that the four theatrical elements should be placed on a straight, horizontal line beginning with the author, who has a clear influence on the director, who stages the author's work. Further, the actor assimilates the creation of the director and reveals his soul freely to the spectator. In so doing, Meyerhold's 'Stylized Theatre' forces the spectator to create, and not to assimilate a theatre production. On the formative role of the spectator in developing a dramatic experience, Edward Braun quotes Meyerhold as saying: "We produce every play on the assumption that it will be still unfinished when it appears on the stage. We do this consciously because we realize that the crucial revision of a production is that which is made by the spectator" (Braun, 256).

Around the same time, numerous other theatre artists began to explore the use of space, movement, lighting, music, setting, and design. The most emblematic innovations took place in stage architecture, where theatre artists deliberately began to manipulate the distance between stage and auditorium. The fourth wall of the bourgeois deep stage was torn down, the apron abolished and the orchestra pit bridged. One of the most ambitious projects to integrate the stage with the auditorium was the 'Total Theatre' Bauhaus director Walter Gropius for Piscator's multi-media shows.

It is very hard to claim that such experimentations, which have taken various directions and degrees, constitute an actual 'movement' defined and united by a homogenous agenda. However, these radical experimentations, despite their heterogeneity, emphasize a highly significant objective which, in one way or another, linked all these experiments together: art theatre movement attempted to reestablish its contact with the audience by means of having radical innovative forms of representation. Breaking with
such conventional modes of representation and developing new ones, art theatre movement encouraged the spectator to actively participate – at least throughout his imagination – in the theatrical event. This is why one can argue that the most accomplished achievement of the art theatre movement consists in the rediscovery of the spectator and the concurrent shift from the internal communication on stage to the external communication with the audience offstage.

In sum, the art theatre movement of the 1900s and 1910s was fuelled by the rejection of a theatre praxis which is characterized by a complete isolation and passivity of the spectator. Instead of the total separateness of art and life, art theatre movement tried to reunite them anew. That was actually achieved by the art theatre movement critique of bourgeois art and society that had encouraged the growing discrepancy between art and life. Regardless of the serious differences between the various tendencies of the art theatre movement, the aim in view was to conceptualize and define theatre as the place where the gap between art and life – a major characteristic of bourgeois society – might be bridged and art might be transferred back into life. In this respect, one can also argue that these art theatres represented an important step towards a fundamental reconceptualization of the role of art in relation to society. However, those art theatres fell short of having fully concentrated on resisting and negating the praxis of bourgeois art and life only via radical formal experimentation. This is actually a solution that is diametrically opposed to the agenda of political theatre. Phrased differently, all various attempts of the art theatre movement to challenge the bourgeois staging practice focused completely on trying to find out new forms of representation at the expense of the themes to be presented throughout such innovative forms. In the theatre practice of the theatre art movement, form is far more important than content. Form is an end in itself; it is not a means to an end.

Despite a lack of political direction, the avant-garde enthusiastically continued the art theatre project of emancipating and activating the spectator. However, it was not enough for the avant-garde theatre to merely incite the spectator to imaginatively participate in the theatrical experience. Rather it went farther than this to the extent that it attempted to shock and provoke the spectator, and to elicit verbal protest and physical action. A spectator's provocation in this stage formed an important step in the direction of political theatre. Sergey Eisenstein, one of the most famous Russian film directors in the early twentieth century, for instance, in his 'Theatre of Attractions' suggested releasing firecrackers from under the seats of the spectators to keep them alert. The Russian Futurists provocatively entitled their manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*
(1912) in which they quite seriously provided a whole list of suggestions on how to cause laughter, commotion, quarrelling and fighting in the audience, for example by smearing the seats of the audience with glue, selling the same seats of several people, or sprinkling the auditorium with sneezing powder. Such provocative techniques actually constituted another important step towards realizing the political theatre. Such a provocation of the audience, mentally and viscerally, helped the avant-gardists to shake the audience from the passivity conferred upon them in the bourgeois theatre. It incited creative as well as physical participation. The overall goal was to turn the recipient into an actor in the arena of theatre and consequently in the world in which he lives.

In short, the avant-garde marked the moment of crisis of bourgeois art, and it is exactly at this moment that the political theatre could emerge and enter the stage. As seen earlier, modernist political theatre selectively inherits all previous traditions. From the naturalist stage, it takes over the social agenda. From the art theatre movement, it learns the necessity of emancipating the spectator from the static passive reception. From the avant-garde, it acquires a complete rejection of the bourgeois art and life. It also continues the avant-garde project of transforming bourgeois life by means of politicization of art.

At the same time, political theatre also defines itself in strict opposition to its predecessors. For none of the preceding modes of theatrical production conceptualized art as an integral function of the social. Political theatre, by contrast, considers art a means of transforming social reality according to its needs. Piscator succinctly summed up this new understanding of art in his masterpiece *The Political Theatre*:

I too had a clear opinion on how far art was only a means to an end. A political means. A propagandistic means. A pedagogical means. Not only in the sense of Dadaists, but in any event: a way with art, make an end of it! (Piscator, 23)

It is quite obvious that Piscator's new understanding of art can only be brought about if art exchanges its purely reflective role for a more transformative function and if it is able to incite the audience to political action. The goal is to motivate the spectator to not only contemplate reality but to actually transform it.

To conclude this part, one can argue that the modernist political theatre which emerged out of this genealogy of modernist theatre is marked by the following characteristics:
• Emphasis on formal innovation as a way of subverting conventional forms of representation.
• Tendency towards abstraction (over verisimilitude) as a way of breaking through illusionism of bourgeois stage and engaging the audience.
• Emphasis on inciting audience to political action.
• Abolition of autonomy of art by refunctioning it in the interest of the proletariat.

Although modernist political theatre rejects bourgeois conceptions of art and culture, it nevertheless continues to consider the theatre as a public site where the masses can be educated, where class-consciousness can be formed, and where aesthetic and political sensibilities can be cultivated.

In this part, the writer attempts an analysis of the modernist approach to political theatre by mapping out its most canonical examples: Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator. As a matter of fact, the theatre of Brecht and Piscator is generally considered the founding model of modernist political theatre. During the 1920s and the 1930s, the two artists developed, in close collaboration but yet independent of each other, a modernist and a political model of theatre which they called 'epic'. The epic theatre was deeply influenced by avant-garde aesthetics on the one hand and the desire to arouse the proletarian masses to political thought and action on the other. In this respect, epic theatre actually formed a unique synthesis of formal experimentation and social agenda. It also represented an entirely different new approach to the role of theatre in society. Theatre was to function as an interventional social force. Both Brecht and Piscator developed this new concept of theatre in response to a prevalent need for the presentation and dramatization of the pressing social and political issues of their time. Such thorny socio-political issues were not presented on the professional bourgeois stage in mainstream theatres. Rather than reflecting the intense class conflict and economic recession of the 1920s, leading theatres resorted to presenting a type of theatre which brought about light entertainment to its spectators. The objective was to distract and divert the working masses from the socio-political issues and conditions that determined their everyday reality. Brecht and Piscator's preoccupation was precisely to offer the opposite: to offer workers an alternative to the prevailing theatre practice of the bourgeois stage. This alternative consists in presenting relevant topical issues in an innovative form in order to provide the working masses with conceptual tools that would enable them to understand and consequently transform reality according to their needs. However, epic theatre is not a homogenous concept. A closer analysis
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reveals that it comes in two different versions. Despite a common understanding of its formal methods and political functions, Brecht and Piscator were different regarding the question of what role the audience was to play in this theatre. Later on in this chapter, both Brecht's and Piscator's individual models of political theatre will be investigated. For now, I want to begin by sketching out the key concept of Brecht's theory of epic theatre/political theatre, namely Verfremdungseffekt, or, the Alienation Effect.

When Brecht was looking for a term that would encompass the type of theatre he was looking to create, he was influenced by the work of Erwin Piscator, who during the 1920s and 1930s was involved in the creation of new theatre forms. Piscator was the first person to coin the phrase 'Epic Theatre', a term that Brecht is often associated with. In his famous extensive analysis of Brecht's theories of epic theatre, particularly his best known technique Verfremdungseffekt or, the Alienation Effect, Fredric Jameson in his book Brecht and Method (1998) delineates four main components. First, it is a way of representing the ordinary and familiar in a way that amazes the audience. Second, it describes a set of staging and acting techniques (V-effekt) used to create a distance between stage and audience, performance and content. Third, it is a method for shutting down empathy with the characters' dilemmas. Fourth, it is a way of depicting characters, processes, and situations in their historical context and consequently as subject to change. To put it differently, Verfremdung is a method of defamilairizing and historicizing the subject by interrupting the flow of dramatic action and thereby distancing it from both the spectator and the actor. Similarly, Peter Brook maintains that 'Verfremdung' demonstrates Brecht's respect for his audience. He argues that "Alienation is above all an appeal to the spectator to work for himself, so to become more and more responsible for accepting what he sees only if it is convincing in an adult way" (Brook, 72). With V-effekt, Brecht "sought to replace classical Aristotelian empathy leading to catharsis with an empathy based on critical observation" (Brecht, Brecht on Theatre 93). By being subject to an epic performance, Brecht wanted his audience members to leave the theatre energized for social and political action, not pacified through their empathy with the characters' dilemmas.

Central to Brecht's technique of V-effekt is his unique concept of spectatorship. Through the cultivation of relaxed but intelligent spectators, Brecht strove to counteract the bourgeois entertainment industry and activate the political will of the audience. He explains the fundamental differences between the spectator of dramatic/bourgeois and epic/political theatre as follows:
The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appal me – Because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (Brecht, ibid 71)

As previously noted, Brecht systematically subordinates dramaturgy, acting, and staging to the primary goal of cultivating a totally unemotional, detached and critical spectator without which he can not imagine political change.

Erwin Piscator, by contrast, insists that political activism needs both a rational and an emotional basis. In Piscator's theatre, reason and emotions play an equal role in developing the audience's consciousness and bringing about social change. His dramaturgy is therefore strongly invested in challenging the audience both intellectually and viscerally. In this respect, Piscator provides a rather different version of modernist political theatre. In his staging practice, the desire for emotional stimulation, however, often, contradicts the wish for rational instruction, canceling out the latter and severely undermining their overall political effectiveness. Piscator attempted throughout his career to strike an effective balance or a compromise between aesthetic representation and political agenda which lies at the core of the very concept of political theatre. In the following portion of this study, I will attempt to provide the reader with an overview of Piscator's political dramaturgy with a focus on his constant ambivalence between rational argumentation and visceral absorption.

Trying to work out the most effective audience approach, Piscator moved through various stages which actually constitute the various phases of his evolution as a man of the theatre. His early political revues (1924/1925) were strongly influenced by Russian aesthetics, particularly by Eisenstein's theories of montage and attraction. With the founding of his own theatre, the Piscatorbühne in 1927, Piscator began to synthesize various theatre arts into multi-media spectacles, merging the audience in a festive community. After the failure of the Piscatorbühne in 1929, Piscator resorted to more minimalist staging practices.

From the very beginning of his theatre career, Piscator insisted that the bourgeois stage had to be refunctioned towards political ends. Like other modernists, he believed that this could only be achieved if theatre
overcame the passive indulgence commonly attributed to bourgeois art and instead, defined itself as a site of political education and agitation. He therefore fervently declared:

The theatre was no longer trying to appeal to the audience's emotions alone, was no longer speculating on their emotional responsiveness it consciously appealed to their intellect. No longer mere élan, enthusiasm, rupture, but enlightenment, knowledge and clarity were to be put across. (Piscator, 49)

It is quite obvious that Piscator's dramaturgical objective was remarkably similar to Brecht's. Both artists stressed that epic theatre should represent collective rather than individual experience. It should elucidate the causality between socio-economic factors and personal circumstances and, more importantly, situate these factors within a general historical context. Above all, it should portray the world as subject to change and consequently as changeable. Piscator, however, differed fundamentally from Brecht in retaining the need for emotional involvement of the audience. Brecht, on one hand, considered the emotional identification and absorption of the audience harmful to the cultivation of critical spectatorship and thus, employed a variety of V-effects to pre-empt them. Piscator, by contrast, firmly claimed that the emotional and the rational should be evenly matched, that the visceral and cerebral incitement should be hand in hand. Towards this end, Piscator used, just like Brecht, various epic elements such as projections, film, narrator, chorus, and music. Piscator's brilliantly used such devices not as a means of defamiliarization and distantiation, but of confrontation and absorption. Needless to say, Piscator's explicit emphasis on visceral appeal and emotional absorption formed a sharp contrast to Brecht's conception of the role of emotionality in political theatre. In short, Piscator approached the goal of refunctioning the stage for revolutionary purposes from opposite ends.

Piscator combined political propaganda with emotional agitation by way of using both the innovative forms and media of modernist political theatre as well as the emotional structures of the classic bourgeois stage, i.e. dramatic suspense, empathy and catharsis. To achieve this purpose, he integrated film clips on World War I and the November Revolution in one of his most famous documentary revues entitled In Spite of Everything (1925). Piscator's use of film in this play is part and parcel of the staging practice. It actually contributes to the overall understanding of the whole drama. Using film clips here serves a double purpose; first, it was meant to instruct the audience about the historical context of the German revolutionary movement; second, it helps to elicit an intense emotional
involvement in it. On his genuine use of film clips in his early political development Piscator writes:

The momentary surprise when we changed from live scenes to film was very effective. But the dramatic tension that live scene and film clip derived from one another was even stronger. They interacted and built up each other's power, and at intervals the action attained a furore that I have seldom experienced in theatre. (ibid 97)

The epic element of film proved effective in providing both intellectual and visceral stimuli. It informed and captured the audience and, above all, built up dramatic suspense and revolutionary sentiment towards a final cathartic climax. Ideally the climactic moment – the moment of complete identification with the dramatic action – would also be the moment in which political cognition would lead directly to spontaneous political action. To put it differently, with the help of various epic elements, Piscator moved the action towards Aristotelian catharsis, through which he in turn hoped to effect Marxist revolution. Piscator commented on the effect of the In Spite of Everything documentary by saying that "For the first time we were confronted with the absolute reality we knew from experience. And it had exactly the same moments of tension and dramatic climaxes as literary drama, and the same strong emotional impact" (ibid 96).

In the following years, Piscator changed his strategy. Founding his own theatre, he aimed at a broader and more heterogeneous audience apart from the proletariat. He did so above all on the aesthetic and not on the political level. He intended to create a stage, on which he could implement his epic dramaturgy with the help of the latest stage technology. This was actually Piscator's great dream which he never achieved; he wanted to direct in what he called a 'total theatre', a theatre building equipped with all the mechanical equipment necessary to realize the full potentialities of modern stage technology. On his unique concept of 'total theatre', Piscator himself writes:

What I had in mind was a theatre machine . . . technically as perfectly functional as a typewriter, an apparatus that would incorporate the latest lighting, the latest sliding and revolving scenery, both vertically and horizontally, numerous projection boxes, loudspeakers everywhere, etc. (Piscator, 179)

Piscator commissioned Bauhaus director Walter Gropius with the design of a new theatre building which could approximate his vision. Gropius
came up with a highly versatile theatre design capable of converting the stage at any time – even in the course of a performance – into any of the three classical theatre models (Greek arena stage, semicircular proscenium stage, bourgeois fourth-wall stage).

As a matter of fact, the ‘total theatre’ represented a radical departure from the static bourgeois theatre because it provided a maximum contact with the spectator. The aim in view was to catapult the spectator in the midst of the dramatic action and to integrate him spatially into the spectacle rather than allowing him to escape behind the curtain. To enhance the impression of complete absorption, a system of spotlights, loudspeakers, film projectors and projection screens was to be installed along the walls and ceilings of the auditorium. Moreover, stage and auditorium would merge into one single site for the unfolding of a multimedia spectacle, and the spectator would be completely immersed in it. In this manner, the entire theatre would be transformed into the site of scenic events.

To conclude this part, it is highly significant to summarize Brecht and Piscator's shared vision of the theatre. The aforementioned discussion of Brecht’s and Piscator’s models of modernist political theatre delineates the following seven characteristics. First, Brecht and Piscator insisted that modern theatre needed to assert itself as a political force, if it was to play an active social role. Second, both Brecht and Piscator stressed that their notion of political theatre was informed by a Marxist worldview. Brecht explained that he inadvertently ended up writing from a Marxist perspective since it best enabled his audience to grasp and actively change the world around them. Piscator similarly announced his Marxist background. Third, the theatre of Brecht and Piscator was a theatre for and about the working class, more specifically for the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat. Fourth, because of its political aspirations, epic theatre considered the education of the audience its main task. One way of doing that was to elucidate the interrelation of the economic, political and social forces of the time. Piscator believed that the continuous education of current events would have a positive effect on all parts of the audience. Similarly, Brecht declared pedagogy to be the new purpose of art. Fifth, in order to be pedagogically effective, epic theatre sought immediate contact with the audience. Like other modernist artists, Brecht and Piscator considered the tearing down of the fourth wall of bourgeois theatre a necessity to the development of an effective didactic practice. However, they developed different methods of approaching their audiences. While Brecht insisted on establishing immediate contact via distanciation, Piscator immersed his spectators in a highly technologized audio-visual
spectacle. Sixth, both artists considered the epic form most suitable for discussing political issues. Brecht insisted that classical drama had to break down because it could no longer accommodate the themes relevant for the working class. Similarly, Piscator maintained that the closed form of classical drama was typical of bourgeois society and thus this form must be changed as well. Both directors considered the open narrative of epic drama capable of presenting contemporary reality with all its complexity since it allowed the authors to shift the dramatic focus from individual suffering to collective processes and from the personal to the general. As Brecht and Piscator asserted, once the working class audience recognized its position within the general economic and social structure of capitalism, it would also know how to go about changing it. In short, form and content are inseparable in epic drama. Finally, Brecht and Piscator agreed on what this epic form looked like. They defined it as an extremely open dramatic form that incorporated various narrative and technical devices as running commentaries into the dramatic actions such as narration, film, slide projections, choreographic movements and songs.

A discussion about the political possibilities of art in our present-day theatre landscape would necessarily have to engage the ongoing debate over the meaning of modernism and modernity as well as postmodernism and postmodernity. That debate became particularly vivid in the early 1980s. In fact, one of the problems in dealing with postmodernism is in distinguishing it from modernism. In many ways, postmodern artists and theorists continue the sorts of experimentation that we can also find in modernist works, including the use of self-consciousness, parody, irony, fragmentation, generic mixing, ambiguity, simultaneity, and the breakdown between high and low forms of expression. In this way, postmodern artistic forms can be seen as an extension of modernist experimentation; however, others prefer to represent the move into postmodernism as a more radical break, one that is a result of new ways of representing the world including television, film, and the computer. Many date postmodernity from the sixties when the world witnessed the rise of postmodern architecture; however, some critics prefer to see World War II as the radical break from modernity, since the horrors of Nazism were made evident at this time.

Linda Hutcheon, for instance, in her seminal book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* attempts to sketch “a flexible conceptual structure which could at once constitute and contain postmodern culture and our discourses both about and adjacent to it” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* ix). She argues that postmodernism cannot be regarded as a new paradigm precisely because it “works within systems it attempts to subvert,” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 2)
neither can it be separated from the problematics of modernism, upon which it comments. In addition, she asserts that many of the most well-known commentators on the postmodern, including Fredric Jameson, fail to define it against existing cultural practices, relying instead on generalizations and simplifications. In her own critique of postmodernism, Hutcheon highlights postmodernism as a contradictory practice that does not pretend to exist outside the system it comments upon and contests, but “overtly acknowledges its complicity, only to work covertly to subvert the system’s values from within.” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 4).

Moreover, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon distinguishes between postmodernity and postmodernism. The former she understands to mean “the designation of a social and philosophical period or condition” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 23), specifically the period or ‘condition’ in which we now live. The latter she associates with cultural expressions of various sorts, including “architecture, literature, photography, film, painting, video, dance, music” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 1) and so on. Indeed, Hutcheon diagnoses as one reason why critics have been led to such disparate opinions about the “postmodern” is because of the conflation of these two disparate if associated domains: socio-historical on the one hand, aesthetic on the other hand. By distinguishing between the two domains, Hutcheon offers a critique of Fredric Jameson’s influential attack against the postmodern: “The slippage from postmodernity to postmodernism is constant and deliberate in Jameson’s work: for him postmodernism is the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 25). Jameson thus sees postmodern art and theory as merely reinforcing the many things he finds distressing in postmodern culture, particularly the conditions of multinational late-capitalism.

Hutcheon does not deny that postmodernity and postmodernism are “inextricably related” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 26); however, she wants to maintain the possibility that postmodernism's cultural works could be successful in achieving a critical distance from the problems of our contemporary age. On the whole, she agrees with other critics regarding the elements that make up the postmodern condition: a world dominated by the logic of capitalism, which has no regard for the rights of oppressed laborers or the ravagement of the natural world; a society increasingly under the scrutiny of government agencies that insist on casting their disciplining gaze ever deeper into our private lives; an increasing reliance on technologies that separate people from each other and the natural world.

A close analysis of Hutcheon's critique of postmodernism clearly highlights the fact that she departs from other critics of postmodernism in
that she underscores the ways that postmodern cultural works engage in effective political critiques of the postmodern world in which we live. In this respect, Hutcheon writes:

critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernism to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity: postmodernism here is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it" (Hutcheon, Politics 27).

Hutcheon, therefore, explores a wide variety of works from various genres and media to illustrate how the cultural works of postmodernism effect their critique of the present. Some of those strategies postmodernism borrows from modernism, in particular its self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, as well as its questioning of such Enlightenment values as progress, science, and empire or such nineteenth-century values as bourgeois domesticity, capitalism, utilitarianism, and industry. However, Hutcheon argues that postmodernism does differ from modernism in important ways and that it is this difference from the modernist project that exemplifies the critical potential of postmodern cultural work. For one, Hutcheon points out that postmodern works tend to be critical of modernism's elitist and sometimes almost totalitarian modes of effecting 'radical change'. She points out how modernists pursued radical change without acknowledging the price that must be paid by the more extremist positions assumed by modernist authors, some of which are, for instance, fascism, futurism, anarchism. She also questions how effective elitist modernist projects could ever be as political critique.

In point of fact, if there is one thing that especially distinguishes postmodernism from modernism, according to Hutcheon, it is postmodernism's relation to mass culture. Whereas modernism "defined itself through the exclusion of mass culture and was driven, by its fear of contamination by the consumer culture burgeoning around it, into an elitist and exclusive view of aesthetic formalism and the autonomy of art" (Hutcheon, Politics 28), postmodern works are not afraid to renegotiate "the different possible relations between high and popular forms of culture" (Hutcheon, Politics 28). Apart from Hutcheon's attempts to identify the perimeters and characteristics of postmodernism in relation to cultural practice, I intend to focus on Fredric Jameson's concept of postmodernism because it poses the question of political agency most clearly and urgently.
Fredric Jameson argues that postmodernism signifies not only a generational reaction to modernism, but also a new conception of culture that blurs the boundaries between high and low, elite and popular. Moreover, it functions as a periodizing concept, which allows one to correlate new formal features to the emergence of a new type of social and economic order; specifically the postindustrial or consumer culture of the Western world. Thus, while the concept of postmodernism acknowledges its links to modernism, it also signifies an important radical departure from it.

Jameson's concept is extremely useful in historicizing new formal features in relation to the social and economic development of Western culture. Jameson strongly believes that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism. At the same time, it projects a rather bleak vision of the possibility of representation. In light of an utter dispersion of language as well as the perpetual difference of meaning, the question of authoritative and objective representation becomes redundant. The classical idea of mimesis is null and void when the connection between the signifier and the signified is no longer secured. Rather than pointing to an actual meaning, the signifier now at best points to the stereotypes, clichés and images it accrued in a mediatized culture. In this sense, Jameson writes:

If there is any realism left here, it is a 'realism' which springs from the shock of grasping that confinement and of realizing that, for whatever peculiar reason, we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach. (Jameson, 198)

Jameson's pronouncement clearly highlights the fact that the 'realism' of postmodernism is a false realism, a mere mimicry in dead languages and hollow images, a realism of a perpetual present, forfeiting the very possibility of authentic, objective imitation. Jameson concludes his argument by saying that art can ultimately only be representational art about art itself. Postmodernism, in this respect, replicates and reinforces the logic of late capitalism. Thus, one can simply say that according to Jameson, postmodern art inevitably is not capable of contesting or even resisting capitalism.

If, as Fredric Jameson postulates, the bind to the real has been severed in postmodernism, how then is it possible for postmodernist art to move beyond mere representation towards a politics of resistance? Moreover, is there something as postmodernist political art or is that a very contradiction in terms? If we take up the modernist definition of modernist political art as a means of social and cultural intervention in society, as developed by,