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Brecht and the Unmensch: Armor for Protest in the 21st Century

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Abstract

In this article, the author posits the epic theater of Bertolt Brecht as a model for narrative resistance to posthumanist theory. The author illustrates how posthumanist theory can and does collude with elite interests by distracting the democratic populace from true political engagement through the dual attractors of anxiety/ elation over machine autonomy and the subconscious fear of political responsibility. The author then illustrates how Brecht's subversion of the traditional epic genre served his project of challenging disempowering cultural narratives, such as those advanced by Nazi authorities, and raised up the figure of Walter Benjamin's *Unmensch*, whose traits of resilience and cunning serve as armor in carrying out their public resistance of oppressive forces both outside and within themself. Building on Brecht's theoretical writing, the author asserts that AI technology is simply the newest god in a long tradition of subjugating the masses through intimidation in the face of an all-powerful force. The author argues that the cultural challenge more pressing than humans coming to terms with machine autonomy is humans coming to terms with their own autonomy. The author concludes with an example of the application of Brechtian theatrical techniques in the creation of an activist street theatre piece on coal and climate change, illustrating how today's activist theatre can borrow from and advance Brecht's theory and practices.

Keywords:
Posthuman, Brecht, AI, activism, climate change.

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Brecht ve Unmensch: 21. Yüzyılda Protesto Zırhı

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Özet

Bu makalede yazar, Bertolt Brecht'in epik tiyatrosunu posthümanist teoriye karşı anlatısal direniş için bir model olarak ortaya koymaktadır. Yazar, posthümanist teorinin, makine özerkliği kaygısı/heyecanı ve bilinçaltındaki siyasi sorumluluk korkusu gibi ikili çekiciler aracılığıyla demokratik halkın dikkatini gerçek siyasi angajmandan uzaklaştırarak elit çıkarlarla nasıl işbirliği yapabileceğini ve yaptığını göstermektedir. Yazar daha sonra Brecht'in geleneksel destan türünü altüst etmesinin, Nazi yetkilileri tarafından ileri sürülenler gibi güçsüzleştirici kültürel anlatılara meydan okuma projesine nasıl hizmet ettiğini ve Walter Benjamin'in direnç ve kurnazlık özellikleri hem kendi dışındaki hem de kendi içindeki baskıcı güçlere karşı kamusal direnişlerini gerçekleştirmede zırh görevi gören *Unmensch* figürünü nasıl yükselttiğini göstermektedir. Brecht'in teorik yazılarına dayanan yazar, yapay zeka teknolojisinin, her şeye gücü yeten bir güç karşısında kitleleri sindirme yoluyla boyun eğdirme geleneğinin en yeni tanrısı olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Yazar, insanların makinelerin özerkliği ile değil, kendi özerklikleri ile hesaplaşmalarından daha acil olan kültürel zorluğun, insanların kendi özerklikleri ile hesaplaşmaları olduğunu savunmaktadır. Yazar, Brechtyen tiyatro tekniklerinin kömür ve iklim değişikliği üzerine aktivist bir sokak tiyatrosu eserinin yaratılmasında uygulanmasına dair bir örnekle sonlandırarak, günümüz aktivist tiyatrosunun Brecht'in teori ve pratiklerinden nasıl yararlanabileceğini ve bunları nasıl geliştirebileceğini göstermektedir.

Real innovation attacks at the roots. – Bertolt Brecht

Introduction

Several years ago, I coordinated an event at the 15th Street Quaker Meeting House in New York City that brought together Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Choir, musician Morgan O'Kane and actor Martin Pfefferkorn performing excerpts from Nikola Tesla's writings about electricity. The event was, in part, a fundraiser to support the protection of Blair Mountain, WV, site of a historic labor uprising, from destruction at the hands of mountaintop removal coal mining. One of the middle-aged attendees I spoke with after the event called it "a consciousness-raising event." At the time, I thought that sounded like an appropriate way to frame the work. But that term does not satisfy me anymore. I don't think "consciousness-raising" is adequate for the times we live in.

In a 1972 conversation between Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, Foucault says that in working with theory it is not "to 'awaken consciousness' that we struggle…, but to sap power, to take power" ("Intellectuals and Power"). Despite the leaps and bounds in technological innovations of our times, culminating most recently in the mainstreaming of artificial intelligence (AI), it is still the struggle for power among and over humans that determines the trajectory of our common lives. If we are going to change our present trajectory, it will be by changing who has power and over whom. By emphasizing things like "awareness" and "consciousness" in resistance work, we assume an ultimately passive stance in relation to the existing order. Instead, resistance work must own its intention: "to sap power, to take power." A historical figure who understood this distinction and worked intentionally toward active resistance and the taking of power was Bertolt Brecht.

When Brecht writes that "real innovation attacks at the roots," he makes the assertion that real innovation in the social order begins by attacking the values, beliefs and traditions that undergird dominant society. It is this foundation of (often unspoken) beliefs that provides the power base for the existing order. Consciousness-raising may be said to be the exposure of foundational beliefs as *damaging* or, in some cases, intentionally *distracting* the populace from the truth of what is going on. An attack must go a step further, working to rip up these foundational beliefs. One could argue that we see such attacks in all of Brecht's plays as he seeks to sever his audience's identification with and faith in existing values by illustrating how these values consistently, woefully, fail the common person. Though more than 90 years have passed since Brecht began developing his epic theatre, the contextual impetus for his goal of attacking societal values persists. Our dominant narratives in the United States are still written from within a capitalist tradition, spiked with myths of boot straps and individualism. With the recent re-election

of Donald Trump, we have seen how vehemently people still want to believe in capitalist principles of wealth as life's supreme objective and primary evidence of virtue. These beliefs help support a society with an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, a disparity that increasingly corresponds to access to and control over technology.

In "A Radio Speech" from 1947, Brecht expresses the hope that a type of person will come into being who actively resists being guided or changed by machines: "What matters most is that a new human type should now be evolving, at this very moment, and that the entire interest of the world should be concentrated on his development….It is my belief that he will not let himself be changed by machines but will himself change the machine; and whatever he looks like he will above all look human" (*Brecht on Theatre* 97). This statement could be interpreted as Brecht's vision of the *post-tech human*, a figure who destroys her roots in oligarchic technocracy and embraces an egalitarian mastery of machines toward the common benefit of humankind.

Walter Benjamin, Brecht's friend and intellectual colleague for many years was likely informed by Brecht's work in his conception of the Destructive Character, or the *Unmensch*. Benjamin and Brecht, writes Stanley Mitchell, "start with the anonymous man and encourage his resilience; so that the 'hard thing' may give way. But because of their fear of a new dark age, they think in a perspective which goes beyond the immediate class struggle to encompass all the social struggles of humanity, where qualities like cunning and endurance are more important than heroism" (xii). Brecht's epic theatre, over a variety of plays, brings the figure of the *Unmensch* into vivid relief, celebrating these figures' cunning and endurance: as Galy Gay in *Man Equals Man*, as Galileo in *Life of Galileo* and as Azdak in *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. These are figures who are free of obligation to any established order or set of beliefs. Through this freedom, they see and grasp the potential to change history. Brecht's *Unmenschen* model the kind of figures needed by today's activist-dramatists who aim to envision new narratives toward changing unequal wealth and power distribution.

While contemporary activism seeks to destroy the power of elitist interests to mediate the common citizen's access to and attitude toward advanced technologies, the figure of the *Unmensch* serves as a powerful affront to the person Benjamin terms the "étui-man," or "case"-man has been made more even comfortable than he was in Benjamin's time through the advanced technology that has disempowered him politically. "The destructive character," writes Benjamin, "is the enemy of the étui-man. The étui-man looks for comfort, and the case is its quintessence. The inside of the case is the velvet-lined trace that he has imprinted on the world. The destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction" ("The Destructive Character" 542). Today's étui-person is a creature of comfort who embraces technology for the ease it provides without questioning the wider system that supports it.

Departing forcefully from the dominant trend of embracing technology in exchange for undeniable comfort, the *Unmensch*'s traits of resilience and cunning are the armor the 21st century activist requires in order to carry out his or her public resistance of oppressive forces, including their own internal étui-person. In this paper, I will first consider how posthuman theory can and does collude with elite interests by distracting the democratic populace from true political engagement. I will then illustrate how Brecht's subversion of the epic genre serves his project of roots destruction and raises up the figure of the *Unmensch*. Finally, I will share an example of the application of Brechtian theatrical techniques in the creation of an activist street theatre piece and consider how activist theatre today can both borrow from and advance Brecht's theory and practice.

Posthumanism and Political Apathy

In her "Afterward: The Human in the Posthuman" published in *Cultural Critique* (2003), N. Katherine Hayles suggests we "abandon the attempt to police the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman," for these boundaries are already transgressed (Hayles 136). This perceived blurring of boundaries between the human and the machine is the most consistent tenet of posthumanism. The cyborg, a hybrid being of biological and machine parts, has appeared in thousands of works of literature, film, TV and video games since well before Clynes and Kline coined the term in 1960. Posthuman theory cannot be reduced to one fixed set of beliefs but needs to be considered as a collective of concepts that stems from the common premise that human-machine boundaries are, can be, and will be blurred. In 1991, Donna Haraway explored this boundary-blurring in her seminal posthuman text "Cyborg Manifesto":

> It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices…. Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. The replicant Rachel in the Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner* stands as the image of a cyborg culture's fear, love, and confusion. (Haraway 177-8)

While I agree with Haraway that the character Rachel in *Blade Runner* embodies the anxiety of the disappearance of boundaries between human and machine, her existence in a dystopian fable does not confirm the reality of this level of boundary-blur. According to the logic of the film, Rachel is a "replicant," a machine who does not know she is not human, but despite rapidly evolving AI, no such being yet exists nor do we know for certain that it could. So while it is true that much of the blurring boundaries between humans and machines *are* tangible – the increasing merging of prosthetic body parts with biological ones – the more spiritual and philosophical realms of

posthuman thought, such as those explored by Haraway, often rest on premises of boundary-blur that are still, and should remain, fantastic.

Jumping back several decades to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, when the *maschinenmensch*, one of popular culture's earliest cyborgs, is identified as a witch, it is burnt at the stake. As it burns, its human disguise dissolves to reveal pure machine underneath. *Maschinenmensch* marks its inhumanity by laughing at the prospect of being burnt, as though burning could be a punishment for something that cannot physically feel. Its humanity is revealed as only a veneer. Despite the nearly 100 years of technological advancement since *Metropolis*, we have created no machine that has progressed to something beyond a veneer of humanity. And as our potential to create something like Metropolis's *Maschinenmensch* has grown, formal guidelines have emerged that discourage robots that appear human. "The United Kingdom's EPSRC Principles of Robotics specifically address this problem in its fourth principle…," writes Joanna Bryson, Professor of Ethics and Technology at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin. "Robots should not have deceptive appearance—they should not fool people into thinking they are similar to empathy deserving moral patients" (Bryson 23).

Posthuman theory soars into grandiosity because it is not rooted in practical realities such as energy infrastructure and limits of essential resources like lithium (McNulty *et al.*), but, rather, preys upon human psyches. "The posthuman" writes Braidotti "provokes elation but also anxiety about the possibility of a serious de-centering of 'Man,' the former measure of all things" (Braidotti 2). This elation/anxiety which Braidotti insightfully identifies, if prolonged beyond the initial, shocking encounter of the potentials of boundary-blur, can only be a result of self-deception. "Elation/anxiety" at the prospect of technological advancement is a condition that, I argue, is deployed to conceal the desire of the individual to *escape responsibility* for addressing serious problems happening now in our world, problems like the geopolitics of energy, the wars it triggers, class disparity and climate change, in which most humans are all complicit. Joanna Bryson complements this argument in her explanation of the moral expectations we should associate with AI technology:

> We are currently the principal agents when it comes to our own technology, and I believe it is our ethical obligation to design both our AI and our legal and moral systems to maintain that situation. Legally and ethically, AI works best as a sort of behavioural prosthetic to our own needs and desires. If we wish to extend the lifespan of our civilisation, I recommend focusing on ways to do this while maintaining a flourishing human society at the motive core. (Bryson 23)

Though Bryson does not engage at length with the psychology behind the attraction to human-machine boundary blur, her argument is a sober answer to the question of why we should not

indulge such an attraction, whatever its underlying motive.

Braidotti does carefully consider those who take what she calls a "reactive" approach to the concept of the posthuman. She highlights Martha Nussbaum as one example who "develops a thorough contemporary defense of Humanism as the guarantee of democracy, freedom, and the respect for human dignity." (Braidotti 38). While I critique aspects of posthuman theory, I do not, like Nussbaum, critique it in order to affirm Humanism, which I agree with Braidotti carries the baggage of Eurocentrism and imperialist tendencies (Braidotti 16). I critique posthumanism as an imaginative leap at the far edge of the elation/anxiety related to technology. I believe this leap is encouraged by our socially-trained aversion to active opposition of entrenched corporate-political power. The trouble such opposition would pose to our well-established comfort nudges us, I argue, into posthumanist theories in which succumbing to technocracy, while frightening, is appealing because it feels easier than the alternative.

Embracing posthumanism then is a turn to a) transcend anxiety and embrace technology for all that it may make possible (thus, it becomes a projection screen for one's personal hopes and dreams, as so clearly evidenced in Haraway) and b) affirm one's aversion to active opposition of entrenched political power. By assuming a posthumanist stance and situating one's creative vision in the imagination of a future in which human-machine boundaries are erased, one neatly side-steps the responsibility to make decisions about and act in response to actual human-driven conflicts that will decide our common future.

Posthuman theory helps train potential socially-conscious thinkers to redirect their concerns away from those human-driven conflicts to philosophical questions of, for example, "machine ethics," which gratify the thinker, allowing them to feel on-trend among the educated without leading to any implications for individual action. Rosi Braidotti demonstrates this redirection: "As they become smarter and more widespread, autonomous machines are bound to make life-or-death decisions and thus assume agency" (Braidotti 44). Braidotti questions whether machines are being given the power of moral decision-making that heretofore only humans have possessed. However, she resists an answer, leaving it an "open question," then offers specific cases in point to encourage her reader to also ponder the question: "Take some burning issues, such as: should an unmanned flying vehicle, also known as a drone, fire on a house where a target is known to be hiding, which also shelters civilians? Should robots involved in disaster relief tell people the truth about their conditions, thus causing panic and pain?" (Braidotti 44). By simply raising these questions, Braidotti is tickling the dual attractors to posthumanism: the anxiety/elation over machines breaking free of human control and the desire to relinquish political responsibility. These entirely philosophical questions obscure the more critical questions behind them: Should governments sanction the use of drones in aerial warfare? Should the particular war in question be

happening at all? Should governments replace human workers with robots in disaster relief work? In what situations is it appropriate for robots to do public service on behalf of bureaucratic entities?

By asking, instead, the questions Braidotti offers, the unspoken premise is that we all accept the inevitability of a world in which machines, placed by the government, without democratic deliberation, into any number of roles, are "autonomously" making decisions that have a major impact on human lives. The human powers behind these entities and the control they have over them is allowed to remain hidden, while the public is led through the ruse of considering "machine ethics," as though the average citizen is actually given a voice in the development of such a set of ethics. Instead, the raising of questions such as Braidotti's serves to stoke the anxiety that ultimately pushes toward a fantasy embrace of the posthuman: "Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" rhapsodizes Donna Haraway (181). Meanwhile, in 2025, amidst so many other actions that it was likely lost on most Americans, "on his first day in office, Trump rescinded a 2023 Biden executive order that required AI systems developers to share with the government the results of tests determining whether any innovation poses a risk to U.S. national security, the economy, public health or safety" (Edsall).

Posthuman thought comes out of a paradigm, originating in the Modern era, of asking "How do machines change humans and human civilization?" This question is typically met with two types of answer, one pessimistic and the other optimistic. The optimistic response, embraced by Silicon Valley leaders and aspirants, crystallizes into something *New Republic* editor Evgeny Morozov calls "solutionism": "the idea that 'political problems are bugs that can be fixed by engineering rather than fundamental conflicts of interest and value"' (Packer). The pessimistic response renders humans the prey of machines, culminating in the end of civilization as we know it. Morozov calls attention to the ways that this paradigm, whether it tends positive or negative, turns citizens into consumers and political problems into efficiency problems: "Technology critics of the romantic and conservative strands can certainly tell us how to design a more humane smart energy meter. But to decide whether smart energy meters are an appropriate response to climate change is not in their remit" (Morozov 111). Instead of asking how machines change humans and human civilization, the *Unmensch* asks, "How do machines change the way humans relate to humans and to the world?" This question moves the emphasis from machines and anxiety/elation over their potential autonomy to the human politics that actually determine the trajectory of civilization.

Perception and Control

Posthuman thought, then, conveniently serves the western historical tradition of an elite few controlling the subjugated masses by convincing them that their lives are shaped by powers beyond their control when, in fact, the roles the machine takes on in society have been consciously orchestrated by powerful human beings. Bertolt Brecht exposes this tradition in his depiction of an encounter between Galileo and his former pupil Andrea Sarti in *The Life of Galileo*:

> To what end are you working? Presumably for the principle that science's sole aim must be to lighten the burden of human existence. If the scientists, brought to heel by self-interested rulers, limit themselves to piling up knowledge for knowledge's sake, then science can be crippled and your new machines will lead to nothing but new impositions. You may in due course discover all that there is to discover, and your progress will nonetheless be nothing but a progress away from mankind. (Sarti 104)

Brecht's Galileo argues that science in service of elite interests does not necessarily serve humankind and, in fact, often works against it. However, if people are taught to revere Science as they were taught to revere God, they will overlook this, convinced that Science, however it is applied, is good.

In his theoretical work, *Messingkauf* (Buying Brass), Brecht addresses the run-away train sense many feel about technological development, as though machines are things that dictate to humans what choices must be made rather than the other way around (illustrated by commonplaces such as, "In the era of the internet…"). Today's activist is forced to work against powerful cultural myths that valorize the exponential growth of energy and evolution of technology to advocate for the human and ecological health and justice concerns of the present. Brecht writes, "The more we have been able to wrest from nature by means of great inventions and discoveries and the organization of labour, the more uncertain our existence seems to have become. We don't control things, it seems - things control us" (*Brecht on Performance* 50). That things control *us*, he says, is our perception – but the perception is not the reality. Rather, we perceive our situation that way "only because some people use things to help them control other people. We will not be freed from the forces of nature until we are freed from human force. Our knowledge of nature must be supplemented with knowledge of human society, of the way people behave toward one another, if we want to use our knowledge of nature humanely" (*Brecht on Performance* 50). Some of the questions posed by "thought leaders" around the concept of "machine ethics" are manipulative because they obscure the reality that certain people design and deploy machines to serve private ends. One's focus then in considering these deployments becomes not whether they share those desired ends, but whether they trust machines to be in charge of the tasks in which they are being given "authority." One's critical, questioning faculties are shifted away from critiques of the

decision-makers to safer critiques of "neutral," inhuman entities.

By accepting the posthuman premise of the blurring of the human boundary and the machine, we, as people have throughout history, relinquish our power to a supposed higher force who, like God or Nature, we are told exists outside or beyond our full comprehension and, certainly, our control. However, as Brecht states, though we are encouraged to perceive things as controlling us (or making decisions independent of us), the truth is that *some people* "use things to help them control *other people*." This is most certainly true of AI, but rather than face this truth, our culture finds itself compelled by the siren song of the coming "singularity" and its masochistic promise of annihilation, the ultimate relief from responsibility.

Subverting the Epic Genre

The epic tale, from the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* to the *Divine Comedy,* often worked in concert with elite interests to affirm the perception of a higher force in whose designs humans could not intervene. In "Epic and the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin argues against the epic, labeling it an antiquated genre. He describes it as something long dead, unable to encounter the present: "a congealed and half-moribund genre" (Bakhtin 12-13). Throughout the essay, Bakhtin refers to "contact zones" as those desirable areas in which a story touches the present reality, including the reader's personal sense of life; the epic, however, is dead, he argues, because it makes such contact impossible. Bertolt Brecht, writing at the same time, agreed with the need for a new genre of storytelling, but, unlike Bakhtin, saw in the distance of the epic not a reason to dismiss it entirely but, rather, a tool to be exploited for new ends. His approach toward the epic genre is predatory rather than dismissive. He uses the distance produced through the epic to encourage an analytical stance in his audience, while destroying its traditional function of perpetuating exalted cultural mores, exposing these mores as hollow in the present day.

In his essay "What is Epic Theater?" Walter Benjamin writes that Brecht explained developing his idea for epic theatre while working on his production of *Edward II* at the Munich Kammerspiele in 1924. Benjamin provides an insightful explanation of how Brecht hoped epic theatre would work:

> Epic theatre…incessantly derives a lively and productive consciousness from the fact that it is theatre. This consciousness enables it to treat elements of reality as though it were setting up an experiment, with the 'conditions' at the end of the experiment, not at the beginning. Thus they are not brought closer to the spectator but distanced from him. When he recognizes them as real conditions it is not, as in naturalistic theatre, with compla-cency, but with astonishment. This astonishment is the means where- by epic theatre, in a hard, pure way, revives a Socratic praxis. In one who is astonished, interest is born, interest in its primordial form. Nothing is more characteristic of Brecht's way of thinking than the attempt which epic theatre makes to transform this primordial interest directly into a technical, expert one. Epic theatre addresses itself to interested persons 'who do not think unless they have a reason to'. But that is an attitude absolutely shared by the masses.

> Brecht's dialectical materialism asserts itself unmistakably in his endeavour to interest the masses in theatre as technical experts, but not at all by way of 'culture'. 'In this way we could very soon have a theatre full of experts, as we have sports stadiums full of experts.' Epic theatre, then, does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them." (Benjamin 4)

Brecht's epic theatre is a subversive tactic designed to work against the mollification of the masses that traditional epics often served. Along with epic theatre, comes the *Unmensch*, who defies the archetype of the epic hero to destroy, rather than affirm, tradition by living the injustice those traditions serve over the course of the drama. Epic theatre and its *Unmensch* work by attacking the roots of the powers that be, the beliefs and teachings used to justify, or even glorify the actions of the elite. By employing the tropes of epic literature, such as verse, a historical setting and gods as characters, while showing how traditional values and systems actually betray well-intentioned characters, Brecht intervenes in the perpetuation of tradition and seeks to shatter the exalted values that traditional epics serve to burnish.

The epic that takes place in the national epic past is over as soon as the curtain falls. The viewer is left with nothing to ponder, only a residual glow from having basked in the light of a hero for the past two hours or more and perhaps a lesson on how to better conduct themselves in life. Brecht, in his epic theatre, hopes to leave the audience with a sense of responsibility for the resolution of the story that is not over with the falling of the curtain. The story is used to propel audiences into revised social futures, insisting that hope lay *there*, not in an idealized past. But his work also makes it clear that that hope cannot be realized without people taking action in the present. Thus epic drama is a sub-genre that reaches actively beyond the fourth wall into the society in which audience members are asked to become self-directed actors.

Brecht's *Good Person of Setzuan* offers one of the most overt examples of Brecht's insistence that the audience finish the story he begins. From the beginning, Shen Te's socially condemned identity challenges the epic genre. However, through the interference of a trio of gods, Shen Te is given the chance to become a proper hero. The gods, we learn, are on earth searching for "at least one good person." Goodness is established in this case through a willingness to put strangers up in one's home. Though it is difficult for her, Shen Te manages to put the gods up for the night and, in turn, they give her the money to buy a small tobacco shop. Now, Shen Te may earn her money honestly and, in the process, do good. However, those who smell money in the hands of a generous soul are quick to descend on her, and thus her goodness, so newly minted, becomes a liability.

To protect herself, Shen Te invents a male cousin named Shui Ta who intervenes whenever a pragmatic approach is needed to resolve difficult situations, like a cabinet maker who demands too much money for the cabinets he installs in her tobacco shop. To become Shui Ta, Shen Te changes her clothes and dons a mask. When she becomes pregnant by the pilot she loves but who has taken advantage of her, Shen Te shifts full time to the Shui Ta personality and takes ownership

of a tobacco factory. But when people become suspicious about Shen Te's disappearance, they blame Shui Ta and "he" is brought to trial. At the trial, Shen Te comes clean to the judges about her dual identity. She explains her choice in a song:

> Your world is not an easy one, illustrious ones!
> When we extend our hand to a beggar, he tears it off for
> us
> When we help the lost, we are lost ourselves
> And so
> Since not to eat is to die
> Who can long refuse to be bad? (Te 102)

The gods ignore Shen Te's quandary and instead express joy at having found her alive after thinking Shui Ta had killed her, wanting only to applaud the fact that her goodness continues to exist in the world. This behavior is an example of Brecht's flouting of the epic genre, showing that supposed gods are actually self-deluding. They will ignore reality to maintain the tradition that elevates them. They are thus precluded from having any real compassion for the struggle of an ordinary person. The gods flee, singing a "Valedictory Hymn": "What rapture, oh, it is to know/ A good thing when you see it/And having seen a good thing, oh,/What rapture 'tis to flee it" (104). Shen Te begs the gods not to leave her with so many problems unresolved, yet still expecting her to remain good. The gods ascend back into the heavens as Shen Te reaches her arms to them in desperation.

Thus Brecht concludes Shen Te's story with no sense of how she will resolve her problems *and* fulfill the expectations of the gods to be good. In Brecht's most direct appeal in any of his plays for an audience to find "completion" in the actual world, his epilogue states:

> You're thinking, aren't you, that this is no right
> Conclusion to the play you've seen tonight?

He proposes a number of questions about what could right the world in which such a story occurs, then concludes with:

> It is for you to find a way, my friends
> To help good men arrive at happy ends
> You write the happy ending to the play!
> There must, there must, there's got to be a way! (107)

Brecht's belief in the potential of a changed society is nowhere more blatantly exhibited than in these lines from *Good Person*. He elaborates on his position, though, in "Short Organum for the Theatre" in *Brecht on Theatre*: "The laws of motion of a society are not to be demonstrated by 'perfect examples,' for 'imperfection' (inconsistency) is an essential part of motion and of the thing moved. It is only necessary – but absolutely necessary – that there be something approaching experimental conditions" (195).

Indeed Shen Te's situation is an experiment left in a state of partial completion. The experiment asks simply whether a consistently good person can live in our society. While the old epic would answer a resounding yes, showing us the hero, either being good all along or learning how to be, and succeeding as a result, *Good Person* shows a person not being able to be good all along, being given a second injunction to be good by the gods, and yet knowing that to do so puts her into a world of uncertainty and, likely, loss of livelihood and of her child. As we the audience consider how the rest of the story may play out, given the world we know, we are likely to conclude that the *probability* is that Shen Te will not be able to continue being good. Brecht intends that we then become critical of a society that makes goodness impossible and are, in turn, inspired to try to change it. While the epic genre affirms cultural values as beneficial to the individual and people in general, Brecht's epic theatre affirms the struggle toward goodness that originates spiritually in the individual and critiques the society in which that struggle is co-opted and ultimately thwarted.

The Co-opting of Human Feeling

While Shen Te's story is tragic, Brecht employs his *Verfremdungseffekt* (translated as "alienation" or "distancing" effect) to prevent the audience from becoming lost in their emotional identification with Shen Te and encourage them, instead, to move consideration of her impossible situation into the world outside the play. Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, a subversion of "absolute epic distance" was, in part, a hostile reaction to the emotion-triggering narratives the Nazi party disseminated though mass media in the 1930s. Where Nazi storytelling's goal "was to create the propagandistic equivalent of the total work of art in which drama, spectacle, music, choreography, and architecture combine into an emotionally gripping experience" ("Fascism and the Cult of Nation"), Brecht sought, through distance, to inspire an audience to dismantle the stories they had internalized through their exposure to mass media and other channels of acculturation. Brecht's creation of the Epic theatre was not a purely theoretical enterprise, but a direct challenge to the Nazi party's exploitation of emotional storytelling which relied on the epic trope of celebrating supposed racial, national traditions.

The Nazis conducted their own revision of the epic genre by linking an exalted past with the potential of an exalted future, inspiring action toward that future by focusing Germans' attention on anything that might stand in the way of it. Performances of nationalism transcended media to the realm of the actual, blurring the lines between reality and myth, affirming the power of storytelling to influence people's perception of self and society.

In 1939, for example, three million mothers, deemed essential to the future glory of the Aryan race, were honored with the *Mutterkreuz* (Mother's Cross of Honor), a "bronze (for 4-5 children), silver (6-7 children) or gold star (8 or more children)" inscribed with the swastika ("The German Mothercross"). The feeling of a mother for her children was co-opted to foster an emotional bond between mothers and the Nazi regime while they, concurrently, carried out

genocide on millions of Jewish mothers and their children. Brecht's epic theatre provided an urgent call to resist Nazi encroachment into the most intimate of human ties to what could be considered the only safe stance from which one could observe the social reality of Germany. We may conclude that the genre of epic theatre is more relevant then to a society in which personal emotions are manipulated for patriotic ends and used to engender a closeness with the representatives of "national tradition," whose intimate narratives conceal missions to ensure they retain supremacy.

Posthuman theory rests on work that, like the traditional epic dramas, valorizes and closes off a distant temporality, in this case, the future. It has also, like the Nazi ritual bestowing of the *Mutterkreuz*, co-opted the most tender of human emotions, the feelings a parent has for a child. Hans Marovec, cited by Hayles and others writing on posthuman theory, writes in *Mind Children*: But within the next century [our machines] will mature into entities as complex as ourselves, and eventually into something transcending everything we know – in whom we can take pride when they refer to themselves as our dependents (1).

Here, Moravec makes an emotional appeal to the reader on the basis of his or her parental instincts toward the birth and rearing of a "superior" intelligence. Marovec continues the parental metaphor: "We humans will benefit for a time from their labors, then, like natural children, they will seek their own fortunes while we, their aged parents, silently fade away" (1).

This morbid picture, sweetened by sentiments of parental pride of sacrifice, plays upon humans' desires to find value by producing offspring better than themselves. But whether or not this vision of extinction appeals to the reader, Marovec delivers the assertion that a symbiosis of human and machine followed by machine transcendence of the human *will* be the future: "Why rush headlong into an era of intelligent machines? The answer, I believe, is that we have very little choice…sooner or later the [societies and economies] that can sustain the most rapid expansion and diversification will dominate" (100). Logical as it may sound, the future transcendence of machines over humans is a story, one that serves elite interests well.

By insisting on the inevitability of machines' transcendence of human intelligence, posthuman theory quietly colludes with elite interests. Narratives of the posthuman become one more way to subdue the average citizen into inaction, convincing them that machine-autonomy is inevitable while the owners of the machines ensure that the machines are, and continue to be, crafted and programmed to serve their best interests.

Epic theatre and the Lobster Boat

There are issues facing us today that do not require abstract ethical consideration regarding future possibilities, but do require human intervention in what we know to be immediately threatening human and non-human life. One of these issues is our burning of fossil fuels, a practice with human and ecological health impacts at the points of its extraction and its burning, and with long-term global health and societal impacts as a result of increased CO2 levels. While "nearly 200 nations who are members of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change"

have gathered every year since 1995 in cities around the globe, little has taken place to truly disrupt and transition developed nations away from our entrenched usage of fossil fuels ("Background on the UNFCCC").

For the same 30 years, environmental activists around the world and the U.S. have sought to assert the need for public consciousness of climate change and action to address it in the face of political debates about the legitimacy of "climate science" and diversionary promises of tech solutionism. Among direct action efforts to raise awareness and perform an actual intervention in the process of the burning of fossil fuels, is the May 2013 blockade of the Brayton Point coal-burning power plant in Somerset, MA. On May 15, 2013, Ken Ward, former deputy director of Greenpeace USA and Cape Cod native Jay O'Hara, a Quaker and longtime climate activist, directed a lobster boat into the waters surrounding the Brayton Point plant. With this boat, they blocked a coal tanker, the Energy Enterprise, from delivering its cargo of Appalachian coal. Over radio, O'Hara and Ward were asked to move by the Enterprise. When they did not, the Coast Guard was called in, and Coast Guard officials boarded their vessel. Finally, when Somerset police arrived, O'Hara and Ward agreed to leave and return to shore. They were subsequently "charged with disturbing the peace, conspiracy, failure to act to avoid a collision, and negligent operation of a motor vessel" (Kieffer).

At their trial on September 6, 2014 in Fall River, MA, the judge dismissed all criminal charges. After the trial, Bristol County D.A. Sam Sutter, now mayor of Fall River, spoke in support of O'Hara's and Ward's larger mission, calling climate change "one of the gravest crises our planet has ever faced." Sutter appeared with O'Hara and Ward on *Democracy Now* later that week and marched with them in the New York Climate March on September 21. O'Hara said in a press release dated September 8, 2014, "This decision by the District Attorney is an admission that the political and economic system isn't taking the climate crisis seriously, and that it falls to ordinary citizens, especially people of faith, to stand up and take action to avert catastrophe" ("Press Releases").

In June 2014, in anticipation of the trial, Jay O'Hara asked me to connect with musician Mark Schwaller of the Boston-based band Melodeego to create a street theatre piece with music taking inspiration from the lobster boat action and supporting the call to stop burning coal. Inspired by Brecht's dramas and theory, we incorporated several Brechtian elements into the script and design of the piece. These included elite powers' befriending of activist opposition, then co-opting their message and using it to persuade the public of their positive values (as in *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*), the use of placards with real news headlines, songs with contrasting tunes and lyrics, and black humor.

The piece borrows the story of David and Goliath while resisting the idea that simply toppling one giant (the Brayton Point Power Plant) could be a final victory. Near the end of the piece, the dying coal plant Goliath implicates the group of people who have taken him down and,

in turn, the audience: "Beware. If you keep at it, you'll see you cannot live without us. What we produce has become your blood! Ah, it's hard to die. I did my best. I did well. And you were a part of me!" As Goliath states, we, performers and audience, are all complicit in his crime. The narrative we constructed echoes *Good Person of Setzuan* in its refusal of the possibility of true heroism within the existing social structure. Our daily lives are dependent on the electricity produced by coal plants (and nuclear and natural gas plants), a system with well-documented adverse near and long-term impacts on human and ecological health. Until we change a society built on the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, there is little hope for individuals to be truly "good" in the way we might aspire to be, regardless of how many "eco"-labeled products we buy.

We also employed Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* in our piece in both visual and textual ways. We used props and costumes playfully, such as green paper maché mountains whose tops were knocked off by black-masked "fossil foolistines," representing mountaintop removal coal mining. Lahmi, the power plant, wore a huge mask with giant black eyebrows and a smoke stack top with grey plumes. Lyrics and music, as was often the case in composer Kurt Weil and Brecht's collaborations, work at odds with one another. The coal barons sing, "Raze, bomb, dig, dump and carry/and then it's time to burn!" to a jazzy, upbeat tune while the romantic tune of the closing song is juxtaposed with the crude frankness of the chorus line, "Knowing with each step, it takes us all to do it/ Knowing with each step, if we don't start now, we blew it."

Today in the U.S. where ticket prices for professional theatre productions are prohibitive for the average person, street theatre, performed in public spaces, for passers-by can more powerfully realize the Brechtian project of turning the audience into actors than can professional theatre. It is understood from the context of an activist street theatre piece that the audience is being asked to take action. Social movements throughout history from labor organizing to anti-racism groups have used public performance to gain support for their work. El Teatro Campesino, founded in 1965, performed skits for farm worker audiences and in public to gain support for the United Farm Workers Union Grape Strike ("Our History"). More recently, protestors of New York City's spraying of glyphosate in city parks performed street theater outside the New York City town hall and were part of an ultimately successful effort to pass the Poison Parks bill in 2021, making New York "the nation's largest city to ban toxic pesticides from routine use by city agencies" (Barnard).

In October 2016, O'Hara and Ward coordinated another environmental direct-action event in support of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe in their resistance of the Dakota Access pipeline. In this action, six "valve-turners" turned off five different pipelines delivering Canadian tarsands oil into the United States (Williams and Kearney). Their action was intended to show solidarity for the Standing Rock tribe's struggle as well as to further the larger, ongoing effort to shut down the fossil fuel infrastructure.

The environmental activist today must assume the mantle of the *Unmensch* who happily

destroys dearly held beliefs and traditions with the knowledge that these beliefs and traditions are helping destroy the living and future life. Echoing Benjamin's critique of the étui-man, one of the valve-turners at Standing Rock, Emily Johnston, said in a statement posted by Climate Direct Action, "My love for the beauties of this world is far greater than my love of an easy life" ("US Pipeline").

Conclusion

Theories of the posthuman appeal to a popular desire to relinquish responsibility for political action in an age of growing technology-supported comfort and distraction that has made technology corporation owners so wealthy that they are now buying our government openly. By embracing the evolutionary fantasies of the posthuman future, we put our future in the hands of an elite few who control the development of advanced technology as well as the energy that fuels it. Both traditional epic tales and posthuman theory take the possibility to intervene in this crisis out of our hands by fixating upon either a valorized past or a valorized future. When, however, the present demands assertive intervention, as it does now, this kind of storytelling becomes very dangerous. If we allow ourselves to be swept up in the emotional promises of the intimate epic, the epic that sets before us an "optimized," more perfect future as a lure for following our leaders without question, we forfeit our autonomy to intervene in the direction of our society at a critical juncture in human history. We do the same when we accept myths of technological determinism that make us feel impotent in the face of machine super intelligence. The figure of the *Unmensch*, described by Benjamin and illustrated by Brecht, serves as inspiration for cutting through the fantasies that subdue political impulses to instead inspire a desire to act.

Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre's subversion of the epic genre makes it a robust and relevant force in exposing and rooting out the self-serving agenda of elite powers. If today's techno-solutionists encourage a destructive stance toward universities (Edsall) but discourage a destructive stance toward climate crisis-fueling fossil fuels, it should not be surprising. Their technology does not exist without electricity. As a result, any threat to sources of electricity generation is a threat to their growth. If Artificial General Intelligence were already in charge, it is possible that we would be well on our way to transitioning to sustainable energy. But people who profit from technology are still in charge. Whether those people continue to be the ones in charge is up to us. The truth that transcends both the optimistic and pessimistic strands of the question, "How will machines change humanity?" is that our struggle in the technological age is not to come to terms with the autonomy of machines, but to recognize, retain and exercise our autonomy as humans.

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