

Training the Audience: Brecht and the Art of Spectatorship

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# TRAINING THE AUDIENCE: BRECHT AND THE ART OF SPECTATORSHIP

## *Introduction*

The central ambition of Brecht's epic theatre was to activate the audience: to encourage spectators to watch performances critically and alertly, to judge and argue over what they had seen, and to consider its political and social relevance to their own lives. In the essay 'Die Straßenszene', Brecht uses the imagined response of a witness to a road accident as a basic model of a scene from epic theatre. By re-enacting key aspects of the accident, the witness seeks to persuade others of his view as to what happened and who was responsible. His spectators, in turn, are free to reject his interpretation and to interject with their own.<sup>1</sup> The witness uses theatre naturally and non-naturalistically, never attempting to convince his audience that it is watching an illusion of reality. He serves as a model example not only of the actor in epic theatre, but also of the spectator: as someone who is alert to what they have seen, and who takes practical action as a result.

While the example of 'Die Straßenszene' is well known, the way in which Brecht stages spectatorship within his plays has not received sustained critical attention. This is a surprising oversight, given his predilection for episodes in which characters perform a role before an on-stage audience. In *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, for example, Grusche adopts the guise of a rich woman, while the Grand Duke attempts to pass as a poor man (*BFA*, VIII (1992), 118–21, 151–53). In *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* Shen Te performs the role of her fictional male cousin, Shui Ta (*BFA*, VI (1989), 195–204). In the first case the performances fail to convince their audience, while in the second the performance succeeds in duping most of the characters on stage. To date, critics have tended to focus on the role of the character-as-actor in such episodes, and on the evidence that they supply of Brecht's self-conscious theatricality. J. M. Ritchie, for example, cites the episode involving Grusche as a 'demonstration of an actress acting', referring to her 'brilliant parody of her mistress'.<sup>2</sup> Siegfried Mews draws attention to 'die zahlreichen Spiele im Spiel' in *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* as epic devices, again without considering the on-stage audience.<sup>3</sup> Such analyses overlook the way in which Brecht uses

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. by Werner Hecht and others, 30 vols (Berlin and Frankfurt a.M.: Aufbau and Suhrkamp, 1988–2000), XXII/1 (1993), 370–81. Further references will be abbreviated as (*BFA*, volume, page number) and included in the main text.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Ritchie, *Brecht: Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, *Studies in German Literature*, 10 (London: Arnold, 1976), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Siegfried Mews, 'Der kaukasische Kreidekreis', in *Brecht Handbuch*, ed. by Jan Knopf, 5 vols (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001), I, 512–31 (p. 527).

these episodes to confront the spectators in the auditorium with examples of 'critical' and 'culinary' spectatorship, providing them with positive and negative role models.

This article uses original archival research to explore Brecht's attempts to cultivate critical spectatorship from three angles. It examines how Brecht theorizes spectatorship in selected poems; how he presents it in the texts of *Die Mutter*, *Mutter Courage*, and *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*; and how spectators responded to his post-war productions of these plays in East Berlin. He would not live to direct *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* himself.

### *Spectatorship in Theory*

For Brecht, watching is an activity: it requires an active gaze. He distinguishes between different modes of vision, contrasting 'sehen' with the passive, unthinking vision of 'glotzen' and the animalistic 'stieren'. Such contrasts feature in the opening scene of *Leben des Galilei* (BFA, v (1988), 11) and the epilogue to *Arturo Ui*, where seeing is presented as an activity that needs to be learnt:

Ihr aber lernet, wie man sieht statt stiert  
Und handelt, statt zu reden noch und noch.  
(BFA, VII (1991), 112)

What is more, Brecht argues that humans face an ethical and political choice about where to direct their gaze. In his exile poem 'Schlechte Zeit für Lyrik' the speaker declares:

Die grünen Boote und die lustigen Segel des Sundes  
Sehe ich nicht. Von allem  
Sehe ich nur der Fischer rissiges Garnnetz.  
Warum rede ich nur davon  
Daß die vierzigjährige Häuslerin gekrümmt geht?  
(BFA, XIV (1993), 432)

Despite this protestation, readers know that the speaker does see the boats sailing on the sound. He chooses, though, not to make them central to his gaze. That gaze is trained on politics and society, on those who are disadvantaged. The poem collapses the gap between 'sehen' and 'reden', as the speaker moves seamlessly from reporting what he sees to asking 'Warum rede ich nur davon | Daß die vierzigjährige Häuslerin gekrümmt geht?' Speaking is not a substitute for action, as it is in the epilogue to *Arturo Ui*, but the form that the exiled speaker's activity takes. He is speaking out, as opposed to merely talking.

The idea that spectatorship needs to be learnt is at the heart of Brecht's poem 'Rede an dänische Arbeiterschspieler über die Kunst der Beobachtung' (BFA, XII (1988), 322–27). He drafted the poem in 1935, and his

collaborator Ruth Berlau traces its origins to his experience of watching actors in Copenhagen rehearse his play *Die Mutter* in the same year.<sup>4</sup> Brecht would later call for the development of ‘Zuschaukunst’ (BFA, XXIII (1993), 191), but in this poem a section of the audience is already in the vanguard of the aesthetic and political revolution. Spectators in the cheap seats rebel against the actors’ performance, rejecting an (Aristotelian) theatre that presents characters as victims of fate or of instinctual drives (BFA, XII, 322–23).<sup>5</sup> Instead, they demand a (Marxist) theatre that shows reality as human-made and changeable, a theatre based on observation of social reality. Like the worker in the poem ‘Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters’ (BFA, XII, 29), the spectators refuse to consume the version of reality that is presented to them:

Nein, sagen wir Unzufriedenen auf den niederen Bänken  
Genug! Das genügt nicht! Habt ihr denn  
Nicht gehört, daß es ruchbar geworden ist  
Wie dieses Netz von Menschen gestrickt und geworfen ist?  
(BFA, XII, 323)

While the narrator—later revealed to be a playwright—did indicate nineteen lines earlier that an argument had broken out among the spectators, the impression at this point is of an indignant, unified collective. The voice of the dissatisfied rings out for fourteen lines, excluding alternative perspectives (BFA, XII, 322–23). It is only after this that the narrator returns and brings the reader back, in two steps, to the dissensus in the auditorium. The narrator concedes first that ‘Freilich nicht alle dort | Stimmen da zu’, and then admits that ‘die meisten’ are sitting in attitudes of dejection and exhaustion:

Mit hängenden Schultern  
Hocken die meisten und Stirnen, durchfurcht wie  
Immer wieder vergeblich gepflügte Steinäcker.  
(BFA, XII, 323)

This language is reminiscent of the stage directions in *Die Weber*, Gerhart Hauptmann’s classic portrait of a working class that is too weak, debilitated, and downtrodden to mount a successful protest.<sup>6</sup> This is a play that Brecht criticized for its defeatism, arguing: ‘die Umgebung trat als Schicksal auf, wurde nicht als von Menschen aufgebaut und von Menschen veränderbar

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Berlau, ‘My First Collaboration with Brecht’, in *Brecht: As They Knew Him*, ed. by Hubert Witt, trans. by John Peet (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), pp. 89–92 (p. 91). Brecht also included the poem in the materials for *Der Messingkauf*.

<sup>5</sup> An early draft of the poem included four examples of the characterizations that the spectators reject, such as the portrayal of a king whose insomnia is attributed to his wife’s adultery, rather than to his insufficient tax revenue. See Bertolt Brecht, ‘Rede an dänische Arbeiterschaulspieler über die Kunst der Beobachtung’, Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv (BBA) 60/46–54 (p. 47).

<sup>6</sup> Gerhart Hauptmann, *Die Weber*, ed. by M. Boulby (London: Harrap, 1962), e.g. pp. 90–91.

dargestellt' (*BFA*, xxii/2 (1993), 635). This is the view of reality that a section of the audience rebels against in his poem.

The exhausted workers in Brecht's poem crave exactly what their counterparts have rejected:

Etwas Knetung

Ihrer erschlafften Gemüter. Etwas Spannung  
Abgespannter Nerven. Billiges Abenteuer, den Griff magischer Hände  
Der sie entführt aus der aufgegebenen  
Nicht meisterbaren Welt.

(*BFA*, xii, 324)

They are putty in the hands of the performers, who are cast in these lines as masseuses—there to knead the emotional equivalent of tired, slackened muscles and to supply their magical touch. The description picks up the 'Griff' that occurs earlier in the poem: the actors present characters 'im Griff ihres Schicksals' (l. 21), and spectators surrender themselves to the grip of the actors ('Nunmehr in eurem Griff', l. 29; *BFA*, xii, 323).<sup>7</sup> They expect this grip to be pleasurable, but the earlier association with 'Schicksal' suggests otherwise. The poem presents an interesting mixture of wishful thinking—progressive spectators leading the actors—and scepticism, suggesting that the majority of spectators are not yet to be trusted.

### *Staging Spectatorship: 'Die Mutter' and 'Der kaukasische Kreidekreis'*

Brecht's epic plays show characters as spectators, exemplary or otherwise, from whom spectators in the auditorium can learn. In *Die Mutter*, the factory porter and prison guard are lazy, uncritical spectators, each accepting the archetype that Wlassowa offers to them at face value. In scene 3 the factory porter takes her for the gossipy old woman she purports to be, while in scene 7 the prison guard is duped by her display of maternal suffering (*BFA*, iii (1988), 337, 360–61).<sup>8</sup> They fail to notice that these performances serve as a cover for Wlassowa's real intentions: to smuggle revolutionary propaganda into the factory, and then to find out addresses of political contacts from her incarcerated son. But there is another reason why the factory porter and prison guard fail as critical spectators: they are both watching on someone

<sup>7</sup> This was extended further in an early draft, which referred to 'ein bauer im griff seines geizes', 'ein könig [. . .] in den fäusten der eifersucht', and someone hurrying off to war 'im griff seiner vaterlandsliebe | oder nur der gendarme?' (*BBA*, 60/47).

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Hilliard comments on the prison scene: '[Wlassowa] goes through the motions of a dead morality for the sake of a spectator who is eager for its debased histrionics, and avid for the sterile satisfaction of "folgenloses Mitgefühl" which it provides. This is a microcosm, on stage, of the tragic scenes of the old bourgeois theatre, now repeated as farce' ('Tableaux of Suffering: Brecht and the Theatre of Pity', *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 61 (1990), 48–64 (p. 60)).

else's behalf. They are paid to watch, and they are not watching eagerly and alertly; the play's injunction 'Prüfe die Rechnung. | Du mußt sie bezahlen' does not apply to them (*BFA*, III, 356). When Wlassowa pleads with the prison guard to show mercy and allow her more time to speak to her son, he—like the factory porter—finds it easier not to argue. Wlassowa's performances in these scenes are designed not to enlighten her on-stage spectators but to deceive them, and in both cases the spectators allow her to succeed.

In contrast, the *Karawanserei* episode in *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* demonstrates how spectators can read performances critically. The maid-servant Grusche plays the part of a rich woman in this episode, but her performance fails as a piece of 'dramatic' theatre. This is not because the rich women watching her are especially skilled spectators, but because they cannot fail to notice that Grusche is different from them: while she speaks like a rich woman, her actions are those of a servant, as she prepares the room for the night (*BFA*, VIII, 120–21). Ruth Berlau played a key role in developing the scene so that the contradictions in Grusche's performance were exposed clearly. When Berlau read Brecht's draft, she said that it was not enough just to have Katja (as Grusche was known in this version) spread out blankets. She suggested having sacks in a corner, and having Grusche drag them to the centre and make the beds, or even clean the floor first.<sup>9</sup> Berlau also had a keen eye to the different audiences of the scene: she pointed out that we—the off-stage audience—are entertained by Katja pretending to be a rich lady, so that we lose sight of the fact that she is working. Berlau suggested that Katja should act the part of the rich lady successfully first, and then start to work.<sup>10</sup> Brecht's handwritten additions to the first draft indicate that he did indeed follow Berlau's advice, supplying the new stage directions 'den boden in der ecke schruppernd', 'schleppt die säcke herbei', and 'ihrer arbeit folgend'.<sup>11</sup> These sources offer a tantalizing insight into Berlau's collaboration with Brecht on the writing of the play.

It is worth dwelling on Grusche's performance for what it reveals about her own skills as an observer. Until she starts to sweep the floor, Grusche has offered a perfect imitation of her former mistress, the governor's wife Natella Abaschwili, deployed for strategic advantage. She complains 'Meine persischen Schuhe—Sie kennen die Stöckel', and says 'ich fürchte, mein Sohn könnte sich erkälten' (*BFA*, VIII, 118, 119). She has been underestimated by those at court who regarded her simply as 'die Dumme, der man alles aufladen kann' (*BFA*, VIII, 114). Her only flaw is her failure to observe herself as she has observed Natella: she lacks the necessary distance to scrutinize her

<sup>9</sup> *Brechts Lai-Tu: Erinnerungen und Notate von Ruth Berlau*, ed. by Hans Bunge (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1985), p. 258.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Der kaukasische Kreidekreis: 1. Fassung', *BBA*, 192/50.

own performance. Grusche's achievement as a spectator of others becomes clear when we compare her to the Grand Duke. Like Grusche, he is on the run, and he attempts to pass himself off as a member of a different class, in this case as a poor man. This attempt is an abject failure: while Grusche can imitate the form and content of Natella's speech, the Grand Duke is able neither to speak like a poor man nor to eat like one (*BFA*, VIII, 151–53). This is because Grusche has had to observe Natella, her former employer, whereas the Grand Duke has paid no heed to the common people. We see that acting and spectating are connected activities: acting requires critical spectatorship.

It is Azdak, however, who shows how actors can use knowledge gleaned through spectatorship to exploit class differences, rather than attempting to elide them. Azdak uses his observation of the Grand Duke to create a piece of exemplary epic theatre, casting him as the accused in a mock trial. Unlike the earlier performances by Grusche and the Grand Duke, this performance openly admits its strategic intent. Azdak tells the on-stage audience that the purpose is to test whether the nephew of the fat prince is fit to be judge (*BFA*, VIII, 158–59). It also admits its theatricality: while Azdak mimics the gait of the Grand Duke, he is not dressed as him. The contrast between the actor and the part that he is playing is intentionally visible, whereas in the earlier performances its visibility was inadvertent. Azdak is more creative than Grusche, for he appropriates the style of the Grand Duke, using this style to expose the ideology of the character that he is portraying. He succeeds in splitting his on-stage audience: the stage directions indicate that the fat prince initially laughs along with the soldiers, but becomes hysterical by the end (*BFA*, VIII, 160–61). Azdak simultaneously succeeds in exposing the behaviour of the would-be judge as an act: the nephew's attempt to impersonate a disinterested judge fails, as he reverts to the clipped tones of the upper classes and demands the defendant's execution (*ibid.*). This scene implies what Grusche could have done differently. She could have abandoned her aim of giving a 'dramatic' performance, and instead used an intentionally epic performance of Natella to split her on-stage audience along class lines.

Azdak may offer an exemplary epic performance, but the soldiers are not an ideal audience. According to Hans Bunge, who worked as an assistant on Brecht's production of the play at the Berliner Ensemble, this was the scene that Brecht wrestled with the most during rehearsals.<sup>12</sup> This difficulty surely lay in the fact that Azdak's epic performance is denied its just reward. The soldiers realize that their interests are different from those of the fat prince and his nephew, but they remain mercenaries, not revolutionaries. They are char-

<sup>12</sup> [Hans Bunge], 'Der kaukasische Kreidekreis', 16 September 1954, in Berliner Ensemble Archive (BEA) 17, 'Brecht: Der kaukasische Kreidekreis: Material'.

acterized as drunken, uncritical, and slow-witted, although Bunge explains that Azdak does win their attention:

Wenn z.B. der Neffe seine Verhandlung führt, setzen sich die Panzerreiter angeekelt hin. Das ist ja gar nichts. Die Soldaten drehen ihm den Rücken zu. Das ist ja kindisch, so ein Urteil. Damit stinkt er absolut ab. — Erst der Azdak peitscht die Stimmung mit seiner Anklagerede wieder hoch. Und dabei wäre es schön, wenn es bei den Panzerreitern trotz der Besoffenheit — oder wegen der Besoffenheit — überginge in ein gewisses dumpfes Staunen.<sup>13</sup>

This ‘dumpfes Staunen’ shows how far removed the soldiers are from the ideal spectators of the ‘Rede an dänische Arbeiterschauspieler’. This part of the action is not set in a revolutionary situation, and the play would not work if the soldiers achieved revolutionary consciousness in the scene.

It is worth returning at this point to the ‘Rede an dänische Arbeiterschauspieler’ to see how Brecht articulates the connection between observation and acting that we have noted in these episodes. The poem’s speaker, a playwright, argues that the art of observation consists of interrogating social attitudes and interactions. For example, he questions the antagonistic relationship that seems to exist between a tax collector and the person that he is chasing for non-payment of taxes, pointing out that they both have to pay taxes (*BFA*, XII, 325). Commenting on the poem, John White argues that ‘[o]bservation [. . .] is the ability to decode phenomena from an activist, class-conscious perspective’.<sup>14</sup> It presupposes knowledge of the class struggle, and the speaker argues that knowledge and observation are interdependent:

Um zu beobachten  
Muß man vergleichen lernen. Um zu vergleichen  
Muß man schon beobachtet haben. Durch Beobachtung  
Wird ein Wissen erzeugt, doch ist Wissen nötig  
Zur Beobachtung.

(*BFA*, XII, 326)

We see a repeated use of chiasmus here, first in ‘beobachten — vergleichen — vergleichen — beobachtet haben’, and then in ‘Beobachtung — Wissen — Wissen — Beobachtung’. These patterns may illustrate the activities’ interdependence, but they also deny access to the uninitiated: in order to observe, actors need to have skills that they can acquire only through already having observed. Later in the poem, the key terms return, yet this time the actors are positioned as active participants in the virtuous circle of knowledge and observation:

<sup>13</sup> [Hans Bunge], ‘Der kaukasische Kreidekreis: IV. Akt’, 14 May 1954, in *BEA*, 17, ‘Brecht: Der kaukasische Kreidekreis: Material’.

<sup>14</sup> John J. White, *Bertolt Brecht’s Dramatic Theory* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004), p. 173.



Ich sehe euch  
 Alle, die Besten von euch, schon gierig nach Kenntnissen greifen  
 Jenem Wissen, das die Beobachtung schärft, welche wieder zu  
 Neuem Wissen führt.

(BFA, XII, 327)

The word 'greifen' returns here, this time with positive connotations: while the actors portrayed characters in the grip of fate, and backward spectators were happy to surrender to the actors' grip, these workers grasp eagerly for knowledge. The description echoes the injunction that we see in 'Lob des Lernens' in *Die Mutter*: 'Hungriger, greif nach dem Buch: es ist eine Waffe' (BFA, III, 356).

In many ways, though, it is Wlassowa who functions as Brecht's ideal spectator. Like Grusche, she is underestimated by those around her; unlike Grusche, she is treated as a mere bystander. She observes the house search and the May Day demonstration, and in each case she intervenes to change the course of the action. In doing so, she puts her observations to strategic use:

*Sie beobachtet den Fabrikportier.* Es ist ein Dicker, Fauler. Ich will sehen, was er macht, wenn ich ihm eine Gurke anbiete. So einer frißt gern und hat nichts. (BFA, III, 337)

When this fails, she adapts her strategy:

*Zum Publikum:* Das ist ein Hartgesottener. Dem muß man mit Gewäsch kommen, dann macht er alles, damit er nur wieder seine Ruhe hat. (Ibid.)

Wera Küchenmeister, who assisted with rehearsals of Brecht's production of *Die Mutter* at the Berliner Ensemble, reports his insistence that Wlassowa—played by Helene Weigel—should observe the factory workers during the scene:

Während des gesamten Bildes war für die Weigel das genaue Beobachten der Arbeiter eine wichtige Aufgabe. Brecht wollte, daß die Wlassowa ihre Umwelt sehr genau fixierte. Es ist ja ihre erste Lektion außerhalb des Hauses.<sup>15</sup>

We can even see Wlassowa's performances as a taxonomy of dramatic and epic theatre. At the factory gate, she offers a dramatic performance, designed simply to dupe the porter. Next, we see a hybrid performance in the prison: she maintains her dramatic performance as a suffering mother when the guard is in earshot, but shows her son the epic split between actor and character, abandoning the role of suffering mother as soon as the guard's back is turned. Wlassowa presents an openly epic performance at the copper collection point. In this scene, she stands in line with women from different classes, as they all

<sup>15</sup> 'Eine Begabung muß man entmutigen': Wera und Claus Küchenmeister, *Meisterschüler bei Brecht, erinnern sich an die Jahre der Ausbildung*, ed. by Ditte Buchmann (East Berlin: Henschel, 1986), p. 93.

wait to donate copper for the war effort. By exaggerating the role of a proud, ambitious soldier's mother, Wlassowa exposes the connection between donating metal and killing. She forces her on-stage spectators to consider whom the bullets may be aimed at, teaches them how to read government propaganda critically, and makes them aware of the class differences between them. Then she abandons her role in favour of direct agitation, speaking in a denunciatory voice that we have not heard before (*BFA*, III, 384–88). Her acting strategy has become more ambitious as the play has progressed: initially her aim was simply to outwit the factory porter and the prison guard, but at the copper collection point her aim is to change what the on-stage spectators think. At this juncture in the play, her aim is to provoke awareness rather than to deceive with an illusion.

It is in her performance in the prison scene, though, that Wlassowa goes beyond the boundaries of what the speaker in the 'Rede an dänische Arbeiterschaulpieler' argued was possible. In early drafts of the poem Brecht uses drastic, graphic language to describe the impossibility of externalizing the gaze in order to observe oneself from a distance:

keiner kann  
seine augen aus sich herausreissen und sie  
an einem pfahl annageln und ihnen befehlen  
ihn zu beobachten. selbst seine stimme  
hört keiner richtig. und wer wird bestimmen können  
ob er würdig wirkte, als er im zorn  
die wohnung kündigte und schreckeinflössend  
als er aufbesserung seiner bezüge verlangte.<sup>16</sup>

While Brecht eventually discarded these lines, his finished poem still argues that we cannot gain knowledge of humans by solely examining ourselves, as we conceal too much from our own view (*BFA*, XII, 324). In the prison scene, however, Wlassowa plays a version of the self that we saw in the opening scenes of the play. What sets her apart from Grusche and Azdak is that she has gained distance from herself. As a result, she is able to perform her past role (or a version of it) for strategic advantage.

The irony, though, is that when Brecht came first to revise and then to stage *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, he actually cut the thread of episodes featuring role-play and spectatorship. He spent three weeks reworking Grusche's character in 1944 for the second version of the play, as he sought to make it more difficult for the audience to empathize with her (*BFA*, VIII, 460). The episode in the *Karawanserei* presented Grusche as demonstrating initiative at an early stage in the play, conflicting with Brecht's new determination to present her as a simple character, a beast of burden bearing the mark of the

<sup>16</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'die kunst der beobachtung', *BBA*, 57/7–11 (p. 10); *BBA*, 60/50.

backwardness of her class (BFA, xxvii (1995), 191). Brecht's decision to cut the episode suggests that this redefinition of Grusche's character took priority over metatheatricity at this point in the play's development. He retained the cut in 1954, when he came to stage the play at the Berliner Ensemble. When a student asked Brecht why he had abridged the play, Brecht's response was purely pragmatic: the spectators needed to catch their trains home.<sup>17</sup> He added that spectators had a long day's work behind them—a comment that calls to mind the exhausted workers of the 'Rede an dänische Arbeiterschau-spieler'.<sup>18</sup> When he published *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* later in 1954, he reinstated the episode in the *Karawanserei* (BFA, viii, 118–23), a decision that suggests that its omission in his production that year may indeed have been largely a pragmatic move.

### *Watching Blindness: Spectatorship in 'Mutter Courage'*

Turning to *Mutter Courage*, we find that acting and spectatorship are presented less self-consciously than in *Die Mutter* and *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*. In his seminal essay on *Mutter Courage* Roland Barthes singles out the role that blindness plays in the spectator's relationship with the protagonist. He argues that the spectator shares Mutter Courage's blindness, only then suddenly to see what she does not. As a result, spectators should see not only Mutter Courage's blindness, but also their own.<sup>19</sup>

This theme of blindness is crucial for Brecht's presentation of on-stage spectatorship in the play. It is illustrated early on by the episode in which Mutter Courage pretends to tell the fortunes of first the recruiting officer and then her children. Brecht used 'DAS LOSEZIEHEN' as the heading for scene 1 in his skeleton outline of the play, indicating its importance for the exposition.<sup>20</sup> From a note on Brecht's 1949 staging of the play, we see that he presented Eilif as Mutter Courage's target audience:

Die Courage profeziert [sic] dem Feldwebel den Soldatentod[.] Es stellte sich heraus, dass die Courage sich nach Eilif umblicken musste, bevor sie dem Feldwebel das Los ziehen liess. Sonst wurde nicht verstanden, dass sie es macht, um den kriegslüsteren Sohn vom Krieg abzuschrecken.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> 'Protokoll über die Diskussion mit Germanisten des 3. und 4. Studienjahres der Universität Leipzig am Montag, dem 12. Dezember 1955', in BEA, 'Protokolle: Leitungssitzungen Dramaturgiesitzungen 50er Jahre'.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Mother Courage Blind', in *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 33–36 (p. 34).

<sup>20</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder: Pläne und Skizzen', BBA, 491/1. Despite the episode's importance, Peter Thomson overlooks it in his discussion of scene 1. See Peter Thomson, *Brecht: Mother Courage and her Children* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 24–28.

<sup>21</sup> [Peter Palitzsch], 'Couragenotat I', BBA, 906/37. Although the staging is often attributed

When the performance fails to achieve its strategic objective, Mutter Courage tells the fortunes of her children in turn, prophesying their deaths. In their discussion of the scene, Frank Thomsen, Hans-Harald Müller, and Tom Kindt write: 'Ob die Courage tatsächlich einen Trick angewendet hat, geht aus der Szene nicht deutlich hervor, doch es spricht einiges dafür.'<sup>22</sup> In his first draft, however, Brecht made it quite clear that the spectators in the auditorium should see Courage cheat: his stage directions indicate that she draws a black cross on each scrap of paper before inviting the other characters to draw lots from a helmet.<sup>23</sup> On stage, Eilif, Schweizerkas, and the soldiers are blind to her duplicity. In 1949 Brecht highlighted their blindness by directing Helene Weigel—as Mutter Courage—to draw the second black cross while Schweizerkas delivered the line 'und den anderen läßt sie leer, siehst du?'.<sup>24</sup> Like Courage, the spectators in the auditorium see the characters' blindness, but the ideal spectator will also see Courage's blindness towards the dangers of her own actions. It is symptomatic of her self-perception as someone standing above the conflict, able to profit from a war that destroys others, that she does not pick out a cross for herself. It is also worth noting that in the first draft Courage draws a cross on *six* pieces of paper—presumably two for the soldiers, three for the children, and one for herself—and that only five of these are subsequently drawn as lots.<sup>25</sup> As a note on the 1949 staging indicates, Courage also ignores the prophecy of the Feldwebel, who warns that anyone who wants to make a living from war will pay for it (*BFA*, xxv (1994), 183).

At the end of scene 2, Eilif's performance of the 'Lied vom Weib und dem Soldaten' allows us to observe how characters react to a performance on stage, and to examine what the performance reveals about the character-as-actor's blind spots. Eilif's performance is the result of selective observation; it is an imitation of a ballad that his mother used to sing and a sabre dance that he has seen (*BFA*, vi, 23–24). He misappropriates the ballad, grafting it onto a militaristic performance and using it to celebrate the actions and attitudes that the final stanza denounces. Eilif's intended audience is the Feldhauptmann, and he is unaware that his mother is eavesdropping from her position outside the tent. Spectators in the theatre see that Eilif is blind to Courage's presence, and they are also invited to notice that he sings only the stanzas that celebrate the soldier's defiance of the old woman's warnings. He has not learnt—or

to the Berliner Ensemble and would subsequently be incorporated into its repertoire, it was premiered over eight months before the Berliner Ensemble was established. See David Barnett, *A History of the Berliner Ensemble* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Thomsen, Hans-Harald Müller, and Tom Kindt, *Ungeheuer Brecht: Eine Biographie seines Werks* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), p. 254.

<sup>23</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder: Urtext', *BBA*, 490/11.

<sup>24</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder: Regiebuch Brecht, 1. Berliner Aufführung', *BBA*, 485/17.

<sup>25</sup> *BBA*, 490/11–12.

has chosen to ignore—the final stanza, which reveals that the soldier met the death that the old woman predicted for him. It is left to Mutter Courage to intervene and sing this final stanza. In Brecht's 1949 staging, her active, indignant reaction contrasted with the passivity of the spectator that Eilif is seeking to impress. Judging by the photograph in the *Courage-Modell*, the Feldhauptmann had fallen asleep by the end of the song (BFA, xxv, 256).

When Brecht directed the play in Berlin and Munich, Eilif offered a caricatured impression of the old woman in the ballad, and Berlau explains that this was a parody of Mutter Courage herself.<sup>26</sup> Berlau outlines the different ways in which the parody was conveyed in three different productions: in Berlin, Ernst Kahler cradled the sabre like an infant; in Munich, Hans Christian Blech parted his hair, making it seem longer, and shook his head sadly; and in Amsterdam, Eli Blom used the sabre as a walking stick, bending over as if he suffered from rheumatism.<sup>27</sup> The irony, though, is that Eilif's parody of the woman in the 'Lied vom Weib' actually parallels Mutter Courage's parody of the role of the tragic mother in the fortune-telling episode. On seeing Eilif draw a piece of paper with a black cross out of the helmet, Mutter Courage wails: 'Oh, ich unglückliche Mutter! Ich schmerzreiche Gebälerin. Er stirbt? Im Lenz des Lebens muß er dahin' (BFA, vi, 16). Neither mother nor son takes the role seriously. In both scenes Mutter Courage is guilty of the same failings for which she criticizes her son. This was underlined in the 1949 production; photographs and the 1960 film based on the staging show that when Courage intervened in the performance, she beat a large barrel in time to the music (BFA, xxv, 256).<sup>28</sup> Her actions supported Eilif's militaristic delivery of the ballad, even as she reminded him of the ballad's warning to the soldier against war.

In this play it is Katrin who functions as a critical spectator and thus as an ally of the spectators in the auditorium. In Brecht's 1949 staging she was the only character to see through the fortune-telling charade. Brecht wrote in his *Regiebuch*: 'Katrin hat bemerkt, wie die Mutter dem Feldwebel das zweite Kreuz gemalt hat[,] und gelacht. Sie lacht auch jetzt.'<sup>29</sup> She is the character whose gaze Mutter Courage is unable to meet after Eilif has been recruited, and who refuses to look at her mother after Schweizerkas's death.<sup>30</sup> Berlau

<sup>26</sup> [Ruth Berlau], 'Der kleine wilde Säbeltanz', BBA, 205/29–30. The essay is in Berlau's orthography, with handwritten annotations mostly by Brecht. An edited, truncated version of the essay is published as 'Der kleine wilde Säbeltanz (2. Szene)', in *Theaterarbeit: 6 Aufführungen des Berliner Ensembles*, ed. by Berliner Ensemble and Helene Weigel, 3rd rev. edn (East Berlin: Henschel, 1967), p. 326.

<sup>27</sup> *Theaterarbeit*, p. 326.

<sup>28</sup> *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, dir. by Bertolt Brecht and Erich Engel, film dir. by Peter Palitzsch and Manfred Wekwerth (DEFA, 1960), 00:28:00.

<sup>29</sup> BBA, 485/19.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth Berlau, 'Courage versteht Katrins [sic] Sprache', BBA, 1218/38.

explains how, in the 1949 production, Brecht highlighted Katrin's refusal to look at Mutter Courage by having her walk past her along the entire length of the stage apron, not along the shortest available route, with her head turned away; and by having Katrin turn her head away again as she passes her mother.<sup>31</sup> Katrin sees the impending catastrophes—the recruitment of Eilif and the men hunting for Schweizerkas—but is unable to avert them (*BFA*, VI, 18, 37). Her position is analogous to that of the audience, and there is a clear parallel with pantomime, where the audience is allowed to warn the characters on stage of impending danger, but not to be understood by them. The question for Katrin is the question that Brecht wants his audience to ask: how a spectator can channel their frustration into productive activity. Katrin finds the answer during the siege of Halle, when she uses the military drum to warn the town of the imminent attack—an action that contrasts with her mother's earlier use of a wooden spoon and a barrel from the army's kitchen to beat time to Eilif's war dance. In both cases the props belong to the army, but they come from different spheres of life—military versus domestic—and are subverted by the characters in contrasting ways.

In the 'Rede an dänische Arbeiterschspieler' the speaker urged his actors to search for the contradictions in social reality. Just as the speaker questions the notion that the relationship between a tax collector and his victim is purely antagonistic, Brecht resisted the temptation to depict the soldiers who kill Katrin simply as her enemy. In a programme note on the 1949 staging Brecht's assistant Wera Küchenmeister (née Skupin) explains that the soldiers are prepared to follow their superior's orders, but are still willing to see them fail:

Sie sind bereit für seine Befehle, stellt es sich jedoch heraus, daß sie nicht durchzuführen sind, so treten sie gleichgültig zurück, zum Beispiel, als eine Axt zum Holzhacken fehlt. So zeigen die Darsteller der Soldaten: sie sind nicht gegen das Mädchen. Trotzdem wird einer von Ihnen [*sic*] die Stumme auf Anordnung des Offiziers erschießen.<sup>32</sup>

We see here how Brecht built contradictions into performance, creating productions that rewarded attentive viewing. His aesthetic was rich in socially significant details, inviting spectators to notice that Eilif and Schweizerkas walk barefoot in the opening scene and that Eilif is still wearing the same threadbare trousers in the next scene, even though he is fêted as a war hero by the Feldhauptmann.<sup>33</sup> It is only in scene 8, when he is arrested and taken away to die

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Wera Skupin, 'Hinweise auf die Darstellung einiger Details', in *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* [programme for the Berliner Ensemble production featuring Helene Weigel], ed. by Peter Palitzsch and Claus Hubalek, BEA, n. p. This version of the programme was published after 1949, as it includes a photograph from 1950, and probably before Brecht's death, as the year of his death has been added by hand to his biographical information.

<sup>33</sup> BBA, 485/05; 'Eilifs Säbeltanz (Szene 2)', in *Theaterarbeit*, p. 232.

in peacetime, that he is wearing expensive clothes—perhaps spoils that he has looted.<sup>34</sup> In her programme note on the role of the soldiers in Katrin's death scene, Küchenmeister (née Skupin) explains that Brecht wanted spectators to discover socially significant details for themselves, adding: 'Die realistische Darstellung der Details zerstört die allgemeinen, ungenauen, schematischen Vorstellungen der Zuschauer.'<sup>35</sup>

It was precisely these habitual viewing patterns, though, that proved so difficult to dislodge in the final scene of *Mutter Courage*. This scene presents Mutter Courage grieving over the death of Katrin, cradling her corpse while singing a lullaby. Kevin Hilliard argues that 'this Pietà, this archetypal *tableau* of suffering, with no trace of "Verfremdung" in sight, reinstates pity in its traditional place in the theatre like no other scene in Brecht'.<sup>36</sup> His choice of words is telling, for while there may be no *Verfremdung* in sight, it is audible through the lullaby that Mutter Courage sings to her daughter. This provides an unreliable commentary on the play's action: Mutter Courage sings that her children wear silk and want for nothing, yet the audience has witnessed Katrin's suffering throughout the play, just as it has seen all three children die (*BFA*, VI, 84–85). Brecht has even highlighted the incongruity of the lyrics by replacing the traditional text of the lullaby—a description of poverty—with his own.<sup>37</sup> The *Courage-Modell* explains how the lullaby should be performed, describing a performance style that jars with the emphasis on pity in Hilliard's reading:

Das Wiegenlied muß ohne jede Sentimentalität und ohne den Wunsch, Sentimentalität zu erregen, gebracht werden. Sonst wird seine Bedeutsamkeit nicht offenbar. Der Gedanke, der dem Lied zugrunde liegt, ist ein mörderischer: Das Kind dieser Mutter sollte es besser haben als andere Kinder anderer Mütter. [. . .] Dem Kind, dem das Gewöhnlichste versagt blieb, wurde das Außergewöhnliche versprochen. (*BFA*, xxv, 238–39)

What the lullaby actually illustrates, then, is Mutter Courage's continuing self-delusion. Yet Hilliard's reaction shows how the visual pull of the scene of mourning, and the familiar and emotive form of the lullaby, may lead spectators to ignore the jarring lyrics. Such a reaction also overlooks the critical framing of the *tableau*, the way in which the reactions of the on-stage audience are designed to disrupt the theatre audience's identification with Mutter Courage. The peasants on stage are hostile to Mutter Courage, and the *Courage-Modell* states that the lullaby does nothing to change this (*BFA*,

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Skupin, 'Hinweise auf die Darstellung einiger Details'.

<sup>36</sup> Hilliard, p. 64.

<sup>37</sup> For the traditional lyrics see *Des Knaben Wunderhorn: Alte deutsche Lieder*, ed. by Achim von Arnim and Clemens von Brentano, 3 vols (Heidelberg: Mohr & Zimmer, 1806–08), III (1808), 424.

xxv, 237).<sup>38</sup> In the 1950 version of the text, we find lines that were not present in the first draft, and that underline Mutter Courage's culpability and self-delusion:

DIE BAUERSLEUTE Wenns nicht in die Stadt gangen wärn, Ihren Schnitt machen, wärs vielleicht nicht passiert.

MUTTER COURAGE Ich bin froh, daß sie schläft [*sic*]. (BFA, VI, 85)

Spectators who miss these examples of *Verfremdung* are repeating the mistake that the prison guard makes in *Die Mutter*. They are buying the archetype at face value, accepting the sight and sound of mourning, rather than interrogating what they see and hear. In a note on the staging Ruth Berlau explains that the actor playing Mutter Courage should perform the scene in such a way that her final line ('Ich muss wieder in den Handel kommen') is received with disapproval, with spectators in the auditorium shaking their heads.<sup>39</sup> No such reactions were recorded in the line-by-line notes that Brecht's assistants made on audience responses to two early performances in January 1949.<sup>40</sup> Instead, the scene was met by silence.<sup>41</sup>

### *Spectators' Reactions to Brecht's Post-War Productions*

Brecht was famously dissatisfied with spectators' responses to *Mutter Courage*, reportedly complaining to his assistant Käthe Rülcke:

Der deutsche Nachkriegszuschauer erkennt die Courage nicht als Händlerin, sondern als 'den Menschen', nicht den Handelskrieg, nicht aus solcher Sicht, sondern 'den Krieg'. Sie können nichts gegen den Krieg machen. Das Schicksal ist so, der eine kommt durch, dem anderen nimmt es alles.<sup>42</sup>

He added: 'Welche Naivität von mir, daß ich annahm, sie würden sich als Händler erkennen. Nein, sie sehen sich als Menschen.'<sup>43</sup> We can trace Brecht's dissatisfaction right back to the first post-war performances of *Mutter Courage*. His archive contains his notes on aspects that made a strong impression

<sup>38</sup> We see another example of this strategy in scene 3, where the Feldwebel functions as a spectator when Mutter Courage denies knowing her dead son Schweizerkas. A note in the *Courage-Modell* explains: 'Der Darsteller des Feldwebels kann das Erstaunen des Zuschauers anführen, indem er erstaunt über solche Härte sich zu seinen Leuten umblickt' (BFA, xxv, 203).

<sup>39</sup> 'Das Modellbuch warnt vor falscher Darstellung', in *Theaterarbeit*, pp. 298–99 (p. 299). The original typescript is in Berlau's orthography, with handwritten amendments by Brecht. See 'Es muss über die Rampe gebracht werden', BBA 205/31–34 (p. 34).

<sup>40</sup> Heiden, 'Publikumsreaktion in der Vorstellung "Mutter Courage" am Montag dem 31. Vorstellung für den Hauptjugendausschuss', 4 February 1949, BBA, 486/103–06; Anon., 'Publikumsreaktion in der Vorstellung "Mutter Courage" am 18.1.1949', BBA, 1824/61–65. These reports document each line that elicited an audible reaction from the audience.

<sup>41</sup> BBA, 486/106; BBA, 1824/65.

<sup>42</sup> Käthe Rülcke-Weiler [née Rülcke], 'Brecht über die Wirkungen der Berliner "Courage"-Inszenierung', in BEA, 1: 'Brecht: Mutter Courage: Couragemodell 1949'.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



on spectators at a performance on 12 January 1949, just one day after the premiere. These notes show that spectators were particularly impressed by Katrin's death scene, but they do not indicate that spectators commented on Courage's complicity in the deaths of her children; in fact, one spectator asked why the wagon continued its journey at the end. In the margin, Brecht commented: 'das [sic] nichts gelernt haben!'<sup>44</sup>

In conversation with Rüllicke, Brecht is said to have attributed spectators' reactions to their identification with Mutter Courage, conceding that this might be an 'error' in the play.<sup>45</sup> His assistants' reports of responses to performances on 18 and 31 January 1949 show that spectators laughed or applauded at lines that resonated with their recent war experiences, such as 'Seit ich verlumpt bin[,] bin ich ein besserer Mensch geworden' and 'den sie wegwerfen im gedanken [sic] an den Endsieg'.<sup>46</sup> Such reactions could be seen as a pedagogically positive act of recognition—evidence of *Historisierung* working as Brecht intended—but some spectators and reviewers projected their views and experiences onto Mutter Courage, even when this ran counter to the logic of the script. For instance, they commonly assumed that Courage hates the war, even though she curses it only once, after Katrin has been injured, and praises it in the very next line.<sup>47</sup> Reviewer Walter Kaul used the words 'trecken' and 'Treck' to describe Courage's travels, eliding the difference between her active pursuit of war and the long marches of refugees at the end of the Second World War.<sup>48</sup> This comparison was made explicitly by typist Gerdie Wiczorek, who saw what she expected rather than what was actually there:

Das Stück ist eine Widerspiegelung unserer Zeit, weil auch wir im 20. Jahrhundert unzählige *Mütter Courage* hatten, die mit ihren Kindern auf einem Handwagen das Notwendigste, im eisigen Winter des Jahres 1945 durch Deutschland zogen.<sup>49</sup>

After watching a production that Brecht directed in Munich in 1950, secretary Erna W. overlooked the fact that Courage does not learn from her experiences, arguing that she realizes too late that she cannot earn from the war.<sup>50</sup> Another spectator, housewife Elisabeth A., provided a fatalistic description

<sup>44</sup> Bertolt Brecht, '12.1.49 songs nicht verständlich', BBA, 1129/55–58 (p. 58).

<sup>45</sup> Rüllicke-Weiler, 'Brecht über die Wirkungen der Berliner "Courage"-Inszenierung'.

<sup>46</sup> BBA, 486/105; BBA, 1824/63 and /64.

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. W.F., 'Courage: Bertolt Brecht im Deutschen Theater', *Der Tag* (East Berlin), 13 January 1949; -a-, 'Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder', *Berlins Modeblatt*, March 1949; Hans Wilfert, 'Das Leiden am Krieg', *Neue Zeit* (East Berlin), 13 January 1949.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Kaul, 'Medizinmann Brecht', *Roland von Berlin*, 23 January 1949.

<sup>49</sup> 'Drei Theaterstücke, drei Frauenrollen, drei Zuschauerinnen', *Für Dich* (East Berlin), 6 February 1949.

<sup>50</sup> Erna W., 'Meine Meinung über Bert Brechts "Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder"', BEA, 1: 'Brecht: Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder. Zum Programmheft. Dramaturgiematerial.' Names of spectators who supplied unpublished statements have been abbreviated to protect their anonymity.

that positioned *Mutter Courage* securely as a victim, not as a perpetrator. She wrote:

Wir, die Generation zweier Kriege, sind erschüttert. Erschüttert über die Kraft des Wortes und die tiefe menschliche Tragik, die vor uns abrollte. Was heißt vor 300 Jahren: Die menschlichen Probleme haben sich nicht geändert, nur die Zeit und die Methoden sind schrecklicher geworden.<sup>51</sup>

This description presents the play as an ahistorical tragedy, suggesting an inevitability—through the verb ‘abrollte’—that again ignores *Courage*’s complicity.

There is evidence, though, that other spectators were edging towards the more critical viewing positions that Brecht had hoped to encourage, and it is these reactions that enable us to gain a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the play’s impact on its first post-war spectators. While Elisabeth A. conforms to the model of the blind spectator, another spectator—who shared her surname and was presumably her husband or another male relative—saw that *Mutter Courage* needed to be viewed critically. He wrote: ‘Mir wurde klar, dass die Menschen heute wie vor 300 Jahren noch vom gleichen Krämergeist beherrscht werden, wie ihn *Mutter Courage* z. T. verkörperte, und dass die Menschen sich heute noch genau so missbrauchen lassen.’<sup>52</sup> This spectator was not in Brecht’s vanguard yet, for he located his explanation in personal morality rather than politics, writing ‘wie im Leben [wird] der grösste Teil der Menschen von seinen schlechten Eigenschaften beherrscht’.<sup>53</sup> Other spectators and reviewers recognized behavioural traits in *Mutter Courage* and then subjected their own actions to critical self-scrutiny. In January 1949 the reviewer Rosemarie Knop wrote:

Wir, das deutsche Volk, sind *Mutter Courage* vor dem einst wohlgefüllten jetzt ausgepowerten Karren. Wir glaubten vom Kriege leben zu können. Nicht schlecht, wird jeder bestätigen, der jemals polnische Gänse gegessen, ukrainischen Weizen verbacken und französische Seidenstrümpfe getragen.<sup>54</sup>

Anni Sager, who was aged thirty and was studying history at university, was also critical of *Mutter Courage*, writing that women had recently allowed their sons to go to war and their children to be buried under rubble, and were sorry only when their own children were among the dead.<sup>55</sup> One unpublished

<sup>51</sup> Elisabeth A., ‘*Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*’, in BEA, 1: ‘Brecht: *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. Zum Programmheft. Dramaturgiematerial’.

<sup>52</sup> Ad. A., ‘*Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*’, in BEA, 1: ‘Brecht: *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. Zum Programmheft. Dramaturgiematerial’. This spectator’s profession is given as ‘Wohnungsbeamter (früher Arbeiter)’.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Rosemarie Knop, ‘*Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*’, *Start* (East Berlin), 21 January 1949.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Drei Theaterstücke, drei Frauenrollen, drei Zuschauerinnen’, *Für Dich*, 6 February 1949.

statement, by peace activist Rosa B., showed an incomprehension of Mutter Courage's actions that would surely have pleased Brecht:

Zu dem Theaterstück *Mutter Courage* möchte ich als Friedenskämpferin nur kurz mitteilen, dass mir Mutter Courage schauspielerisch sehr gut gefiel, aber der Zeit nach mir unverständlich ist, dass eine Mutter mit drei verschiedenartigen Kindern in solcher Not immer wieder durch den Krieg Geschäfte macht.<sup>56</sup>

This fits the response that Brecht identifies with the spectator of epic theatre, who responds to tragedy by saying that it is 'höchst auffällig, fast nicht zu glauben' and reaching the conclusion: 'Das muß aufhören' (BFA, xxii/1, 110). What he had not predicted was that one and the same production could unleash 'dramatic' as well as 'epic' responses: the 'dramatic' response of crying with the heroine because her fate was inevitable, and the 'epic' response of crying because there was a way out, but the heroine failed to see it.

The surviving records of spectators' responses to *Die Mutter* and *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* would also have given Brecht some grounds for curbing his frustration, even though GDR cultural politicians continued to criticize his theatre.<sup>57</sup> In the Berliner Ensemble Archive there are forty-three statements by spectators who saw performances of *Die Mutter* in Chemnitz, Dresden, and Weimar during a Trade Union Festival in 1951. These statements indicate that most spectators perceived the aesthetic as unconventional, and that the half-curtain and music attracted some criticisms. A representative of the Kulturkommission Olympia complained that it was unacceptable for spectators in the second circle to be able to watch the scene changes over the top of the half-curtain, adding: 'wir wurden durch diese technischen Mängel in der Illusion, d.h. in der richtigen Aufnahme des Stückes gestört'.<sup>58</sup> Yet even this complaint indicates that the half-curtain was having the effect that Brecht had intended, and spectators often praised the production after noting that it did not conform to their expectations. The Berliner Ensemble Archive also holds a five-page document of a discussion between spectators from the Ministry of Finance, who saw *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* in November 1954. In what initially sounds like a complaint about Brecht's play, one spectator confessed: 'bei *Egmont* spürte ich viel mehr im Herzen. Hier fühle ich nur Einzelnes'.<sup>59</sup> However, the spectator went on to add: 'Ich *bin* nicht die Grusche', imply-

<sup>56</sup> Rosa B., 'Zu dem Theaterstück "Mutter Courage"', BEA, 1: 'Brecht: Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder. Zum Programmheft. Dramaturgiematerial'.

<sup>57</sup> For critical GDR reactions to *Die Mutter* see e.g. *Der Kampf gegen den Formalismus in Kunst und Literatur, für eine fortschrittliche deutsche Kultur*, ed. by Hans Lauter (East Berlin: Dietz, 1951), pp. 51–52 and 131–32. On *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* see e.g. Fritz Erpenbeck, 'Episches Theater oder Dramatik?', *Freies Volk* (Düsseldorf), 22 January 1955.

<sup>58</sup> Hans J., 'Stellungnahme anlässlich der "Theaterwoche der Gewerkschaften" zur Aufführung "Die Mutter"', in BEA, 5, MK 12.

<sup>59</sup> 'Diskussion über "Der kaukasische Kreidekreis" im Ministerium für Finanzen am 10. Nov. 1954', in BEA, 17: 'Brecht, Der kaukasische Kreidekreis: Disposition'.

ing an understanding that full identification would not be appropriate.<sup>60</sup> The discussion continued:

Man bleibt dem Stück gegenüber kühl [als] Zuschauer. Man wird nicht mitgerissen.

Bei mir war es gerade das Gegenteil. Es war so viel Menschliches, Problematisches und auch das Innere Ansprechendes in dem Stück.

Ich meine, es ist doch immer eine Gefahr, hingerissen zu werden. Ich meine, wenn das Gefühl den Verstand übertölpelt.

Es kann also kein Fehler sein, nüchtern zu bleiben.

Mitreissen darf man sich nur lassen, wo man vorher geprüft hat, ob die Sache gut ist.<sup>61</sup>

We can see here how these spectators were edging towards an understanding of the role and value of critical distance in Brecht's theatre, as they worked to articulate its impact on them. In contrast, the deceptive familiarity of the subject matter of *Mutter Courage*—its depiction of maternal loss during war—had allowed some spectators to assimilate it into their existing world-view, contrary to Brecht's intentions and to the epic devices that he had built into the play.

### Conclusion

In *Die Mutter*, *Mutter Courage*, and *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* Brecht's use of role-play enabled him to put spectatorship in the spotlight. The scenes work through ideas that he articulates in the 'Rede an dänische Arbeiterschauspieler', showcasing examples of critical and uncritical spectatorship, and demonstrating how characters can put their experiences as spectators to strategic use. Brecht presents informed action as the logical consequence of critical spectatorship, and his characters use their observations of social behaviour to create both 'dramatic' and 'epic' performances. At the Berliner Ensemble he extended this approach by designing productions that were rich in socially significant details and contradictions, and that therefore rewarded attentive viewing. This inductive approach offered no guarantee, of course, that spectators would bring their critical intellect and powers of observation to bear on Brecht's productions, or that they would be alive to the contradictions between the characters' behaviour and their own. The reception of *Mutter Courage* shows that some spectators replicated the behaviour of the soldiers in *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, consuming the performance without seeing the challenge that it posed to their world-view. Or, to make a different comparison, they repeated the errors of the porter and prison guard in *Die Mutter*, seeing only what they expected to see. Even so, the archival traces of

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

reception do suggest that Brecht was making some progress in his attempts to train his post-war audience. We see hints of this progress not just in the responses that recognized the political arguments of *Mutter Courage*, but also in the queries, objections, and comments that the distancing devices in *Die Mutter* and *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* provoked from spectators accustomed to a theatre of identification. Our challenge now is to recover these histories of spectatorship, which were more nuanced than Brecht's expressions of frustration suggest.

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