

Monika Bregović, University of Zadar, Croatia

Erwin Piscator's Russia's Day: Agitprop between History and Myth

Abstract

The work of Erwin Piscator as a theatre director is marked by attempts to introduce communist ideology into theatre, which was reflected in various aspects of his theatrical practice. This paper focuses on the agitprop productions staged by his Proletarian Theatre, which propagated the communist narrative of class struggle by the use of an irrational aesthetics. These performances embodied the contradiction that can be found in communist practice, which appealed to the scientifically rational analysis of history as class struggle, but in practice abolished criticism and transformed class struggle into a myth. Piscator's production of Russia's Day staged the conflict between the capitalist and the proletarian class according to the scientific analysis of history as class struggle, but the irrational aesthetics of the performance immersed the audience into the staged history, transforming the communist narrative into a myth.

Keywords: Erwin Piscator, agitprop, Proletarian Theatre, Russia's Day, myth, historical materialism, rationality, emotion

1. Introduction

The art scene of the Weimar Republic was largely marked by new forms of realist art that appeared side by side with the avant-garde movements of Expressionism and Dada. New forms of art that foregrounded realism included agitprop theatre, the movement of New Objectivity, and the epic and documentary theatres of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. Most of the documentary art of the period was explicitly connected to specific ideologies, since its authors perceived it suitable for the mediation of political ideas:^[1] Erwin Piscator was one of them, as he believed that

documentary theatre is more appropriate for the affirmation of communist ideas. Namely, Piscator embraced Marxism as an alternative to capitalism, which he saw as responsible for WWI. Taking his first steps as an artist under the influence of Berlin-based Dada, he took up communism, which was assumed by this avant-garde movement as a source of positive values.^[2] After his contact with the Dadaists, he joined the German Communist Party, and gradually turned to the kind of theatre that he believed to be more suitable for the mediation of communist politics. The aim of this article is to analyze the complex relationship between Piscator's theatre and communist ideology, which displayed its ambiguous nature most prominently in Piscator's work with agitprop, staged by his Proletarian Theatre. The article will focus on the paradox between the rational enlightenment of the proletarian masses by communist propaganda, and the irrational methods used to gain support for communism, which pertains both to Piscator's theatre and communist practice. Before moving on to a more detailed analysis of Piscator's agitprop theatre, let us first provide some crucial information about Piscator's career in theatre.

Due to its diversity, the work of Erwin Piscator as theatre director cannot be subsumed under a single category or genre. Critics labeled his productions with terms that designate genres that predominated in different stages of his artistic development, and which remain related to specific theatres in which he worked as a director. His early work in theatre at his Proletarian Theatre was labeled "agitprop" (Innes 23), since it was explicitly dedicated to communist propaganda. This phase of his work was superseded by "documentary drama" (Innes 66), which was staged by Piscator at the Volksbühne, and his own theatre Piscator Theatre.^[3] Some of Piscator's performances have also been linked to the genre of "epic theatre" (Innes 97), which includes political plays produced at his own Piscator Theatre, and points to the resemblance with Brecht's epic techniques. Furthermore, Piscator himself called the final stage of his work "confessional theatre"^[4] (Willet 173), which includes the documentary productions dealing with the legacy of WWII, staged at Freie Volksbühne in West Berlin during the 1960s, after Piscator's return from exile. When Piscator took up the position of director at the Freie Volksbühne, he became dedicated to staging plays that addressed sensitive issues from the German past, such as the Nazi genocide, which were not spoken about in the post-war Germany for two decades. In addition to issues with proper categorization, the work of Erwin Piscator has been evaluated rather differently by various

critics. This can be accounted for by the numerous failures which he suffered, due to finance, political conflict, and a fervent drive for experiment that often backfired. For that reason, many critics neglected his work and perceived him as a second-rate theatre hack. However, the value of Erwin Piscator as a theatre director lies in the scope of his experiments, the immense influence he had on many artists of the 20th century, and the role which his work as director at the Freie Volksbühne played in the process of coming to terms with the past after WWII. In other words, he was – and has remained to this day – one of the most impressive innovators when it came to technology in theatre, he proved influential for seminal artists such as Bertolt Brecht, and his production of documentary plays by Peter Weiss, Heinar Kipphardt, and Rolf Hochhuth, staged at the Freie Volksbühne, played a crucial role in the German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Moreover, his experiments with documentary material are perceived as the origins of documentary theatre, his work with theatre propaganda set in motion the agitprop movement, and he is considered as the predecessor of the effect of estrangement. In addition, Willet points out that the four productions which he staged at his first and second Piscator Theatre – *Hoppla*, *We're Alive*, *Rasputin*, *Schweik*, and *Economic Competition* – can be considered as benchmarks in the history of theatre (*The Theatre of the Weimer Republic* 74). These plays are highlights of his career, and display a successful integration of innovative technology and traditional elements of theatre.

2. Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre

Most of Piscator's work in theatre was heavily influenced by Marxist ideas, which he warmed to after his Dadaist experiments. Communist politics was reflected in various segments of his work, such as his relationship to theatre as an institution, the choice of plays and novels he decided to stage, and his perception of documentary realism as a source of emancipation. Namely, Piscator either chose texts which directly reflected the political concerns of his era, or adapted traditional plays to his own needs. His production of Schiller's *The Robbers*, which greatly divided the audience, provides a notorious example of such an adaptation. Innes explains that in Piscator's *The Robbers*, staged at the Volksbühne, the original play was transformed into a revolutionary text that illuminated Schiller's classic from a different perspective (166). More precisely, Schiller's minor character Spiegelberg became a Bolshevist hero, the aristocratic characters of Franz Moor and the

Old Moor were depicted as cruel representatives of the ruling class, and the tragic aspect of the character of Karl Moor was “made an object of ridicule as a bourgeois weakness” (Innes 166-67). Often, the political issues which Piscator targeted in plays and novels of his choice were supported by original documentary material that provided his plays with an impression of historical authenticity. Namely, Piscator used original documentary sources, such as writing, photography, and film, to highlight the historical context of the performance, which he saw as crucial for the emancipation of the viewers. As many authors and directors who worked with documentary material, Erwin Piscator believed that the use of original documents roots the dramatic action into the historical context relevant to the issue in question, which he saw as seminal to the critical stance he wanted to produce in his audience. For this purpose, Piscator employed every means that were at his disposal, including elaborate machinery, which he used to mediate the historical reality preserved in the original documents. Piscator claimed that his use of technology remained motivated by politics, and pointed out that a successful political theatre must make use of the most advanced technology of the given era (188). His work in theatre is greatly marked by the use of diverse machinery, such as the moving treadmill, the revolving stage, or the rotating hemisphere. The technological highpoint of his career would have been reached in “the total theatre,” which was designed for Piscator by the Bauhaus member Walter Gropius, but which was unfortunately never built. The concept of “total theatre” was not restricted to Gropius, but was developed by several other Bauhaus designers, including Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Farkas Molnar. As Rorrison explained, Piscator’s theatrical experiments were part of a wider trend in developing alternatives to the traditional proscenium-arch stage, and redefining the relationship between the actors and the audience (“Introduction to Chapter VI” 176). However, it is crucial to point out the difference between Piscator’s and Gropius’ perspective of the total theatre. Namely, although both were interested in doing away with the old proscenium-arch stage, Gropius did not perceive the total theatre in exclusively political terms, but was mostly interested in its illusionist effects^[5] However, for Piscator, the technologically awe-inspiring total theatre meant precisely the opposite, as he saw it crucial for his anti-illusionist political theatre, in which emancipation was to be achieved by the rational enlightenment of the audience. As pointed out previously, Piscator saw technology as inherently progressive and directly related to political emancipation. Therefore, he imagined the total theatre as an emancipative alternative to the dominant theatrical production of the era. The

total theatre was imagined as an integrative version of the three paradigmatic types of stages – the picture-frame stage, the arena stage, and the thrust stage. Such a mutable construction would enable a highly flexible treatment of theatre space, and abolish class division embodied in the seating arrangement of the picture-frame stage, which Piscator saw as a reflection of an outdated ideology. He believed that the proscenium-arch theatre embodies class segregation, and pointed out that “the division into orchestra, circle, boxes and balcony reflects the social stratification of a feudalist society” (Piscator 180). According to Piscator, the theatre of the Weimar Republic was largely irrelevant to crucial political issues, since it was produced in a different historical context, and embodied social relations that had become obsolete. Such an outdated stage should be replaced by a contemporary version of the political theatre that would participate in the production of emancipative social relations. Obviously, Piscator’s concept of political theatre was largely shaped by the application of Marxist ideas to the sphere of art.

Marx and Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* provides an overview of the basic postulates of communism, focusing on the analysis of history in terms of class struggle, an approach to history grounded in historical materialism. According to this classical piece of writing, the bourgeois includes the owners of the means of social production, while the proletariat refers to those forced to sell their labor power for life, with no means of production of their own (Marx and Engels 33). This social hierarchy is perpetuated by the dominant ideology which naturalizes the aforementioned order, transforming its own standards into a universal law that provides legitimacy to its own rule (Marx and Engels 36-48). The cultural products that are categorized and valued by the standards of the ruling class reflect the regime in power, while art that fails to conform to established standards remains invisible as art (Marx and Engels 62). The communist project is aimed at a historical revolution that would subvert these naturalized social relations by providing the oppressed with the means of social production, which would in turn produce new forms of art. Piscator assumed communist ideas on the historical relativity of art, and wanted to create a stage that would produce social relations relevant to the struggle against capitalism.

In accordance with Marxist ideas on the need to redistribute the means of social production, Piscator sought to destroy not only the proxemics of the picture-frame stage, but also the relationship between theatre professionals and the audience. In his analysis of Piscator’s work in

theatre, Senker explains that the Proletarian Theatre was a result of an experiment in the creation of a more democratic community between the theatre director, actors, and theatre staff on the one hand, and audiences on the other. Namely, Piscator wanted to transform the proletarian audience into producers of the theatrical event (Senker 198-200), a position quite different from the one assigned to them in traditional theatre, where they occupied the role of passive consumers of dominant ideology. Piscator's Proletarian Theatre would replace the conventional proscenium-arch stage that embodied oppressive social relations, without granting the proletarian audience access to means of social production. By erasing differences between administrative staff, actors, directors, and audience, it would abolish not only traditional categories that separate professionals from amateur audiences, but also the opposition between the classes endowed with means of social production and the education that assigns them a superior social role, and the uneducated working class members consigned to role of consumers. However, Senker points out that the experiment was not entirely successful, as these performances suffered on account of the lack of professionalism of the amateur actors (199). Besides these experiments in the inclusion of the proletarian class in the production of theatre, Piscator's Proletarian Theatre was dedicated to staging communist propaganda.

Very similar to Brecht, Piscator rejected the concept of art as an embodiment of eternal values, cultivating instead the perspective of art as a historical product created by relative social relations (Piscator 187-88)^[6] For this reason, he believed that theatre needs to reflect current political and economic concerns, rather than stage plays produced in previous historical conditions. In his Political Theatre, Piscator explained that he imagines his Piscator Theatre as a theatre that rejects tradition in favor of staging plays that correspond to current social needs, which are conditioned by politics and economics:

Time and again our opponents have overlooked the fact that types do not have eternal validity, so that art can never do more than record the historic aspect of its own record along with the action. The Classical epoch saw its eternal plane in the great personality, an epoch of aestheticism would see it in the elevation of beauty, a moral epoch would see it in terms of ethics, an epoch of idealism in the sublime. All these evaluations were considered eternal in their own times and art was anything that provided a generally valid statement of these values. For our generation these values are exhausted, outmoded, dead. What are the forces of destiny in our own epoch? What does this

generation recognize as the fate which it accepts at its peril, which it must conquer if it is to survive? Economics and politics are our fate, and the result is society, the social fabric. And only by taking these three factors into account, either by affirming them or by fighting against them, will we bring our lives into contact with the historical aspect of the twentieth century. (188)

In Piscator's view, contemporary theatre has to reflect current economy and politics as the predominant forces that shape Weimer Germany, instead of staging canonical plays that embody aspects falsely considered eternal in previous periods, and which are dated for Piscator's audience. As previously explained, he developed his theatre in opposition to the traditional stage, which he imagined as an illusionist bourgeois institution.

3. Emotion versus Reason: Agitprop between History and Myth

In addition to the various elements of Piscator's theatre that were developed under the influence of Marxist ideas about art, it is crucial to single out another one which he shared with Brecht, namely his belief in the emancipation of the audience by rationality.. While Brecht in his "epic theatre" developed a full-fledged theory of the estrangement effect, or the so-called "V-effect", which refers to the rational insight he wanted to produce by an estrangement of various elements of theatre (192), traces of ideas of "estrangement" can also be found in his predecessor Erwin Piscator.^[7] However, for Piscator, the concept of emancipation by reason referred less to specific techniques of staging, and more to the communist narratives of class struggle represented on the stage. Like Brecht, Piscator based his political theatre on concepts such as "enlightenment, knowledge, clarity" (Piscator 49), which he perceived as crucial sources of emancipation. The emphasis on reason as the source of empowerment was something that he shared not only with Brecht but also with Marxism. Namely, the analysis of social relations in terms of class struggle was perceived as a scientific method of approaching history that reveals the social conditions of oppression, and emancipates the oppressed by granting them insight into their own social position and the changeable nature of the social fabric. As for Piscator, his turn to documentary realism was explicitly connected to his desire to stage such a supposedly scientific insight into social relations, which he perceived as a source of enlightenment and emancipation. However, his theatrical practice often subverted this scientific approach to history by being coupled with an explicitly

irrational aesthetics. The contradictory nature of Piscator's theatre, in which irrational and emotional means were used to represent a supposedly rational analysis of history, can be detected in many of his productions. One of the reasons for the strong emotional impact which Piscator's theatre often produced was its impressive theatre machinery, which was used to mediate original documents, such as sound recordings, photographs, or film scenes featuring images from WWI. The awe-inspiring machinery produced effects of fascination, immersion, and emotional activation, which directly clashed with the objectivity of the historical narratives, perceived as the source of emancipation. The paradox between emotional activation and rational enlightenment was more pronounced in Piscator's agitprop performances, staged by his Proletarian Theatre, which should come as no surprise, since the very genre of agitprop embodies the contradiction.^[8] A similar problem can be found in communism, which drew on the scientific analysis of history as class struggle, but in practice transformed the idea of class struggle into an irrational myth.

Due to its close alignment with historical materialism, which is perceived as an empirical method of interpreting history, Marxism is considered to be a social phenomena grounded in scientific objectivity. Providing rational evidence on historical laws to everyone, it enables people to govern themselves without the need of an overarching authority. However, Arendt detects a curious displacement of historical and social laws that occurred in totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Namely, in totalitarian regimes such as these, social laws were not seen as historically relative frameworks for the establishment of human legality, but were rather treated as eternal laws of History or Nature that provide parameters of justice. Moreover, totalitarian regimes employed terror to correct every aspect of human life that departed from these historical laws, with the aim to produce a universal mankind that would embody the law (Arendt 461-68). As for the totalitarian aspects of communism, the historical laws of class struggle, if extended to entire humanity, were perceived as producing enlightened rational proletarian subjects that would lead a global revolution. Therefore, the scientific analysis of history as class struggle was established as an eternal law, providing legitimacy to its own rule, which was perceived as the provider of justice on earth. The employment of authoritarian means made communism impervious to questioning, while the supposedly rational concept of history as class struggle was transformed into an essentially irrational myth. Directly opposite to the scientific approach to human history, pertaining

to historical materialism, the concept of myth refers to an unscientific understanding of the world which lacks rational grounding, and which is maintained by irrational means. Myth is believed beyond scientific proof, and accepted without questioning, often providing the community which nurtures the myth with a common goal. Adorno and Horkheimer explain that the mythical understanding of the world was displaced by the scientific one in the period of Enlightenment, during which myth and religion were supplanted by science, perceived as the source of emancipation that enables human beings to master nature by scientific knowledge grounded in calculable evidence. However, in the process of constituting itself against myth, science produced itself as myth, as the belief in science as the source of human empowerment became accepted without questioning, while anything that failed to conform to rational evidence was discarded as superstition. The idea of rational enlightenment by science is totalitarian (Adorno and Horkheimer 1-6). The same paradox occurred in communist regimes, which used historical materialism to produce legitimacy for their own rule. Communism perceived the scientific analysis of history as class struggle as the source of rational emancipation, and aimed to produce a totalitarian community populated by rational proletarian subjects. Any departure from the narrative of proletarian liberation was sanctioned, even in the face of rational evidence. Class struggle was transformed into an irrational myth that produced legitimacy for the communist regime by establishing the historical laws of class struggle as eternal parameters of justice, which were used to discipline perceived threats. To go back to Piscator's theatre, Innes detects a similar paradox in Piscator's theatrical practice. Namely, Piscator often appealed to the emancipative rationality embodied in his productions of historical narratives of class struggle, but simultaneously employed conspicuously emotional means to stage these narratives. This paradox is most prevalent in Piscator's agitprop productions (Innes 30-31), which is not surprising due to the nature of the genre. Before moving on to a more detailed analysis of Piscator's Proletarian Theatre, let us first provide a brief explanation of the conflicting relationship between reason and emotion that is found in agitprop.

The description of agitprop dates back to Lenin's political strategy, in which it designated various techniques of activating the masses for proletarian struggle. For Lenin, the concept of "propaganda" included the enlightenment of the proletariat about their position in society by

providing objective explanations of the current social system, which would strengthen the consciousness of their oppression. On the other hand, the concept of “agitation” referred to appealing to the emotions of the masses by presenting the most glaring examples of social injustice, with the aim “to rouse discontent and indignation among the masses against this crying injustice” (Lenin 102). The term propaganda therefore included an explanation of social issues to the proletarian masses, while agitation referred to the appeal to direct action against social injustice. The concept of agitprop can be applied to various social activities, including art and theatre. In its archetypal form, agitprop theatre appeared after the Russian revolution, and evolved mostly in Russia and Germany. When it comes to the agitprop movement in Germany, Erwin Piscator’s work in theatre proved crucial, since his performances pioneered the whole movement. However, theatre in the service of propaganda often lacked sophistication, since every aspect of the performance became subordinated to its didactic purpose. For that reason, art labeled as agitprop acquires specific aesthetic elements, which highlight its emotional impact on the viewers, crucial for the mediation of information.

As explained previously, the productions staged by Piscator’s Proletarian Theatre were used for communist propaganda, and included spreading information about historical events that were, according to Marxist analysis of history, perceived as products of class struggle. These agitprop performances embodied the paradox reflected in communist practice, which in its totalitarian form transformed social laws into eternal laws of History, subverting the supposedly rational nature of historical materialism. To repeat, the analysis of history as social construct is seen as emancipative, as it encourages the questioning of established hierarchies, which becomes a sounding board for historical change. However, in practice, such a concept of history was subverted by transforming class struggle into an irrational myth or religion, which produced legitimacy for its politics, and was meant to be accepted without criticism. The same paradox was reflected in Piscator’ agitprop, which staged communist narratives of class struggle, targeted at the proletarian masses that were meant to be enlightened about their position in history and their power to change the given social reality. However, such a supposedly scientific account of history, performed on the stage, was supported by aesthetic means that facilitated the acceptance of the Marxist historical narrative. The sensationalist effects of Piscator’s agitprop theatre, embodied in

the concept of “agitation,” appealed to the audience on an emotional level, which clashed with the representation of history as class struggle. The scientifically objective analysis of history, pertaining to historical materialism, was coupled with an irrational aesthetics that weakened the critical attitude of the audience, while simultaneously strengthening their emotional readiness for political action. Piscator’s theatre therefore participated in the production of the myth of history as class struggle, providing an irrational understanding of human history that was believed contrary to rational evidence. To analyze the complicated relationship between emotion and reason in agitprop theatre, let us now provide more information on Piscator’s Proletarian Theatre, where the aforementioned contradiction was the most pronounced.

4. Piscator’s Russia’s Day: Producing Myth by Performing History

Performances staged by Piscator’s Proletarian Theatre display the typical features of agitprop, and can be seen as an archetypal example of the agitprop aesthetics. In line with the genre of agitprop, productions staged by the Proletarian Theatre were marked by a simplified aesthetics that was supposed to make the didactic message of the performance as transparent as possible. Innes explains that these performances typically included character types, simple scripts, and the use of slogans instead of speeches (25-32). In addition, the group travelled around with the use of a moveable stage-equipment, and staged their performances at halls and meeting rooms, targeting the audience in their own environment (Innes 25-32). From what we can gather from this description, the aesthetic elements of theatre were subordinated to the communist message they were meant to communicate, which most probably repelled the more sophisticated audience. From all the agitprop productions staged by Piscator’s theatre, only one was preserved, Russia’s Day, which was based on the text written by Lajos Barta, and staged in the year 1920. Let us note that the topic of the performance, the Bolshevik revolution, bore special significance for many Weimer artists and intellectuals who perceived communism as a source of liberation from the regime of capitalism.

In accordance with the aesthetics of agitprop theatre, the scenery and stage design of Piscator’s Russia’s Day were simplified and symbolic. According to Innes, the scenery included a backcloth

representing a simplified map of Europe, and frontier-barriers painted in the national colors of European nations, which surrounded the acting-area (27). In addition, the lighting was unsophisticated, and the costumes were either ordinary clothes or uniforms. Since the Proletarian Theatre did not have its own building, but rather travelled around, the stage for Russia's Day was set up on a patch of the floor at one end of the hall (Innes 27). Piscator's performance embodied the communist concept of history as class struggle, but such an explanation of history was staged in the manner of caricature. The representatives of capitalism in the performance include a diplomat, an officer and a priest, all of which are presented as slaves of "World-Capital," who is greeted by everyone as "Your Majesty." These representatives of capitalism are defined in opposition to the proletarian characters, which are represented as their victims. Servants of capitalism reveal their oppressive intentions in a series of clichés, as evident from the following quote:

World Capital [dressed in a giant moneybag with a stockbroker's top hat]: I am World Capital. Silence! [To the Diplomat] Have you given orders for force to be used ruthlessly against anyone who infringes the sacred rights of property? Speak up!

Diplomat: Your Majesty's power embraces the entire world that has been bestowed upon man. But Your Majesty's omnipotence is gravely threatened by the masses of the workers in their struggle for power.

World Capital: Trample the masses underfoot!

Officer: Yes, sir. Well-drilled men, field guns, bombs, machine guns, poison gas!

Preacher: In the name of the Lord God, blessed be thy name.

Diplomat: It is clear that freedom for the masses would be the downfall of us all.

World Capital: Downfall? Anybody who is not with me is against me. I will smash my enemies.

(qtd. in Rorrison, "Introduction to Chapter III" 38-39)

Capital is represented as an all-engulfing, powerful force that threatens to annihilate anyone who opposes its rule. On the other hand, the proletarian masses are represented as victims of capitalist oppression. Therefore, Piscator's production staged a simplified social hierarchy in which

capitalism preserves its rule over the proletariat by force, while the proletarian class is represented as a potential source of subversion.

The performance continues with survivors of war and war widows who appear on the stage, blaming capitalism for their suffering, which underscores the emotional impact of the performance. Simultaneously, the megaphone is used to emit a voice that represents the Russian revolution, which cries for the destruction of the capitalist order as the only solution against terror. The emotional impact of the performance escalates further when the dying victims of Hungarian counter-revolution enter to describe thousands of people killed, massacred, or imprisoned, after which they die on the stage (Innes 28). The impassioned tone of the production is highlighted by the Voice of Russia that can again be heard from a megaphone: “Proletarians of all the Nations, listen to the voice of these who have been tortured and destroyed, the voice of the martyrs of our Holy Cause” (qtd. in Innes 29). Furthermore, the concluding scenes of the production symbolically stage the subversion of the capitalist order, in which the allies of capitalism concede their powerlessness against forces that will empower the proletarian masses. Rallying cries of the Voice of Russia entice the proletariat to revolution. Finally, the representatives of capitalism, including the characters of Capital, Learning, Military, the Church, and Diplomacy, are driven off the stage by the German workers, and the production ends with the actors and audience singing “The International” (Innes 29). The stage directions indicate an ending typical for agitprop:

Voices. A roaring chorus repeats the battle-cry. Masses appear on the stage... crowds rush from every direction onto the stage, breaking down the frontier-barriers with the cry of ‘Brothers, Comrades, Unite!’ The German worker recites the first verse of the International, a trumpeter in Russian uniform steps forward, blows the International, the chorus on the stage join in, as do the audience. (qtd. in Innes 29)

Such an energetic and emphatic conclusion of the performance that both stages a proletarian revolution and appeals to one by encouraging the audience to join the actors in the singing of “The International,” makes for the climax of the production. The ending of Russia’s Day aims to do away with the boundary that separates art from life by inspiring the audience into direct action immediately after the performance.

As evident from the description of the play, there was a discrepancy between Piscator's appeal to rational objectivity, supposedly embedded in documentary realism and the constructivist accounts of human history, and the actual impact that this production most probably had on the audience. As explained previously, this paradox was detected by many critics, who pointed out that Piscator's performances were often more irrational than objective (Rorrison, "Introduction to Chapter III" 39; Innes 30), which was even more pronounced in his agitprop theatre. Piscator's performance supported the analysis of history as class struggle, staging a conflict between the servants of "World-Capital", and the oppressed proletarian class. The performance ended with the revolutionary subversion of the capitalist order, according to the communist narrative of the proletarian liberation that was to be achieved by class struggle. The theatrical production was meant to educate and enlighten the proletarian audience on their social position, strengthening their rational understanding of social laws that govern history, which supposedly grants them autonomy. However, the critical attitude associated with a scientific analysis of history was disabled by the aesthetic elements of the performance that highlighted the emotional involvement of the recipients. The description of the production of *Russia's Day* reveals that the performance most likely had a strong emotional impact that supplanted the desired critical rationalism, with the aim to encourage the audience to political action. Piscator's production of *Russia's Day* that included flat characters, explicit descriptions of violence, the image of proletarians as martyrs, and the use of the megaphone, produced an effect that amounted to quite the opposite to the desired critical insight into social oppression. Instead of producing a group of thinking individuals, empowered by rational insight into the social sources of their own oppression, these immersive and sensationalist aspects of the performance disabled the critical stance of the audience, and enabled a more facile acceptance of the didactic message. The performance immersed the audience into the historical events represented on the stage, bonding them to produce a totalized unity ready for direct action. Piscator's theatre paradoxically subverted the rational objectivity of the staged communist narrative by encouraging the immersion of the audience, while the underlying historical laws were transformed into an irrational myth. Since the performance used irrational means to support a specific understanding of history, a method commonly ascribed to myth, the

concept of history as class struggle was stripped of its scientific essence and became established as its opposite, providing an irrational understanding of the world comparable to myth.

5. Towards World Revolution: On the Path to Liberate Mankind

Although Piscator's theatre explicitly supported communist politics, it is important to point out the ambivalent nature of Piscator's relationship with communist authorities. The KPD did make use of some of his performances to gain public support, such as the Red Revue and *Despite All!*, produced by Piscator at the Volksbühne. However, on other occasions his performances became an object of censorship and control on the side of the KPD. Innes describes the ambivalent relationship between the KPD and Erwin Piscator by pointing out that the party fashioned various aspects of Piscator's theatre according to their own ends. For instance, the Party exercised control over the subject matter of his plays, while the process of playwriting had to be officially approved. The KPD therefore sent the approved author Felix Gassbara to help Piscator rewrite the existing plays, and organize the dramatic action as it wanted. Moreover, the Party manipulated historical facts if they worked against it or tarnished the communist myths. Therefore, the KPD disapproved of one of Piscator's productions in which the revolutionary heroes Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were represented with too much historical fact, and staged in a manner that was not idealistic enough by the standards of the Party (Innes 38-39). Communism was affirmed by authoritarian means that censored any departure from the established historical narratives, which were meant to be accepted by the entire community without any questioning. This discouraged the rational analysis of social phenomena that was perceived as a source of emancipation, while the concept of history as class struggle was transformed into an eternal law that provided legitimacy both for communist practice, and for the use of authoritarian methods, which were perceived as administering justice. The scientifically rational analysis of historical laws was transformed into an irrational myth, a dogmatic explanation of human history, which was maintained by force and emotional means, such as fear and uncritical idolization. Communist agitprop such as Piscator's *Russia's Day* reflected the aforementioned contradiction, instilling the myth of proletarian revolution by the use of irrational aesthetics that facilitated the acceptance of the master narrative, while its recipients were to be encouraged into direct action in accordance with the concept of class

struggle. Piscator's *Russia's Day* staged the conflict between the capitalist and the proletarian class, but the emphasis on the rational enlightenment of the proletarian subject was countered by the use of irrational aesthetic means that facilitated the acceptance of the didactic message of the performance. These highly emotional theatrical elements immersed the audience into the simplified events presented on the stage, with the aim to activate them in accordance with the didactic message of the performance. Instead of transforming the audience into a group of critical individuals by educating them on their social role, Piscator's production highlighted the emotional activation of the viewing subjects, which enabled an uncritical acceptance of staged events that demanded immediate action, and transformed the staged events into a myth. The emotional means used in the performance established the communist perspective of history as a mythical explanation of the world, stripped of its supposedly scientific core, and accepted contrary to reason.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973. Print.
- Bertolt, Brecht. *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic*. Trans. and Ed. John Willet. London: Methuen Drama, 2001. Print.
- Gropius, Walter. "the construction of a modern theater, with particular reference to the building of a new piscator theatre in berlin." By Erwin Piscator. *The Political Theatre*. Trans. Hugh Rorrison. 181-83. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980. Print.
- Innes, Christopher. *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre. The Development of Modern German Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972. Print.
- Lenin, Vladimir Iljič. *Essential Works of Lenin*. New York: Dover Publications, 1987. Print.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Pluto Press, 2008. Print.
- Piscator, Erwin. *The Political Theatre*. Trans. Hugh Rorrison. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980. Print.

Rorrison, Hugh. "Introduction to Chaper III." By Erwin Piscator. *The Political Theatre*. Trans. Hugh Rorrison. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980. 37-41. Print.

Rorrison, Hugh. "Introduction to Chapter XVI." By Erwin Piscator. *The Political Theatre*. Trans. Hugh Rorrison. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980. 174-177. Print.

Senker, Boris. *Redateljsko kazalište*. Zagreb: Centar za kulturnu djelatnost, 1984. Print.

Willet, John. *The Theatre of the Weimer Republic*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers Inc, 1998. Print.

Willet, John. *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator. Half a Century of Politics in the Theatre*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1978. Print.

[1] For more information on theatre during the Weimer Republic see John Willet's The Theatre of the Weimer Republic.

[2] For more detail on the influence of the Dadaists on Piscator see Innes 9-22.

[3] Piscator Theatre was closed and reopened three times.

[4] Bekenntnistheater.

[5] The concept of total theatre was meant to produce an effect of total immersion by the use of film projections that would surround the audience on all sides. For more information see Piscator 183.

[6] For more information on this issue in Brecht's theatre see Brecht 97.

[7] See Innes 194-95.

[8] The term "agitation" refers to emotional activation, while the idea of "propaganda" includes the spreading of objective fact.



Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License