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Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theories and Their Relationship to Rock Music: In Reply

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In Reply

Doug Milburn

Prof. Conard has very helpfully provided much background material concerning the finer points of Brecht's theatrical theories. As I read the quotations taken from sources other than the *Organon*, I must say I found myself saying, "Yes, yes, yet another point in support of my thesis." The fact that Prof. Conard and I could take pretty much the same data from Brecht and arrive at quite dissimilar conclusions seems to indicate that he and I are working with different implicit, mutually exclusive assumptions. Before going into the implications of that possibility, perhaps I should summarize my paper in as brief and concise a manner as possible. The basic idea, stripped of all examples and references, looks like this:

Brecht tried to create a theater which would change the behavior of its audience in a profound, long-term way. He wrote down the theory in some detail. In practice, though, his theater failed to accomplish the revolutionary goal he had set for it. We have an example today of a theatrical situation, the rock concert, which seems to be producing (or at the very least, reenforcing) certain behavioral changes in its audience not unlike those desired by Brecht. In fact, it turns out that the rock concert uses many of the very methods which Brecht recommended; because of the advance of technology and the higher level of affluence, certain of the methods appear in a somewhat different form from that seen in Brecht's theater. Finally, the rock concert is succeeding where Brecht's theater failed.

It seems to me that the crucial point here is that Brecht's theater failed to accomplish the stated aims of its founder, while the rock concert is in various ways associated with the development of a highly critical attitude toward society on the part of a sizable segment of the younger population. Near the end of his paper, Prof. Conard states that he can find no evidence of such a critical attitude; I would suggest that there is a real danger here of falling into a gratuitous dismissal of the behavior of the present student generation as being "just another passing phase." I feel that there is also a danger of delimiting Brecht in a way which hardly does justice to the breadth of his ideas and to the sensitivity of his comprehension of the nature of the theater.

First of all, it is essential to make explicitly clear the fact that rock is sufficiently complex that it exhibits the very wide range in quality which one finds in any much-practiced art form. When Prof. Conard uses the word "revivalistic" we all know what sort of rock concert he has in mind. Certainly, much rock is, as Prof. Conard has it,

“a primitive, revivalistic music of worship.” (It is, by the way, I think quite erroneous to dismiss such music out of hand – but to go into the reasons here would lead us far afield.) At the same place, Prof. Conard goes on to say, “It appeals to the elemental make-up of man, not to his refined, cultivated sentiments, nor least of all to his *ratio*.” Well, of course the standard counter-culture response to such a statement is, “But look where our refined, cultivated sentiments and our ratio have got us to planetarily.” Leaving that response aside for now, two other responses seem appropriate: 1. I rather suspect that Brecht would have been horrified to have been told that his theater appealed to our refined, cultivated sentiments. 2. The appeal to reason is of course something else and brings us to the heart of the disagreement between Prof. Conard and myself. Apparently because rock and the rock concert do not appeal to one’s rationality in an immediately recognizable, logical manner, he concludes that its appeal is basically emotional and irrational. In contrast, I am in agreement with McLuhan’s idea that we have created a generation whose perceptual processes, modes of consciousness, and resulting behavior are so different from that of preceding generations that to apply old criteria in an undiluted form only further compounds the confusion already existing between the old culture and the new.

Thomas Hanna, in his recently published book, *Bodies in Revolt* (which, by the way, is the best linear analytical description of the new culture I have found), baptizes the counterculture, naming it the somatic culture. Very briefly, Hanna sees in the somatic culture a widespread attempt to overcome the dualism which has up to now largely shaped western civilization, an attempt to deal no longer with the mind/body problem and to begin dealing with the mind/body problem. Rationality, the life of the mind, has, Hanna argues, enabled us to create a fairly secure place in a threatening and hostile environment. But, at the same time, it has delivered us to the very edge of the abyss of racial suicide and planetary sterilization. Indeed, it does seem that our situation is so precarious that we have to treat any argument based on the supposed sanctity of the *ratio* (to the exclusion of our other possible modes of perceptual behavior) with rather great caution, even where it issues from a mind as worthy of attention and study as that of Brecht. But, just as it is true that Brecht did not intend his theater to exist solely in the realm of pure intellectualization, so too is it true that the rock concert is far from being the animalistic, back-to-the-jungle phenomenon which Prof. Conard makes it out to be.

I would refer Prof. Conard, and the reader, to a few rock groups who are, to use Hanna’s terminology, somatic. That is to say, they do art in sophisticated ways, the close study of which will reward the student with a revealed complexity which will present a highly satisfying challenge to both the *ratio* and the body. Just to mention a few groups, and a few of their records: The Incredible String Band (*Wee Tam*; *The Big Huge*); Procol Harum (*A Salty Dog*); Neil Young (*After the Gold Rush*); The Thirteenth Floor Elevators (*Easter Everywhere*); Pearls before Swine (*America Underground*; *The Use of Ashes*); The Who (*Tommy*). (Empirical aside: I have seen all of these groups except Pearls before Swine in concert; the experience in each case bears very little resemblance to the kind described by Prof. Conard.)

The ideas which those groups (and many others) deal with are as wide-ranging as may be found in any school of poetry which the reader might care to mention. With these groups the words very often do function as I have suggested in my paper; Prof. Conard, on the other hand, seems to be talking about the words, music, and performances of the "Top-40" groups, those being the commercial, exploited by-products of the counter-culture. *Some* rock is simplistic, individualistic, etc.; but much rock is frighteningly objective and anti-individualistic (Dylan; the Jefferson Airplane). As I observed in my paper, one of the qualities of rock is the fact that it is *not* tied to any one ideology; if in my paper I have left the impression that rock was somehow a realization of Brecht's own peculiar ideological brew I am guilty of grossly misstating the case.

Finally, to dwell on the distinction between feeling and reason in the audience response to rock strikes me, I am afraid, as somewhat gratuitous. I cannot avoid the fact that many of my students are attempting to act out certain ideals to which we have for so long paid only lip-service. And the on-going – if you will – dialectic concerning the decisions which they have already made and are now in the process of making is very much evident both in recorded rock and in the institution of the rock concert. I cannot in good conscience write off their actions as mere emotionalism; I can only urge the curious reader to investigate for him/herself.

Of course Prof. Conard is right when he states that the rock concert is a religious experience, but not in the pejorative sense he intends. It is rather religious in the ancient sense of exploration of mystery undertaken out of an awareness of one's own beauty, one's own extraordinary potential – as well as that of others. I have in fact only recently completed a book, *The Rock Testament*, whose central thesis is precisely that.

Brecht was clearly trying to create a theater which would change human behavior in a predictable, life-affirming fashion. He did the best he could with the audience and the technology available to him. That he failed says, finally, more about the audience and the technology than about Brecht. That rock is succeeding says as much about rock as it does about the changed audience and the accelerated technology.

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