Brecht reads Bruegel: Verfremdung, Gestic Realism and the Second Phase of Brechtian Theory

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Abstract

Brecht’s interest in Bruegel is widely testified, but no one has asked quite what the playwright and theorist saw in the pictures of the Flemish master. This article tracks Brecht’s reception, from a putative first encounter in 1936 and through his own notes on the pictures, and demonstrates how closely Brecht’s reading of Bruegel may have entwined with his contemporary reflections on Verfremdung, Gestus and “cognitive realism,” as also with the theatre projects of the later exile period. There are particularly close relationships, for example, between Bruegel’s Dulle Griet and Mutter Courage and Der kaukasische Kreidekreis. Through the gaze of the modernist dramatist, Bruegel comes across as an artist of political cunning whose works demand a complex (even dialectic) cognitive process in order to read and decipher them. He is, like Brecht, both a satirist and a realist. His paintings are full of inversions designed to unsettle the onlooker’s conventional views, full of political hints and separate little narrative episodes to tease. What Brecht discovered in Bruegel and in the detail of Bruegel’s pictures was to have far-reaching consequences, both for the formulation of his theory and for the look and practice of his theatre. (TK)

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