

PETER WOLLEN: BERTOLT BRECHT

It is unclear when Peter Wollen wrote 'Brecht in LA'. Leslie Dick—who rediscovered the manuscript earlier this summer—dates it to the late 1990s, during his own Los Angeles years. Wollen had initially moved there in 1988 to take up a year-long position at UCLA, in what was then known as the department of Theatre, Film and Television. A temporary job soon became permanent, and what Wollen had expected to be a short stint evolved into the longest, and ultimately final stretch of his working life, brought to a close by illness in 2003. In historical terms, the relocation was part of a broader movement of the film studies avant-garde into the academy. Over the preceding quarter century—through pioneering work in auteurist criticism, semiotics, film theory, as well as the radical film movement—Wollen had been integral to its extra-mural development in the Anglophone world. Writing a few months before leaving London, he expressed some ambivalence about this process, registering a bitter irony: that at the moment the study of film was becoming institutionalized, cinema itself was passing into history, as the electronic age took hold. A decade later, he would be more hopeful, sensing that the art form was re-inventing itself.

*Throughout those previous decades, Brecht had been a key inspiration and intellectual resource to draw upon in developing a new cultural-political programme. His writings on epic theatre and the inadequacies of traditional forms of realism offered a template for Wollen's influential conception of 'counter-cinema', galvanizing the call for work that was analytic rather than descriptive, open rather than closed, oriented to the possible rather than the actual. Brecht was at hand for a further landmark intervention, the critique of a formalist cinema in favour of the expressly political work of Godard, Straub–Huillet and others. 'For Brecht, of course, the point of the Verfremdung-effect was not simply to break the spectator's involvement and empathy in order to draw attention to the artifice of art, an art-centred model, but in order to demonstrate the workings of society, a reality obscured by habitual norms of perception'. The pathbreaking films Wollen co-directed with Laura Mulvey—which began with *Penthesilea* (1974) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977)—also belong in the postscript to 'Brecht in LA' devoted to posthumous Brechtian film. As Wollen would reflect, Brecht's vision of aesthetic elements in tension 'was the example I followed in my own work'. In the emerging landscape of postmodernism, Brecht continued to offer an important precedent: the avant-garde needed to look to him along with Breton—revolutionary artists 'who strove to play a hegemonic role in the general culture of their time'.*

Migration crystallized Wollen's separation from the fray of earlier decades. Having been based mainly in London since the early 1960s, much of this time without steady employment, Los Angeles represented a significant shift, offering a slower pace and newfound stability. Wollen never learned to drive, however, as if anticipating imminent departure, and travelled constantly. Old friends passed through, to be taken on the various idiosyncratic tours of the city that he devised. LA was a place for research and teaching and, like Brecht, Wollen found it conducive to writing, opening a rich new phase in his work. In part this involved revisiting formative interests. 'Finally', Wollen had concluded his inaugural auteur study for NLR in 1964, 'despite all the speculation about Lang and Losey, it seems to me that Fuller is the film director whose methodology closest approaches Brecht's theatre'. Far from luring him to write for the studios—as was necessary for Brecht, to his constant frustration—proximity to Hollywood led Wollen to delve into its neglected histories, one of which, evident here, was the triumphs of the Popular Front generation before the onslaught of McCarthyism. The montage of connections it sketches—some fleeting, some profound—with Welles, Losey, Laughton, Isherwood and Auden, Lorre and Lang are an analogue of ones that Wollen himself had long sought, rendered in historiographic mode. Brecht and the cinema, auteurism and the avant-garde, aesthetics and radical politics, as well as one that Wollen feared being severed by the academicization of film—theory and practice.

PETER WOLLEN

BRECHT IN L.A.

A Few Footnotes

I

THE EXILE Bertolt Brecht arrived in Los Angeles on 21 July 1941, and was taken by friends to a small house in Hollywood found for him by the director William Dieterle and his wife. Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* had recently premiered in New York, on 1 May. On his previous short visit to the United States, in connection with the New York opening of his play *The Mother* in 1935, Brecht had met the composer Marc Blitzstein through Hanns Eisler, who was teaching at the New School for Social Research. Blitzstein had played one of his new songs to Brecht and Brecht had advised Blitzstein to go ahead and write a full-scale opera. The result was Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, which was dedicated to Brecht and directed on stage by Orson Welles. A decade later, in 1946, Brecht saw Welles's production of Cole Porter's *Around the World* in Boston and went backstage afterwards to announce that, 'This is the greatest thing I have seen in American theatre. This is wonderful. This is what theatre should be.' Subsequently Brecht tried to persuade Welles to direct his own new play, *Galileo*. Welles was keen to do it but negotiations broke down over the role of Mike Todd, with whom Welles had become involved as his producer. Instead, it was Joseph Losey who directed *Galileo*.

2

In 1935 Joseph Losey visited Finland (where he stayed with Hella Wuolijoki, who later collaborated with Brecht on *Herr Puntila and His*

Man Matti) before continuing on to Moscow. There he attended some of Eisenstein's classes and rehearsals directed by Vakhtangov, Meyerhold and Okhlopkov, whose techniques of staging Losey adapted for his own *Living Newspaper* productions after he returned to the United States. In Moscow, Losey also met Brecht. Within a year they were to cross paths again, this time in New York. After his return from Russia, Losey worked for John Houseman—later to become the producer of *Citizen Kane*—and the Federal Theatre Project in Harlem, where Welles later directed his notorious black *Macbeth*. From Harlem, Losey was summoned downtown to work with the new Living Newspaper theatre unit, which he inaugurated with his production of *Triple-A Plowed Under*, both avant-garde and politically committed. 'It was approaching a movie technique', Losey later recalled. 'Parts of the stage on different levels were picked up by spots—like film cuts . . . The music consisted of a large orchestra with only trombones and percussion; the rest were all fire sirens and sounds . . . It was a plastic set entirely moulded by light.' Attempts to ban the production failed and, after enduring riots and sabotage, it went forward under police protection. Brecht was excited by the Living Newspaper and discussed his theatrical ideas with Losey round at his apartment—or rather the apartment of his wife, the fashion designer Elizabeth Hawes, who also worked with the Living Newspaper as costume designer. In a later interview with the *New York Times*, Losey reminisced about the Living Newspaper, noting that, 'This was Brechtian theatre . . . but I didn't know it at the time. Brecht saw it and adored it. And in spite of his austerity in matters of colour, his preference for white light and neutral colours, he particularly appreciated the passage where I dressed my workers in fuchsia and rose.'

3

Joseph Losey had already met Charles Laughton; during a visit to London he struck up friendships with the impresario, Gilbert Miller, the actor Laughton and his wife, Elsa Lanchester. As a result he got the job as stage manager for *Payment Deferred*, when it transferred to New York later that year. This was a run-of-the-mill shocker in which Laughton gave, by all accounts, an extraordinary performance as a guilt-ridden murderer. It was just before the opening of this play that Laughton had confessed his homosexuality to a theatre friend who turned out to be a policeman in mufti and found himself arrested on a vice charge.

His relationship with Elsa Lanchester deteriorated for a while and she either became involved with Losey (his version) or might have become involved but didn't because he came down with the mumps (her version). At all events, he took her around Harlem jazz clubs and other murky dives—'very stuffy, dark basements, smoky and eerie and very sickly sweet'. Laughton first met Brecht some years later, in 1944, at Salka Viertel's house at 165 Mabery Road in Santa Monica. Salka Viertel was famous as the confidante and virtually the personal screenwriter of Greta Garbo, from *Queen Christina* on. She had begun her career as an actress in the old Hapsburg Empire and it was in Vienna that she met and married the stage director and poet, Berthold Viertel. Together they became leading lights in the Berlin theatre world, until in 1928 Berthold Viertel was invited to Hollywood by his old associate, F. W. Murnau, to write the screenplay for Murnau's second American film, *The Four Devils*. However, he soon returned to Europe, to Germany, then to England, where he made *Little Friend* for Alexander Korda, then back to Santa Monica. There is an unforgettable portrait of him as the director Friedrich Bergmann in Christopher Isherwood's novel, *Prater Violet*, Isherwood's best piece of writing, I think—'Bergmann jerked to his feet with startling suddenness, like Punch in a show. "A tragic Punch", I said to myself. I couldn't help smiling as we shook hands, because our introduction seemed so superfluous. There are meetings which are more like recognitions—this was one of them. Of course we knew each other. The name, the voice, the features were inessential. I knew that face. It was the face of a political situation, an epoch. The face of Central Europe.'

4

Isherwood and Auden were frequent guests at Salka Viertel's salon. Both had lived in Berlin and Brecht listed them both as prospective members of his projected 'Diderot Society', along with their collaborator Rupert Doone, his own collaborator Slatan Dudow (director of *Kuhle Wampe*), Eisenstein, Okhlopkov, Piscator and others who all ended up, like Brecht, living in LA—Hanns Eisler, Mordechai Gorelik, Jean Renoir. It was to be a corresponding society, through which workers in the performing arts could 'organize the mutual exchange of problems and experiences'. Interestingly, it brought together—or would have—figures from both theatre and cinema, seen as involved in a common project.

Elsewhere, Brecht linked Auden and Isherwood with Marc Blitzstein as exponents of the theatre that he most wanted to encourage. In America, however, their relationship became somewhat strained. Isherwood had become a Vedantist and Auden an Episcopalian. Nonetheless, Auden did work closely with Brecht on an adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi* for the producer-director Paul Czinner. It all ended badly, as did another collaboration with Czinner on a film story which, Brecht claimed, was stolen by Billy Wilder, thus giving rise to the poem, *Shame*:

When I was robbed in Los Angeles, the city
Of merchandisable dreams, I noticed
How I kept the theft, performed
By a refugee like me, a reader
Of all my poems,
Secret, as though I feared
My shame might become known,
Let's say, in the animal world.

The peak of Isherwood's screenwriting career was *Rage in Heaven*, an Ingrid Bergman vehicle, made by MGM. Soon afterwards, it was brought to a shuddering halt when his 'semi-pacifist' picture, *The Hour Before Dawn* was cancelled by Paramount in 1942. Long afterwards, at the beginning of the Sixties, Isherwood began a collaboration with the dying Charles Laughton, a play about Socrates, a project which echoes Brecht's collaboration with Laughton on *Galileo* in an uncanny way. Isherwood was one of the pall-bearers at Laughton's Forest Lawn funeral, along with Otto Preminger and Jean Renoir, with whom Laughton worked on *Advise and Consent* and *This Land Is Mine* respectively. Renoir was especially close to Laughton. Indeed, Laughton owned *The Judgment of Paris*, a vast painting by Renoir's father and served as a witness at Renoir's wedding.

5

Brecht chose to work with Laughton because he admired his style of acting, which he had seen exemplified in his British pictures of the 1930s. Their collaboration on *Galileo* was the high-point of his sojourn in the Southland. In the audience at the opening night in Los Angeles were Charles Chaplin, Gene Kelly, Billy Wilder, Lewis Milestone, Frank Lloyd Wright and Igor Stravinsky, as well as a number of great stars—Ingrid

Bergman, Anthony Quinn, Olivia de Havilland, John Garfield and several others. It was the chicken-eating sequence in Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* that had impressed Brecht—a film which came out in 1933, the year before his friend Léo Lania had told Brecht that there was a good chance of their selling a script to Korda, news which set them both scribbling away on a possible bio-pic based on the life of Ignaz Semmelweis, the Hungarian doctor who rid the world of puerperal fever. Lania had worked with Brecht shortly before as co-writer on the doomed first draft screenplay for the *Threepenny Opera* film. Nothing came of the Korda idea, of course, except, perhaps, the chance exposure that led Brecht to Laughton's door high on the Pacific Palisades. Laughton, however, was unhappy with the final outcome of their joint endeavours. To Eric Bentley, he wrote, 'I also feel that the actors as a whole failed this great man miserably in our production of *Galileo*. The demands he makes on actors are much the same as the demands that Shakespeare made on actors in the Elizabethan days. This is pretty strong and you could never print this, but I believe there is Shakespeare, and then Brecht. To this end I have started a Shakespearean group, training a bunch of American actors and actresses in the business of verse speaking and prose speaking . . . I am doing this solely with the aim of getting a company together that can play Brecht's plays. I want to see *Galileo* really performed, and *Circle of Chalk* and *Mother Courage*, and the rest of them. I am devoting all my spare energies to that end.' Sadly it never came to pass.

6

Acting was always the crux of theatrical performance for Brecht, as it was for film performance. There are very few words of praise from Brecht, however, for performances in Hollywood films. He admired Spencer Tracy for his work in Fred Zinnemann's 1944 anti-Nazi film, *The Seventh Cross*, and defended Tracy vigorously when Harold Clurman of the Group Theatre disagreed, telling him flatly, 'You lack sufficient understanding'. (Brecht's companion, the great actress Helene Weigel also appeared in this film—30 seconds, no words, her only professional job in Hollywood.) Clifford Odets also failed to grasp the point. Brecht noted that 'for him, a movie theatre is a kind of electric machine, and he registers the shocks. Impossible to explain that one can go to a movie theatre and curiously observe if any reflections of reality appear on the

screen, hidden beyond childish plots, concealed in stock characters.' It was Tracy, we might recall, who summed up his advice to other actors in one immortal maxim: 'just know your lines and don't bump into the furniture.' Some years later, Brecht wrote one of his lapidary essays on the subject of 'Building up a part: Laughton's *Galileo*'. In the course of describing how Laughton invented what we might call 'bits of business' with the aim of showing how people really behave towards each other, Brecht notes an idiosyncratic 'exercise' which Laughton devised for himself. Laughton hired a studio in order to record 'half a dozen different acts telling the story of the creation, in which he was an African planter telling the negroes how he had created the world, or an English butler ascribing it to His Lordship'. (In John Willett's translation). In essence, what Brecht approved of in Laughton's approach was the attention that he paid to the precise way in which people said or did something, heightened in performance in order to make a clearer demonstration of each 'gest', as Brecht would call it. Brecht wanted attention to detail, employed to get to the heart of a given situation, but also stylization, even hyperbole, employed to underline what was essential for the audience to grasp. In film terms, of course, hyperbole is a fluid concept, depending necessarily on the nature of the frame—whether in long shot or in close-up.

7

Among the exiles Brecht found in Hollywood was his old co-worker, Peter Lorre, who, in 1926, had played the principal role in *Mann ist Mann*, giving a performance that Brecht considered paradigmatic for the epic theatre. Brecht wrote a couple of 'film stories' for Lorre in the hope of finding work for himself, but nothing came of them. After ending his association with Brecht in 1929, Lorre had had to wait something over a year before Fritz Lang handed him the script of his film *M* in which Lorre was to star as a child-murderer, giving an unforgettable performance, one of the greatest in the history of film. After leaving Germany Lorre travelled, via England, to Los Angeles, where his career began to founder as he became type-cast as a grotesque in a series of trashy B pictures. In fact, the first Peter Lorre film released after Brecht's arrival was the one which marked a crucial turning-point in his career—John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*. This was to be followed within a few months by Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*. Lorre was devoted to Brecht, pushing his

projects with producers, advancing him money when there was urgent need for it. Then, when Lorre's new wave of success turned sour, Warner Brothers let his contract expire in 1946 and his image deteriorated again into that of the ludicrous clown, Brecht tried to raise his spirits by bringing him projects, assuring him of his greatness as an actor, re-building his morale as he had Laughton's. Lorre's greatest work was still to come. In 1949 he returned to Germany and eventually managed to direct his most extraordinary film *Der Verlorene*, released in 1951, in which he also starred, playing a mass murderer again, this time explicitly a Nazi. *Der Verlorene*, however, reflects the influence of Brecht more than that of Lang. Four years later, Charles Laughton made his solitary film, *Night of the Hunter*, equally extraordinary in conception and execution. It is hard to watch these films without thinking about the determining role played by Brecht in their directors' lives.

8

Peter Lorre had introduced Brecht to Fritz Lang in Munich in the early 1930s, but they had never become close. Nonetheless Lang started up a fund for the support of Brecht and his family and, together with his friend and neighbour, the writer Lion Feuchtwanger, swore an affidavit that made it possible for Brecht to enter the United States. Once Brecht had arrived, he hoped to interest Lang in a film story, using Lorre as an intermediary. In the end, however, it was Lang who apparently approached Brecht. His relationship with Twentieth Century Fox had run into the sand after *Moontide*, in 1942, and he was looking for a project he could take to an independent producer. Lang read in the newspaper that Heydrich, the Nazi governor of Czechoslovakia, had been assassinated and saw in the story the germ of a possible film. He approached Brecht, possibly through Feuchtwanger, and on 28 May 1942 Brecht noted in his journal,

with Lang. On the beach, thought about a hostage film (prompted by heydrich's execution in prague), there were two young people lying close together beside us under a big bath towel, the man on top of the woman at one point, with a child playing alongside, not far away stands a huge iron listening contraption with colossal wings which turn in an arc; a soldier sits behind it on a tractor seat, in shirtsleeves, but in front of one or two little buildings there is a sentry in full kit. huge petrol tankers glide silently down the asphalt coast road, and you can hear heavy gunfire beyond the bay.

On 5 June, he writes 'try to sketch a story SILENT CITY with lang, about prague, the gestapo, and the hostages, the whole thing is of course pure monte carlo.' By 14 September, he is writing that

work on our film (which I would like to call TRUST THE PEOPLE) is going better now that it is wexley and not lang with whom i am discussing how to convert the outline into a script [Wexley was a communist screenwriter Lang had brought in to write a proper English-language version of the screenplay]. above all i have got wexley to come home with me in the evenings and write a completely new, ideal script, which will later be shown to lang. i have naturally laid the main emphasis on the scenes with the people.

On 4 November, Brecht observes that 'for two weekly pay-cheques.. wexley has torn down what it took ten months to build. i had almost managed to eliminate the main idiocies from the story and now they are all back.' A year or so later, reflectively, he notes, 'recipe for success in writing for films: you have to write as well as you can, and that has to be bad enough.'

9

What are the lessons we can learn from Brecht's experience in Los Angeles? Brecht never had any illusions about Hollywood. Working there could provide him a financial 'breathing space'—otherwise there was nothing much good to say about it. Chaplin, of course, he revered (he was full of praise for *Monsieur Verdoux*) but Chaplin was a monument by now, with very little purchase on the reality of Hollywood. Welles and Losey he thought of as theatre people rather than film. Laughton and Lorre as actors, showing no sign, as yet, of becoming startlingly oddball directors. In his earlier years, Brecht had simultaneously idolized and distrusted a kind of mythic America—the America of skyscrapers, the Lindbergh flight, radio contact, the Wild West. At the same time, it was the land of the Chicago pit, the corner in wheat, the business tycoon. Los Angeles, however, presented him with another vision of America—consumerism, provincialism, dumbing-down, puritanism, the ideology of LA, 'this mausoleum of easy-going', 'the very centre of world drug-trafficking', where 'all they are concerned about is selling an evening's entertainment'; this 'tahiti in the form of a big city' with its 'eternal sunshine which desiccates the brain so that people end up only being able to write hollywood films etc etc'. The logic of Brecht's position, it

seems to me, would have taken him in search of the marginal and the excluded, the *film maudit*, the oddity that slipped through the net, the avant-garde film that never thought of compromise. Brecht himself said as much: 'Even an ivory tower is a better place to sit in nowadays than a Hollywood villa.'

A brief postscript. Brecht never developed any detailed programme for cinema as such, as he did of course for the theatre. The best clue to his thinking might have been the unfinished 'ideal-script' for *Hangmen Also Die*, but sadly it has not survived. It was not until the revival of the 1960s that a recognizably Brecht-driven concept of film first made its appearance—episodic, gestic, documentary, demonstrative, political—in the work of Kluge, Godard, Straub–Huillet and others.