

FROM BINARY TO RICH DIALECTICS:
THE REVOLT OF THE FISHERMEN AND MAUSER

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In memory of Mark Fisher

DIALECTICS: SOME INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Dialectical analysis appears to be a fringe concern in film studies. The intellectual landscape of the discipline is dominated by discussions of production practices, star studies, market analyses, and scientific neo-positivisms, which are hardly embedded in questions of social and political relevance. While these theoretical approaches take pride on their apolitical disposition — often disguised as objectivism — the situation is hardly different when it comes to scholarship concerned with political questions. For instance, although cultural studies have addressed important political issues with respect to identity politics, much of the work done in the field proceeds quite un-dialectically as if concepts of race, gender and sexuality operate independently of the logic of capital. This is not far from what Wendy Brown calls the liberal “culturalization of politics”,¹ which under the rubric of liberal “tolerance” provides explanations for diverse group realities and communities without acknowledging broader structural and historical factors, thus reducing complex issues to moralist platitudes. Obviously, there are still discussions of cinema and politics, but although much ink has been spilled on criticizing the so-called Grand Theory of the 1970s, symptomatic reading still dominates the political analyses of films and as David N. Rodowick suggests, Althusserian concepts are still ubiquitous “in almost every instance of contemporary theory.”² But for the most part, symptomatic reading sees films as illustrative and not as dynamic objects, since they are simply reduced to reflecting the historical, political, social contradictions of their times. Dialectical analysis was not in vogue even in the 1970s when discussions of cinema went hand in hand with politics. Criticism focused on films made “politically”, but rarely on films made “dialectically.” There were of course exceptions to the rule, and Roland

Barthes' scattered film writings are good examples of dialectical criticism. Nonetheless, Barthes — whose influence was significant in the late 1960s-early 1970s *Cahiers du cinéma* — was mainly concerned with demystifying the seemingly progressive content of popular films, so as to expose their conservative nature and ideological obviousness.³ He rarely employed dialectical readings of films — his writings on Eisenstein are notable exceptions — to uncover the richness and complexity of objects whose politics he approved of.

It is the crux of my argument that any discussion of cinema and politics cannot evade the question of dialectics. Dialectical analysis provides a means of considering whether films address political questions/issues as unities of contradictory opposites whose acknowledgement can lead to a change in our perception of reality; or whether they simply muse on political issues as a platform to propagate moralist assertions that see social phenomena as isolated objects divorced from their social/historical context. Identifying the conflicting theses and antitheses within a film can also enable us to read seemingly innocuous films against the grain, as evidenced in Mark Fischer's work.⁴ Moreover, it can enable a shift in the approach of film studies, from studying politically laden films under the rubric of ethics to studying their contradictions in ways that can reveal their complex social and political implications.⁵ Fredric Jameson has convincingly clarified the difference between dialectical and ethical thinking: whereas the former invites us to see reality as the unity of positives and negatives and think constructively so as to imagine alternatives, the latter is keen on having "the luxury" to criticize reality without bothering to imagine ways to overcome its impasses.⁶ In a way, Max Horkheimer's distinction between critical and traditional theory is relevant in clarifying Jameson's point. For Horkheimer traditional theory even in its critique of reality cannot go beyond the pragmatic acceptance of the broader reality principle, such as the division of labor, whereas critical theory is interested in imagining alternative possibilities.⁷ In this context, ethical criticism is grounded in the belief that small-scale changes can make a difference, whereas the dialectical one sees the ethical problems as a small part of a wider web of social interconnections.

Partly, one of the reasons why dialectical criticism is not fashionable has to do both with historical reasons, namely the defeat of socialism in the East, and of the labor movement in the West; it also relates to the present celebration of the commodity on the part of the academy that seems to be content with offering empirical verifications of the existing reality rather than critical interventions. Thus, to posit the significance of

dialectical analysis one needs to demonstrate the pertinence of dialectical criticism in the present circumstances. But such a task requires an acknowledgment of the different historical contexts and usages of the dialectic. Thus, the aim of this article is archaeological in the sense that I detect the shift from a binary dialectic as typified in the classic films of the Soviet era, to a rich one that remains committed to the view of the dialectic as negation and counter-perception without offering explicit interpretative schemata. I use as case studies Erwin Piscator's undeservedly overlooked film *The Revolt of the Fishermen* (1934) and Philippe Vincent's adaptation of Heiner Müller's *Mauser* (1999). Before moving to the case studies a series of definitions of dialectics are underway.

Etymologically, the noun dialectics derives from the Greek verb *διαλέγομαι*, which literally means "enter into conversation." Hegel, a key philosopher of the dialectic, defines the dialectic as a "negative activity" which intends to destabilize what seems fixed and unchangeable.⁸ This is founded on the proviso that one understands everything that seems concrete, as the outcome of a chain of contradictions that clash with each other. Contradiction is not to be confused as something exceptional and unique; contradiction is the precondition of life, since objects and concepts include in themselves antithetical forces, whose clash produces a "negative unity."⁹ In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel suggests that this concept of contradiction is an essential part of life; life can only be understood as a process, that is, as something that is not static and permanent, but as changeable reality "a living thing."¹⁰ Negation is, thus, an inherent quality of the dialectic. Dialectic is "a negative movement" that destabilizes certainties and ideas that one takes for granted.

Dialectics as negation is also the foundation of Marxist thinking. Unlike Hegel, Marx postulated that instead of starting with ideas to explain humans' practical activity, one needs to start with the study of social and material reality so as to understand ideas, ethics, and religion that appear to be independent from the social processes in which they develop. The core of Marxist dialectics is that by understanding the world as a unity of contradictory opposites one encounters its negation, the forces that oppose it.¹¹ As such, negation in Marxist dialectics is not just a theoretical concept but a practical one as well, since it does not simply make the subjects of history see the world anew and think about it in a speculative, philosophical way, but enables them to understand that they can change it. Marx, therefore, proposes a non-evolutionary understanding of reality and considers the world to be the product of a collision of theses and anti-theses. This in turn

implies that reality is historically particular and not fixed, but ephemeral. In other words, social beings can change the social and economic conditions of their time. Thus, theoretical activity devoted to the critique of the present social conditions goes hand in hand with social praxis devoted to overcoming the existing reality principle.

BINARY DIALECTICS: *THE REVOLT OF THE FISHERMEN*

Sergei Eisenstein is undoubtedly the godfather of dialectical cinema because he theoretically formulated the principles of dialectical cinematography and put them into practice. Eisenstein understood the function of the dialectic as a negative and constructive principle. The task of representation was to reveal the social causality behind the characters' actions. Reflecting on the use of *mise-en-scène*, he makes a distinction between the "representational" and the "figurational" plane. Both are necessary parts of any expressive *mise-en-scène*: the former refers to the characters' specific actions and the logic of their activities in particular situations. The representational plane is thus the "superficial level."¹² The figurational plane on the other hand, must, "communicate the inner dynamic of the characters' relationships."¹³ Simply stated, the representational plane stresses the relationships between the characters, whereas the figurational calls attention to the ways that the characters' relationships are not private ones but directly linked with social situations. This choice doubtlessly serves to shift the focus of attention from the abstract, universal individual, to a historical and social view of subjectivity that understands conflict to be located not within private, but within social and collective contexts. The collision created between the representational and the figurational plane has thus both aesthetic and political effects. The aesthetic contradiction produces pathos, which in turn generates knowledge effects. As Frank Kessler eloquently explains, the Soviet filmmaker intended to produce realism out of the collision of two extremes, that is, "formless naturalism" and "a graphically expressed idea",¹⁴ and I would like to add here that for Eisenstein realism refers to a practice that reveals the mass/collective aspect of social phenomena.

In this sense, Eisenstein's major intervention was the theorization of a dialectical cinema, which radically challenged the individualistic dramaturgy motivated by the nineteenth century theatrical traditions; he introduced a collective dramaturgy whose aim

was to reveal the ways characters were the product of processes taking place on a mass scale. Consequently, Eisenstein's starting point was reality and by this I do not imply the production of reality effects, but the view of reality as the conflict between individuals representing concrete material interests. All the same, Erwin Piscator, one of the fathers of political theater, proceeded to challenge the boundaries between art and life, by using multiple media in his theater productions, such as revolving stages, puppets, cartoons, and film projections. Like Eisenstein, Piscator's aim was the creation of a collective dramaturgy that placed emphasis on social phenomena rather than private conflicts/affairs. He named his theatre epic, and his understanding of the term corresponds with Hegel's definition of epic poetry. For Hegel, in epic poetry character does not occupy a central role; epic poetry is not based upon dramatic action, but on external "events" and circumstances that reveal something about the reality of the nation and not about the characters (he saw epic poetry as a national art form dealing with the historical complexities of the nation). In this sense, epic poetry privileges the presentation of circumstances rather than individualistic stories. As he says,

For, in epic, character and external necessity stand alongside one another with equal strength, and for this reason the epic individual can seem to yield to external circumstances without detriment to his poetic individuality. His action may seem to be the result of circumstances and these therefore appear as dominant, whereas in drama it is exclusively the individual character who produces results.¹⁵

Along similar lines, Piscator aimed for grandiose theatrical productions that privileged external historical/social events, typicality and collectivity at the expense of canonical dramatic action. His ultimate motto was "less art, more politics."¹⁶ He used giant screens and blackboards as a means of reportage that connected the stage reality with the social one and all this was put to use to foreground a materialist understanding of social phenomena. Commenting on the experimental aspect of his work he stated that his aim was not the mere production of formalist trickeries, but the uncovering of "the link between events on the stage and active forces in history."¹⁷ Piscator's politicized dramaturgy was a product of his disillusionment with the brutality he experienced as a World War I soldier, as well as his politicization following the German revolution of 1918-19. He reacted towards the dominant expressionist dramatic tendencies of the time,

which he dismissively called “the *O-Mensch* (oh-man) dramatists”.¹⁸ This expressionist drama emphasized individualism and reduced complex social phenomena to questions of fate. He criticized dramatists such as Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller arguing that they preached an abstract call for universal brotherhood, and reacted to the war and the ensuing social uncertainty in an idealist way that failed to identify the causes behind the historical events. Yet, Piscator was not a de facto critic of Expressionism. He acknowledged many of the revolutionary stylistic developments brought about by the movement, but disagreed with its abstract individualism.

Piscator wanted to supply a remedy to this dramatic individualism by introducing a collective dramaturgy that did not present social reality as a matter of fate, but as the outcome of forces to be located outside the realms of the drama. His employment of film on stage served precisely this role, that is, to create a visible dialectic between the drama and the forces of history located in society. Commenting on his theatre production of *Hoppla wir Leben*, the renowned film critic/theorist, Béla Balázs, explained that the film images projected on stage aimed not to reproduce dramatic actions that could be presented via theatrical ways, but to capture segments of reality that urge the audience to identify its “meaning.”¹⁹ The dialectical conflict between stage and screen allows one to identify the deeper collective causes that can account for the social complexity of the dramatic events. Film for Piscator was a means of persuasion that could magnify situations so as to reveal their collective character. He further clarifies this in an essay written in 1929, where he defends film’s transition to sound. As he states,

The more universal a medium is, the more fantastical (in a film, a fly can be portrayed to be as large as an elephant, and similar effects are possible with sound). So much more can be said in a way that is more powerful, simple, illustrative, persuasive, and varied in terms of movement, color, magnification, and reduction.²⁰

While the industry used film to further its profits, a materialist employment of the medium could lead to the simultaneous production of agitative and knowledge effects: pathos and enlightenment. In line with the other key features of his collective dramaturgy, such as the *Sprechchöre* (the speaking chorus), and the elevation of the mass as the central character of the drama, his deployment of film aimed to overcome the dualism between inner (dramatic) and outer (social) reality.

Film Theory has not really identified the ways Piscator's theatre influenced cinema. One key exception is the major German film historian, Lotte H. Eisner, who has succinctly showed Piscator's influence on German Expressionist filmmakers including Fritz Lang. Eisner goes at great lengths to show how Piscator's collective dramaturgy, and his mass choruses were influential on Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), especially in its representation of the mass of workers and their stylized movements/gestures, which underlined industrial capitalism's production of a sense of impersonality that challenges the view of the individual as a private and self-determined persona. For Eisner, one of Piscator's major innovations, visualized in *Metropolis*, was the transformation of "the extras into architectural elements, which he then projected forward again in swift, preferably wedge-shaped movements, either singly or in groups."²¹ It is, thus, legitimate to argue that Piscator (like Eisenstein who moved from theater to film) was a multi-media theorist and practitioner whose materialist understanding of the world was the foundation of his artistic innovations.

Yet Piscator's privileging of collective dramaturgy and typicality is grounded upon a binary dialectic that reduces all social conflict to a class war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie of the time, something that might seem a bit oversimplistic in the present times, where, as according to Guy Standing, the class structure is much more fragmented.²² Standing, who is not a Marxist scholar, convincingly suggests that the class divisions go beyond the familiar binary bourgeoisie and proletariat. He identifies five class groups: the elite: a rich global minority that has a strong political influence; the salariat: a managerial class enjoying high salaries and benefits; the proficians: a well-paid group that tends to be on highly paid flexible contracts — e.g., accountants. Flexibility is something desired by the proficians, since it allows them to make use of their skills in various enterprises; the traditional working class, whose social networks of solidarity tend to disappear due to aggressive anti-union policies; and the precariat which works on zero-hour contracts and does not even enjoy the remaining forms of social protection. Standing's description makes plain that class antagonisms are still existent and is useful in making us understand the reasons why class fragmentations prohibit viable social solidarities and alliances that can productively counteract the existing social order. Contemporary cinema is not immune to this historical particularity as evidenced in numerous films (for instance the New Extremism in global cinema) whose political critique is restricted to the negation of the existing order.²³

Things were much different in the first decades of the twentieth century where the class structure allowed one to perceive class divisions in binary ways. A closer look at Piscator's sole filmmaking effort, *Vosstaniye Rybakov* (*The Revolt of the Fishermen*, 1934) can indicate this binary employment of the dialectic. Based on Anna Seghers' novel, the film tells the story of a group of fishermen working in Bredel's ships. They react against their exploitative working conditions and go on strike to ask for higher wages. The film registers the pressure faced by the workers during the strike, such as the collisions between strikers and strike-breakers; when Kedennek, the leader of the fishermen, is shot by the army, which sides with Bredel, a revolt erupts. The story concludes with the fishermen convincing other workers to join their struggle, and interestingly these workers' garments make them look more like members of the bourgeoisie. The film was made during Piscator's self-exile in the USSR following Hitler's ascension to power and one can interpret this alleged alliance between workers and the bourgeoisie as a call for a broader coalition against fascism.

Piscator's visual rhetoric follows his principles of epic dramaturgy and generalization. Indicative from this point of view is that 1200 extras were employed to perform, while the majority of the scenes were exterior ones and minimum work was done in the studio.²⁴ To this one should mention the addition of an invisible chorus commenting on the action, as well as the emphasis on the mass as the film's central character. Even the death of Kedennek, acts as a pretext for revealing the potential of a politically conscious collectivity. In other words, Piscator uses all these elements to increase the intensity of the political tensions and invite the audience to understand the historical contradictions of the time in terms of class-relations.

But to comprehend class relations, one needed to perceive the collective aspect of modern reality and this was articulated by Piscator in 1929 when he wrote that, "it is no longer the private, personal fate of the individual, but the times and the fate of the masses that are the heroic factors in the new drama."²⁵ The film's opening is a good example of a dialectical introduction to conflicting collectivities. Following a brief self-reflexive introduction to the actors and the characters, we get to see a series of visuals of recently caught fishes being skinned and cleaned. The succession of images is frenetic, accompanied by extra-diegetic music that adds a sense of pathos and intensifies the visual impact of the sequence. For the first minute we do not get to see any of the fishermen's faces and their labor appears impersonal and mechanized. The voice of an off-screen

supervisor urges them to work faster. Eventually, the camera captures close-ups of faces of various fishermen and crosscuts between them and the faces of their supervisors, who keep on commanding them to work harder. When one of the workers complains he is immediately rebuked and told that “we pay for hands not tongues.” In the visual that comes immediately after this one, a worker is shown cutting his hands while trying to follow the imposed working pace. Cut to another worker who asks: “Captain, what do you pay for an injured hand?.” The Captain responds: “we only pay for healthy hands.” This sequence introduces in an economical way the audience to the major dramatic conflict that preoccupies the film’s narrative. It sets in direct opposition antithetical social interests so as to question the timelessness of the particular social structure and show its potential for change. The mechanized and alienated labor presented in the film’s opening is immediately shown to be the unity of antithetical opposites, that is, the product of conflicting interests whose clash can initiate change.

Piscator’s employment of the dialectic here is in service of denaturalizing the social order and revealing its impermanence. To evoke the major Marxist theorist, Karl Korsch, we shift from what appears to be normal, “a static connection”, to a “dynamic” one. This in turn implies that there is a move from what initially appears to be a social contract, “a harmonious consensus” to “a dissensus.”²⁶ This is intricately achieved within four minutes of screen time. Notably, the *mise-en-scène* has an expressionist edge that aims to render the dialectical conflicts comprehensible but also to impart a thrilling atmosphere that creates a sense of urgency and intensifies the binary contradictions.

This occurs throughout the film. Picture for example, a sequence focusing on the tensions between the striking fishermen of Santa Barbara and the strike-breakers coming from the village of Saint Sebastian. During the annual St Sebastian festival, the fishermen from Santa Barbara enter the festivities to persuade the strike-breakers to join them. The camera continuously crosscuts between the festivities and the oppositions amongst the strikers and the strike-breakers. Prominent in the sequence is a carousel accompanied by fairground music, which creates uncanny effects à la Hitchcock. Piscator privileges these visual materials that allude to the origins of cinema in public spectacles, such as fairgrounds and amusement parks, and when he crosscuts to the workers’ disputes this montage arrangement produces both sensual and pedagogical effects. The rapid montage sequences present segments from the workers’ interactions, a sex-worker’s attempts to

solicit clients, apolitical fishermen getting drunk in the pub and the fragmented dialogues that communicate the mistrust between the strikers and the strike-breakers.

These segments serve simultaneously a narrative and commentative function and the constant intercutting between the stimulating visuals of the fairground and the workers' conflicts creates a sense of cinematic excess, which produces hyperbolic visuals that skip dramatic verisimilitude. Here one can see clearly Piscator's dalliance with Expressionism and the ways he prioritizes mood and "atmospheric tension"²⁷ – a fundamental element in Expressionist theatre and cinema. This excess produces pathos and adds a thrilling dimension to the narrative rendering it enjoyable and suspenseful. But this emphasis on mood and atmosphere acts as a dialectical commentary and corresponds with what Jacques Aumont calls "*film de montage*", that is "a film, or a piece of film made up of shots which are not linked by narrative logic, but whose aim is to suggest, describe or comment upon".²⁸ For Aumont, this use of montage is applicable to numerous narrative films devoted to commenting on ideas that exceed the film's diegesis. Aumont mainly refers to French filmmakers such as Alain Resnais, but he makes a crucial distinction between montage used simply to serve narrative continuity (as in Hollywood) and one that creates constructive discontinuities to generate ideas. Certainly, Eisenstein is an obvious example given his famous distinction between montage used mainly for rhythmic purposes and montage devoted to the production of ideas.²⁹

Eventually, this passage from the film culminates in a sequence in which the arguments of the strikers are counteracted by the ones of the strikebreakers. Again the group formations throughout the sequence are evocative of experiments initiated by Piscator in the theatre — the Piscatorian "*Ballung* (agglomeration of the human figures)" and the speaking choruses (*Sprechchöre*) that make the mass appear as a solid collective subject —, which had a tremendous influence on German Expressionist cinema.³⁰ Similar formal devices originating from the theatre were also standard in Soviet cinema, which drew on Vsevolod Meyerhold's stylized anti-naturalism and experimented with group formations and gestural acting concerned with the production of rhythmical associations, which aimed to produce concrete dialectical conflicts. Picture for instance this sequence in *The Revolt of the Fishermen*. One of the ringleaders of the strikers begs the other fishermen to join the strike. Cut to a strike-breaker who explains that they need to feed their families. Another cut to a striker who accuses them of treason. These cuts to and forth continue and every time an argument is pitted against a counterargument, the camera captures a

different member of each group that voices their collective concerns. Here the binary dialectic is used to demonstrate the frictions within the workers. We encounter an analogous situation later on, when Kedennek challenges the strike-breakers and is ultimately shot by the army. Kedennek's death becomes the narrative ploy that makes the workers overcome their divisions. In the long run, the workers become one collective body opposed against the army and the employers. Class divisions become the key categories that exceed individuality and this aspect of Piscator's work is symptomatic of the historical contradictions of his time that demanded the flattening of other complex differences and contradictions in light of his commitment to anti-fascist activism.³¹

It is therefore not much of a stress to say that Piscator's dialectical approach to filming is structured around the formation of cohesive collectives that counteract each other. The first collision within the film's narrative is between fishermen and employers; followed by the conflict amongst the fishermen themselves. Finally, Kedennek's death leads to the unification of the workers and their coalition against the employers and the army. Not unlike Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, it is an emotional situation in the narrative that enables the workers to unify. This occurs during Kedennek's funeral when a priest accuses the dead rebel of having fought against the established order of God and the state. While the priest continues his speech praising the virtues of the army, an associative montage parallels another scene showing a group of soldiers raping a woman for refusing to reveal the whereabouts of a striker. Ultimately, the priest's speech is violently interrupted by a woman who grabs the Bible from his hands and tears it apart. This signals the beginning of the fishermen's rebellion captured via a series of high angle shots coupled with rapid close-ups showing the two collectives fighting against each other. As one East-German critic commented, these mass sequences rely on symbolic visuals that create an expressionist atmosphere, which becomes meaningful rather than abstract. He attributes this to Piscator's commitment to "the technique of illumination" according to which formal experimentation is not an end in itself but a method committed to the communication of knowledge.³²

Then again, Piscator's dialectical methodology offers a somehow mechanistic understanding both of the historical process as well as of cinema's ability to employ the dialectical method productively. The reduction of history to a binary conflict between cohesive collectives does not take into account numerous contradictions that create fractions within what one would initially consider allying groups and interests. For all its

oversimplifications, the power of Piscator's dialectical cinematography derives from its ability to be comprehensible by combining stimulating mise-en-scène with clarity of information. Thus, the fundamental advantage of this method is the capacity to use cinema as a means of creating a political public sphere something that dismally sounds far too remote from the present.

RICH DIALECTICS: *MAUSER*

Culture comes only from the losers and from defeat. That produces culture.

The victors have never produced culture.

— Heiner Müller

David Harvey has famously suggested that “contradictions have the nasty habit of not being resolved but merely moved around.”³³ This is precisely the problem with a mechanistic employment of the dialectic, as it is the case in Piscator's film, in the sense that it does not acknowledge the historically complex issues that defy facile determinisms. Hindsight allows us to understand this by looking at the contradictions between capital and labor in the twentieth and early twenty-first century that can be schematically described as follows: the social crisis following World War I leads to a growing dissatisfaction with the established system. Capitalism is challenged by the growing popularity of Socialism and the organized labor movement; these are in turn counteracted by the rise of fascism and World War II. Far from resolving any structural contradictions, the end of the war deepens them leading to the Cold War and the division of the world in two opposing camps. The collapse of the socialist alternative in 1989 puts an end to the Cold War but the unrivalled establishment of market capitalism produces policies that both increase world debt and social divisions leading to the economic crisis of 2007. The structural readjustments and bank bail-outs avert temporarily economic collapse but increase social inequality and dissatisfaction manifested in the rise of the extreme right and nationalism across the globe. Thus, the central contradiction between capital and labor persists and keeps on generating other dialectical relationships and contradictions that resist any sense of historical teleology and closure.

As Alexander Kluge and Oscar Negt have aptly explained, history does not advance horizontally, but in curves. When looking at historical relations, the dialectic is not linear, but “damaged” and makes the task of resolving the contradictions impossible.³⁴ Kluge and Negt emphasize how historical relations point to collectives rather than individual subjects, but even so these collectives are far from being unified and it is this aspect of history that challenges the reduction of the dialectic to clear-cut binaries. Philippe Vincent’s adaptation of Heiner Müller’s *Mauser* is a good example of a film pointing to rich dialectics that go beyond the paradigm of the Soviet dialectical cinema. Before moving to the film itself a brief discussion of the play and Müller’s aesthetic strategy is necessary.

Written in 1970, *Mauser* is a critique of Brecht’s *Lehrstück, Die Maßnahme (Measures Taken)*; Brecht’s play contended that the individual should subordinate itself to the mass so as to facilitate the Communist revolutionary project that would lead to a new society. In the play, a group of communist agitators represent in front of a Party chorus the killing of their young comrade, an agitator committed to the revolutionary project whose emotional responses to critical situations prevented him from promoting the Party’s practical interests. Having become a liability to the Party, his comrades decide to execute him and he acquiesces to his death; the implication is that any revolutionary change presupposes the renunciation of individuality in aid of the collective project of Communism. Brecht’s play radically departs from the dramatic traditions of individualism and the collective is at the center of the action. The contradictions between individual consciousness and the collective project of Communism are presented dialectically placing argument against counterargument; in the end the dialectical complexity seems to be resolved through the elimination of individuality by the organized mass. Müller’s play takes the *Lehrstück* model as its starting point and similarly subscribes to a collective dramaturgy. The difference is that he deploys this model to explore how alienation and reification have become the norm in the post-revolutionary society. The contradiction between individual and collective consciousness is staged again and the play focuses on the liquidation of two communists, A and B, on account of their inability to promote the Party’s interests. Character A becomes consumed by his revolutionary labor and turns into a killing machine. His “labor” consumes him and turns him into an enemy of the revolution, while character B is liquidated for having refused to kill counter-revolutionary peasants.

Müller questions Brecht's rationalized justification of killing as a means of facilitating the Communist project and presents the pressing contradictions within a post-revolutionary society in which violence is not a means to changing the world, but has become routine and an end in itself serving an estranged Party structure. It is this reality that makes the contradiction between individual and collective consciousness resurface. As Benton Jay Komins explains, the play's emphasis on murder as alienated labor indicates "the revolutionary project's reification"³⁵ implied also by Müller in his notes to the text:

Here, death is a function of life understood as production, a job among others, organized by the collective and organizing the collective. SO THAT SOMETHING CAN COME SOMETHING MUST GO THE FIRST SHAPE OF HOPE IS FEAR THE FIRST MANIFESTATION OF THE NEW IS TERROR.³⁶

The play attends to the historical complexities of the GDR and the State Socialism of the time and ruminates on the conflict between the promises of the Communist project and its practical materialization. In this context, Müller's dialectic does not produce synthesis but shows how the socialist alternative has failed to harness the contradictions of history. Yet for all its productive critique, Müller's approach is decidedly dialectical as evidenced by his radical departure from dramatic individualism generated by his recourse to anonymous characters who stand for broader collective forces. Robert Buch has brilliantly captured the play's dialectical complexity and relevance to the present arguing that, it functions as "as an experiment and a sort of training for those committed to the socialist utopia, an opportunity to "work through," to embrace, and to brace themselves against, the inevitable fallout of violence."³⁷ I would also add that the Marxist understanding of history as the collision of collective interests is retained, but following Kluge's and Negt's abovementioned comment, the dialectic is "damaged" because it does not subscribe to historical linearity. As David Barnett explains, Müller was part of a post-Brechtian theater tradition in the GDR that embraced Brecht's critique of dramatic individualism and naïve representationalism, but was cautious at the same time of any facile deductions deriving from the canonical application of the Brechtian dialectic.³⁸ Instead, Müller's commitment to a rich dialectics that reveals how the nightmare of history has multiplied its contradictions without harnessing them is encapsulated in his following statement: "Marx

didn't devise a system, on the contrary, he worked on negation, on a critique of the existing state of affairs. Consequently, he was open to new realities in principle."³⁹ The binary conflict between capital and labor has given rise to various other conflicts within the very society that purports to have solved them. Yet labor relations figure importantly in the play given that A and B are both executed for not being able to successfully conduct the Party labor; the first one is consumed by his task and, as the Chorus tells him, "your hand became one with the revolver and you became one with the work", and B refuses to conduct the labor (read murder) ordered by the Party officials. Alienated labor is therefore not the sole "privilege" of capitalism and Müller's dialectical negation serves precisely the purpose of opening the dialectic to new possibilities.

Mauser is a convoluted text whose collective dramaturgy and dramatic openness make its staging a challenge. In the remainder of this section, I want to explore the ways Philippe Vincent has visualized the text's dialectical openness on screen. To begin with, it is important to note that the play itself has a cinematic quality and indeed scholars have paralleled the non-linear structure of Müller's writing, its problematization of individuality, and its employment of cinematic cutting, to audio-visual objects, such as films, advertisements and video-clips.⁴⁰ The film originates from a performance given by the Scènes Company in Vénissieux. The performance of the play was filmed in the spirit of live television broadcast so as to enable the audience to have a sort of participation analogous to the *Lehrstück* format of suspending the division between actors and spectators. Vincent explains that the principle of the film's shooting resembles that of a television broadcast where the viewers are in the viewpoint of the camera. To this one should add that the unity of the theatrical space and the black and white cinematography add a claustrophobic tension that influences the audience's reactions as captured within the film.⁴¹ Yet despite its origins in a theater production, the final result relies very much on a montage cinematic aesthetic. The camera fragments the diegetic space by a series of Dreyeresque close-ups that capture members of the Chorus and character A while delivering the lines. Furthermore, expressionistic shot transitions are created through the constant alteration between light and darkness, whereas different shots are superimposed upon each other placing the collective Chorus in opposition to character A. One of the film's most radical solutions is the representation of character B using the device of a film within a film, through a video-wall stage backdrop. A group of musicians are also part of the visible Chorus playing the organ, piano and saxophone and the combination of

images and sounds creates uncanny montage effects and adds a monotonic dimension both to the auditory track, but also to the performance of the actors reducing them to text-deliverers.

The film's fragmented narrative configurations along with Müller's convoluted text, which is devoid of dramaturgical coherence, radically question the notion of individuality and force us to think in terms of collectives. Yet unlike *The Revolt of the Fishermen*, the visualized collectives are far from being cohesive and this is made manifest through the film's formal complexity and style. The core Party Chorus consists of three women dressed uniformly, who take turns in enunciating/reading the Party lines, and seven female students, who at times repeat those Party lines as a song, while they also double or repeat A's lines and thus fragment the character. The *mise-en-scène* intentionally resembles a court and the audience's seats are circularly arranged making the spectators look as part of the broader Party apparatus. This choice transmits a sense of Orwellian surveillance.

In the film's opening we get to see the Chorus of the seven students entering and positioning themselves on the right side of the stage as if they are the court's jury. Then, each of the women that form the main Party Chorus enter, face A, and charge him with insubordination. This is repeated until each one of them is seated at the center of the stage. As A faces the Party functionaries the following *stichomythia* ensues:

A: I killed for the revolution.

CHORUS: Die for it.

A: I made a mistake.

CHORUS: You are the mistake.

A: I am human.

CHORUS: What is that?

In the course of this exchange, the camera cuts back and forth between the central *locus dramaticus* focusing on A and the Party functionaries, and the Chorus of the seven students who sing the charges pressed upon A. This is followed by a series of close-ups of each of the Chorus members while singing "knowing the daily bread of the revolution, in the city Vitebsk as in other cities, is the death of its enemies, knowing we must yet tear out the grass to keep it green."

These close-ups and the song interrupt the stichomythic exchange between A and the three core Party members. Interestingly, unlike the epic shots of the Soviet dialectical cinema that privilege a group cinematography of the heroic masses prefiguring optimistically the emergence of Socialism, here the fragmentation of the Chorus points to the very unresolved contradictions within the existing socialist states of the time. Thus, this resort to the close-up is not to be confused as a return to the narrative categories of individuality, given that the succession of the close-ups coupled with the recited texts/songs forcefully undermine the idea of subjectivity outside the collective. It is rather a fragmented visualization of the collective that points to its lack of cohesion, or to use a Marxist term its alienation, since the collective is merely reduced to the rigid repetition of Party dogmas.

Vincent's formal solutions to the screen adaptation of the play are in line with Müller's vision for a collective dramaturgy that confounds the individuality of the performers. As he says, "experiences can only be passed on collectively; training the (individual) faculty to gain experiences is one function of enactment."⁴² The film's formal features draw on the closed, or chamber drama aesthetic with the difference being that this spatial restriction does not operate as a means of emphasizing the reactions of the individuals within a historical backdrop; instead history takes center stage, since this restricted space develops into a site in which the actors become the mouthpieces of historical memory staging the collective experience of the failure of Socialism to turn into a tangible alternative that can overcome the contradictions between labor and capital. The reification of revolutionary labor is forcefully visualized in a passage when A faces B, the Party rebel who withdraws from his labor and reacts to the Party's command to murder some counter-revolutionary peasants. Through a combination of choreographic camera movements and stylized performances on the part of the Chorus, A is encircled by the Party members who urge him compellingly to kill the enemy of the Revolution. In the shot that comes immediately after this one, a video projection within the film captures B who explains his political disobedience. He refuses to kill the peasants because they are enemies of the revolution out of ignorance. Suddenly, a male Party member enters the stage, orders A to complete the task of killing B, the traitor of the revolutionary cause, and hands him a gun. A points the gun to the video-wall which screened B's disobedience; B offers a counterargument wondering what is the point of the Revolution when one has to kill those who are supposed to benefit from it. In the following sequence, A recalls on

how he went on a killing frenzy against the enemies of the Revolution. Importantly, the actor impersonating him points his gun towards the video-wall which screens his lines that are ultimately read mechanically by him:

One morning in the city Vitebsk
 With the voice of the Party in the sound of battle
 To dispense death to its enemies
 So that killing will cease,
 and I spoke the command
 On this morning as on the first morning
 DEATH TO THE ENEMIES OF THE REVOLUTION
 And dispensed death, but my voice
 Spoke the command like not my voice and my hand

The motif of reading the lines from the screen underlines the reification of revolutionary labor and the transformation of the Party “worker” to a killing appendage. Killing becomes production for the sake of production and the reified revolutionary project alienates those who were supposed to benefit from the Communism. The paradox of production as an end in itself recalls Marx’s critique of capitalism in *Grundrisse*, where he argues that one of the causes of alienation is that production exists for its own sake without being in service of the social beings from which it emanates.⁴³ *Mauser’s* parallel of revolutionary murder as alienated labor astutely evokes Socialism’s failure to overcome the contradictions of capitalism.

The dialectic here does not proceed linearly — as in *The Revolt of the Fishermen* — aiming to complete the Enlightenment project; it is rather a rich dialectic that forces us to rethink past, present, and future at once and seek solutions to the present historical impasse. Müller has repeatedly explained that his aim is to use metaphors that bring the historical past, present, and future together so as to produce a conversation between different historical periods and the ways they relate to each other.⁴⁴ This Benjaminian, or “damaged” dialectic as per Kluge and Negt is heightened by Müller’s radical diminishing of individuality. As mentioned earlier, for Kluge and Negt, historical relations cannot be understood in terms of subjects but as collective experiences. Whereas the ancient Greek model of the dialectic was the outcome of dialogic exchanges, “grammatical dialectic”, the

dialectics of history is much more complex. Kluge's and Negt's application of the term grammatical dialectic suggests that the dialectical method's origins in ancient Greece had the form of dialogical exchanges that produced a sense of linearity that is hard to apply to complex historical relations, whose chief characteristic is non-linearity and the production of multifaceted rather than binary relationships.

Its application to historical relations, which are not based on two individuals talking, renders it ungrammatical. Like celestial bodies, dialectical gravitational relations reciprocally warp one another. This is how dents and "damaged" dialectics develop. It is particularly difficult to straighten out.⁴⁵

It merits to be noted that for Kluge and Negt, this form of damaged/multidimensional dialectics is not at odds with the spirit of Marxism. Unlike Hegel's binary dialectics e.g. master/servant, Kluge and Negt suggest that Marxist dialectics is intricate and "multipolar" given that it relies on "unsymmetrical" opposites (e.g., relations of production, distribution and consumption) that do not necessarily form an organic whole; at times they run incessantly counter to each other, "blocking points of contact without ever thereby arresting the dialectical movement between them."⁴⁶

In Müller's work, who was also a regular interlocutor of Kluge, this "damaged" dialectics differentiates his collective dramaturgy from the epic dramaturgy of Piscator and the Soviets. For as I discussed in the previous section, Piscator's dramaturgical recourse to cohesive collectives setting argument against counter-argument is still in line with the dialogic principle of the dialectic, the difference being that the masses have replaced the private subjects. In Müller's post-apocalyptic landscape, where the dream of Socialism has not managed to complete its historical mission, the dialectic proceeds in such a way that dramatic dialogue (grammatical dialectic) is almost impossible as made manifest in Vincent's adaptation, in which the characters are turned to mouthpieces of collective experiences. This is precisely the reason why characters are nameless trying to make sense of the historical processes that have thrown past certainties into doubt.

Mauser is an exemplar of a hybrid film or as André Bazin would call it "impure cinema", namely a type of cinema that consciously foregrounds its borrowings from other artistic media such as literature and film.⁴⁷ Contra notions of cinematic "purity", Bazin

suggested that cinema's maturity as an institution leads it to a more self-conscious borrowing from other art forms and numerous cinematic innovations are to be attributed to this intermedial conversation. Commenting on Bazin's point, Philip Rosen appositely remarks that the upshot of this point is that "the non-cinematic" is an important part of film history and aesthetics.⁴⁸ Yet this hybridization as evidenced in such a politically loaded film as *Mauser*, forces us also to address questions of cinema and politics. In a historical period that cinema has migrated to mobile phone devices, laptops, tablets, and private home theaters, the question that arises is whether the medium has still the capacity to build an oppositional public sphere given that it has stopped being considered a collective event, that is, a group of people sharing an experience in a dark theatre.⁴⁹ Film experience has turned to a privatized one, since the past spectator of the darkened theatre, who was part of an anonymous collective, has been replaced by the screen user, who streams or downloads films, shifting continually from screens that produce different types of stimuli and prohibit spectatorial concentration. This privatization of experience runs the risk of de-radicalizing even the most radical objects, given that political aesthetics seems eminently pointless without a collective (rather than an atomized) public sphere that can initiate collective responses, arguments and most importantly social conflicts. In Eisenstein's years, even the attempts to distribute *Potemkin* in Western Europe were already political events that managed to establish oppositional communities, something entirely irrelevant in the present media landscape. Vincent's solution is to consciously incorporate the public (the theatre spectators) in his screen adaptation of *Mauser* and obviously a great hindrance is the fact that the film spectator witnesses a collective experience from which she is absent. For all its contradictions, Vincent's choice is a testament to the need to explore new ways, not only of thinking about the world dialectically, but also of engaging a public in these dialectical meditations. It is thus not surprising that *Mauser's* aesthetic has curious echoes of the early cinematic experience not only in terms of its undramatic montage aesthetic, which aligns a series of independent tableaux that have the form of early cinema attractions, but also as regards its attempt to redeem the theatrical origins of the medium, its capacity to develop a space where the collectives merge and debate. What an ironic reversal: Piscator thought that theater could be politicized and rejuvenated by resorting to the spectacular effects of the cinema, while presently cinema's re-politicization is contingent on its reclaiming of the theatrical, and by

the theatrical, I mean the foundational aspect of the theatre, which is its capacity to actualize a community.

The metaphor of the theater as a locus where unexpected and non-unitary formations are being established is a productive way of clarifying this. Alain Badiou, for instance, in his *Inaesthetics* muses on the theater's capacity to produce a collective experience, whose character can be political so long as it does not address a homogeneous public. The core of his argument is that the theater public can only have a connection to society when it replicates the divisions, inconsistencies and, chances, which characterize the social sphere. As he says, "Only a generic public. a chance public. is worth anything at all."⁵⁰ The "chance public" defended by Badiou is a public whose divisions and potential clashes can produce a threat to the established reality principle. Yet the public, is a sine-qua-non of any aesthetic desire to address issues on a collective scale. After all, cinema in its early days was considered a threat to the social order, precisely because of its ability to bring people from antithetical social strata, who would rarely encounter each other in a closed space.

By way of conclusion, Piscator's employment of the binary dialectics, which draws on the Soviet cinema tradition, was a historically relevant way of identifying the collective and mass aspect of complex social phenomena. Yet it has very little connection with the present, precisely because its core interest was the formation of a homogeneous public, whose ability to learn to think dialectically would allow it to construct a concrete community that would hopefully counteract the existing order. Yet, in the present globalized environment where the fragmentation of social experience has taken center stage and the formation of coherent social collectives is hindered by complex class subdivisions, and labor insecurity, the ability to think dialectically is a necessary step in cinema's attempt to address the political. Then again, following Vincent's, adaptation of Müller's text, this requires an emphasis on the multidimensional aspects of the dialectic and the historical and social relations that fail to produce harmonious wholes. This is precisely what Vincent's film aspires to achieve by focusing on all these historical contradictions that have obfuscated past historical certainties and utopias. The question that remains is whether this type of dialectical cinema can have practical utility, that is, tangible political effects. I would venture to assert that the use value of such a cinema lies in its ability to instigate debate, a type of debate that might help us expose the

contradictions of the present and prohibit the reduction of the cinematic experience to another harmless, individualized visual consumption.

1. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 17.

2. D. N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 2014), 245.

3. See for example Barthes' review of Elia Kazan's *On The Waterfront*, Philip Watts, Roland Barthes' *Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 14-5. Even Alain Badiou in his early attempts on film criticism upheld a similar method in his outright panning of what he called "revisionist films" like Costas Gavras' *Z* (1969). See Alain Badiou, *Cinema* trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge: Polity: 2013), 10-11.

4. See Mark Fischer's astute discussion of Mike Judge's *Office Space* (1999) in his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There no Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 39-40.

5. See for example Lúcia Nagib's book *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (New York: Continuum, 2011). A fascinating book in some respects that is sadly apolitical in its discussion of some key films from the World Cinema canon, downplaying questions of politics, and history in favour of ethics.

6. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 421.

7. See Tyrus Miller, *Modernism and the Frankfurt School* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 7-9.

8. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. and ed. by George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 35.

9. *Ibid.*, 384.

10. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 107.

11. Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, trans. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 458.

12. Sergei Eisenstein, *Mise en Jeu and Mise en Geste* (Montréal: Caboose, 2014), 27.

13. *Ibid.*, 27.

14. Frank Kessler, *Mise en Scène* (Montréal: Caboose, 2014), 41.

15. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Notes on Fine Art Vol. 2*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1935] 1975), 1081.

16. Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre* trans. Hugh Rorrison (London: Methuen, 1980), 25.

17. *Ibid.*, 93.

18. *Ibid.*, 22.

19. Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, ed. Erica Carter, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 144.

20. Erwin Piscator, "Sound Film Friend and Foe", in *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory 1907-1933*, ed. Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan (Oakland: California University Press, 2016), 567-9, here 569.

21. Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 224.

22. Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 7-8.

23. *Ibid.*, 8.

24. See John Willett, *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator: Half a Century of Politics in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1978), 129.

25. Cited in Judith Malina, *The Piscator Notebook* (London, New York: Routledge, 1012), 9.

26. Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2016), 135.

27. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 51.

28. Jacques Aumont, *Montage* (Montréal: Caboose, 2013), 44.

29. See Eisenstein, *Film Form Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1977), 49. It needs to be stressed that Piscator was heavily influenced by Eisenstein. John Willett reports that between 1926-7 he was involved in getting a German distribution of *Bronenosets Potyomkin* (*Battleship Potemkin*, 1925). All the same, C.D. Innes identifies Potemkin's impact in many of Piscator's theater productions. Both scholars, however, acknowledge that he had numerous reservations against Eisenstein. He thought that he was more committed to enthusing the audience rather than to clarity. See *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator*, 57, 186; see Piscator, *Political Theatre: The Development of Modern German Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 30, 187.

30. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 223.
31. In an illuminating passage, Fredric Jameson explains how class relations are “binary ones” and tend to understand other social relationships in binary terms. See, Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 395.
32. Anon, “Der Aufstand der Fischer”, *Film-Blätter* 63, Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR, 36. Accessed through the Brecht Archiv, Berlin.
33. David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2014), 19-20.
34. Alexander Kluge and Oscar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, trans. Richard Langston et al. (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 431.
35. Benton Jay Komins, “Rewriting, Violence, and Theater: Bertolt Brecht’s *The Measures Taken* and Heiner Müller’s *Mauser*”, *The Comparatist* 26 (2002), 99-119, here 112.
36. Heiner Müller, *Mauser*, trans. Helen Fehervary and Marc D. Silberman, *New German Critique* 8 (1976), 122-149, here 149. Capitals in the original.
37. Robert Buch, *The Pathos of the Real: On the Aesthetics of Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 137.
38. David Barnett, “Dialectics and the Brechtian Tradition”, *Performance Research* 21:3 (2016), 6-15, here 14.
39. *Ibid.*, 14.
40. Joachim Fiebach, “Resisting Simulation: Heiner Müller’s Paradoxical Approach to Theater and Audiovisual Media since the 1970s”, *New German Critique* 73 (1998), 81-94, here 86.
41. Philippe Vincent, “Über *Mauser*”, *Brecht Plus Minus Film* ed. Thomas Martin and Erdmut Wizisla (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2003), 156-158, here 157.
42. Müller, *Mauser*, 149.
43. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 149.
44. See Alexander Kluge and Heiner Müller, “Heiner Müller on Legal Questions”, <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/conversations/mueller/film/111/transcript>, last accessed 12 Oct. 2016.
45. Kluge and Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, 431.
46. *Ibid.*, 260.
47. See André Bazin, “In Defence of Mixed Cinema”, in *What is Cinema? I*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California University Press, 1971), 53-75.
48. Philip Rosen, “From Impurity to Historicity”, in *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film* ed. Anne Jerslev and Lucia Nagib (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 3-20, here 11.
49. For more on this see Francesco Casetti’s brilliant book, *The Lumière Galaxy Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
50. Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 74.