

# **“To be or not to be”: The Terror (Un-)Masked and the Dialectics of Form and Content in Bertolt Brecht’s *The Measures Taken***

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## **Abstract**

The dramatic form of Bertolt Brecht’s *The Measures Taken* as a learning play and its thematic content of advocating the absolute priority of the collective at the price of the individual have long received much attention from critics, but the dialectical relationship between its form and content, between its extensive use of mask and the agitators’ bodily enactment, still remains unexplored. It is thus the purpose of this paper to offer a detailed account of such a dialectical relation between the two in the light of Hegelian assertion that in works of art these seeming extremes have their absolute correlation and reverse into one another. In *The Measures Taken* as a whole, the thematic content, the ABC of Communism, is furiously called into question and finally subverted by its dramatic form, which turns out to be the “precipitated content” of the play proper. The ideological demand of the individual’s sacrifice, like the erasure of the body by the mask, naturally evokes a perturbed feeling of uncanniness and terror. Put in the light of Hegelian “reconciliation,” we may well infer that, if the mask’s concealing the body is a negation and denial of the individual in favour of the collective, then the Brechtian *Gestus* of the Young Comrade’s death in the form of the agitator-actor’s tearing off the mask and then becoming a voice without the body certainly manifests itself as a negation of negation, which, according to Žižek, would affirm the differences between rather than the identity of the mask and the body. What is to be learned, so to speak, is neither the Young Comrade’s revolutionary passion to sacrifice himself nor the priority of “the teachings of the classics,” but the four agitator-actors’ aloofness in their role-playing, the indispensable necessity of the mask for the sake of bodily survival both onstage and offstage.

**Keywords:** Brecht, Žižek, *The Measures Taken*, dialectics, form and content, body, mask, terror, role-playing

We only attain the level of proper dialectical analysis of a form when we conceive a certain formal procedure not as expressing a certain aspect of the (narrative) content, but as marking or signalling that part of the content is excluded from the explicit narrative form, so that – and herein resides the proper theoretical point – if we want to reconstruct “all” of the narrative content, we must reach beyond the explicit narrative content as such and include those formal features which act as a stand-in for the “repressed” aspect of the content. (Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 306)

The point of great art is to reveal existence – including its uncanniness – and ultimately it does this through revealing the limits of art to reveal. Art should reveal that death is more than any artist can reveal through performing. (Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity* 268)

## I. Introduction

In *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Slavoj Žižek’s eloquent exploration of the indispensability and significance of Hegelian “reconciliation” or “negation of the negation” in the process of history is quite inspiring, but his seemingly casual reference to Bertolt Brecht’s *The Measures Taken* (*Die Maßnahme*) to illustrate this reconciliation as such remains somewhat puzzling. For Žižek, the Hegelian “negation of the negation” is never a simple reversal of the opposite; rather, it implies an acceptance of the opposite at one and same time. “Thesis” and “antithesis” as two extremes, Žižek postulates, “already flow into each other” and, therefore, “synthesis does not affirm the identity of the extremes, but on the contrary, affirms their differences” (*Demanding the Impossible* 5). By the same token, Žižek takes Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera* (*Die Dreigroschenoper*)<sup>1</sup> as an exemplar play of his works of the 1920’s, and *The Measures Taken* as that of the “learning plays” of the early 1930’s. In the former Žižek finds “a brutal sacrifice of all ideological ideals to cynical earthly interests – power, money, sex – that lie at the core of the egotistic subject” whereas in the latter “the subject itself is obliterated in a gesture of radical sacrifice on behalf of the collective” (2012: 478). That is to say, *The Threepenny Opera* advocates individualism by negating ideological ideals, like Communism, and *The Measures Taken*, as a negation of the negation, affirms

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<sup>1</sup> Here Žižek mentions John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) instead of Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) – the one is obviously mistaken for the other (2012: 478). Interestingly, this seems Žižek’s “consistent” mistake because, in his “Christianity against the Sacred” he again claims that “Brecht put it in his *Beggar’s Opera*: ‘Erst kommt das Fressen, dann knoot die Moral!’” (2013: 49).

individualism while celebrating the collective over the individual. Being sustained by the ego's "fantasmatic support of illusion and dreams" (ibid.), the individual finds his authentic self in sacrificing his own self. The Young Comrade in *The Measures Taken*, so to speak, is a true martyr, as Thomas Becket proclaims in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, "who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God" (199), the God in Brecht's play being the Communist Party.<sup>2</sup>

Be that as it may, Žižek also detects something "uncanny and disturbing" about this learning play, because he holds that Brecht simply brings onto stage the mechanism of sacrifice "in its *formal neutrality*" without delving into "deeper subjective condition or message" beneath such a mechanism (2012: 748, italics added).<sup>3</sup> The dialectics of form and content has been a long discussed issue in the Western aesthetics, notably raised by Hegel in his *Science of Logic* and, in the field of drama, best elaborated by Peter Szondi in his *The Theory of the Modern Drama*. For Hegel, form and content are never two clear-cut opposites; rather, in the true works of art, they are "completely identical" because of their "absolute correlation ... their reversion into one another" (qtd. in Szondi 4). To be brief, in the words of Theodor W. Adorno, form can be conceived as "precipitated content."<sup>4</sup> All these are concepts with which Žižek is no doubt extremely familiar, as already shown in his discussion on the dialectical relationship between form and content in the passage quoted above: form can hardly be neutral in that some formal features always "act as a stand-in for the 'repressed' aspect of the content." Then, what on earth does this "formal neutrality" mean, anyway? Žižek acknowledges his debt to Fredric Jameson without identifying its specific source. In Jameson's *Brecht and Method*, however, we find part of the possible explanation: *The Measures Taken* is an incomplete play by itself so that another play is supposed to be added to it, a counterpart in which the Young Comrade "might refuse, and be executed anyway." Jameson seems to indicate that only if the Young Comrade were given the freedom of choice to say yes or no, the "neutrality" would come into shape *formally* and that is the so-called "*formal neutrality*." But even such a counterpart is not absolutely indispensable since, on the one hand, the Young Comrade in *The Measures Taken* proper is already given such freedom and, on the other, Jameson also holds that the play itself is "a dramatization of the dialectic, the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Žižek's interpretation of the Holy Spirit in "Only a Suffering God Can Save Us": "Its status is similar to that of an ideological cause like Communism or Nation" (*God in Pain* 171).

<sup>3</sup> Meg Mumford offers similar observation that in this play Brecht "fails to address the passionate and empathetic nature of the onlookers" (2009: 16).

<sup>4</sup> Here the chemical metaphor of form as "precipitated content" ("niedergeschlagenen" Inhalt) naturally implies its emphasis on the interactive relationship between form and content (Szondi 4 and 118). Szondi borrows this conception from Adorno's *The Philosophy of Modern Music*. Similar idea also appears in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, wherein form is taken as "itself a sedimentation of content" (209).

primacy of the collective situation over individual ethic” and affirms that this play’s “central yet enigmatic status ... in Brecht’s work as a whole is secured” (Jameson 63). What the Young Comrade encounters, so to speak, is what Žižek calls in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* “the forced choice of freedom: ... you have freedom to choose, but on the condition that you choose the right thing.” It is a “paradoxical point of *choix forcé*” at which the subject “*must choose what is already given to him*” (1989: 165). Such being the case, the Hamletian dilemma “To be or not to be” seems to lose its ground totally in the play since the choice is always “already given.”

But is it really the case? If so, why, then, does *The Measures Taken* still impose the feeling of something “uncanny and disturbing” – which is, in fact, a terror of being killed by one’s own comrades -- upon a sophisticated reader like Žižek? The problematic dialectics between form and content of the play remains unexplained in Žižek’s and Jameson’s explication as well. Neither of their explanations accords with the Hegelian sense of dialectics that “content is nothing but the reversion into form and form nothing but the reversion into content” (qtd. in Szondi 4). A detailed account of such a reversion is needed – this is the attempt of this paper – to show that the dialectics of form and content in the play also manifests the dialectical relation between mask and body, which, when going beyond the limits of performance, naturally evokes our perturbed feeling of terror.

## II. Controversial Reception of *The Measures Taken*

In form, *The Measures Taken* is a learning play presented in the shape of a play-within-the-play with extensive use of masks. Besides its experimental form, it also marks a pivot in Brecht’s theatrical development: it is a drastic thematic shift from the physical indulgence in *Baal*, through the body’s socialisation in *Man Equals Man* (*Mann ist Mann*), to a total erasure of the body by “the teachings of the classics,” that is, the teachings of Communism. An immediate product of Brecht’s initiation into *Das Kapital* in 1929, this didactic play advocates in a straight way the necessity of revolution at the price of individual life, the elimination of one’s bodily existence. This simple theme receives a “simple” formulation: the death of a Young Comrade in revolution is narrated and enacted before the Control Chorus by four agitators, who killed the Young Comrade with his own consent and now in turn take the part of the Young Comrade -- a technique of “alienation” (*Verfremdung*) intended to destroy any possible identity with the character. That is, in the play, the agitator-actors with their bodies give presence to the Young Comrade’s absence. To a certain extent, this play is also a narrative of “history” – ‘history’ in the sense that it is a narrative/performance of the past through the representation of the agitator-actors. Between the story narrated and its narrative mode there is, to borrow from

Hegel, a shared “internal vital principle,” a political principle of adapting the subject matter of the past to the advantage of “the production of such history in the very progress of its own being” (qtd. in White 29). So is the very purpose of this particular learning play – the death of the Young Comrade is adapted to teach the absolute necessity of one’s “willing” submission to the ideological ideal of the collective, that is, the Communist Party in the play. It is, in Brecht’s own words, also a play of “the Great Pedagogy” (*grosse Pedagogik*) mainly aimed to goad the actors/students to take immediate action in the revolutionary process, unlike that of the “little pedagogy” (*kleine Pedagogik*) to expose the shortcomings and evils of capitalist society.<sup>5</sup> The result, ironically, has proved completely contrary to Brecht’s declared purpose. Nowhere else is the content of Brecht’s plays so furiously questioned by the dramatic form as in *The Measures Taken*. This simple and complex work, as this paper intends to argue, displays the essence and limitations of theatre as an art of representation, which are here unmasked by Brecht’s extensive usage of visible and invisible masks.

In common critics have noticed the ironical counter-effect of this didactic cantata but rarely paid attention to the dramatist’s consciousness/conscience exemplified by the form of this play. Intended to be a play for proletarian actors and singers, *The Measures Taken* was submitted to the committee of the New Music Festival in the late spring of 1930 and was immediately turned down because of “the formal inferiority of the text” (Fuegi 1994: 248). It was also rejected by the orthodox Marxist critics in the Moscow Central Organ of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers after its premiere in 1930 and later production in 1931. The orthodox critics, represented by Alfred Kurella, found serious fault with the play, charging it with abstractness, overgeneralization, and a conflict between reason and emotion, a conflict incompatible with Marxist doctrines (Wulburn 1971: 108-15). The rebuttal was so formidable that Brecht had to withdraw the play from his repertoire. In 1956, however, Brecht argued that “only the young comrade can learn from it, and he can learn only if he has also played one of the four agitators and sung in the *Kontrollchor* [Control Chorus]” (Wulburn 1971: 112). But, as Wulburn points out, this play was originally intended for the education of the public as

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<sup>5</sup> See Jochen Schulte-Sasse’s “Foreword” to Peter Szondi’s *The Theory of the Modern Drama* (xv-xvi). The terms “little pedagogy” (*kleine Pedagogik*) and “Great Pedagogy” (*grosse Pedagogik*) have received alternative translation by others as “minor pedagogy” and “major pedagogy.” For more various discussions, see, for instance, Elizabeth Wright’s *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation* (1989: 12-13), Roswitha Mueller’s “Learning for a New Society: The *Lehrstück*” (2006: 108), Joy H. Calico’s *Brecht at the Opera* (2008: 141-142), and Meg Mumford’s *Bertolt Brecht* (2009: 23-24). In its removal of the division between the actors and the characters, the play of “major pedagogy” also turns the receivers into participants through its interventional training (Bishop 274). In this sense, this “learning” play is indeed a “theater of the future” since it heralds Augusto Boal’s “Poetics of the Oppressed” which upholds the idea of theater as “a rehearsal for the revolution” (Boal 122).

well, although in his notes to the 1931 production Brecht said that it “can *also* be staged in a quite simple, private way” (Wulburn 1971: 99; italics added). More puzzling is that since in the text the role of the Young Comrade is already asserted to be played by one of the four agitators, how can he also sing in the Control Chorus? Brecht’s later “recantation,” for Wulburn, is “a joke at the expense of his Communist critics” (1971: 113).

Besides the ideological attacks on its ambiguous theme, *The Measures Taken* also has received various criticisms for its structural deficiencies. Ronald Gray, for instance, sees no reason why the four agitators have to kill the Young Comrade. The Young Comrade at times acts out of spontaneous humanity, out of his pity for the coolies, indeed; but this is not the cause of failure of their revolutionary strategy. “The orders of the other agitators are followed” by the Young Comrade, Gray contends, and they are rejected by the coolies, not because the latter recoil at revolution, but because they “merely observe that the agitators are foreigners” (1976: 50). Raymond Williams, on the other hand, disapproves of the ending of the play in which the Control Chorus affirms the agitators’ “erasures” in killing the Young Comrade when their lives are endangered. As Williams observes, “the chorus, instead of allowing the action to be seen in its many aspects, in the end merely ratifies the decisions to execute: the critical-objective element is then counter-seeing rather than complex-seeing” (1973: 281-82). In so doing, the ending of the play allows its spectator/reader only an either-or choice and deprives him of further critical reflection.

Another interesting analysis is Andreas Huyssen’s postmodern viewpoint that Brecht’s learning play as a dramatic form has not yet developed its full potential. For Huyssen, the learning play is not an “object lesson,” not a finished product from which the spectator/reader can learn, but an “example lesson,” a re-production process through which the audience-participant will learn. More importantly, at the root of the learning play lie two fundamental presuppositions:

- a> specific historicity and concreteness within the play is suspended in order to explore the logic of contradiction, a process which is itself informed by the historicity of the performance-actors-viewers-participants;
- b> a dialectical-materialist understanding of that historicity. (1986: 83-84)

Huyssen’s proposal to suspend the “specific historicity and concreteness” is an echo of the postmodern conception of antinarrative. However, Huyssen finds that this play contains not only naturalistic and tragic moments but also “too much plot, too much (hi)story.” Led and confined by the tight construction of the plot, “the audience cannot but interpret the death of the young comrade as the telos of the entire play.” That is, the

Young Comrade is presented onstage as a tragic hero who “is sacrificed, [and] sacrifices himself, experiencing catharsis and transcendence. The thrust is toward salvation rather than toward changing society” (1986: 84-85). With the hero’s death so sublimated, this play has been accordingly regarded by most critics as a tragedy or, as Darko Suvin calls, “a kind of Mystery play” (1984: 126).<sup>6</sup>

Behind Huyssen’s postulate of the suspension of concrete historicity in the learning play is again a perception of the priority of idea/ideology to experience. Yet, as Brecht announces, “the truth is concrete.” “The truth” has to be checked by reality: “Taught only by reality can / Reality be changed,” so concludes the Control Chorus (34).<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, opposite to Huyssen’s charge of concreteness, the “reality” exemplified in the play, for some other critics, is quite abstract (Speirs 1982: 180). The problem lies in the fact that, as Michael Patterson pertinently points out, in this play Brecht “condoned violence as an instrument of political struggle” but did it “with so little rational argument.” The consequence is that “the stark and unemotional language of the piece deceives us into thinking that the decision is a purely rational one and we therefore accept its validity, just as surely as the theatre of emotion which Brecht so despised hypnotises our feelings” (1990: 92).

The Communist dogmatism proclaimed in *The Measures Taken* fails in two aspects: an external one in the counter-productive effect of all its performances, and an internal one in the Young Comrade’s practice of the four agitators’ orders. These double failures also testify to the incompatibility between Brecht’s political commitment and his theatrical practice. In its inner structure, on the one hand, this play demonstrates repeatedly that “the very type of person who needs to be taught the importance of rational self-control is incapable of putting what he knows in theory into practice in real life” (Speirs 1982: 179). On the other, the counter-effect of the play justifies that Brecht is a “dramatist of disorientation” (Bennett 1979: 324), unfitted and resistive to fixed, authoritative discourse, that in the play “the polemic is superseded by the poetic” (Wulburn 1971: 99).

### III. Role-Playing and the Dialectics of Mask and Body

In the very beginning *The Measures Taken* immediately unfolds itself with a court scene, a confession which displays the four agitator-actors’ consciousness/conscience.

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<sup>6</sup> Ruby Cohn also notices that, although the axiomatic basis of Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* lies in class solidarity rather than divine grace, they are modeled on Jesuit plays of the Counter-Reformation because they “present similarly abstract problems, similarly discursive doctrine, and a similar concern with salvation” (1969: 45).

<sup>7</sup> *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*, trans. Carl R. Muller (London: Methuen, 1977), 34. Hereafter all references to this play, unless indicated otherwise, are from this version and noted in the text.

Already accepted and celebrated by the Control Chorus for their success in the mission to aid the Chinese Party, the four nameless agitators nevertheless insist on a further confession: they shot a Young Comrade and cast him into a lime-pit near the border because he endangered their revolutionary movement. “Wait,” they declare (9) -- a verbal interruption of “*Verfremdung*” holding back the Control Chorus’ rather rash judgement, demanding from it a further consideration, a typical Brechtian thinking of “yes ... but.” Then they start enacting the past event before the Control Chorus, each in turn representing the Young Comrade during their performance. The play-within-the-play comes so early that its function is usually bypassed: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king” (*Hamlet*, II, ii), the king here being the actors/spectators, the killers/killed at one in the representation process. Through their performance, the four agitators demand judgement from the Control Chorus -- other spectators/actors in the play proper: “We will submit to your verdict” (9).

Ironically, the whole play is to see the Control Chorus being instructed by the agitator-actors. Although in the Control Chorus’ final conversion Raymond Williams discerns a curious replacement of complex-seeing by counter-seeing, we should also notice that the conscience of the confessors (the agitators as well as the Control Chorus) is tested and exposed through the play-within-the-play, itself a self-conscious form of metatheatre. Here the deed of conscience is revealed in an act of self-consciousness. That is, the performance gives expression to the conscience/consciousness hidden behind the masks of the four agitator-actors, the masks which temporarily eliminate “their own existence” in their performance.

Self-masking is a necessity of role-playing, in real life offstage as well as in the performance onstage. The four agitators know it well: “the work in Mukden was illegal. And so before we crossed the border, we had to efface our personal features” (12). Thus begins their “effacement.” Like an actor stepping from the world offstage into the world onstage, they are to cross the border, walking onto another “stage” and assuming different roles. Even more complicated is that the masks not only strip them of their personal features but also, literally, eradicate their bodily existence. Before they start their work, in scene two, the four agitators ask the head of the Party House for a leader -- the Young Comrade. In their performance here, two of them thus have to represent the head of the Party House and the Young Comrade respectively. In so doing, these two agitators inevitably remove themselves from the scene. That is, the Control Chorus sees only two instead of four agitators in the performance. In the conspicuous absence of these two agitator-actors’ bodily existence as agitators, the absence of one’s former role in a specific role-playing is made visible. Throughout their performance, a similar phenomenon repeats again and again to each of the four agitator-actors. In the presence of their absence we perceive the elimination of their personal features, the nameless bodies

becoming almost like the Derridean “floating signifiers.”

However, they only look like “floating signifiers”; they are in fact thoroughly fixed, addicted to an “unquestionable” ideology. Unlike Baal’s longing for oneness with cosmic nature, and unlike Galy Gay’s malleability to difficult situations, the agitators’ -- including the Young Comrade’s -- namelessness grants them no freedom, nor promise of return to nature or physical survival. On the contrary, their nameless bodies are imprinted with and constrained by articulated, political discourses. As the head of the Party House indoctrinates them:

THE HEAD OF THE PARTY HOUSE: Then be yourselves no longer: you no longer Karl Achmitt from Berlin; you no longer Anna Kjersk from Kazan; and you no longer Peter Sawitsch from Moscow. You are nameless and without a past, empty pages on which the revolution may write its instructions.

THE FOUR AGITATORS: Yes.

THE HEAD OF THE PARTY HOUSE *gives them masks which they put on:*  
And therefore from this moment you are no longer no-one; but rather from this moment on, and in all probability until your disappearance, you are unknown workers, fighters. (12-13)

Though nameless, they are “no longer no-one.” They have to “be recognisable and be unrecognisable” (13), just like an actor/character on stage. Furthermore, in the absence of their presence and the presence of their absence, particularly with the praxical doctrines written into “the empty pages” of their subjectivity, the four agitators thus become what Foucault calls “the body [...] dissolved by ideas, the locus of a dissociated Self” (1977: 148). In order to assume the roles of agitators, the four have to “disappear,” to allow the revolutionary instructions written “over” their body/text. They come into existence as agitators only when they put on their masks, which in a certain sense “imprison” their bodies. As Foucault observes in his genealogy of man: “A ‘soul’ inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body” (1979: 30; see also Ostrander 1987: 120-33).

The “soul” inscribed on the body, in this play, is the articulated political discourses, “the teachings of the Classics and the Propagandists: the ABC of Communism” (11). Ironically, what these agitators bring is not, as the Young Comrade demands, locomotives, tractors, seed-corn, munitions, nor even a letter from the Central Committee telling them what to do -- not what the people need and expect -- but some “instructions,” some outlines of a dramatic text to be enacted, translated, embodied into a performance text.

That is, the soul is a kind of dramatic text to be put into theatrical form. Here a further play-within-the-play-within-the-play takes shape: the four agitators, like the playwright/director, withdraw from the scene, and the Young Comrade -- as the mask, the persona of the agitators -- is instructed and put onto the stage.

#### **IV. The Young Comrade's Role-Playing**

As all performance texts by necessity betray the dramatic texts, so the Young Comrade's personal performance has its own immediate context and thus goes astray. In his premiere, "The Stone," he is instructed to join the coolies hauling the rice barge up the river -- "but must not fall prey to pity." The four agitators teach the Young Comrade: "Tell them that in Tientsin you saw shoes for barge-hauliers with boards on the soles so they won't slip" (14). He follows the order, but it does not work. The overseer answers the coolies' request for shoes with lashes. The coolies slip as often. Thus from his witness, from the body-to-body contact with the suffering coolies, arises the Young Comrade's pity. For him, the immediate, corporeal tortures should not be bypassed by any abstract, utopian "soul." Temporality cannot be replaced by any telos, and the body's existence and tortures likewise refuse any reduction and procrastination. An immediate problem demands an immediate solution. He repeatedly contends later: "I see with my two eyes that misery can't wait" (28, 29). He starts and exhausts himself picking up stones and placing them in the slime for the coolies. Unable to go on, he again instructs the coolies to ask for shoes. This time he is jeered at by the coolies -- "He's a fool. We laugh at people like him" (17) -- and accused by the overseer as an inciter. Together with the four agitators, the Young Comrade flees.

The Young Comrade's failure in his first performance is repeated later in the same way. In the scene "Justice," he is taught to distribute leaflets at the gate of a factory. But as a worker is captured by the policeman, the Young Comrade stands out to argue with the latter. His role is soon exposed -- not by himself, but by another worker. Finally, in "What Is Man?" the Young Comrade is told to get weapons from a merchant. Again he cannot tolerate the latter who exploits the coolies, who knows nothing but the "price" of man: "I don't know what man is / All I know is his price" (24). He refuses the merchant's invitation for dinner and thus fails the mission, too. His performance puts the content of the agitators' dramatic text into concrete form, calls it into doubt, and at last subverts it with what Szondi calls the "precipitated content" of his own form.

No performance can totally bring itself back to the dramatic text. That also means, no dramatic text can completely dictate and confine a performance text. The gap between the two can never be erased. Neither thematic content nor soul can completely imprison and eliminate the actor's bodily enactment and existence. The Young Comrade's

“theatre,” like all theatres, is a special locus with its own temporal and spatial dimensions, in which the actor’s body always resists the sovereignty of the soul. From this resistance thus looms large the residual humanity -- the Young Comrade’s pity for the coolies: “I see with my two eyes that misery can’t wait.” From his insistence on the irreducibility of one’s bodily existence also develops the final rebuttal of his body against the “soul,” the imprisonment of the mask. Near the end he will throw his mask away: the body will finally claim its own existence.

However, the four agitators do not allow the Young Comrade to go on in his own way. In their discussions, they again and again return to review and dictate the latter’s performance, sometimes even with some revisions. Neglecting the Young Comrade’s reproduction of their text and his immediate difficulties, the four instead attribute the first failure to the Young Comrade’s separating feeling from reason.<sup>8</sup> After the Young Comrade’s second failure, the four even re-write their version: “He could have told the workers that their only defense was to win over their fellow workers and form a common front against the police. Because the policeman had committed an injustice” (21-22)<sup>9</sup> -- a version quite different from their former instructions. (Brecht is also well-known for re-writing his own plays.) Then the Young Comrade fails in winning weapons from the merchant. The four agitators become clearly aware of the Young Comrade’s “weakness,” but they need him because he has “a large following among youth assemblies. He was a great help in those days in uniting the Party network in the face of capitalist guns” (25). The four cannot give up the Young Comrade, just as the playwright/director cannot do without the actor. They constantly return to “revise” and put the Young Comrade onto the stage, to fit him into the mask, as if he could be manipulated like a puppet, totally under their control.

Between the mask and the Young Comrade, at any rate, exists a hiatus, a literal cleavage that betokens the tension and conflict between the actor and the playwright/director. The four agitators, to borrow from Edward Gordon Craig, can be well taken as the artist/director who uses masks as a certain “statement”:

Masks carry conviction when he who creates them is an artist, for the artist limits the statements which he places upon these masks. The face of

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<sup>8</sup> The conflict between feeling and intellect, according to Marxist critics, can be taken as a petit-bourgeois nature of the Young Comrade and Brecht alike. However, as Wulburn points out, at the root of this conflict lies Brecht’s “insight into the logical consequences of the totalitarian nature of the party” (1971: 110).

<sup>9</sup> This passage appears only in the A3 version (1931) of the play. In other versions, the four agitators’ assessment of the Young Comrade’s performance runs as follows: “*Um die große Unge-rechtigkeit zu erhalten, wurde die kleine Gerechtigkeit gewährt. Aber uns wurde der große Streik aus den Händen geschlagen*” (“In order to retain the big injustice, the small justice was permitted. But the big strike was knocked out of our hands”; 1972: 21 and 50; my translation).

the actor carries no such conviction; it is over-full of fleeting expression -- frail, restless, disturbed and disturbing. It once would have seemed doubtful to me whether the actor would ever have the courage to cover his face with a mask again, having once put it aside, for it was doubtful whether he would see that it would serve as any sign. But now the time gives it proof, for the cinematograph favours the art of the theatre in that it reduces the number of theatres year by year. (1983: 21)

For Craig, six hundred human expressions may well be summarised into six masks, six forms each of which is a main statement and which together designate the essence of man. Yet so far as the relationship between the director (artist) and the actor is concerned, behind Craig's optimistic though somewhat cynical "conviction" in the necessity of masks in theatre exists an imminent and constant tension between the domineering power, the mask, and the actor's "frail, restless, disturbed and disturbing" body. The actor's "courage" to cover his own face in fact cannot do away with this inner tension. The "courage" by nature presupposes a potential fear of losing oneself; the need of courage may even intensify the conflict.

Put in this light, the Young Comrade's "betrayal" is an actor's counter-attack against the tyranny of the director, against the mask imposed upon the bodily performance/presence. Behind the mask the Young Comrade is seriously "disturbed and disturbing." His doubt deepens so much that he at last debunks "himself" to challenge the tyranny of the mask by exposing his own body, the immediate, corporeal presence of himself as "a living being," indeed. Firstly, he rejects the dictatorship of dramatic writing, the ABC of Communism. His debate with the four agitators takes a form of fervent catechism:

THE YOUNG COMRADE: Then I'll ask you this: Do our classics allow misery to wait?

THE THREE AGITATORS: Their methods encompass the totality of misery.

THE YOUNG COMRADE: Then do our classics fail to allow immediate aid to the miserable before all else?

THE THREE AGITATORS: Yes.

THE YOUNG COMRADE: Then our classics are worth nothing and I tear them to pieces! Man, as a living being, cries out in his misery and destroys all obstacles of instruction. That's why I must have action now, at once. And so I cry out, to destroy all obstacles of instruction.

*He tears up the writings. (27)*

Then as the agitators try to silence him “in the name of the Party,” the Young Comrade goes even further to question the authenticity of the dominant, collective discourse. In a powerful gesture full of visual impact, he unmasks himself, assuming the authentic subjectivity of the individual:

THE YOUNG COMRADE:

But who is the Party?

Does it sit in a house with a telephone?

Are its thoughts secret, its decisions unknown?

Who is the Party?

[...]

THE THREE AGITATORS: Silence! You’ll betray us!

THE YOUNG COMRADE: I can’t keep silent, because I’m right.

THE THREE AGITATORS: Right or not -- if you speak, we’re lost! Silence!

THE YOUNG COMRADE:

I have seen too much.

Therefore I will stand before them

As no one but myself, and tell them the truth.

*He takes off his mask and cries out. (28-29)*

After the first line in the Young Comrade’s final speech, four extra lines are added in the 1937/38 version: “Ich schweige nicht länger. / Warum jetzt noch schweigen? / Wenn sie nicht wissen, daß sie Freunde haben / wie sollen sie da sich erheben?” (“I’ll keep silent no more. / Why keep silent now? / If they don’t know that they have friends / How can they rise up in revolt?”) (1967: 658; my translation). Here a further charge is put on the four agitators for their “betrayal” against friendship or comradeship. For the Young Comrade, however, the misery near-at-hand should not be overlooked by the instructions which preach a telos far away, just as his performance should not be controlled in distance, “telephoned,” by the Party. Every moment claims its own singularity and irreducibility. He is “no one” but himself, an actor with his own bodily presence, with his own performance (con-)text which refuses to be dictated by the totalitarian writing discourse. For the four agitators, the Young Comrade’s language, his disobedient discourse, has to be silenced, just as the id has to be suppressed by the superego. Yet the Young Comrade insists that his voice, the expression of his immediate, instinctive existence, demands its own presence: his subjectivity refuses reduction. That is, he refuses to be directed. He wants to be his own director, not merely a puppet to be manipulated.

## V. The Four Agitators' Role-Playing

The Young Comrade is in reality not an “actor” at all, but a “character” given presence onstage. We should not forget that he is brought into existence by the four agitators. It is they who are the real actors, their bodies being inscribed, masked, by the “soul” of the classics. Nameless as agitators from the very beginning, they repeatedly give presence to the absence of the Young Comrade with their own bodily presence. The result is ironical and paradoxical: despite Brecht’s attempt to disintegrate the presence of the hero, “the image of The Young Comrade is made vital and real as each agitator illumines another aspect of his behaviour and personality” (Lyons 1968: 83). The artifice of their demonstration -- the epic distancing -- only comes to ensure the vital presence of the hero in his absence. Frequently assuming other roles in their performance, the four agitators even have to disappear from the actual scene in which they participated in the past. They are in this sense simulacra of beings, masking and masked at once. In their bodily presence is inscribed the soul of the Young Comrade. Thus the Young Comrade becomes what I would call their “collective double.” The Young Comrade is already dead and, as Benjamin says, “if it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the body too comes properly in its own” (1977: 217). In their presentation of the Young Comrade with their own bodies, so to speak, the four agitators are haunted, dominated by the Young Comrade’s “spirit.” Their performance is in this sense a kind of exorcism.

What should also be exorcised for the four agitators is the terror of death in their own mind. As a double of the Young Comrade, each of the four agitators accordingly shares in part the hero’s guilt and fate. Under such circumstances, the death of the Young Comrade becomes particularly formidable to the four agitators because they “have to” kill their own double. Since the Young Comrade exposes himself, they all have to escape. Pursued, ironically, by “the exploited” (30) -- by the people they want to help -- and pressed for time, they decide that the Young Comrade must be killed and must not be found.

### THE FOUR AGITATORS:

Pressed for time, we found no way out.  
Just as animals help their own kind  
We also wished to help him who  
Fought with us for our cause.  
For five minutes, in the face of our persecutors.  
We deliberated in hope of finding a

Better possibility.  
Now it's your turn to deliberate.  
And find a better course of action.  
*Pause.*  
And so we decided: we now  
Had to cut off a member of our body.  
It is a terrible thing to kill.  
We would not only kill others, but ourselves as well, if the need  
arose. (32)

The simple stage direction "*Pause*," as Julian H. Wulburn notices, is the key word in this passage. It is Brecht's device to realise the goal of the Epic Theatre, "to awaken the activity of the spectator, to force him to make decisions, and to drive him to cognition of the truth" (1971: 106). Yet the dilemma firstly belongs to the four agitators, who know well that it is "a terrible thing" to kill, to extinguish not only the bodily existence of others but also that of themselves whenever necessary. What happens to the Young Comrade may well happen to themselves. The Young Comrade comes into existence only in their bodily presence: the hero is but a collective double of themselves. In their demonstration, they share the role of the Young Comrade and thus share his fate, too.

In the above "*Pause*," if the spectator is forced to make decisions, to consider the alternatives of the Young Comrade's future, then the chance is cancelled out by another "*Pause*" in their final discussion. The discussion is so suggestive that it allows no reduction:

THE FIRST AGITATOR: We want to ask him whether he agrees with us, because he was a courageous fighter. (That face, of course, which appeared from under the mask, was not the same face which he had once hidden with the mask; and that face, which the lime will extinguish, is different from the face which once greeted us at the border.)

THE SECOND AGITATOR: But even if he does not agree with us, he must disappear, completely.

THE FIRST AGITATOR *to the young comrade*: If you are caught you will be shot; and since you will be recognised, our work will have been betrayed. Therefore we must be the ones to shoot you and cast you into the lime-pit, so that the lime will burn away all traces of you. And yet we ask you: Do you know any way out?

THE YOUNG COMRADE: No.

THE THREE AGITATORS: And we ask you: Do you agree with us?

*Pause.*

THE YOUNG COMRADE: Yes.

THE THREE AGITATORS: We also ask you: What shall we do with your  
body?

THE YOUNG COMRADE: You must cast me into the lime-pit, he said.

THE THREE AGITATORS: We asked: Do you want to do it alone?

THE YOUNG COMRADE: Help me.

THE THREE AGITATORS:

Rest your head on our arm.

Close your eyes.

THE YOUNG COMRADE *unseen.*

And he said: In the interests of Communism

In agreement with the progress of the proletarian masses

Of all lands

Consenting to the revolutionizing of the world.

THE THREE AGITATORS:

Then we shot him and

Cast him into the lime-pit

And when the lime had swallowed him up

We turned back to our work. (33-34)

Here the “*Pause*” after the three agitators’ interrogation is a tragic silence: the Young Comrade cannot find his way out. In the 1937/38 version a further sense of guilt is given to the Young Comrade in his confession after the “*Pause*”: “Ich, der ich so sehr nützen wollte, habe nur geschadet,” “Aber jetzt wäre es besser, ich wäre nicht da” (“I wanted to make myself useful, but I have only hindered,” “But now it would be better that I were not here”) (1967: 662; my translation). The Young Comrade’s guilty sense and consent for his own death may well alleviate the four agitators’ own guilty sense of killing him. But it should be noticed that here the Young Comrade is treated with a terrorist violence (Patterson 1990: 90-91). He falls into tragic silence because he *is convinced* that he has no alternative.

In the silence there is an implicit but intense conflict between the Young Comrade and the four agitators. What should they do if the Young Comrade says “no”? In the previous address to the Control Chorus the second agitator has revealed their presumptuous decision: even if the Young Comrade refuses their suggestion, he is still sentenced to “disappear,” to be removed from the face of the world. Since they will not take no for an answer, the Young Comrade is in fact deprived of the chance to make his own decision.

It is exactly what Žižek calls “the forced choice of freedom” since the Young Comrade cannot but choose what is expected and given. Like a character whose existence onstage is given and determined by the dramatic text and the actor’s performance, the Young Comrade’s physical existence is inscribed and, furthermore, totally overtaken by political doctrines. Effaced from the stage, “*unseen*,” his body is then reduced into and replaced by an empty voice in praise of world revolution. Political instructions become a modern oracle, from which no one in the play can escape. Like Oedipus who commits crime without consciousness, becomes the blemish of the state, and exiles himself for the sake of social ethics, the Young Comrade is sacrificed as a scapegoat. Having returned to the border, to the origin from which he comes into existence as an agitator, the Young Comrade at last is ostracised.

Literally as well as symbolically, the Young Comrade as an enacted character is predestined to “disappear” from the world/stage. Here a more complicated and significant phenomenon in the passage quoted above reveals itself in the agitator-actors’ attempt to withdraw and detach themselves from their role-playing in the play-within-the-play, to shake off their own mask as the Young Comrade. This is especially obvious in the agitator who is now enacting the Young Comrade. When asked what they shall do with his body, the “Young Comrade” answers: “You must cast me into the lime-pit, *he said*” (italic added).<sup>10</sup> A centrifugal force of severing himself from the role enacted – “*he said*” -- emerges to collide with the centripetal statement of acquiescence. Or in Foucault’s terms, “*he said*” can be taken as a later discourse that exercises the function of “commentary” on the former discourse, tending to override and nullify the former and claims its own “truth” (1972: 222). Underlying the almost instinctive response “*he said*” is therefore the agitator-actor’s resistance against, his anxiety and fear of, the “terrible thing” -- to kill as an agitator and/or to be killed as the Young Comrade, a dilemma much more complicated than the Hamletian “To be or not to be.” In this brief statement, we cannot help feeling that the agitator-actor is trying to sever himself and rescue his own bodily existence from the “soul” of the Young Comrade. Just as in the play-within-the-play he has to cross the border so as to ensure his own physical survival, the agitator-actor by the same token disappears from the stage, becoming “unseen” and safe behind the curtain, leaving nothing onstage but the “soul,” the political instructions, the voice without the body.

In the sense of being inscribed with the teachings of the classics, the four agitators are only a voice without the body, indeed. Yet through their demonstration they come to realise the split between the mask and their bodies -- a hiatus that by nature asserts the

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<sup>10</sup> It is a new technique of acting invented by Brecht to enhance the alienation-effect: “Using the third person and the past tense allows the actor to adopt the right attitude of detachment” (*Brecht on Theatre* 138).

irreducibility of one's physical being. In the face of death because of the political "measures," they recoil. The fear of "the terrible thing" does not reside in the Young Comrade alone but also in each of the four who share the former's existence. This fear finds a subtle expression in the first agitator's description of the Young Comrade's true face, a face totally different from the one "hidden with the mask" and even different from the one "which once greeted us at the border." (The description is removed from the 1937/38 version). At the end, and for the first time, they recognise the Young Comrade not as an agitator, nor even a revolutionary youth, but as an ordinary man, an individual body. Suggestive enough, too, is that the description is put between brackets, which in the dramatic text constitute another conspicuous "mask." Hidden in/behind the formal, official statement, the description significantly unmasks their political masks as agitators. Together with the Young Comrade's gesture of tearing off his mask, the second agitator's description powerfully turns outside the suppressed inner self, making visible the human existence as a genuine body. The bracketed description reveals a human/humane voice in awe of death: not an ideological discourse echoing the teachings of the classics, but a heteroglot utterance speaking for the body behind the masks of the agitators.

## VI. Conclusion

Essentially a demonstration, a play in the form of the play-within-the-play as we have already discussed, *The Measures Taken* is subject to the limitation of representation, subject to the dialectics of its dramatic formation and thematic content. The failure of the thematic content to dominate the agitator-actors' performance, however, has nothing to do with theatre's innate inability to trace the primordial origin as seen by Derrida. Nor does it concern the Pirandellian ambiguity between illusion and reality as shown in the chaotic ending of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.<sup>11</sup> Theatre, as Foucault suggests, is a kind of phantasm which should be "freed from the dilemmas of truth and falsehood and of being and non-being: theatre is an 'extra-being'" (1977: 170).<sup>12</sup> In *The Measures*

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<sup>11</sup> *Six Characters in Search of an Author* ends with the Manager's confused yell: "Pretence? Reality? To hell with it all! Never in my life has such a thing happened to me. I've lost a whole day over these people, a whole day!" (Pirandello 276). In Pirandello's play, the death of the little boy and the little girl is an illusion, a fictive rehearsal onstage, but it is a reality for the Characters in their life. Such a confusion of illusion and reality never appears to *The Measures Taken* in that all the "characters" are actors. For a remarkable Derridean reading of Pirandello's play, see David McDonald's "Derrida and Pirandello: A Post-Structuralist Analysis of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*." *Modern Drama* 20.4 (1977): 421-436.

<sup>12</sup> See Wilshire (1982: 245-57) for the distinction of "primary metaphor" and "secondary metaphor" of theatre. For Wilshire, theatre "reveals because it is imagination in concrete forms. It has both the limits endemic to imagination in general and to its concrete theatrical form" (1982: 246). Cf. also Herbert Blau's focus on the "unimaginable" aspect of theatre: "it *once* existed, or still exists but inexplicably withdrawn (like the God of the Kabbalah who endowed us with the void),

*Taken* neither should the Control Chorus doubt nor should the spectator/reader interrogate the “truth” about the Young Comrade represented. In their performances -- either the Young Comrade's role-playing as an agitator or his faults demonstrated by the four agitators -- everything is real by itself.

What emerges from the dramatic formation of this play, to all appearances, is a covert and irremovable gap between the stage and the world, an undeclared but powerful resistance of the actor's body against the confinement of the “soul,” against the mask imposed by the thematic content. The consequence of the conflict is the death of the Young Comrade. The Young Comrade's tragedy, so to speak, lies in his failure as an actor: unable to keep himself “recognisable and unrecognisable” in his role-playing, he has already *shaken off his mask* in the three missions. That is, he has given up his role as an agitator. Crossing the border between the stage on which he must assume the role of an agitator and the real world in which he claims to be himself, he no longer plays any given role. He leads a life of his own, a life not permitted by the four agitators' dramatic text. Therefore, he is killed not only because of his humanity, but also because of his failure in playing the role prescribed by the four agitators. For him, his “performance” as an agitator is not an “extra-being”: it is his very being. As an actor, an agitator with a mask, he is assigned a confined space, a certain stage, becoming “a man who cannot get out without dying” (Barthes 1983: 8). But he transgresses the border and therefore disappears from the stage/world, not only as a human subject but also as an incurable agitator/actor.

On the contrary, the four agitators survive because they are “actors” in every sense of the word. Their demonstration/performance is simply an event, not a fact. To borrow from Foucault again, the Young Comrade's death designates a “fact” – “a state of things in relation to which an assertion can be said true or false” -- and his death can be well asserted: it is simply real. Yet for the four agitators, the Young Comrade's death is an “event” with a meaning -- dying -- it is “a pure event that can never verify anything” (Foucault 1977: 173). They never experience the fact of death, but only represent an event of dying. Their demonstration is an extra-being, a kind of phantasms which must be “allowed to function at the limit of bodies,” and which by necessity have to be “outside of bodies, because they function between bodies according to laws of proximity, torsion, and variable distance” (1977: 169-170). Holding themselves fast as agitators/actors, they allow no equation between themselves and the Young Comrade. The killing of the Young Comrade is not even represented in the play. Instead, the fact of death, together with the political instructions, is reported, narrated at a distance, without the presence of the body. While performing the Young Comrade, the body of the agitator secures itself in its own

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or never existed, but in some mysterious way occurs as a *first thought*, as in the aboriginal myths of Origin, a bringing of something that never was into the world, out of a void a stone a thread a laugh” (1982: 100).

absence, making its own survival visible. Hidden behind the masks, the four agitators by the same token keep aloof from the scene they bring onto the stage and in doing so ensure the continuation of their physical life. They are, in Wilshire's words quoted in the beginning of the paper, revealing that "death is more than any artist can reveal through performing."

In this play Brecht unmasks not only the political masks of the agitators but also the dialectics of mask and body in performance, the dialectics of form and content in theatre. With its political, thematic content totally subverted, *The Measures Taken* testifies to the success of its dramatic form. In the play as a whole, the thematic content, the ABC of Communism, is put into doubt and subverted by its dramatic form, by its own dramatic "measures." Indeed, the play is a learning play, an "example play" as Huyssen postulates, a representation -- an event with a meaning -- "through which the audience/participant will learn." But what is to be learned is neither the Young Comrade's revolutionary passion to sacrifice himself -- it is indeed too "uncanny and disturbing," too terrible a demand for the actor/participant/audience to realise an "event" of death into a "fact" of his own life -- nor even the priority of "the teachings of the classics," for its cost is already exemplified in the Young Comrade's death. What is to be learned is rather the four agitators' aloofness in their role-playing, that is, the indispensable necessity of the mask for the sake of the body's survival both onstage and offstage.

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