

Title	Review of Brockmann, S. (Ed.) (2021). Brecht in context. Cambridge University Press.
Authors	Frimberger, Katja
Publication date	2022
Original Citation	Frimberger, K. (2022) 'Review of Brockmann, S. (Ed.) (2021). Brecht in context. Cambridge University Press.', Scenario: A Journal for Performative Teaching, Learning, Research, 16(1), pp. 156-161. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.16.1.12
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	https://journals.ucc.ie/index.php/scenario/article/view/scenario-16-1-12 - https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.16.1.12
Rights	© 2022, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2025-07-02 15:43:45
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13461



UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Review of Brockmann, S. (Ed.) (2021). *Brecht in context*. Cambridge University Press.

Katja Frimberger

The views and opinions expressed in the book reviews are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of SCENARIO.

President of the International Brecht Society Stephen Brockmann's edited volume *Bertolt Brecht in Context* gathers world-leading Brecht scholars from around the globe (many of the German essays are translated by Brockmann himself) - to curate an exciting collection of scholarly essays on German playwright, poet and intellectual Bertolt Brecht. The sheer diversity and breadth of the individual essays (and the various specialisms of its contributors) make it difficult to distil the book's scholarly focus in terms of a set of academic questions, which the book then sets out to answer. This is however not a weakness but rather a strength of the current collection. There are of course other edited works on Brecht's life, oeuvre and impact, which have (successfully) taken a different editorial path. These have circumscribed their topic and drawn intellectual boundaries more tightly, to give an in-depth and cohesive overview of specific spheres of Brecht's activity (*Wirkungsfelder*). Just to name an eclectic few of these edited volumes for comparison - all of which are also quoted in the reviewed volume. Bradley and Leeder's (2011) edited volume looks at Brecht's life and influence in/on the German Democratic Republic (GDR) - its theatre, politics and public life; Kuhn's and Leeders (2002) collection of essays explore Brecht's poetry; and Tatlow and Wong (1982) edited a book on Brecht's intellectual and artistic relationship with East Asia.

In contrast, Brockmann's current collection takes a broader, and perhaps more ambitious, approach to curate its chapters. Rather than organising the essays along the lines of a specific *Wirkungsfeld*, it opens out the breadth, richness, complexity, and the resulting tensions (and at times non-synthesisable nature) of Brecht's ideas, work and influence across his lifetime. The envisioned audience (I would include the Brecht-curious as well as the Brecht-specialist) is hereby trusted to be able to navigate the books' broad intellectual landscape without too much editorial hand-holding. In a rather Brechtian spirit, the readership is conceived - as Brecht put it in a 1935 New York Times article (found in Brecht, 1978, p. 79) - as a "a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and of reasoning, of making judgements (...)". In other words, "it [epic theatre; here the editorial process] treats it as individuals of mental and

emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded". Please don't get me wrong. *Bertolt Brecht in Context* is not simply a loose potpourri of musings on the "most influential playwright of the twentieth century", as put in the introductory blurb (Brockmann, 2021, p. i). It does not throw the reader in at the deep end – in a sort of intellectual sink-or-swim mentality - far from it. What *does* the current volume want?

The broad and ambitious pedagogical intention and tone of the collection is best conveyed in the editor's own introductory remarks. "To study Brecht is to study the tumultuous history of Germany, Europe and the world in the twentieth century. (...) He was an astute and articulate participant in his own era, seeking both to understand and shape it in his writing and thought. For him ratiocination itself – the process of thinking and, via thought, coming to terms with the complexity of the world – was deeply pleasurable" (Brockmann, 2021, p. 1). The book certainly lives up to its title. It explores Brecht, his life and work, in the context of his time – spanning imperial Germany, two World Wars, Weimar Germany, his exile during the Nazi regime and his return to a politically divided Germany. Within this broad historical frame, the collection covers the wide range of Brecht's creative work (in poetry, fiction to photography, music and of course theatre). It introduces us to Brecht's various and sometimes delightfully eclectic intellectual and creative influences – from Wedekind to Nietzsche, Piscator, Marxism and East Asian philosophy, just to name a few. And finally, it even takes on Brecht's influence on a range of widely varied, contemporary artistic and academic contexts (e.g., his reception in various countries; his impact of transcultural and experimental theatre; contemporary opera productions; US actor training; feminist readings and adaptations of his work). Having laid out the book's ambitious scope - let's look at its structure a bit more closely.

The 37 essays are organised in three parts: *Part 1 - Brecht's World*; *Part 2 – Brecht's Work*; *Part 3 – The World's Brecht*. Part 1 (with 12 essays) sets the stage for our understanding of Brecht's key formative influences, starting with his childhood in Swabian Augsburg. Jürgen Hillesheim's first chapter peeks behind the curtain of Brecht's (only on the surface) idyllic bourgeois, Lutheran family background in Augsburg. Drawing on Brecht's (and his friends') personal diaries and early literary efforts (when he was only around 14-15 years old), Hillesheim sketches the early origins of Brecht's persisting cultural and linguistic references. The recurring Biblical imagery and Luther-inspired language of his work, we learn, was first spawned by his youthful, Nietzschean interrogation of his own Christian middle class upbringing. Meg Mumford's second chapter follows to carefully trace Brecht's immersion in the lively, political Munich cabaret scene of imperial Germany. Deeply influenced by the work of Bavarian comedian and clown Karl Valentin and playwright Frank Wedekind, Wedekind's early death gave rise to the completion of Brecht's first full length play "Baal"; a tribute to the wild balladeer's performances and Dionysian style of his (sexual) taboo-breaking 'Lulu' plays.

In chapter 3, Ronald Speirs picks up on “Baal” to deepen our understanding of its rich formation process. Elaborating on Brecht’s first play’s many literary references, e.g., to Shakespeare’s open dramas; themes that allude to Goethe’s Faust and Büchner’s Woyzeck, and the poetic imagery and sensual language that borrow from the French symbolists, Speirs also brings to life Brecht’s fascinating transition towards his more overtly social and political aesthetic stance. It finds first expression in Brecht’s early (*New Sobriety*-style) experimentations with the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect) in his second play (and first to be performed on stage) “Drums in the Night”, which earns him the prestigious Kleist Prize in 1922. It is here, we learn, where Brecht first asserts his ethical and aesthetic refusal of an emotionally manipulative theatre – best exemplified in “Drums in the Night”’s protagonist Kragler’s famous tearing down of the on-stage, glowing artificial moon, and his pithy dictum and direct audience address “Glott nicht so romantisch!” (Stop that romantic staring!). My favourite chapter in *Part 1* of the collection is chapter 6 by Laura Bradley, which I will certainly use for my own seminar readings next term in Education Studies. Bradley carefully explores what might be understood by Brecht’s “political theatre” – distinguishing the more strategically politically themed plays (e.g., “Die Mutter”/“The Mother”; “Die Entscheidung”/“The Decision”) from his more general pedagogical view that theatre “needed to stage its revolution on aesthetic grounds by developing methods for engaging with contemporary reality” (p. 58); methods that would aid the audience to recognise their own agency in a world that was man-made and thus changeable. This chapter will make for great student reading because it evokes still relevant questions around the nature and purpose of theatre’s pedagogy and politics. At the same time, it also demonstrates to students the careful (historical, hermeneutic) research necessary to understand the emergence of Brecht’s own views and aesthetic approach in historical and cultural context. Chapter 6 touches on Brecht’s rejection of the expressionist romanticization of politics (e.g., as martyrdom) and his critique of the naturalists’ “normalisation” of the portrayal of poverty and misery. It details his material approach to showing instead the socio-economic influence on his protagonists’ actions and decisions and gives examples of his Anti-Aristotelian staging of the complexity of a person’s agentic possibilities (e.g., in “Mutter Courage”/“Mother Courage”). The chapter also delves into Brecht’s Marxist critique of theatre’s production processes and his off-the-mainstream experimentations with alternative plays/operas and productions, written and performed not for the traditional stage, but for schools, radio and worker’s choirs.

Part 2’s 10 chapters – *Brecht’s Worlds* – opens out Brecht’s various creative activities beyond the theatre (but often connected to it) in poetry, film, fiction, photography and music, and continues the exploration of his diverse artistic and intellectual influences. To give you an impression of the tone of the chapters that made it into this middle section of the collection,

I will focus on those two that have most captured my imagination – Markus Wessendorf’s *Brecht’s Ethics* (chapter 19) and Antony Tatlow’s *Brecht and East Asia* (chapter 21). My choice is admittedly, and unashamedly, personal. I have only recently properly taken note of Brecht’s fascinating relationship with East Asia, since reading Brecht’s *Me-ti texts* (2016) and Tatlow’s enlightening editorial comments; and stumbling across Tatlow’s now older, but still captivating, “Brecht, Shakespeare and the Intercultural Sign”(2001). In Brockmann’s collection, Tatlow’s chapter equally fascinates. He carefully elaborates on Brecht’s “Taoist attitudes”, with its championing of self-love and critique of a hierarchical ethics, when it is put in service of controlling and organising people’s behaviour and thinking (think of Mother Courage’s famous dismissal of the land that calls for heroes and virtues – as a sure sign of corruption and immorality). He traces Brecht’s Buddhist-inspired suspicion of pre-mediated judgements, rejection of metaphysical speculation, and Brecht’s estranged staging of the difficulty of relating theory and practice - in various artistic genres. Tatlow draws on a variety of original sources, amongst them Brecht’s *Der Zweifler/The Doubter* poem, his written exchanges with dissident Marxist Karl Korsch, and his incomplete play *Das Leben des Konfutse/Life of Confucius*. My own marginal notes in chapter 21 disclose that I was most captivated by Tatlow’s implied pedagogy of silence that resonates from Kabuki and Noh theatre all the way through to Helene Weigel’s famous silent scream sequence in “Mother Courage” (when her son is executed due to her refusal to pay the demanded ransom). The stage action is slowed down from agitation into stillness and silence – creating a pedagogical space, in which the audience has time to reflect on the shocking suggestion that “what may happen to us can also be done in our name” (p. 186). Tatlow’s chapter is probably my favourite one in the whole book. Similarly enriching is Markus Wessendorf’s *Brecht’s Ethics* (two chapters earlier – number 19), which equally focuses on Brecht’s interest in ancient Chinese philosophy (Daoism, Mozi-ism, Confucianism). He explores his aesthetic and political take on the relationship between form and flow, e.g., in Brecht’s notion that the non-interventionist “wuwei” (non-action/effortless action) can indeed act as a strategy of resistance – using as examples his *Keuner Geschichten/Stories*, the play “Schweyk im Zweiten Weltkrieg/Schweyk in the Second World War” and, of course, his poem *Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking auf dem Weg des Laotse in die Emigration/Legend of the Origin of the book Tao Te Ching on Laotze’s Road into Exile’s* famous line: “The gentle water, if in motion/ In time can overcome unyielding stone” (Brecht and Kuhn, 2019, p. 679). Again, my notes in the margins reveal that my curiosity was particularly sparked by Wessendorf’s “anarchist allusions”, evident in Brecht’s pedagogical idea that “the anticipatory imitation of model attitudes and gestures”(p. 171) should have some role to play in the unleashing of human’s potential for productivity across all spheres of life (not just the economic one).

Part 3 (*The World's Brecht*) discusses the impact of Brecht's work across countries and in many fields of application (from feminism to transcultural theatre and contemporary opera). It is difficult to pick a favourite chapter here, but I was taken with number 23 - Helen Fehervary's detailed mapping of Brecht's portrayal of women characters across his plays and the diverse and long-standing feminist adaptations (since the 1950's) of his work across the (war-torn) globe, e.g., "to depict the vulnerability of women and children amid the ravages of war" (p. 207). Another chapter (number 34) that captured my interest was Wendy Arons' investigation of Brecht's influence on US actor training, as exemplified in Overlie/Bogart's Viewpoints approach. Against the usual assumption that US actor training is exclusively Stanislavsky-based, Viewpoints, as a (Brechtian-influenced) training technique, "focuses on developing a performer's awareness of the spatial, gestural and behavioural expressivity of her body in relation to all other elements of the environment" (p. 296). I further wish to express my appreciation for the carefully curated index in the current volume (I tracked down Nietzsche and Taoism without delay). Further, the concise bibliography at the end of the book orients the Brecht-curious (layman and specialist alike) towards a range of key primary or secondary sources (in English and German), enabling a smooth continuation of the reader's scholarly quest(s) - whatever the inspired route into Brecht's life and work.

In summary, Brockmann's 354-page-collection of 37 essays sets the stage for a Brechtian *rationation* – a pleasurable, dialectic engagement with, and understanding of, the complexity of Brecht's world and works. Let me further illustrate this by personal anecdote. Over the last few months (since I have received the review copy – thank you kindly to Scenario editor Dragan Miladinović!), I regularly found myself wrapped in a woolly blanket (it can get rather cold in Glasgow), sipping hot tea in my favourite purple armchair – dipping into the volume in a pleasurable unstructured, but (of course) alert and curious manner. I am not sure that I count as the Brechtian ideal, critical audience (Brecht, 1978, p. 44), since I did not smoke a cigar whilst browsing Brockmann's episodic volume. At the same time however, I inhabited a rather relaxed, and positively detached, *gestus* of reading. In other words, I was pretty well occupied with myself (enjoying said hot beverage and, more often, a good piece of chocolate also), whilst being guided by my own curiosity (I mentioned East Asia), and finding myself drawn into the scholarly worlds and rich detail of the collated chapters (which have all just the right length and never turn into laborious study). Concluding from the coffee and chocolate stains, the highlighted sections, and my barely readable scribbles in the margins, *Brecht in Context* is on its way to becoming a much thumbed, and valued *Gebrauchsgegenstand* (object of regular use) and reference book on my shelf. It certainly opened my eyes to the vast scope of exciting Brecht research out there. I shall return. That said, some readers might get overwhelmed by the proliferous scholarly landscape, hoping for some more editorial road-mapping. But this

collection is not one to be crammed in or speed-read over a weekend. My advice: allow yourself to 'get lost'. Brockmann's volume is to be enjoyed for the anticipation of where it might lead you (Brecht reception in Brazil or Southern Africa? Brecht's biographers? The current state of publishing Brecht's work? His influence on contemporary opera – or higher education?). To conclude then, *Brecht in Context* has to be allowed to unfold over many relaxed armchair sessions – so that it can rightfully join the ranks of the readers' *Vergnügungen* (pleasures), adding to Brecht's poem (Brecht, 1964, p. 79) the pleasure of discovering this new book.

Bibliography

- Bradley, L., & Leeder, K. (Eds.) (2011). *Brecht and the GDR: Politics, culture, posterity*. Oxford University Press.
- Brecht, B., & Jens, W. (Eds.) (1964). *Ausgewählte Gedichte*. Suhrkamp.
- Brecht, B., & Willet, J. (Eds.) (1978). *Brecht on theatre*. Methuen.
- Brecht, B., & Tatlow, A. (Eds.) (2016). *Bertolt Brecht's Me-ti: Book of interventions into the flow of things*. Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472579201>
- Brecht, B. & Kuhn, T. et al. (2019) (Eds./Trans.) *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht*. Liveright.
- Kuhn, T., & Leeder, K. (Eds.) (2002): *Empedocles' shoe: Essays on Brecht's poetry*. Methuen.
- Tatlow, A. (2001). *Shakespeare, Brecht and the intercultural sign*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv120qtbh>
- Tatlow, A, & Wong, T.-W. (Eds.) (1982). *Brecht and East Asian theatre*. Hong Kong University Press.