Brechtian and Wagnerian Aesthetics Today

A special session for the Modern Language Association Convention in New York City, 4-7 January 2018, sponsored by the International Brecht Society.

Scholars have long questioned the dichotomy between the Epic Theater and *Gesamtkunstwerk* which Brecht sets up in his first major statement on the Epic Theater, “Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.” In *Wagners Aktualität*, Theodor W. Adorno indicated that Wagner’s *Ring* is in a significant sense “epic,” due to its episodic structure and preference for narrative scenes over action. More recently, Joy Calico has traced the contours of the relationship between the Epic Theater and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, showing how Brecht is indebted to Wagner’s opera not just because it offers a historical and political foil, but also because it is an important forerunner to his own attempts to rethink the contract with the audience and the relationship between music and the body onstage.

Recent works by Alain Badiou, Slavoj Zizek and others have further complicated the easy identification of Wagner’s art with reactionary politics. Artists themselves have also long combined the Wagnerian with the Brechtian to more-or-less self-conscious degrees (for example, in the films of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the performance art of Christoph Schlingensief and Jonathan Meese, or the theater of Frank Castorf).

In our age of total digital distraction, has the dialectic of the Brechtian and Wagnerian reached an end? Are the categories of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and *Lehrstück*, or techniques such as *Verfremdung*, *Gestus*, and historicization still coherent or useful in understanding contemporary works of art?

The International Brecht Society invites proposals on any aspect of the interplay between “Brechtian” and “Wagnerian” aesthetics – broadly conceived – in theater, music, film, television, or other media. Please submit ca. 200 word proposals and a short CV to Jack Davis (jackdavis@truman.edu) by Friday, 24 March 2017. Presenters must become MLA members by 7 April 2017.