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HCC (Fall, 2014)

Viewing Guidelines and Viewing Questions – Weeks 6 and 7 / “Theater of War” (dir. Walter) (2008)

Hopefully many of you may have already viewed John Walter’s film, “Theater of War” (2008); others may still be planning on watching it. If you have already seen the film, you may want to read through these guidelines and questions and recall your experience of the film as you watched it through them (or you may want to watch it again!). If you have not yet screened the film, use these guidelines and questions to find your way into a critical (not criticizing, but thoughtful...) viewing of this pretty complex piece of film art!

1. Star Power: It is obvious that the most visible actor in this film is the “star,” Meryl Streep; we see much more of her – in both the interviews and in rehearsal and performance – than we see of the other actors (Kevin Kline and so on); likewise, we see a great deal of the “star,” Bertolt Brecht. And of course, Brecht’s play, Mother Courage and her Children, is also something of a “star” here! It is thus interesting that even though his point of view and editorial “fingerprints” are all over this film and that his is what I will be referring to as the “mediating intelligence” of the film, we never see the filmmaker, John Walter, although we do hear him asking questions (there are also two shots in the movie where he is explicitly referred to by name; can you spot them?). What is the relationship between the “stars” in this film – Brecht and Streep, but also Kushner et al – and their readings of Brecht’s play and Walter as himself a “producer of meaning” about the play? Separate out what is said about Brecht’s play and war by the stars *in the film* from what is being said about Brecht’s play and war *by Walter’s film*.

2. Documentary vs. / and the Film Essay: I will be making an argument that this film, even though it is often referred to as a “documentary” (by reviewers and by some of the “witnesses” in the film itself) ought not to be reduced to a “the making of”-documentary that has only the performance of Brecht’s Mother Courage and her Children in NYC, with Meryl Streep starring, as its focus. There is really a lot more going on in it! As you watch the film, consider what else you see in addition to the rehearsals, the designing and production of the props and the costumes, and the performance itself. What else is Walter showing us, from what point of view is he showing us more than just this specific production, and how might the message of *his* film overall either be in sync with **or differ** from the message of Brecht’s play in its original (or earlier) productions **and** from the message about Brecht’s play that several of the “witnesses” give in the course of the film?

3. “Five Acts about...”: You will notice that Walter’s film is itself “staged” as a drama of sorts, down to being divided into “five acts.” Write down the titles of each of the “acts” and develop a claim about how the various “acts” work individually and together. How does one act lead to another, what goes on within each act, and why does Walter begin his film with one set of issues in “act 1” and end it with another set of issues in “act 5”? What is the role of each “act” and what is the impact on our understanding of each “act” of that “act” being placed in relation to the other “acts”? Think here especially of “act 4,” “In Search of Bertolt Brecht”; is this version of Brecht’s (hi)story the only one that can be told? Finally: Because Brecht taught us to think of the ballads and songs in his play as commentaries on the action, think about the ballads and songs that are performed in each “act”; why is a specific song sung in a specific “act”? Does the song confirm / refute the overall message of the “act” in which it is sung in the film? Had it been sung in another “act,” would the commentary it provides have changed?

4. Performance(s): In “Theater of War,” we see Brecht’s Mother Courage and her Children “produced” a number of times; Walter films “table work” and read-throughs, rehearsals indoors, rehearsals outdoors, and an actual performance of the 2006 production in New York City. He also includes still shots from the 1949 production in Berlin (many of them from Brecht’s Couragemodell book that we see here in one of the interviews scenes with Carl Weber). How does Walter – as a film editor – link these various productions together, and what might his editing technique suggest about how he sees the issues that the play addresses – and its various productions – interacting? Is the 2006 production a re-production of the 1949 staging, a re-presentation of Brecht’s “original” play and concerns, **or**, in re-presenting / re-producing the play some 50 years on, has George C. Wolfe (the director of the 2006 production) re-presented Brecht in a new form? You may also want to take this question one step further: How is Walter re-presenting the historical event that was the 2006 NYC production of the play in his 2008 film?

5. Doublings and Beyond: In this same vein: Keep your eyes open for the high number of doublings in this film. Some obvious ones are the doubling of the lead actresses playing Mother Courage (Helene Weigel and Meryl Streep), the doubling of the two playwrights (Brecht and Tony Kushner) and of the two directors (Brecht and George C. Wolfe), as well as the doubling of the two performances (1949 and 2006). Some perhaps less obvious doublings are two versions of Berlin (1945 and 2006) and the several versions of anti-war street protests (1969 and 2006). Is Walter suggesting here that history “repeats itself” or not? Think in this context about the various montage sequences (of various smaller bits of film edited together) of war that go beyond doubling, with images from WWII and the Viet Nam War, for example, alongside some kind of odd clips that suggest battles from the WWI era. Is war endless, always the same, always different? **Where, finally, is the Thirty Years’ War in this film?** How is the Thirty Years’ War exemplary in this film? What might it be exemplary of?

6. Teaching in “Theater of War” / “Theater of War” as Teaching? There are numerous scenes in the film in which we observe the novelist and professor, Jay Cantor, teaching a class about Marx (a class in which he also teaches Brecht). Is Walter’s film itself “teaching” us (Marx? something else?); Of special interest is “act 2,” “Marx and Coca Cola,” in which the explicit teaching of some principles of Marxist analysis in Cantor’s classroom are then explored in the interviews with the costume designer, Marina Draghici, and Jeremy Lydic of the props team from the 2006 production; Walter thus calls attention to the fact that classroom materials can be “taught” by other means. Is Walter’s film the same kind of “pedagogical theater” as Brecht’s Mother Courage and her Children? If so, how? If not, why not?

7. The Hand of the State: One of the issues in which I have been interested as I presented several versions of the Thirty Years’ War to you has been the role of the state in war time and post-war eras. I have asked just how visible the state is to those who experience (and enable?) the war on the ground. Track where we see the state in Walter’s “Theater of War” film; is this the same state that planned grand military strategies and fought glorious battles in the Thirty Years’ War? (Streep refers to this version of the state in some of her “interviews,” when she mentions “kings,” “popes,” and “emperors,” for example). Consider not only the role of the military as an extension of the state in the battle footage, but also the visibility of police at the various anti-war protests, the FBI files on Brecht that we see in “act 4,” the HUAC hearings, the Homeland Security helicopter fly-overs during the rehearsals, the rounding up of Japanese U.S. citizens after the outbreak of WWII, and so on. What version of the state’s responsibility to keep the “peace” and attend to “defense” do we see in Walter’s film?

8. Talking Heads: Color vs. Black and White: You will notice that the archival footage of

the 1949 Berlin performance (as well as of post-1945 Berlin), the HUAC hearing, the Brecht family “home movies,” and so are all in (their original) black-and-white; Walter has also elected to film many of the “witness” interviews in black-and-white. The rehearsals and performances in 2006, and the street protests, however, are filmed in color. What kind of impact / effect does being filmed in black-and-white have upon the audience reception of the “talking heads” of the “witness” interviews? Do they become as “historical” and “authoritative” as the older archival footage? If so, how would you interpret Walter’s decision to have the rehearsals, performance, and protests filmed in color (which has the effect of making them seem more “real”)? What can we say about the re-presentation of (hi)story as it is rendered in black-and-white or in color in film?

9. Individuals and Collectives: Last week, I had asked you to consider the question of **individual acts** as evidence (or not) of **agency** and **self-determination** in Brecht’s Mother Courage and her Children. Public Theater Artistic Director Oskar Eustis and novelist and professor Jay Cantor give us *very* strong readings of Brecht as someone who endorsed **collective action**. Are *their* readings of Brecht on this issue shared by filmmaker, John Walter? That is, does the message of *the film* regarding individual vs. collective action mirror / overlap with Eustis’ and Cantor’s versions *in the film*? Consider Cantor’s address to the off-screen Walter at the end of “act 5.” What does Cantor say here and how does Walter respond?