

## **The Medium Revolution: The Art of Seeing in *Life of Galileo* and *La Chinoise***

### **Introduction**

Both Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo* (1938-39 and 1945-47) and Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967) are works of political art, specifically political modernism. But too often, these designations have been misrepresented by critics who isolate or distill elements of the play and film that conform to narrow definitions of politics and praxis. In extreme cases, *Life of Galileo* has been read as a failed intervention in the political thought that led to the bombing of Hiroshima—critics “blame Galileo for Hiroshima” (McNeill 69). More often, though, scholars who focus on *Life of Galileo*'s narrative and themes, on *Galileo* as solely a text argue that the work offers a discrete Marxist-Leninist ideology and that its representation of “seeing” is a prescriptive metaphor and theme for a political practice.

*La Chinoise* has also been tied to a definitive political intervention: “The film was later praised as a brilliant anticipation of the events of May 1968, and as a lucid look both at the passing infatuation with Maoism by bourgeois youngsters and at the outcomes of that infatuation: the return to order and terrorism” (Ranciere 1). As Jacques Ranciere's account suggests, the film's reception is significantly shaped by the 1968 student rebellion. Accordingly, scholars have extensively debated the politics of the film, and while the relationship between its medium's formal innovations and the narrative content has received greater attention than *Galileo*'s, critics contend that *La Chinoise*'s central “debate is how to bring [radical political change] about ... Godard negotiates these political debates through the construction of the scene” (Morgan 88).<sup>1</sup>

This essay challenges readings that treat *Life of Galileo* and *La Chinoise* as either dogmatic critiques bound to a specific history or a Marxist political programme that the audience is then meant to enact. In what follows, I read the representation of seeing in *Life of Galileo* and *La Chinoise*, asking, what is the relationship between seeing within the fictional narrative and the experience of seeing created by the formal innovations to each medium? By accounting for the works' formal and thematic stratas, this reading argues that Brecht and Godard's ways of seeing, despite their “structural differences in medium,” reflect a radicalism rooted in an aesthetic rather than political and, specifically, Marxist-Leninist practice (Jameson 197). Finally, as I address in the conclusion, the relationship between politics, aesthetics, and spectatorship that these works both conceptualize and perform affirms and advances Andreas Huyssen and

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<sup>1</sup> Levi Pavle takes a more middle ground approach to the relationship between *La Chinoise* and 1960s politics, “the film advanced a sustained critique of representational realism,” but ultimately suggests a similar dogmatic-didactic function, “but [the film] also concluded with an equivocal stance toward revolutionary violence” (146-47).

Fredric Jameson's critiques of the narrowly defined "failure" of modernism.

### *Life of Galileo*

In 1956, Roland Barthes implored critics to examine the "ideological content" of Brecht's theoretical texts as well as his "creative body" in order to determine his political and ideological position (73). But this emphasis on distilling Brecht's work into a critical theory, which continues to guide Brecht scholarship, conflates Barthes's own project with Brecht's, overlooking crucial features of his work and legacy, specifically the late artist's aesthetics. Darko Suvin's essay "Heavenly Food Denied: *Life of Galileo*" marks a recent iteration of a Barthian approach. In the essay, Suvin observes that *Life of Galileo* is "dominated by discussion of proper looking," and this preponderance of "looking" based content, thereby, merits analysis (142). Suvin's reading of the play's undeniable interest in seeing centers on how seeing is a thematic and allegorical feature, "I shall read these references first as a series of drawn-out metaphors and as a 'metaphoric theme' leading to a complex seeing in and of *LG*" (143). In turn, Suvin argues that "right seeing" or "complex seeing"<sup>2</sup> is a metaphor for a theory of understanding and cognition that challenges the Ptolemaic and Aristotelian "wrong worldview." Moreover, this theory, as evinced by the narrative's metaphors of right seeing and wrong seeing, is an expression of a prescriptive Marxist ideology (Suvin 145). This method of reading, of deriving a political doctrine from Brecht's play neglects a crucial layer of its representation of seeing: its formal medium.

Brecht's formal innovations enact *Galileo's* narrative of—as Andrea conclusively puts it—"learn[ing] to use your eyes" (105). The allegorical relationship between seeing in the play's text and the experience of seeing created by the formal innovations to the theatrical medium cannot be reduced to a passive, didactic transmission of Brecht's orthodox Marxism, which is where Darko Suvin's line of inquiry inevitably leads.<sup>3</sup> *Galileo's* representation of seeing, instead, encourages a spectatorship that is active, critical and mediated. Moreover, this representation draws attention to the political stakes of our modes of perception, and specifically Brecht's unique use of the theatrical medium, making a case for a radicalism rooted in an aesthetic rather than a specifically Marxist-Leninist political practice.

In its famous opening, *Galileo* stresses one aspect of seeing: it requires an object, a material form that can be viewed. Galileo teaches Andreas by using an apple, and it is only through seeing this object that Galileo gives his young pupil "something to think about" (11). Moreover, this object, unlike Galileo's

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<sup>2</sup> Suvin does not explicitly define Brecht's understanding of "complex seeing," though he is referencing the desired effects Brecht's epic style: "the spectator adopts an attitude of smoking-and-watching [. . .] By these means one would soon have a theatre full of experts, just as one has sporting arenas full of experts" (Brecht 44).

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Lunn's *Marxism and Modernism* (1982) mobilizes the claim of Brecht's orthodoxy against him, arguing that works such as *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* were "a symptom of an all too Orthodox Marxism . . . a healthy revisionism was sorely needed"(138).

textbooks, is not didactic in nature – it does not have an explicit association with scientific scholarship.

Because the apple does not connote a discrete discipline and pedantic function, it enables “commonsense” observations, such as Andrea’s remark, “There. Underneath” (10). And through these observations, which enforce what Jacques Ranciere terms an equality of intelligence,<sup>4</sup> Andrea is finally able to engage with scientific study. Like Andrea, the play’s audience is given an object to observe: a theatrical situation produced by the actors and stage. In addition to its fundamentally visual nature, a quality that characterizes all theatrical productions, Brecht’s theater highlights its status as a material form. From making the sources of light visible to the audience to more complex techniques such as *epische*, or third person acting, Brecht’s formal elements resist mimetic illusions that might prevent the audience from using the production as an object for investigation and transformation (Brecht 141, 195).

Fredric Jameson’s dissects one effect of Brechtian theater’s reflexive insistence on its materiality and artifice. Jameson argues that the method of *trennung*, or radical separation, “guards Brecht from wholesale aestheticization, against a complete foundering into the sensory and the aesthesis of spectacle and performance, as in postmodern heterogeneity” (72). For example, in third person acting, the actor ‘quotes’ the character’s speech and actions rather than performs the illusion that he and the character are identical. One effect of this method is that the character/text is estranged from the actor/performance, creating an internal dissonance that allows spectators to experience the theater as a mediated form composed of separate, unresolved parts. As Jameson argues, this aspect of Brecht’s dramaturgy crucially differs from the totalizing spectacle, immanence, and complicit collective politics (e.g. “the commitment to identity politics and hybridization”) that overwhelmingly characterizes postmodern forms (72).<sup>5</sup> The play’s relationship to the audience, therefore, enacts Andrea’s question to Galileo, “Can I have the apple?” and Galileo’s response, “Yes” (12). Like Galileo and Andrea, who symbolically rewrite the story of the first man by undermining the authority and singularity of the apple, the formal techniques undermine the authority and singularity of the theater itself, enforcing the audiences’ autonomous, active and critical relationship to the production.

It is also key that like the apple, *Galileo* elides established theatrical paradigms and expectations. It allows for “commonsense” observations because it is not associated with specialized or isolated knowledge, and it cannot be accessed through a fixed, coherent discourse or mode of perception.

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<sup>4</sup> In *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), Ranciere argues for the emancipatory potential of ‘equality of intelligence,’ meaning that rather than assuming the student/spectator is without knowledge and must be guided to prescribed and alienating knowledge, the teacher/artist must accept the equal value of the student/spectator’s manifestations of intelligence and his ability “to venture forth in the forest, to tell what they see, what they think of what they have seen, to check it and so on” (9).

<sup>5</sup> Jameson’s critique of these characteristics of postmodern forms reflects what is lost when feminist criticism, such as Elin Diamond’s *Unmaking Mimesis*, as well as theater, such as Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud 9*, attempt to use Brecht to “expose and throw back to the spectator” his specific sex/gender oppression (Diamond 46).

Characteristic of Brechtian *trennung*, *Galileo* mixes but never fully mingles genres and conventions.<sup>6</sup> For instance, dramatic dialogue occurs alongside wry song lyrics and melodies in the carnival scene, and the last scene title betrays the ostensible ‘point’ the play’s ending. Moreover, *Galileo* doesn’t draw on content that presupposes a specific end. It marked the conclusion of Brecht’s efforts to write plays and poems of “instant political relevance, such as the Spanish Civil War one-acter *Senora Carrar’s Rifles* or the loose sequence of anti-Nazi scenes known variously as *99%*, *The Private Life of the Master Race* and *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*” (Willet vii). While Brecht’s play set in the Spanish Civil War, *Senora Carrar’s Rifles*, leads audiences to expect commentary on the war,<sup>7</sup> *Galileo* allows for engagement without directive terms. It is set in the past and, more importantly, abstracts this historical layer.<sup>8</sup> Just as *Galileo* rejects the value of the Philosopher’s question, “I just wonder where all this is leading?,” the play does not provide a sense of an endpoint, direction, or ready-made application (39). It performs *Galileo*’s story, “I should say our duty as scientists is not to ask where truth is leading” (39).

The opening scene also decisively emphasizes that seeing is not a natural, transparent phenomenon but a mediated practice that demands reflexive critique. Andreas initially resists *Galileo*’s pedagogy by affirming the natural authority of sight, “But I can see with my own eyes that the sun goes down in a different place from where it rises. So how can it stay still? Of course it can’t!” (8). Andreas thinks of sight as something that is essential rather than mediated, leading him to ignore that his point of view—literally his view from Earth—influences how he sees the sun. Consequently, *Galileo*’s goal of “teaching him to see” requires that Andreas develops an awareness of how his view is constructed (9). This theme of sight’s illusory naturalness is developed by the performance of the text.

The act of seeing is performed: seeing is seen. And this reflexive representation is only heightened by *verfremdung*, the estrangement effect, in which words, gestures, and other phenomena that seem natural, familiar, and immutable are staged so that they become unfamiliar, tangible, and historical. Together, these elements draw attention to how perception is mediated in the context of the play as well as the context of the production. The narrative repeatedly connects seeing to *Galileo*’s pedagogical methods and scientific instruments, while Brecht’s formal uses of the theatrical medium emphasize the play’s fundamentally analogous methods and mechanisms. This comparison aligns Brecht’s aesthetic mode with the “new day” claimed by *Galileo*. One reason critics have overlooked this situation may be because

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<sup>6</sup> Brecht describes this formal effect in his essay on Elder Brueghel, the painter who “manages to balance his contrasts” but “never merges them” (Brecht 157).

<sup>7</sup> The play is widely considered anti-Franco agitprop that intervenes in a specific historic juncture. As Willett notes in *On Brecht and Theater*, Brecht himself called it “technically a step backward,” “too opportunistic,” and an “Aristotelian (empathy-) drama” (115).

<sup>8</sup> Jameson contends that Brechtian theater’s abstracted historical layer stops it from “lead[ing] us back into empirically rich, yet contingent content on social types and social satire” (Jameson 77).

Brecht's V-effect challenges the perceived naturalness of not just of sight but all phenomenon – emphasizing contingency and historic specificity in general. And while the play features mediation in general, the mediated nature of sight is specifically and perpetually evoked through the allegorical process by which the narrative of seeing references the formal experience of seeing and the formal experience references the narrative.

“I was thinking you could just look through the telescope and convince yourselves” (36). The third scene stages a literal discussion of looking. But the discussion is not centered on “proper looking,” as Darko Suvin suggests. The discussion centers on the question, why look? In Galileo's dialogue with the court scholars, looking through the telescope stands in opposition to their authoritative and fixed modes of perception, perhaps best expressed by Andrea's sardonic reference to the Ptolemaic model, “So they say” (33).<sup>9</sup> Galileo's telescope is not only a scientific instrument that challenges the doctrine protected by these modes, it is a mass commodity that challenges the church's ability to control that doctrine. The philosopher and mathematician's old models, namely Aristotle's texts, demand a passive, totalizing, and static spectatorship. Moreover, they resist technological advancements as well as mass audiences (they are written in Latin rather than vernacular Italian). This fictional debate resonates with Brecht and Benjamin's insistence on the revolutionary potential of mass media and communication technology. Jameson contends in *Aesthetics and Politics*, “Brecht's conception of ‘realism’ is thus not complete without this perspective in which the artist is able to use the most complex, modern technology in addressing the widest popular public” (207-8).

The title of the final scene gives away the plot's potentially suspenseful conclusion: “Galileo's book, the ‘Discorsi’, crosses the Italian frontier” (102). In turn, the scene is not about what happens but how it happens. And once again, the how is expressed in terms of seeing. The guard at the border examines Andrea's luggage, involving the clerk in the process, as well. “I can't see nothing,” the clerk concludes (103). The two men's inability to see the *Discorsi* is a result of the constraints of their class (“we need that money”) and religious morality (“the devil helped”), constraints that call to mind the young Andrea (105, 104). But now Andrea, as he was once implored by Galileo, states, “You should learn to use your eyes” (105). Significantly, the story does not end with Andrea turning to the content of Galileo's *Discorsi*. Rather, it is Galileo's lesson on seeing that defines Andrea in the play's final moments. “We're really just at the beginning,” he says. This punning last line signifies both Andrea's answer to the young Giuseppe's question about scientific knowledge as well as the final scene's reenactment of the play's opening. In this version of the opening, Andrea is the teacher and Giuseppe is the pupil—creating an ironic tension between how the end returns to and diverges from the beginning. This tension enacts one

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<sup>9</sup> This line is also repeated in Brecht's *Man Equals Man*.

of Galileo's early understandings: "But now the word is 'that's how things are, but they won't stay like that'. Because everything is in motion my friend"(6). The irony of this gesture—it, at once, expresses change and permanence—also denies an emotional, moral, or didactic resolution. Instead of narrative closure, the play points outwards.

### ***La Chinoise***

The relationship between *La Chinoise's* formal uses of its medium and its narrative of seeing also reflects a radicalism rooted in an aesthetic practice rather than a Marxist-Leninist political practice. The film both conceptualizes and performs a politics of possibility and change based in aesthetic practice. And this aesthetic practice is achieved with and through our existing modes of perception.

In "The Red of *La Chinoise*: Godard's Politics," Jacques Ranciere brilliantly argues that "knowing what 'seeing, listening, speaking, reading' mean is exactly what Godard puts into play in *La Chinoise*"(1). To significantly paraphrase his argument, one of the film central projects is to practice seeing in the Althusserian sense. It is an exercise in seeing "the acts which relate men to their works, and to those works thrown in their faces, the 'absences of work'"(1). Alberto Toscano has also attended to the important role of seeing in the film, although he offers a seemingly contradictory argument. According to Toscano, Godard uses a method of "didactic anti-didacticism," whereby the filmmaker teaches us not to be taught by "constantly frustrating that organization of the image which would allow for the overlay and imposition of meaning from director/producer to viewer/audience." Both these readings, in their apparent contradiction, are supported by the film's representation of seeing.

The revolutionary activities of the five young Maoist, shackled up in an Parisian penthouse, are entirely filtered through culture and, more precisely, cultural mediums. The groups revolutionary politics are constantly articulated through and sanctioned by photographs, books, songs, and so forth.<sup>10</sup> And often, these characters are unable to see because of their insistence on the authority and primacy of certain mediums of perception. During the guest lecture by Omar, "Comrade X," they study socialist revolution while the working class Yvonne labors in the back of the room, an irony that echoes Veronique's earlier dogmatic rebuke of Yvonne, "The wrong policy is the wrong politics. If you're unaware, you're blind." They are unable to observe the class system at work in their presence because their presence is mediated by totalizing modes of perception. In this case, *Mao's Little Red Book* literally prevents them from seeing the young proletariat, and the setting (the bourgeois apartment owned by "factory owners") operates as an implicit form of totalizing mediation. But the satirical narrative of the

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Guillaume throws arrows at the pictures of "public enemies," such as Kant, to express the shifting radicalism of the group, and Henri's Soviet "revisionism," the grounds of his explosion, is articulated through his defense of the film *Johnny Guitar*.

young Maoists' own blindness—their inability to see the situation's potential and their own complicity as a result of their abstract and mediated reality—is complicated by the film's formal commitment to the aesthetics of mediation.

The formal uses of media in *La Chinoise* prevent the film from being a mere parody of attempts to enact revolution within a (capitalist) system or a critique of the incompatibility of theory and practice or art and politics. As in the lecture scene, the audience is constantly reminded of the film's status as a constructed artistic medium. The film uses scene titles and displays the different filmmaking apparatus such as the lighting sources, camera, and editing clapperboard, much like in Brechtian theater.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the film confronts its spectators with contrasting forms of media. Before the lecture scene's irony can coalesce into a stable meaning, a series of cartoons, texts, photographs, and documentary moving images overtake the screen. These formal impositions oppose the spectator's privileged sense of mastery over the scene by frustrating an understanding of who or what is the subject of the representation. Quite simply, what is it that the spectator is spectating? On the surface, these images correspond to the political content of the lecture, an impression furthered by the voiceover. And while they are images that are clearly associated with Marxism (a cartoon of Mao, a still frame of industrial ruin, and so forth), they become strange, silly, and tangibly historical. These images do not clarify or further the 'moral' of Comrade X's Marxist lecture or that of the ostensible scene, rather each image has a striking *gestus* that exceeds the context and hermeneutics of the five student's narrative. This experience of spectating, then, disrupts the authority, naturalness, and self-evidence of the images. The picture of Mao is no longer a transparent expression of the idea of 'revolution': it is an object that the spectator can use to, as Guillaume says of the actor, "look through and with."

The experience of viewing *La Chinoise*, therefore, enacts the hypermediated nature of the film's fiction.<sup>12</sup> Just as the characters lives are dominated by cultural mediums—the radio, record player, books, newspapers, paintings, cartoons, theater, and so forth—the film's formal techniques are deeply invested in the process of mediation. But unlike the French youths, for whom the cultural mediums and discourses are a far greater adversaries than the actual Soviet Minister of Culture, we spectators experience mediated seeing as a process that encourages, if not not demands, a dialectical and critical consciousness (had Brecht been alive in 1967, it seems likely that he would have used media similarly to produce the v-effect). This contradiction between the narrative of seeing and the experience of seeing performs a

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<sup>11</sup> Though to different degrees, theater and film are both limited in their ability to represent the entirety of their apparatus and representational illusions. This similarity is something that the arguments defending the value of 'aura' minimize, specifically those produced in opposition to the emergence of mass culture and technological reproduction.

<sup>12</sup> The narrative also borrows and references established narratives. For example, the script is based on Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* (1872), Guillaume is named after Goethe's hero in *Willhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1975), and Kirilov is named after the suicidal Russian engineer in *The Possessed*.

synthesis of oppressive and a liberating mode of perception. Without the film's uses of its medium, *La Chinoise* could be interpreted as a critique of our existing cultural mediums (akin to Adorno's claims about the impossibility of revolutionary culture produced in a capitalist society) and a defense of artistic realism. But the film's formal uses of these modes and its performance of the indivisibility of art and reality suggests that there is a liberating potential through a critical and dialectical approach to our media.

Guillaume's self-professed quest—"looking" for "a socialist theater"—crucially bookends the film. This plot anticipates the question, what is socialist theater? And does Guillaume ever 'see' it? In an early scene, Guillaume states he is an actor. Like nearly everything in the film, this moment operates as both a text and meta-text, exceeding the 'scopic regime'<sup>13</sup> of the film. For, Guillaume seems to be confessing his identity as an actor within the fiction of the film, and Jean-Pierre Léaud seems to be confessing his identity outside the film as an actor playing Guillaume.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, his monologue about the Chinese protester-actor—"Look what they did to me! Look what the dirty revisionists did!"—reflexively questions the nature of this moment. Is it art? Is it real? Is it political?<sup>15</sup> At the end of the film, the scene titles, which together read "The theatrical vocation of Guillaume Meister and his years of apprenticeship and his travels on the road of a genuine socialist theater," continue to evoke a critical and alienated spectatorship that seem to perform socialism theater as the search itself -- looking for new ways to see and be. Ranciere writes of the scene "Germany Year Zero":

There is no zero situation, no world in ruins or to be ruined. There is only a curtain that rises and a child, an actor who plays with so much lightness the role of a child whose shoulders have to bear the double weight of a devastated world and of a world about to be born. Anyone determined to think the separation between the games of the child actor and the wanderings that end with the death of the child in the fiction, or between theatrical work and revolutionary work, must also think their community. (Ranciere 6)

## Conclusion

The attempt to integrate art and life, to explode the reified dichotomy of culture and politics is one of modernism's great legacies. And therefore, the alleged failure of modernism has often been expressed as a failure to produce a revolution, a failure to affirm the political efficacy of art. But this understanding of modernism's failure stems from the same line of thinking that has dismissed or reduced Brecht to a failed

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<sup>13</sup> Elin Diamond's account of Brecht's *gestus* reflects *La Chinoise's* formal methods. It marks a dialectical engagement rather than a mastery, "generating meaning it would recover (specifically gestic) moments in which historical actor, the character, the spectator, and the author disrupt the scopic regime of realist representation." But unlike Diamond's gestic feminist criticism, *La Chinoise* does not have a clearly delineated goal or political target (such a patriarchal ideology).

<sup>14</sup> Another example of this is Veronique's professor in the film, Francis Jeanson, who was also actresses philosophy professor in 1966–67. And like his character, he had been part of a communist movement for Algerian national liberation, which led to his highly publicized arrest and trial in September 1960.

<sup>15</sup> During a discussion in the course "Brecht, Aesthetics and Politics" at Fordham University, students expressed this tension. One student argued that this moment felt real, exceeding the confines of the film, while others saw it as a sustained critique within the film.



dogmatist whose Marxist doctrine and theater is no longer applicable in our post-Cold War, late capitalist context.

The representations of seeing in *Life of Galileo* and *La Chinoise*—the relationship between seeing in the plot and the experience of seeing created by the formal innovations to their mediums—challenge the terms of this failure. Brecht and Godard's works offer a radicalism rooted in an aesthetic experience. It is not premised upon the transmission and enactment of a specific Marxist-Leninist programme, rather the revolutionary potential of these works is their resistance to systematic and static modes of perception.

You're crazy.

A dreamer.

Ok, it's fiction, but it brings me closer to reality.

Everything must be ready Saturday. Coming, Blandine?

Think about it.

What is "it"? And who is this directive directed at? I think Jameson's account of the Brecht's usefulness best answers these closing questions: "A specifically Brechtian theater is one for whom the idea of the theater is a pulsating allegorical process, including, but greater than, the individual work or performance" (Jameson 72).

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