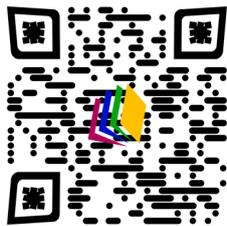


**e-ISSN: 2582-502X**

Asiatic Society for Social Science  
Research. 2(2): Dec 2020, 65-71.

### Research Article



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*(Peer Reviewed)*

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Received on 15.11.2020

Modified on 29.12.2020

Accepted on 10.01.2021

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## **Debating the Techniques of Expression: Lukacs, Brecht, and the Aesthetic Conflict between Realism and Modernism**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

In 1930s Georg Lukacs and Bertolt Brecht engaged in a stimulating debate on the efficacy of modernism and the commitment of modernist writers. The debate produced some of the important arguments on aesthetics and politics, artistic autonomy, and the suitability of mode of expression for representation of individuals in the backdrop of capitalism. Lukacs denounced the modernist technique of stream of consciousness and more specifically the absence of historicity in the writings of modernist novelist. He believed realism is better art for portraying the individuals trapped in capitalism. Brecht, however, rejected Lukacs' criticism of modernism on the ground that his views are conservative; he argued that the mode of expression in a literary epoch is characterized by the socio-economic problems of the age and therefore, the contemporary artists can use newer techniques to respond to these challenges and thus, they cannot be compelled to employ the techniques used by their predecessors. This paper intends to reexamine the realism-modernism debate from a fresh perspective to gain insight into the question of form, content, and literary commitment.

**KEY WORDS:** Realism, Modernism, Aesthetics and Politics, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht.

### **INTRODUCTION**

“Modernism”, Roland Carter and John McRae (2016) write, “has been described as one of the most profound changes and upheavals ever to have occurred in the history of literature” (400). Influenced by the psychological writings of Sigmund Freud and anthropological works of James Frazer novelists like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and D.H. Lawrence, and poets like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and W.H. Auden significantly changed the literary landscape with their experimentation with both medium and manner of expression (349). Stream of consciousness and a sense of alienation of self and society became defining features of modernist writings. However, the modernists

writers produced some of the most difficult literary works which were beyond the comprehension of most readers (350). Due to this and some other reasons modernist writers were heavily criticized. The major criticism of modernism came from a group of intellectuals represented by the Hungarian Marxist literary critic George Lukacs. Denunciating modernism, in his article "Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline" published in 1934 in *International Literature*, he accused the modernist writers of neglecting the "dialectical unity of appearance and essence" (Lukacs 2010, 33). He even categorized the modernist mode of expression such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue as mere formalistic device. Another group of intellectuals represented by Bertolt Brecht reacted sharply to Lukacs' criticism and defended the ideals of modernism by rejecting his views as static and conservative. This followed a series of academic debates on aesthetics and Marxism. While Lukacs' chief concern was historicity and 'totality' Brecht emphasized aesthetic autonomy. The mode of literary expression may change with time allowing the writers of that epoch to experiment with form and content. Modernism was no exception. In this paper, I will reexamine the debate on Realism-Modernism which gained currency during the 1930s, from a variety of perspectives.

### **Modernism:**

Modernism as a literary movement originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century against traditional mode of expression. Unlike the preceding epochs when the "system, the whole mechanism of society, the forces of history" were "all greater than any individual, no matter how idealistic or heroic his aspirations" the age of modernist writers was more disintegrated (Roland Carter and John McRae 2016, 260).

Industrialization and urbanization made the individuals more fragmented and isolated both from the individual and society. Accordingly, the novelists preoccupied with the "themes of loneliness and isolation and the difficulties of relationships both with the individuals and with a wider social and cultural community" (394). For this, the modernist writers employed techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue that suited their age and purpose. Their novels "concentrated less on a social, public world and more on the inner world of unique and isolated individuals" (394). As the Psychology and concept of time were the major factors that impacted the human mind during the twentieth century, the modernist writers did not intend to only narrate the experience of their characters but they wanted the readers to experience them themselves. As Ronald Carter and John McRae (2016) observe, "Writers no longer simply wrote 'he said' or 'she said', 'this reminded him', or she decided in future to....'" (393). Here is how, in *Ulysses* (1922), James Joyce puts the thoughts going on in the protagonist Leopold Bloom's mind:

He entered Davy Byrne's. Moral pub. He doesn't chat. Stands a drink now and then. But in leapyear once in four. Cashed a cheque for me once. What will I take now? He drew watch. Let me see. Shandygaff? ----- Hellow, Bloom! Nosey Flynn said from his nook. ----- Hello, Flynn. How things? -----Tiptop---- let me see ---- Sardines on the shelves. Almost taste them by looking. Sandwich? --- What is home without Plumbtree's potted meat? Incomplete. What a stupid ad! --- Eat, drink and be merry. Then casual words full after. Heads bandaged. Cheese digests all but itself. Mighty cheese. ----- Have you a cheese sandwich? ----- Yes, sir. (Joyce 2000, 218)

Brecht, while reacting to Lukacs' criticism of

modernist writers, highlighted these characteristics of modernism. One of the remarkable features of the modernism he emphasizes is its preoccupation with the plot. Brecht believes the modernist writers engage the plot with the specific feature of stream of consciousness and interior monologue. By engaging with the ideas and thoughts that are going in their characters' mind, they posit the issues they want to explore. The emphasis is not physical actions but on the thought process.

### **Lukacs' Views on Modernism:**

George Lukacs is often considered as one of the founders of the tradition of Western Marxism, which tried to liberate Marxism from the indolence of Soviet orthodoxy. His contribution of the ideas of reification and class consciousness to Marxist philosophy helped explain why the proletariat revolution took place in feudal society and not in the capitalist countries. He tried to make Marxism pertinent to the twentieth century by emphasizing the role of the novel and privileged realism over modernism (New World Encyclopedia, "Georg Lukacs" 2020, para 1). His 1923 work *History and Class Consciousness* is instrumental in understanding many of his concepts. Lukacs believed that in the modern world the society and the individual are alienated by capitalism, therefore, he strongly advocated the contextualizing of class conscious and class struggle in the novel as a literary genre. However, the modernist writers, he argued, failed at depicting reality as they represented reality as appeared to them without considering historical condition of the nature of reality. The realist writers, on the other hand, integrate these two into a complex totality by combating alienation and fragmentation of capitalist society. A realist work for Lukacs comprises of "a complex, comprehensive set of relations between man, nature and history", in

which the lives of the individual characters were depicted as a part of narrative which situated them within the entire historical dynamics of their society (Eagleton 2003, 26-27). Lukacs believed Shakespeare, Balzac and Tolstoy employed such techniques. These writers could produce great realist art because they traced the movement of the history. On other hand, modernist writer's works are deprived of historical content. Terry Eagleton elaborates this further: "In the alienated words of Kafka, Musil, Joyce, Beckett, Camus, man is stripped of his history and has no reality beyond the self; character is dissolved to mental states, objective reality reduced to unintelligible chaos" (29). Lukacs claims that for modernist writers' reality is what appears to them; therefore, he recommends them to adhere to the styles of Balzac and Tolstoy.

In his essay titled "Kafka or Thomas Mann?" while critiquing modernism, he denounced the modernist techniques of stream of consciousness and interior monologue. He categorized the literary mode of expression of Kafka, Joyce and Brecht as mere formalistic device. Therefore, he advocated the literary styles of Scott, Balzac, and Tolstoy as these authors wrote historical novels in which they depicted their heroic characters in the history of class struggles which best suited to counteract capitalism. In the essay "Realism in the Balance" he accused the modernist writers of lacking "a genuine historical perspective, an understanding of the dialectical nature of historical change" (Gluck 1986, 850). His conception of realism is succinctly put by Terry Eagleton (2003) in his book *Marxism and Literary Criticism*:

For the Marxist Lukács of *Studies in European Realism* and *The Historical Novel*, "the greatest artists are those who can recapture and recreate a harmonious totality of human life. In a society

where the general and the particular, the conceptual and the sensuous, the social and the individual are increasingly torn apart by the 'alienations' of capitalism, the great writer draws these dialectically together into a complex totality. His fiction thus mirrors, in microcosmic form, the complex totality of society itself. In doing this, great art combats the alienation and fragmentation of capitalist society, projecting a rich, many sided image of human wholeness. Lukács names such art 'realism', and takes it to include the Greeks and Shakespeare as much as Balzac and Tolstoy." (26)

Thus, emphasizing the history of class struggle he commends the historical novels of Scott, Balzac, Tolstoy, and Stendhal. Charles Prusik (2012) believes that Lukacs' conception of realism as a mode of expression captures not an immediate and visible reality on the surface level but the one which is permanent in nature and which depicts the man in his entire range of contexts of the actual world (3). Lukacs considered a writer realist who "links the individual to the social whole" and shows "the significant movements of the history itself. Shakespeare, Scott, Balzac and Tolstoy were great realist and could produce great realist texts because they themselves were "present at the tumultuous birth of an historical epoch" (Eagleton 2003, 27). However, the modernist authors such as Kafka, Joyce could not produce such realist tradition because for them "history is already an inert object" (28). Their works are deprived of historical conditions. Therefore, in "Realism in the Balance" he insists on the objective reality:

The modern literary schools of the imperialist era, from Naturalism to Surrealism, which have followed each other in such swift succession, all have one feature in common. They all take

reality as it manifests itself to the writer and the characters he creates. The form of this immediate manifestation changes when society changes. (Lukacs 2010, 36).

### **Realism:**

Realism, which developed in response to Romanticism, emphasizes the ideology of objective reality. As a literary movement it attempted to capture the physical and social settings with meticulous details in order to communicate the spirit of the contemporary age. Therefore, the characters were represented in specific social reality with primacy of actions and choices (New World Encyclopedia, "Realism" 2020, para 1). Realism, for Lukacs, is a medium of literary expression that encapsulates individuals in the context of historical totality. One of the major differences between the realist and modernist according to him is that the former portrays man's last phase of struggle against capitalism while the latter reproduces a capitalist world that is already disintegrated. Therefore, history and historical contexts become more important for him. Commending the realist tradition of Shakespeare, Balzac, and Tolstoy he writes:

Every major realist fashions the material given in his own experience, and in so doing makes use of techniques of abstraction, among others. But his goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society. (Lukacs 2010, 38).

### **Critique of Lukacs' Views:**

Brecht responded to the charges of Lukacs in the essay "Against George Lukacs". Reacting sharply to Lukacs' accusation that modernist technique of expression is merely a formalistic device he argued that "Realism is not a mere question of

form” (Brecht 2010, 82). Unlike Lukacs who stressed the importance of character and heroic figure, Brecht emphasized on the significance of plot: “Individuals should not occupy much more space in books and, above all not another space, than reality” (77-78). While Lukacs admired Balzac, Shakespeare, and Scott, and wanted the modernist writers to adhere to their literary technique, Brecht criticized Balzac by saying that he “was first of all a businessman, indeed a businessman in debt.... he took to speculation ... suspended payments and wrote novels to pay his debts” (78). Aesthetic autonomy gives writers to choose their literary mode of expression, therefore, they cannot adhere to a single literary mode of expression. As Brecht (2010) remarked: “New problems appear and demands new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new” (82). Brecht’s defence of modernism does not imply that he deserts realism or presuppose it as an inferior mode of representation. It is only he considers the concept in a wider realm, “Our Marxism and literary criticism concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions” (82). Besides, he also talks about ‘cleansing’ realism before being made used by successive generation of writers, “We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived elsewhere, to render reality to men in a form they can master (81).

### **Criticism:**

Lukacs has been criticized by various literary critics for his views on modernism. Actually, this realism-modernism debate has been a contentious topic of debate among the Marxist scholars since

1934 when Lukacs’ controversial article “Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline” was published in *International Literature*. Since then a number of critics have contributed to this debate. Eagleton (2003) believes that Lukacs’ conceptualization of realism is formalistic as it is both abstract and unhistorical derived from a fixed literary epoch alone rather than in conformity with the changing realities which shape the literary production. It is narrowly based on a few novels written in a particular epoch and ignores to take into account other genres (66). Even literary critic Fredric James (2010) has expressed his views. Positioning the realism-modernism debate into a larger historical perspective, he remarked:

the aesthetic conflict between ‘Realism’ and ‘Modernism’, whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today, even though we may feel that each position is in some sense right and yet that neither is any longer wholly acceptable. The dispute is itself older than Marxism, and in a longer perspective may be said to be a contemporary political replay of 17<sup>th</sup> century *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, in which for the first time, aesthetics came face to face with the dilemmas of historicity. (196).

Lukacs advocated a politically engaged literature that can serve for the cause of the left. But should art profess any political commitment? Art, according to Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, is self-contained and self-sufficient. It has no other purpose to serve. Art and artists are free from all constraint as Brecht (2010) writes:

we must not cling to ‘tried’ rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art

and derived elsewhere, to render reality to men in a form they can master. We shall take care not to describe one particular, historical form of the novel of a particular epoch as realistic - say that of Balzac or Tolstoy- and thereby erect merely formal, literary criteria for realism... Our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions. (81,82)

Lukacs fails to consider the role of the author when he privileges form over content. An author, according to Brecht and Benjamin, is predominantly a producer, similar to maker of any product (Eagleton 2003, 63). Interestingly, the author does not himself create the resources which he produces. For example, forms, principles, legends, codes, and ideologies come to the author as already created notions. He is just like a worker in an assembly plant where he is merely assembles things already manufactured by other workers (64). Thus, his role is merely of producer, not of a creator. In this context the author cannot be criticized for the form. Secondly, the form itself becomes lesser important because there are host of other factors that regulate the artistic production. Additionally, if the question of form is a problematic idea for modernist writers then certainly it equally a problematic idea for the realist authors (Prusik 2012, 5).

Every literary age is characterized by its own peculiar social problems and therefore writers also develop new literary modes to deal with them. Sir Walter Scott wrote his historical novels at the time when Britain fought Napoleonic war and social unrest was growing. He wrote in an age when society not the individual was defining yardstick. There was no least sense of fragmentation, alienation of individuals. Therefore, his engagement with 'historicity' was both desirable

and prerequisite and to deal with class division he employed historical struggle of men of different classes. On the other hand, the twentieth century, the age of modernist was characterized by fragmentation and isolation. Therefore, individual's fragmentation and isolation could better be portrayed through the stream of consciousness and interior monologue techniques.

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, it can be argued that though Lukacs' argument against modernism has been brilliantly conceived yet his views on modernism are based on conservatism and his approach is static. Realism for him was reflection of movement of history as idealized by Balzac and Tolstoy. Lukacs stressed upon politically engaged literature that can serve the cause of the left. Therefore, he wanted human beings to be depicted in struggles against capitalism in the novels. He gave importance to characters, specifically, the heroic figures created by Balzac and Shakespeare. However, Lukacs' arguments are against aesthetic autonomy and artistic innovation. With the passage of time society changes and new problems crop up that require new methods and therefore writers react to these by adopting new modes of representation. Lukacs' position is not correct because literary mode of expression is subject to change over a period of time. At the same time artistic autonomy allows a writer to choose his own mode of expression. Nevertheless, the Brecht-Lukacs debate, which involved a series of intellectual outpourings from Ernst Bloch to Walter Benjamin to Theodor Adorno, generated some of the most critical arguments not only on realism and modernism but also on the question of form and aesthetics, literary commitment and ideology, that continue to revisit even in the twenty first century.

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