

From Alienation to Ecological Awareness: Ecocritical Perspectives on Brechtian Dramaturgy

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Abstract: Ecology emerged in the nineteenth century as a biological discipline concerned with relations between species and their organic and inorganic environments. Over time, it developed into an interdisciplinary field engaging sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, history, and the arts. Ecocriticism, which explores the cultural and literary dimensions of ecological thought, reconnects nature and culture by showing how environmental problems are closely linked to social injustice, war, exploitation, and ideological domination. This study interprets Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre through an ecocritical perspective, arguing that ecological methods can clarify the structural dynamics of his dramaturgy. Applying ecological theory to dramatic form, it examines a relatively rare intersection in scholarship. Brecht's representation of oppressor–oppressed and exploiter–exploited relations reflects wider anthropocentric hierarchies shaping humanity's relation to nature. The techniques of epic theatre, including estrangement, episodic structure, montage, and didactic narration, challenge habitual perception and present society as an unstable ecosystem marked by inequality. From an ecocritical viewpoint, epic theatre reveals not only social and political contradictions but also ecological imbalance and human domination of nature.

Keywords: Ecology, ecocriticism, Bertolt Brecht, epic theatre, anthropocentrism, environmental ethics.

Yabancılaşmadan Ekolojik Farkındalığa: Brecht'yen Dramaturjiye Ekoeleştirel Perspektifler

Öz: Ekoloji, on dokuzuncu yüzyılda türler ile onların organik ve inorganik çevreleri arasındaki ilişkileri inceleyen biyolojik bir disiplin olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Zamanla sosyoloji, antropoloji, siyaset bilimi, ekonomi, tarih ve sanat gibi alanları da kapsayan disiplinlerarası bir alana dönüşmüştür. Ekolojik düşüncenin kültürel ve edebî boyutlarını inceleyen ekoeleştiri, doğa ile kültür arasındaki ayrımı yeniden düşünerek çevresel sorunların toplumsal adaletsizlik, savaş, sömürü ve ideolojik tahakkümle yakından ilişkili olduğunu gösterir. Bu çalışma, Bertolt Brecht'in epik tiyatrosunu ekoeleştirel bir çerçevede yorumlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Ekolojik teoriyi dramatik biçime uygulayan çalışma, literatürde görece sınırlı incelenmiş bir kesişim alanına odaklanmaktadır. Brecht'in ezen–ezilen ve sömüren–sömürülen ilişkilerini sunuşu, insanın doğayla kurduğu ilişkiyi belirleyen daha geniş insan merkezci hiyerarşileri yansıtır. Yabancılaştırma, epizodik yapı, montaj ve öğretici anlatım gibi epik tiyatro teknikleri, toplumu eşitsizliklerle biçimlenen istikrarsız bir ekosistem olarak görünür kılar.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Ekoloji, ekoeleştiri, Bertolt Brecht, epik tiyatro, insan merkezcilik, çevre etiği

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Introduction

Theatre is among the earliest and most enduring forms of human cultural production, reaching back to the pre-verbal stages of human development. Long before writing systems or institutionalized forms of communication existed, early humans used their bodies as instruments of expression, transforming gesture, movement, and sound into shared meaning. In this primordial context, bodily performance constituted a fundamental mode through which humans interpreted natural phenomena, interacted with other species, and made sense of their immediate surroundings. The human being, in this sense, was already theatrical in its earliest and most nature-bound state. Theatre thus emerges not as an exclusively artistic invention but as an embodied cultural practice deeply entangled with human evolutionary history, environmental awareness, and social life. As societies evolved, theatre continued to mediate the relationship between human communities and the natural world, reflecting the shifting structures, tensions, and contradictions of culture. Because human relations with nature are always refracted through cultural frameworks, theatre becomes a site where these relations are staged, dramatized, questioned, and reimaged. This study follows this reciprocal logic, approaching theatre from an ecological perspective in order to examine how dramatic forms register and critique the entanglement of culture, society, and environment. Human culture, in its earliest manifestations, emerged alongside and in continuous interaction with natural environments. While rooted in nature, culture gradually evolved into a complex, increasingly artificial system shaped by social, technological, and political developments. Over time, cultural evolution outpaced biological evolution, producing a widening conceptual and material distance between nature and human societies. Culture encompasses the symbolic and material dimensions of social life: belief systems, knowledge, language, law, art, economy, and politics—everything humans create, preserve, and transmit across generations (Tylor, 1871; Sutton & Anderson, 2013).

Yet the Enlightenment marked a pivotal shift in this trajectory. Rationalist philosophy and technoscientific expansion accelerated cultural development while simultaneously intensifying environmental degradation, resource extraction, and ecological imbalance. The culture–nature divide, once a conceptual tool for understanding the world, became embedded in the dominant epistemologies of the West and profoundly shaped its philosophical, scientific, and artistic paradigms. The earliest systematic attempts to respond to the intensifying rupture between humans and the natural world emerged within the field of ecology, broadly defined as the scientific study of relationships between organisms and their physical environments (Odum, 1971). However, the philosophical genealogy of ecological thinking extends much further back. Classical Greek thinkers debated the status of nature long before ecology emerged as a scientific discipline. Plato viewed nature as an unstable, imperfect reflection of an abstract realm of immutable forms, while Aristotle conceptualized nature as a coherent, observable system governed by empirical principles. Aristotle's hierarchical classification of life forms and his teleological view of nature placed humans at the apex of a natural order, thereby laying conceptual groundwork for later anthropocentric and hierarchical interpretations. These classical ideas were absorbed into medieval Christian cosmology, which interpreted nature as a divine creation existing primarily for human use and moral instruction. The Cartesian revolution intensified this anthropocentric tendency. Cartesian dualism sharply divided mind (*res cogitans*) from matter (*res extensa*), rendering the nonhuman world mechanical, inert, and instrumentalizable. Within this paradigm, consciousness and agency belonged solely to the human subject, while animals and ecosystems were reduced to manipulable objects governed by mathematical laws. Enlightenment rationalism consolidated this worldview, portraying nature as an external domain to be mastered through scientific knowledge and technological progress. This mechanistic, instrumental relationship to nature underpinned modernity's expansionist projects—including colonialism, industrialization, and capitalist growth—and contributed to the ecological crises that define the contemporary world. The emergence of ecological thought in the twentieth century constitutes a critical challenge to these entrenched dualisms. As environmental degradation, climate instability, biodiversity loss, and social injustice intensified, scholars and activists increasingly recognized that environmental problems were inseparable from social, political, and economic structures.

Ecology expanded beyond biology to become an interdisciplinary framework that brings together natural sciences, social sciences, philosophy, and the arts (Bateson, 1972; Merchant, 1980; Bookchin, 1982). This

intellectual expansion drew inspiration from earlier traditions, particularly Romanticism, which countered mechanistic conceptions of nature by emphasizing interconnectedness, intuition, and aesthetic experience. Alexander von Humboldt, a pivotal figure in the emergence of ecological knowledge, conceptualized the Earth as a living network of dynamic relations shaped by climate, geography, and human activity. His fusion of scientific observation with artistic sensibility laid the groundwork for holistic understandings of nature that resonate strongly with contemporary ecological theory (Wulf, 2015). Within this broader intellectual landscape, ecocriticism emerged in the late twentieth century as a distinct field examining the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). While first-wave ecocriticism focused primarily on representations of nature and wilderness, subsequent phases expanded the field to include environmental justice, gender, race, postcolonial ecologies, new materialisms, and posthumanist theory (Buell, 2005; Alaimo, 2010; Barad, 2007; Oppermann, 2013). These developments align ecocriticism with parallel movements in environmental thought, including deep ecology, social ecology, and ecofeminism. Together, these frameworks challenge anthropocentrism, critique hierarchical systems of domination, and seek to reconceptualize human–nature relations through relational, ethical, and systemic perspectives. Situating theatre within ecocritical discourse thus provides an opportunity to analyze not only environmental representations but also theatre’s material, spatial, and embodied ecologies. Theatre scholars such as Baz Kershaw (2007) and Bonnie Marranca (1996) have conceptualized performance as an ecological system composed of interdependent bodies, spaces, materials, and affects. From this perspective, theatre is not merely a symbolic representation of environmental concerns but itself an ecological event—one that reveals how cultural practices participate in and influence ecological processes. Performance studies increasingly emphasize that stages are not neutral platforms but environments shaped by architecture, infrastructures, technologies, atmospheres, and political conditions. Ecological dramaturgy extends this insight further by challenging binary thinking—nature/culture, human/nonhuman, subject/object—and foregrounding relationality, contingency, and co-creation (Woynarski, 2015). In doing so, ecological theatre contributes to broader cultural efforts to reckon with the Anthropocene and to cultivate ecological consciousness through embodied, sensory, and affective experience. The theoretical background provides the foundation for reexamining the work of Bertolt Brecht, one of the most influential playwrights and theorists of the twentieth century. Brecht’s epic theatre, shaped by Marxist dialectics and a commitment to political critique, offers fertile ground for ecocritical reinterpretation. Epic theatre departs fundamentally from bourgeois realism and psychological identification, seeking instead to expose contradictions within social systems and to encourage spectators’ critical engagement. Brecht developed a set of dramaturgical strategies—*gestus*, alienation, historicization, fragmentation—that aim to defamiliarize social norms and reveal the historical conditions underlying human behavior. These techniques encourage audiences to recognize that social arrangements are neither natural nor inevitable but historically produced and therefore subject to change.

When read through an ecocritical lens, Brecht’s theoretical framework resonates strikingly with ecological critiques of domination, hierarchy, and anthropocentrism. Marxist theory, which informs Brecht’s dramaturgy, conceptualizes capitalist relations as systems of exploitation, commodification, and alienation—structures that parallel contemporary analyses of environmental degradation. Social ecologists such as Murray Bookchin explicitly argue that ecological crises originate in social hierarchies: the domination of nature by humans is rooted in the domination of humans by other humans. Brecht’s theatre, likewise, foregrounds systemic forces—economic, ideological, political—that shape individual actions and social outcomes. His insistence on historicization aligns with ecological principles emphasizing interdependence, feedback loops, and the historical contingency of socio-environmental systems. Meanwhile, *gestus*, with its capacity to reveal underlying social relations through embodied action, offers a powerful tool for staging human–nature interactions and the ideological formations that structure them. Epic theatre’s core techniques thus lend themselves to ecological reinterpretation. The alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), for example, aims to estrange familiar practices and thereby reveal their social construction. This estrangement resonates strongly with ecocritical efforts to interrogate normalized forms of environmental exploitation and to denaturalize anthropocentric assumptions. Fragmentation and episodic structure parallel ecological dramaturgy’s commitment to non-linear, open-ended forms that reflect the complexity of ecological systems. Even Brecht’s

attention to material theatrical elements—lighting, music, set design—can be understood ecologically, as part of a broader theatrical environment that shapes audiences' sensory and cognitive experience. Taken together, these intersections suggest that Brecht's epic theatre can be productively reinterpreted as a model of ecological critique. While Brecht did not explicitly address environmental issues, his dramaturgical strategies provide a powerful framework for examining the social, economic, and ideological structures that underlie ecological crises. By making systemic relations visible and contestable, epic theatre offers tools for cultivating ecological awareness, interrogating anthropocentric narratives, and reimagining human–nature relations. This article therefore proposes a dialogue between Brechtian theory and contemporary ecocritical thought. It argues that epic theatre's critical, dialectical, and estranging methodologies can be mobilized to develop an ecocritical theatre practice capable of addressing the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century. In doing so, the study contributes to broader conversations in the environmental humanities about how aesthetic forms can illuminate and transform cultural understandings of ecological crisis, responsibility, and possibility.

Brecht and Epic Theatre from an Ecocritical Perspective

Epic theatre, as formulated by Bertolt Brecht, constitutes one of the most rigorous attempts in twentieth-century culture to rethink the relationship between art, society, and material conditions. Although developed primarily as a Marxist critique of capitalist modernity, Brecht's theatrical practice resonates strongly with contemporary ecocritical theory. Both Brechtian dramaturgy and ecocritical thought seek to expose systems of domination, decentralize the human subject, foreground marginal or silenced perspectives, and encourage audiences to perceive the world as a dynamic, interdependent network rather than a static set of relations. When read through an ecocritical lens, Brecht's theoretical writings and dramatic experiments reveal an underlying concern with the very issues that define ecological critique: alienation from nature, the ideological construction of "second nature," the marginalization of the nonhuman, and the normalization of destructive forms of social and environmental exploitation. This convergence becomes apparent when Brecht is placed in dialogue with writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Murray Bookchin, Guy Debord, Theodor W. Adorno, and Hubert Zapf. Although these figures operated in different intellectual traditions, all share an interest in the mechanisms through which capitalist modernity produces conformity, erases alternative ways of living, instrumentalizes nature, and suppresses dissent. Thoreau, for instance, begins from the degradation of the natural world and traces from there the deeper contradictions of society. His reflections on the moral dangers of industrial life anticipate Brecht's analysis of how material conditions shape consciousness. Both thinkers insist that a critical examination of one's environment—whether natural or social—is a precondition for ethical agency. Brecht approaches similar problems through the public, collective medium of theatre. His plays repeatedly feature characters who exist on the margins of the social order: vagrants, wanderers, beggars, failed adventurers, or socially expendable figures whose lives have been rendered precarious by the structural inequalities of modernity. These characters serve as diagnostic tools. By foregrounding individuals who do not "fit" smoothly into the system, Brecht exposes the fractures of capitalist society.

Ecocritical theory arrives at a comparable insight: the logic of exclusion that casts nonhuman nature as an object or resource also marginalizes those humans who fall outside dominant economic or ideological frameworks. As Thoreau observes, the poor, the unconventional, and the unsuccessful are treated as social waste in the same way that nonhuman nature is treated as raw material. Brecht uses theatrical representation to reveal these dynamics, showing how modern systems generate hierarchies that extend across both human and nonhuman domains. The theme of otherness finds a symbolic expression in Brecht's early engagement with the mythic figure of Baal, the Near Eastern deity associated with storms, forests, fertility, and the earth's abundance. In Brecht's early play *Baal*, the title character embodies energies that bourgeois society represses: bodily desire, instinct, material need, and an unregulated relation to the natural world. Mythologically, Baal resembles the Dionysian figure of Greek imagination—a god of excess, dissolution, and ecstatic freedom. For Brecht, Baal functions as a critique of civilization's constraints. While outwardly destructive, Baal also represents a force that resists the ascetic, rationalized discipline of modern life. Ecocritically, this alignment with bodily and ecological excess reveals an early Brechtian concern with the domains excluded by bourgeois reason: nature, instinct, materiality, and the voices silenced by utilitarian logic. Brecht's attraction to Baal is

therefore not a celebration of chaos but an implicit recognition that cultural and environmental repression are structurally linked. This insight anticipates core arguments of social ecology. For Bookchin, modern domination takes multiple forms—hierarchical social structures, gendered oppression, and the instrumentalization of nature. These forms are not separate but mutually reinforcing. Brecht, though not writing as an environmental theorist, dramatizes analogous patterns of domination throughout his work. His characters often exist within rigid hierarchies that distort human relations, frustrate ethical behavior, and produce ecological indifference. In the same way that Carson foregrounds the invisible victims of chemical pollution—birds, insects, rural communities—Brecht foregrounds those human victims whose suffering is concealed by modern ideologies of progress. Both writers expose how capitalist development distributes benefits to a minority while externalizing environmental and social costs onto those without power. Brecht's critique of domination aligns closely with Debord's theory of the "society of the spectacle" and Adorno's analysis of the culture industry. For Debord, modern life is mediated by images that manipulate desire and obscure material realities. Adorno similarly argues that mass culture pacifies audiences, training them to accept standardized pleasures instead of questioning the structures that govern their lives. Brecht recognized that traditional dramatic theatre participates in this logic. By encouraging audiences to identify emotionally with individual characters, bourgeois theatre conceals systemic mechanisms and invites spectators to see social problems as personal tragedies rather than structural conditions. The result is a form of theatrical consumption that mirrors ideological consumption: an acceptance of the world as it appears. Thoreau's critique of modern habit parallels this; he describes individuals who live unreflectively, lulled into complacency by routine and spectacle.

Brechtian theatre, by contrast, seeks to wake the spectator from this ideological sleep. This awakening is accomplished through Brecht's signature dramaturgical techniques—*gestus*, interruption, alienation, and historization—which together form what may be described as a dramaturgical ecology. Each technique contributes to a broader aesthetic system that emphasizes relationality, interdependence, and systemic critique, echoing ecological principles. Dramaturgy in this sense becomes a living organism, as Bonnie Marranca suggests: a dynamic interplay of scenes, images, attitudes, and textual strategies that adapt to changing material conditions. Rather than constructing a closed narrative designed to elicit catharsis, epic theatre organizes itself as an open system in which individual elements can be reconfigured to generate multiple interpretations. This openness mirrors ecocritical notions of ecosystems as fluid, relational networks rather than fixed entities. Within this dramaturgical ecology, the actor holds a central position. In epic theatre, the actor does not aim to merge psychologically with the character but instead maintains a reflective distance, simultaneously embodying and analyzing the role. This doubleness is crucial. It allows the actor to treat the character's behavior as the outcome of social and historical forces rather than as a private essence. The actor thereby becomes a mediator between culture and critique, demonstrating how human actions are shaped by their socio-material "ecology"—class relations, labor structures, ideological norms, and historical pressures. Brecht famously compares this process to a chess player evaluating multiple possible moves at once. Instead of presenting behavior as inevitable, the actor reveals alternatives: how things could be otherwise. Ecocritically, this performance models a form of relational agency that resists deterministic accounts of human behavior and foregrounds the possibility of change. *Gestus* is the foundational instrument of this approach. A gesture becomes *gestus* when it expresses an attitude embedded in a specific social relation—class superiority, submission, exploitation, or resistance. *Gestus* is therefore not psychological but relational. It maps the character's position within the social ecosystem and exposes power dynamics that remain invisible in everyday life. Through *gestus*, epic theatre reveals the hierarchical structures that organize social life, thereby illuminating the logic of domination that extends from human interactions to environmental practices. The same attitudes that justify the exploitation of workers—indifference, entitlement, instrumentalization—also justify ecological harm. *Gestus* thus becomes a tool for exposing the ethical framework that underlies both social and environmental degradation. Interruption (*Unterbrechung*) further reinforces this analytical stance.

By breaking the narrative flow, Brecht creates cognitive gaps that prevent audiences from being swept into emotional identification. Each interruption presents a situation as a discrete problem to be examined, rather than a seamless part of a dramatic arc. Titles, songs, commentary, or projected text all function to

fracture continuity and transform the stage into a space of demonstration. As Walter Benjamin observes, meaning in epic theatre emerges from the juxtaposition of discrete gestic moments, much like the way ecological writing juxtaposes episodes or phenomena to reveal systemic relationships. Through interruption, Brecht demands that the audience interpret situations historically and socially, not psychologically. The alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) works in tandem with interruption and *gestus*. Alienation makes the familiar strange, forcing spectators to examine behaviors that they would normally accept as self-evident. By showing the constructedness of social behaviors, alienation challenges the naturalization of hierarchies and ideologies. In ecological terms, alienation disrupts the ideological production of “second nature”—the realm of habits, routines, and cultural representations that conceal the material exploitation of both people and environments. Just as ecocriticism reveals how idyllic images of nature mask environmental destruction, alienation reveals how theatrical conventions mask social contradictions. The stage becomes a site for exposing the ideological operations that shape human relations with one another and with the nonhuman world. Historization complements these techniques by situating actions within their specific socio-historical conditions. Rather than presenting human behavior as timeless or universal, Brecht insists that it be understood as contingent, mutable, and shaped by historical forces. This principle resonates with ecological conceptions of nature as a dynamic process rather than a static backdrop. Environmental thinkers such as Leopold emphasize that natural phenomena—mountains, forests, ecosystems—are products of long historical developments. Likewise, Brecht’s historization encourages viewers to see human behavior as the outcome of historical processes, thereby enabling them to imagine how different conditions might produce different forms of action. Historization thus fosters critical distance and collective reflection, essential capacities for ecological consciousness. These dramaturgical devices also shape Brecht’s use of *décor*, music, and form. *Décor* in epic theatre is not designed to replicate reality but to reveal it. Sets are simplified, flexible, and transparent in their construction. Scene changes occur in view of the audience to emphasize the artificiality of representation. From an ecocritical perspective, this approach parallels critiques of realistic theatre’s reliance on illusion, which reproduces the dominant ideology by presenting constructed realities as natural. Brecht’s *décor*, by contrast, exposes its own constructedness, thereby encouraging viewers to question the constructedness of their social environment.

Music functions similarly. Rather than reinforcing emotional identification, it comments on action, summarizes situations, or reveals contradictions. The orchestra is placed visibly onstage to emphasize the performance’s materiality. Songs interrupt rather than enhance dramatic flow, drawing attention to the socio-political implications of the scene. The use of folk melodies, street songs, and popular idioms reflects Brecht’s commitment to accessibility and his alignment with cultural forms rooted in communal practices rather than commercial production. This connection to folk culture is ecologically significant: folk traditions often maintain a closer relationship with nature and collective life than the commodified cultural forms of modernity. Folk theatre, in particular, provides an important model for Brecht. Its type-based characters, direct language, improvisational elements, and satirical tone create a performance mode that resists psychological identification and emphasizes social critique. Folk theatre also draws on communal knowledge and rejects elitist cultural forms, making it a natural ally for Brecht’s anti-bourgeois aesthetics. Ecocritically, folk theatre represents a cultural form that has not yet been severed from its ecological and communal roots. Brecht’s appropriation of it therefore supports his broader project of reconnecting theatre with material conditions and collective agency. Taken together, these elements—*gestus*, interruption, alienation, historization, *décor*, music, and form—compose a dramaturgical ecology aligned with ecocritical critique. Epic theatre challenges the ideological structures that naturalize exploitation, whether of people or of environments. It rejects anthropocentric assumptions that place human experience at the center of representation and instead positions human behavior as an object of investigation. By foregrounding relationality, systemic analysis, and critical reflection, Brecht offers theatrical tools for confronting the intertwined social and ecological crises of modernity. Viewed through this ecocritical framework, epic theatre emerges not merely as a historical avant-garde movement but as a model for ecological aesthetics in the Anthropocene. Its techniques dismantle illusion, disrupt habitual perception, and cultivate a spectator who is both critical and active—a spectator capable of recognizing the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems and of imagining alternatives

to prevailing structures of domination. In this sense, Brecht's theatre continues to provide a powerful resource for contemporary efforts to think and perform ecological justice.

Ecocritical Elements in Brecht's Plays

Kesting notes that Brecht is virtually unique among epic dramatists in systematically developing a theoretical corpus alongside his dramatic works, so that the plays themselves become concrete laboratories for his dramaturgical concepts (Kesting, 1985). Read from an ecocritical perspective, these plays not only embody the principles of epic theatre but also dramatize the tensions between culture and nature, anthropocentrism and otherness, domination and resistance. This section examines several key plays—*Baal*, *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti*, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *The Yes-Sayer / The No-Sayer*—to show how Brecht's dramaturgy anticipates and enriches ecocritical concerns. One of Brecht's earliest plays, *Baal* takes its title from its central figure, whose name evokes the ancient Near Eastern deity of fertility, storm, and the earth's abundance. Brecht was deeply interested in non-Western cultures, and the Baal figure became an obsessive symbolic presence that reappears in later works in altered guises. In *Baal*, this figure appears as a poet who is unable or unwilling to adapt to the demands of a modernizing, bourgeois society. Baal is initially drawn into the rhythms of a "civilized" life: he finds a white-collar job, assumes responsibilities, pays bills, and is expected to please his superiors through diligent work. In this environment, he is taught not to create but to consume. Even his poetry, when turned into a commodity to be sold in entertainment venues, becomes another consumable object. Baal proves incapable of conforming to this regime. He abandons his office work, attempts to earn money by singing in bars, fails economically, commits murder, and sinks progressively deeper into social and moral marginality before dying alone and destitute. Viewed ecocritically, Baal personifies a nature-cult figure trapped within a cultural apparatus that seeks to discipline, market, and ultimately destroy him. He is marked by excess—of appetite, sexuality, drunkenness, and violent passion—and thus recalls Dionysian energies traditionally associated with wilderness, irrationality, and fertility.

Culture appears in the play as a machinery of domestication: it tries to stabilize, categorize, and instrumentalize Baal, while his impulses and desires move in the opposite direction, toward dissolution, wandering, and bodily pleasure. Baal's conflict with bourgeois labour ideology is especially revealing. His refusal to work in the prescribed manner echoes critiques of the capitalist work ethic that identify relentless productivity as a source of physical and spiritual degradation. Work, in this logic, is not a neutral necessity but a disciplinary mechanism that channels human energy into the service of accumulation. Baal's rejection of regular employment and his preference for drifting, sleeping in barns, wandering in rain and wind, and pursuing sexual pleasure mark him as a figure of resistance to this second nature of industrial culture. His "idleness" is not simple laziness but a refusal of a system that equates human worth with productivity. At the same time, Baal is far from an idealized nature hero. He is destructive, exploitative, and often cruel, particularly in his relations with women. From an ecofeminist viewpoint, his behaviour exposes the violent underside of patriarchal desire. He seduces and abandons women, drives one young woman to suicide, impregnates another and drags her through a life of misery, and emotionally and materially exhausts those who care for him, including his mother. The play thus foregrounds a double logic of consumption: Baal himself is consumed by culture, but he also consumes women as if they were resources to be used up. In one sequence, Baal's gluttonous, almost obscene way of eating becomes a gestic image of the consumer society. His voraciousness is staged in a way that repels the other characters and the audience; he is thrown out of a restaurant because his manner of eating reveals the grotesque truth of a culture that endlessly devours and excretes.

The speech in which he mocks the self-satisfied complacency of those who believe they "live well" while in fact merely consuming and dominating others crystallizes Brecht's social-ecological critique: the ethic that legitimizes domination over other humans is structurally linked to the ethic that legitimizes domination over nature. Baal's trajectory can thus be read as a dramatization of deep ecological and social-ecological concerns. His failure to find a place in modern society, his destructive excess, and his ultimate collapse reveal the pathological character of a culture that cannot accommodate alternative modes of being and that demands conformity at the price of both personal and environmental ruin. A second play that lends itself to ecocritical

analysis is Mr Puntila and His Man Matti. Puntila is a wealthy landowner, a figure who embodies patriarchal authority over both land and people. Ecocritically, he personifies an anthropocentric attitude that treats land as property and workers and women as extensions of that property. Puntila's personality is sharply split. When drunk, he is generous, emotional, and seemingly egalitarian; he imagines friendship with his driver Matti, promises marriages, jobs, and favours, and displays warmth and sociability. When sober, he becomes calculating, cruel, exploitative, and class-conscious—a quintessential capitalist patriarch. Brecht uses this split to expose the contradictions of bourgeois subjectivity: the same man who, in moments of intoxicated “nature,” appears humane and egalitarian, in moments of sober “reason” becomes the ruthless representative of class interest. Matti, his chauffeur, serves as a critical observer of this oscillation. As a worker, he understands that intimacy with the ruling class is dangerous and that any apparent closeness is fragile and contingent. Puntila's attitude toward Matti—sometimes treating him as a comrade, sometimes as a disposable subordinate—recalls the instrumental attitude of human dominance over nature. From an ecofeminist angle, Puntila's relationships with women further clarify this critique. He treats his daughter Eva as a bargaining chip, hoping to marry her to a diplomat for financial gain, and casually becomes engaged to several rural women while drunk, only to reject them once sober. Women here are treated as resources, much like forests and fields: to be possessed, used, and discarded. The ring test scene, in which Puntila recklessly distributes engagement rings to several women, and the subsequent episode in which the “Kurgela women” confront him, dramatize the intersection of gender, class, and ecological ethics. These women, poor and socially vulnerable, transform their humiliation into collective storytelling and humour, using narrative as a weapon against the landowner's power. They function as a kind of chorus of nature and subaltern knowledge—simultaneously naïve and wise, marginal yet morally central.

Folk-theatrical elements—songs, rustic humour, colloquial speech—strengthen this ecological dimension. Folk culture, rooted in simple economic structures and close ties to the land, appears as an alternative to the alienated culture of the ruling classes. Epic theatre here draws on folk forms not merely for aesthetic colour but to emphasize a worldview in which human life is still entangled with natural cycles and communal practices. In ecological terms, Mr Puntila and His Man Matti stages the continuity between the domination of workers, the domination of women, and the commodification of land. Puntila's relation to the forest and the soil is mirrored in his relation to the people around him; both are objects of exploitation. Matti's eventual decision to leave Puntila can be read as a symbolic refusal of this entire regime of mastery. The Good Person of Szechwan centres on Shen Te, a sex worker who becomes the focus of a test conducted by visiting gods. They are searching for a “good person” to prove that their moral order functions in the world. Shen Te is the only one willing to offer them shelter, and in return they give her money. She uses this money to open a tobacco shop, hoping to abandon sex work and live ethically by helping others. From an ecocritical standpoint, the play can be read as an allegory of how systems of domination test and strain individuals. The gods' visit evokes an external, quasi-natural force that exposes the structural conditions in which people live. They seek confirmation that goodness is possible without altering the socio-economic order. Ecologically, this resembles attempts to preserve “good” environmental behaviour while leaving intact the structures that produce ecological crisis. Shen Te soon discovers that her generosity attracts exploitation. The poor crowd into her shop; relatives and neighbours take advantage; her resources rapidly disappear. To survive, she invents a male alter ego, Shui Ta, who embodies the ruthless logic of capitalist self-preservation. As Shui Ta, she evicts those she once sheltered, exploits labour, and accumulates capital. The play thus stages a dialectical tension between an ethic of care and solidarity and the systemic pressures that reward selfishness and punishment of vulnerability.

Through Shen Te / Shui Ta, Brecht dramatizes the human subject fractured by socio-economic imperatives. Eco-justice perspectives highlight how environmental and social injustices intersect: those who seek to act ethically toward humans or nature often bear disproportionate costs. The play suggests that, under a given system, it is structurally impossible to be both “good” and secure. The question Shen Te poses—why the good are punished and the ruthless rewarded—points directly to the systemic nature of injustice rather than individual moral failure. The gods' ultimate refusal to change the order they administer—insisting on their own innocence and departing without altering the conditions that produced Shen Te's crisis—introduces

a critique of any transcendent authority that upholds an unjust status quo. The unresolved ending leaves the audience with the task of judgment. The theatrical “trial” of Shen Te becomes an implicit trial of the social and economic order itself. In ecocritical terms, *The Good Person of Szechwan* shows how systems that generate environmental devastation also generate moral contradictions: they compel individuals to choose between self-preservation and solidarity. The impossibility of being “good” within such a structure suggests that ecological and social change requires systemic transformation rather than individual heroism. The *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, inspired by a Chinese tale, is particularly important for ecocritical theory because it dramatizes a principle analogous to Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic.” Leopold argues that ethics expand historically—from concern with the individual, to society, to the land community—and that humans must come to see themselves as “plain members and citizens” of a biotic community rather than its conquerors. The play begins with a dispute between two Soviet-era collectives—one pastoral, one agricultural—over the use of a valley. Both have been displaced by war and now seek to reclaim or repurpose the land. Representatives debate not only efficiency and productivity but also attachment, memory, and the affective bond to particular places. This opening establishes land as more than a neutral resource; it is a site of labour, identity, and emotional investment. The resolution, which favours the group that can use the land more productively while also recognizing their care for it, anticipates Leopold’s idea that ethical relations must include soil, water, and nonhuman life. Nested within this frame is the famous story of Grusha, the servant who rescues the governor’s abandoned child during a coup and raises him at great personal cost. From an ecofeminist angle, Grusha’s journey through mountains, forests, and war-torn landscapes foregrounds the intersection of gendered vulnerability, environmental hardship, and political violence. She endures cold, hunger, pursuit, and social hostility, yet continues to care for the child. Her relationship to him is defined not by biology or property but by responsibility and labour.

The second key figure is Azdak, an eccentric village scribe who becomes an unconventional judge. Formerly marginalized, he later finds himself in a position to adjudicate disputes—especially those between the powerful and the poor. Azdak embodies an unstable mixture of drunkenness, cunning, and sharp ethical insight. He belongs simultaneously to the world of social outcasts and to the institutional machinery of justice, thereby personifying the meeting of “first nature” (unruly, unpredictable) and “second nature” (social norms, legal codes). The chalk-circle trial that gives the play its title directly inverts a property-based conception of ownership. Two women claim the child: his biological mother, the governor’s wife, for whom the child is a token of status and power; and Grusha, who has nourished, protected, and raised him. Azdak draws a circle, places the child inside it, and asks each woman to pull him out. The governor’s wife yanks without regard for the child’s pain; Grusha refuses to injure him. On this basis, Azdak awards the child to Grusha. Ecologically, the child functions as an analogue for land. The question “Who owns the child?” becomes “Who owns the land?” The answer Brecht proposes is Leopoldian: the rightful claimant is not the one with legal title or biological connection, but the one who has cared for and taken responsibility for the vulnerable being. Ownership is redefined in terms of stewardship and ethical relation, not domination. Both Grusha and Azdak undergo profound transformations shaped by their environments. Grusha’s flight through harsh landscapes forces her to confront the real weight of responsibility; she emerges as a figure of resilience and moral clarity. Azdak, initially a petty trickster, becomes a vehicle for a more expansive justice that challenges formal law in the name of the oppressed. Together, they model an ethic in which human beings are answerable not only to abstract principles but also to the concrete needs of others—human and, by implication, nonhuman. In the paired didactic plays *The Yes-Sayer* and *The No-Sayer*, Brecht stages a school excursion into the mountains, where a group must cross dangerous terrain to reach a distant city for medical or scientific aid. The journey takes place in “first nature”—steep slopes, ravines, and narrow passes—but the key conflict is generated by “second nature,” the cultural norm that a member who cannot continue must consent to being sacrificed for the good of the group. In *The Yes-Sayer*, a boy on the expedition becomes too ill to proceed.

Tradition dictates that he should agree to be left behind to die so that the expedition can continue. Pressured by the group and the teacher, he consents and is thrown into the ravine. The play then asks whether this sacrifice was necessary, exposing the brutality hidden beneath the language of duty and tradition. In *The No-Sayer*, Brecht rewrites the situation. This time, the boy refuses to consent and declares that a tradition

requiring such a sacrifice is unjust and must be changed. The group, confronted with his refusal, ultimately chooses to carry him back, inaugurating a new “great custom” in which human life is not subordinated to unexamined rules. From an eco-justice perspective, these plays resonate with debates about who bears the costs of environmental crisis. The “sick boy” evokes those populations—often the poor, the colonized, or marginalized communities—who suffer most from ecological degradation while contributing least to its causes. The group’s initial willingness to sacrifice him mirrors the way societies sacrifice vulnerable people in the name of “progress,” “development,” or the “greater good.” At the same time, the plays dramatize the relation between first and second nature. The physical danger of the mountains (first nature) provides the immediate context, but the real violence stems from a cultural convention (second nature) that rigidly dictates behaviour. The boy’s illness is not fatal in itself; what kills him in *The Yes-Sayer* is the internalized command to obey an inherited rule. Brecht invites the audience to see that such rules are not natural law but human constructions, and thus open to critique and change. The shift from “yes” to “no” also foregrounds the politics of consent. In many ecological and social contexts, people are compelled to “say yes” to destructive conditions—polluting industries, toxic neighbourhoods, unsafe labour—because they are given no viable alternative. Brecht’s second version insists that genuine ethics begins with the possibility of refusal: the right to say “no” to practices that present themselves as necessary, inevitable, or traditional. In this sense, *The Yes-Sayer* and *The No-Sayer* function as miniature parables of ecological modernization and its discontents. They show a group negotiating the tension between urgent collective needs and individual vulnerability, between the lure of expediency and the demand for justice. By locating this conflict in a stark mountain landscape, Brecht makes visible the intimate connection between environmental conditions, cultural norms, and ethical decision-making. Taken together, these plays demonstrate that Brecht’s epic theatre offers more than a Marxist critique of capitalism; it outlines a dramaturgical ecology in which questions of class, gender, power, and ideology are inseparable from questions of land, nature, and responsibility. Through marginal figures, split identities, unconventional judges, and fractured narratives, Brecht exposes the structures of domination that shape human and nonhuman life alike. In doing so, he anticipates many of the central concerns of contemporary ecocriticism and suggests how theatre can become a critical medium for thinking and feeling through the intertwined crises of society and environment.

Conclusion

Ecology, once defined narrowly as a branch of zoology, has expanded into a broad interdisciplinary field that examines the complex relationships among humans, nonhuman beings, and their environments. Contemporary ecological thought challenges anthropocentric assumptions and incorporates insights from deep ecology, social ecology, and ecofeminism, all of which emphasize the inseparability of environmental issues from social, cultural, and political structures. Within this framework, ecocriticism brings ecological inquiry into dialogue with literature and the arts, revealing how cultural narratives shape and are shaped by environmental consciousness. Theatre, with its origins in ritual and embodied interaction, provides a particularly fertile site for ecological interpretation. Modern ecological theatre theory conceptualizes performance as an evolving ecosystem in which text, performer, audience, and space interact dynamically. In this sense, Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre aligns closely with ecological perspectives. Brecht’s critique of conventional Western theatre and his emphasis on critical distance, historicisation, and social analysis create a dramaturgical model that disrupts naturalized assumptions about culture, power, and human behaviour. The techniques of epic theatre—such as defamiliarisation, *gestus*, and interruption—underscore that social relations are constructed rather than inherent. This insight mirrors ecocritical concerns with exposing the cultural foundations of domination, dualism, and exclusion. Brecht’s marginalised characters, caught between social structures and personal agency, further illustrate ecological principles of relationality and transformation. Their interactions with both social and material environments demonstrate how individuals shape and are shaped by the systems they inhabit. Taken together, this study shows that epic theatre and ecocriticism intersect in their shared commitment to revealing underlying structures, challenging hierarchical systems, and foregrounding interconnectedness. Brecht’s dramaturgy offers not only a political aesthetic but also an ecological mode of thinking that reconceives theatre as a site of critical awareness and cultural transformation. Through this convergence, epic theatre emerges as a meaningful tool for examining the

reciprocal relationships among humans, society, and the environment.

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