

2014

**Yasco Horsman. *Theaters of Justice: Judging, Staging, and Working Through in Arendt, Brecht, and Delbo*. Stanford UP, 2010. 232 pp.**

Peter Yang  
Case Western Reserve University, peter.yang1@case.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

## Recommended Citation

Yang, Peter (2014) "Yasco Horsman. *Theaters of Justice: Judging, Staging, and Working Through in Arendt, Brecht, and Delbo*. Stanford UP, 2010. 232 pp.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1019>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

Yasco Horsman. *Theaters of Justice: Judging, Staging, and Working Through in Arendt, Brecht, and Delbo*. Stanford UP, 2010. 232 pp.

**Abstract**

Review of Yasco Horsman. *Theaters of Justice: Judging, Staging, and Working Through in Arendt, Brecht, and Delbo*. Stanford UP, 2010. 232 pp.

**Keywords**

theater, Hannah Arendt, Charlotte Delbo, Bertolt Brecht

Yasco Horsman. *Theaters of Justice: Judging, Staging, and Working Through in Arendt, Brecht, and Delbo*. Stanford UP, 2010. 232 pp.

This volume investigates how the theatrical structure of legal trials can be used in literary texts to facilitate processes of healing and learning from the past. It attempts to reach this goal through close readings of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) by philosopher Hannah Arendt, poems included in *La memoire et les jours* (1985) by poet Charlotte Delbo, and *Die Maßnahme* (1930) by playwright Bertolt Brecht.

The selection of the texts for this study is based on the following criteria: that they deal with the pedagogical and therapeutic implications of a legal trial, that they offer insights into the theatrical aspects and the didactic and therapeutic functions of the legal trial, and that they challenge some current assumptions about the cultural role of legal trials, especially their role in coming to terms with the past.

The volume opens with an analysis of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Horsman admits that Arendt's disagreement with the didactic ambition of Eichmann's trial to create a moment of catharsis or redemption by restaging the tragedy of the Jewish people makes the book less useful for his study. However, he finds her conservative stance on the function of the legal trial, i.e., legal judgment, invaluable for his investigation. In his view, Arendt's theater of justice must be read from the perspective of a "judge-spectator" with a "detached and rational gaze" (10). Instead of the tragedy of Jewish victims, she observes "comic scenes" of banality of crimes against the community and humanity (33-39; 43f.). Horsman considers this reinterpretation of the trial from a tragedy to a comedy to create a surprising and unexpected lesson from the trial for both the reader and herself.

Chapter 2 analyzes how *Eichmann in Jerusalem* recreates a theatrical structure of justice and how the restaging has changed the focus of the trial from the suffering of the Jewish victims to justice for the community and humanity. Chapter 3 analyzes how Delbo reconstructs, in her attempt to create a literary "supplement" to the trials of her time, "theatrical scenes" of justice in her poems included in *La memoire et les jours*. The analysis focuses on the "theatrical" technique used in her writings by embedding each sentence in the cry for justice, i.e. by resituating the narrative past in the dramatic present. Horsman claims that Delbo's "theater of justice" allows the "voicing of a particular demand for justice" (11) that remains unvoiced with the legal code of the courtroom.

Chapter 4 examines the strategies of staging and dramaturgy that Brecht uses in his *Die Maßnahme* to remodel his theater after courtroom hearings by staging a set of trials and verdicts. The identified trials and verdicts include the execution of a young communist during a revolutionary mission; the reenactment

of the execution by his comrades in front of Party members, who are asked to judge the execution; and the third verdict the audience is invited to make at the end to judge the previous two verdicts. The author claims that the “tripling of a moment of judgment in a theatrical setting, or rather, of a theater modeled after a trial” (11) allows Brecht to explore the didactic possibilities of theater as trial. What complicates this study is Horsman’s attempt to account for the historical event that *Die Maßnahme* itself became a main subject of the cross-examination in a House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearing in 1947, in which Brecht had to appear to defend himself against the Communist charges.

Horsman’s study proves to be a difficult task because the texts under scrutiny are of widely divergent genres, including a journalistic and philosophical text as a trial report, poems as memoirs, and a play with a declared didactic intention. Since *Die Maßnahme* is the only text in this study that belongs to theater, the term “theaters of justice,” which the author uses to profile the texts, may only directly apply to Brecht’s play and needs to be redefined and probed to apply to Arendt’s and Delbo’s texts based on their theatrical dimensions. The study accomplishes the necessary redefinition and probing by focusing on identifying and analyzing the theatrical dimensions, strategies of staging and dramaturgy, or theatrical structures used in these texts of different types to stage or restage the “theaters of justice.” By providing an overarching methodological framework and examining the divergent texts accordingly, the study is successful in its inquiry into literature’s ability to call for justice in ways that are off-limits to courtrooms and to go beyond the socially important task of coming to terms with the past.

However, the author’s characterization of *Die Maßnahme* by Brecht as one of the three “responses to key trials of the twentieth century,” the Moscow trials (12, 13), is anachronistic and therefore inaccurate. Since the Moscow trials took place years after Brecht had written the didactic play, *Die Maßnahme* can at best be viewed as an anticipation of those later trials, instead of a response to them. Therefore, while the alignment of Brecht’s play with the other two authors’ texts as texts exemplifying “Theaters of Justice” is a productive inquiry, the paralleling of this text with the other texts as the literary responses to relevant historical trials of the twentieth century is not convincing, but rather distracting. While the Eichmann trial in Arendt’s case and the Nuremberg trials in Delbo’s case were both important historical trials intended for justice, the Moscow trials that took place after Brecht’s didactic play were designed to achieve the opposite of justice.

Despite this distraction, this volume is a thorough study. With useful reference matter accounting for one third of the book’s total length, including an extensive bibliography, detailed notes and an index, the study not only contributes

to the research on literature's ability to come to terms with the past as "theaters of justice," but also provides additional assistance to the reader to navigate the complex materials it explores.

Peter Yang  
*Case Western Reserve University*