

## DESTRUCTIVE CRITICISM REVISITED

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*"In every art there is a diabolical principle which acts against it and tries to demolish it."*<sup>1</sup>

Robert Bresson.

**Abstract.** *This essay considers the fact that destructive criticism is a dialectical criticism. It survives off conflict both as an oppositional idea and a critical method. The phrase itself is often used informally in journalistic circles and has not yet entered into the official discourse of academic theory. Destructive criticism operates through dialectics and then surpasses it in an attempt to escape all binding relationships, dogmatic and otherwise. Adopting a refrain, destructive criticism yearns to be free, to break chains.*

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The diabolical principle in question is called destructive criticism, this brief survey is an effort to trace the history of this caustic manner.

When the professor and theater critic Richard Gilman wrote "The Necessity for Destructive Criticism" in his edited collection *Common and Uncommon Masks* (1971), he identified George Bernard Shaw as an ideal destructive critic — an ideal that Gilman himself strived to adhere to. Shaw indeed wrote of his own criticism as a destructive force. However, the idea of destructive criticism as it has grown throughout the modern history of letters probably has its strongest roots in the writings of Karl Marx and his notion of ruthless criticism.

Gilman analyzed destructive criticism as it related to the world of theater criticism — though the task remains of theorizing destructive criticism in a wider light and identifying its appearance across other art forms. This essay will serve as a modest step in this direction, highlighting Gilman and the Yugoslav

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bresson, *Notes on the cinematographer* (Green Integer, 1997), p. 29.

film theorist and director Zivojin Pavlovic as interesting examples of recent continuations of the destructive tradition inherited from Marx and Shaw.

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Richard Gilman worked as a professor at the Yale University School of Drama for over 30 years and wrote five books of criticism, eventually earning him the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism<sup>2</sup> in 1971 for *Common and Uncommon Masks*. For Gilman, “the so-called ‘destructive’ element works, oddly enough, as a source of light.”<sup>3</sup> This idea that destruction brings illumination (or truth) is Gilman’s most urgent justification for this brand of criticism. Gilman wrote that plays should be “enactments of consciousness”;<sup>4</sup> in other words, they should assist man in the conception of an ideal society, stressing the social efforts that art should join in. He also wrote that the history of theater was “a record of attempts to work free from the morass of illusions.”<sup>5</sup> Gilman spoke of these illusions, or bad artistic dreams, in the same manner that Shaw spoke of their need to be supplanted.

Gilman’s polemic on destructive criticism is a dangerous piece of work in and of itself, for it posits the notion that any critical work that is not destructive merely obscures and does not clarify, let alone illuminate. In fact, for Gilman *constructive criticism* (or criticism that serves the artist’s and/or financial capital’s needs) exists only as a myth, part of the “morass of illusions” previously mentioned. In that sense, his most provocative idea is that there is no criticism except the destructive kind — better yet, that anything else should not go by the name “criticism”. On the subject of Chekhov and his plays, he wrote that the Russian author “stripped art of all purposes of consolation and exhortation”.<sup>6</sup> This position was echoed in his polemic on destructive criticism, which was not meant to reassure but rather to be ruthless. As Gilman notes, “The critic cannot give his loyalty to men and institutions since he owes it to something a great deal more permanent. He owes it, of course, to truth and to dramatic art.”<sup>7</sup>

Gilman was resolute in believing that theater should not imitate reality but instead create an alternative to it; to unmask that reality it must be destroyed — only then offering an opportunity to construct an idealized one before the viewer’s eyes. The responsibility of the destructive critic is to facilitate this process, which means that the critic and the artist, though usually believed to be in opposition, are actually working hand-in-hand (in those instances where they are not already one and the same person). This idea reinforces not only the necessity for destructive criticism but the very necessity and importance of criticism in general.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan himself was an ardent practitioner of destructive criticism. The award named after him is the richest and one of the most distinguished in American theater.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Gilman, *Common and uncommon masks: Writings on theater 1961-1970* (Random House, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Gilman, *The making of modern drama: A study of Büchner, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, Handke* (Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Richard Gilman, *Common and uncommon masks: Writings on theater 1961-1970* (Random House, 1971).

Gilman was important because he carried the torch of destructive criticism into the postmodern era. His extensive work as a professor gave him the opportunity to instill destructive critical principles in the minds of numerous students. Zivojin Pavlovic was able to function in this way as well, because he also worked as a professor. The anarchic spirit of destructive criticism must be renewed from generation to generation in an effort to hold society accountable to the highest standards possible, and, to counter the ideological morass which would attempt to bog it down. If, as Marx has so powerfully written, there is a world to win, this is the manner in which it can be won.

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Paving the way for Gilman, in 1890 Bernard Shaw likened his own criticism to a “destructive force”.<sup>8</sup> However, he questioned the interpretation of the destructive capabilities of this kind of criticism. In comparison, he wrote that the strong winds do not kill the patient but rather the onslaught of disease (further associating his critical approach with a destructive *natural* force). With regards to this destructive naturalism, a parallel factor exists between criticism and the work of art (or the artist) it is aimed at (also evoked in Bresson’s statement on the diabolical principle lurking within the arts). What ultimately seals the fate of the work of art is not the critic’s pen but rather an inherent deficiency brought to the forefront by the gale winds of critical destruction. In this sense, as Shaw noted, the critic is akin to the executioner (though he also said neither has the power of life or death).

If the critic plays the role of the executioner, someone must play the roles of judge and jury. One would perhaps think of the artist as a judge but he is actually more like a litigator, decoding narratives for the public to absorb. Experiencing art is a trial by jury and the work of art itself a defendant, if Shaw’s metaphor is taken to its logical conclusion. Because of the unjust society in which it is produced, art is guilty until proven innocent of collusion in the creation of the morass of illusions that Gilman spoke of.

Shaw was a dedicated socialist (by way of his party affiliation, also because he was concerned with the exploitation of the working class) and political activist who wrote numerous books and pamphlets on those very subjects. He felt that there was no sense in writing anything unless it was in an effort to change the environment. Following Marx’s example, he attempted to link art to social effort in his critical writing, as he often did in his plays — particularly the *Plays Unpleasant* collection, named so because they were not intended to entertain the audience but rather to raise awareness about social problems. As a critic Shaw prioritized those artists who wedded social relevance and criticism to their work and when he described their aesthetic, he often spoke of it in destructive terms. One such artist was Henrik Ibsen, who Shaw championed as a pioneering and destructive artist in his extended essay *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*.

Noting the destructive qualities of what he termed the “pioneer”, Shaw described such an artist in the following manner: “For we now see that the pioneer

<sup>8</sup> G. Bernard Shaw, ‘Destructive Force’ in *Shaw on music* edited by Eric Bentley (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), p. 32.

must necessarily provoke such outcry as he repudiates duties, tramples on ideals, profanes what was sacred, sanctifies what was infamous, always driving his plough through gardens of pretty weeds in spite of the laws made against trespassers for the protection of the worms which feed on the roots, letting in light and air to hasten the putrefaction of decaying matter, and everywhere proclaiming that “the old beauty is no longer beautiful, the new truth no longer true.”<sup>9</sup>

The pioneering destructive artist opposes the dominant ideologies of society, which Marx says are invariably the ideas of the ruling class and as such are utilized to enslave. Seen in this light the artist can assume his role in the revolutionary struggle against the dogmatism that strangles society. This social dogmatism must be fought with destructive intentions, as must artistic dogma — for they are both generated from the same source.

Shaw compares the work of art to a dream. However, these dreams can possibly carry detrimental elements towards society and social progress — diseases, which are to be inflamed by critical storms to engineer their self-destruction. Shaw writes, “The advantage of the work of destruction is, that every new ideal is less of an illusion than the one it has supplanted; so that the destroyer of ideals, though denounced as an enemy of society, is in fact sweeping the world clear of lies.”<sup>10</sup> The pioneering artist is a destroyer of idealistic illusions and criticism should support this endeavor, while also engaging in destructive actions towards works of art and artists that create these falsities.

Setting the idea of destructive criticism with social relevance into relief, Shaw wrote, “The point to seize is that social progress takes effect through the replacement of old institutions by new ones.”<sup>11</sup> However, this is unlike Marx’s early theoretical works exactly because it prioritizes new systems as solutions. Conversely, in his letter to Arnold Ruge printed in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher/German-French Annals* in 1844, Marx stated that he was against setting up “ready-made systems”, also noting that “mankind begins no *new* work, but consciously accomplishes its old work”.<sup>12</sup> Even considering this slight theoretical difference, Shaw adhered to the destructive line that he shared with Marx by writing that “every step of progress means a duty repudiated, and a scripture torn up”.<sup>13</sup>

Ruthless destruction was the key to the Shavian method — the standard he held himself and his artistic contemporaries to when composing their works. As he wrote in the preface entitled “How to Write a Popular Play” in the collection *Three Plays by Brieux*, he felt that one must be “like Brieux, a ruthless revealer of hidden truth and a mighty destroyer of idols”.<sup>14</sup> The destructive artist counts these ruinous deeds among his noble accomplishments.

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<sup>9</sup> G. Bernard Shaw, *The quintessence of Ibsenism* (London: Walter Scott, 1891), p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, ‘For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing’ in *The Marx-Engels reader, revised edition* edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York-London: Norton, 1978), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> G. Bernard Shaw, *The quintessence of Ibsenism* (London: Walter Scott, 1891), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> G. Bernard Shaw (ed.), *Three plays by Brieux* (New York: Brentano’s, 1911), pp. 22-27.

Zivojin Pavlovic, as a film critic and director, was closely associated with what came to be known as the Yugoslav Black Wave in the 1960s — a phenomenon in cinema characterized by polemical critique through a modernist film form, also featuring other film artists who were working critics at the same time they were working directors. In his 1969 collection of essays entitled *Đavolji film/Diabolical Film*,<sup>15</sup> Pavlovic advocated for a brutal cinema (and a likewise ill-mannered critical method) that carries destructive power. For him this destructive power was a necessity not simply to augment ills already present in a deficient work of art so that it can implode but, more importantly, also to eradicate ills in society.

Pavlovic's destructive aesthetic was wielded as a weapon against classical Yugoslav cinema, particularly the Partisan war film, which represented conservative and dogmatic ideological values. Classical Yugoslav cinema was steeped in the myths and conventions of a ruling political body, which created a stagnant film culture. Destructive criticism with Pavlovic is a liberating force. Brutal cinema was such to counter (and criticize) classical models and to clear the ground for open filmic expression that could lead to a free and productive society. This open filmic expression was embodied in the appearance of Yugoslav New Film in 1961, which provided fertile ground in turn for the growth of the Black Wave.

In September 1962, Pavlovic wrote an article called "Mirages" for the Yugoslav newspaper *Danas/Today*.<sup>16</sup> This article mounts an attack on "primitive directing" in relation to the film *Uzavreli grad/Boom Town* (1961) by Veljko Bulajic, what Pavlovic also calls "elemental directing", which is sketched in the following way: "awkward rhythm in staging; frontal pictures, situated at the zero point; mise-en-scène situated on two parallel planes without depth and nuanced change (gradation values); long shots completely out-of-sync with the nature and meaning of the scene".<sup>17</sup> Pavlovic felt this sort of stunted expressivity was plaguing classical Yugoslav cinema. Here, we see him beginning to formulate and theorize what would be his own (oppositional) aesthetic approach to filmmaking, realized in its ideal and purest form in his Black Wave film *Kad budem mrtav i beo/When I am Dead and Pale* (1967), which diverges from this primitive/elemental approach through its use of elaborately orchestrated long takes, rich depth of field, and an ill-mannered attitude that eagerly exposes the seamy sides and faults of society (the film also evokes a destructive self-critique in its title).

The Black Wave was a form of cinema in Yugoslavia operating through an anti-traditional, oppositional, and critical outlook that can be said to be derived in spirit from the ruthless stance taken in Marx's early works — though this is not to say that all of the Black Wave filmmakers were committed Marxists (and perhaps Pavlovic cannot be described in this way either). A wave of new Marxist humanism (often called Western Marxism) was sweeping Yugoslavia in the

<sup>15</sup> Zivojin Pavlovic, *Đavolji film/Diabolical film* (Belgrade: Institut za film, 1969).

<sup>16</sup> Zivojin Pavlovic, 'Mirages' in *Beogradski filmski kritičarski krug, drugi tom 1961-2001/Belgrade film critics circle, volume two 1961-2001* edited by Ranko Munitic (Niš: Niški kulturni centar/Art Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

1960s, brought on by the propagation and celebration of Marx's early works, which were very influential. This Marxist humanism cleaved a differentiation between the younger vanguard in the country — consisting of philosophers and artists, as well as other intellectuals — and the relatively inflexible (and older) representatives of the structures of official power. Black Wave films were labeled (and attacked as) “black” by a conservative and reactionary Yugoslav press because of their fatalistic and destructive nature; the films often concluded with death, as does *When I am Dead and Pale*, in which the main character is shot while sitting on a toilet.

Pavlovic first wrote his conception of artistic brutality in 1964 in an article entitled “Brutal Poetry”,<sup>18</sup> which was published in the Yugoslav film journal *Filmska kultura/Film Culture* and later re-printed in *Diabolical Film*. This brutality in relation to cinema is designed to achieve a revolutionary destructiveness. Pavlovic posits the idea that “at the time when brutal literature destroyed narration, so did film”.<sup>19</sup> For literary examples of this brutality he notes the work of James Joyce and William Faulkner in the 1920s. For filmic examples, he offers: D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916); Sergei Eisenstein's *Stachka/Strike* (1925); Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou/An Andalusian Dog* (1929); Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc/The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928); Jean Epstein's *La chute de la maison Usher/The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928); and Dziga Vertov's *Chelovek s kino-apparatom/The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). As evidenced, the idea of this brutal/ill-mannered aesthetic can be equated with modernism and the revolution of form.

The destructive principle is not stagnant — it is a method for progressive movement. To understand why Pavlovic favored this brutality as an ideal to be achieved we must consider his suggestion that “crude (raw, unfinished) pictures have the strongest destructive power”.<sup>20</sup> What he hoped to be destroyed were cinematic lies, or the “revolutionary kitsch” that pervaded classical Yugoslav cinema. Again, actual social progress was the aim of this form of destructive criticism.

As it was with Shaw, theory became united with practice in Pavlovic's work. He began his film directing career after working as a critic in the same way Shaw began as a playwright after making his mark in the dramatic critical world. Where these two artists built upon Marx's method was in their moving fluidly from theory to practice rather than standing on the sidelines and urging others to carry on with their revolutionary principles. This willingness to join the fight is the most potent aspect of destructive criticism. Destructive criticism functions as persuasive rhetoric with Shaw and Pavlovic.

The destruction of classical narration had historical precedents in literature and film, which Pavlovic identified and analyzed. Shaw's destructive criticism was also anti-classical, urging a move forward from the traditional Victorian

<sup>18</sup> Zivojin Pavlovic, ‘Brutal Poetry’, *Filmska kultura* 39-40 (1964).

<sup>19</sup> Zivojin Pavlovic, *Đavolji film/Diabolical film* (Belgrade: Institut za film, 1969).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



theater that dominated the English scene at the time, with its intoxicating focus on the distractive illusion of entertainment. The argument that modern art must be engaged rather than distant was stressed by Shaw and Pavlovic (as well as Gilman), aligning them in continuity with the tradition of other revolutionary movements in the arts.

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In his letter to Arnold Ruge, Karl Marx advocated for “a ruthless criticism of everything existing. Ruthless in two senses: the criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be.”<sup>21</sup> The destructive strain in this early statement by Marx grows out of social responsibility and an effort to change the world and not simply interpret it, as he would later famously write. The letter to Ruge was composed while Marx was in his 20s and is a building block of that which has been labeled “Early Marx”, described as a more humane and morally-aware phase of Marxism. Though Marx may have been an idealist in his earlier years he was also a realist in recognizing that ruthlessness was the best manner in which to achieve social progress against a fortified conservative front, the kind which he felt personified Germany of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In this letter Marx wrote that “the air here makes one servile and I see no room at all in Germany for free activity”.<sup>22</sup> Continuing, he wrote, “In Germany, everything is being forcibly repressed, a true anarchy of the spirit has burst out [...]”.<sup>23</sup> It is not at all inconceivable to think that Pavlovic recognized this feeling in Yugoslavia a century later, lending inspiration to his destructive critical activities.

Marx wrote that he wanted to “find the new world only through criticism of the old”.<sup>24</sup> This aim can stand as his definition of critical philosophy — “criticism” more than any other concept was the byword of young Marx and his associates. That he felt this critique should be ruthless links his polemic to principles of destruction; Marx was a destructive critical philosopher not only in theory but also in practice, his writing often displaying a sharp wit (an instrument that can often be used to excise and destroy). Humor is a powerful weapon in the arsenal of the destructive critic because it can cut deep in a revelatory fashion. Shaw certainly realized this as very little of his writing, both critical and dramatic, is without an incisive and biting playfulness full of satire and irony. Likewise, Pavlovic’s film *When I am Dead and Pale* is a black comedy which never passes an opportunity to poke fun at modern Yugoslav society and life.

The theoretical form of Marx’s destructive criticism was as equally important as the practical. In the Ruge letter he writes, “We have to concern ourselves just as much with [...] the theoretical existence of man, in other words to make religion, science, etc., the objects of our criticism.”<sup>25</sup> The very theory of destructive

<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, ‘For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing’ in *The Marx-Engels reader, revised edition* edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York-London: Norton, 1978), p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

criticism in Early Marx is its comprehensiveness, its focus on *everything* existing — its ruthlessness deriving very much from its thoroughness. This is why the method of destructive criticism is equally at home in the arts as it is in the social sciences. Marx's stated aim is social truth, which he felt could be developed out of conflict within the political state. Here one can see that his destructive criticism is actually productive in the long run — it is this revelation that is key to a proper understanding of destructive criticism in general.

Ruthlessness and destruction eventually aid and abet construction — to offer an analogy with industrial development: before something can be built the grounds must be razed of impediments, whatever form they may take. In this sense the seeds of hope and new creation can be sowed by the destructive force. This creative impulse in Marx was carried out through his postulating of the basic tenets of socialism — however, it could not be carried out without the ruthless criticism of capitalist (preexisting, dominant) models. Marx writes, "The reform of consciousness consists *only* in enabling the world to clarify its consciousness, in waking it from its dream about itself, in *explaining* to it the meaning of its own actions."<sup>26</sup> If the world is locked in a dream, destructive criticism serves to puncture this fragile bubble. When the dream (what Gilman called the "morass of illusions" and Pavlovic called "mirages") is destroyed, the real work of shaping life in a proper manner can begin. Marx identifies shaping life, or changing the world, to be the ultimate goal of destructive social criticism — a call to arms that Shaw and others answered in targeting the dream that imposes this passive slumber on the world.

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This brief journey following the general line of destructive criticism can now lead us to the task of succinctly theorizing it. A few ideas are offered here in condensing and translating these various incarnations and efforts to polemicize for and practice destructive criticism, also potentially charting new areas and directions for it to expand in.

Destructive criticism is a dialectical criticism. It survives off of conflict as an oppositional idea. Destructive criticism does not simply oppose — it opposes and incinerates both its subject and the morass of illusions surrounding it. In short, it goes all the way. It operates through dialectics and then surpasses them in an attempt to escape all binding relationships, dogmatic and otherwise. Destructive criticism yearns to be free, to break chains.

Destructive criticism does not only survive off conflict — it actively seeks out conflict. Like the shark that must continually move forward or perish, destructive criticism must do so also, lest it destroy itself (this is especially true if criticism is indeed itself a work of art and not a work of consolation). Destructive criticism has an insatiable appetite; it is a parasite that feeds off of lies. Destructive criticism would wither away and die — or self-implode — without inert artistic matter to attack.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.



This is one reason why destructive criticism is necessary: truth cannot prevail without disposing of the false, just like good cannot prevail without disposing of evil. Anything else is a dangerous compromise. Destructive criticism accepts no half-measures because it understands the stakes it is playing for.

Some may shudder before the perceived harshness of destructive criticism — and they should, because it means they are the targets. Cancerous objects cannot be attenuated — they must be eradicated. Destructive criticism strives to keep us free of these unhealthy growths.

Another reason why destructive criticism is necessary: it is not passive. Marx noted that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”<sup>27</sup> Destructive criticism is action. Everything else is mere discussion.

Yet another reason why destructive criticism is needed — we are in the midst of a battle for dramatic art along the lines of commodification. As Gilman stated, he opposed the “turning of dramatic art into culture — something to use as a storehouse of ‘higher’ feelings and recognitions.”<sup>28</sup> If so, art would cease to edify and only serve to satiate instead; art would be illusory instead of revelatory. Destructive criticism has the courage to take a stand against this appropriation. It fights back and risks its own neck where other forms of criticism often stay on the sidelines and play it safe. Other forms of criticism serve this commodification by building the walls of the storehouse. Destructive criticism tears them down.

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<sup>27</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ in *The Marx-Engels reader, revised edition* edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York-London: Norton, 1978), p. 145.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Gilman, *The making of modern drama: A study of Büchner, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, Handke* (Yale University Press, 1999).