

Brecht Between Mediums

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A dissertation  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of philosophy

University of Washington

2019

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of Drama

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**Abstract**

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Is Epic theory solely applicable to live performance? Was German writer and director Bertolt Brecht a champion for the theatre and theatre alone? This dissertation combines analysis of live and recorded performance, historical analysis, Epic theory, film and media theory in order to discuss Brecht's shifting relationship with film and other multi-medium performance traditions. The historic and theoretical exploration of Brecht both influencing and being influenced by cinematic work seeks to reclaim him as a multi-medium artist and explore a kind of continual flow of Epic theory and technique not merely between Brecht's cinematic and stage projects but also in the work of his contemporaries, fellow exiled artists during World War II, and a direct line of cinematic careers shaped, to this day, by the Brechtian legacy. The larger scope of this case study questions the allocation of artists, like Brecht, into disciplines and troubles the existing medium-disciplinary hierarchies-separations that negatively affect the ways in which performance is created, viewed and studied. This dissertation, therefore, more broadly examines the segregation of the performing arts within the academic world and scholarly research that maintains a staunchly medium-specific approach that fails to recognize the endless stream of theories and methods that circulate between performance mediums.

## Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank the man who taught me to reason, to question, and to never surrender! To Bertolt Brecht, I owe you much and will always strive to contribute, in my small way, to the endurance of your theories and vision of artistic activism.

Without the support of my mentor and Brechtian scholar, Sarah Bryant-Bertail, I surely would have lacked the courage to take on a figure so extensively studied as Brecht. I thank her for all that she has contributed to the field of Brechtian and Epic theatre studies and the many hours that she devoted to the development of this project. Your memory is safe with those who were so rewarded with the opportunity to learn from and pass on your vast and invaluable knowledge.

Sue Bruns, department of drama administrator. What you give to the department of drama and its students is incalculable. Thank you for making me feel like I exist and for truly being invested in every student who passes through your door.

I must, most personally, thank my departed Grandmother, Lilliann Ribarich-Ivancic, for teaching me the importance of education and the power of knowledge. She forged her way in the corporate world during a time when women, particularly first-generation immigrants, were rarely seen in high level positions. She taught me the value of hard work and perseverance and I will be forever in her debt.

To my husband, Christopher, I thank you for drudging through this long and drawn out process of graduate school along my side. I hope that I can repay you for the time and support that you have given me while I followed my dreams. To my dachshunds, who have sat, laid, and stood by my side through every page that I have written, you are my joy and my comfort. A friend who never judges is a much-needed asset when working on a project that forces you to constantly both judge and be judged. To my Mother and Step-Father, I thank you for offering a safe space and support through my illness, surgery and recovery so that I could regain my health and the ability to complete this project. To my Father and departed Step-Mother, thank you for your unwavering pride in and support of my unconventional career path.

I would like to thank my dissertation advisor, Stefka Mihaylova, for taking on this project. You are a brilliant theorist and have offered me invaluable feedback under the very difficult circumstances of losing my mentor and struggling through my own period of illness and personal loss. I thank you for your continued faith in my abilities and in this project.

To my co-chair, Jennifer Bean, without the Cinema and Media Studies graduate certificate and your guidance, I may never have opened my eyes to the great need for departmental integration and collaboration that plagues the arts and humanities. I learned that theatre is not the only legitimate performance medium, nor does film eliminate the desire for the live event, regardless of the beliefs held by many of my film and theatre colleagues respectively. Thank you for always being open to my multi-medium approach to performance studies.

Lastly, I would like to thank Scott Magelssen for stepping in as a reader on this project. You have sought and achieved interdepartmental collaboration, putting into action the very principles that I return to over and over again in this project. You are an inspiration to performance scholarship, unbound by fields of study.

*“As long as one and one is two...”*

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## *Brecht between Mediums*

### Introduction

“I’m very much on my own, playing billiards in the attic, reading R. Tagore’s *The Home and the World*, not eating much, thinking in visual images and showing myself a film version of my rise to fame”.<sup>1</sup>

On September 25<sup>th</sup> 1920 a twenty-two-year-old Bertolt Brecht, attending Munich University, wrote the above in his journal. Although he had begun work on his first full length play *Baal*<sup>2</sup> in 1918, it would not see its stage premier until 1923 and, as a young adult raised during the dawn of silent-era cinema, Brecht was notably envisioning his own future not playing out on the page or stage, but rather on the screen. The first public screenings of short silent-era films were presented by the Lumière brothers in Paris in December of 1895. Brecht was born just over two years later, on February 10<sup>th</sup> 1898, placing him in a position where both his own evolution as a writer and performance theorist coincided with the evolution of a groundbreaking performance medium that would become known as the cinema.

Twentieth century Brechtian scholarship has focused primarily on German writer and performance theorist Bertolt Brecht’s theatrical work. More recently, scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser, Marc Silberman, Sarah Bryant-Bertail, Joachim Lang and Joy Calico have begun to recognize Brecht as a multi-medium artist, examining his work in film, opera and radio. Although the film medium informed Brecht’s work on theatre throughout his career, we have yet to fully account for how his thoughts and work on film shaped his aesthetic theory or the legacy

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<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Diaries 1920-1922*, edited by Herta Ramthun and translated from the German by John Willett, St. Martin’s Press (New York: 1979) p 55.

<sup>2</sup> Brecht’s first full length play written in 1918 revolving around a wasteful young poet named Baal who seduces women and kills his friend. Written prior to Brecht’s development of his form of Epic theory, *Baal* utilizes elements of the Strum und Drung movement, a form of performance that presented characters living outside of modern Bourgeoise cultural norms. Baal finds that he cannot live outside of this culture and ends up running from law enforcement and dying alone in the woods.

of Brechtian theory on the screen. This dissertation addresses this oversight by arguing that Brecht's engagement, first with silent-era and later synchronized sound-era film, was integral to his evolving thinking about Epic performance<sup>3</sup>. Is Epic theory solely applicable to live performance? This study combines examples and analysis of live and recorded performance along with multi-medium performance theory in order to reveal how Brecht's shifting relationship to film influenced the development of his Epic performance theory within his own work and in turn how these theories informed and continue to inform the film medium.

Examining Brecht and his contemporaries' relationship to the film medium will demonstrate how their thinking about the potential of film, as a reproducible performance medium capable of inciting mass social and political transformation, changed as silent-era film evolved into synchronized sound-era film and beyond. This dissertation puts forth new evidence confirming that film played a significant role in not only the creation of Brecht's theatrical theories but also in the formulation of a multi-medium Epic theory that has a continued legacy on both the stage and screen.

A tendency to omit discussions of Brecht's experimentations in mediums other than theatre is evident in early seminal Brechtian studies such as Martin Esslin's 1959 book *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* and John Willett's *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, published in the same year.

When these works mention film, they assume that the medium was either a means to fund Brecht's theatrical work both in Germany and during his years of exile in America<sup>4</sup>. Film is often

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<sup>3</sup> Brecht's concept of Epic performance would evolve into a dynamic performance style that can be successfully accomplished through multiple performance mediums and contains a mixture of sung and spoken narrative with clear separation of action. Epic performance is didactic in nature and utilizes juxtapositions and reason/logic rather than linear narrative and pathos/catharsis to encourage active rather than passive viewership directed towards positive working class-conscious social and political change (own definition).

<sup>4</sup> Brecht arrived in Los Angeles in July of 1941, eight years after he went into European exile as a result of the Nazis' rise to power in Germany. Brecht returned to East Berlin in October of 1948 after being blacklisted as a Communist and forced to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

presented as an offshoot of Brecht's career marred by legal battles with studio heads and directors, unsuccessful films and a stubborn Brecht who believed that "art can do without the cinema". The former title appears under the heading *The Film, the Novel and Epic Theatre* in John Willett's now canonical, albeit fragmentary, 1957 compilation of Brecht's theoretical writings, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Brecht wrote this piece in response to a highly publicized lawsuit surrounding German director G.W. Pabst's 1931 film adaptation of Brecht's stage musical *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). As this is one of the only selections chosen for the book in which Brecht expresses direct sentiments regarding film, readers are led to assume that Brecht rejected the medium altogether. These editing approaches have aided in creating and propagating the myth of Brecht as a champion for the theatre and the theatre alone. The rather anti-Brechtian legacy of G.W. Pabst's film adaptation of Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* and the resulting *Threepenny* lawsuit will be fully examined in this dissertation, in an attempt to grapple with the dilemma of, what German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin labeled, "the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility".<sup>5</sup>

The historic and theoretical exploration of Brecht both influencing and being influenced by cinematic work within this study reclaims him as a multi-medium artist and explores a kind of continual flow of Epic theory and technique not merely in Brecht's cinematic and stage projects but also in the work of his contemporaries, fellow exiled artists during World War II, and a direct line of cinematic careers shaped, to this day, by the Brechtian legacy. The larger scope of this case study questions the allocation of artists, like Brecht, into disciplines and troubles the existing medium-disciplinary hierarchies-separations that negatively affect the ways in which

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (1936), edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others, Harvard University Press (Cambridge: 2008).

performance is created, viewed and studied. This dissertation, therefore, more broadly questions the segregation of the performing arts within the academic world and scholarly research that maintains a staunchly medium-specific approach that fails to recognize the endless stream of theories and methods that circulate between performance mediums.

This study examines Brecht's developing aesthetics from 1921, when his journals express a possible connection between film and his thoughts on radical performance, through the post-World War II East Berlin premier of Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1949). Central to this discussion are Brecht's produced screenplays, plays adapted to the screen and films of his contemporaries that rely heavily on early Epic theory; *Mysteries of a Barbershop* (1923), *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), *M* (1931), *Kuhle Wampe* (1932) and *Hangmen also Die* (1943). These projects illustrate both how Brecht rethought his aesthetics during the historic transition from silent-era to synchronized sound-era film and how his developing Epic theory was reimaged on the screen by his contemporaries. These films present a body of work that is often overlooked in discussions of Brecht and Epic theory. These projects will be examined along with the work of Brecht, his collaborators and aesthetic influences. Amongst Brecht's many collaborators, this dissertation is in primary conversation with the works of; vaudevillian stage trained silent and early sound-era screen star Charlie Chaplin, Bavarian cabaret trained clown Karl Valentine, German director G.W. Pabst, Astro-Hungarian German/American actor Peter Lorre and Austro-German filmmaker Fritz Lang amongst other artists and theorists both influencing and influenced by Brecht's work.

We begin by examining Charlie Chaplin's influence on Brecht's film theory, which occurred in the same year in which Brecht wrote his first screenplay, *Mysteries of a Barershop* (1921 screenplay). 1921 was also the year that Germany lifted the embargo on U.S. and French

film imports that had been in effect during World War I. Brecht's first direct reference to Chaplin appears in an October 29<sup>th</sup>1921 journal entry in which he expresses amazement at Chaplin's 'grotesque' acting style in *The Face on the Bar-Room Floor* (1914) and *The Cure* (1917), two short silent-era films that introduced Brecht to Chaplin's screen persona. Chapter one outlines an apparent intensification in Brecht's focus on screenplay writing following his exposure to Chaplin's silent-era films. Brecht's increase in screenplay production is evident not only in the work itself but also in references in his journals as well as his first published piece on film which appeared in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* in September of 1922 confirming that Brecht's Epic theory expands beyond the theatre partly as a result of his fascination with Chaplin and silent-era film. The canonical *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* skips Brecht's introduction to film altogether; beginning with a piece written in 1918 by a twenty-year-old Brecht upon the death of friend and German playwright Frank Wedekind and then jumping to a 1926 piece on theatre audiences titled *Emphasis on Sport*. Journal entries and published essays in fact do begin to include more detailed analyses and consideration of film after Brecht's introduction to Chaplin. Chaplin and Brecht's interest in the film medium is therefore essential to the discussion of silent-era cinema's influence on Epic theory and the employment of the grotesque in Epic performance. Cabaret trained Bavarian clown Karl Valentine will be considered in conjunction with Chaplin as his performance of the grotesque seems to meld with that of Chaplin as Brecht comes to simultaneously admire their unique European and American interpretations of the grotesque in performance.

Brecht's strongly held social/political beliefs would also come to play an essential role in his writing and performance theory. By January of 1919 Brecht had attended his first political rallies, in the aftermath of the assassinations of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, leaders of

the Spartacist League and Communist Party of Germany's protest against German involvement in World War I. Brecht attended Luxemburg and Liebknecht's funeral in February of the same year. Although Brecht would not dive fully into reading the works of German philosopher and political theorist Karl Marx until the summer of 1926, communist leanings were already weaving their way into Brecht's early plays, such as *Baal* (1918) and *Drums in the Night* (1919), in the form of strong anti-Bourgeoisie themes and messages.

The transition from silent-era to synchronized sound-era film is carefully considered throughout this study. Brecht's initial love for the cinema stemmed from his experiences with the screen prior to the era of synchronized sound systems. His theories and views on film shift as the medium transforms into 'talkies' or films utilizing the innovation of synchronized sound, and this dissertation explores how this shift affected Brecht's performance theories. With the introduction of synchronized sound to German Cinema Halls in 1927, Brecht began rethinking his aesthetics in terms of this new medium. We find direct evidence of this reassessment in his 1942 notes 'On Film Music', which heavily draws on his Epic theory in order to explore the emergence of synchronized sound. This essay, which appears most recently in Marc Silberman's collection, *Bertolt Brecht on Film & Radio*, was written at the request of German philosopher and composer Theodor Adorno and Austro-German composer Hanns Eisler, for their 1947 book *Composing for Film*. Also exiles in the United States during World War II, Adorno and Eisler were close acquaintances sometimes collaborators of Brecht.

This study reevaluates Brecht's participation in several major German film productions, preeminent among these is G.W. Pabst's adaptation of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1931), based on a screenplay written by renowned Hungarian film critic and aesthetic theorist Béla Balázs along with Ukrainian born play/screenwriter Leo Lania and Hungarian born film director

Ladislao Vajda. This was Brecht's first major film project and it resulted not only in a highly publicized lawsuit but also in the interminable reproduction and commercial manipulation of the prologue song 'Mack the Knife'. Brecht moved more than cautiously onto his next film project, the leftist working-class political film *Kuhle Wampe* (1932). *Kuhle Wampe* offers perhaps the best illustration of Epic theory on screen, as envisioned by Brecht, as he worked closely on every aspect of the film from the inception of the screenplay until its premier in May of 1932.

Fundamental to a fresh discussion of Brecht's *Kuhle Wampe* is an analysis of Astro-German filmmaker Fritz Lang and German writing partner Thea von Harbou's first sound film *M* (1931). This study confirms that Lang and von Harbou successfully brought Epic theory and technique to the big screen six months after the release of G.W. Pabst's, not so 'Epic', 1931 film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera*. Evidence is presented illuminating a two-way exchange of stage and cinematic techniques that demonstrate Lang and von Harbou borrowing methods and actors from the Epic stage, and in turn, Brecht borrowing editing and sound experimentation techniques directly from Lang and von Harbou's *M* in his 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe*.

Moving through Brecht's years in European exile, from the Nazi rise to power in 1933 until he received his American visa in 1941, this dissertation analyzes the great shift in Brecht's writing that occurred as a result of his exile experience. In European exile and unable to be involved in the 1941 Zürich premier of his play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Brecht was left only with disheartening reviews of the production which launched a rewriting/reworking of not only *Mother Courage and Her Children* but of several of his plays, resulting from both his ever developing Epic theories along with his experiences as an exile. Brecht's career in Hollywood from 1941 to 1947 is reevaluated as a period of writing and reformulation of his Epic theories as well as a time in which he composed some of his most scathing Capitalist critiques.

This period is often viewed as Brecht's dark age, a time when he struggled to actualize his plays and screenplays. This study troubles this negative and unproductive view of Brecht's time in America, focusing on the vast amount of writing, reformulation of theory and heightened Capitalist critique that arose from his exile experiences and from being surrounded by the material driven Hollywood film industry of the 1940s.

Brecht's collaboration with Fritz Lang on the 1943 anti-Nazi film *Hangmen Also Die*, although impaired from the outset by Hollywood studio guidelines, censors, and Lang and Brecht's very different exile experiences, is worthy of discussion as it manages to maintain residue of Brecht's work and influence. The final years of Brecht's life, his return to East Berlin in 1948 following his call before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and his subsequent stage work, illuminate the affect that his exile experiences had on the reformulation of his Epic theory. A discussion of the Berlin premier of *Mother Courage* (1949) and plans for the *Mother Courage* film (1961) produced five years after Brecht's death, further elucidates Brecht's reformulated Epic theories along with the fact that film projects were never off the table for Brecht, not even in the final years of his life.

In reevaluating Brecht's work on film, this study moves beyond discussions of the use of projection and film on the Epic stage or mere adaptations of stage plays for the screen. In fact, Brecht was continuously at work on original screenplays and film projects both while in Germany and during his years of exile in Europe and the United States. Marc Silberman's 2000 book *Brecht on Film & Radio* offers the first cinematic response to Willett's *Brecht on Theatre*. Like Willett, Silberman is also highly selective and does not include selections from Brecht's personal journals or communications with fellow theorists and practitioners. Nonetheless, Silberman's book takes an essential first step towards recognizing several key writings on

multiple performance mediums that are not featured in Willett's foundational collection. Silberman's compilation inaugurates an important era of expanded Brechtian scholarship that begins to take into account Brecht's multi-medium theories. Silberman's project offers several previously unpublished screenplays and essential published Brecht notes on film. This dissertation analyzes these and other primary source/archival materials, demonstrating that Brecht's cinematic work is not only worthy of analysis but also imperative to adequately account for his evolving Epic performance theories.

The analyses of live and filmed performances within this study are also indebted to the conceptual models outlined in American Brechtian scholar Sarah Bryant-Bertail's 2000 book *Space and Time in Epic Theatre*. Bryant-Bertail explains that Brecht's stage productions, such as the 1928 Piscator-Bühne production of *The Good Soldier Schwejk*, utilized both projected images and live performance, often simultaneously, allowing for the performed action to be "mechanically reproduced at the same moment that it was being produced".<sup>6</sup> This study is foundational to this research as it explores how cinematic influences were being incorporated into Brecht's stage productions, making these productions multi-medium events within themselves.

Scholarship on Brecht's influence on modern film is limited, but German film historian Thomas Elsaesser establishes a starting point for this discussion in his 1990 article *From Anti-Illusionism to Hyper Realism: Bertolt Brecht in Contemporary Film*. Elsaesser rightfully notes that Brecht's influence has been vast, general and often misunderstood and offers a jumping off point for the discussion of Epic influence on contemporary film with a discussion of French New Wave and East German Cinema. Building upon the non-medium-specific discussion presented in

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theatre: The Brechtian Legacy*, Camden House (Rochester: 2000) p 49

Elsaesser's article, this study foregrounds a non-theatre-centric interpretation of Brecht and Epic theory. In looking at Brecht as a multi-medium artist and theorist, this dissertation aims to raise larger questions regarding theatre's 'liveness' in relation to the recorded (radio, records, television, film) and the arguably opposing natures of Epic stage theory and recorded-reproducible mediums. Conversely, by historically analyzing the transition from silent-era to synchronized sound-era film, this study illustrates that Epic theory and film can be complimentary modes of radical representation under the right circumstances. This study further explores the ways in which Epic theory has been accelerated by technology and new media, evident in the works of contemporary screenwriters and filmmakers like Jean Luc Goddard, Werner Herzog, Mel Brooks, Gene Rodenberry and Wes Anderson, amongst others.

Studies of Brecht are typically discipline-specific: dramatic, literary, or musicological. The handful of studies that focus specifically on Brecht's work in film include, from the dramatic perspective; Pia Kleber & Colin Visser's 1990 book *Re-Interpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film* as well as Silberman's previously mentioned collection. Of the fourteen essays included in Kleber & Visser's book, only two actually deal with film; Renate Möhrmann's feminist study of Brecht's influence on women's cinema in West Germany and Elsaesser's analysis of Brecht and contemporary film. General references to Brecht's cinematic work also appear in John Fuegi's 1987 book *Bertolt Brecht: Chaos According to Plan*.

Fuegi confronts Brecht's work in the film medium while continuing to propagate the myth of Brecht's disdain for the cinema. According to Fuegi, Brecht's refusal to transition to film, unlike contemporaries such as Soviet director-theorist Sergei Eisenstein and German director Erwin Piscator, is remarkable because it demonstrates his exceptional loyalty to the stage. It is in this way that Fuegi puts into writing what early Brechtian theatre scholars such as Esslin and Willett only

hinted at through their avoidance of the topic of Brecht and film. The silence of early Brechtian scholars in itself, speaks volumes. In avoiding a discussion of Brecht and film, early scholars make Brecht's multi-medium projects appear unsuccessful and unimportant. Brecht is subsequently endowed with a kind of mythic theatrical power; he is the theatre artist who championed the stage during the age of 'technological reproducibility'.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps to preserve this image or as a means by which to claim Brecht for the theatre and or theatrical studies, an in depth study of Brecht's work conducted through a multi-medium lens has yet to surface in the English language until now.

Two Brecht film studies in German, Wolfgang Gersch and Hanser Verlag's 1975 book *Film Bei Brecht* and the more recent 2006 study by film scholar and documentarian Joachim Lang *Episches Theatre als Film: Bühnenstücke Bertolt Brechts in den audiovisuellen Medien*, deserve mentioning here. To date, neither of these texts have been translated from the original German. Verlag's earlier study deals primarily with Brechtian stage techniques transferred to the screen while Lang's project is a study of screen adaptations of Brecht's plays. Lang's work is helpful with regards to this study as it questions the intended non-illusionistic nature of Epic stage performance and its relation to the mimetic structure of film. Through the exploration of cinema's influence on Brecht's stage productions and what Lang refers to as the 're-translation' of these concepts to film, Lang concludes that some form of reinvention was required. Lang's analysis, although opening a door for Brechtian cinematic studies, still devotes the greater portion of its scholarship towards the tracing of Epic techniques from stage to screen. An attempt to uncover what the mentioned 'reinvention' entailed or produced is not part of Lang's project nor is a multi-directional discussion of the flow of ideas between stage and screen, which this study expounds upon.

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin

Two other major film studies, German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer's critical 1947 study *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* and American film scholar Bruce Murray's 1990 Avant-garde centered response to this work *Film and the German Left in the Weimar Republic: From Caligari to Kuhle Wampe*, deserve mention here. Kracauer's five-page commentary on Brecht's 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe* nowhere mentions Brecht's relationship to the theatre. Instead, Kracauer analyzes the film strictly through a cinematic lens and without considering the unique conventions transferred from the Epic stage and their reimagining on the screen. Kracauer's inclusion of *Kuhle Wampe* in this foundational study of German cinema is important however; and yet it is equally important to note that he labels it "the first and last German film which overtly expressed a communist viewpoint" and insinuates that this film may have played a vital role in increased censorship under the third Reich.<sup>8</sup> Murray extends Kracauer's discussion of *Kuhle Wampe* by including mention of Epic theory. Murray believes that the film successfully demonstrates Brecht's Epic theories through juxtapositions, sung dialogue and the use of Brecht's defamiliarization effect. Still, Murray primarily focuses on Epic techniques taken directly from the stage rather than exploring how these techniques are re-envisaged on screen or how these re-envisaged Epic techniques may have, in turn, affected the future direction of Epic stage theory.

The formulation of Epic cinema may have been a constant experimental struggle with which Brecht was rarely satisfied, but what past and current scholarship on this topic fails to mention is that Brecht had a very similar relationship with much of his stage work, rewriting, reformulation and restaging being a constant in his work. This knowledge has not hindered scholars from further developing and solidifying Brecht's concepts into what is referred to

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<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Princeton University Press (New Jersey: 1947) pp 243-248.

primarily as ‘Epic Stage Theory’, so why has it delayed formulation of an ‘Epic Screen Theory’? Or, as this project advocates as, a more inclusive multi-medium ‘Epic Performance Theory’. As Brecht’s mythological status as a champion for the theatre grew, so did the propagation of theatre-centric discussions of Epic theory which this study reconsiders.

This dissertation’s foundational hypothesis is that Brecht’s work is defined by and helped define more than one medium. The project therefore is situated within theatre, film and multi-medium performance studies. In illuminating how Brecht’s work in film informed his Epic theory, this study sheds light on how the transition from silent-era to synchronized sound-era film changed perceptions of how art facilitates social change in the age of technological reproduction. Through historical and archival research, theory, along with analyses of live and recorded performances, this dissertation revises and revives a discussion of Epic theory both on and beyond the stage.

In the introduction to the 2005 book *Theatre and Film: A Comparative Introduction*, theatre and film professor Robert Knopf urges scholars to expand the lens through which we analyze theatre and film by focusing “less on adaptation and more on the economic, aesthetic, cultural, and technological relationships between theatre and film”.<sup>9</sup> This dissertation responds to Knopf’s call for combined theatre and film scholarship that considers more than the mere adaptation of stage plays for the screen, revealing the economic, political and artistic implications for an artist like Brecht; conducting multi-medium performance experimentation during decades of war, exile, political division and technological development.

The examination of the films and stage plays specified in the introduction are framed by German theorists Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno’s early twentieth century debate over

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Knopf, in the introduction to *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology*, Ed Robert Knopf, Yale University Press (New Haven: 2005).

artistic autonomy and the auratic nature of art in the technological age. The legacy of this debate has been reprised by late twentieth century American performance scholars Peggy Phelan and Phillip Auslander with particular focus on the essential radicalism (or lack thereof) of live performance in capitalist societies. While Phelan and Auslander focus on contemporary live and recorded performance, the intellectual history of their debate originates in the early twentieth century when film first challenged theatre's dominance as a live visual medium. Central to this debate is the work conducted by the Frankfurt School whose members, including Adorno and Benjamin, were closely connected to the development, analysis and criticism of Epic theory. In fact, both Phelan's concept of live performance as the last resort of the authentic or 'auratic' experience as well as Auslander's contrasting assertion that the concept of liveness exists only as a result of technological mediatization, are influenced heavily by Benjamin and Adorno's work. Auslander's argument is also indebted to American literary critic Fredric Jameson's theory that the very concept of 'liveness' exists only as a result of the contrivance of an antithesis, what Jameson defines as 'technological mediatization'.<sup>10</sup> By reading these theories together with select stage and screen productions, this study demonstrates a kind of interdependent relationship between live and recorded performance which results in an ongoing multi-directional stream of representation.

The historic transition from silent-era to synchronized sound-era film troubles mediatized performance and Brecht's evolving thoughts about radical representation on screen. Therefore, this study's genealogy of Epic theory as a multi-medium aesthetic is indebted to key works regarding this shift. Amongst the most influential analysis of this transition is the work of German film theorist Rudolph Arnheim. Arnheim's pivotal 1932 essay *Film as Art* is one of the

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<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*, Duke University Press (Durham: 1991).

foundational studies that endeavored to legitimize the film medium. Although Arnheim was an advocate for promoting film as art, his analysis arose from an appreciation for the qualities of silent-era film, a concept that he elaborates upon in his 1930 essay in response to the introduction of synchronized sound, *The Sad Future of Film*. Arnheim's belief that the qualities of silent-era film made it unique to all other art forms remained strong throughout his career. In a 1999 essay *Composites of Media: The History of an Idea*, Arnheim looked back on the pivotal transition from silent-era to synchronized sound film, stating that

Cinema worked very well, as long as the medium was left alone; but it was exposed to an aesthetic crisis when technical inventions and a popular appetite for lifelikeness threatened the purity of the medium. Spoken dialogue in particular wreaked havoc on artistic expression.<sup>11</sup>

Here it is synchronized sound specifically that is being attacked along with the industry's growing adherence to Naturalism which threatened film's status as a truly radical medium.

Arnheim, similar to Brecht's thinking on both theatre and film, believed that art should not copy nature but rather mold it.

Arnheim, Brecht and Benjamin were amongst early critics who viewed film as a new and radical art form, but this view remained reliant upon the medium's ability to maintain social relevance. Once synchronized sound was introduced, as Arnheim notes, a hierarchy was created within the medium where sound gave privilege to speaking images. In this case, the sound rather than the camera dictates the audience's attention. Russian filmmaker's Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Alexandrov confront this issue in their 1928 *Statement on Sound* where they warn that synchronized sound threatened to destroy the early achievements of the medium. Camera and editing techniques, like montage and framing, would be replaced by what

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<sup>11</sup> Rudolph Arnheim, *Composites of Media: The History of an Idea*, Michigan Quarterly Review, Vol 38 No 4, Fall 1999, pp 568-561.

Eisenstein and his collaborators called “unimaginative” synchronized sound, eliminating the possibility for juxtapositions necessary and essential to artists like Brecht. The discussion of Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou’s first sound film *M* along with Brecht’s sound film *Kuhle Wampe* will illuminate the fact that artists were in fact overcoming many of these obstacles very early in the sound-era through the use of unique visual and audio editing techniques.

Brecht’s close friend Walter Benjamin viewed film as a ‘radical’ medium, a concept based largely on the work of Soviet filmmakers like Eisenstein, whose dialectical montage theory greatly influenced Brecht’s work.<sup>12</sup> Although Benjamin argued that film lacked authenticity or ‘aura’ he also maintained the hope, along with Brecht, that the revolutionary or radical qualities of film were capable of instigating social change on a massive scale. It is also important to note that Benjamin exhibited particular reservations with regards to the nature of film under capitalism, a controversy that Brecht would face head on during his time in Hollywood from 1941-1947. Consideration of Brecht’s art in relation to the technological revolution occurring within his historical moment may aid in understanding Brecht’s shifting attitudes towards film. Brecht’s sometimes apparently negative attitude towards film is more often directed, not at the medium itself, but rather at the growing capitalist industry’s (primarily in Germany and the United States) controlling the medium. Navigating and analyzing Brecht’s film theories therefore take place while carefully evaluating the technological, economic, and political moments in which they were imagined.

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<sup>12</sup> Eisenstein lays out his definition of montage theory in his 1925 manifesto *The Method of Making Workers’ Films*. His “montage of attractions” consists of socially relevant and class conscious “chain[s] of suitably directed stimulants” (a quick succession of edited shots that are dialectical in nature). Sergei Eisenstein, *The Method of Making Workers’ Films*, Kino 11 August 1925, reprinted in *Film Essays and a Lecture Sergei Eisenstein*, Edited by Jay Leyda, Princeton University Press (Princeton: 1968) pp 17-20.

A discussion of Brecht's exile experiences informs the later chapters of this study, as the artist faced a substantial life and career obstacle, alienation from his homeland and the dissolution of his highly successful early career in Weimar-era Germany. Additionally, Thomas Elsaesser's concept of the split-consciousness experienced by German exiles in Hollywood during World War II plays an important role in analyzing the often-disjointed nature of projects, such as the Brecht/Fritz Lang collaboration on the 1943 anti-Nazi film *Hangmen Also Die*. There was nothing justifiable about the war or Brecht's itinerate state and his journals and letters from this period attest to the fact that his hostilities towards outsiders grew exponentially during this period. This study further elucidates the gravity of Brecht's exiled state and the affects this state had on his work both during this period and after his return to East Germany in 1948.

#### Chapter Overview

Chapter I: *Silent-Era Cinema and the Epic 'Grotesque'*, analyzes Brecht's early career and the influence of both American and European definitions of the grotesque through a discussion of cinematic icon Charlie Chaplin and famed Bavarian cabaret stage performer Karl Valentin. This chapter focuses on Brecht's early cinematic influences including the work of Charlie Chaplin and Sergei Eisenstein. A discussion of Chaplin in relation to the concept of grotesque acting is essential to this chapter as it informed not only Brecht's theatrical acting theories but also the form that his early screenplays would take. An in depth discussion of the earliest Chaplin films that Brecht viewed, such as, *The Face on the Bar Room Floor* (1914), are analyzed in conjunction with the stage and screen performances of Karl Valentin and Brecht's journals (1920-1922), correspondence in *Letters (1913-1956)* and initial publications on the topic of film primarily appearing as articles in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* between 1919-1928.

Sergei Eisenstein's montage theory for film plays an important role in this chapter as Brecht's stage productions, such as *In the Jungle of Cities*, along with film projects and evolving Epic theory are clearly indebted to this concept. In both his journals and early publications Brecht refers to his admiration of Eisenstein's films *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *The Strike* (1925). Brecht's earliest foray into the film medium, the short silent film *Mysteries of a Barbershop* (1922) is analyzed with regard to its indebtedness to silent-era cinema. This chapter raises the following questions; What aspects of early Epic theory appear in *Mysteries of a Barbershop*? How are the influences of Chaplin, Valentin and Eisenstein present within Brecht's early foray into film? And how do Chaplin and Valentin's American and European interpretations of the grotesque along with Eisenstein's use of montage inform Brecht's evolving multi-medium Epic theory?

Chapter II: *Epic Theatre Meets Popular culture: Modern Media and Celebrity's Role in Shifting Social Referents in 'Mack the Knife'* explores the lasting affects of director G.W. Pabst's 1931 film adaptation of Brecht's play *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). The screenplay for *The Threepenny Opera* film, co-written by Hungarian-Jewish film writer/critic Béla Balázs, Ukrainian born screenwriter Leo Lania and Hungarian-German screenwriter Ladislaus Vajda is analyzed in order to demonstrate the studio and production team's attempts to detach Brecht from the project and drastically shift its direction in an appeal to popular culture. The subsequent *Threepenny* lawsuit, which was highly publicized, has informed an abundance of scholarship on Brecht's relationship to the film medium, often singling out this event as the moment where Brecht rejected the film medium altogether. It is paramount to this study that Pabst's adaptation and subsequent lawsuit surrounding the *Threepenny* film be revealed as the moment, not when Brecht rejected the film medium as a whole, but rather a moment that prompted contemplation of

the nature of commercial vs. truly radical film capable of inducing positive class-conscious social change.

Tracing the reproduction and devolution of the song ‘Mack the Knife’, originally written by Brecht and German-Jewish composer Kurt Weill for the Berlin premier of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928 will reveal that Brecht and theorist Walter Benjamin’s reservations about the film medium were, in some ways, warranted. This study in no way seeks to cover up the fact that the very reproducibility and mass circulation possibilities of film can, at times, work in direct opposition to Brecht’s radical and socially driven intentions. But it is also important to recognize that this reproducibility and ability to reach masses on a global scale continued to appeal to Brecht’s desire to inspire positive class-conscious social change on a global level. For Brecht, film’s assets were often simultaneously its faults. Instead of shrugging away from this fact, this chapter traces the reproduction and devolution of the song ‘Mack the Knife’ from stage, to screen, into the world of celebrity musician covers and finally as it morphs into a commercial jingle for a popular fast-food chain. The following questions are raised; Can commercial film be radical film? What happens to Brecht’s *gestus* when the social referent is replaced with a celebrity or commercial referent? And did Brecht really believe that “art can do without the cinema”?<sup>13</sup>

Chapter III: *Sound, Silence and Montage: Fritz Lang’s M and the making of Kuhle Wampe* analyzes director Fritz Lang’s 1931 sound film *M* in relation to Brecht’s 1932 sound film *Kuhle Wampe*. Brecht’s response to the *Threepenny* fiasco, *Kuhle Wampe* offers direct evidence that Brecht still believed in the film medium’s ability to present socially/ politically relevant and

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<sup>13</sup> Brecht titles section III of his lengthy response to the *Threepenny* Lawsuit ‘Art Can Do Without the Cinema’. John Willett’s 1957 compilation of Brecht writings includes only this section and a brief section on commercial film’s preoccupation with human interest stories, excluding passages where Brecht discusses the possibilities of film unencumbered by commercialism and studio systems.

change driven work on the screen, even in the face of commercial cinema. Having come head to head with the ‘industry’ during the planning stages of *The Threepenny Opera* film and subsequent lawsuit, Brecht was careful to seek out German independent film collective Prometheus for his next project. Possibly the greatest example of Epic theory on film and the only film in which Brecht maintained complete artistic control throughout production, *Kuhle Wampe* is essential to any discussion of Brecht and cinema.

This chapter illuminates a flow of ideas that originates with Austro-German filmmaker Fritz Lang and writing partner Thea von Harbou’s first encounters with the early Epic stage. Lang and von Harbou borrow both techniques and actors from Brecht’s Epic stage for their 1931 film *M*. Hungarian born German actor Peter Lorre simultaneously stars in Brecht’s Epic stage production *Man Equals Man* while filming Lang and von Harbou’s *M*. Brecht’s *Kuhle Wampe* later borrows heavily from *M*’s sound and editing techniques, almost mirroring some shots and sequences. Brechtian and Lang scholarship has thus far failed to make this connection. This chapter demonstrates that Lorre’s simultaneous education on the Epic stage and work on Lang and von Harbou’s film offered an avenue for exchange between the Epic stage and early synchronized sound-era film. The following questions are considered; What did Epic theory look like when Lang and von Harbou attended the stage production of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928? What Epic techniques were at work in the 1931 production of *Man Equals Man*, starring Peter Lorre? What Epic techniques does Lorre bring to the screen in *M*? How do Lang and von Harbou approach pathos and catharsis? What does Lorre bring back to the Epic stage from Lang and von Harbou’s interpretation of Epic and montage theories? And how does Lang and von Harbou’s reimagining of Epic theory inform Brecht’s 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe*?

Chapter IV: *Brecht in Hollywood: Exile, Resistance and Capitalist Critique* explores Brecht's European exile, following the Nazi rise to power in 1933, and his subsequent time spent in exile in Hollywood during and after World War II (1941-1947). Brecht's rather turbulent career in American theatre and film from 1941-1947 are analyzed through his work on Fritz Lang's anti-Nazi film *Hangmen Also Die* (1943). An exploration of the Hollywood film industry with regards to preferred form and content as well as output and circulation during this period play an important role in this chapter as they aid in revealing why Brecht's Epic theories and leftist political messages struggled to make it onto the screen during this period.

This chapter revisits a period that is often considered a dark age in Brecht's career, where he failed to actualize either stage or screen productions, and reveals that there is not only residue of Epic theory in projects like *Hangmen Also Die* but that Brecht's very experiences as an exile in a commercially driven 1940s Hollywood drove his reformulation of Epic theory and heightened his capitalist critique. These reformulations are evidenced in his reworkings of plays like *Mother Courage and Her Children* while in exile, the 1949 Berlin performance with its scathing capitalist critique and stripped of all traces of empathy, bears little resemblance to the 1941 Zürich performance. Several questions are considered including; How did Brecht's exile experience influence his evolving Epic theory? Was Brecht's European and America exile really a hiatus, as some scholars have suggested? Did Brecht's time in Hollywood and appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee help reshape his capitalist critique? And, as a result of his negative experiences in Hollywood, did Brecht once and for all turn his back on the film medium upon returning to East Germany in 1948?

In the *Afterword*, proposed directions for study of the Epic legacy on screen are discussed. This study reclaims Brecht as a multi-medium artist by laying foundations of a deeper

discussion of the flow of ideas between the Epic stage and screen during Brecht's lifetime. Although the film *Mother Courage* (1961), released five years after Brecht's death, is mentioned in chapter IV, posthumous projects based on and influenced by Brecht's work have not been included in the scope of this dissertation. The *Afterword* is included as a launching point for opening new avenues of discussion on Brecht and contemporary cinema. French New Wave Cinema and East German Cinema artists are briefly discussed as direct descendants of Brecht's Epic cinema legacy. New names will also be put forth as noteworthy cinematic practitioners utilizing Epic techniques; from German documentarian Werner Herzog, Science Fiction writer/Stark Trek creator Gene Roddenberry, Comedic actor, writer and director Mel Brooks, to the *Mise en Scène* of American director Wes Anderson.

#### A Note on Translations

Most quotes from Brecht's plays are derived from the English translations of English-born American theatre critic, writer and translator, Eric Bentley. Bentley's translations of Brecht's notes and other writings have also been used where possible.<sup>14</sup> Bentley and Brecht met in 1942 while Brecht was in exile in Los Angeles. The two became fast friends and spent a great deal of time together between 1942 and Brecht's return to Germany in 1948. In 1945, Bentley worked with Brecht on a translation of Brecht's play *The Private Life of the Master Race*. Bentley would continue to work with Brecht both in person and via letters on English translations of Brecht's plays. Bentley was present during the rehearsals and on opening night of the 1949 Berlin performance of *Mother Courage* and worked as Brecht's assistant during the rehearsals for the 1950 Munich performance of *Mother Courage*. In the forward to his 1987 collection *Brecht Commentaries 1943-1986*, Bentley states "I could never see any Brecht poem

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<sup>14</sup> Willett and Manheim's translations of Brecht's journals, letters and poems serve as additional resources.

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or play except as an extension of the man I knew.”<sup>15</sup> Brecht’s continued desire to work with Bentley and Bentley’s unwavering devotion to preserving Brecht’s intentions, is evidenced in their correspondence and in the work itself. Bentley’s translations are supplemented with my own translations where and when necessary for clarity purposes. Translations from the German films *M* and *Kuhle Wampe*, along with translation of Brecht’s unpublished letter to Hanns Eisler from the University of Southern California archive are also my own translations from the original German.

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Bentley, *Foreword*, in *The Brecht Commentaries 1943-1986*, Grove Press (New York: 1981) p 15.

## Chapter I Silent-Era Cinema and the Epic 'Grotesque'

"You are about to witness an inexplicable wrestling match"<sup>16</sup>

A clown appears in the cinematic frame, staggeringly drunk, stumbling and askew, yet radiating a casual grace, a thoroughly hypnotic plasticity. It is October 29<sup>th</sup>1921, seven years after the release of English-American comic actor and filmmaker Charles (better known as Charlie) Chaplin's Keystone short silent-era film, *The Face on the Barroom Floor* (1914), and young German playwright Bertolt Brecht is experiencing the earliest renditions of Chaplin's already widely beloved Tramp figure, likely one of his first experiences viewing Chaplin. Due to film importation bans during World War I, Germany would not be introduced to Chaplin until 1921. Unimpressed by a production of German composer Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold*<sup>17</sup> the previous evening, part of an ongoing rejection of, what Brecht deemed culinary pleasure driven performances directed at passive audiences, Brecht writes on October 29<sup>th</sup>, "I saw a little one-acter of Charlie Chaplin's, it's called *The Face on the Barroom Floor* and is the most moving thing I have seen in the cinema: utterly simple."<sup>18</sup> Brecht's introduction to Chaplin would be a decisive point in his young career. From Chaplin, and other artists, Brecht would appropriate a formula for enacting the grotesque which would become a core component in his pursuit of methods and styles that promoted active viewership directed at working class-conscious political and social change. The Oxford English Dictionary defines early concepts of the grotesque as "A kind of decorative painting or sculpture, consisting of representations of portions of human and

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<sup>16</sup> Bertolt Brecht, May 9<sup>th</sup>1923 program for the premier production of *Im Dickicht der Städte* (Man Equals Man).

<sup>17</sup> The less acclaimed opera within Wagner's four-part *Ring Cycle* (Premiered at the National Theatre in Munich on September 22, 1869).

<sup>18</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Diaries 1920-1922*, Edited by Herta Ramthun and translated by John Willett, St. Martin's Press (New York: 1979) pp 140-141.

animal forms, fantastically combined and interwoven with foliage and flowers".<sup>19</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, the grotesque breaks from its romantic connotations and acquires a deeper sense of the morose: it becomes a sign for the unnatural distortions of human life in the industrialized urban 'jungle'. For Brecht, the grotesque becomes a demonstration of the conflicts of his time as enacted by some of his favorite clowns. Closely connected to Brecht's understanding of the grotesque is *gestus*, a core concept of his epic theatre. But in order to fully comprehend the impact of this moment and its effect on the evolution of Epic theory, we must first go back to the stage.

Born the middle-class son of a paper mill director in Augsburg, Bertolt Brecht, born Eugene Berthold Brecht, found himself in Munich by 1919, eager to pursue a literary and theatrical career. In a beerhall Brecht was introduced to Bavarian clown Karl Valentine, resolutely performing over a restless and rowdy crowd. A tall, thin, and imposing figure, Brecht described the Bavarian clown

The man [I] learnt most from was the clown Valentin, who performed in a beer-hall. He did short sketches in which he played refractory employees, orchestral musicians or photographers, who hated their employer and made him look ridiculous.<sup>20</sup>

Valentin was often referred to as 'The Charlie Chaplin of Germany' frequently taking on the role of the "kleina zayla" or "little man", much like Chaplin's Tramp figure only cloaked in the dark and expressionistic aura of Weimar cabaret and street performance.<sup>21</sup> German-Jewish writer Lion Feuchtwanger, who would later become both friend and supporter to an exiled Brecht in America, wrote perhaps the most vivid description of Valentin's mesmerizing acting style in his

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<sup>19</sup> "grotesque, n. and adj." OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2019, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/81794](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/81794). Accessed 10 May 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, 1939-1942, translated by John Willett, Methuen (London: 1965) p 69.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Glasmeier, *Karl Valentin: Der Komiker und die Künste*, Carl Hanser Verlag (Munich: 1987) p 37.

1930 novel *Success*. The fictional comedian Balthasar Hierl, based entirely on Valentin, is referred to as “the melancholy clown” who repeatedly attempts to

Solve absurd problems by a lugubrious pseudo-logic...crudely painted, his bottle-nose woefully white and two red spots on his cheeks, he could not be said to sit on his rickety chair, he clung to it like a fly; he had enormous shoes on and his lean shanks were cleverly twisted round the leg of his chair.<sup>22</sup>

Valentin took on roles socially analogous to those of Chaplin and both shared a near complete rejection of psychological realism<sup>23</sup> in their acting styles, but it is clear from Feuchwanger’s description along with *Figures I* and *II* below, that Valentin’s appearance and influences varied from those of Chaplin.



*Fig. I* Karl Valentin as the “Kleina Zayla”<sup>24</sup> *Fig. II* Charlie Chaplin as ‘The Tramp’<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger, *Success*, Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. Literary Guild (New York: 1930) pp 200-201.

<sup>23</sup> Psychological realism here refers to a method developed by Russian writer/director Konstantin Stanislavski beginning in 1909 in which actors were trained to search within themselves and work from “emotional memory”. Stanislavski’s ‘method acting’ spread quickly after his acting company, The Moscow Art Theatre went on a world tour in the early 1920’s, spreading his psychological and emotion driven acting style throughout Europe and the U.S.

<sup>24</sup> Photograph of Karl Valentin in *Der Rennfahrer* (*The Racer*), 1910, Ullstein Bild/Getty Images, [www.gettyimages.com/detail/545031119](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/545031119), EMB.

<sup>25</sup> Promotional photograph of Charlie Chaplin as *The Little Tramp*, 1920, Bettmann/Getty Images, [www.gettyimages.com/detail/517207228](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/517207228), EMB.

Chaplin found his roots on the vaudeville stage and in silent-era and early sound-era Hollywood films, while Valentin was schooled on the cabaret stage. Valentin was known on stage; for his use of wordplay, heavy Bavarian accent, bright orange hair, eccentric costumes, and ‘gallows humor’, a style that treated serious and traumatic situations in a detached and comedic manner. In his 1927 book *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud described gallows humor or “grim humor” aptly with a simple joke “The rouge, on being led to execution on a Monday, remarked: “Yes, this week is beginning well”.<sup>26</sup> While the comment taken on its own seems rather common place, the situation displaces its meaning and moves into the realm of the nonsensical with a grotesque detached awareness similar to the detachment techniques that Brecht was developing on the early Epic stage. Valentin’s ‘gallows humor’ tended to criticize bourgeois norms and comedically present radical social and political commentary.

Karl Valentin was in his forties and a fully established comedic actor by the time he met Brecht in 1918 and his unique grotesque gallows humor, as we will see, had a great impact on a young Brecht mesmerized by German actress Trude Hesterberg’s *Wilde Bühne* cabaret. As Germanics professor Alan Lareau notes in his 1991 article *The German Cabaret Movement During the Weimar Republic*, “cabarets before the First World War stressed two things: conspicuous consumption and eroticism”.<sup>27</sup> After World War I, a ‘literary’ cabaret movement that aimed at educating viewers and promoting political and social change was underway in Germany. The *Wilde Bühne*, which closed in 1924, is often considered the pinnacle of the

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<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), English edition with introduction by A.A. Brill, Moffat, Yard and Company (New York: 1916) p 372.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Lareau, *The German Cabaret Movement During the Weimar Republic*, *Theatre Journal* 43, The Johns Hopkins University Press (Baltimore: 1991) p 473.

German ‘literary’ cabaret, a short-lived movement that ran in tandem with the more popular and sumptuous cabarets of the period.<sup>28</sup>

Brecht’s early contact with Chaplin was through silent-era film. Brecht became fascinated by how Chaplin used his body. The simple yet complex gestures and expressions of Chaplin’s Tramp figure added something seldom conveyed in Weimar ‘literary’ cabaret, charm and an inimitable sense of hope, characteristics that Brecht often struggled to incorporate into his own stage and screen characters as a result of his desire to keep audiences from a state of pure empathy. Chaplin and Valentin’s characters also fell in line with Brecht’s early leanings towards placing unheroic characters at the center of his work, a theme that would continue to be central to his evolving Epic performance theories.

It is clear, from a piece published in 1922, that Brecht believed Chaplin and Valentin’s acting styles to be complimentary

There is no reason why Karl Valentin should not be seen as the equal of the great Charlie, with whom he shares an almost complete rejection of mimicry and cheap psychology. The only possible explanation could be that being a German is counted too heavily against him.<sup>29</sup>

Although Valentin would not know global fame like Chaplin, perhaps a result of anti-German sentiments post World War I as suggested by Brecht, his impact on Brecht aided in the creation of a grotesque style that combined aspects of vaudeville, silent-era film, Weimar ‘literary’ cabaret along with European and American forms of the grotesque.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century European interpretations of the grotesque, relevant to this study, include the theatrical work of German poet Wilhelm Busch and German playwright Frank Wedekind. Wedekind’s work was heavily influential to Brecht’s career. The

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<sup>28</sup> Lareau further describes the evolution of popular and literary cabaret in his article cited above, pp 471-490.

<sup>29</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Große Kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, eds. Werner Hecht, Jan Knop, Werner Mittenzwei and Klaus-Detlef Müller, Aufbau Suhrkamp (Berlin: 1988-2000) 23, p 61.

premiere of Wedekind's *Springs Awakening* at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin in 1906, ushered in a new age of the grotesque in performance. Wedekind attempted to move beyond earlier representations of the grotesque on stage, which emerged through commonly known Commedia dell'arte figures such as the Harlequin<sup>30</sup>. Wedekind was also heavily influenced by German dramatist Georg Büchner's employment of slapstick and satire as a means by which to expose the animalistic nature of man.<sup>31</sup> Chaplin's autobiography reveals a similar tendency towards the contemplation of the dark yet comic nature of humanity, Chaplin recalls

At the end of our street was a slaughter-house, and sheep would pass our house on their way to be butchered. I remember one escaped and ran down the street to the amusement of the onlookers. Some tried to grab it and others tripped over themselves. I had giggled with delight at its lambent capering and panic, it seemed so comic. But when it was caught and carried back into the slaughter-house, the reality of the tragedy came over me and I ran indoors, screaming and weeping.<sup>32</sup>

Chaplin goes on to ponder this incident as the premise for his future career and quite possibly the creation of his legendary Tramp figure, side-splittingly comic yet heartbreakingly tragic. The grotesque in Chaplin's silent-era work presented itself in the form of gestures, "utterly simple", in the words of Brecht yet wholly encompassing of the early twentieth century human experience. German philosopher Walter Benjamin, one of the first theorists to thoroughly trace the connection between the grotesque, as performed by Chaplin, described Chaplin's way of moving as the epitome of the Bechtian concept of 'gestus' in his 1936 book *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*

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<sup>30</sup> Harlequin is a comical servant character from the Italian Commedia dell'arte performance tradition.

<sup>31</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, translated by Peter Smith, Indian University Press (Bloomington: 1963) p132.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (1964), with introduction by David Robinson. Melville House (New York: 2012) location 657, E-book.

The innovation of Chaplin's gestures is that he dissects the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations. Each simple movement he makes is composed of a succession of staccato bits of movement.<sup>33</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Benjamin believed that linear, naturalistic performance driven by empathy no longer had a place in a world of chaos and disorder, where sentiment and the world as they knew it had been obliterated. Chaplin's staccatoed acting style embodied the uncertainty and disorder of the early twentieth century. The first mention of Brecht's concept of 'gestus', however, appears a decade earlier in a March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1926 note written by his writing collaborator Elizabeth Hauptmann where she writes "Brecht discovers the formula for 'Epic theatre': act from memory (quoting gestures and attitudes) and works in his writing entirely in this direction".<sup>34</sup> This is the first direct reference to the use of gesture and 'attitudes', German translation 'gestern'. The concept of 'gestus' is being experimented with on stage shortly after Brecht's introduction to Chaplin and Valentin in his plays *Drums in the Night* (1922), *Baal* (1923), and *In the Jungle of Cities* (1923). In order to fully understand this influence though, we must delve deeper into the acting styles of Chaplin and Valentin.

Hungarian-Jewish writer and film critic Béla Balázs referred to Chaplin as the "American Schielt-bürger"<sup>35</sup> or "Simpleton". In a December 8<sup>th</sup> 1922 issue of *Der Tag*, Balázs described the European reception of Chaplin. Even though European himself, Chaplin was viewed as foreign.<sup>36</sup> Balázs' perception of Chaplin, which is overall approving, calls attention to a perceivable American influence on his acting style, but what were the sources of these influences? Balázs goes on to state that in Chaplin's acting style "there is a certain grotesque and ironic rebellion

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, p 340.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Hauptmann, *Notes on Brecht's Work* (1926), in *Brecht as they Knew Him*, translated by John Peet and edited by Hubert Witt, International Publishers (New York: 1974) p 53.

<sup>35</sup> Schieltbürger

<sup>36</sup> Béla Balázs, *Chaplin, or The American Simpleton*, published in *Der Tag*, December 8, 1922.

against our machine-driven culture”.<sup>37</sup> While Balázs points out a use of the grotesque in the acting styles of other comics from the period, such as American actor and filmmaker Fatty Arbuckle, he discernibly notes that Arbuckle’s persona is “not bathed in the warm, sad aura of some deeper significance”<sup>38</sup>, an attribute ever pervasive in Chaplin’s depiction of his Tramp figure. But what *is* this “deeper significance” and how might Chaplin’s style move beyond the European grotesque as presented in works such as that of Wedekind or the developing Expressionist movement in Germany? The answer to these questions may lie in a deeper analysis of Brecht’s developing theory of the grotesque as revelatory of the contradictions of early twentieth century urban life, influenced not only by the performances of Chaplin and Valentin but also by American writers such as Sherwood Anderson. Brecht, like Chaplin, was interested in exploring the ironic American aspects of the grotesque.<sup>39</sup> Having read American writer Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* (1906), himself only recently relocated to the big and bustling city of Munich, Brecht began to formulate a metaphor that would be utilized throughout his career, implying a parallel between the growing metropolis and the savage nature of a new society built on a self rather than mass preserving capitalist system.

In an unpublished poem Brecht reveals the influence of American writer, Sherwood Anderson, whose 1920 novel *Poor White* greatly impacted his concept of the grotesque. Brecht’s poem, entitled *Coals for Mike*, explores the empty existence of poor American coal workers, their families and lives threatened and eventually ripped from them by a greedy capitalist system. Aid to such families as Mike McCoy, who died from weakness of the lungs on an Ohio coal train, could only be given to his widow in the form of discrete lumps of coal, heaved over their

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> James Scheville, *Notes on the Grotesque: Anderson, Brecht, and Williams*, in *The American and the European Grotesque*, edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing (New York: 2009) p 4-5.

fence in the night by Mike's former coworkers. Brecht's interpretation of the grotesque, much like Chaplin's, arose from an awareness of the distorted individual as a product of what has been imposed upon them by a modern industrialized society rather than something arising 'naturally' or from some primal aspect of human nature, as suggested by performance mediums rooted in psychological realism and the Naturalist tradition.

It is significant that Chaplin's 1914 short, *Face on the Barroom Floor* re-enacts an 1887 poem by French writer Hugh Antoine D'arcy.<sup>40</sup> Brecht's revision of texts, poems, and plays in his own Epic style mirrors that of such early Chaplin films, and would actually become a hallmark of Brecht's career. The psychologically realistic and somewhat Romantic poem *The Face on the Floor* focuses on an artist who has lost his love and, as a result, becomes an out of work drunk. But while the poem reads

I was working on a portrait, one afternoon in May, of a fair haired boy, a friend of mine, who lived across the way. My Madeline admired him, and much to my surprise, she said she'd like to know the lad, who had such dreamy eyes.<sup>41</sup>

Chaplin's rendition employs no such psychological realism. Rather than being introduced to the romantic artist we are confronted by a bumbling portrait painter who accidentally spatters himself with his medium, trips over rugs, and seats himself upon his pallet. Instead of the "fair haired boy" with "dreamy eyes"<sup>42</sup> we are presented with a paunchy older gentleman donning a ridiculous mustache. Chaplin's jab at Romanticism does not end there, with his lover swept away by a portly and senseless suitor, the artist proceeds to fight the unsophisticatedly rendered painting of his enemy, tearing it to shreds with his bare hands. Reciting his story as the artist now

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<sup>40</sup> Although D'arcy's version of the poem has been popularized in print and on screen it is actually an adaptation of an 1872 poem by American poet John Henry Titus.

<sup>41</sup> Hugh Antoine D'arcy, *The Face Upon the Barroom Floor and Other Ballads*, Greenroom Club (New York: 1918) pp 7-12.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

transitioned to Tramp, the poem reads “Another drink and with chalk in hand, the vagabond began, to sketch a face that well might buy the soul of any man.”<sup>43</sup> While the poem ends with the beautiful gesture of a dying artist drawing the face of his lost love on the barroom floor and collapsing, Chaplin’s Tramp figure, after a series of inebriated attempts, draws a simple smiley face on the barroom floor; perchance intimating an aversion to art that takes itself too seriously.



Fig. III *The Face on the Barroom Floor*<sup>44</sup>



Fig. IV *The Face on the Barroom Floor*<sup>45</sup>

It is this very casual and self-mocking attitude that may have been missing, in Brecht’s eyes, from the cabaret tradition, itself having developed increasingly romanticized ‘types’. If cabaret was becoming prescribed, familiar, expected in a German setting, then perhaps this may point towards yet another reason for Brecht directing his attention across the Atlantic and towards the possibilities of new styles and mediums.

Chaplin also had an early tendency to break the fourth wall and present medium-reflexive films that often involved the cinematic ‘apparatus’ or camera at work or, on occasion, as a

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid*

<sup>44</sup> Still shot of Charlie Chaplin as ‘The Artist’ from the 1914 Keystone short *Face on the Barroom Floor*, taken by Kristin Seifert, Director Henry Lehrman, Keystone Film Company, 1914, Film, 00:08:13.

<sup>45</sup> Still shot of Charlie Chaplin as ‘The Artist turned Tramp’ from the 1914 Keystone short *Face on the Barroom Floor*, taken by Kristin Seifert, Director Charles Chaplin, Keystone Film Company, 1914, Film, 00:11:29.

plaything. In his 1914 Keystone short film *Kid Auto Races at Venice*, Chaplin's first iteration of his Tramp character continuously interrupts a filming of a soap box derby race. He strategically places himself in front of the camera and attempts to pose for it, returning to the frame again and again regardless of the camera crew's attempts to remove him from the scene. Angered by the crew's attempts to stifle his fantasy of celebrity, the Tramp turns to the camera and proceeds to stick his tongue out and mock the apparatus itself. Brecht's Epic theatre would take on a similar reflexive form, always striving to remind the audience that they are watching a play through the incorporation of multiple techniques including; dialectical acting, intertitles, installment of musicians in plain view on stage, breaking of the fourth wall, not adhering to the traditional rules of dimming auditorium lights, and set movements taking place in plain view of the audience.



Fig. V *Kid Auto Races in Venice* 1914<sup>46</sup>



Fig. VI *Kid Auto Races in Venice* 1914<sup>47</sup>

Chaplin's vaudeville-derived acting style relied heavily upon gesture during the silent-film era. Chaplin created a series of trademark gestures that became easily recognizable to his

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<sup>46</sup> Still shot of Charlie Chaplin as 'The Tramp' from the 1914 Keystone short *Kid Auto Races in Venice* taken by Kristin Seifert, Director Henry Lehrman, Keystone Film Company, 1914, Film, 00:03:50.

<sup>47</sup> Still shot of Charlie Chaplin as 'The Tramp' from *Kid Auto Races in Venice* taken by Kristin Seifert, Director Henry Lehrman, Keystone Film Company, 1914, Film, 00:05:30.

audiences. Brecht describes his first encounter with this acting style in an October 1921 journal entry

He puts his hat on askew and goes off upstage into the darkness, staggering as if he had been hit on the head, all askew, my God, all askew as if he'd been blown off course by the wind all windblown like no one you have ever seen.<sup>48</sup>

Chaplin's unique walk intrigued Brecht so that he wrote a poem about a drunken man which clearly echoes his earlier quoted initial reaction to Chaplin's acting style in *The Face on the Barroom Floor*, Brecht writes that the man "Walked straight and steady, Now feels freer as instead he, Walks askew. (Walks askew.)"<sup>49</sup> Chaplin's unique body language struck Brecht, but he was also intrigued by the ending of his films, which typically involved Chaplin's slow disappearance from the cinematic frame, employing his unsteady directionless walk. Brecht would attempt to bring this and other cinematic techniques to the theatre through the employment of revolving stages, treadmills, and use of projections that blurred the mediums of film and theatre. Through the use of these devices, Brecht and his colleagues were able to control the speed of scene shifts and create a multi-medium world that would keep its audience actively viewing.

Brecht's introduction to Chaplin is tied up in a period of American discovery. During this period Brecht wrote a number of plays set in the United States, including *In the Jungle of Cities*, which premiered in Munich in 1923. Set in 1912 Chicago, the play presents a family's move from the prairie to the "great city jungle."<sup>50</sup> American critic and playwright James Scheville writes in his 1973 book *Break Out! In Search of New Theatrical Environments*

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<sup>48</sup> Brecht, *Diaries 1920-1922*, p 141.

<sup>49</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913-1956*, Edited by John Willett and Ralph Manheim, Methuen Paperback (London: 1979) p 669.

<sup>50</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *In the Jungle of Cities* (1923), translated by Anslem Hollo, in *Bertolt Brecht: Jungle of Cities and Other Plays*, edited by Eric Bentley and translated with Bentley's notes by Anslem Hollo Grove Press (New York: 1966) p 12.

The image of America in Brecht's work is puzzling- fantastic, brutal, chaotic, materialistic, romantic, daring, primitive and sophisticated at the same time- a strange mixture of attraction and repulsion, the same attitudes that Brecht revealed in conversation about the United States. Reading Brecht's work and talking to him was a lesson in what the United States meant to European's in the 1920's, and a warning why the United States is still regarded by Europeans as a grotesque mixture of raw materialism and free openheartedness.<sup>51</sup>

This juxtaposition of the coarse and the convivial, cruelty and compassion, suggests the distortion of *all* reality, the grotesque nature, if you will, of the human race in the modern material driven world. It is the irony of the simultaneous existence of these human attributes which drive the performances of Chaplin and which led to Brecht's further development of the concept of 'social gestus'.

Brecht would come to define 'social gestus' as "the gest relevant to society, the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about social circumstances."<sup>52</sup> As an essential element of Brecht's *Verfremdungs* or *defamiliarization* effect the 'gest' in Brecht's Epic performance theory aimed to create a series of signs explicitly placed in order to point to an intended social referent. The grotesque, in Brecht's epic theory then takes on a similar form to that described by German writer Thomas Mann in his 1918 work *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* where he states "The grotesque is that which is excessively true and excessively real, not that which is arbitrary, false, unreal, and absurd."<sup>53</sup> In this sense, the true nature of humanity is revealed through the grotesque. The use of the grotesque is then no longer merely caricature and satire presented for a quick laugh but rather a deeper representation of the mechanisms of modern humanity.

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<sup>51</sup> James Schevill, *Break Out! In Search of New Theatrical Environments*, Swallow Press (Chicago: 1973) reprinted in *The American and European Grotesque*, edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing (New York: 2009) p 6.

<sup>52</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, translated and edited by John Willett, Hill and Wang (New York: 1964) pp 104-105.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Mann, *Reflection of a Nonpolitical Man* (1918), translated by Walter D. Morris, Frederick Unger (New York: 1985) p

Chaplin's Tramp figure embodied Brecht's developing concept of social *gestus*. The Tramp is a Brechtian character in that he is what he is as a result of society. While slapstick on its surface, the silent-era Chaplin films that Brecht came into contact with in the early 1920's were rife with references to social injustice. The Tramp figure was consistently being presented in relation to capitalist society, his 'jobs' turned every business upside down, exposing harsh realities through gestural engagement with everyday objects. In this way Chaplin depicts the dark comedy of ordinary human experiences. As Balázs noted "his enemies are *things*", the material world at large, an approach that Brecht begins to explore in his early plays. Chaplin's light-hearted yet grotesque antics appealed to a young Brecht who was on the verge of a successful career in the early 1920s with the premier of his plays *Baal*, *Drums in the Night*, *Edward II*, and *In the Jungle of Cities*, the latter of which is pivotal to this study as its writing and premier coincide with Brecht's introduction to Chaplin. But prior to returning to the stage, we must first explore the direct cinematic implications of Brecht's introduction to Chaplin at this time and the results of his coupling together the vaudevillian-silent-era Hollywood style of Chaplin with the 'literary' cabaret-beerhall performance techniques of Karl Valentin.

The German government owned the film studio Universal Films AG, abbreviated as UFA. UFA was formed in Berlin in November of 1917 with the intent to produce World War I propaganda films. Following the war this company continued to produce films, many of which contained the deep psychological layers that Brecht so despised. On the other side was a wave of Expressionist films that included the now canonical *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), written and directed by Austrian-Jewish filmmaker Carl Mayer, as well as Astro-German director Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse* (1922). These Expressionist films featured characters with exaggerated facial expressions and heavy eye make-up that served to further the over-stylization of their

performance, extreme close-ups, and sharp camera angles. Even as a young emerging artist, Brecht realized that he belonged in neither of these camps, perhaps this is why his first produced film did not receive wide or successful circulation until it was re-discovered in a Moscow archive in the 1970's.<sup>54</sup>

Although Brecht's attitude towards film would shift throughout his career, first with the transition from silent-era to synchronized sound film and later through his experiences as an exile in Hollywood during World War II, his introduction to Chaplin was integral to his evolving thinking about the grotesque and the development of what Brecht would later term the *Verfremdungs* or *Defamiliaration* effect.<sup>55</sup> Brecht's first produced screenplay, *Mysterien eines Fisersalons* or *Mysteries of a Barbershop* was produced by the German company Kopro-film and released in 1923. Starring the Bavarian clown himself, Karl Valentine, the twenty-eight-minute film was written by Brecht and co-directed with German film and theatre director Erich Engel. Although *Calgarian* expressionism can be perceived in the film's style, Chaplin's influence is felt in the series of grotesque episodes that occur between barbershop employees and their customers, which discernibly includes the appearance of a Tramp imitator (German actress and cabaret performer Liesl Karlstadt in drag).

The inclusion of Chaplinesque techniques and, perhaps most notably, a Chaplin imitator in *Mysteries of a Barbershop* directly reveals the influence of Chaplin at this point in Brecht's career. Brecht's choice of comedian and cabaret performer Karl Valentin in the role of the lazy, sadistic, yet comical Barber is significant as the film clearly combines Valentinian and

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<sup>54</sup> W. Stuart McDowell, *A Brecht-Valentin Production: Mysteries of a Barbershop*, *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Winter: 1977) p 5.

<sup>55</sup> Brecht's fully formed *Verfremdungs* or defamiliarization effect involves the audience receiving unfamiliar conflicting signifiers thereby inciting critical observation. It is also through critical observation that the social *gestus* is revealed.

Chaplinesque styles through the inclusion of both the humorous and the horrifying. Liesl Karlstadt appears in drag as Chaplin's Tramp figure, entering the barbershop in an over-sized suit and promptly removing both her bowler hat and mustache. Valentin, as the lazy-sadistic barber, makes his way down a series of bunk beds in a humorously worm-like manner. But the scene clearly has roots in gallows humor, simultaneously employing slapstick to horror when the barber attempts to remove one customer's facial boil with a chisel.



Fig. VII *Mysteries of a Barbershop*<sup>56</sup>



Fig. VIII *Mysteries of a Barbershop*<sup>57</sup>

Later scenes involve 'elite' client's heads being accidentally sawed off and then sown back on along with the rather unfortunate makeover of Dr. Moras, presented as a rather distinguished gentleman who is then made ridiculous by the inept Barber. The film depicts bourgeois society thrown into a state of upheaval, as the working class: in the form of the Barber and his devious assistant, German actress Blandine Ebinger, enact ghastly yet farcical antics upon them.

Everyday activities are made thoroughly unfamiliar and nonsensical, a nod to Brecht's

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<sup>56</sup> Still shot of Liesl Karlstadt in silhouette dressed in drag as Chaplin's 'Tramp' character from *Mysteries of a Barbershop* taken by Kristin Seifert, Directors Bertolt Brecht and Eric Engel, Dr. Koch (München), 1923, Film, 00:03:10.

<sup>57</sup> Still shot of Karl Valentin as 'The Barber' and Liesl Karlstadt as 'The Tramp' from *Mysteries of a Barbershop* taken by Kristin Seifert, Directors Bertolt Brecht and Eric Engel, Dr. Koch (München), 1923, Film, 00:04:40.

developing theory of defamiliarization in performance and clearly indebted to Chaplin and Valentin's acting styles.

Brecht's first produced film project, *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, is rarely mentioned in Brechtian studies although there is an apparent intensification in Brecht's focus on screenplay writing and production immediately following his exposure to Chaplin's silent-era films. This increased interest in film is evident in the numerous screenplays written during this period, beyond the produced *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, Brecht wrote several complete unproduced screenplays in the early 1920's; amongst these are *The Mystery of the Jamaica Bar* and *The Jewel Eater*, both of which appear in translation in Marc Silberman's 2000 book *Brecht on Film and Radio*. Brecht's first published piece on film theory, which appeared in the Berliner Börsen-Courier on May 19<sup>th</sup> 1925 begins with the statement "Film can be of great importance in the Epic theatre" and goes on to assert that "since film can represent reality in such an abstract way, it lends itself to confrontations with reality. It can confirm or dispute. It can recall or prophecy".<sup>58</sup> Brecht clearly sees the many possibilities of the film medium at this early point in his career, although he expresses some caution regarding what he refers to as the "static nature" of film. Brecht's negative perception of 'commercial' film and "ridiculously cut" films would not present itself until 1928, with a Berliner Börsen-Courier piece titled *Mutilated Films* in which he cites German filmmaker Charlotte 'Lotte' Reiniger's 1926 animated film *The Adventures of Prince Ahmed*. While Brecht admires the talent and diligence of the artists/filmmaker, he finds the editing deplorable and blames the studio itself for the resulting "mutilated" product. This is the

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<sup>58</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The ABC's of the Epic Theatre*, originally published in the Berliner Börsen-courier, May 19<sup>th</sup> 1925, in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, translated and edited by Marc Silberman, Methuen Drama (London: 2000) p 7.

first occasion in which Brecht raises questions, in publication, surrounding studio heads and the artistic license of filmmakers.<sup>59</sup>

Early studies of Brecht, such as those written by Martin Esslin and John Willett, tend to mention film as merely a means to fund Brecht's theatrical work, side projects that ended in legal battles with studio heads, like the *Threepenny* lawsuit which resulted from a conflict-ridden attempt to work with German director G.W. Pabst on the 1931 film adaptation of Brecht's play *The Threepenny Opera*. Willett's now canonical compilation of Brecht's major theoretical writings, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* contains only one piece on film titled "Art can do without the cinema."<sup>60</sup> Brecht had not only written several pieces prior to this selection on the film medium but also wrote this piece in response to one negative experience working in the medium. As this is the only piece in Willett's renowned compilation of Brecht's writings in which Brecht expresses direct sentiments regarding film, readers may assume that he had little interest in the medium either before or after this incident. These editing approaches have aided in the creation and propagation of what this study argues to be, the myth of Brecht as champion for theatre and the theatre alone. If Brecht has been claimed for the theatre by twentieth century scholars than it is no wonder that his films, including his first produced piece, *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, are often overlooked or viewed as nothing more than amusing side projects with fellow artists and friends. The further exploration of Brecht's continued preoccupation with the film medium, both before and after the *Threepenny* incident within this study troubles this position.

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<sup>59</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Mutilated Films*, in *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, originally published August 30<sup>th</sup>1928, in Silberman, p 8.

<sup>60</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* p 47.

Brecht would not see another film project to fruition until nearly a decade following the production of *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, the feature length 1932 sound film *Kuhle Wampe*. It is common amongst Brechtian scholarship to assume that Brecht was merely an unsuccessful screenwriter and that his theatre work is most influential and therefore most worthy of discussion and analysis. In further opposition to this view is a recent list of the *100 Most Significant German Films* released by The National Information and Advisory Center for the Promotion of German Films Worldwide. Both *Mysteries of a Barbershop* and Nazi-banned Brecht film *Kuhle Wampe* are included on a list comprised of such globally renowned films as Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) and *Metropolis* along with F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922). Re-visiting the films of Brecht also brings us closer to discovering the cinematic elements of his theatre, the ways in which he incorporated Chaplin's cinematic use of vaudevillian derived-grotesque along with Valentin's live cabaret derived-grotesque styles.

One of Brecht's early plays, *In the Jungle of Cities*, premiered on May 9<sup>th</sup> 1923 at the Residenztheater in Munich. Brecht's journals, letters, and poems from the period leading up to the premier reveal a preoccupation with both Valentin's stage performances and Chaplin's cinematic shorts. The May 9<sup>th</sup> 1923 premier of *In the Jungle of Cities* was directed by German film and theatre director Erich Engel with stage design by Austro-German scenographer Casper Naher, whose name would eventually become almost synonymous with Brecht's as a result of his innovative stage designs created for Brecht's early plays. A technique that would be used continuously throughout Brecht's career, Naher constructed Brecht's imagining of the great city as jungle on a revolving stage. Brecht's close friend, German physician and writer Hanns Otto Münsterer recalls

Neher's sets were fully visible, turning on an open revolve with the street sounds of the waking city rising above them – until the stage came haltingly to rest, as if by chance, at Mayne's lending library.<sup>61</sup>

Although this play, along with the majority of the work written and constructed by Brecht throughout his lifetime, has been altered from its original format, the lending library of C. Maynes remains the opening scene in published German and English re-productions of the plays text. During the filming of *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, Brecht and Valentin had discussed the possibility of setting *In the Jungle of Cities* in a sporting arena. Perhaps a result of the literal nature of the boxing match/arena, Brecht instead created ten short scenes, mimicking the structure of the boxing match but with constant shifts in time and location made possible by a circulating stage. The boxing arena would later appear in the 1930 premier run of Brecht's play *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.

The revolving stage was Brecht's live answer to Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and other early soviet director's developing theory of 'montage' in film. Eisenstein lays out his definition of montage theory in his 1925 manifesto *The Method of Making Workers' Films*. His "montage of attractions" consists of socially relevant and class conscious "chain[s] of suitably directed stimulants" (a quick succession of edited shots that are dialectical in nature).<sup>62</sup> Montage in films like Eisenstein's 1925 silent-era film *Battleship Potemkin* is often used as a means by which to reveal the monotony and futility of working-class life in a globally expanding capitalist system, shuffling chaotically between shots of; factory lines, urban streets and people robotically moving through the motions of their work day. Brecht admired not only Eisenstein's leftist working class-conscious subject matter but also his montage technique which lent itself to the

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<sup>61</sup> Hanns Otto Münsterer, *The Young Brecht*. Translated by Tom Kuhn and Karen Leeder, Lebris (London: 1992) p 107.

<sup>62</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *The Method of Making Workers' Films*, Kino 11 August 1925, reprinted in *Film Essays and a Lecture Sergei Eisenstein*, Edited by Jay Leyda, Princeton University Press (Princeton: 1968) pp 17-20.

creation of juxtapositions and separation of action. In Brechtian scholar Sarah Bryant-Bertail's 2000 book *Space and Time in Epic Theatre: The Brechtian Legacy*, she explains how Brecht's use of the revolving stage, which would be utilized throughout his career including in the 1949 Berlin premier of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, allows the stage to convey movement in both space and time, separation of action and the futility of the working-class experience.<sup>63</sup> But further than this, the revolving stage allows motion to be halted or resumed in contrast to the actors/characters movements, to move backwards or forwards in time and space, to display non-linear juxtaposed sequences that resemble cinematic editing techniques like montage and jump cuts.<sup>64</sup> Silent-era cinematic influences are clearly at work in Brecht's earliest staged plays.

Brecht's play *In the Jungle of Cities* is significantly set in 1912 Chicago, an American backdrop by no means chosen by accident, as evidenced by both Brecht's early fascination with American culture and his desire to remove his audience from any empathetic connection with the characters and their surroundings. This was the first of Brecht's 'American plays', which would grow to include *St. Joan of the Stockyards* (1929-1931), *The Resistible Rise of Arturo* (1941), amongst others. The young George Garga appears behind the counter of C. Mayne's lending library, a modest clerk recently relocated from the prairie with his family. Shlink, a Malay lumber dealer, enters the shop, forever altering the path of his and young Garga's lives. And so the match begins, a fight with neither objective nor malice, a metaphysical clash, an inconceivable simultaneous march towards obliteration.

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<sup>63</sup> Sarah Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theatre: The Brechtian Legacy*, Camden House (Rochester: 2000) pp 72-73.

<sup>64</sup> French filmmaker George Méliès's 1896 silent-era film *The Vanishing Lady* demonstrates perhaps the first example of the jump cut on screen. A magician presents a woman on stage who seems to disappear, reappear as a skeleton and then revert to her original form again. This is an early example of continuity play directed at disorienting the viewer.

Austrian-German actor Erwin Faber, who would later appear as Dr. Maros in *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, appeared in the role of George Garga. Brecht's early notes on the play state that Garga is "like a young [Arthur] Rimbaud in appearance. He is essentially a German translation into American from the French".<sup>65</sup> Known for his influence on the Surrealist movement, French poet Rimbaud resembled Valentinian characters both in his tall and slim appearance along with his reputation for being a dark and troubled soul. Garga's character had then been filtered through both Brecht's imagining of early twentieth century America and his fascination with Karl Valentin. German actor Otto Wernicke, who also appeared in *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, performed the role of Shlink, the lumber dealer. Known for his later roles in Austro-German director Fritz Lang's *M* and *Dr. Mabuse*, Wernicke had an astonishingly Chaplinesque quality, shorter and more robust than Faber, Brecht states that "Shlink wears a long dirty yellow costume down to his ankles, picturesquely blackened hair, and a black tuft on his chin".<sup>66</sup> Shlink comes across as an international amalgamation, a caricature both rough in appearance yet peculiarly warm-hearted. When the characters meet, an unusual duality manifests itself, individual yet congruent. It is significant that much of the cast for this early play also appeared in *Mysteries of a Barbershop*. Brecht was, if anything, always changing, ever experimenting with styles and spatio-temporality. It is no surprise then that the actors that appeared in his earliest plays were also part of his simultaneous cinematic experiments.

The 1923 Munich production of *In the Jungle of Cities* reflects the influences of Chaplin, Valentin, and early silent-era film editing techniques, having penned the play during his introduction to Chaplin and Valentin's unique forms of the comic grotesque along with the early film theories of Soviet filmmakers like Eisenstein. The play takes place in various places of

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<sup>65</sup> Brecht, notes on *In the Jungle of Cities* p 431.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*

business throughout Chicago, including Shlink's lumber shop and includes a bar scene strikingly similar to Chaplin's *Face on the Barroom Floor*, complete with Worm, the hotel owner's, recitation of the story of G. Wishu who came to the big city, was spurned by a woman, and ended up poor, alone, and rejected by the society that surrounded him. What is perhaps most striking about the recitation of the story of G. Wishu at the beginning of scene nine of Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities* is the interruption prior to its telling, in which Worm announces "Ich muß aber das Orchestrion dazu haben"<sup>67</sup> ("I must have Orchestration"<sup>68</sup>) in order to tell the story. At this point music begins to play and lyrics and pictures are projected onto a canvas at the back of the stage. In his 1933 notes on his play *Di Mutter*, Brecht discusses the purpose of his early incorporation of projections on stage

The projections are in no way pure mechanical aids in the sense of being extras, they are no *pons asinorum* [concept difficult to grasp]; they do not set out to help the spectator but to block him; they prevent his complete empathy, interrupt his being automatically carried away. They turn the impact into an *indirect* one. Thus they are organic parts of the work of art.<sup>69</sup>

Immersed in the aura of 'literary' cabaret and silent-era film, Brecht's use of multiple mediums on stage is already being inaugurated in these early productions. The live and the recorded, the American and the European grotesque were merging to form Brecht's early Epic theories. Münsterer recalls the result of the innovative and socially driven *In the Jungle of Cities* production, "As the struggle between Shlink and Garga became increasingly brutal, the performance started to be interrupted by occasional whistles, which eventually became an unbroken chorus."<sup>70</sup> He goes on to describe hearing "frenzied applause" underscored by "furious catcalls", the former of which emanated from supporters and the latter of which originated from

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<sup>67</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Im Dickicht der Städte Erstfassung und Materialien*, 1922, Suhrkamp Verlag (Berlin: 1968) p78.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, own translation.

<sup>69</sup> Brecht, *Notes to Die Mutter*, extracts translated by John Willett and reproduced in *Brecht on Theatre* p 58.

<sup>70</sup> Münsterer p 107.

disapproving affiliates of the early Nazi party who were in attendance (no doubt offended by the race and class conscious subject matter, avant-garde style and not so flattering metaphors to the current German state).

In the end, Brecht had written a play that urged its audience to observe the experience as a multi-faceted event, a series of ‘matches’ rather than scenes, with clear attempts to play with spatio-temporality in a manner that often resembles Chaplinesque and Eisensteinesque silent-era cinema. Shlink and Garga’s metaphysical war wages for years, through loss of employment, companionship, shelter, and eventually Shlink’s life, followed by Garga’s complete moral annihilation. Even on the brink of death, Shlink remains calm and collected, displaying an odd sense of decorum through the years of conflict with Garga. There is something truly Chaplinesque in this character. Chaplin so often appeared as the outcast, taking on the role of the down-trodden or foreigner, Shlink’s social status and his ‘yellow’ skin are derogatorily referred to throughout the play and it is this that leads to his eventual death. Where Garga is imprisoned for the crimes he is accused of, Shlink is never given the chance; he is sought out by a lynch mob and forced into the gravel pits of Lake Michigan where he meets his end. Garga, on the other hand, is a brasher and moodier character, a Valentinian character in many aspects. Still an outcast, like Shlink, but due to poverty rather than nationality. The two characters attempt to brawl on a level that exceeds the material world, a spiritual battle rather than a battle of the flesh, a kind of fight that Shlink deems impossible on the brink of his death, as humanity is so grounded in the material world. Shlink’s final words and actions illustrate one of Brecht’s early attempts at articulating *gestus* in his plays and films through the use of the grotesque. In a deserted tent in the gravel pits of lake Michigan, Shlink paces around, sits, takes a drink and delivers a staccatoed chaotic monologue

George? Gerettet! Ein wahnsinniges Licht! Welch ein Rechenfehler! In Sicherheit bringen! In Sicherheit bringen! *Er rißt sein Halstuch weg.* Di Fässer stinken schon. Gute, fette, selbstgeangelte Fische! Gut gedörst, in Kisten vernagelt. Eingesalzen! In die Teiche gesetzt zuvor, eingekauft, überzählt, fettgefüttert! Todstüchtige, selbstmörderische Fische, die die Angel schlucken wie Hostien. Pfui Teufel! Jetzt schnell! *Er geht zum Tisch, setzt sich. Trinkt aus einem Fläschchen.*<sup>71</sup>

George? He ran away! What a mistake---Safety! (*He tears his scarf off.*) The barrels are stinking already. Good, fat, caught-by-hand fish! Well dried, nailed up in crates! Salted down! After having been planted in ponds, bought, overpaid, overfed! Death-loving fish, suicidal fish, swallowing bait and hook like holy wafers! Oh, hell! And now, fast. (*He goes over to the table, sits down. Takes a drink from a small bottle.*)<sup>72</sup>

Once a successful businessman, Shlink has sunk into the distorted world of the grotesque: squatting in the deserted gravel pits of Lake Michigan, all as a result of fighting a battle not worth winning. Shlink speaks in incoherent sentences dripping with the morose, the grotesque, the rotten and contradictory nature of the modern industrialized urban ‘jungle’. Shlink’s final words and actions demonstrate a life disfigured: a world in disorder. Brecht introduces the modern city in a state of chaotic ambiguity, a theme that will be discussed further in the next chapter, as it permeated both Brecht’s 1928 production of *The Threepenny Opera* and the cinematic transition from silent to synchronized sound-era film in Germany.

This chapter has illuminated how Charles Chaplin and Karl Valentin’s grotesque acting styles simultaneously played a pivotal role in Brecht’s development of Epic Theory, bringing together European and American iterations of the grotesque. Early silent-era cinema techniques like Eisenstein’s montage theory also push Brecht to invent new stage techniques that attempt to mirror silent-era cinema. An often-overlooked aspect of Brecht’s career, Brecht’s multi-medium and international influences more fully account for the development of an ever fluid multi-

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<sup>71</sup> Brecht, *Im Dickicht der Städte* p 102.

<sup>72</sup> Brecht, *In the Jungle of Cities*, p 87.

medium aesthetic theory. It is there, in the moments where the European and American grotesque, the stage and the screen collide, that Epic gestus is realized and active viewership is achieved. Such collisions, particularly where the stage and screen are concerned, were and continue to be rather controversial in the eyes of practitioners and scholars, and thus we are introduced to another seemingly “inexplicable wrestling match”.<sup>73</sup> This battle was one familiar to Brecht throughout his career as he navigated between the worlds of page, stage, screen and radio. Ever driven by the work, the process, the “problem [rather] than the solution; more in the road than the goal”, in the words of friend and mentor, Lion Feuchtwanger, Brecht aimed early on to create art that used whatever means or mediums necessary to initiate active viewership and work that advanced positive working class-conscious social and political change.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Brecht, *In the Jungle of Cities*, p 12.

<sup>74</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger, *Bertolt Brecht Presented to the British*, 1928, in *Brecht as They Knew Him*, translated by John Peet, International Publishers (New York: 1974) p 19.

## Chapter II

### **Epic Theatre Meets Popular culture: Modern Media and Celebrity's Role in Shifting Social Referents in 'Mack the Knife'**

It would be an oversight to reevaluate Brecht's interactions with film and other mediums outside of the theatre without calling specific attention to the disastrous attempt at collaboration that occurred between Brecht and film director G.W. Pabst on the 1931 feature length sound film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). This collaboration, its collapse, and the resulting lawsuit are frequently singled out in discussions of Brecht and film. The conclusion generally drawn from the Threepenny Lawsuit and Brecht's later notes on his distaste for the direction early synchronized-sound films had taken in Weimar Germany, is that Brecht had little influence on film and that film had little influence on his theory after this point.

In chapter one we began to evaluate ways in which silent-era film influenced Brecht's early Epic theory and will go on to discuss other avenues of intersection between the stage and screen. However, we must first stop to digest this very negative and pivotal experience that Brecht had with film. Brecht's involvement with the film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* and his resulting notes, including one titled *Art Can do Without the Cinema*, are often taken as Brecht's absolute perspective on film.<sup>75</sup> In this chapter we will confront the *Threepenny* adaptation moment head on and analyze Brecht's work as it becomes exposed to and reproduced by popular culture and mass media in ways that Brecht never could have condoned or even imagined in his lifetime. This chapter illuminates that Brecht's true 'enemy' was not the film medium itself but rather how 'the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility' is

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<sup>75</sup> See Introduction, p 2 on John Willett's canonical compilation of Brecht writings, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* in which this piece stands alone with regards to conveying Brecht's view on cinema yet only illustrates his thoughts on a single negative experience with his first play adapted to the screen.

manufactured, circulated and consumed.<sup>76</sup> This discussion is necessary to understanding the ways in which reproduction and circulation of Brecht's work can work against the very nature of Epic theory, further revealing possible reasons for Brecht's struggle to bring Epic techniques to screen, records and radio. In chapter three we will discover how this struggle paid off and how Brecht borrowed techniques from silent-era and early sound-era films to produce his pivotal leftist political film *Kuhle Wampe* (1932).

G.W. Pabst's sound film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* may not have succeeded in demonstrating early Epic theory and techniques on film, but it did introduce Brecht's work to the global masses. A discussion of Epic theory's consumption in what German philosopher Walter Benjamin described as 'the age of technological reproducibility' is necessary to understanding not only Brecht's shifting attitudes towards the film medium but also how the film medium introduced Brecht's work to a popular culture and mass media with little interest in his concept of *gestus*<sup>77</sup> or the role Brecht meant this mechanism to play in promoting social change. The film medium, as we will see, was becoming a double-edged sword for Brecht; a medium capable of impacting wide social change in both positive and negative ways.

This chapter will also track yet another medium in which Brecht took a great interest, music. Throughout Brecht's career he collaborated, most notably, with Austro-German composer Hanns Eisler, German-Jewish composer Kurt Weill and German composer Paul Dessau, writing lyrics to juxtapose against an often-conflicting score. Analyzing the intended meaning of the now widely popular song 'Mack the Knife', will illustrate how textual interpretation, celebrity, reproduction, circulation and mass consumption manipulate and shift meaning. Although popular

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<sup>76</sup> See *Introduction*, p 2 for overview of Walter Benjamin's 1936 book *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*.

<sup>77</sup> A means of conveying signs in Epic performance which will be further defined in this chapter.

versions of ‘Mack the Knife’ are recognizable in melody, when viewed through a semiotic lens, changes in signifiers have shifted what is signified, therefore invoking a referent quite different from that which was originally intended by Brecht in his 1928 production of *The Threepenny Opera*.

Brecht’s use of juxtaposed rather than synchronized dramatic elements that appealed to audiences on an emotional level has fascinated semioticians. French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes writes, in a piece titled *The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism* which appears in Barthes’ 1963 book *Critical Essays*, that Brechtian theory presupposes “that today at least, the responsibility of a dramatic art is not so much to express reality as to signify it. Hence there must be a certain distance between the signified and signifier”.<sup>78</sup> Some scholars, such as Germanics professor Ellis Shookman, believe that, in viewing Brecht’s theory through a semiotic lens, Barthes focuses more on the style of Brecht’s performance theory than on its substance and “increasingly ignores Brecht’s politics”.<sup>79</sup> While considering Shookman’s critique, this chapter uses semiotics to illuminate how the separation of dramatic elements in the 1928 stage version of Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera* contributed to the creation of a politically driven social referent and how the lack of such separations of dramatic elements in Pabst’s 1931 film adaptation intrinsically transformed Brecht’s original piece and intentions.

Semiotician Charles W. Peirce defined a sign as “something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity”<sup>80</sup>. The sign, according to Pierce, contains three parts: the *representamen* (the signifier), the *interpretant* (the signified), and the *object* (the referent).

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<sup>78</sup> Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, translated by Richard Howard, Northwestern University Press (Evanston: 1972) pp 74-75.

<sup>79</sup> Ellis Shookman, *Barthes Semiological Myth of Brecht’s Epic Theatre*, Monatshefte Vol. 81, No 4, 1989 p 460.

<sup>80</sup> Charles S. Peirce, *Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs* (1900), in *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, edited by Robert Innes, Indiana University Press (Bloomington: 1985) p 5.

Brecht's social gestus involves signifiers explicitly placed in order to point to an intended signified. If successfully communicated, the viewer or listener would relate the signified to the real-world referent that Brecht was attempting to invoke. These real-world referents were most often directed at class conscious social change, therefore creating what Brecht termed 'social gestus'.

Brecht was experimenting with separation of music and text along with the installation of musicians spotlighted on the stage as early as his 1926 productions of *Baal* at the Deutsches Theatre in Berlin and *Man Equals Man*, staged in Darmstadt. In March of the same year Brecht's German writing partner, Elisabeth Hauptmann, noted "Brecht discovered the formula for 'epic theatre': act from memory (quote gestures, attitudes) and when writing he works wholly in that direction".<sup>81</sup> This is the first direct reference to the use of gestures or 'attitudes', German translation *gestern*. Brecht would eventually label this concept 'gestus', a means of conveying signs in Epic performance. Brecht was opposed to art forms that tended to empty any social element from the gestus. He would later describe this concept, which was first put to use in the 1926 stage performances of *Man Equals Man* and *Drums in the Night* as follows

On the other hand, a gest of pain, as long as it is kept so abstract and generalized that it does not rise above a purely animal category, is not yet a social one. But this is precisely the common tendency of art: to remove the social element in any gest.<sup>82</sup>

Here Brecht refers to art aimed at reaching audiences on a purely emotional or primitive level.

Conversely, Brecht sought to appeal to people's logic in order to promote active viewership and positive social change.

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<sup>81</sup> Elisabeth Hauptmann, *Notes of Brecht's Work*, in *Brecht as They Knew Him*, translated by John Peet, International Publishers (New York: 1974) p 53.

<sup>82</sup> Brecht, *On Gestic Music* (1932), in *Brecht on Theatre* p 104.

Peirce's semiotic theory also aids in explaining forms of art that Brecht was opposed to, art that emptied content directed at positive working-class conscious social change from the *gestus*. The signifiers would be so abstract in these art forms that any number of things could be signified. The audience may then come away with nothing more than a fleeting moment of emotion driven empathy and catharsis. For example, artists such as German opera composer Richard Wagner used music to reinforce stage illusion, while Brecht turned away from what he called "highbrow" art and opera, in search of a more radical socially driven performance style. As explored in chapter one, Brecht was attracted to working class or "lowbrow" performance mediums like vaudeville and 'literary' cabaret. A combination of these styles along with the influence of silent-era films helped Brecht to move beyond passively consumed entertaining illusion and imbue his productions with social *gestus* which promoted active and reflective viewership.

In 1928, German writer and Brecht collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann completed a translation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. Hauptmann, Brecht and composer Kurt Weill proceeded to write a play loosely based on Gay's opera. The result of this collaboration was *The Threepenny Opera* which premiered at Berlin's Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in the same year. This premier production opened with the song "Die Moritat von Mackie Messer"<sup>83</sup> sung by German-Jewish actor/ film director Kurt Gerron. Gerron, who played the chief of police, Brown, performed this song as the opening number. "Die Moritat von Mackie Messer" was inspired by the long popular *Moritaten* (murder acts) songs, also known as 'penny dreadfuls', performed by singers at street fairs which recounted real-life murders and hangings ripped directly from

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<sup>83</sup> "The Ballad of Mac the Knife"

current newspaper headlines. Brecht had been a longtime admirer of these raw live documentary street performances which he became familiar with growing up in Augsburg.<sup>84</sup>

*The Threepenny Opera* is an opera for beggars; an early Brechtian critique of the dangers of capitalist culture and the state of the poor and working classes in the modern world. The timing of Brecht's play was befitting in light of the looming Great Depression which would hit the industrialized world in 1929 and endure through much of the 1930s. *The Threepenny Opera* would be an early Brechtian attempt at raising questions aimed at poverty, unemployment and the wide disparity existing between social classes. As we will see in later chapters, Brecht's capitalist critique would become heightened as he navigated his way from early to late adulthood and continued to reformulate his Epic theory as a German exile in both Europe and the United States. There is every reason to believe that Brecht was pleased with the 1928 Berlin premier of *The Threepenny Opera*. Writing to close friend and fellow proponent of Epic theatre, German director Erwin Piscator, months after the August 1928 premier, Brecht states "[*The Threepenny Opera*] hasn't an ounce of falsehood in her, she's a good honest soul. Her success is most gratifying".<sup>85</sup> Although Brecht would later express negative views towards *The Threepenny Opera*, it is important to examine these views in light of Brecht's negative experience with the 1931 G.W. Pabst screen adaptation of the play. As we will see, Brecht's adverse remarks surrounding *The Threepenny Opera* appear to arise only after he mistakenly signs away all rights to the play and music, paving the way for unprecedented manipulation, reproduction and circulation of Brecht, Hauptmann and Weill's work.

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<sup>84</sup> Brechtian scholar John Fuegi describes Brecht's early exposure to these documentary street performances at fairs held in his hometown of Augsburg in his 1987 book *Bertolt Brecht: Chaos According to Plan*, Cambridge University Press (London: 1987) pp 4-6.

<sup>85</sup> Brecht, *Letters 1913-1956*, p 120.

Walter Benjamin's 1936 book *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* is in continuous conversation with Brecht's developing Epic theories. Benjamin described a kind of transcendent unreproducible element that exists within a first-hand experience or original artistic piece, what he termed "the *aura*".<sup>86</sup> Benjamin theorized that, if 'the *aura*' indeed existed, society was responsible for its decay, citing two mass tendencies "the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction."<sup>87</sup> Brecht would never fully reconcile with Benjamin's concept of 'the *aura*', going so far as to call it "a load of mysticism" in a 1938 journal entry written while Benjamin was staying with him. But the original intentions and aftermath of the mass reproduction of Brecht and Weill's 'Ballad of Mack the Knife' may aid in justifying Benjamin's concerns while placing them in a more corporeal context.

In order to apply his concept of social *gestus* to a musical score, Brecht first developed a system of techniques by which to separate music from all other aspects of the play. In the 1928 Berlin premier of *The Threepenny Opera* at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamma a small orchestra, 7 musicians in total, was installed visibly on the stage and spotlights were focused on the musicians as they played. Song titles were displayed on a screen at the back of the stage, offering a further separation between plain speech, heightened speech, sung and instrumentally performed music. Brecht would later describe how these techniques relate to the actor stating

Nothing is more revolting than when the actor pretends not to notice that he has left the level of plain speech and started to sing. The three levels-plain speech, heightened speech and singing-must always remain distinct...As for the melody, he must not follow it blindly; there is a kind of speaking-against-the-music which

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<sup>86</sup> Benjamin, p 23.

<sup>87</sup> Benjamin, p 22

can have strong effects; the results of a stubborn, incorruptible sobriety which is independent of the music and rhythm.<sup>88</sup>

Seamless transitions between sung and spoken text were most often seen in the traditional forms of opera that Brecht was attempting to work against in *The Threepenny Opera* and in Epic productions to come. In writing “Mack the Knife” Brecht and Weill also employed conflicting lyrics and music to further separate dramatic elements. In a piece titled *On the Use of Music in Epic Theatre*, dated 1935, Brecht declares

The most successful demonstration of the Epic theatre was the production of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928. This was the first use of theatrical music in accordance with a new point of view. Its most striking innovation lay in the strict separation of the music from all the other elements of entertainment offered.<sup>89</sup>

This production was a pivotal moment in the development of Epic music and therefore serves as a significant example of how Brecht’s intentions, while successful on stage, would become obscured through manipulation, reproduction, mass circulation and consumption.

In Brecht’s Epic theory, the main goal of music is to underline or, in semiotic terms, serve as an index to the written text of the song. Brecht achieved this through the incorporation of juxtapositions. In Brechtian scholar Sarah Bryant-Bertail’s book *Space and Time in Epic Theatre*, she describes juxtaposition in Epic music in spatial terms, stating that “In all of Brecht’s works, songs are often the means by which an invisible space-time “invades” the visible”<sup>90</sup>. She goes on to state that

Space, becomes a dynamic spatiality in process, which always involves at least two ideologically coded contradictory spacial dimensions at any moment, in an ongoing juxtaposition with each other.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Brecht, *The Literarization of the Theatre: Notes on Threepenny Opera* (1930), in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp 44-45.

<sup>89</sup> Brecht, *On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre* (1935), in *Brecht on Theatre*, p 85.

<sup>90</sup> Sarah Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theatre*, Camden House (Rochester: 2000) p 19.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid*

As we will see, Brecht employed these spatial-temporal juxtapositions through experimentation with musical genres, sung text, along with visual stage elements carefully separated from one another.

In the version of “Mack the Knife” used for the prologue of the 1928 Berlin premier of *The Threepenny Opera*, the audience heard upbeat ragtime-jazz inspired music while the lyrics presented a reflective and moralizing message:

An ’nem schönen bauen Sonntag  
Liegt ein toter Mann am Strand  
Und ein Mensch geht um die Ecke  
Den man Mackie Messer nennt<sup>92</sup>

On a blue and balmy Sunday  
Someone drops dead in the Strand.  
And a man slips round the corner.  
People say: Macheath’s on hand.<sup>93</sup>

Each verse of the song presents various murder and other nefarious acts committed by *Threepenny’s* lead character Macheath. These lyrics play against emotions that may be initially called forth by the music as the music does not reflect the somber and horrific subject matter presented by the lyrics. This form of juxtaposition also illustrates Brecht’s developing *Verfremdungs* or defamiliarization effect.<sup>94</sup> Brecht’s defamiliarization effect involves the audience receiving unfamiliar conflicting signifiers thereby inciting critical observation. It is also through critical observation that the social *gestus* is revealed.

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<sup>92</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, 1928, reprinted by Suhrkamp Verlag (Berlin: 1955) p 7.

<sup>93</sup> Brecht, Bertolt and Kurt Weill, “Mack the Knife” from *The Threepenny Opera*, translated by Eric Bentley, Grove Press Inc. (New York: 1949) p 3.

<sup>94</sup> Brecht was utilizing this effect in his early theory and performances and would label it *Verfremdungseffekt* in an initially unpublished piece written in 1936 which appears in *Brecht on Theatre* pp 94-99.

The Moritaten or murder act musical recounting remained a well-known and popular street fair performance style when *The Threepenny Opera* appeared in 1928. As the performance's opening number, its very form therefore signified a real-world social referent. The character Macheath's heinous list of crimes are recounted before the audience with upbeat ragtime-jazz inspired accompaniment. Though the Moritaten and ragtime performance styles may have been familiar to the audience, the contradictory nature of the two forms working in tandem further aided in producing Brecht's defamiliarization effect. Receptive audience members might find themselves tapping their foot to the catchy and cheery music and suddenly hear a line referencing an old man and seven children being burnt alive in Soho or a coachman stabbed, drowned or shot. Brecht hoped that these moments of conflict might wake viewers up, pushing them to view and listen more actively.

Working closely with German film and theatre director Erich Engel, Brecht was able to assume a breadth of artistic control over the 1928 Berlin premier of *The Threepenny Opera*. The original version of the now widely popular song 'Mack the Knife' was added late in the rehearsal and writing process. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this song is that it was actually a product of celebrity. The events leading up to the writing of "Mack the Knife" just prior to the August 31<sup>st</sup> 1928 premier of *The Threepenny Opera* revolved around the apparently sizeable ego of German actor Harold Paulson, cast in the role of Macheath. A well-known operetta star, Paulson threatened to quit if forced to relinquish his choice of costume. Attempting to stand out as the leading actor, Paulsen allegedly visited a high-end tailor shop and purchased a double-

breasted black suit with a stiff collar, shiny black shoes, white spats, black bowler hat, a sword cane and a stunning blue cravat that mirrored his striking blue eyes.<sup>95</sup>



Fig. VII Paulsen as Mcheath<sup>96</sup>



Fig. VIII Paulsen as Mcheath<sup>97</sup>

In an attempt to counteract Paulsen's blatant conceit, Brecht and Weill composed "The Ballad of Mack the Knife". With regards to Paulsen's costume, Brecht concluded

Let him keep it, Weill and I will introduce him with a *Moritat* that will describe his crimes, and that way he will appear even more frightening with that blue necktie.<sup>98</sup>

Austro German actress Lotte Lenya, who appeared in alternating roles as Low-Dive

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<sup>95</sup> John Fuegi describes Paulson's costume and Brecht's reaction in further detail in *Brecht and Company*, Grove Press (New York: 1994) p 202.

<sup>96</sup> Photograph of Harold Paulsen as Mack the Knife, 1930, Hulton Archive/Getty Images, [www.gettyimages.co.nz/detail/82094895](http://www.gettyimages.co.nz/detail/82094895)

<sup>97</sup> Final Scene of Die Dreigroschenoper with Kurt Gerron, Roma Bahn and Erich Ponto, 1928, [www.gettyimages.co.nz/detail/515356478](http://www.gettyimages.co.nz/detail/515356478)

<sup>98</sup> Brecht quoted in Fuegi, *Brecht and Company*, p 202.

Jenny and Lucy Brown for the 1928 production, further revealed that on top of Paulsen's heavy handedness with his costume, he also demanded a song that would introduce his character with a splash stating that

Paulsen, as vane as ever, insisted that his entrance as Mackie Messer needed building up: why not a song right there, all about Mackie, getting in mention if possible of the sky-blue bow tie that he wanted to wear? Brecht made no comment but next morning came in with the verses for the "Moritat" of Mack the Knife.<sup>99</sup>

To Paulsen's dismay, Brecht gave 'Mack the Knife' to German actor Kurt Gerron, cast as police chief Tiger Brown, and designed the song to hinder the audience from relating to the character Macheath whom, due to Paulsen's narcissism, appeared in dress very similar to the middle and upper-middle class patrons who attended the Berlin premier.

In performance scholar and professor Michael Quinn's 1990 article *Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting* he discusses the ways in which personal qualities or celebrity of a performer can come to dominate a performance. Quinn refers to the actor's personal contribution to the acting as the "expressive function".<sup>100</sup> Brecht was able to somewhat subdue Paulsen's expressive function through the incorporation of social gestus in the song "Mack the Knife". A song whose creation sprung out of a desire to salvage social gestus in the face of celebrity expression, "Mack the Knife" would eventually fall victim to the very thing it was designed to oppose.

After the 1928 premier, *The Threepenny Opera* quickly grew in popularity, subsequently giving rise to a number of performances and translations around the world. In 1931, a film version directed by G.W. Pabst was released simultaneously in French and German. This

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<sup>99</sup> Lotte Lenya, *August 28<sup>th</sup> 1928*, originally published in Theatre Arts, May 1956 as *That was a Time!*, translated by Eric Bentley and reprinted in the 1949 Bentley/Desmond Vesey translation of *The Threepenny Opera*, p xi-xii.

<sup>100</sup> Michael Quinn, *Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting*, The New Theatre Quarterly, 1990 No 22, pp 154-155.

project would result in Brecht's suing the Nero Film Company whom he regretfully sold *The Threepenny Opera* adaptation rights to in May of 1930. The contract, which stated that Brecht would be allowed to collaborate on the film script, was broken when Brecht left the project due to disagreements over his desire to incorporate his Epic theories and rework the script in an attempt to further enhance the sociopolitical subject matter contained within. New to the world of the major film company, Brecht made the mistake of completely signing away the adaptation rights to his script. What resulted was a film that bears only slight resemblance to the original stage play and removes nearly all elements of Brecht's developing concept of social gestus. Brecht's lawsuit was thrown out due to breach of contract, as he made a conscious decision to walk away from the production after signing away his rights to the adaptation. Kurt Weill, who continued on the project after Brecht's departure, was fired, won his lawsuit and was awarded meager monetary compensation.

Brecht would later state that "The *Threepenny* lawsuit demonstrates how far the process of transforming intellectual values into commodities has progressed" and go on to declare that "*Threepenny Opera* fell into a huge machine whose function it is to make commodities out of artistically formed works at enormous expense".<sup>101</sup> Although it is unclear of what Brecht means by "artistically formed works" here he seems to be implying that the adapted film served mainly as a catalyst for reproduction and mass circulation directed singularly at producing profit. Brecht's words seem to mirror Benjamin's thoughts on the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility. Benjamin explained the crisis of reproduction as follows:

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<sup>101</sup> Brecht, *On the Discussion about Sound Film, Der Scheinwerfer 7*, (Essen: December 1930), translated by Marc Silberman in *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*, Methuen Drama (UK: 2000) p 144-145.

It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence.<sup>102</sup>

The 1931 film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* is removed from the Epic tradition and caters to mass circulation and consumption. Although stripped of many of the Epic techniques that Brecht incorporated for the stage production and removed from Brecht and Weill's influence, the film would eventually go on to become a box office success and launch the song "Mack the Knife" into an even wider world of manipulation, reproduction, mass circulation and celebrity influence.

G.W. Pabst's film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* opens in complete darkness, a gong rings twice and orchestral music fades in. As the opening credits begin, German actor/singer Ernst Busch's disembodied voice begins to sing a brief section of the 'Second Threepenny-Finale'. This song originally appeared at the end of act two scene three of Brecht's stage play. This is one of many songs that is either edited, moved or removed during the transition from stage to screen. As Busch sings lines originally sung by Lotte Lenya as Low-Dive Jenny in the stage production, he is joined by a chorus of voices that become heightened as the rather complementary orchestral music crescendos. The opening scene presents a long shot of Macheath (Austro-German actor Rudolph Forster and Low-Dive Jenny (Lotte Lenya) exiting the brothel at which she works. Forster's costume is reminiscent of Paulsons, although the well-funded film manages to make Macheath appear even more elite and well coifed. Polly Peachum and her mother, the daughter and wife of a man who operates an outfitting and licensing shop for beggars, also appear unusually elegant in satin and lace dresses with fine white gloves, elaborately trimmed hats and matching parasols.

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<sup>102</sup> Benjamin, p 22.

As Macheath catches a glimpse of Polly Peachum and Mrs. Peachum walking by, he rejects Jenny's arm and begins to follow them down the street. This scene is followed by a rather pedestrian presentation of 'Mack the Knife' performed by Ernst Busch, now embodying the role of the Street Performer. As Macheath, played by future Nazi film star Forster roams the crowded streets of London, the faint sound of the Street Performer accompanied by an organ grinder fades in. Macheath approaches the crowd gathered around the street performer and stops momentarily to listen as his own crimes are recounted before him in song. He lingers for a moment behind Polly and her mother. Polly, turning to see Macheath cockily smirking at her, naively smiles back.



Fig. IX Forster as Macheath<sup>103</sup>



Fig. X Macheath, Polly and Mrs. Peachum<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Screenshot of Rudolph Forster as Macheath taken by Kristin Seifert from *The Threepenny Opera*, Director G.W. Pabst, Janus Films, 1931, Film, 00:04:01.

<sup>104</sup> Screenshot of Rudolph Forster as Macheath, Carola Neher as Polly Peachum and Valeska Gert as Mrs. Peachum taken by Kristin Seifert from *The Threepenny Opera*, Director G.W. Pabst, Janus Films, 1931, Film, 00:05:29.

'Mack the Knife' loses its larger social referent here, becoming background music that is more of a warning to his future wife Polly than to the masses affected by Macheath's atrocious crimes.

The song fades out as Macheath follows Polly and Mrs. Peachum off screen.

No intertitles are utilized in the opening of the film and the music seamlessly fades in and out. There seems to be no real attempt to separate dramatic action and elements as Brecht had done in the 1928 stage production. With films editing capabilities, Pabst had a unique opportunity to experiment with cinematic separation of action but disappoints, aiming rather for the kind of seamless transitions that Brecht so despised. The Moritaten performance style is still present, but the song is performed with no indication that the character standing nonchalantly listening on the street is actually the culprit of the crimes being recounted. The line spoken by Jenny at the end of the 1928 version of the song as Macheath strolls across the stage "Das war Mackie messer!"<sup>105</sup> ("That was Mackie the Knife!"<sup>106</sup>), has been completely eliminated. Little is signified here beyond the momentary distraction of a street performance and the brief period in which the lyrics can clearly be heard comes and goes without any spoken reference to the character Macheath.

The music in the above scene is no longer a separate and underlining entity as it was in Brecht's stage production. Brecht's originally intended social gestus becomes even further removed when viewing this movie after actor Forster's close connection and participation in numerous films for the Nazi party from 1940 until the end of World War II. Forster would come to embrace what Brecht was so vehemently opposed, and it becomes difficult to watch his performance without a degree of awareness of the gruesome crimes that the actor would condone

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<sup>105</sup> Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, p 8.

<sup>106</sup> Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, p 4.

in his real life. But Pabst's film was only the beginning of a succession of manipulations and reproductions of the song "Mack the Knife", that would stray widely from Brecht and Weill's original intentions behind writing the song.

Two years after the American release of Pabst's film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* the first U.S. staging of Brecht's play premiered at New York City's Empire Theatre. Translated into English by Gifford Cochran and Jerrold Krimsky, the show ran for only two weeks and was generally disliked by critics, yet Pabst's film was a box office success in the U.S.<sup>107</sup> A successful staging of *The Threepenny Opera* would not occur in the U.S. until 1954. Translated by American composer/lyricist Marc Blitzstein, the show premiered at the off-Broadway Theater de Lys and had a six-and-a-half-year run. Blitzstein attempted to recreate Brecht's 1928 script through a literal translation and making as few cuts as possible. During production of the play Blitzstein stated:

I regard my role as that of a relay, a middleman; I have simply made negotiable to our American audiences an opera I have adored since my Berlin student days. All translations—all, I say—are bound to be failures; one must be content to settle for that which fails least.<sup>108</sup>

Brecht was not involved in the 1954 production and Kurt Weill had passed away four years earlier. It was left to Weill's widow, Lotte Lenya, to maintain an authoritative voice with regards to the production. Lenya had played Jenny in the original 1928 production as well as in the 1931 Pabst film. Blitzstein relied heavily on direction from Brechtian trained Lenya. In an April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1954 edition of *Musicals Off Beat*, Lenya stated that

Marc Blitzstein has come closest to capturing the power of Brecht's book and lyrics. He has kept the slang and the sting. Every time Broadway has approached

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<sup>107</sup> Percy Hammond, *The 3-Penny Opera at the Empire is just a torpid affectation, sluggish, ghastly and not nearly so dirty as advertised*, *The New York Herald-Tribune*, 1933.

<sup>108</sup> Marc Blitzstein, *Prize Dreigroschen*, *Saturday Review*, October 25, 1958.

me about Kurt's opera, they have wanted to change it...I have always turned them down, and so did Kurt.<sup>109</sup>

With the help of Lenya, Blitzstein had successfully introduced Brecht and Weill's musical to the American public making full use of the fact that Lenya had been schooled on the Epic stage.

Harriet Johnson, theatre critic for *The New York Post* wrote

Marc Blitzstein's translation of the Brecht text is, to my mind, the finest thing of its kind in existence. He has got the spirit of the play and rendered it powerfully, colloquially, compactly. And his English versions of the songs are so apt prosodically, fit their music so perfectly, that one can scarcely believe them to be translations at all.<sup>110</sup>

Blitzstein's lyrics do indeed fit their music, but as discussed earlier, Brecht was not aiming for symmetry in his Epic music. *The New York Post* review actually reveals a burgeoning misunderstanding of Brecht's intentions and Epic theories. Blitzstein's translation borrows heavily from popular American music of the time, mirroring popular jazz-inspired easy listening like that of American crooner's Frank Sinatra, Bobby Darin and the like. The earlier Bentley translation, worked on in conjunction with Brecht, ends with the same question posed in Brecht's original 1928 German version, "Mackie, welches war dein Preis?"<sup>111</sup> ("what did Mackie pay for this?"<sup>112</sup>) calling attention to the fact that Macheath continues to escape the law. Blitzstein's translation concludes by listing Mcheath's female love interests "Sukey Tawdry, Jenny Diver, Polly Peachum, Lucy Brown" and introducing Macheath with an orchestral and vocal flourish in the final line "Oh the line forms on the right dear, now that Mackie's back in town!"<sup>113</sup>

Blitzstein's translation may have made him more than simply a "middleman", as would be seen

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<sup>109</sup> Lotte Lenya in Emory Lewis' article, *Musicals Off Beat*, Cue, April 3, 1954.

<sup>110</sup> Harriet Johnson, *Don't Miss Threepenny Opera*, New York Post May 17<sup>th</sup>1954.

<sup>111</sup> Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, p 8.

<sup>112</sup> Own translation

<sup>113</sup> Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, as adapted and translated by Marc Blitzstein, *Sheet Music for 'Mack the Knife'* from *The Threepenny Opera*, Weill-Brecht-Harms (New York: 1955).

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when his translation of “Mack the Knife” made the transition from stage to popular radio in 1955 through American musician and singer Louie Armstrong. From stage, to film, to stage, to popular radio, “Mack the Knife” would undergo its most substantial journey out of the context of *The Threepenny Opera* and into American popular culture, a journey that would not be accompanied by Brecht’s concept of social gestus. Interestingly enough, Lotte Lenya, who earlier showed concern for the future of her late husband’s work, would be present in the studio during Armstrong’s recording. Picking up on the Blitzstein translations listing of characters in its conclusion, Armstrong went so far as to incorporate Lenya’s name into the lyrics thereby changing the final verse of the song from

Sukey Tawdry, Jenny Diver  
Polly Peachum, Lucy Brown  
Oh the line forms on the right, dear  
Now that Mack is back in town.<sup>114</sup>

To:

Sukey Tawdry, Jenny Diver...Lotte Lenya,  
Sweet Lucy Brown  
Oh, the line forms on the right, dears.....now that Macky’s back in town! Take it Satch  
(instrumental)<sup>115</sup>

The character Polly Peachum’s name is completely cut out in order to recognize Lotte Lenya as the celebrity who was playing Jenny Diver, whose name is also mentioned, in the famous off-Broadway production. With the shows growing popularity Lenya would go on to win a Tony award in 1956 for her performance as Jenny.

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<sup>114</sup> *ibid*

<sup>115</sup> Louis Armstrong, *Mack the Knife*, adapted from Marc Blitzstein’s translation of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s lyrics and score, Pablo Records 1957.

The character list in the final verse of Armstrong's version undergoes a definite change in signification. Lenya's name, as a signifier, now points directly to her celebrity and fame from the successful six-year off-Broadway run of *The Threepenny Opera*. Her character's name remains in the song but there is an obvious recognition that Jenny Diver is being identified by the star that played the character in the off-Broadway production. This would most certainly not be the last, nor the most recognizable star whose name would be added to versions of "Mack the Knife". The song was not only being removed from its context but also becoming an extremely popular celebrity name dropping tune.

American pop singer Bobby Darin would go on to record his widely popular version of "Mack the Knife" in 1959. Also working from the Marc Blitzstein translation, he would take even more liberties by adding an extra verse altogether along with utilizing slang and singing techniques common to pop music of the time

Now...Jenny Diver...ho, ho...yeah...Sukey Tawdry  
Ooh...Miss Lotte Lenya and old Lucy Brown  
Oh, the line forms on the right, babe  
Now that Macky's back in town.

Aah...I said Jenny Diver...whoa...Sukey Tawdry  
Look out to Miss Lotte Lenya and old Lucy Brown  
Yes, that line forms on the right, babe  
Now that Macky's back in town ...  
Look out...old Macky is back!!<sup>116</sup>

Lotte Lenya's name has now been separated from the character that she played, and Darin actually gives a heads up or "Look out to Miss Lotte Lenya" in the added verse. As we can see, the style of the song is also changing. Darin has turned the song into a finger snapping dandy sing along.

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<sup>116</sup> Bobby Darin, *Mack the Knife*, adapted from Marc Blitzstein's translation of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's lyrics and score, Harms Inc. 1960.

This version creeps ever closer to removing the original social referents from a song that was once about the heinous crimes of a man who eerily manages to blend into society. Darin also adds his own signifiers to the song with the “Now, ho hos, yeahs, ohs, and look outs!” so common to pop music of the 1950s. Darin, and for a brief moment Lenya, are the only things being signified in this version. The referent is no longer social injustice and Macheath’s ability to escape the law here, but celebrity.

When celebrity takes over we are confronted with what Quinn referred to as the “expressive function” and an emotional response is elicited from the audience based upon their recognition and imagined connection to the celebrity figure. The celebrity breaks the chain between Brecht’s social *gestus* and the audience by dominating the performance with their expressive function. In the hands of Louie Armstrong and Bobby Darin, “Mack the Knife” began to morph into a piece of upbeat popular music driven by celebrity. Remaking this song becomes a kind of rite of passage for pop singers, a way to add your name to a list of top celebrities who have sung the song before you. In Micheal Quinn’s earlier mentioned article on celebrity he aptly described “a historical system of celebrity, where stars appear as heirs to a tradition of predecessors who resemble them or represent similar values”.<sup>117</sup> This statement lends itself nicely to the discussion of adaptation and reproduction of Brecht and Weill’s song “Mack the Knife”. After its consumption by American popular culture, the song begins to literally catalogue its own celebrity past and popularity while the current singer moves forward with the knowledge that they are adding their own name to future adaptations and reproductions of the song, solidifying their place in this popular celebrity tradition.

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<sup>117</sup> Quinn, p 159.

In 1976 *The Threepenny Opera* was revived at The New York Shakespeare Festival and ran for nine months. The show featured a new English translation by John Willett and Ralph Manheim. *New York Times* theatre critic Richard Eder wrote “*Threepenny Opera* emerges lightened and somewhat simplified. In a way, this to the good”.<sup>118</sup> With the popularity of adaptations and reproductions of the song “Mack the Knife”, audiences may have come to the theatre seeking a show filled with light-hearted upbeat pop songs and celebrity references, only to realize that “Mack the Knife” comes and goes in the prologue and Willett and Manheim’s translation attempts to reclaim some of the rawer language utilized in Brecht’s original German play. The show received overall mixed reviews but had a long run which made *The Threepenny Opera* available to a new generation of theatregoers.

The 1980’s would bring with it another slew of radio remakes of “Mack the Knife”. Frank Sinatra would not record his well-known version until 1984. Two years later the global fast food chain, McDonald’s, would introduce commercials featuring Mac Tonight, intended to advertise the restaurant chains new late-night hours. Sinatra’s version of the song adds an entire three extra verses to the Blitzstein translation

Ah, old Satchmo, Louis Armstrong, Bobby Darrin  
They did this song nice, Lady Ella too  
They all sang it, with so much feeling  
That Old Blue Eyes, he ain't gonna add nothing new

But with Quincy's big band, right behind me  
Swinging hard, Jack, I know I can't lose  
When I tell you, all about Mack the Knife babe  
It's an offer, you can never refuse

We got George Benson, we got Newman & Foster  
We got the Brecker Brothers, and Hampton's bringing up the rear  
All these bad cats, and more, are in the band now

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<sup>118</sup> Richard Eder, *Stage: Threepenny Opera*, *New York Time* July 8<sup>th</sup>1977.

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They make the greatest sounds, you ever gonna hear.<sup>119</sup>

This version contains the most apparent celebrity name parade to date. Sinatra even references himself, “That Old Blue Eyes, he ain’t gonna add nothing new”. This statement is rather ironic considering the fact that he added three new verses. This celebrity name dropping tangent precedes the final verse, which has also been altered

Hey Sookie Taudry, Jenny Diver, Polly Peachum,  
Old Miss Lulu Brown  
Oh the line forms, on the right dear  
Now that Macheath, I mean that man Macheath  
Yeah he's bad, mercy mercy  
Yeah he's badder than old Leroy Brown  
You better lock your door, and call the law  
Because Macheath's, that bum,  
He's back in town!<sup>120</sup>

In this final verse, Sinatra has eliminated any reference to Lotte Lenya, as seen in Armstrong and Darin’s adaptations. Polly Peachum’s name has reappeared although Lucy Brown is referred to as Lulu Brown. Perhaps the most interesting shift in significations occurs when Macheath is associated with Leroy Brown, another fictional character created by popular American folk-rock artist Jim Croce in the 1973 song ‘Bad, Bad Leroy Brown’. Little of Brecht and Weill’s original song is present in this version. A song that was written in an attempt to subdue Herald Paulsen’s celebrity ego is completely devoured by celebrity by the time we reach Sinatra’s adaptation.

1986 would see yet another and perhaps the most removed from the original version of Brecht and Weill’s “Mack the Knife”. With a crescent moon for a head, a sleek black suit and sunglasses, the character Mac Tonight burst onto the television screen as a mascot for the popular

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<sup>119</sup> Frank Sinatra, *Mack the Knife*, adapted from Marc Blitzstein’s translation of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s lyrics and score, Bristol productions and Quest Records, 1984.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid*

American fast-food chain McDonalds. The character was presented as a jazzy lounge singer and piano player. The lyrics read

When the clock strikes half past 6, babe  
Time to head for golden lights  
It's a good time for the great taste -- dinner!  
At McDonald's, it's Mac Tonight  
Come on, make it Mac Tonight!<sup>121</sup>

With this commercial, Brecht and Weill's song had come to represent the complete opposite of what was initially intended in its addition to the 1928 Berlin staging of *The Threepenny Opera*. The song had been consumed by celebrity and popular culture and lost all resemblance to Brecht and Weill's anti-celebrity, conflict driven lyrics and score. The melody is recognizable, but the lyrics signify nothing more than a capitalistic advertising ploy which Brecht could never have condoned. The only real-world referent present in this version is the sense that the viewer needs to venture away from the television set momentarily to purchase a hamburger and a side of fries.

In a November 29<sup>th</sup>1987 New York Times article American writer/singer Eileen Prescott discussed the making of Mac Tonight. The advertising campaign not only increased and, in some areas, doubled Macdonald franchise profits but also brought the regional advertising firm D.J.M.C. into the spotlight. After the success of Mac Tonight, D.J.M.C. gained several other high profile million dollar accounts. According to Prescott

McDonald's, for its part, won't disclose sales figures except to say that the program had "great success." But Nation's Restaurant News, a trade magazine, reported that some restaurants in California enjoyed double-digit increases in dinner business as a result of the ads. Equally convincing were the crowds that turned up for "live" appearances by an actor dressed as the Mac Tonight character at local McDonald's restaurants. A McDonald's spokeswoman, Terry Capatosto, said 1,500 people flocked to a single promotion at one Los Angeles outlet.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Doug Jones, <http://www.thedougjonesexperience.com/mactonight.htm>

<sup>122</sup> Eileen Prescott, *The Making of Mac Tonight*, The New York Times (New York, Nov 29, 1987).

With Mac Tonight “Mack the Knife” had undergone a complete makeover, consumed by a fast food and material driven culture. A new generation would grow up associating “Mack the Knife” with happy meals and big macs rather than as the appeal to justice and anti-celebrity piece that it had originated as. All references to Brecht and Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* had disappeared and along with this, all techniques and messages intended at producing positive working-class conscious social change and active reception. One is left wondering if Brecht might reevaluate his comments regarding Benjamin’s “mystical” concept of the work of art losing its *aura* through reproduction. Brecht might be intrigued by the reprisal of this debate by late twentieth century American performance scholar’s Phillip Auslander and Peggy Phelan who focus on the essential radicalism (or absence thereof) in live performance in capitalist societies. Phelan’s concept of live performance as the last resort of the authentic or ‘auratic’ experience is countered by Auslander’s assertion that the concept of liveness exists only as a result of technological mediatization, reprises the early twentieth century debate between Benjamin and fellow Frankfurt School member Theodore Adorno. Auslander’s argument is also indebted to American literary critic Fredric Jameson’s theory that the very concept of ‘liveness’ exists only as a result of the contrivance of an antithesis, what Jameson defines as ‘technological mediatization’.<sup>123</sup> Keeping these theories in mind, a picture begins to develop of a young Brecht incapable of escaping new media and its tendency towards mass reproduction, manipulation, circulation and consumption. Brecht is living and working in worlds that cannot be separated, the live and the recorded, for better or worse, have a fundamental interdependence and therefore Brecht simply cannot be a champion for the theatre and the theatre alone in his time.

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<sup>123</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*, Duke University Press (Durham: 1991).

The Epic performance tradition is lost entirely in the commercialized version of “Mack Tonight”, only a faint residue of a familiar Weill melody remains. “Mack the Knife” has undergone extensive shifts in meaning and continues to be rerecorded, most recently by singer Michael Buble, who has continued to add to the list of celebrity names included in the song. One need only conduct an internet search in order to witness how far out of its original context the song “Mack the Knife” has been removed. Many popular music-applications, including Apple Music and Spotify, simply list the song as “Mack the Knife” by Bobby Darin, eliminating any reference to Brecht, Weill, or *The Threepenny Opera*. Manipulation, reproduction, circulation and celebrity has devoured Brecht’s social gestus and other Epic music techniques and allowed the expressive function of the actor or singer to dominate the performance creating what Brecht called “empty” gestus.

With the undeniable popularity of “Mack the Knife” as it has been consumed by American popular culture, it becomes rather difficult to separate the song from its celebrity referents. Before you even hear the words to this song, the melody invokes images of Louie Armstrong, Bobby Darin, Frank Sinatra, and the slew of other celebrities that have performed and continue to perform this song. The song now refers, first and foremost, to its performer or to a long tradition of performers; any other meaning derived from the song becomes secondary.

Perhaps the only way to get a sense of Brecht and Weill’s original intentions for this song would be to attend a stage production of *The Threepenny Opera*. Unfortunately, even productions that attempt to be faithful to Brecht’s intentions are incapable of wholly removing the celebrity referents from the song as audience members will likely come to the production having heard many popular versions of the song. Spectators may simply latch onto this one familiar element of the show and passively enjoy the tune that they have tapped their feet to and heard on the radio, film, and television screen so many times. Popular mass reproductions of the song and the celebrities

involved in their making may dominate viewers minds then, even when the song is returned to the stage, in the words of Benjamin “substituting a mass existence for a unique existence”.<sup>124</sup> But, as previously stated, “the age of technological reproducibility” had arrived and, regardless of the outcome of the 1931 *Threepenny Opera* film adaptation, subsequent lawsuit and its prompting of manipulation and mass reproduction of “Mack the Knife”, Brecht would not give up on the film medium, he would merely tread lightly as he ventured forward into his next film project. From the negative experience with the Pabst film adaptation, Brecht learned that film’s ability for mass circulation, reproduction and consumption could be a double edge sword for his carefully constructed Epic theories and politically driven work. Brecht would move forward carefully constructing contracts that gave him full rights over the adaptation and distribution of his intellectual property. In fact, art clearly *could not do* without the cinema, as Brecht began work on his leftist political film *Kuhle Wampe* only three years after his negative experience with the *Threepenny* film, raising further questions as to the editorial choices of early Brechtian scholars that tend to single out his angry rebuttal to the Threepenny Lawsuit *Art can do without the Cinema* as a means by which to claim Brecht as a champion for the theatre.

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<sup>124</sup> Benjamin, p 22.

### Chapter III

#### **Sound, Silence and Montage: Fritz Lang's *M* and the making of *Kuhle Wampe***

We begin in silence, the camera centered above a dark street, a silhouette appears on the left under the soft glow of a streetlamp and approaches two other passing shapes. Simultaneously, the right half of the stationary frame depicts two figures entering a hotel. The camera cuts to street level, headlights reflect off a disheveled brick façade, a car appears, and two male figures jump out, their approach prefaced only by the visual reflection of light preceding their arrival. Cut to two additional cars filled with dark figures that emerge at once onto the now increasingly enigmatic silence. Close up on three men in overcoats, one glances at his watch and, nodding his head, walks to the center of the dark street and raises his right arm signaling swarms of, what are only now revealed to be police officers. Motorcycles, cars, whistles and horns are seen but not heard.

Epic theory and technique are employed in a uniquely cinematic way in the above described scene from Austro-German director Fritz Lang's 1931 synchronized sound film *M*. This silently chaotic scene depicts the beginning of a raid of the late Weimar period criminal district in Berlin, a moment in which the viewer would likely expect a very audible commotion, takes place in nearly a minute and a half of complete silence, broken when a piercing police whistle breaks the quiet, followed by a voice that yells "Bullen!" ("cops!"). The sudden silence at such a seemingly audible moment is jarring. The first-time viewer will likely find themselves questioning the reliability of synchronized sound, a cinematic innovation that was in its infancy when this scene appeared on screen in 1931. This scene, and others that will be discussed in this chapter, succeed in cinematically presenting aspects of performance distinct to the then developing Epic theory of Bertolt Brecht. Experimentation with music, the Epic acting style, sound and silence, along with editing techniques like montage that aided in separating the

dramatic action and achieving Brecht's defamiliarization effect are used throughout this film to blur the lines between the audible and the visual, good and evil, the impoverished and middle classes, criminal and law enforcement, pathos and logic. Two years after the release of Lang and wife/writing partner German screenwriter Thea von Harbou's first sound film Bertolt Brecht's leftist political film *Kuhle Wampe* would be released, mirroring many techniques utilized in Lang and von Harbou's *M*. This chapter seeks to outline the clear connections between Brecht's early stage work, mainly his plays *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) and *Man Equals Man* (1930), Lang and von Harbou's first synchronized sound film *M* (1931) and Brecht's 1933 leftist political film *Kuhle Wampe*. Analyzing Lang and von Harbou's reimagining of Epic stage techniques in *M* and Brecht's expansion upon Lang and von Harbou's reimagining in his film *Kuhle Wampe* will illuminate a clear flow of ideas between the stage and screen during the early synchronized sound film era in Germany. This chapter conjectures that, influenced by Brecht's stage work, Lang and von Harbou's reimagining of Brecht's theories on screen aided in the creation of a mechanism that helped solve Brecht's ongoing struggle with the incorporation of pathos within his work while sustaining the intention to restrict audiences from fully identifying or empathizing with characters and situations.

The juxtaposition and intercutting between the criminal underworld and the supposedly law abiding police sector in the above described scene points to Brecht's concept of defamiliarization, a concept semiotically defined as a troubling of the signifier-signified relationship.<sup>125</sup> Canadian Theatre theorist Ric Knowles refers to the result of this troubling as having the "potential to destabilize unified representations", in other words, aimed at inciting

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<sup>125</sup> See chapter II p 55 for further definition of Brecht's defamiliarization effect.

inquiry into signifiers that society tends to view as stable or unshifting.<sup>126</sup> As discussed in chapter II, this theory was already at work in Brecht's premiere of *The Threepenny Opera*, which opened three years earlier at Berlin's Theatre am Schiffbauerdamm. The secretary of Lang's collaborator and wife, Thea von Harbou, confirmed the attendance of both Lang and von Harbou early in the Berlin premier run of the *The Threepenny Opera*.<sup>127</sup> Brecht's 1928 *The Threepenny Opera* presented a spatio-temporal and class ambiguous world often blurred as characters and objects seemed to shift between the past and present while simultaneously traversing both the impoverished and middle classes of a Victorian London, designed to mirror social and economic inequalities in post-World War I Weimar Germany. In addition, the "star" of *The Threepenny Opera*, slick and conniving criminal Macheath, throws a wrench in the delineating of protagonist and antagonist. *The Threepenny Opera* is a play, like Lang's *M*, without a hero.

In a November 27<sup>th</sup> 1927 article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* Brecht stated that "The essential point of the Epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things."<sup>128</sup> It is apparent, by this point, that Brecht is leaning away from the still popular Aristotelian concepts of pathos and catharsis and honing in on the concepts of ethos and logos, appealing to his audience on an ethical and logical level.<sup>129</sup> Brecht felt that the Aristotelian concepts of pathos and catharsis, which appealed to the audience on a spiritual and primitive level accomplished nothing but the creation of scenarios in which "Everyone (including the spectator) is then carried away by the momentum of the events portrayed, so that in a

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<sup>126</sup> Ric Knowles, *How Theatre Means*, Palgrave Macmillan (New York: 2014) p 32.

<sup>127</sup> Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: Nature of the Beast, a Biography*, St. Martin's Press (New York: 1997).

<sup>128</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties*, in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, November 27, 1927.

<sup>129</sup> Aristotle laid out three "modes of persuasion" in *Rhetoric* (4<sup>th</sup> century BC); ethos (ethics), pathos (empathy/suffering) and logos (logic/reason).

performance of *Oedipus* one has for all practical purposes an auditorium full of little Oedipuses".<sup>130</sup> Brecht wanted his audiences to be active rather than passive viewers, to ask questions and utilize their reason in order to translate his work into real-world social and political change. For Brecht, the concept of pathos or empathy hindered one's ability to reason and therefore became an ongoing struggle for Brecht working within a performance theory that attempted to keep its audience from forming deep emotional connections with characters and situations while still imparting meaning and maintaining the audience's attention. The following questions arise; how much critical distance is too much? At what point does an audience become too detached? And is there a need for partial reclamation of pathos on the Epic stage and screen? These questions will be confronted later in the chapter through a discussion of the negative reviews for Brecht's stage play *Man Equals Man* and the success of Lang and von Harbou's *M*, both starring Epic stage trained Hungarian born German actor Peter Lorre.

A defamiliarized acting style and separation of dramatic elements were already at work in the 1928 premier of *The Threepenny Opera* and the 1930 Berlin premier of Brecht's *Man Equals Man*. Brecht's defamiliarization effect, which was contingent upon the audience receiving unfamiliar conflicting signifiers thereby inciting critical rather than passive observation, was also at work in these early examples of Brecht's Epic performance. *The Threepenny Opera* introduced gestic music- the score being at odds with the lyrics, the band members being displayed on stage and spotlighted rather than in a pit, song and scene titles appearing on placards and a clear attempt to separate dialogue from sung text. Juxtapositions were present throughout the play in the sets, music, costumes, lighting and acting techniques. When Lang and von Harbou saw the live performance of *The Threepenny Opera* at the Theatre am

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<sup>130</sup> Brecht, *Über die Verwendung von Musik für ein episches Theater*, Schriften zum Theater, 1957 No. 11, in *Brecht on Theatre* p 87.

Schiffbauerdamm in 1928, they were witnessing a relatively fleshed out version of Brecht's early Epic theory that would only intensify in the 1930 production of *Man Equal Man*.

Well-known studies of Lang and von Harbou's first sound film developed by scholars such as Noel Burch, Roger Dadoun, Tom Gunning, and Anton Kaes, tend to overlook the pervasive influence of Bertolt Brecht's developing concept of Epic performance on Lang's pivotal film *M*. Gunning's 2000 book *The Films of Fritz Lang*, directly refers to Brecht on three occasions; once in referencing a line from an early Brecht poem that reminds him of the opening scene in *M*, again in describing a scene that takes place at the Beggars Union that was "inspired undoubtedly by Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*", and lastly through the use of a lengthier excerpt from Brecht's poem *The Chalk Cross* at the opening of his conclusion to the discussion of *M*.<sup>131</sup> In all three cases, Brecht is mentioned in passing and a deeper discussion of Epic theory and technique are absent. The reader is left wondering exactly *how* Brecht influenced Lang and von Harbou's first sound film.

In a 1963 interview with Gero Gaander, Lang was asked if he was influenced by Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* in the making of *M* to which he replied "Did Bert Brecht influence me? Of course, which of his contemporaries did he not influence?"<sup>132</sup> In typical Lang fashion, he refrains from fully answering the question and quickly sways the conversation back to a discussion of his own artistic genius. The fact that Lang concedes to having been influenced by Brecht at all is rather revealing in itself, as he rarely applauded the talents of other artists. Lang had seen Becht's staging of *The Threepenny Opera* along with Thea von Harbou in 1928. The

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<sup>131</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*, British Film Institute (London: 2000).

<sup>132</sup> Fritz Lang, interview with Garo Gander, *M: Protokoll*, trans. By Barry W.K. Joe, Marion Von Schröder (Hamburg: 1963) reprinted in *Fritz Lang Interviews*, Ed. Barry Keith Grant, University Press of Mississippi (Jackson: 2003) p 35.

play had been a resounding success, bolstering the reputations of a young Brecht and experienced composer Kurt Weill. Brecht's Epic stage, housed primarily at Berlin's Volksbühne Theatre during this period, not only proclaimed a new performance theory but also trained and launched the careers of several actors, including the star of Lang's *M*, Peter Lorre.

Although Lang does not utilize the musical score in *M* quite in the burlesque/opera style of Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, Brechtian defamiliarization is clearly at work in child killer Hans Beckert's (actor Peter Lorre's) repeated whistling of "Hall of the Mountain King", the theme from Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. An upbeat melody, "Hall of the Mountain King" is contradictory much in the same way as Brecht and Weill's "Mack the Knife", the original score by Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg is upbeat and catchy while Ibsen's lyrics relate various torturous methods of killing the man who has seduced the Mountain King's daughter. The first contact that the viewer has with the child murderer Beckert comes in the form of a silhouette and this upbeat yet contradictory partly disembodied whistle.

As the young girl Elsie Beckman walks home from school playing with a ball, she stops to bounce her toy against a post. The viewer's attention quickly shifts from the ball to a poster that reads "10,000 Marken belohnung! Wer ist der Mörder?"<sup>133</sup> ("10,000 Mark reward! Who is the murderer?"<sup>134</sup>). The poster goes on to list the names of four children that have been murdered since June of that year and that law enforcement believes the murders to be connected. Attention is shifted when a silhouette of a man enters the frame, projected on the poster. Without ever seeing the man's face we hear him address the young girl "Du hast einen schönen Ball...wei ist dein Name?"<sup>135</sup> ("You have a pretty ball...what is your name?"<sup>136</sup>). We then cut

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<sup>133</sup> M. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero Film A.G., 1933. Film.

<sup>134</sup> Own translation.

<sup>135</sup> *M*

<sup>136</sup> Own translation.

directly to a scene where Elsie's mother is preparing her lunch and waiting for her arrival. These scenes are intercut with several images of Elsie with the murderer, whose face continues to elude the viewer. It is at this point, as Beckert purchases a balloon for Elsie, that we first hear the whistling of "Hall of the Mountain King". The defamiliarization effect created by the inability to actually see the killer is further heightened by the contradictory nature of both his actions and the upbeat melody that he whistles. Much like Brecht's Macheath, Beckert's first appearance is contradictory in nature, the viewer knows not what to think and can only question the various signs and signifiers that have been presented. The viewer does get a sense, through the juxtaposition of the poster and silhouette, that this man may ultimately harm Elsie, but we are left questioning why and this question only grows when finally introduced to the small statured, innocent looking Lorre as Beckert.

Much in the same way that Brecht and Weill utilize the defamiliarization effect in introducing the nefarious character Macheath in *The Threepenny Opera* with the upbeat tune "Mack the Knife", Lang and von Harbou introduce us to a walking contradiction in the character of Hans Beckert, carelessly whistling "Hall of the Mountain King".<sup>137</sup> Like Macheath, Beckert is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Although we do not see Beckert's face we do see what he is wearing and, much like the suave Macheath, his well kempt middle-class appearance raises no alarms, yet we are made suspicious, through the juxtaposition of his silhouette on the wanted poster, that he may be the child murderer described. The viewer receives mixed signifiers. The social referent here being that we cannot establish identity based upon socially accepted interpretations of appearance. As viewers we therefore lose the sense of knowing what the so called "average" person is capable. The authorities, in Lang and von Harbou's film, stereotypically turn to the

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<sup>137</sup> See chapter II for further discussion of 'Mack the Knife'.

underbelly of society, the beggars and criminals, in their initial search for the murderer. As viewers, we become increasingly aware that Beckert does not fit the stereotypical criminal ‘type’, his internal monster is at odds with his exterior ability to unsuspectingly move through society. Macheath exudes a similar aura in Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*, perhaps more rakishly, but still pushing the audience to question the supposed finite binaries of good and evil.

Real world referents are present throughout Lang and von Harbou’s *M*. The film strikingly begins in complete darkness. We are confronted with a black screen but hear the voice of a young girl fade in, she is reciting a song, “Warten Sei einfach eine Weile, der böse Mann in schwarz wird kommen. Mit seinem kleinen Hubschrauber, er wird dich zerhacken”<sup>138</sup> (“Just you wait a little while, the evil man in black will come. With his little chopper, he will chop you up”).<sup>139</sup> Lang’s inclusion of this song situates the audience in place and time as this was a recognizable rhyme about real life serial killer Fritz Haarmann.<sup>140</sup> The viewer, familiar with the origin of the song or not, is introduced to sound before image. We are forced to listen, or read subtitles in some cases, because we are offered no accompanying image. This scene also helps to set up the ways in which sound and image will be juxtaposed throughout the film, further troubling the signifier-signified relationship. We also see examples of this concept in other scenes when we hear car horns prior to actually seeing a car and, as earlier mentioned, the introduction of the child murderer with his disembodied whistle.

Inclusion of the Haarmann rhyme at the beginning of the film is reminiscent of the opening number in *The Threepenny Opera*. The Haarmann rhyme, like “Mack the Knife”, is

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<sup>138</sup> *M*

<sup>139</sup> Lang, Fritz and Thea von Harbou. *M*. English translation by Nicholas Garnham, Simon and Schuster (New York: 1968) p 15.

<sup>140</sup> Friedrich Heinrich Karl Haarmann was an infamous German serial killer who assaulted, murdered and mutilated a confirmed 24 children in Hanover from 1918-1924.

derived from the popular moritaten or murder acts songs performed by singers at street fairs. These songs recounted actual murders and hangings. Brecht and Weill's "Mack the Knife", was placed at the opening of the play, immediately presenting the audience with juxtaposition and tension. The audience would hear an upbeat ragtime melody, but the lyrics would then play against the emotions initially called forth by the score

An 'nem schönen blauen Sonntag  
Liegt ein toter Mann am Strand  
Und ein Mensch geht um die Ecke  
Den man Mackie Messer nennt.<sup>141</sup>

On a blue and balmy Sunday  
Someone drops dead in the Strand.  
And a man slips round the corner.  
People say: Macheath's on hand.<sup>142</sup>

The opening of *M* follows directly in the footsteps of the epic theatre tradition and clearly borrows from the immediate defamiliarization effect at play in the opening number of *The Threepenny Opera*. The choice of a disembodied voice of a young girl playfully reciting the horrifying Haarmann rhyme sets up the uncertainty to come, a series of juxtapositions and social gestures that result in, much like Brecht's plays, more questions than answers about the modern world.

Brecht's plays attempted to reveal contemporary social issues, often in a historically removed setting. The Victorian London in *The Threepenny Opera* is revealed to be a rather straight forward critique of a Weimar Germany on the brink of depression and a Nazi take over. Lang and von Harbou's film also delves into an issue that was a pressing concern in Düsseldorf from 1925 until the real life arrest of child murderer Peter Kürten on May 24<sup>th</sup> 1930, upon whom the character of Beckert is based. The timing of newspaper articles describing an escalation in

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<sup>141</sup> Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, p 7.

<sup>142</sup> Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, trans. Bentley and Vesey, p 3.

the then anonymous murders, coincide directly with the August 31<sup>st</sup> 1928 premier of *The Threepenny Opera*. During this period, Lang was not only influenced by Brecht's work but also by real-life news articles documenting serial killings. Lang claimed to have been struck by an article in the *Berliner Tageblatt* describing how the "legitimate" criminal activities of the underworld organizations of Düsseldorf had been upset by the effects of a drawn-out murder investigation. The newspaper states that a beggar's association had teamed up with a well-known underground criminal organization to seek out the killer.<sup>143</sup> This world of ambiguous beggars, criminals, murderers and law enforcement was a clear derivative of Brecht's then highly popular *The Threepenny Opera*.

One indisputable connection between Brecht and Lang/von Harbou's *M* that Brechtian and Lang scholars have yet to account for, was actor Peter Lorre. In a 1967 interview with BBC radio host Alexander Walker, Lang admits that he had Peter Lorre in mind to play the leading role in *M*, child murderer Hans Beckert. Lang states "I did not give him a screen test, I was just absolutely convinced that he was right for the part."<sup>144</sup> . Lang repeatedly stated that he himself had discovered actor Peter Lorre, but the truth is that he discovered him on the Volksbühne stage, where he had already made a name for himself working with Brecht and other leaders of Berlin's avant-garde in productions of Brecht's *Happy End*, Frank Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening*, and Marieluise Fleißer's *Pionere in Ingolstadt*. It was backstage at a dress rehearsal for *Spring's Awakening* that Lang and American/German producer Seymour Nebenzahl would be introduced to Lorre for the first time. Having already seen Lorre on the stage, Lang centered his film on a character that would be performed by a man trained in early Epic acting

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<sup>143</sup> Egon Jacobson, editor and chief of the *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag* produced a series of stories on Kürten between 1928-1930.

<sup>144</sup> Lang, Fritz, from BBC radio Alexander Walker/Fritz Lang interview 1967, reproduced in Barry Keith Grant's collection *Fritz Lang Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2003) p 78.

techniques. In January of 1931, Lorre appeared in the leading role of Brecht's own production of *Man Equals Man* at the Berlin Staats Theatre. On May 11<sup>th</sup> 1931, Lang/von Harbou's *M* premiered in Berlin cinemas. This discovery is extremely significant to this study because, by simultaneously working directly with Brecht on the Epic stage in *Man Equals Man* and filming Lang's *M*, Lorre acted as a conduit between the Epic stage and the cinema, proving that there was a clear flow of ideas between the Epic stage and early synchronized sound film in Weimar Germany.

Lorre's well-known intensity and grotesque acting style on the stage fell in direct contrast to his small stature and childlike features.<sup>145</sup> Lorre was a walking juxtaposition, and a product of a Brechtian education. Unlike Expressionist performance, Brecht called for the spectator and actor to move apart from one another so that they could not become emotionally attached to the performance. Lorre's style of acting was disjointed, signification in his performances in a constant state of flux. Brecht encouraged Lorre's extremely agitated demeanor, the result being that his acting took on a bi-polar nature, the viewer experiencing simultaneously the process of the actor at work *and* the character portrayed.

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<sup>145</sup> See *chapter I* for a complete description of American and European forms of the grotesque and Brecht's developing Epic acting style.



Fig. XI Lorre as Galy Gay/Jeraiah Jip<sup>146</sup>



Fig XII Lorre as Galy Gay/Jeraiah Jip<sup>147</sup>

Lorre's performance as Galy Gay in Brecht's 1931 staging of *Man Equals Man* at the Staatstheater was so pivotal for Brecht that he used it to demonstrate the successful use of Epic acting techniques on stage in a March 1931 letter to the *Berlin Börsen-Courier*.<sup>148</sup> His letter was in response to audience and critic reception that criticized Lorre's performance as an Irish porter who is duped into believing that he is the fourth soldier, Jeraiah Jip, in a larcenous British army unit stationed in India. Brecht regarded this reception, which alluded to Lorre's performance as lacking in power and incapable of clearly communicated meaning, as an indication that his audiences did not understand his Epic acting techniques, not as a failure on the part of Lorre. Brecht makes it clear that he encouraged Lorre's disjointed performance and with regards to the dialogue Brecht states

The speeches' content was made up of contradictions, and the actor had not to make the spectator identify himself with the individual sentences and so get

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<sup>146</sup> Photograph of Peter Lorre in *Mann ist Mann*, 1931, Ullstein Bild/Getty Images, [www.gettyimages.com/detail/548813153](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/548813153)

<sup>147</sup> Photograph of Peter Lorre in *Mann ist Mann*, 1931, Ullstein Bild/Getty Images, [www.gettyimages.com/detail/541048365](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/541048365)

<sup>148</sup> Later reprinted in Brecht's *Notes on Man Equals Man*, included in Willett's compilation *Brecht on Theatre*.

caught up in contradictions, but to keep him out of them. Taken as a whole it had to be the most objective possible exposition of a contradictory internal process.<sup>149</sup>

It will later be revealed just how significant it is that Brecht goes on to select Lorre's performance in the 'kangaroo court' scene in *Man Equal Man* to demonstrate this process. In this farcical scene, the character Galy Gay, convinced by the scheming soldiers that he is actually standing trial for the illegal sale of an elephant, throws himself at the mercy of the counterfeit court, exclaiming that he is indeed the missing fourth member of their unit Jeraiah Jip in an attempt to save himself from being condemned to death. Lorre delivered the character's defensive plea by intermittently speaking lines of text that were disjointed not only in their presentation but also in their meaning. Throwing himself on the ground before the bogus court, Galy Gay states

Oh, geht nicht so rasch vor. Ich bin nicht der, den ihr sucht. Ich kenne ihn gar nicht. Mein Name ist Jip, ich kann es beschwören. Was ist ein Elefant gegen ein Menschenleben? Ich habe den Elefanten nicht gesehen, ein Strick war es, den ich gehalten habe. Bitte, geht nicht weg! Ich bin ein ganz anderer. Ich bin nicht Galy Gay. Ich bin es nicht.<sup>150</sup>

Oh, not so fast! I'm not the man you're looking for. I don't even know him. My name is Jip, I swear it. What is an elephant compared to a man? And I don't even know the creature. I didn't see the elephant. Only the rope that I was holding. Please go away! I'm someone else. [At most I bear that man some very slight resemblance, and you confuse me with him.] I am not Galy Gay. I am not.<sup>151</sup>

In Brecht's March letter to the Berlin Börsen- Courier, he mentions that the production team made a short silent film of Lorre's performance and edited it to focus on specific gestures that he believed showed how Lorre was able to "mime the basic meaning underlying every (silent) phrase".<sup>152</sup> Here Brecht reveals that there is a kind of silent subtext revealed, not by the dialogue,

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<sup>149</sup> Brecht, Letter to the Berlin Borsen-Courier March 8<sup>th</sup>1931, reproduced in Willet's *Brecht on Theatre* p 54.

<sup>150</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Mann ist Mann*, 1924-1926, Suhrkamp Verlag (Berlin: 1953) pp 58-59.

<sup>151</sup> Brecht, Bertolt *A Man's A Man*, 1924-1926, Edited by Eric Bentley in *Seven Plays by Bertolt Brecht* (Grove Press, Inc.: New York, 1961) p 122. The bracketed line is an addition to the 1924-1926 original German text.

<sup>152</sup> Brecht, Letter to the Berlin Borsen-Courier March 8<sup>th</sup>1931, reproduced in Willet's *Brecht on Theatre*, p 55.

but by the way in which it is delivered along with the highly calculated movements and facial expressions of the actor. This style, as noted in chapter one, grew out of influences by such stage and screen actors' as Karl Valentine and Charlie Chaplin, a mixture of methods used in both cabaret and vaudevillian performances of European and American Grotesque traditions.

What Brecht fails to note while describing the short silent film of Lorre's performance in *Man Equals Man* is that he was utilizing montage editing techniques pioneered by Russian film directors like Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov in such silent films as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929). Brecht was a fan of both Eisenstein's focus, films that portrayed left-leaning political messages, along with his editing style, a technique that allowed for the ability to jump between numerous locales and points of view in quick succession. Brecht believed that the camera clearly added something to Lorre's performance, but he fails to fully realize, at this stage, how the camera underlined the disconnected nature of the performance while calling attention to the "silent" or unspoken meaning. Brecht's letter to the Berlin Börsen-Courier ends in a rather lengthy quandary focused on how to maintain critical distance while not fully losing the connection with the audience. Brecht's reference to the short silent montage film of Lorre's performance in *Man Equals Man* may be a starting point for solving Brecht's struggle with maintaining a connection with the audience without having them fully empathize with the characters presented. It is the silence or the unspoken moments of gest along with the spasmodic nature of cinematic montage that this chapter proposes connects the audience while maintaining critical distance, creating a kind of restrained pathos or empathy that offers a slight reprieve from Brecht's often heavy-handed use of logic and reason. One gets the sense that Brecht is close to answering his own quandary in bringing up the short silent film experiment just before questioning how to better connect to the audience without fully pulling them in, nearly but not

quite piecing together the significance of combining silence and montage with grotesque derived acting techniques.

We must keep in mind the significance of Peter Lorre rehearsing for *Man Equals Man* while filming *M* with Fritz Lang. It is in Fritz Lang's first sound film *M* that Lorre gets the opportunity to reimagine Epic acting techniques on the screen. Lorre's criticized performance in *Man Equals Man* comes to life on the screen in the famously applauded 'kangaroo court' scene in *M*. Lorre's simultaneous work with Brecht may have influenced more than just style, the very fact that one of the most famous scenes in *M* is consistently referred to as the 'kangaroo court' scene is interesting since this term usually applies to unsanctioned military trials, like the one that appears in Brecht's *Man Equals Man*. However, the 'kangaroo court' scene in *M* is a mock trial for child murderer Hans Beckert, conducted by Berlin's criminal underbelly. Lorre has been repeatedly applauded for his pivotal performance in this scene. So, what is different about Lorre's performance in the 'kangaroo court' scene in *M*? And if the performances are similar, how might Lang's reimagining of Brecht's acting and production techniques aid in revealing meaning in a way that both keeps the audience's attention while maintaining critical distance?

We come now to Lorre's stand out performance at the conclusion of *M*, also known as the 'kangaroo court' scene. This scene, at the culmination of the film, offers one of the clearest manifestations of Brechtian performance techniques on screen. Child murderer Beckert, acted by Lorre, is brought before a jury of criminals, the very act drawing our attention to a lingering ambiguity throughout the scene. Again, Beckert's crimes are being classified in a monstrous category of their own. Although the dark, damp underground room is filled with prostitutes, thieves, and murderers, Beckert is singled out because he "kills without purpose". When questioned by the criminal court, actor Peter Lorre gives one of the most memorable

performances of his career. Renowned early German theater historian, Siegfried Kracauer, categorized Lorre's performance as belonging to a long Expressionistic tradition.<sup>153</sup> As established earlier, Epic theatre sought to move away from Expressionism. If Lorre was trained on Brecht's Epic stage, is it possible to reread this well-known performance as a vital moment in the history of the Epic rather than the Expressionist performance tradition? The moment where Brechtian techniques successfully leapt off the stage and transformed German cinema in one of the first and most renowned films to usher in the medium altering transition from silent-era to synchronized sound film?

Lang's early silent-era films, such as the acclaimed *Metropolis* (1927) and *Woman in the Moon* (1929), do indeed follow in line with the Expressionistic acting trend of German silent-era cinema. Actor's facial expressions and gestures were highly exaggerated, heavy makeup called attention to character's eyes and close-ups were utilized in a further attempt to bring out the inner emotion or spirituality of the characters. An audience viewing these acting techniques can easily be drawn into the emotions of the character, allowing them to sympathize or 'feel' with the character. When compared to Lang's early silent-era films, *M*'s 'kangaroo court' scene illustrates that a clear transition has occurred in Lang's directing style as well as in the techniques utilized by his actors.

Unlike Expressionist performances, Brecht called for the spectator and actor to move apart from one another. If the spectator and character are allowed to emotionally connect with one another then the Brechtian defamiliarization effect would not be successful. Lorre's performance is disjointed not only by the actor's physical and mental agitation but also by the

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<sup>153</sup> Siegfried Kracauer points to Lorre's performance as a continuation of not only Lang's early Expressionist style but also of a long tradition that began with silent films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (London: Princeton University Press, 1947) pp219-222.

interjection of the criminals who have put him on trial. Lang frames the ‘kangaroo court’ scene with silence. We first see a set of metal stairs leading to an underground cellar. The initial silence is interrupted when we hear but do not see Lorre’s character attempting to escape his captors and then see him appear, clawing at the stairs leading out of the dark underground cellar serving as a makeshift courtroom. Lorre contorts his body and screams “Hilfe!...Lass mich raus!”<sup>154</sup> (“Help!...Let me out!”<sup>155</sup>). Lorre’s character is forced up the stairs and then down another set of stairs that lead to a large underground cellar. Lorre slowly turns with the camera as both character and audience are simultaneously confronted with a makeshift courtroom filled with his accusers, criminals themselves. Recognizing that there is no way out, Lorre as child murderer Beckert, begins to plead with the criminals “Aber meine Herren...Bitte, Ich weiß gar nicht, wofür du mich willst. Ich bitte dich. Befreie mich. Es muss einen fehler geben. Ein feh...”<sup>156</sup> (“But gentlemen...Please, I don’t even know what you want me for. I beg you. Set me free. There must be some mistake. A mis...”<sup>157</sup>) at this moment a hand falls onto his shoulder and Beckert falls silent. Lang at first prevents the viewer from identifying the person who has interrupted Beckert, offering only a close up of the hand on Beckert’s shoulder. Only as the camera slowly pulls out do we recognize the blind beggar responsible for naming Beckert as the murderer. Relying only on the audible rather than the visible, the blind beggar earlier discovers the child murderer by his whistling of “Hall of the Mountain King”. He recalls selling a balloon to a man and child on the day young Elsie Beckmann disappeared and listening to the whistled tune as the two walked off. The blind beggar who, in strikingly Brechtian style, wears a sign around his neck that literally labels him as ‘blind’, appears throughout the film as a means of

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<sup>154</sup> *M*

<sup>155</sup> Own translation

<sup>156</sup> *M*

<sup>157</sup> Lang/von Harbou, p 98

exploring the importance of sound and silence, visible and invisible. This disruption, and those to come, halts the viewer's ability to empathize with Beckert's pleas.

Schranker, played by actor Gustaf Gründgens, leads the court as a head of the criminal underground. Schranker himself is ironically introduced to the court as a well-known criminal mastermind who has killed three people. As Schranker begins to confront Beckert with a series of photographs of his young victims, Beckert attempts to run again, his panic-stricken face contorting slowly before he dashes towards the door. Lorre's continual examination of his own hands, the gradual transition of his facial expressions and mannerisms, and the disjointed display of mental and physical agitation make his acting technique visible, therefore creating a separation between the actor and the character being played. The viewer will likely fluctuate between brief moments of pity for Beckert and horrifying recollections of his crimes presented through the use of montage editing techniques that bounce between the pitiable looking creature Beckert and pictures of his victims, intercut with shots of the ironic criminal organized 'kangaroo court' that accuses him. Links to Brecht's developing Epic performance style that employs the grotesque are apparent in Lorre's disjointed facial expressions, gestures, and posture, along with the incorporation of interruptions that separate the action and delivery of intermittent lines with disconnected meanings. Beckert's only admission to the crimes comes in the form of a staccatoed succession of brief moments of silence intertwined with a jumble of disconnected spoken lines, structurally reminiscent of Lorre's performance in the 'kangaroo court' scene in *Man Equals Man*

Aber ich kann nicht anders... Aber ich kann nicht... Kann nicht entkommen...  
mich selber!... Ich muss den Weg gehen, der mich runter treibt... renne und renne  
durch endlose Straßen... Ich will weg!...Ich will weg! Und mit mir laufen die  
Geister... Vor einem Plakat stehen... Lesen, was ich getan habe... will  
nicht...muss...will nicht...muss!<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Own translation

But I can't help it...But I can't...Can't escape...myself! I have to take the path that it's driving me down...run and run down endless streets...I want off!...I want off! And with me run the ghosts...Standing before a poster...reading what I've done...don't want to...must...don't want to...must!<sup>159</sup>

Lorre frequently analyzes his own hands while delivering the above lines, moving from clenching them into rigid claws to relaxing his fingers and back again to clenching. These moments of observation call attention to the actor's process, disrupting the viewer's ability to empathize with the character's pleas of insanity. Like the interruption by the blind beggar, Beckert's pleas are also overlapped with shouts and sudden bursts of laughter from the court attendants. Even Beckert's dubious defense 'attorney' is interrupted by laughter in the middle of a rather rational and progressive speech referring to compulsion as a sickness that society should feel bound to treat rather than punish. The controversial real-world referent here is that Beckert cannot control his perverse nature and heinous crimes, ironically the majority of the 'kangaroo court' accusing him commit intentional criminal acts including murder. Beckert will likely be executed for his crimes, legal systems failing to recognize mental illness as a reasonable plea during this period. The 'court' is ultimately moved by the fact that letting Beckert go may result in more murders and additional hindrances in their own criminal operations. Thus, Lang has set up a scene in which his viewers do not know what side to associate themselves with, corruption and irony surround and distance us from the situation, leaving us questioning the very nature of justice in the modern world.

Lorre's performance in the 'kangaroo court' scene exemplifies Brecht's concept of "fixing the 'not...but'", never fully allowing himself to inhabit the character being portrayed.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> M

<sup>160</sup> Brecht, *Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces and [Defamiliarization] Effect*, 1940, in *Brecht on Theatre*, p137.

Brecht used the defamiliarization and “not...but” concepts to train actors in the Epic performance style. Brecht described this acting style, which he had been developing in his early work with actors such as Lorre, in a 1935 essay, stating

The artist’s object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic.<sup>161</sup>

The actor is aware of his own performance, and this is made visible to the audience. Brecht referred to this technique’s successful use as “gest of the body”, the actor simultaneously embodying and breaking their character. Lorre’s performance in the ‘kangaroo court’ scene is an example of the successful transition of this technique from stage to screen and a pivotal step in mapping the evolution of Epic acting for the synchronized sound film.

Figure XII, below, shows Lorre as Beckert pleading with the ‘kangaroo court’ as his face transitions into a sadistic glare he recounts the urges that lead him to kill. He then glances down at his own hands: demonstrating his vicious tendencies, seeming disbelief that these hands that belong to him could have committed such atrocities and managing to demonstrate or call attention to his acting process.

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<sup>161</sup> Brecht, *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting*, 1935, in *Brecht on Theatre*, p 92.



Fig. XII Lorre as Hans Beckert<sup>162</sup>



Fig. XIII Lorre as Hans Beckert<sup>163</sup>

Figure XIII immediately follows Figure XII, as Lorre changes his body language and demeanor for the fourth time within a matter of seconds, dropping his shoulders and appearing as a helpless child. Brechtian defamiliarization is at work in this scene on a number of levels. We are never truly allowed to sympathize with *or* despise Beckert, the layers of defamiliarization here distance viewers from becoming emotionally involved with the characters or from drawing any sound conclusions regarding the ‘justice’ being sought. Instead we are left with questions, questions with clear real-world referents. We are asked to take an active rather than passive role both during the viewing and upon later reflection on the true relevance of the questions posed through the use of Brechtian social gestus combined with Lang’s unique combination of editing techniques that add layers of disconnect while retaining the audience’s attention and ability to construct meaning.

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<sup>162</sup> Still shot of Peter Lorre as Hans Beckert from the 1931 film *M*, taken by Kristin Seifert, Director Fritz Lang, Nero Film A.G., 1933, Film, 1:43:13

<sup>163</sup> Still shot of Peter Lorre as Hans Beckert from the 1931 film *M*, taken by Kristin Seifert, Director Fritz Lang, Nero Film A.G., 1933, Film, 1:43:21

Beyond the use of Epic acting techniques through stage and screen intermediary Lorre, *M* also offers a uniquely cinematic separation of action accomplished through Lang's use of audio and visual editing techniques like montage, intercutting and sound play. Like the scene described at the beginning of the chapter *M* utilizes these techniques to present criminality on a variety of levels, the psychological criminal is juxtaposed against a world of petty thieves, organized crime, and a flawed and often corrupt law enforcement system. Much like the stage production of *The Threepenny Opera*, there are no heroes here. Lang and von Harbou present their viewers with an underground criminal organization whose business is fledgling as a result of constant police raids directed at finding the child murderer. On the other hand, we are introduced to the heads of law enforcement, who seem completely incapable of tracking down the murderer. Rather than presenting the criminal underground and law enforcement as binaries, Lang instead intercuts scenes of both groups discussing the situation at hand. These scenes are audibly and visually intercut so seamlessly that it is often difficult for the viewer to discern whether they are viewing the criminal or law enforcement officials.

Layered on top of the seamless visual transitions is an overlapping of the voices of police with those of the criminal underworld. Throughout the film, Lang experiments with the introduction of sound and sound play. In example, Schranker, head of the criminal underground, begins "Ich bitte Sie..."<sup>164</sup> ("I beg you..."<sup>165</sup>) and makes a gesture with his hand that is then completed by the Chief of Police after a seamless cut to police headquarters followed by the chief finishing the line "...Ihre Meinung zu äußern"<sup>166</sup> ("...to express your opinion"<sup>167</sup>). Criminal and law enforcement, sound and image are in conflict throughout this sequence.

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<sup>164</sup> *M*

<sup>165</sup> Own translation

<sup>166</sup> *M*

<sup>167</sup> Own translation

Although we are introduced to two groups, seemingly at opposite ends of the law, they both desire the same outcome, capture and arrest of the child murderer, which would allow them to return to business as usual. The Brechtian defamiliarization effect can be seen in the simultaneous tension and agreement that is present between the two groups. Criminality is constantly in question, much like *The Threepenny Opera*'s introduction of Police Chief Tiger Brown as close friend to the well-known criminal Macheath. We are presented, in both *M* and *The Threepenny Opera*, with a criminal underground represented as a business and means of survival. In *M*, the child murderer, therefore, comes to be viewed less as a criminal and more as a monster. Beckert's psychoses places him outside of the duality set up by the representatives of the criminal underground and law enforcement, although Beckert's mental instability only further calls into question his own criminality. Both Brecht and Lang present criminals and law enforcement worlds as comparable 'lines of business', blurring socially accepted binaries. Gunning attributes this depiction of humanity to "The brilliance of Lang's urban topography [that] shows people united in patterns, yet alienated and separate from each other" attributing no credit to the revolutionary montage techniques developed on screen by the likes of Russian filmmaker's Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein nor to Brecht's 'city plays', as discussed in Chapter I, which introduced the concept of the 'urban jungle' to the stage.<sup>168</sup> Eisensteinian montage is used in *M* as an editing technique that allows a shifting or overlaying of opposing spaces, objects and characters which aids in further realizing Brechtian defamiliarization. A failure to link Lang's first sound film to the many traditions and mediums that influenced it is a failure to recognize the avenues and intersections between mediums during this pivotal moment in performance history.

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<sup>168</sup> Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*, British Film Institute (London: 2000) p168.

Lang's experimentation with sound and montage throughout *M* served to create tensions, often between what was heard and what was seen, or unseen. Significantly, Lang does not forget the usefulness of silence. We discussed the ways in which Lang utilized silence in the well-known raid scene at the beginning of the chapter. As Lang's first sound film, he boldly continued to rely heavily on visual aspects often through the juxtaposition of visual montage, sound and silence. In juxtaposing moments of sound with those of complete silence, Lang created a kind of audio/visual montage, which aided in further separation of action and achieving Brecht's defamiliarization effect while allowing the audience to engage in a kind of restrained pathos.

The concept of creating oppositions in performance was by no means unique to Lang's work, nor was the juxtaposition of image and sound, which Brecht and other avant-garde artists had already been experimenting with on stage even prior to the dawn of the twentieth century. What *was* unique to Lang's first sound film was the manner in which cinematic visual montage, sound and silence interacted with one another in a way that would not have been possible on the stage or in silent-era films. One of the clearest uses of sound play and visual montage in *M* comes very early in the film when we realize that Elsie Beckman has been abducted by the child murderer. Although we see Elsie with a stranger, we do not see what happens to her. Instead, we see Frau Beckmann preparing Elsie's lunch and waiting for her arrival. After a messenger rings the Beckmann's doorbell to deliver a package and states that he has not seen Elsie, the scene moves into a series of carefully constructed still shots revolving around intentionally placed objects. The camera cuts first to a cuckoo clock that reads 1:15 and chimes once. The camera then cuts to Frau Beckmann leaning over the stair railing in their apartment corridor calling "Elsie, Elsie!". The camera then abruptly cuts to a full shot of an empty attic laundry room where some children's clothes hang drying. Frau Beckmann's now disembodied voice calls her

daughter's name, first in the abandoned attic and then in the still empty stairwell. Frau Beckmann's voice suddenly seizes and the scene plunges into silence which accompanies the next series of still shots; Elsie's empty place setting at her kitchen table, a lonely toy ball rolling through the grass, and finally, the balloon given to Elsie by her murderer struggling to break free from the telegraph wires in which it has become entangled. Although the wind visually blows the ball through the grass and tosses the balloon from side to side, Lang removes even these ambient sounds and the scene ends in complete silence. As Noël Carroll elucidates in his article *Lang and Pabst: Paradigms for Early Sound Practice*, montage is used in *M* to "infer the unseen".<sup>169</sup> Specific objects are placed within a carefully constructed silent montage sequence that points to Elsie's disappearance through her absence, the items she will no longer use and the places where one might expect to find her. The absence depicted through Lang's use of still shots and silence further establishes a sense of restrained pathos, creating meaning without heightened sentiment. We do not see Elsie's murder or her body nor do we see or hear her anguished mother's discovery of the death. In this way Lang manages to keep the audience from fully experiencing the trauma of Elsie's death or from becoming caught up in the emotion of the loss.

Brechtian *gestus* is heavily present throughout this scene, merging spatio-temporal dimensions. Brechtian scholar Sarah Bryant-Bertail explains spatio-temporality in Epic theory and technique as follows

The *Gestus* is the main organizing principle of epic spatio-temporality, both as an aesthetic structure and as a sociohistorical signifier of ideology... The *Gestus* is also a nexus where spatio-temporal dimensions and their ideological values converge in one material object. They pass from character to character and connect one scene to another, marking out certain rhythms. In appearing and disappearing they give the sense of traveling between visible and invisible space and of gradual or sudden transformation.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Noël Carroll, *Lang and Pabst: Paradigms for Early Sound Practice*, in *Theory and Practice: Film Sound*, eds Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) p 268.

<sup>170</sup> Bryant-Bertail pp 213-214.

Bryant-Bertail's explanation of *gestus* defines, in more precise terms, what Gunning only hints at when mentioning Lang's "many geometrically precise arrangements of objects", the juxtaposition of continuity and discontinuity of space, and Lang's move away from Expressionist influences towards a focus on objects and "greater realism".<sup>171</sup> Sound plays an imminent role in creating and converging spatio-temporal dimensions throughout *M*, which is significant at this early moment in synchronized sound film history.

Lang's experimentation with audio and visual montage during the above-mentioned scene is unique to the sound film form. The camera and soundtrack are capable of redirecting the viewer's attention. The tensions and juxtaposition of image and sound are additionally heightened through the use of montage. Lang also importantly recognizes that, at times, silence speaks louder than words. This was a discerning attitude when faced with contemporaries who were embracing the new form of 'talkies' and the full incorporation of sound in film. Lang offers his viewers the ability to witness a series of shots that reveal places where we would expect to see and hear Elsie but she is neither seen nor heard. The ball and balloon offer further evidence of her disappearance, as both objects had previously been visually associated with the now absent child. Much like Brecht's plays, these objects become imbued with *gestus*, these signs speak to something beyond and often opposed to the signifiers commonly associated with such 'innocent' items. The above scene is particularly important as Brecht would go on to construct a strikingly similar scene in his first feature length film.

The first and last feature length film that Brecht would be fully involved with from start to finish, the leftist political film *Kuhle Wampe*, had its first screening in Moscow in May of 1932. Brecht and co-director, Bulgarian filmmaker Slatan Dudow, struggled to get the film

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<sup>171</sup> Gunning pp 170-178.

released in Germany, the Berlin Film Inspection Board having prohibited the film's release in March of 1932. An appeal was made by production company Praesens Film in April of the same year and the Inspection Board eventually allowed the film to be released with the removal of certain scenes deemed unsuitable, including a scene that displayed nude shots of athletes swimming. Due to the film's coinciding with the rise of the National Socialist movement, Brecht's greatest cinematic accomplishment and what renowned German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer would later call "the first and last German film that overtly expressed a communist viewpoint", would not be fully recognized for its cinematic and political contributions until its rediscovery and rerelease in the 1960s.<sup>172</sup>

The *Threepenny* lawsuit fresh in Brecht's mind, he demanded a contract that gave him copyright over his intellectual property.<sup>173</sup> At last Brecht was given free range to experiment with Epic cinema. The film consists of four segments divided by songs composed by Austrian musician Hanns Eisler, the musical compositions accompanied by a montage of either city or nature shots. The film opens with Eisler's shrill and repetitive score which overlays 'the job hunt' which depicts the daily routine of Berlin's unemployed youth, desperately waiting for the morning newspapers poised on their bikes ready to outrun each other in an attempt to grasp for what little work they can get. This scene concludes with a boy returning home empty handed yet again, having to face his parents and sister with news that he has yet to find work.

The first spoken line of the film occurs minutes in when Mr. Bönike verbally attacks his emotionless and speechless son "Der Junge bekommt überhaupt keine Unterstützung mehr"<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Kracauer, p 243.

<sup>173</sup> See *Chapter II* for complete discussion of German director G.W. Pabst's 1931 screen adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* and subsequent lawsuit. The film was released in February of 1931, two months prior to the release of *M*. As *M* was filmed prior to the release of Pabst's film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera*, it is not considered here as an influence for Lang/von Harbou's *M*.

<sup>174</sup> *Kuhle Wampe*. Dir. Slatan Dudow. BFI, 1932. Film.

(“The boy won’t get support at all anymore”<sup>175</sup>) at which point his wife adds “Du interessierst dich nicht mehr für etwas” (“You don’t care about anything anymore do you?”)<sup>176</sup>. The boy does not speak, in fact Brecht gives the boy neither a name nor lines within the film. The only insight that we get into young Bönike’s thoughts come in quick silent flashbacks of a morning spent endlessly and exhaustedly biking around Berlin seeking work intercut with the image of an empty shell of a young man staring at a table emotionless and silent. His sister Anni prepares for a date and attempts to stand up for her brother stating that “es gibt keine Beschäftigung” (“there are no jobs”)<sup>177</sup> and reminding her father that he too has no work or means of supporting the family. Anni tries smiling at her brother but he continues to stare blankly at the table. The scene is interrupted by a whistle, Anni leans out the apartment window and yells “Ich Komme! (“I’m coming!”)<sup>178</sup>, and so begins a scene remarkably congruent with Elsie Beckman’s previously described disappearance scene in *M*.

Like Elsie’s disappearance scene in Lang/von Harbou’s *M*, Brecht and Dudow set up a series of calculated shots where quick cuts to objects occur in silence, creating meaning without heightened empathy. After Anni exits the apartment, the camera cuts to a wall hanging above the table where young Bönike sits motionless embroidered with the phrase “Behlage nicht den Morgen der Müh und Arbeit es ist so schön zu sorgen Für Menschen die man liebt” (“Don’t blame the morn that brings hardship and work. It’s wonderful to care for those one loves”)<sup>179</sup>. The camera then cuts back to young Bönike as he listens to his sister’s footsteps descending down the stairs and then fading out of hearing. He rises mechanically and goes to the window.

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<sup>175</sup> *Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World* screenplay translated into English by Marc Silberman, in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, Edited by Marc Silberman, Methuen Drama (UK: 2000) p 215.

<sup>176</sup> *ibid*

<sup>177</sup> *ibid*

<sup>178</sup> *ibid*

<sup>179</sup> *ibid*

He opens the window, clenching each casement tightly, then suddenly looks at his left arm. Pausing and turning, young Bönike slowly and methodically takes off his watch and lies it carefully on a nearby chest. Turning to the window again, he moves a flowerpot aside and steps onto the sill. The camera quickly cuts to the apartment stairwell, empty until we see Mrs. Bönike silently ascending with groceries, and then back to young Bönike who jumps from the window. The viewer only briefly sees the left shoulder and back of the boy's head before he disappears out of frame and a disembodied voice from below discharges a brief scream.

The moment of revelation that young Bönike has taken his own life follows strikingly in line with Lang's revelation that Elsie Beckman has been murdered. In silence, the camera cuts first to a close up of the windowsill with the out-of-place flowerpot, then to an extreme close up of the boys watch, then to a flashback of the young unemployed biking tirelessly, then back to a shot of young Bönike's bike hanging in the apartment. We are confronted with a series of precisely placed objects, montage editing techniques and silence. Strikingly, the silence is not complete like that utilized in Lang's film. Non-diegetic sound or noise is present throughout young Bönike's suicide scene. The figures on the next page demonstrate how precisely young Bönike's suicide sequence visually draws upon Elsie's disappearance scene in Lang/von Harbou's *M*.



Fig. XIV Stairwell shot *M*<sup>180</sup>



Fig. XV Stairwell shot *Kuhle Wampe*<sup>181</sup>



Fig. XVI Elsie's place setting *M*<sup>182</sup>

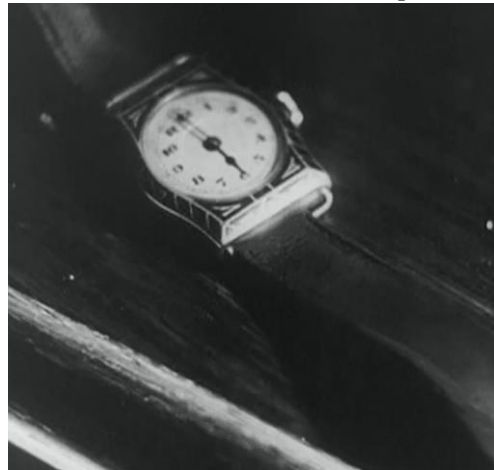


Fig. XVII Young Bönike's watch *Kuhle Wampe*<sup>183</sup>



Fig. XVIII Elsie's ball *M*<sup>184</sup>



Fig. XIX Young Bönike's bike *Kuhle Wampe*<sup>185</sup>

<sup>180</sup> Still shot of staircase from the 1931 film *M*, taken by Kristin Seifert, 0:07:47.

<sup>181</sup> Still shot of staircase from the 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe*, taken by Kristin Seifert, 00:13:00.

<sup>182</sup> Still shot of Elsie's place setting from *M*, taken by Kristin Seifert, 0:07:58.

<sup>183</sup> Still shot of Young Bönike's watch from *Kuhle Wampe*, taken by Kristin Seifert, 0:13:27.

<sup>184</sup> Still shot of Elsie's ball from *M*, taken by Kristin Seifert, 0:08:08.

<sup>185</sup> Still shot of Young Bönike's bike from *Kuhle Wampe*, taken by Kristin Seifert, 0:13:39.

While Elsie Beckman's disappearance and the objects she has left behind serve to point directly to the referent that the young girl has been murdered by a serial killer, the suicide of young Bönike points to multiple social, political, and economic issues being faced in Weimar Berlin. The wall hanging reinforces Mr. and Mrs. Bönike's earlier spoken discontent with their "lazy" son and young Bönike's decision to protect the watch, the only thing of value that he has to offer his family, echoes Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels critique of the effects of capitalism on the family unit in the *Communist Manifesto*, "the bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation".<sup>186</sup> Young Bönike lives in a world where worth is dictated by capitalist principles, his life is worth only as much money as he can earn, but we see in the bike scene and later flashbacks, that he also lives in a society where one cannot earn even when tirelessly seeking to earn. In a society where worth is based on capital, young Bönike, as one of his family's neighbors simply concludes in a close up shot that breaks the fourth wall, is "Ein arbeitsloser Arbeiter weniger" ("One unemployed worker less")<sup>187</sup>.

While Brecht and Dudow utilize silence in the above scene, it is important to note that, unlike Lang, they never remove sound completely. Ambient noise is still present. Although Brecht does not specifically address the use of ambient noise vs. removing sound entirely in his *Notes on Kuhle Wampe*, it seems a deliberate choice. At this still very early stage in sound film, some films, including Lang's *M*, purposely played with the presence and complete elimination of sound. To understand Brecht and Dudow's choice to leave ambient sound in the suicide scene we have to remember Brecht's attachment to the stage and the fact that total removal of sound could never occur in a live production, ambient or non-diegetic sounds would always be present in the

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<sup>186</sup> Karl Marx and Frederich Engles, *The Communist Manifesto*

<sup>187</sup> *M* and Silberman translation.

theatre space. On top of this realization, Brecht was also likely trying to remind the audience that the urban industrialized world continued on regardless of young Bönike's death. Ambient sounds of cars driving past, footsteps, birds chirping, etc. can be heard distantly in the background as we see the close up of the displaced flowerpot, watch, and hanging bike.

Allowing ambient sound to be present in the absence of dialogue serves to further restrain pathos or empathy while successfully communicating meaning. Brecht and Dudow again use this technique to tackle the 'love story' between Anni and her boyfriend Fritz. The 'love scene' that takes place after Anni's family is forced to move to the tent community Kuhle Wampe on the outskirts of Berlin, contains neither dialogue nor the lovers themselves. We only see Anni emerge from a tent, Fritz waiting for her, and the two disappear into the woods. We hear the ambient noises of nature as a series of shots shows grass blowing in the wind and trees being jostled about. Eisler's ballad "The Spring" begins with Helena Weigel's alarmingly severe voice singing "The play of the sexes renews itself each spring...". The lyrics speak of love and the beauty of nature yet Eisler's score and Weigel's vocal performance work in opposition to the lyrics. Anni and Fritz's 'romance' is depicted as nothing more than a brief animalistic urge. In perhaps the least romantic moment, Anni and Fritz emerge from the woods looking rather indifferent towards one another, Fritz walking some distance ahead of Anni with his hands in his pockets while she follows looking rather disenchanted. Their 'romance' ends in an unwanted pregnancy made worse by their apparently reduced economic situation. Brecht's focus on objects and use of montage and sound play are layered with deep social, political, and economic questions.

In chapter IV we will explore the effects that war and exile would have on Brecht's evolving Epic theory. Moments of restrained pathos became increasingly rare as Brecht

reworked plays such as *Mother Courage and Her Children*, making these moments all the more significant. The famous ‘silent scream’ at the end of scene three, added to the post-World War II versions of *Mother Courage*, depicts a mother’s reaction to the corpse of her dead son. Weigel, as Courage, simply drops her jaw and stares blankly and emotionlessly ahead, her scream is seen but not heard. The silence at such an expectedly emotion filled moment represents perhaps the most striking use of restrained pathos in Brecht’s work, hindering the audience from fully empathizing with a character who has consistently overlooked her children in favor of profit and now appears incapable of fully feeling or engaging with grief. This use of silence with gesture, posture, expression and the natural ambient sounds of the theatre may be the key to connecting Brecht’s experiences with early sound film to a moment where he seemed to finally somewhat overcome his struggle with the use of pathos in his work, the audience being detached yet aware of meaning, understanding yet not fully empathizing with the character.

This chapter has established that early Brechtian theory played an influential role in one of the most renowned early German synchronized sound films. Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou incorporated early Epic music, acting styles, separation of action and defamiliarization along with actors who were simultaneously rehearsing with Brecht on the developing Epic stage in their first sound film, *M*. Lang and von Harbou’s reimagining of early Epic theory on the screen combined with their unique use of sound play and montage aided in the incorporation of restrained pathos, imparting meaning without creating an overwhelming sense of empathy: keeping the viewer’s sense of reason and active viewership alive. This chapter illuminates the fact that Brechtian theories *were* successfully at work on screen in the early German sound-era film. Previous studies of Brecht and film highly disregard the success of his theories in the developing film medium, primarily tracking projects that Brecht had been directly involved with

Kristin Seifert

and the difficulties he experienced. In fact, Brechtian theory was, early on in its development, not confined to the stage nor to projects of which Brecht had hands-on involvement.

Furthermore, there was in fact a continued flow of ideas between the theatre and the cinema during the pivotal transition from silent to synchronized sound film. This example further speaks to the multi-medium nature of Brechtian theory and its clear legacy on both the stage and screen.

## Chapter IV

### Brecht in Hollywood: Exile, Resistance and Capitalist Critique

Bertolt Brecht arrived in Los Angeles on July 21<sup>st</sup>1941, eight years after he went into European exile as a result of the Nazis' rise to power in his homeland of Germany. Brecht's time in Hollywood was marked by theatre and film projects that tended to unravel or were stifled from the onset by a dissenting Brecht, unwilling to forfeit the Epic techniques and principles that drove his work during the politically uncertain yet artistically liberating Weimar period in Germany. Brecht's previous experiences working with New York based theatre companies along with advice on cost-of-living, led him to settle in LA rather than the costlier theatrical center, New York City. This choice meant that Brecht's career, in America, would be predominantly reliant on the Hollywood film industry.

This chapter will trouble the commonly held belief that Brecht's time in America was an unwanted hiatus, theorizing that his experiences as an exile in World War II Hollywood aided in both heightening Brecht's capitalist critique and in a recalculation of the dialectical character<sup>188</sup>. Firstly, we will preface Brecht's journey into exile with a brief history of the transition from Weimar to Nazi Germany and Brecht's resulting exile. Secondly, we will explore the experiences of exiled German artists in Hollywood during World War II and director Fritz Lang and Brecht's vastly different experiences of exile, applying the theories of Germanics scholar Cornelius Partsche and film scholar Thomas Elsaesser. We will then examine Brecht's turbulent relationship with Lang while attempting a collaboration on the 1943 film *Hangmen Also Die* and the Brechtian and Epic traces that remain in the highly edited anti-Nazi film. Brecht's heightened capitalist critique and recalculation of the dialectical

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<sup>188</sup> Brecht derived his concept of the dialectic from German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, as laid out in Hegel's 1807 book *Phenomenology of Spirit*, while derived from Plato's concept of a philosophical argument involving contradictions between two opposing sides, Hegel moves beyond Plato's limited notion that contradictions lead to false premises and proclaims that *reason* generates contradictions. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by Michael Inwood, Oxford University Press (London: 2018). See chapter's one and two for descriptions of Chaplin and Valentine along with chapter two descriptions of Peter Lorre's acting styles for examples of how Brecht used the dialectic on the Epic stage.

character will further be evidenced through the discussion of re-workings, completed in exile, of his play *Mother Courage and Her Children* along with the Berlin Premier of the play (1949) after Brecht's return to Germany in 1948.

Prior to Brecht's European and American exile period, he was enjoying success on stage, screen, and radio in Weimar era Germany, a period of great political unrest, yet a time that lent itself to vast artistic experimentation. When the Nazi party rose to power in 1933, they quickly singled out a large group of "modern" artists, labeling them as "degenerates". These artists included Brecht, Lang, German writer Klaus Mann, former Brecht collaborators; German composer Kurt Weill and Austrian singer Lotte Lenya, amongst many others. One of the first steps in the Nazis' move towards purification was a forced purge of German libraries which culminated in a May 10<sup>th</sup> 1933 public book burning in Berlin. Amongst the works burned were those of Brecht and his fellow "modern" artists. His plays were banned from appearing on stage and both his artistic and personal freedoms were under threat. Like many other avant-garde artists, Brecht was labeled "degenerate" by the Third Reich. The term "degeneracy", as used here, and as it relates to art and artists, can be traced to nineteenth-century racial theorist Max Nordau. Nordau, a German speaking physician and author from Budapest, denounced the European avant-garde movement and its practitioners in his 1892 book *Degeneration*. Drawing on his practice in the medical field, Nordau attempted to "diagnose" modernity as an artistic decadence that led to physical degeneration, mental disorders, sexual deviancy, and lawlessness, amongst other things.<sup>189</sup> When Hitler and the Nazi party took power in 1933, they adopted Nordau's view of

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<sup>189</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, translated from the second edition of the German work. William Heinemann (London: 1898) pp 15-34.

degeneracy and Brecht fled Germany on February 28<sup>th</sup>, the day after the infamous Reichstag fire, fearing arrest, imprisonment or worse.<sup>190</sup>

In the early months of Brecht's European exile, he, wife Helene Weigel, and son Steffan, spent time in Prague, Vienne, Paris, and various other European cities until Brecht purchased a house on the Danish island of Funen in September of 1933. In June of 1934, the Nazi Party revoked Brecht's German citizenship, making his exile official and forced. Brecht would not move to America for another seven years, yet, in Fall of 1935, he set sail for New York to offer input on a production of his play *The Mother*<sup>191</sup> by Theatre Union, a company sponsored by the Communist Party of America. Brecht, therefore, may have been considering New York as a destination, very early on in his exile, and prior to the start of the war. Brecht was outraged when he received Theatre Union's initial proposals for staging *The Mother* and responded with an ultimatum, that he either come to New York and have full control over the script or he would not permit them to proceed with the production. Promised full control of the script, Brecht arrived in New York with composer Hanns Eisler to face a production team that disagreed with nearly every decision that they made, ending with Brecht and Eisler being locked out of rehearsals, the company maintaining that Brecht was unwilling to adapt the play for American audiences.

In mid-November of 1935, still in New York but unable to attend rehearsals for *The Mother*, Brecht began to write a series of increasingly heated letters to Theatre Union forbidding them to change the plays text or move forward with making cuts without his consent. Theatre Union ignored both Brecht and pleas from the Communist Party of America to allow Brecht and Eisler to maintain full

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<sup>190</sup> On February 27<sup>th</sup> 1933, the Reichstag building, which housed the German parliament, stood ablaze. Hitler had been sworn in four weeks earlier and seized the opportunity to blame the Communist Party of Germany for the incident and proceeded to arrest, imprison, and murder thousands of communists.

<sup>191</sup> Adapted from Russian writer and political activist Maxim Gorky's 1906 novel of the same name, Brecht's *The Mother* focuses on a mother, Pelagea Vlassova, as she undergoes a journey of personal loss, illness, and activism. The play ends with Vlassova raising her own red flag during the overthrow of the Russian Czar in 1917. Brecht wrote *The Mother* between 1930-31 and the play had its Berlin premier on January 17<sup>th</sup> 1932.

control of the script and music and proceeded with the opening performance on November 19<sup>th</sup>1935. Brecht did not see the play, but was informed both by word-of-mouth and reviews, that the play was “poor, technically inadequate, and at many points amateurish”, the very issues that Brecht had tried to correct during rehearsals.<sup>192</sup> Prior to returning to Europe, Brecht wrote his good friend and colleague, director Erwin Piscator stating

*The Mother* has been badly butchered here (stupid mutilations, political ignorance, backwardness of all kinds, etc.). One thing I can tell you: steer clear of so-called left-wing theatres. They're run by small cliques dominated by hack playwrights who have the manners of the worst Broadway producers without their know how.<sup>193</sup>

He had consigned himself to the belief that even left-wing American theatres supported by the Communist Party of America were interested in nothing but naturalistic, empathy filled productions. Reason and Brecht's dialectic were thrown out the window by Theatre Union. As theatre and American studies professor Ilka Saal so poignantly put it in her 2007 article *Vernacularizing Brecht: The Political Theatre of the New Deal*

Brecht insisted that critical thinking and political agency could be brought about only by radically distancing the spectator from the stage, Theatre Union believed that empathy was indispensable to the successful political education of the audience.<sup>194</sup>

The Theatre Union incident had lasting effects on Brecht's relationship with American theatre and certainly had some influence over his choice to settle in, film industry dominant, Los Angeles when he fled to America in 1941.

On September 1<sup>st</sup>1939, the Wehrmacht<sup>195</sup> invaded Poland, an act that would result in the commencement of World War II. In the aftermath of this catastrophic event, Brecht wrote *Mother*

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<sup>192</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Letters 1913-1956*, p 222.

<sup>193</sup> Brecht, *Letters 1913-1956* pp 223-224.

<sup>194</sup> Ilka Saal, *Vernacularizing Brecht: The Political Theatre of the New Deal*, In *Interrogating America Through Theatre and Performance*, W.W. Demastes and I.S. Fischer, Eds, Palgrave Macmillan (New York: 2007) p 102

<sup>195</sup> Nazi combined armed forces.

*Courage and Her Children*<sup>196</sup>. Having experienced World War I and living in exile in Europe at the time of writing, Brecht perceptively foresaw World War II as an event with the possibility of being as devastating as the Thirty Years War. In truth, the loss of life in the six years in which the European portion of World War II was fought<sup>197</sup>, would near that of the Thirty Years War, with estimates of lost military and civilian lives in Germany alone ranging from 6,630,000 - 8,680,000 or 10 – 12 percent of the population.<sup>198</sup> Compare these figures to an overall loss of German life between 20 – 50 percent during a *thirty* year period from 1618 – 1648, in which plague and famine also played a huge factor in mortality rates.<sup>199</sup> Selecting the Thirty Years War as the backdrop for *Mother Courage* was therefore telling, Brecht could see history repeating itself, the greed precipitating the conflict, and the futility of the war and devastation to come.

Once the Nazis' invaded Denmark in April of 1940, Brecht and his family fled to Finland. Awaiting his American visa, Brecht was uninvolved with the 1941 Zürich premier of his play *Mother Courage*, the reviews of which he found infuriating. Cast in the lead role, German-Jewish actress Therese Giehse, portrayed Mother Courage as a brave, victimized mother, even bringing the audience to tears during some performances. Brecht did not intend for the audience to feel pure empathy towards the character, so he would begin reworking several areas of the play during his time in America. These changes will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, particularly as they are swayed by Brecht's negative experiences with American capitalism. As we will see, having written what is often considered his most pivotal Epic piece, Brecht's exile prevented him from full involvement in a live stage production of the play until 1949, after his return to East Berlin.

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<sup>197</sup> The war in the Pacific would not end until the signing of the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951.

<sup>198</sup> Reperes – module 1-2-0, explanatory notes – World War II casualties – EN, English translation by Julie Gratz, Centre European Robert Schuman, 2011.

<sup>199</sup> Johannes Burkhardt, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg*, Frankfurt am Main (Frankfurt: 1992) p 236.

During his years in exile, Brecht himself faced many of the same choices and questions presented in his pivotal play. Brecht's exile from his homeland would force him to walk into a war zone, this time a mental and artistic one, where he, like *Mother Courage*, would feel forced into selling a product that he viewed as stagnant and inconsequential, as we will see in his involvement with the Hollywood film *Hangmen Also Die*. John K. Lyon's 1980 book *Bertolt Brecht in America* states in its conclusion that "Brecht was probably too far ahead of his time and too uncompromising in promoting his kind of theatre in his own way to have succeeded in an alien environment like America".<sup>200</sup> While it is true that Brecht's attempts at successful film and theatre productions during his American exile tended to be fraught with difficulties, his firsthand experience in the material driven Hollywood film industry, along with his exiled state, as we will see, would have a profound impact on his reformulation of dialectical characters, like *Mother Courage*.

American passports in hand, Brecht and his family fled to the Soviet Union as Finland's port of Petsamo had come under German control. They sailed out of Vladivostok on June 13<sup>th</sup> and arrived in Los Angeles on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1941. When Brecht arrived in America, already disenchanted with the idea of staging his plays in New York, he hoped to try his luck in Hollywood. What he was confronted with was a major capitalist machine that opposed many of his theories, staging techniques and politics. Brecht's journals from this period offer a clear indication of his ever-increasing aversion to dominating capitalist systems and their affect on art

The attitude to money here gives away their colonial capitalism. You get the impression that everybody here is where he is just to get away, they are only in the USA to make money. It is a nomadic theatre, by people on the move for people who are lost. Time is money.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> John K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, Princeton University Press (Princeton: 1980) p 347.

<sup>201</sup> Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, p 166.

Having lived through the rise of National Socialism in Germany, Brecht would now be treated to an endless display of capitalism and materialism on parade in the glamorous and decadent Hollywood of the 1940s. Hollywood of the 1940s was a booming, money making industry where sweeping romantic dramas, romantic comedies, westerns, cartoons, and lavish musicals reigned supreme. Keeping inflation in mind, the Guinness Book of World Records ranks the highest grossing film of all time as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced *Gone with the Wind*, a sweeping highly romantic historical drama set against the backdrop of the American Civil War and Reconstruction Periods.<sup>202</sup> Released in 1939, the three hour and thirty-seven-minute film won ten academy awards in February of 1940, including best film, director, and actress. Although Brecht does not mention the film by name, he refers negatively to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer productions on several occasions in his journals from this period. A December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1941 journal entry describes Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer as “the biggest film company in the world”, a company that produces films and artists that have “no laws of psychology, of common sense, of economy, of morality, of probability. What is right is what has already been shot and is in the can, what is good is whatever gets you a raise in salary”.<sup>203</sup> This environment was a far cry from the thriving, experimental, avant-garde Weimar theatre and film scene in which Brecht thrived as a young and burgeoning artist.

Although often considered one of the best films of all time, Orson Wells’ *Citizen Kane* was a box office failure and the Oscar award for best picture in 1941 went to yet another sweeping emotional drama, director John Ford’s *How Green is My Valley*. In a December 28<sup>th</sup> 1941 journal entry, Brecht writes that, during a discussion with fellow exiles, he defended Orson

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<sup>202</sup> *Gone with the Wind* is centered on the life of Scarlett O’Hara, the overindulged daughter of a plantation owner, and the moral and psychological struggles that she faces during and after the war.

<sup>203</sup> Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, p 174.

Wells against critiques of being “eclectic and uneven”, going on to state that Wells “shows things that are interesting from a social point of view, though it may be that as an actor he has not yet turned his showmanship into a stylistic element”.<sup>204</sup> Welles experimented with long tracking shots and deep focus, amongst other ground breaking cinematic techniques. This was the state of film when Brecht arrived in America and, contrary to the general belief amongst Brechtian scholars, there were American directors that Brecht admired.

Only months into his arrival in America, Brecht had a clearly formed opinion of the country that he had once idolized as a young playwright. Brecht was immediately feeling the effects of his own nationality living in an Allied nation, writing in an undated letter to friend and collaborator Hanns Eisler prior to Eisler’s 1942 arrival in America, of the many restrictions that he and his family faced. German exiles had to maintain strict curfews, could not travel over five miles from their homes and were subject to property searches and seizures.<sup>205</sup> Brecht also rejected Naturalist theatre companies like New York based The Group Theatre, and flat out refused to allow co-founder Harold Clurman to direct his play *Galileo* on Broadway.<sup>206</sup> Brecht attempted to uphold his Marxist ideals and Epic production techniques while displaced within a highly capitalistic environment. Clurman’s response to Brecht’s inflexibility was that it seemed nothing more than “typical German arrogance”.<sup>207</sup> German stereotypes abounded in the American press and a Hollywood that once courted German cinema artists throughout the 1920s and pre-war 30s, began delegating German talent to the peripheries.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, p 186.

<sup>205</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. Hanns Eisler papers, USC Libraries Special Collections. [https://archives.usc.edu/repositories/3/archival\\_objects/44312](https://archives.usc.edu/repositories/3/archival_objects/44312), translated by Kristin Seifert.

<sup>206</sup> James K. Lyon elaborates on this point in *Brecht in America*, pp 92-94, citing a series of letters passed between Brecht and Ferdinand Reyher.

<sup>207</sup> Harold Clurman in Lyon, p 92.

<sup>208</sup> Film historian Thomas Elsaesser elaborates upon this point in his essay *Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Exile: A Counterfeit Trade?* in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, edited by Hamid Naficy, Routledge (New York: 1999) pp 97-123, citing several “talent-raiding campaigns” conducted by Hollywood and

Director Michael Curtiz, an Austrian-Hungarian native set the tone for German artists enduring in Hollywood during World War II with his 1942 film *Casablanca*, recognizing the need to take a clear and decisive stand against Nazi Germany or risk his career. German actors like Conrad Veidt, were cast in roles as hostile SS officers, confined to portraying the very figures that forced him and his Jewish wife into exile.<sup>209</sup> Actor Peter Lorre who once thrived in leading roles on Brecht's Epic stage and in Fritz Lang's first sound film, found himself playing minor roles, like that of the crooked Sinor Ugarte, in *Casablanca*. German actors played antagonists and German writers and directors produced films that verified their anti-Nazi status. Leading roles, of course, went to American actors such as Humphrey Bogart and Robert Taylor. When Conrad Veidt was finally offered a leading role, it was in the 1942 film *Nazi Agent* where he plays both a Nazi officer and the officer's anti-Nazi twin brother. As both hero and villain, Veidt seems to personify the German exile psyche. Like many fellow exiled artists, Veidt's nationality became a permanent scar, a burden that exiles carried regardless of their political affiliations.

Film historian Thomas Elsaesser elaborates upon the exile experience of German artists in World War II Hollywood in his essay *Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Exile: A Counterfeit Trade?*, noting a kind of "split-consciousness", an infliction that diasporic communities have faced throughout history. Elsaesser poignantly refers to stories of exiled German artists in World War II Hollywood as

Illustrat[ing] painful dependencies, uprootedness, and the perverse need to reassert individual identity in the face of a common fate. But especially among artistic circles, where the immigrant ethos of trying to blend with the host culture

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Broadway studio/stage executives. This talent search likely began as a result of American artists/producers desire to compete with the highly successful German film production company UFA (Universum-Film AG) prior to World War II.

<sup>209</sup> Veidt appeared as a Nazi officer in the 1940 MGM film *Escape* and, perhaps more famously, in the 1942 Warner Brothers film *Casablanca*.

in order to give positive value to a decision forced upon one by external circumstances is blunted by resentment about the loss of prestige and nostalgia for the status enjoyed back home...personalities with such opposing views as Bert Brecht and Thomas Mann, Theodor W. Adorno and Lotte Lenya, Arnold Schoenberg and Hanns Eisler were agreed on one issue: that Hollywood represented culture at its most corrupt, venal, and hypocritical.<sup>210</sup>

Many Austrian and German artists, like actors Peter Lorre and Conrad Veidt, along with director's Michael Curtiz and Fritz Lang, would concede to Hollywood's needs and popular opinion, reinventing themselves both artistically and politically in an image digestible to an American audience. As Elsaesser notes, Brecht was part of a rather small group of exiled artists who found it nearly impossible to assimilate. For some who chose to reinvent themselves, assimilation meant work and survival, to others, like Fritz Lang, the glamour and decadence of Hollywood were welcomed with open arms.

Director Fritz Lang arrived in Hollywood in 1936, leaving ex-wife and collaborator Thea Von Harbou, who chose to remain in Germany and affiliate herself with the Nazi party, gaining writing credits for over twenty-six National Socialist Party aimed films. Brecht too had lost his close friend and writing partner, Margerete Steffin, one week prior to his journey to America. Steffin worked with Brecht, perhaps most notably, on early iterations of *Mother Courage*, along with co-writing *Galileo* (1938) and *Fear and Misery in the Third Reich* (1938). Brecht and Lang became part of a small group of exiled artists who met frequently, both as a community undergoing a shared experience and in the hopes of collaborating on projects and rebuilding their artistic careers in America. It was under these circumstances that Brecht first became acquainted with Lang. Lang was a fan of Brecht's work, utilizing actors trained on the Epic stage along with early Epic theory.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Elsaesser in Nacify, p110.

<sup>211</sup> See chapter 2, on how Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* influenced Lang's first sound-film *M* (1931) and Peter Lorres' simultaneous work on Brecht's Epic stage and in Lang's films.

Perhaps the largest scale film collaboration of German exiles in Hollywood during World War II, the Brecht/Lang collaboration *Hangmen Also Die* (1943) utilized the talents of Brecht, Lang, musician Hanns Eisler, actor Hans Heinrich Von Twardowski along with a slew of other German exiles appearing in minor roles as SS officers. The film is based upon the 1942 assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, a high-ranking Nazi official and central architect of the holocaust who became known as ‘The Hangmen of Prague’. Although the film is based on an anti-Nazi theme, Nazi characters are by no means the center of this emotionally charged tale based on a middle-class family’s unexpected involvement in the plot to hide Heydrich’s assassin. The romanticized story of a Czechoslovakian surgeon, played by Irish actor Brian Donlevy, as a lone anti-Nazi assassin, is also an extreme exaggeration of real events. The real-life Heydrich was assassinated by a group of British-trained Czech and Slovakian soldiers sent by the exiled Czechoslovakian government. Lang’s tale of mystery and romance bears little resemblance to his early Expressionist and sound-era films.

Unlike Brecht, Lang embraced the glamorous Hollywood lifestyle. Brecht’s journals preceding the *Hangmen* project note several casual meetings with Lang, on one such occasion, Brecht writes of Lang’s continued praise of Hollywood, or what Brecht begins calling “Atlantis”. He further states that Lang

Sees a special lifestyle where I only see high capitalism; possible that I can’t see the ‘real’ Atlantis for the high capitalism; but he just obscures it. Here you have the unadulterated version before you; development, without anything actually developing.<sup>212</sup>

Lang was under contract with MGM for nearly a year before he was offered a film. His first American film *Fury* (1936), was reminiscent of early German sound films like *M*, but was highly

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<sup>212</sup> Brecht, *Journals 1935-1956*, p 193.

censored by the studio.<sup>213</sup> Lang's original proposal for *Fury* was that it focus on a black victim of a lynching mob, an idea that was immediately turned down by the studio. Lang's desire to focus on social issues was quickly shifting to fit the Hollywood model of supply and demand. In a 1959 interview with Jean Domarchi and Jacques Rivette, Lang vacillates greatly in answering if there were films that he made for money rather than interest, stating

No, of course. I have never made a film solely for money, never. But certain films, I admit, I would have preferred to make something else. When I conceive a film, I am interested in it, but certain adventure films interest me less than *M* and *Fury*, the films that critique society.<sup>214</sup>

Brecht and Lang came into the *Hangmen* project with very different views on Hollywood, capitalism, and the future of their careers. While Brecht needed to work to some degree to survive, he was unwilling to fully abandon his beliefs and artistic goals to pursue fame and fortune as Lang so willingly proceeded to do.

The problematic collaboration between Brecht and Lang during the production of *Hangmen Also Die* is no secret. Brechtian and Lang scholars have written extensively about Brecht's negative experience and attitude towards Hollywood and his experience working with Lang. The prevailing conclusion is that Brechtian concepts failed to make it into the American market and that Brecht was, instead, forced to cow-tow to Hollywood trends and censors in order to make enough money to care for his family and survive the war.<sup>215</sup> Proof that working on *Hangmen Also Die* grew increasingly tedious for Brecht as the process progressed is also abundant throughout his journal entries. Brecht believed that he had to become someone else,

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<sup>213</sup> Like *M*, *Fury* is a crime/social drama. *Fury* producer Joseph L. Mankiewicz pushed many changes through, including a rewritten ending where, after delivering a profoundly gripping speech to a judge, actor Spencer Tracy instantly turns and embraces his girl, in a Hollywood prescribed happy ending. In a 1975 interview with Gene D. Phillips, Lang explains how appalling he found these and other changes that the studio imposed on a film that he enjoyed working on but was displeased with the final cut.

<sup>214</sup> Fritz Lang, *Interview with Fritz Lang*, Jean Domarchi and Jacques Rivette (1959), in *Fritz Lang Interviews*, Edited by Barry Keith Grant, University Press of Mississippi (Jackson: 2003) p 19.

<sup>215</sup> See Lyon.

shut off his avant-garde instincts, to remain employed in Hollywood. A journal entry from this period expresses the financial and artistic dilemma Brecht faced when working on the Lang film

Interesting how a person falls apart if one function is closed down, the ego becomes formless if it is no longer addressed, approached, ordered around. Alienation of the self sets in. During the work [on *Hangmen Also Die*] I was occasionally hard put to it to avoid getting involved in solving their grubby little problems, like finding those slick ‘*lines*’ and the transitions from one pointless situation to another, and writing gush in general, all of which I left to others. That kind of thing can seriously damage your handwriting, at least that’s how I felt.<sup>216</sup>

It can be speculated that the “function” that Brecht is referring to in this excerpt, is his dependence on reason and the development of performance that creates critical rather than passive viewership, in line with his developing Epic theory. Brecht writes as if he has been detached from his own ego, further illustrating Elsaesser’s concept of ‘split conscious’ and exile experience. But this is not an experience that results solely from a loss of homeland, the political state of the world, or personal finance. Brecht speaks of distance from freedom of artistic expression, as if floating in memories of a Weimar Germany that offered a platform for a successful young Brecht’s artistic experimentation and social commentary. Brecht is an exile in both time and space.

As noted in chapters I and II, Brecht was by no means an easy man to get along with, nor was he ever truly satisfied with any project that he worked on, be it on the page, stage, screen or radio. As an artist committed to the evolution of performance, no script was ever complete in his eyes, resulting in editions and translations of his plays that often contain multiple versions of several scenes written and re-written over the course of his career. During the Weimar period, a young and prolific Brecht, was offered both the stage and screen as a kind of Epic playground, finding both artists and audiences who supported his often-subversive styles and methods.

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<sup>216</sup> Brecht, *Journals 1935-1956*, p 261.

We have discussed how Brecht's unique exile experience may have played a role in his discontent and unwillingness to work or be accepted during his time in Hollywood, but Brecht initially mentions the Lang collaboration in a positive light. A May 28<sup>th</sup> 1942 journal entry recalls a lazy afternoon spent on the beach with Lang in which they discussed a hostage film based around Heydrich's execution in Prague. Brecht and Lang's initial conversations about the film appear quite positive and relaxed, one fellow exiled artist working with another, but Brecht's attitude changed the moment contracts, censors and money became involved. Forced to work with American screenwriter John Wexley, supposedly to aid Brecht in writing a solid English screenplay, Brecht became increasingly annoyed, stating in a journal entry "what an infinitely dismal fabrication this hostage story is that I have to occupy myself with these days. What a load of hackneyed situations, intrigues, false notes!"<sup>217</sup> Brecht's dispassion with the film is clear, yet there is a certain residue of Brecht's Epic style that lingers in rare moments of the film.

Evidence of Brecht's work on *Hangmen Also Die* arises in scenes that clearly diverge from the classical Hollywood formula, moments that interrupt the linear nature of the story and raise questions about the state of the world and humanity's role in its future. The film focuses on a family, led by Professor Novotney, that becomes entangled with the assassin of Reich Chancellor Reinhard Heydrich when their daughter unknowingly aids in his escape. In an attempt to protect the assassin, the underground movement, and his family, Professor Novotney offers himself as a Nazi prisoner and is placed in prisoner barracks. After an opening scene, in which German actor Hans Heinrich von Twardowski offers an outrageous, almost psychotic, performance as Reinhard Heydrich, screaming nearly unrecognizable German in a room full of Czechoslovakians with American accents, the film progresses into a series of scenes that focus

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<sup>217</sup> Brecht, *Journals 1935-1956*, pp 248-249.

on character's psychological motivations and goals. Stereotypical romance scenes, are interwoven with idealized domestic scenes and formulaic moments of suspense. In the midst of this film, that seemingly diverges from earlier discussed projects respective to Brecht and Lang, one scene stands out very clearly as indicative of Brecht's influence.

Following Professor Novotney's arrest, the camera cuts to a dimly lit and scarcely furnished barracks. Professor Novotney plays chess with a 'famous poet' surrounded by men of various backgrounds. A poor working man steps forward but Lang does not use close ups during this scene, rather shooting these men, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, as a group connected by their struggle and common oppressors. Furthermore, and in opposition to other scenes in the film, viewer's attention is unexpectedly drawn away from the Professor and 'famous poet', when a shabbily dressed common man steps forward and asks the poet to review and edit a poem that he has written. The poet reviews the poem and hands it back to the man, asking him to read it as is. Shyly, and still framed by his fellow prisoners, the man reads

Fellow patriots the time has come, fellow patriots there's work to be done. Raise the invisible torch and pass it along, keep it burning, keep it burning forward on the road that has no turning. Die if you must for a cause that's just but shout to the end NO SURRENDER! Ever onward no returning, until the senseless butcher will be learning that his war isn't won until the last battle's won. Carry on when we are gone, NO SURRENDER!<sup>218</sup>

After a moment of silence, Professor Novotney repeats the poem adding rhythm and inflection, that will later turn into a song of freedom and solidarity sung as small groups of men are being led from the barracks to their deaths. Brecht's journals reveal the 'ideal' version of this song

brother, it is time  
brother, be prepared  
pass on the invisible flag now  
in dying you'll still be the same as you were in your life  
you will not, comrade, surrender to them.  
Today you're defeated, which makes you a slave

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<sup>218</sup> *Hangmen also Die*, Dir. Fritz Lang (Arnold Productions: 1943) Film.

but the war only ends when the last battle's fought.

brother, it is time  
brother, be prepared  
pass on the invisible flag now!  
violence or law, its still in the balance  
but when slavery's day's done, a new day will follow.  
today you're defeated, which makes you a slave  
but the war only ends when the last battle's fought  
but the war will not end till the last battle's fought.<sup>219</sup>

References to death for a just cause and continuing on in this fight even when confronted with death, remain in the version that made it into the film. Brecht's "invisible flag" becomes an "invisible torch", perhaps due to its less benign symbolism, avoiding any national or political connotations. The song also bares strong resemblance to the "Solidarity Song" that Brecht wrote for his 1932 German film *Kuhle Wampe*<sup>220</sup> Brecht's "Solidarity Song" begins:

Vorwärts, und nicht vergessen,  
worin unsre Stärke besteht!  
Beim Hungern und beim Essen,  
vorwärts, nicht vergessen  
die Solidarität!<sup>221</sup>

Forward! Without forgetting  
Where our strength is now to be!  
When Starving or when eating  
Forward! Not forgetting  
Our solidarity!<sup>222</sup>

Both songs stress solidarity in the fight against tyranny. What studio executives and Lang did not know, was that Brecht and Hanns Eisler, who composed the music for *Hangmen Also Die*, scored the "Freedom Song" in *Hangmen* to resemble Eisler's "Comintern March", written for the

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<sup>219</sup> Brecht, *Journals 1935-1956* p 274.

<sup>220</sup> See *Chapter three* for additional discussion of *Kuhle Wampe*, the only film that Brecht had full involvement with from pre to post production.

<sup>221</sup> *Kuhle Wampe*, von 'Solidaritätslied', Texte von Bertolt Brecht.

<sup>222</sup> *Kuhle Wampe*, from 'The Solidarity Song', Lyrics translated by Marc Silberman, in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, Methuen Drama (UK: 2000) p 256.

Communist Party of Germany. In the barracks of a Nazi prison camp filled with Czech hostages, a reputable communist melody takes over the scene of this artistically and politically conflicted film. Although Brecht felt the film an artistic failure, *Hangmen Also Die*, was a mild box office success. Perhaps through all the melodrama and suspense, movie-goers in America may still have walked away with a handful of socially driven questions, or at least unknowingly humming the “Comintern March”.

For all the negative feelings Brecht may have expressed regarding the Hollywood system and his work on *Hangmen Also Die*, it is important to remember that he once had a passion for both America and the burgeoning film industry, as displayed in both his admiration of Charlie Chaplin and in his ‘American’ plays.<sup>223</sup> Although Brecht’s political beliefs may have shifted with his introduction to Marx, he still chose to seek exile in America and additionally to settle near Hollywood rather than reliving his 1935 experience with leftist theatre in New York City. Brecht did indeed view his time in America as trivial and the work produced on stage or screen as worthless, but we must consider the fact that he reworked, perhaps his most studied and performed play, *Mother Courage*, during this period. Brecht also completed two of his other frequently performed plays, *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1941) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944). Living in a capitalist machine, as Brecht saw World War II America and Hollywood in particular, led Brecht to write some of his most scathing capitalist critiques within these well-known plays. His capitalist critique was surely partially fueled by his own vision of his surroundings, a lavish and material driven Hollywood, a culture driven by money, celebrity and greed. Greed, as we will see, would play an essential role in his empathy-free rewrites of *Mother Courage*.

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<sup>223</sup> See *Chapter I* for more on Chaplin’s relationship to Epic theory and early Brecht plays set in America.

Throughout Brecht's Hollywood experiences, he was writing and rewriting *Mother Courage*. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed Brecht's displeasure with his briefing on the 1941 Zürich performance, of which he was unable to be involved. Brecht was concerned about the amount of empathy that the audience had for *Mother Courage*, and he intended to rework several sections of the play once he arrived safely in America. If Brecht's experiences in Hollywood added fuel to the fire of Brecht's growing capitalist critique, his final experience in America, being ordered to appear before Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee on October 30<sup>th</sup> 1947 would create an inferno of distrust and loathing for America and its driving force, capitalism. Brecht was attacked for his communist ties and the committee ignored Brecht's anti-Nazi stance and work, stating "We are not interested in any works that he might have written advocating the overthrow of Germany or the government there".<sup>224</sup> Brecht left the country two days after his trial. In an un-read statement, Brecht revealed his final thoughts on the country that once gave him refuge as an anti-Nazi German exile

I wish to say that the great American people would lose much and risk much if they allowed anybody to restrict free competition of ideas in cultural fields, or to interfere with art which must be free in order to be art. We are living in a dangerous world. Our state of civilization is such that mankind is capable of becoming enormously wealthy but, as a whole, is still poverty ridden...do you not think that in such a predicament, every new idea should be examined carefully and fully?<sup>225</sup>

Here Brecht attacks the committee's intentions while incorporating blatant Marxist leanings. Brecht, along with other artists called before HUAC, such as musician Hanns Eisler seemed to be relaying a warning, one tyrant falls while a new tyranny rises. A statement read by Eisler on the day of his departure at La Guardia airport further elucidates this point

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<sup>224</sup> Statement by Vice Chairman Karl Mundt, in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*, edited by Eric Bentley, the Viking Press (New York: 1971) p 209.

<sup>225</sup> Brecht in Bentley, p 9.

I leave this country not without bitterness and infuriation. I could well understand it when in 1933 the Hitler bandits put a price on my head and drove me out. They were the evil of the period; I was proud at being driven out. But I feel heartbroken over being driven out of this beautiful country in this ridiculous way...I listened to the questions of these men and saw their faces. As an old anti-Fascist it became plain to me that these men represent fascism in its most direct form.<sup>226</sup>

It perhaps comes as no surprise that both Brecht and Eisler chose to settle in the Soviet affiliated-communist East German state, upon their return to Berlin in October of 1948.<sup>227</sup> Brecht makes a point not to mention the U.S. by name in his journals from his German resettlement period, simply referring on several occasions to “other occupying forces” driven by capitalist ambitions who were responsible for the reconstruction of West Berlin as a bastion against communism.<sup>228</sup> Brecht caught the eye of the communist press as well as German communist leader Wilhelm Pieck and was offered use of the Stadttheater. In 1949, along with wife Helene Weigel, Brecht founded the Berliner Ensemble, where he would at last have a hand in staging *Mother Courage* as reworked during and after his abruptly ended stay in the U.S.

The 1949 Berlin production of *Mother Courage* removed nearly every trace of empathy one might once have had for the title character, and showed a markedly heightened capitalist critique, focusing on greed, materialism and war as a profitable industry. Brecht’s experience living through two world wars and his being exiled within a capitalist driven performance industry like Hollywood clearly affected his theory and method, and further aided in his reformulation of *Mother Courage*. Earlier we discussed Therese Giehse’s ‘moving’ performance in the 1941 premier of *Mother Courage* in Zürich and Brecht’s negative reaction upon hearing

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<sup>226</sup> Hanns Eisler, in *Hanns Eisler: Political Musician*, Albrecht Betz, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1982) p 207.

<sup>227</sup> The East German Democratic Republic was led by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany while the West German Federal Republic of Germany was occupied by UK and US forces and turned into a Capitalist state run by a parliamentary democracy.

<sup>228</sup> Brecht, *Journals*, p 404.

that Giehse had brought the audience to tears.<sup>229</sup> Armed with his recent experiences in a material driven Hollywood and having been driven out of America during a communist witch hunt, Brecht delivered perhaps his strongest capitalist and war critique to date in the 1949 version of *Mother Courage*.

A post-World War II Berlin in ruins and politically split in half set the backdrop for the Berlin premier of *Mother Courage* on January 11<sup>th</sup>1949. The play took place in the middle of the Berlin Blockade which lasted from June 24<sup>th</sup>1948 – May 12<sup>th</sup>1949 and is often considered the first clash of the Cold War.<sup>230</sup>



Figure XII: Berlin 1949 courtesy of CBS New archives

Helene Weigel would take on the title character, and unlike Gieshe, she would play the role with an unrelenting coldness, ravenous for money and a barbarous war both fueled by and fueling commerce. Brecht was in rehearsals daily, meticulously reworking scenes and weaving in

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<sup>229</sup> Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils: A Critical Study of the Man, His Work and His Opinions*, Eyre Methuen (London: 1980) p 211-212.

<sup>230</sup> CBS News archive. Bill Downs reporting from Berlin on the May 12<sup>th</sup>1949 end of the Berlin Blockade, when Soviet-run East Berlin reopened roads, railways and canals that had blocked American and British-run East Berlin from travel and receiving supplies. <https://billdownscbs.blogspot.com/2015/08/1949-occupation-powers-in-berlin-clash.html>

persistent *gests*<sup>231</sup> aimed at constantly reminding the audience that greed and money are at the heart of both the world he creates on stage and the world outside of the theatre. In Piercean semiotic terms<sup>232</sup>, the social gest involves signifiers explicitly placed in order to point to an intended signified. If successfully communicated, the viewer would relate the signified to a real-world referent. For Brecht, these real-world referents were most often directed at social critique and change. Given ample time for rehearsals, Brecht was able to work and re-work each scene for the 1949 Berlin performance of *Mother Courage*. He also left behind a model book which contains a detailed archive of pictures, notes and scene designs for future productions.

1949 additions to Scene I of *Mother Courage* included; Mother Courage spotlighted as she bites a half guilder and her prominently snapping her money bag closed after placing a coin inside. The leather money bag hung from around Weigel's neck, eluding to the fact that you would have to strangle her to get her money. These gestures are rich with social referents of greed and distrust for our fellow man. It is also relevant that these pronounced moments are spotlighted and given more attention than the familial storyline that continuously takes a back seat to Mother Courage's business ventures. While Mother Courage's eldest son, Eilif, is being recruited to fight in the war, Mother courage is scrupulously closing a business deal, making sure the money is genuine and then carefully snapping her purse shut. Purposely splitting the action of the scene on either side of her cart of wares, by the time she finishes her sale, Mother Courage has lost her son to the war. A line that did not appear in the 1941 version is added after Mother Courage, her daughter Katrin and her son Swiss Cheese exit pulling their wagon, The Sergeant

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<sup>231</sup> Brecht defined *social gestus* as "The social gest relevant to society, the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about social circumstances" Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* pp104-105.

<sup>232</sup> According to Semiotician Charles W. Pierce, a sign is "something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity", the sign contains three parts: signifiers, the signified and the referent.

states: “Will vom Krieg leben wird ihm wohl müssen auch was geben”.<sup>233</sup> (“When a war gives you all you earn, one day it may claim something in return”.<sup>234</sup>) As so many Germans profited from the war, the addition of this line may have been challenging for some audience members to hear, particularly as they were now living in ruins and struggling to survive.

Courage is not driven by revenge, in fact she appears to be void of morals altogether in the 1949 production, driven solely by greed and selling her goods at outrageous prices. Weigel showed no emotion after the realization that Eilif had been recruited to fight, she simply turns to Katrin and states “Jetzt mußt du mit deinem Bruder ziehn, Katrin” (“you must help your brother [Swiss Cheese], now, Katrin”) simply replacing one child laborer with another. Brecht painstakingly reworked scenes with Weigel, assuring that her character refrain from showing emotion. In Scene I, no loss is felt. As an audience you get the impression that Mother Courage simply has one less mouth to feed and that people are expendable, merely products to be used, thrown out and replaced at will. Mother Courage is a product of capitalist greed and war.

Although Mother Courage’s wagon of goods moved around the stage at the 1949 production, it moved only in a circle. With money as her bait, Mother Courage drives her cart in endless circles on a revolving stage, depicting the futility of capitalism for the lower classes. In this play, even humans are commodities, as we see in the case of Eilif and later his brother Swiss Cheese. All of Mother Courage’s children can be reduced to adjectives; Eilif- bravery, Swiss Cheese- honesty and Katrin- compassion. These adjectives are depicted as flaws which have no place in a commercial and war driven system, thus all three characters die as a direct result of the adjectives that have been attached to them.

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<sup>233</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. Auflage Suhrkamp Verlag (Berlin: 1949) p 18.

<sup>234</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, In *Bertolt Brecht: Jungle of Cities and Other Plays*, edited by Eric Bentley and translated with Bentley’s notes by Anselm Hollo, Grove Press (New York: 1966) p

One of the most significant examples of Mother Courage's lack of compassion, appears in the 1949 version of Scene IV. It is perhaps even more intriguing when we consider the fact that this scene displayed Mother Courage at the height of compassion in Therese Gieshe's 1941 performance. These strikingly different takes on this scene reveal a Brecht hardened by exile, war and his experience with greedy and tyrannical political systems. In this scene, Mother Courage is approached by the Chaplin and asked if she will donate officer shirts for use as bandages for injured peasants. In the notes to the *Mother Courage Model Book*, it is explained that Therese Gieshe, although audibly grumbling, paced around the stage and actually tore the shirts into bandages herself. Gieshe offered a glimpse of a dialectical character, torn between motherly/moralistic instincts and the need to operate her business in order to survive. Weigel's 1949 depiction of Mother Courage removes the nod to Courage's motherly/moralistic instincts, as she flatly refuses to donate the shirts, stating "Ich gib nix, ich mag nicht, ich muß an mich selber denken"<sup>235</sup> ("I give nothing, I do not like, I have to think of myself")<sup>236</sup>, declaring commerce above all. In this altered state, Mother Courage becomes less polemic. Brecht is careful, in the 1949 version, that the dialectic not be depicted through the internal struggle of Courage but rather through a split stage rendering of Courage and her compassionate daughter Katrin who steals the shirts from her mother and gives them to the Chaplin. On one side of the stage, Katrin is seen delivering the shirts and risking her life to save an infant. Simultaneously, on the other side of the stage, Mother Courage grieves the loss of her products and their potential earnings. Brecht makes it nearly impossible to admire Mother Courage, she has become one dimensional, driven by greed and commerce. Brecht only allows the audience to glimpse other

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<sup>235</sup> Brecht, *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* p 62.

<sup>236</sup> Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, own translation.

dimensions, moralistic dimensions, through the juxtaposition of Courage and her ill-fated brave, honest and compassionate children.



Figure XIII Therese Gieshe<sup>237</sup>

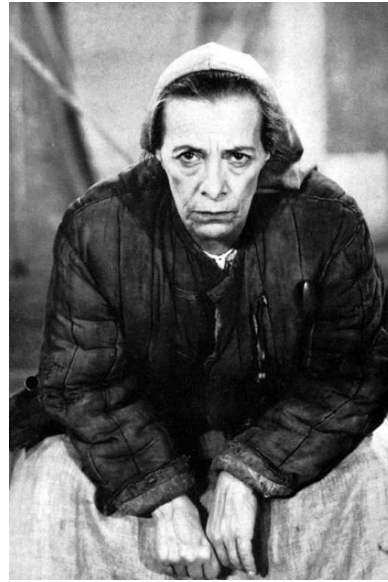


Figure XIV Helene Weigel<sup>238</sup>

In the images above, Therese Gieshe's face and body language appear representative of a character in conflict, a character beaten down by the struggles of the world yet retaining a glimmer of hope and compassion in her eyes. Helene Weigel's expression and body language depict a very different character, hardened and expressionless. Weigel's Courage is a post-World War II depiction of Courage, devoid of hope and incapable of pathos. Nearly every ounce of sympathy that the character may have once possessed has been suffocated by greed and the futility of war and commerce, thus making Courage's one act of restrained pathos rather striking. For the 1949 Berlin production, Brecht and Weigel developed a 'silent scream' at the end of scene three to portray Mother Courage's reaction to the corpse of her dead son. Weigel, seated, simply drops her jaw and stares blankly into the audience. The scream is seen but not heard and a

<sup>237</sup> AKG Images, AKG253237, Brecht, *Mother Courage/Therese Gieshe*. Zürich Schauspielhaus, April 4, 1941.

<sup>238</sup> *Mother Courage/Helene Weigel*. Bertolt Brecht, *Couragemodell* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1958).

kind of restrained pathos emerges, reminiscent of the silent or ambient only montage scenes from *M* and *Kuhle Wampe* discussed in chapter III. It is as if the character is incapable of fully feeling or expressing emotion. This use of silence along with gesture, posture and lack of expression is a moment when Brecht seems to overcome his long struggle with incorporating pathos into his work while sustaining his intention to restrict audiences from fully identifying or empathizing with the characters on stage. Perhaps the question of *how much critical distance is too much?* is partially accounted for in this use of the silent or unspoken ‘gest’ which connects the audience while simultaneously maintaining critical distance. This moment of restrained pathos offers a reprieve from Brecht’s, often heavy-handed use of the Aristotelian concepts of ethos and logos while never fully allowing the audience an opportunity to empathize with Mother Courage. In this moment we see the influences of Chaplin and Valentin’s grotesque acting techniques, the sound/silence/and montage play of Lang’s *M* and Brecht’s *Kuhle Wampe*, along with Brecht’s wartime/exile experiences which helped to further mold his bleak view of a profit and war driven world.

Brecht’s time in exile sounds rather productive when the evidence above is taken into account. Through multiple displacements, Brecht continued to write new plays and screenplays, rework his early plays and develop his Epic performance techniques. Residue of Brecht’s Epic techniques can also be seen in movies like *Hangmen Also Die*. This time of great uncertainty and conflict for Brecht drove him to reformulate his evolving Epic theories and to write some of his most scathing capitalist critique. Although Hollywood would forever be, to Brecht, a capital driven big industry, he did not give up on the film medium and its ability to produce radical and socio-political change driven art. For Brecht, Hollywood was an example of the antithesis of the truly radical cinema that Brecht still believed possible. Upon his return to Germany in 1948,

Kristin Seifert

Brecht would continue to seek out film projects. The 1961 *Mother Courage* film would be released five years after Brecht's death.

## Afterword

### Brecht and Contemporary Film

Although Brecht was technically home in space, he may never have returned home in time. The Weimar Berlin, which gave Brecht some of his most exciting and experimental years as an artist, was not only split in half politically but lay greatly in ruins. Brecht's exile experience clearly remained, as he would continue to refer to those of his own nationality as "the Germans", frequently journaling searing depictions of "their" post war actions. In many ways Brecht remained a man without country up until the time of his death, his path laid out not by himself but by constantly changing political and artistic climates.

Although Brecht enjoyed a degree of artistic freedom in East Germany, he was still subject to scrutiny from communist leaders, as would be seen when the government urged Brecht to alter several aspects of his opera *The Trial of Lucullus* which premiered in March of 1951. Brecht largely agreed with the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) revisions, primarily due to the fact that they most often took the form of, what Brecht believed to be, a push towards more socially effective working-class drama. Although not adverse to the government's involvement in artistic production, Brecht was troubled by the fact that the role of dictating the course of socialist realism was often put into the hands of officials that he deemed unqualified to carry out this important task. Brecht felt that conditions in the GDR were favorable to other options yet he questioned the one-sidedness of political beliefs, even those of which he was a supporter. In an August 1953 article that appeared in *Neues Deutschland*, Brecht states

Our artists are producing for a public recruited from various classes. Its level of education and also its degree of demoralization are very varied. Equally various are the needs that art must satisfy. The state is primarily interested in the workers; our best artists are primarily interested in them too. But at the same time there are other classes' tastes that must be taken account of. All this can only be accomplished by a highly qualified, highly

differentiated art. For a truly socialist art the question of quality is politically decisive.<sup>239</sup>

Brecht's essays from this final period of his life indicate a man whose politics and aesthetics had been greatly affected by the political, economic and aesthetic systems that he had come into contact with during his exile.

Beyond Brecht's growing fear of one-sided political systems, he was also concerned with German Communists general disregard for the past. In a journal entry regarding the reconstruction of the Nazi destroyed gravestones of revolutionary leaders Karl Liebhnecht and Rosa Luxemburg Brecht recalls that when president of the GDR, Wilhelm Pieck, was questioned about the fact that the gravestones had yet to be rebuilt, he answered that "it had been decided that nothing was to be done about this". Brecht's response to Pieck's reaction was that "the Germans have no sense of history at all, probably because they have no history".<sup>240</sup> Again Brecht refers to his own people as the other, a group from which he feels a sense of alienation similar to that experienced during his exile. This furthers the theory that Brecht remained in a kind of exile until the time of his death in 1956. His experiences and resulting mental state caused him to oppose even his own beliefs as being the only acceptable conclusions. Brecht's experiences had made him distrustful of any system that sought to solidify its own beliefs at the expense of eliminating all others. This change in Brecht was perhaps most notable by those who witnessed both his directing style and the revisions made to well-known plays that would be returned to Germany on East Berlin stages.

Brecht's once dictatorial style of directing appears to have shifted during his final years in East Berlin. While ever boisterous, spontaneous, and involved in mounting productions of his

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<sup>239</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Kulturpolitik und Akademie der Künste', from *Neues Deutschland*, East Berlin, 12 August 1953, in *Brecht on Theatre*, translated by John Willett.

<sup>240</sup> Brecht, *Journals*, p 414.

work, the evolution of his Epic theory also seemingly involved a shift in his own means of conducting rehearsals. He became much more accepting of criticism and inviting of new thoughts and ideas. His rehearsals were open venues where artists could come and go as they pleased and were always warmly welcomed by Brecht. Where American playwright George Sklar once compared Brecht to Hitler, stating that he had “the same apoplectic indulgence, the same ranting and shrieking associated with the German dictator”, Swedish director Erwin Leiser describes post-exile Brecht as an inspiration to the actors and French writer Vladimir Pozner describes a courteous Brecht, welcoming of ideas and onlookers in his rehearsals<sup>241</sup>. Surely this post-exile Brecht is in conversation with the experiences of the exiled state, pointing to the possibility that this state never truly seized to exist within the psyche of the twice exiled artist. Perhaps Brecht was more accepting of ideas that were not his own in part due to his own experiences with strictly partisan systems that resulted in censorship, witch hunts, war, and mass death and destruction. Even his working relationship with adaptor and translator Eric Bentley during his late career shows that Brecht may have inherited a more cooperative attitude about his work, their letters and interactions proving much more in the spirit of collaboration than earlier letters to colleagues during his Weimar and American periods. In general, there is no great foe during this period of Brecht’s career, even when his opera *The Trial of Lucullus* was removed from the Berlin State Opera repertory in March of 1951, Brecht welcomed the subsequent discussions and suggestions. After a conference in which Brecht was invited by the Council of Ministers to discuss the play, Brecht wrote to Wilhelm Pieck on April 6<sup>th</sup> 1951 attaching the reworked passages of the play and remarking

I wish to thank you and the other comrades once again for the suggestions concerning *Lucullus* put forward at our conference of 24 March. I hope that the

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<sup>241</sup> George Sklar Lyon pp 11-12. Erwin Leiser, “Der freundliche Frager,” in *B.Brecht: Gespräche auf der Probe*, 44. Vladimir Pozner “*Bertolt Brecht, Sinn und Form*, Brecht Sonderheft II, 450.

work that I immediately did on the text will have eliminated some potential misunderstandings. I also believe that the poetic quality of the work has been greatly improved.<sup>242</sup>

Brecht's letters and journal entries from this period confirm that, rather than being irate with the government for their interference, Brecht was gratified by the open structure of their conference and the overall shared goal that the state should take an interest in a socially positive direction for the arts.

The final years of Brecht's life were spent reworking and restaging several of the plays written before and during his exile. Film projects were few and, although several attempts were made to launch a *Mother Courage* film, the project did not see fruition until five years after Brecht's death. The 1961 film *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, directed by German filmmaker Peter Palitzsch and future director of the Berliner Ensemble, Manfred Wekwerth, is an unusual synthesis of stage and screen. Utilizing most of the actors from the 1949 Berlin production, including Helene Weigel in the lead role, the play is filmed on a single stage utilizing *Mother Courage's* wagon of goods as the primary set piece as was the case in the 1949 production. What is most interesting about these choices, is that the filmmakers manage to, perhaps unknowingly, latch onto an idea that may get us closer to solving the Epic cinema equation. Brecht's cinema and theatre projects tended to look very different, perhaps indicating that Brecht himself may have viewed these two mediums as somewhat distinctive. Brecht's film projects seem to fail in the moments where the stage is left behind, implying that successful Epic cinema may require the stage or some element of the live event. Palitzsch and Wekwerth filmed on a single stage, utilized continuous shots and cast directly from the Berlin stage production yet they fell into the editing and close-up trap, apparently failing to see that they may have been on the verge of

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<sup>242</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Letters 1938-1956*, pp501.

discovering a formula for Epic cinema that included; a clearly framed single stage, set pieces, continuous shots or even one-shot filmed performances, sustaining medium shots and use of actors trained on the Epic stage.

An internet search for 'Brechtian films' returns several links to websites claiming to be the 'top ten or top twenty films influenced by Brecht'. Sadly, many of the films listed result from misinterpretation of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* or defamiliarization effect. One list actually claims that a film is Brechtian because "The movie jumps from elements of the musical, to gangster films, then melodrama without any kind of internal logic", a list that seems more akin to Artaudian or Absurdist alienation effects. These lists are also overwhelmingly based in the realm of the serious drama or 'off-the-wall' independent films.

Scholarship on Brecht's influence on modern film is limited but Thomas Elsaesser establishes a starting point for this discussion in his 1990 article *From Anti-Illusionism to Hyper Realism: Bertolt Brecht in Contemporary Film*. In this article, Elsaesser points to 1960's French New Wave directors Jean Luc Godard and Jean Marie Straub<sup>243</sup>. Straub and directorial partner Danièle Huillet actually quote Brecht in several of their films, including the opening shot of their 1965 film *Nicht versöhnt (Not Reclined)*. Defamiliarization, Epic acting techniques (particularly the use of staccatoed delivery of lines) are common in French New Wave Cinema. Elsaesser also calls attention to the substantial influence that Brecht had on East German cinema or 'New German Cinema'. Elsaesser points to East German directors Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, Hans Jürgen Syberg and Rainer Werner Fassbinder but recognizes that nearly all East German directors were in some way influenced by Brecht, stating that East German films were

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<sup>243</sup> Much like Brecht and Lang, Jean-Marie Straub was actually only half of a directorial team that included Danièle Huillet, who is not mentioned by Elsaesser.

Typified by episodic narratives, frequent interruptions by voice-over or inserts, no-naturalistic acting, separation of sound from image, self-conscious staging of scenes, quotations from diverse sources, and, finally, their didactic interventionist stance *vis-à-vis* contemporary social and political issues.<sup>244</sup>

Actors, directors and designers from the Berliner Ensemble were also taking part in Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) film productions.<sup>245</sup> DEFA, the East German state-run film studio, thrived from its inception in 1946 until its 1992 dissolution in the wake of German reunification. Although Brecht died in August of 1956, those who trained with him continued his work on both the East German stage and screen. There is a great deal of scholarship yet to be done on Brecht's influence on East German film and ample material to study.

Although Elsaesser focuses primarily on Brecht's influence on French New Wave and East German cinema, he dedicates two sentences to German director Werner Herzog and his affinity for the "grotesque elements of human behavior" reminiscent of Brecht's beloved Bavarian clown, Karl Valentine. This is one of the only pieces of scholarship on Brecht and film that even comes close to mentioning comedy as a genre worthy of possessing Brechtian or Epic qualities. Perhaps film and theatre scholars alike sometimes seem to forget that Brecht had a sense of humor and that it shone through in the vast majority of his work. His admiration for Karl Valentine and Charlie Chaplin's unique forms of grotesque comedy, as discussed in chapter one, never faded. Interestingly, Elsaesser does not label Werner Herzog as both a feature film maker and documentarian, and therefore misses an opportunity to discuss documentary film as a genre that lends itself to the use of Epic techniques.

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<sup>244</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *From anti-Illusionism to hyper-realism: Bertolt Brecht in contemporary film*, in *Re-Interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film*, edited by Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1990) p 171.

<sup>245</sup> Actors Therese Giehse, Ernst Busch and Helene Weigel; directors Eric Engel and Peter Palitzsch, along with many other artists trained in the Epic theatre become familiar names in East German cinema.

Brecht had a propensity to document his work very early in his career, a 1931 ‘film’ of *Mann ist Mann*, starring actor Peter Lorre, consists of several still shots and short scenes from rehearsals put together in a montage style. As we saw in the chapter four discussion of the 1949 Berlin performance Model Book for *Mother Courage*, Brecht was still meticulously documenting his work in the final years of his life. Brecht does not mention the documentary film genre in his notes, journals, letters or publications. Although he surely viewed news reels and other forms of ‘non-fiction’ on the screen, early forms of documentary did not seem to be on Brecht’s radar. Documentary film does, however, lend itself to Epic technique, particularly the raw, unapologetic, grotesque and politically/socially driven documentary of filmmakers like Werner Herzog.

Herzog’s documentaries are historically, socially and politically deconstructive as well as self-reflexive. Herzog’s deconstruction often takes on the form of unexpected questions directed at interviewees, particularly those who claim to be ‘experts’ on a certain topic. For example, in his 2010 historical documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* French ‘archeologist’ Julien Monney is suddenly interrupted by Herzog, off screen or ‘behind the camera’, when he makes the mistake early on in his interview of stating “we can never reconstruct the past, we can only construct a representation of what exists now, today. You are a human being. I am a human being and here, when you come to the cave there are already some things. I have my own background-”. Here Monney is cut off by the disembodied voice of Herzog asking “so-what is your background if I may ask?” to which Monney reacts with clear physical and mental discomfort, not only at the interruption but as he is being put on the spot to produce some kind of credentials for his supposed expertise. Monney shrinks, laughs nervously and responds “Well...uh...I...uh, used to be a circus man before”. Rather than letting it alone, in typical Herzog fashion, he continues to

ask Monney, not about the 30,000 plus year old Chauvet Cave paintings but about what he did in the circus. This is a common interview technique used by Herzog meant to question how we write and document history, questioning not only our supposed 'experts' but the very nature of documentation and documentary film itself.

Herzog's 1997 documentary *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, is yet another example of Herzog's deconstructive documentary style. In this film, Herzog attempts to reconstruct the Vietnam prisoner of war experience of German-American United States naval pilot, Dieter Dengler. But rather than being a heroic film about Dengler's struggles, the documentary quickly reveals itself as a fact checking device. Herzog does not simply interview Dengler, he actually documents a trip he took with Dengler to Laos and Thailand in which he has Dengler retrace the incidents that led up to his capture and his experiences as a POW. Regardless of the fact that Dengler was held prisoner in North Vietnam and that Herzog hired local villagers to play Dengler's captors; Dengler proceeds to walk the camera through a reenactment of his capture, imprisonment and eventual escape. The result of Dengler's reenactment mixed with Herzog's use of found footage of the Vietnam war and still shots of Dengler as a young pilot, is an irony filled critique that always seems just on the edge of questioning Dengler's hero status or more widely, how humans perform history.

As discussed in chapters one and two, Brecht was utilizing projections on stage even in his early Weimar-era productions. Projections were used to display scene titles, song titles, still and moving images. Brecht was also enamored by performances of news stories, particularly the performance of moritaten or murder songs, which resulted in the writing of his most widely known song 'Di Moritat Von Mackie Messer' (known in English as 'Mack the Knife') from his *Threepenny Opera*. The documentary film genre may have lent itself most readily to Brecht's

inclination towards including found footage or actual news events. Montage is also a staple of documentary along with the inclusion of mixed media. Herzog proves that documentary, like Epic theatre, can be self-reflexive and capable of utilizing several devices and forms of media to make its audiences step back and question not only the content but the form of documentary cinema. This discussion is beyond the scope of the current project, which is contained to a study of Brecht between mediums during the course of his life, but ripe for further research on Brecht's influence on modern cinema.

As mentioned earlier, comedy films and comedic filmmakers rarely make the list of cinema influenced by Brecht. Considering the deep admiration that Brecht had for the Bavarian clown, Karl Valentine and English-American silent-era/early sound-era screen star Charlie Chaplin, it is hard to believe that Brecht has only influenced serious dramas and films that find themselves, often mislabeled, as 'avant-garde'. A deep look at Jewish-American comedic actor, director and writer Mel Brook's career would likely open up a new line of discussion regarding Brecht's influence on modern comedic screen performance. Films like *Blazing Saddles* move beyond mere satire; utilizing a historical setting, self-reflexive acting styles and cinematography to break not only the fourth wall, but also a long list of contemporary social and political boundaries.

The Science Fiction film and television series may also prove to be an exciting new avenue of exploration with regards to Brecht's influence on the screen. The creator of Star Trek, Gene Roddenberry, utilized not a historical setting but a futuristic setting to raise questions about current social and political issues. While the first iteration of *Star Trek* that ran for three seasons between 1966-1969, made some noticeable leaps (i.e. one of the more recognized early on-screen interracial kisses occurs in the 1968 episode 'Plato's Stepchildren'), the second iteration *Star*

*Trek*, *Star Trek the Next Generation* which ran for seven seasons between 1987 and 1994 offers a laundry list of episodes that use the future as a backdrop on which to explore current social and political issues from the cold-war, to racism and sexuality. More recently, actor, writer and director Seth Macfarlane's television series *The Orville* (2017-) has used both a future setting and his well-known satirical writing style to raise question about current events. Macfarlane's work also has a self-reflexive nature and a tendency to break the fourth wall.

A unique modern director whose name is rarely associated with Brecht is American filmmaker Wes Anderson. Although Anderson's films tend to live in the realm of the fantastical, Anderson's *Mis-En-Scène* is noteworthy with regards to possible ways to utilize Epic techniques on screen. Like Brecht, Anderson is meticulous about the construction of each scene and all of the elements therein. Anderson's projects take years to prepare, film and edit as he directs the construction of large-scale theatrical sets that give his films a staged quality. For his 2004 film *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, Anderson's team built a 150ft long 40 ft high cross-section of a boat. Anderson is not afraid to reveal the stagedness of his films, often panning through the walls of the set rather than utilizing quick edits and delineating scenes through the use of intertitles. Anderson also has a tendency to install musicians unexpectedly in shots, often performing music that works against the nature of the scene and its dialogue. Even film projects that Brecht was somewhat proud of like the 1932 leftist political film *Kule Wampe* seem to lose some of the *Mis-En-Scène* that had become synonymous with the Epic stage. Perhaps a study of Anderson and his inspirations, like the films of French explorer and filmmaker Jacques-Yves Cousteau may lead to an exploration of possible means by which to better transpose Epic *Mis-En-Scène* from the stage to the screen.

This project has attempted to reexamine the medium-specific categorization of artists like Bertolt Brecht in an attempt to open up new avenues of discussing artists influencing and being influenced by multi-medium performance styles. While the scope of the project is contained to Brecht's lifetime, this project is meant to be a jumping off point for a reconsideration of Brecht as a multi-medium artist and a means by which to continue the study of Brecht's influence on modern performance mediums. Much like Brecht's work, this project is an ongoing one, perpetually in the process of revision and additions, and of course, ever in service to provoking inquiry.

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