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**Title: An Anarchist Aesthetics of Education in Bertolt Brecht's Gestic Theatre**

*Abstract*

This paper explores Bertolt Brecht's view of the relationship between education and the theatre, with particular reference to his notion of the *Verfremdungseffekt* and *gestus*. Epic theatre aims to educate its audience into a form of critical, practical curiosity about the world. Positioning his theatre as being anti-Aristotelian, Brecht seeks to not only make social reality recognisable in the theatre. He wishes to render possible (through the V-effekt aesthetic) the observation of the social and aesthetic processes, which bring forth what we name our reality. I will show that Brecht's pedagogical intention pivots around his (rather Aristotelian) view that pleasure resides at the heart of the theatrical mimetic task. This is a pleasure that does not however emerge from Aristotelian identification, but instead from theatre's pedagogical task. Brechtian theatre wishes to make observable the coming-into-meaning of our ideas about, and representations of, the world. As a form of concept-making, theatre is hereby called to not erase individual experience in the name of representing higher ideals. Theatre is tasked instead to *not* obscure the uneasy congruence between the individual's experience of the world and its ideal presentation (in the metaphors of art, science). The artist is to acknowledge this theory-practice connection in the imitations of the world that s/he creates, as well as in her/his conduct towards the audience. Theatre is not to aim to 'govern' the audience through its images by instructing them into a worldview. It is to position people's innate capacity to reason and govern themselves at the heart of theatrical mimesis. The V-effekt acts hereby as an aesthetic pedagogy that is to forestall Aristotelian catharsis, and with that, the act of instruction into a fixed image of the world. The 'dialectic (non-Aristotelian) theatre' is to instead heighten the contradictions of a mimetic work that *creates* as much as it represents things, people and actions. As a consequence, the theatre leaves a productive, pedagogic gap that can only be 'closed' by the audience's own consideration as to the truth of what is presented to them on stage. In other words, the pedagogical act is not to be fully controlled by the artist. Brecht's somewhat anarchist educational tendency is hereby revealed in his concern with the artist's role in creating the conditions for social virtues and human propensities to flourish. Attending to the productive conditions specific to the theatre, the artist is to care for its ultimately 'superfluous' creation of metaphors about human actions. Drawing on Brecht's *Me-ti* texts (and editor Antony Tatlow's editorial comments), I will also show how Brecht's concern with the interdependent relationship between theory and practice echoes his own examination of the Marxist-Leninist doctrinal distinction between idealism and materialism. This includes its materialism's assumption that the individual's consciousness simply reflects matter (as 'real being'), but cannot shape (or question) it. As a last step in the paper, I will look at actress Helene Weigel's gestic acting in her role as *Mother Courage*. Her *gestus* of showing the complex process of Courage's (self-)formation, productively illustrates Brecht's pedagogical concern. The modern theatre is to not obscure, but make observable in mimesis, the 'critical dialectical' relationship between an individual's conscious experience, their actions in the world, and the material circumstances they live in.

## Brecht in Philosophy of Education Journals

Bertolt Brecht is certainly no total stranger to Philosophy of Education Journals in the Anglophone world. His work, however, is normally only touched upon relatively briefly, and placed as part of broader discussions around the nature and purpose of the arts (film, media literacy, socially engaged public arts) in/as education (Yun 2021; D'Olimpio 2014; Kellner 2021). More sustained engagement with Brecht's work is rare. An exception presents Alan Scott (2013), who explores the role of Brecht's estranged, realist theatre as a form of political education. (Applied) theatre-focused publications in turn engage with Brechtian theory and practice usually in relation to specific educational institutions and educational theory. Just to mention a few: Franks and Jones (1999) re-read Brecht's theatre theory for its contribution to the pedagogic underpinnings of drama and media education. Russo (2003) applies Brecht to educational theory (esp. Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development'), drawing a comparison between progressive education's student-centred and Brecht's audience-centred pedagogy. Otty (1995) connects Brecht's *Lehrstücktheorie* to Freire's *conscientization* and Boal's theatre; and my own publications have looked at Brechtian theatre pedagogy as a 'philosophical ethnography', that prioritises a productive over a representational orientation in education research (Frimberger 2016; 2017). Rather than 'applying' Brecht to a particular educational context, institution, or putting his work in service of progressive theory, this paper is driven by a curiosity to explore Brecht as a philosopher of education on his own terms. But I first need to manage the readership's expectations. 'Brecht was not a systematic thinker tied to one specific mode of [textual] reflection, but rather he developed and tested his ideas across various literary and non-literary genres. As a result, many of his key insights are reiterated in multiple forms, for example: as dramatic dialogue, song text, journal entry, aphorism, prose fragment, and theoretical essay (...)' (Wessendorf, 2016, p. 122). In other words, we will encounter Brecht the philosopher of education and his *theatricum philosophicum* (ibid), not in the systemacity of his ideas (alone), but only when reading his reciprocative theatricalisations of ideas in the same productive, interpretive stance, which he demanded of his audiences. Let us start the journey then with Brecht's arguably most well-known piece of theory in the Anglophone world.

## Theatre as Knowledge

Brecht's *Short Organum for the Theatre* (written in 1947/8) was produced at the tail end of his exile years, just before he settled in (post-WWII) East Berlin. The unusual title *Organum* (meaning 'a body of principles'), written in 78 aphorisms - short pithy statements in prose - refers, in form and title, to renaissance scientist Francis Bacon's 1620 book *Novum Organum* (2019). Brecht was likely attracted to making the link with Bacon and his empiricist natural philosophy, as a way of giving aesthetic expression to his own (implied) anti-Aristotelian 'scientific' position in the theatre (Brecht 1978, p. 205). Bacon's *interpretation naturae* is considered the ground work for what we now think of as the scientific method. With its emphasis on empirical and rational observation, and methodical, inductive reasoning, it was composed as an ideological refutation of Aristotelian deductive logic as *anticipation naturae* in his *Organon* (2017). Brecht indeed shared Bacon's concern regarding the authoritative finality of concept-making that can potentially result from a *purely* anticipatory approach, even when supposedly grounded in the scientific observation of the material world. This is reflected in Brecht's own critical examination (from the 30's) of the Marxist-Leninist doctrinal distinction between idealism and materialism; and its (practical, political-tactical) assumption (turned into dictatorship under Stalin), that consciousness is solely determined by matter as 'real being' (Brecht, 2016, p.18). In Nietzschean (1873) fashion, Brecht reminds his

fellow countrymen in particular of the danger of obscuring that theory and practice are interdependent. Knowledge, Nietzsche and Brecht would agree, might be best considered (playful) metaphor rather than eternal truth. And knowledge is to firstly serve *life*, rather than a narrow conception of (e.g. rational) truth. It is to aid our understanding as to how our human cultural productions - including our political systems and our concept-making - nourish (or stifle) our human capacity to live a flourishing life. Accordingly, Brecht warns his fellow artists to not forget (and deny in their artistic expressions) the pleasure of playful exploration that resides at the heart of our acts of knowledge production.

‘And here one again let us recall that their [the artists’] task is to entertain the children of the scientific age, and to do so with sensuousness and humour. This is something we Germans cannot tell ourselves too often, for with us everything slips into the unsubstantial and unapproachable, and we begin to talk of *Weltanschauung* [worldview/ideology] when the world in question has already dissolved. Even materialism is little more than an idea with us. Sexual pleasure with us turns into marital obligations, the pleasures of art subserve general culture, and by learning we mean not an enjoyable process of finding out, but the forcible shoving of our nose into something (...)’ (Brecht 1978, p. 204)

Education in the theatre is to be a joyful process of finding out about the world. It is not meant to be an act of moralising from the stage. It is no self-satisfied act of shoving one’s nose into how people live up to, fail, or can be best instructed into a set of universal norms. This applies even if these norms are evoked in the name of greater ideas (‘culture’, ‘materialism’, ‘marital obligations’). Theatre, Brecht claims, would in fact ‘be debased’ if it tried to become a ‘purveyor of morality’ and failed to make its ‘moral lessons’ enjoyable - not only to people’s reason, but also to their senses (ibid, p. 180). In an earlier essay (written in the 1930’s), Brecht already highlights the inadequacy of art when it only *anticipates* the nature and workings of ‘the great and complicated things that go on the world’ (ibid, p. 73). Theatre is instead to draw on the insights and methods of the new sciences of his time (e.g. modern psychology).

‘People are used to seeing poets as unique and slightly unnatural beings who reveal with a truly godlike assurance things that other people can only recognise after much sweat and toil. It is naturally distasteful to have to admit that one does not belong to this select band. All the same it must be admitted’ (...) (ibid, p.73).

This is of course not to imply that, in Brecht’s view, art *is* science or that art should operate by the same means. Even if the artist makes use of the (new) sciences, in order to gain an understanding of an increasingly complicated modern world. The poet’s task is that of *translating* any such knowledge about the world into poetry. ‘Whatever knowledge is embodied in a piece of writing has to be wholly transmuted into poetry. Its utilization fulfils the very pleasure that the poetic element provokes (...)’ (ibid, p. 74). In other words, the pleasure evoked by poetry is to be derived from aesthetic elements that are indeed shaped by the poet’s efforts to ‘penetrate deeper into things’. Most importantly however, this search for ‘truth’ is always to be undertaken with a view to the artist’s primary task: to entertain his audiences ‘with sensuousness and humour’ (ibid). Given Brecht’s eudemonistic emphasis, he echoes a rather Aristotelian premise. Theatrical mimesis allows artists and audiences to exercise their capacity for recognition and understanding; an activity, which is naturally pleasurable to humans (Poetics, 48b12-17).

## Brecht's anti-Aristotelianism

As part of his (self-styled) anti-Aristotelianism however, Brecht critiques a way of making modern art that represents an unchangeable world. He critiques a presentation of world that is either determined by invisible metaphysical forces or by individual motive forces alone - especially when these are represented as the result of (an already) fully formed moral character in-action (Brecht, 1987, p. 70). Brecht rejects certain poet's overreliance on individual feeling and individual artistic intuition, when it is devoid of the commitment to investigate the complicated workings of those cultural productions that mark the (modern) world. These modern phenomena include the individual politician's 'lust to power', embedded in the very workings of politics; as much as the coming into being of a (Nazi) propaganda newspaper (like the *Völkische Beobachter*); the workings of global capitalist business (his example is Standard Oil); as well as the complicated moral discourse around war-profiteering (ibid, p. 73). But Brecht's antagonism towards Aristotle must also be considered as part of Brecht's dialectical theatricalisation of ideas. Aristotle was by no means simply an 'ideological opponent' for him. Brecht in fact accords with Aristotle's emphasis on theatre's mimetic function. 'Tragedy [drama] is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life' (Poetics, 50a16f). Flourishing, for *both* Brecht and Aristotle, can only be achieved in action. And the imitation of such actions, as to how one flourishes (or perishes) in life and death, are the stuff of (both their) theatrical mimesis. As already hinted at, Brecht also affirms Aristotle's eudemonistic premise. 'Thus what the ancients, following Aristotle, demanded of tragedy is nothing higher or lower than that it should entertain people (...)' (ibid, 1978, p.181). Brecht however refuses Aristotle's position on the *nature* of this theatrical pleasure. And he differs with him also with regards to the kind of aesthetics that is to constitute a 'plausible' theatrical imitation of life's actions. According to Aristotle, the well-constructed tragedy is to bring forth a pleasurable experience in the audience. It is to evoke empathy with the fate of the hero and the arousal of the *tragic emotions* of fear and pity, and their subsequent physical relief as catharsis (Poetics, 53b10f; 49b27f).

'This [Brecht's] dramaturgy does not make use of the 'identification' of the spectator with the play, as does the aristotelian, and has a different point of view also towards other psychological effects a play may have on an audience, as, for example, towards the 'catharsis'. Catharsis is not the main object of this [Brecht's] dramaturgy. It does not make the hero the victim of an inevitable fate, nor does it wish to make the spectator the victim, so to speak, of a hypnotic experience in the theatre' (Brecht, 1978, p. 78).

The pleasure of recognition, according to Brecht, does not reside in a theatrical mimesis that stimulates tragic emotions and their cathartic release, because it shows the world as it is. The pleasure of the poetic element, for Brecht, emerges from theatre's pedagogical function. Theatre is tasked with not only making reality *recognisable* in the theatre ('as does the aristotelian'), but with opening out for consideration to an audience the very aesthetic-social processes that constitute this imitated 'reality' in the first place. Through a theatrical mimesis that is to appeal to people's reason and their senses pleasurably, Brecht aims to educate his audience into a disposition of a certain practical (critical) curiosity. The (aesthetic) gesture of showing/pointing to theatre's double mimetic activity is hereby at the heart of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. The (Aristotelian) theatre of illusion emphasises the spontaneous unfolding of actions in front of the audience, as if these happen for the first time. Brechtian *Verfremdungs-* theatre deliberately points to the fact that its theatrical activities are imitations of actions that have already taken place. It doesn't hide the rehearsed nature of its

performances or the fact that texts have been learned by heart. In fact, it aesthetically heightens theatre's artifice. It brings forth the contradictory nature of its imitative work by revealing – and putting in juxtaposition (in acting, stage design, lighting, music) - its various processes of production. The *Verfremdungseffekt* does hereby not just serve an aesthetic but a social-dialectical function. It is to make striking and strange (to audience and actors alike) what is normally taken for granted about people and their actions in the world. In other words, it is to instigate a practical philosophical inquiry into *human being* (as a noun and verb). Theatre is to turn spectators (as well as actors, as we will see later) into observers and commentators on the very reality that is brought forth on stage. Asserting the pleasure that resides at the heart of theatre's acts of knowledge production, the audience is invited to deliberate. How do social phenomena (like war, politics, business) and the concepts and discourses that give life to them map onto people's everyday life actions, and their capacity to live a flourishing life therein? This philosophising audience is hereby conceived as 'a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and of reasoning, of making judgements even in the theatre; it [epic theatre] treats it as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded' (p. 79).

### **(In)complete images of the world**

Through the V-effekt, Brecht also seeks to draw attention to the (often) uneasy congruence between our everyday, material experiences and their ideal representation. The dialectical theatre is to evoke reflection. How is it that explanations of the world can end up governing the very world and people that they seek to represent – rather than serve people's flourishing in life? As Brecht's Daoist-inspired teacher *Me-ti* (2016) formulates it:

'Judgements reached on the basis of experiences are not usually connected as are the events that led to the experiences. The combination of judgements does not amount to an exact image of the events that gave rise to them. If too many judgements are connected with each other, it's often very difficult to reconstruct the events. It takes the whole world to come up with an image but the image does not include the whole world. It is better to connect judgements with experiences than with other judgements, if the point of the judgements is to control things. Me-ti was against constructing too complete images of the world' (p. 50).

As editor Tatlow suggests, the *Me-ti* texts also echo Brecht's own engagement with what happened to Marxism. *Me-ti* can be read (in parts) as a (poetic) reflection on 'dialectical determinism' (e.g. under Stalin; later the GDR) and its disregard of people's 'experience' of socialism; including the control and censorship of individual 'dissident' productions (ideas, art) in the name of freedom from bourgeois rule (ibid, p. 21). Brechtian theatre's key artistic-pedagogical premise then pivots around the (anti-Aristotelian) artistic distancing (*Verfremdung*) of the audience's full identification with the *images* of the world, presented *in* the world – and of course on stage. Aiming to forestall catharsis, Brechtian mimetic practice is to bring forth a stance of active *observation and inquiry*: into the productive relationships that constitute the coming-into-meaning of our images of the world. In order to serve such pedagogical aim, theatrical representation, as a form of concept-making that positions art as a form of knowledge, has to be also wary of its own *anticipation naturae*. In other words, the 'scientific theatre' must not sever and obscure the connection between theory and practice in its own imitations, so as not to 'debase' the theatre into a 'purveyor of morality' (Brecht, 1978, p. 180). Brecht seems indeed aware of the tricky balancing act required of the (modern) theatre. On the one hand, he does not wish to obscure that his theatre indeed pursues a

pedagogical intention to influence the way that people attend to/intervene in the social world. And having a pedagogical intention of course implies that the theatre has a view-point. It has 'moral lessons' to convey, even if these are partial and not a closed *Weltanschauung*. On the other hand, Brecht is conscious of the danger. A pedagogical intention, when too willingly burdened by a theatre claiming a 'higher status', can too easily obscure that it is in the business of metaphor-creation. And as such, it can slide into normative impositions as to how people *should think and act*. Brecht was indeed accused of betraying his own 'scientific' principles, even by his admirers, such as the philosopher Paul Feyerabend (1991). Feyerabend lauded Brecht's anti-ideological, dialectical approach to presenting knowledge in poetry (e.g. in his 1939 poem *To those who follow in our wake*). Feyerabend praised his poetry for the way it 'enlarges faults and lets different incommensurable jargons run side by side' (Feyerabend, 1991, p. 95) without harmonising different aspects into a more systematic account. But he also accused Brecht (many of his plays in particular) of humourless, Marxist intellectualism and, indeed, of moralising from the stage (ibid: p. 81; 143). Brecht then perhaps reminds himself, e.g. in *Organum*. Epic theatre is not only tasked with making enjoyable the very act of inquiry into the workings of the social world. It is also called to acknowledge, through the kind of imitations it presents, that its audience is capable of reasoning and governing themselves. 'There is such a thing as leaving mankind alone; there is no such thing as governing mankind', as Oscar Wilde (2018, p. 15) formulates his view on the role of socialism for the attainment of individualism. Wilde points us to Daoist philosopher Chuang-Tzu. In the fictional persona of the Chinese elder in his *Me-ti*, Brecht equally evokes the Daoists' dislike for (Confucian) moral teachings, critiquing the espousal of virtues as a way of organising and controlling populations.

'There a few occupations, which so damage a person's morals than the occupation with morality. I hear it said: You must love the truth, you must keep your promises, you must fight for the good. But the trees don't say: You must be green, you must let the fruit fall vertically to the ground, you must rustle the leaves when the wind passes through them' (Brecht, 2016 p. 70).

Too much normative imposition - 'too much administration, whether moral or political is counterproductive' to human flourishing, Tatlow (ibid) comments in his editorial notes. *Me-ti's* reflections on the nature of morality echo Brecht's own struggle with his theatre's striving for a 'higher status' and the (perhaps) ever looming desire of becoming a 'purveyor of morality' to the masses. The temptation of the abstractions of Western thought (e.g. mirrored in Brecht's own Marxism) is here counteracted with Daoist-inspired allegorical description. Nature's drive to life needs no further justification in abstraction; other than a pointing to what nature *does*. The human capacity for life, *Me-ti* implies, is not spawned through normative imposition. It is fostered instead by creating the productive conditions for growth, so people can act freely on their innate capacities. This is however not a simple act of 'leaving mankind alone'. Brecht clearly pursued a pedagogical intention to influence 'mankind's' relation to social reality. He presumed that a better society has to be actively created, even if our human capacity for living a flourishing life is innate. As is evident, Brecht wished to radically challenge the institutions (artistic, political, economic) of his time, driven of course by his first-hand experience of fascism. Theatre was considered to play a part in creating the conditions for a socialist future. But as to what kind of social-*ism* was exactly to be endorsed on a political level was a recurring question over his life-time.

As Brecht's exchanges with 'dissident' Marxist philosopher and life-long teacher Karl Korsch (2012), and his *Me-ti* texts (which were likely inspired by their discussions), reveal, Brecht struggled with Marxist-Leninist's false idealist/materialist distinction. Dialectical determinism turned materialism into a 'doctrine equated with Being, which consciousness simply reflects, but does not shape or question' (Tatlow/Brecht, 2016, p. 25). And Brecht experienced of course the disastrous results of its politics. Many of his collaborators (e.g. the actress Carola Neher and director Asja Lācis), communists who had moved to the Soviet Union after the revolution were, under Stalin, branded Trozkyist spies and part of a literary opposition. Seen to undermine the higher purpose of (Soviet realist) art for the direct illustration of Marx's class laws (Paškevica, 2006, p.118f), they were imprisoned and forced into labour camps (Gulags). As Reinhold Grimm (1979) aptly summarises Brecht's (necessarily 'tragic') political position:

'The Marxist Brecht was faced with a terrible decision. In service of the final humanising of human beings, in which he believed, he either had to demand their total de-humanisation and objectification ... or to question – even to negate - this ideology, his life's and work's prime value.' (p. 100)

It might be argued then that Brecht reveals, in his pedagogical and aesthetic ideas, what we shall call a certain social- anarchist tendency (likely inspired by Korsch, 2012). In other words, he can be said to share anarchism's pedagogical 'faith in the idea that human beings already possess most of the attributes and virtues necessary to create and sustain such a different society, so do not need to either undergo any radical transformation or to do away with an 'inauthentic consciousness' (Suissa, 2010, p. 149). In fact, in *Me-ti*, Brecht comments on Marx's observation that consciousness is shaped by being or 'life', e.g. the way we make a living. For him, this interdependency does not prove people's in-capacity for reason or joy in life. Brecht simply points to the undeniable dependency between our ideas about the world and how we engage with it materially. He admits that Marx's observation sounds rather depressing, but suggests pragmatically that 'the simple realisation that all great works were nevertheless created in this dependency and that conceding this dependency doesn't make them any less great, settles the matter' (Brecht, 2016, 76). Brecht also argues that Marx's principle of the dependency of thought won't seem so depressing, when dependency on the economy won't be felt as so oppressive anymore by people. Brecht's unorthodox Marxist, perhaps anarchist, proclivity then takes shape in his pedagogical positions. He believes in the capacity to reason of his theatre-going audience. He emphasises theatre's eudemonistic role. Brecht refuses to (fully) instrumentalise theatre for an abstract, 'higher' cause, disconnected from people's individual experience. And he believes that too much (moral, political, social) governance stifles people's capacity to be good, and live a flourishing life. A certain anti-teleological notion is equally articulated in his belief that the artist cannot control the pedagogical/political outcome of his artistic work. In other words, the *exact* pedagogical outcome between what is presented to an audience in the materiality of theatre, and the way that the audience interprets and acts (or not) on the insights thus gained, must remain unpredictable.

'Not even instruction can be demanded of it [the theatre]: at any rate, no more utilitarian lesson than how to move pleasurably, whether in the physical [aesthetic] or the spiritual [moral] sphere. The theatre must remain something entirely superfluous, though this indeed means that it is the superfluous for which we live. Nothing needs less justification than pleasure'. (Brecht, 1978, 180-181)

The conditions for change can be created, and the effects of this (indirect) education can be of course ‘hoped for’. But it is firstly in the careful attending to the productive conditions particular to the theatre – e.g. when (co)-creating the aesthetic imitations of theatre’s ultimately ‘superfluous’ and necessarily playful metaphors - that the artist can hope to influence his audiences. In other words, Brecht draws attention to what it means for an artist to partake in the (indirect) creation of conditions (e.g. in the theatre) for the purpose of ‘social virtues and human propensities to flourish’ (Suissa, *ibid*) – in a way that does not deny the relation between theory and practice. Tatlow (Brecht, 2016) reminds us (p. 53) hereby of the very purpose of the *Verfremdungseffekt*. It is to not only invite inquiry into the productive relationship between theory and practice in ‘other’ acts of cultural production. The V-effekt is to render possible the questioning of Brechtian theatre’s own artistic and pedagogical ways and means of presenting the world on stage. The audience is to be invited to read and judge: do theatre’s metaphors still ‘move pleasurably’ and ‘superflously’? - or have they hardened into a *Weltanschauung*? Are the images disconnected from the particularity of their emergence in (everyday life) practice, and the question of people’s flourishing therein? Do they seek to organise and govern the world in their own image? Do they create the conditions for social virtues to flourish? If Brecht himself honoured, or failed, his own principles has of course been discussed (see e.g. Arendt, 1948; Feyerabend 1975; Bloch et al. 1977). What can perhaps be stated for the purpose of this paper, is Brecht’s intention. Tatlow gets to its heart in his editorial footnote to *Me-ti*: ‘Brecht disliked any (artistic) practice without space to question its aesthetic intentions. In such a world you either manipulate or are manipulated. To provoke such questions was, of course the purpose of the so-called estrangement effect (Brecht/Tatlow, 2016, p. 53).

### **Gestus in *Mother Courage***

Having established the pedagogical role of Brecht’s ‘anti-Aristotelian’ aesthetics, I now wish to illustrate its coming-into-meaning in the acting practice of one of his closest collaborators: the actress (and his wife) Helene Weigel. In accordance with Brecht’s key idea, that the ‘producer of ideas’ should not obscure the reciprocative translations between theory and practice, I will focus on a practice example from Weigel’s portrayal of *Mother Courage* (in the eponymous play). Brecht wrote the play in Swedish exile in 1939, in just over a month, as a furious reaction to Hitler’s occupation of Warsaw, Poland. Due to the looming Scandinavian occupation, the play was premiered, in Brecht’s absence, in neutral Switzerland (Zürich) in 1941 (Brecht, 2015, p.181). Unable to assert his directorial influence, Brecht was disappointed that his play seemed to have evoked an unwanted Aristotelian catharsis in the audience. They had read *Mother Courage* (as Brecht wrote in his journal) as a ‘hymn to the inexhaustible vitality of the mother creature’ (*ibid*); a mother who victoriously thrives in the face of an inescapable fate (‘war’). When returning to Europe in 1947/48, he immediately revised the script to make Courage a less sympathetic character. She was not to be so easily assimilated as an unchanging mother archetype. Her social behaviour and attitude were to provoke more uneasy questions as to the processes of her (self)formation. The result of the script changes led to the 1949 production in East Berlin at the Deutsches Theater, whose success firmly placed epic theatre on the (East) German arts scene’s map. Like all of Brecht’s plays, *Mother Courage* is *historicized*, in order to shine a new light on contemporary issues. It tells a story from the past. *Mother Courage* is set in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe during the Thirty Year War; one of the most destructive wars in European history, fought over struggles for political hegemony and religious allegiances. The play explores the complicated (dialectical) process of moral (self)formation set in motion by our concrete ways of engaging with each other and the physical world around us. It deals with the complexity of formative processes in

situations when finding ourselves in de-humanizing social structures that are not of our own making. In other words, it explores what (moral) formation means in those conditions that are *not* conducive to the flourishing of social virtues and human propensities. The play follows the fortunes of Anna Fierling known as Mother Courage. A feisty canteen woman with a keen sense for business, she is determined to feed herself and her children, and make a good living, by selling provisions to soldiers on the battlefields of Europe. We first encounter Courage pulling her cart loudly and proudly and ready for business. Over the course of the play and her various business dealings, we see her lose all her three children - Schweizerkass, Eilif and Katrin - to the very war that she hoped to make a profit from. And surprisingly, at the end of play, even after her money has run out, her children have all been killed, and peace has arrived, she still pulls her cart towards what she hopes will be the next (profitable) battlefield. 'A play is therefore more constructive than reality, because in a play the situation of war is set up as an experimental situation, for the purpose of giving insight; that is the spectator assumes the attitude of a student – provided the type of performance is right' (Brecht, 2015, p. 221). When watching a play as an experimental educational situation, the audience is to have enough distance from the events and characters on stage. They are to compare, and criticise, the various influences that form human behaviour, as well as to consider the implied alternatives. The art of incorporating the V-effect into the art of acting was hereby a key way of making this observation of the character's (self-)formation possible.

'When s/he [the actor/actress] appears on stage, besides what s/he is actually doing, s/he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what s/he is not doing; that is to say, s/he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that this acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants (...) whatever s/he doesn't do must be contained and conserved in what he does. In this way, every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision; the character remains under observation and is tested. The technical term for this procedure is 'fixing the "not ... but".' (Brecht, 1978, p. 137).

*Gestus* describes the various ways that the actor makes manifest these 'not...but' moments in the art of acting. She is to show the complicated and contradictory social influences and personal decisions that have lead to the character's (self)formation. *Gestus* is brought to presentation through gestures, postures, tone of voice, facial expression, ways of handling props, and standing in relation to other characters on stage. As such, it is an expression of a 'social attitude' rather than of the character's fixed psychological make-up. 'Human behaviour is shown as alterable; man himself dependent on certain political and economic factors and at the same time as capable of altering them' (ibid, p. 86). Not all of the actor's gestures embody *gestus* of course. It is only those gestures which act as *social gests*; 'the social gest is the gest relevant to society; the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances' (ibid, p. 105). Brecht explains:

'(...) one's efforts to keep one's balance on a slippery surface results in a social gest as soon as falling down would mean 'losing face'; in other words losing one's market value. The gest of working is definitely a social gest, because all human activity directed towards the mastery of nature is a social undertaking, an undertaking between men. On the other hand, a gest of pain, as long as it is kept so abstract and generalised that it does not rise above a purely animal category, is not yet a social one...The "look of a hunted animal" can become a social gest if it is shown that particular manoeuvres by men degrade the individual man to the level of a beast (...)' (ibid, p. 104-105).

Helene Weigel's gestic acting is documented in Ruth Berlau's extensive 1949 production photographs for the *Courage Modellbuch* (Brecht, 2015). They illustrate how *gestic acting* productively translated, and with that also co-created, Brecht's pedagogical intention. Gestus renders observable the non-teleological - what Tatlow (Brecht, 2016, p. 29) calls 'critical dialectical' - relationship between an individual's conscious experience and the material social world they find themselves in. There are many of Weigel's fine acting moments documented in the modelbook. Given the limitations of the paper, I will focus on the 'mute scream' sequence in scene three. It is here where we learn that Courage's honest son Swiss Cheese has been arrested and is about to be executed by the enemy army (the Catholics). He did not hand to them the regiments' cash box of the besieged army (the Protestants), which he was entrusted with as their paymaster. The honest Swiss Cheese, when realizing that the enemy was trailing him, threw the cashbox in the river. Captured by the army, he is now suspected of keeping it hidden somewhere. He is threatened with execution. The camp prostitute Yvette, a sympathetic friend of Mother Courage, wants to help her to get her son back. She uses her intelligence and wit to convince the officer (called 'One Eye') responsible to court martial Swiss Cheese to let him free - for the price of 200 florins. Yvette also arranges for an admirer to buy her Courage's cart as a gift, so the ransom can be paid. Courage agrees to the asking price of 200 florins and sells Yvette her beloved cart. Courage is aware of the urgency of the situation. But she also realises that she and her daughter Kattrin will run the risk of becoming destitute, when losing their way of making a living. Secretly, she had hoped that her son had hidden the cash box somewhere. She had hoped that she would be able to use that money to buy back her cart later. But when she learns that honest Swiss Cheese was in fact (again) *too* honest, and threw the cashbox in the river, she makes the decision to haggle over the demanded ransom. Finally, she offers 120 florins instead of 200 for his release. At the key turning point in scene three, Yvette has raced three times to haggle with the officer holding Swiss Cheese captive. Yvette is furious at Courage's stubborn refusal to pay the full asking price, regarding it as a straightforward betrayal of her son.

*'YVETTE comes running in.*

Yvette: They won't do it. I warned you. One Eye was going to drop it then and there. There's no point, he said. He said the drums would roll any second now and that's the sign a verdict has been reached. I offered a hundred and fifty, he didn't even shrug. I could hardly get him to stay there while I came here.

MOTHER COURAGE: Tell him I'll pay two hundred. Run!

*YVETTE runs. MOTHER COURAGE sits, silent.*

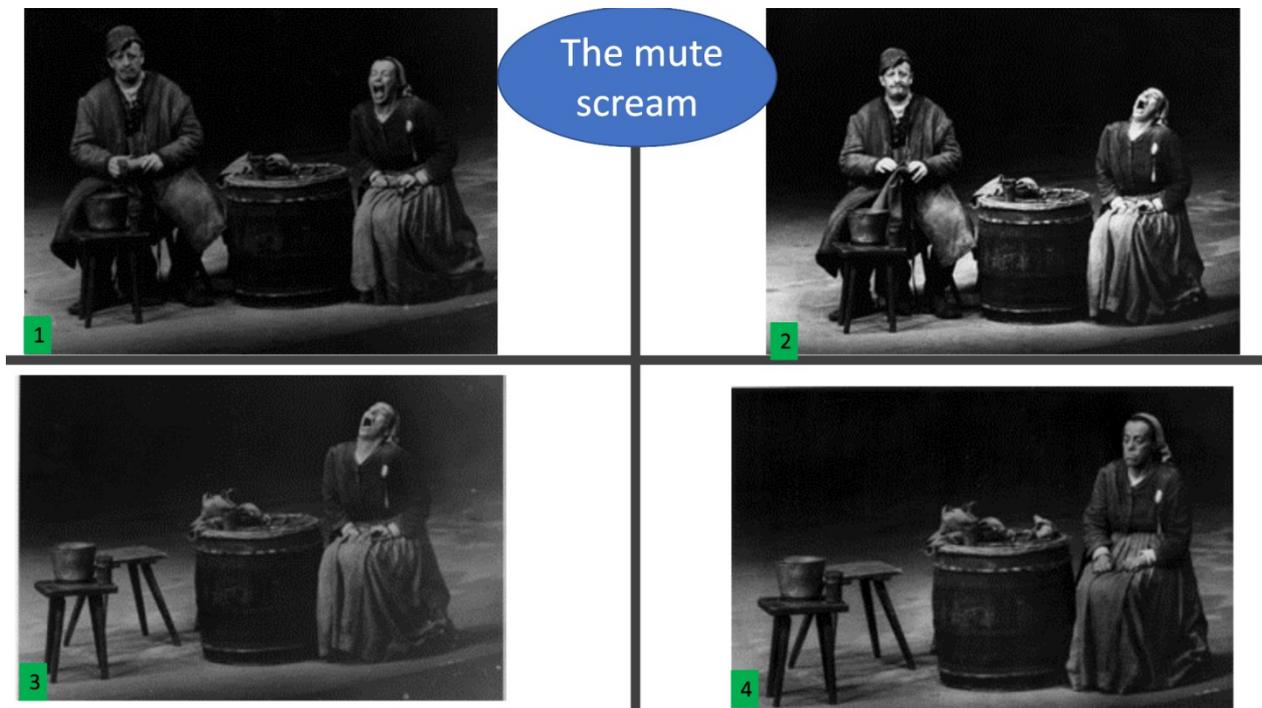
*The CHAPLAIN has stopped doing the glasses*

I believe—I've haggled too long.

In the distance, a roll of drums. The chaplain stands up and walks toward the rear, mother courage remains seated. It grows dark. It gets light again,

MOTHER COURAGE has not moved. YWETTE appears, pale' (Brecht, 1966, p. 63-64).

Yvette runs off once more to see if she can save Courage's son by offering the full price. Meanwhile, we see Courage and the Chaplain sit in silence, motionless. In the distance we hear drumming - the sign that Courage' son is now being executed. And here, the mute scream sequence starts.



(Brecht, 2015, p. 211f.)

Two minutes of silent screaming by the actress. Her mouth is wide open, head raised, but no sound is heard. In the only bit of dialogue in this sequence, Courage admits her mistake: 'I reckon I bargained too long' (p. 64). The chaplain gets up silently and goes to the rear. Mother Courage remains seated. Her face is a screaming mask. She must have sat there for a long time, as the stage grows dark. The drumming stops. Then the stage grows light once more. Her son is dead. He has been executed. Yvette was too late. Mother Courage is still sitting in the exact position, when Yvette arrives. She tells her, full of righteous anger, that Courage got what she asked for. Courage already knows. Her hands are balled fists placed firmly on her lap. Courage is used to getting her way. In scene one, we witnessed her confident entrance. Her head was held high, loud singing voice, proud purveyor of provisions for soldiers. She knows how to get a good deal in a bad situation. She is used to traversing the theatres of war with cunning and humour - coming out the other side with a purse full of money. But here, we see, again, that all her learned behaviour; all the routines and talk and smart moves have their limits. They could not save her son. She did not calculate that she could not bargain with war. As the audience we are rightly exasperated with her. Does she not get it? Why does she still think she can win this one? Why does she still measure the value of her children's lives against the value of money? But things are complicated. Courage implored Yvette:

'I need a minute to think it over, it's all so sudden. What can I do? I can't pay two hundred. You should have haggled with them. I must hold on to something, or any passer-by can kick me in the ditch. Go and say I pay a hundred and twenty or the deal's off. Even then I lose the wagon.' (ibid, p. 62).

Courage is scared of destitution and she is certain as to what will prevent it. She just has to keep back some coins to ensure a new start, even if the cart is lost. The common sense decision leads to her son's execution. In the mute scream sequence, the actress Helene Weigel shows us Courage's behaviour, in all its contradictions. She heightens the ambiguity of her attitude, rather than solving it. In her acting, she in fact points the audience to Courage's split persona – as business woman and mother. Courage urgently wants to liberate Swiss Cheese; she haggles for the price of his freedom. But she haggles because she knows that, otherwise, she and her daughter could end up homeless. And, as a result of her hesitation to pay the full price, her son gets killed. And she suffers; unspeakably perhaps (the mute scream). She is aware, for a brief moment at least, that she has bargained too long. She knows that her decision had deadly consequences. But her scream is silent. It does not manifest audibly. The audience cannot fully empathise with the mother's pain and experience catharsis. Courage's scream acts as a social gest. It allows the other possibilities, and outcome, of her action (i.e. paying the full price) to be inferred. In the last image, Courage's pain mixes with anger at the loss of her son, perhaps at her own behaviour, perhaps – finally - at the circumstances that she was unwillingly forced into, and left her seemingly no decision? (We cannot be sure – what would we have done?). Is she going to learn from this and curse the battlefields? But then, her silent scream recedes and her usual stubbornness is returning. In the next moment, she takes her daughter's hand to comfort her. At the same time, she also denies her son's identity when asked to identify his dead body, so as not to be associated with a traitor. Courage acts as pragmatic as ever. The contradiction between trader and mother has not been resolved in Weigel's acting. The theatre of war will go on for Courage. In the mute scream sequence, Helene Weigel's gestic portrayal turns the audience into observers of the complex process of human (self)formation, in all its variables. She invites the audience to reflect on how our social-material being impacts on our behaviour, our decision-making and even our enacted values. But she also provokes us to consider what it might mean to act on our capacity to reason, and to trust and learn from our individual experience. How does one live without re-enacting the very circumstances that stifle and extinguish our human capacity for life?

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