Brechtian Cinemas: Montage and Theatricality in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Peter Watkins and Lars von Trier

by

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Abstract

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In this dissertation I investigate the stylistic shift in the cinema of selected filmmakers whose work is rooted in Bertolt Brecht’s dramatic theory: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Peter Watkins, and Lars von Trier. Through the work of these filmmakers, I trace the ongoing change in the cinematic applications of the theory. By and large, the change consists of a lessening of the role of montage – a technique that occupies a paramount place in Brecht’s theatrical and filmic practice – in favour of the objects within the camera’s field of view and the sounds within the microphone’s range. Since the ultimate effect for which the Brechtian filmmaker aims is that of Verfremdung, theatrical stylisation – itself estranging within the context of cinema – appears as a natural corollary of the described shift in emphasis.

I also suggest a causal connection between the aforementioned shift and the growing self-consciousness of the style employed by mainstream cinemas (of which Hollywood is the foremost representative), which often manifests itself in the use of unorthodox editing patterns. Accordingly, I propose that we can attribute the contemporary Brechtian filmmaker’s growing reliance on mise-en-scène elements\(^1\) as a source of Verfremdung largely to the major film industries’ adoption of montage and other specifically cinematic codes\(^2\) that make a film’s style overt. Not surprisingly,

\(^1\) Performance style, set design, lighting, costume, properties, and make-up.
perhaps, the Brechtian filmmaker – whose political stance is inherently antagonistic to
that exemplified by most mainstream cinema, reacts to the normalisation of foregrounded
film style by employing the opposite strategy.

2 The term is borrowed from Christian Metz. For classification and discussion of specifically cinematic and
non-specific (cinematic) codes, see Metz’s *Langage et cinéma* (1971).
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Introduction

Revisiting Brecht and Cinema

Although Brecht’s interest in cinema was only intermittent, resulting in comparatively few films and critical writings on the medium, he seems to be referenced with nearly equal frequency in the literatures on theatre and film. The vast range of filmmakers with whom Brecht has been associated includes figures as diverse as the Brothers Taviani (Turovskaia 224-233), whose eclectic style evokes Italian Neorealism, and – somewhat outrageously – the American sexploitation filmmaker Russ Meyer. (Greene 217) The mutual disparity between some of the connotations that Brecht’s name has acquired in film studies led the critic Jonathan Rosenbaum to remark that “One of the most abused critical terms we have is ‘Brechtian.’” (Rosenbaum) Brecht was a modernist who refused the idea of medium specificity, which underlay the artistic practices of some of the major representatives of the cultural trend. It was only logical, then, that Brecht tried his hand at a wide array of literary genres and representational media (including, respectively, the novel and radio).

The “abuse” that Rosenbaum refers to can be accounted for at least partly by Brecht’s output itself, with its extraordinarily extensive nature. For this among other reasons, there are at least three broad meanings the term “Brechtian” can possess in the context of theatre and film studies. The most obvious of these is historical: a play by Brecht is Brechtian as King Lear is a Shakespearean play. This sense of the term is the least ambiguous, but also the least common of the three. One is more likely to run across the term “Brechtian” in a commentary of a play by Peter Weiss or Naomi Wallace, or –
potentially more confusingly – of any theatre production that opposes the narrative and / or stylistic norms of Aristotelian realism (which illustrates the second usage of the term), than in a discussion of The Good Person of Szechwan. 3 Leaving aside the dubious implications of the fact that, in contradistinction to the previous examples, the term “Shakespearean” is seldom, if ever, used as a descriptor of plays not written by the Bard, I want to briefly pursue the conundrum posed by the practice of designating with the same term the works that display narrative, stylistic and – ultimately – political differences as tremendous as are those between, for instance, Wallace’s In the Heart of America (2001) and Russ Meyer’s Beyond the Valley of the Ultravixens (1979).

Wallace’s play bitterly criticises the American Gulf War, dialectically paralleling it with the war in Vietnam, whereas Meyer’s film is a minimally-plotted spectacle of campy humour and large bosoms. What allows (albeit problematically) for the above-cited reference to Brecht in relation to Meyer’s film are its formal operations; more specifically, its non-linear editing patterns and self-reflexivity (the latter being exemplified by the appearance in one scene of Meyer – who photographed the film – carrying a film camera around the set).

This leads me to the third common meaning of the term. In an attempt to adjust for cinema the strategy of Brecht’s theatre whereby foregrounding the constructedness of a theatrical presentation aids the spectator in creating a critical distance from it, many

3 Martin Brady (2006) remedies the terminological confusion in the context of film studies. The commentator identifies three kinds of Brechtian cinema existing at present, each suggestive of one broad meaning of the adjective: first, the work of Straub and Huillet and Godard; second, the “ubiquitous Brechtian style” consisting of “aestheticised alienation effects”, which the writer associates with MTV; third, “a hybrid form which attempts to employ Brechtian techniques to critical effect within the framework of more or less conventional narrative cinema.” (314)
filmmakers chose editing as the privileged arena of stylisation. They emphasised in various manners the “spaces” between shots, as smallest units of the filmic chain, instead of aiming for the impression of unity between discrete segments of the spaces that those shots represent, as do filmmakers who work within the continuity editing system. (In light of Brecht’s rejection of medium-specificity, it is a small paradox that the former popularity of non-continuity editing with Brechtian filmmakers can be safely related back to that concept.)

The described senses of the term “Brechtian” can serve as the lines along which to divide the existing scholarship on Brecht and cinema. One group of texts employs historiographic approaches to the topic (his writings on specific films and the medium in general, and the films on which he creatively collaborated): Brady 2006, Curran 2009, Gersch 1975, Hinck 1971, Elsaesser 1990, Mueller 1989, Silberman 1997, Willett 1998, Witte 2006, and certain portions of Turovskaia 1982 and Walsh 1981. The texts vary chiefly in their respective emphases. For example, Hinck – in the section of his article dedicated to Brecht’s unrealised film projects – elaborates particularly on the screen adaptation of German folkloric tales about Till Eulenspiegel (76-8), one of several films Brecht planned in collaboration with DEFA, the East German state film organisation. In contrast, Mueller – in the equivalent segment in her account of the topic – singles out an entirely different series of projects (99-100). More broadly, the respective stresses of the journal articles and book chapters on the subject fall on different historical segments of Brecht’s film endeavours. Willett, for example, emphasises Brecht’s Hollywood projects at the expense of those conceived in Germany, both in the pre- and post-World War II periods. As one commonality, this group of texts reflect on the influence of Brecht’s
ideas and techniques on film studies (manifested most persistently in the version of psychosemiotics proposed by the contributors to the British journal *Screen* in the early 1970s), as well as on film practice (shown in a range of cinemas and film movements, most distinctly in certain films of the French *Nouvelle vague*, Brazilian *Cinema Novo*, and New German Cinema). The texts in question comment also on the cinematic influences on Brecht, attributing a particular significance in this respect to Chaplin (Silberman) or the Soviet montage filmmakers (Walsh).

The other group of texts is informed by what David Bordwell disparagingly refers to as “SLAB” theory (the initials of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Roland Barthes, whose ideas – linked by their use of semiotics – the theory amalgamates). Dominant in film studies until the rise of Bordwell’s and Carroll’s oppositional “cognitive” approach in the late 1980s, the “SLAB” discourse on film has produced too many texts concerning Brecht to mention here. I summarise and critically comment upon the most influential of these (MacCabe 1974 and Heath 1974), as well as upon Murray Smith’s comprehensive critique of this strain of film theory (1996), in chapter one.

Because my primary interest concerns the manners in which film practitioners deploy Brecht’s theoretical ideas (“the proof of the pudding is in the eating”, to quote Brecht’s favourite proverb), my methodology takes an approach somewhat different from those employed in both groups of texts. In contrast to the versions of Brecht characteristic of our post-communist era, which tend to regard the artist’s and theorist’s communism as fish bones that need to be removed for the meal to become edible, I attempt in this

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4 A case in point is Elin Diamond, who proposes that “we should be long past the point of accepting Martin Esslin’s view that Brecht’s theories ‘were merely rationalisations of intuition, taste, and imagination’” (84)
dissertation a more holistic approach to Brecht, which considers also his political project. The rationale for such an approach lies in the continued relevance of this aspect of Brecht’s work, as reflected in the cinematic practices that acknowledge Brecht’s dramatic theory as a decisive influence. A continued critical relevance is also the reason will consider also the films that Brecht co-directed (which use montage and / or theatricality to varying degrees).

While this dissertation acknowledges the significant changes in Brecht’s dramatic theory between his 1930 formulation of the principles of epic theatre and his death in 1956, it emphasises the similarities, not the differences, of its various versions. John J. White suggests that Brecht’s thinking about theatre developed in a linear fashion; he maintains that after Brecht’s discovery of Marxism in the mid 1920s, it became increasingly informed by this philosophy. According to White, the change of emphasis from political to artistic radicalism that occurred in the middle phase of Brecht’s work as a theorist of theatre and the decreased presence of recognisably Marxist ideas in his work from the period, should both be attributed to the circumstances of exile: in his countries of asylum, Brecht was required to refrain from political activity, even in the aesthetic realm (White 79). Subscribing to this view, I will argue that Verfremdung and related Brechtian concepts in their mature form have an essentially political (more precisely, Marxist) function.

Brecht’s politics and the best examples of his film practice intersect at the notion of dialectics, a method behind both his embraced philosophy of Marxism and much of his after implicitly rejecting the theories’ political foundation by stating that her interest in Brecht lies in the potentiality of his theory for feminism. (Ibid.) Thus, Diamond gives undue emphasis to one notion of Brecht’s dramatic theory (Gestus) at the expense of those that more readily reflect their ties to Marxism (Verfremdung, dialectics), while ostensibly acknowledging the theory’s integrity.
The filmmakers I focus on in this dissertation are selected for the diversity of formal ways in which their work uses dialectics as a structural principle, and for the cultural diversity they represent. The choice of a Danish filmmaker, and three filmmakers who produced films in different European countries and in the United States, is intended to illustrate that the phenomenon of Brechtian cinema is not exclusive to the German cultural context. Another criterion for the selection was the persuasiveness of filmmakers’ and commentators’ arguments for the relevance of Brecht’s theories of drama and media on the former’s work. Alexander Kluge and Harun Farocki, two other major filmmakers who have eloquently expressed theirs indebtedness to Brecht, are excluded from the study because of the prevalence of the non-fictional mode in the later works of Kluge and in the entire Farocki’s filmography. Another contender, Glauber Rocha, disassociated himself from Brecht too early in his career for his films to adequately illustrate my thesis. Similarly, Rainer Werner Fassbinder – whose “Brechtianism” is widely noted by commentators – more often denied than confirmed his allegiance to Brecht’s dramatic theory. Lastly, Jean-Luc Godard, whose 1960s and 1970s films overtly nod to Brecht’s literary and theoretical output, is excluded from the scope of this investigation merely on account of the existence of abundant scholarship on the subject. Nevertheless, Godard – the co-director of the only film I encountered that directly references Brecht’s dramatic theory – will be frequently invoked throughout the dissertation.

See, for example, Thomsen 224, Hughes and Riley 345, and Spanow 406.

For an early and comprehensive example, see Lesage 1975.
Having made passing remarks on the meanings of this dissertation’s title terms in their context, I now want to define them with precision.

THEATRICALITY is, as Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis suggest, often used interchangeably with a variety of related but distinct concepts – from mimesis to theatrum mundi, from ritual behaviour to performativity. Before I define the notion for the purpose of this study, I will offer on the following few pages a historical survey of the term, as well as of the various approaches to it.

Postlewait and Davis cite 1837 as the year when the term theatricality entered the English language. The authors do not mention the context in which the term appeared first, but the assumption seems safe that its original usage was restricted to the context of theatre as an art, and that the term originally denoted the medium’s various contemporary conventions. The term acquires a decidedly more complex meaning with its appearance in Russian as teatralnost. It is widely considered that Nicolas Evreinov, the theorist and practitioner who coined the term in 1908, found inspiration for it in the concept of literariness (literaturnost), introduced into critical discourse by the Russian Formalist school of literary criticism. Presumably because of theatre’s multi-channeled nature (Pfister 1988) and the eternal competition for primacy amongst its various aspects, Evreinov’s definition of the former concept is incomparably broader than the Russian Formalists’ definition of literariness – the peculiar quality of literature that separates it

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7 Because of the combined facts that the slant of the introduction and chapter one is theoretical rather than practical, and that the theoretical implications of theatricality as defined in the context of this dissertation are considerably less important than those of Verfremdung and the related Brechtian notions therein investigated, the respective sections greatly differ in length.
from other artistic forms and extra-artistic reality. (Jestrovic 2002: 55) Evreinov attributed the principle to all actions resulting in transformation of the elements of the subject’s environment or themselves, as well as to the human beings’ very will to transform (which he referred to as “theatrical instinct.”) The array of the meanings attached to the term was broadened even further with its penetration into the international critical discourse in the 1990s. For the sake of clarity, I will divide here into three groups the vastly overlapping approaches to theatricality that can be discerned in the literature on the subject so far: 1) the predominantly historical approach, aiming to elucidate the notion by tracing the changes of its negative connotations across the millennia of theatre history; 2) the predominantly phenomenological approach, which associates theatricality not only with the medium itself, but also with other kinds of human endeavour; 3) the predominantly semiotic approach, focusing on the notion within the context of theatre per se.

1) This line of inquiry into the concept typically uses as a starting point that part of its etymological history which links it to such traits as fakeness, superficiality, and extravagance (to mention only those negatively marked terms with which my dictionary describes theatricality). The adherents of this methodology (that include the writings of Jonas Barish (1981) Marvin Carlson (2002), and Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis (2003), are engaged in a dialogue with the tradition of Western theatre detractors running from Plato across Tertullian, Rousseau and Nietzsche to Sartre on the one hand (to name but the perhaps most frequently quoted theorists of the medium), and, on the other – as a strand in art criticism, distinct from philosophy – to Michael Fried. Summarising the anti-

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8 Josette Féral, in her 2002 article “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language", states that the texts she has been able to assemble dealing with the notion date back only 10 years. (95)
theatrical arguments of the above writers would exceed this dissertation’s scope. As an illustration of the variety of ideas they contain, I will give the examples of the first and the last only. The discussion of theatre in Plato’s *Republic* uses as a departure point the parable of prisoners in a cave, who mistake the shadows on the wall of people and objects from the outside world – their appearances – for the things themselves. The aim of mimesis to capture the real is bound to fail, as the real is located not in the observable phenomena, but beneath them. Michael Fried’s indictment of theatre concerns its relationship with the spectator that the writer sees as inherent to the medium. In his writings on Minimal Art and French painting in the age of Diderot, Fried posits that theatre “exists for one [ ] in a way that other arts do not”, (1998 [1967]: 163) and suggests an equivalence between the self-sufficiency of an artwork – its not depending on the beholder’s gaze to complete it – and non-theatricality. (1980: 230) Writing about the alleged corruption of Minimal Art by theatricality at the height of the modernist paradigm, Fried goes as far as to state that theatre and theatricality are at war not just with modernist painting and sculpture, but with modernist artistic sensibility as such. (1998: 163) Significantly for this dissertation’s topic, Fried suggests that film escapes theatricality through the barrier it imposes between the actor and the viewer. Still, the writer maintains that film is not a modernist art “even at its most experimental”, since the refuge it offers from “the condition of theatre” is not a property of individual films as artworks, but is intrinsic to the former medium (and therefore “automatic, guaranteed”). (164) Also important for this dissertation’s focus are Fried’s use of Brecht and Artaud as examples of theatre practitioners who sought to establish a new relationship with the

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9 Significantly, J.L. Baudry’s famous critique of the allegedly inherent ideological nature of cinema, articulated in his “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus” (1974), reworks Plato’s parable.
audience (163), thereby subverting the medium “from inside.” (Surprisingly, however, Fried does not use the example from Brecht’s theatrical theory and practice that would serve his argument best – that of the Lehrstück – but quotes instead Brecht’s statement that “Marx was the only spectator for [his] plays [he had] ever come across.”) (as qtd. in Ibid. 171)

The investigations of the history of anti-theatricality carry the insinuation that the antagonism toward the medium has been proving, and thereby reinforcing, the medium’s social relevance and also – potentially – its subversiveness. It is for this reason that, as Jonas Barish observes, hostility toward the stage erupts when the theatre is flourishing and contributing to the community in vital ways. (as qtd. in Tassi 35)

2) The second approach might be called “expansionist,” as it involves transferring the idea of theatricality from the context of the medium into the (suspiciously) broad context of the totality of social activities. The move, which started in the 1950s with the work of the anthropologists Milton Singer and Victor Turner, necessitated a new vocabulary: instead of theatricality – one of whose connotations concerns the institutional aspect of theatre, irrelevant for the variety of disciplines that were adopting the idea – the more general term “performance” was embraced. It has been used, as Janelle Reinalt writes,

... to differentiate certain processes of performing from the products of theatrical performance, and in its most narrow usage, to identify performance art as that which, unlike “regular” theatrical performances, stages the subject in process, the making and fashioning of certain materials, especially the body, and the exploration of the limits of representation-ability. (201)

The dissemination of the terms theatricality and performance into the realms of anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology and linguistics did not leave unaffected the studies of theatre. The first amongst the key contributors to the
transformed discourse on theatricality that proved relevant for the field was J.L. Austin, who in his *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) remarks that performative utterances (such as “I swear” and “I bequeath”) do not simply describe the reality of the acts to which they refer, but – being the sole location of the mentioned acts’ truthfulness – create that reality. Another influential writer using the theatrical metaphor is Erving Goffman, whose *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) views the individual’s interaction with others as a performance aimed at creating impressions favourable for the individual’s purposes. Elizabeth Burns’ definition of theatricality (1972), according to which the phenomenon occurs when certain behavior seems to be not natural or spontaneous but ‘composed according to this grammar of rhetorical and authenticating conventions’ in order to achieve some particular effect on its viewers, (as qtd. in Carlson 240) builds upon Goffman’s view only ostensibly: while he implies that naturalness and spontaneity in social interactions are not possible (as theatricality takes place even unbeknownst to the performer), Burns suggests precisely the opposite.

Austin’s exclusion of theatrical utterances from his system of performatives, which are, in his view, “parasitic” on their use in the extra-artistic context, yielded an influential critique of the theory by Jacques Derrida. The critique conflated theatrical and other kinds of utterances on the account of their “iterability”. All utterances can be seen as instances of iteration. However, this power rests on a degree of deviation from the context of the given linguistic structure. (Reinelt 204) Judith Butler takes up Derrida’s idea of the relationship between iteration and performance, applying it to the non-linguistic domain, and offers the definition as performativity as

not a singular “act,” for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the convention of which it is
a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity). (as qtd in Egginton 16)

With Butler’s introduction of the idea of historicity into the discourse, Austin’s theatrical metaphor comes full circle. Namely, the ahistorical perspective within which Austin situates the medium appears informed by one theatrical tradition only: that of realism, dominant on the American stage in the period when the writer was concocting the theory of the performatives.

3) The third approach seems a reaction to the dominance in the critical discourse of performance discourse to the point of stupefaction, as Elin Diamond puts it (as qtd. in Postlewait and Davis 31), and appears informed by Erika Fischer-Lichte’s view that “if everything is ‘theater’, the concept becomes so wide that it loses any distinctive or cognitive capacity.” (as qtd. in Reinelt 207) The semioticians critique the “expansionist” approach for its disregard of the differences in nature between the signs used in the context of theatre, and outside of it. Eli Rozik enumerates these in a convincing critique of the line of thought that connects such writers as Austin, Goffman, and Richard Schechner:

1) The semiotic systems employed in action and enacting an action are different: Whereas action is fundamentally indexical, enacting an action is iconic. (114)
2) The ways action and enacting an action refer to a world are fundamentally different: while action is self-referent, enacting an action is both self-referential to the actor, in producing signs, and deflects reference to a character. (115)
3) Although indexality is shared by action and enacting an action, there is an essential difference. In real action, indexes refer to the doers, and are only self-referential. (115)

Rozik offers a definition of theatricality at once broad and precise: to this writer, the fundamental principle of theatre is acting, “imprinting images of indexes and deflection of reference” (122) His use of the term concerns not only human acting, but “enacting” in
the sense of ‘representing and describing’ an object in a real or fictional world by any real object on stage. (110)

Rozik’s conception of theatricality, then, involves the process inherent to cinema as a representational art. Still, because of its exceptional breadth, this writer’s notion of theatricality is unsuitable for my purposes. However, Jacques Gerstekorn, who in “Rise of the Curtain” explores the term within the context of cinema, provides a categorisation of different understandings of theatricality whose adoption seems appropriate: 1) theatricality as it appears in films that explicitly reference theatrical practice (theatre as a content); 2) as it is produced by a film’s use of a characteristically theatrical mode (theatre as a form within form); 3) as it is achieved through a process the writer calls recycling (recyclage), using a distinctly theatrical convention (for example, the direct address of the camera in Woody Allen) not for the purpose of celebrating it, but to divest it of its aura of medium-specificity, thereby effecting its full assimilation within the cinematic context (Gerstenkorn 1994). In this last context, the term pertains strictly to those aspects of a film that are semiotically marked as derivatives of theatre as an art form. The dissertation, then, focuses on how film borrows from theatrical conventions which are foregrounded as such and on the complexity of their ideological implications in relation to a given film’s use of Brecht’s dramatic and media theories.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the next title term, the relationship between the two media needs to be investigated slightly further. While both theatre and film merit comparisons with other arts and social practices, they have an especially close interconnection. In her essay “Film and Theatre,” Susan Sontag convincingly challenges the notion of inherent differences between the two art forms. The writer offers examples
that run counter to theses supporting this notion (the latter concern, among other things, a
difference between the materials the two media represent or depict, the fixity of angle of
vision in theatre, and the fact that “cinema is an object (...) while theatre is a
performance.”)  
(1992: 368) The remark that immediately follows questions the
importance for theatre hermeneutics – as opposed to ontology – of the last of the three
differences: “Is this so important? In a way, no. Whether objects (like films or paintings)
or performances (like music or theatre), all art is first a mental act, a fact of
consciousness.” (Ibid.) Later in the essay, Sontag proposes that the only irreducible
distinction between theatre and film may consist of the older medium’s confinement to a
logical or continuous use of space. The possibility to use space otherwise is, Sontag
observes, granted to cinema through editing. (367) This observation appears to rest on a
rather dubious conflation of the architecture of the stage and the dramatic space(s)
represented on it, made possible through a disregard of the long theatrical tradition of
Western theatre that separates them. This tradition began with the combined stage of
French classicism, and continues to the present day with an increasingly varied number of
manifestations in theatrical productions that employ spatial simultaneity. A tendency in
contemporary theatrical practice to stage texts originally intended for other media, as
described in Hans-Thies Lehmann’s Postdramatic Theatre, renders obsolete Sontag’s

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10 Presumably in order to avoid diminishing her argument’s strength, Sontag downplays the last
observation, never employing the term that would suggest the theatre’s uniqueness in the mentioned respect
perhaps more vividly than any other: liveness. Similarly, the writer’s pointing to film’s possession of a
syntax (the constituents of which are, it should be noted, identified in the essay not as shots or frames, but -
curiously - as “associations and disjunctions”), (368) is without its logical accompaniment of a remark of
theatre’s not having one (due to the impossibility of defining the basic unit of construction of a
performance.)
observation that “one can make a movie ‘of’ a play but not a play ‘of’ a movie”. Sontag’s comment appears within the context of her discussion of film’s ability to be perceived as merely a transparency, in which cases “it seems correct to say that one is seeing the event filmed”. (Ibid.) However, if we replace the restricting term “play” used by Sontag with a term encompassing other aspects of a theatrical production (for example, “theatrical production”), we see that her observation is questionable even in the historical context of 1966, when the article was published. If an event can be photographed and edited so that the viewer “sees through” the exclusively cinematic properties of the film, so too the opposite must be possible: a stage production can emulate the world of a film successfully enough for the viewer to be distracted from its lack of cinematic codes (such as cuts, alternating shot scales, angles, and perspectives). Claims to uniqueness of both media are, therefore, feeble.

MONTAGE denotes the formal principle of works of different arts, whereby heterogeneous parts are assembled to produce a fundamentally new relationship with each other. (Bordwell 1972: 10) Adorno succinctly identifies in his *Aesthetic Theory* two dialectically opposed tendencies that underwrite the principle: “montage (…) disavows unity through the emerging disparateness of the parts at the same time that, as a principle of form, it reaffirms unity.” (202) The connections established can be purely abstract (as in Eisenstein’s intellectual editing, explicated below), or can result also in a semblance of spatial or temporal coherence (as in the canvases of the Renaissance painter Arcimboldo, where recognisable human portraits are made through the compositional arrangement of

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11 As illustration, three of the nine productions on the main stage of Schauspiel Stuttgart in the 2007-2008 season were based on films. Coincidentally, two of those, *Manderlay* and *Die Dritte Generation* (The Third Generation), were based on the films of two filmmakers mentioned here: von Trier and Fassbinder, respectively.
realistically depicted everyday objects.) As can be inferred from the historical coordinate of the latter example, montage *avant la lettre* can be traced to a distant past in art history. It is, however, the twentieth century – and in particular the era of the historical avant-gardes (1910-1933) – when the technique saw its most prolific application. The development of mechanical reproduction in the twentieth century decisively influenced the understanding and practice of it in two manners. First, it greatly facilitated the use of the technique; second, it allowed for the artist’s subjectivity to recede somewhat (the basic constituents of a montage no longer being necessarily a result of her work.) Examples of the use of montage are found in the novels *St. Petersburg* (1922) by Andrei Biely and *Ulysses* by Joyce (1922), in the Cubist poetry of Reverdy and Apollinaire, in the Surrealist collages of Max Ernst, in the satirical photomontages of John Heartfield, and the theatre of Ernst Toller and Meyerhold. Finally, montage is employed in the cinematic traditions of both the West (for example, in Griffith’s 1916 *Intolerance*) and East (most notably, in the works of Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s). A halt to the development of montage-based art significantly coincided with the socio-political developments at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s in the countries where the era’s leading artistic centres in Europe were situated, the Soviet Union and Germany. Following Stalin’s succession of Lenin in 1924, the latter’s New Economic Policy – which allowed private enterprises – was replaced by the First Five Year Plan (1928), during which cultural production, as well as all the other sectors of social life, were centralised by the state. Prominent revolutionary artists such as Mayakovsky and most montage filmmakers fell out of favour with the new government and increasingly faced accusations of ‘formalism.’ With the announcement of Stalin’s decree “On the Reconstruction of
Literary and Art Organisations’’ in 1932, the doctrine of socialist realism – whose stylistic traits were based upon those of the nineteenth-century realism – was unofficially inaugurated. The stylistic gap that separates the Vasilyev brothers’ *Chapaev* (1934) from Dmitri Furmanov’s eponymous book upon which the film is based well illustrates the extent of change this brought about. The book belongs to the mixed genre of factograph, promoted by *LEF* (the Mayakovsky-edited journal of the loose association of Soviet cultural workers *Levy Front Iskusstv: Left Front of the Arts*), and employs a fragmentary structure whose different parts integrate the conventions of the diary and journalistic articles, among other forms. In contrast, the film follows the rules of continuity editing and other norms of cinematic classicism, thereby approaching Hollywood’s ideal of stylistic transparency. Although the influence of the Soviet montage filmmakers is blatant in one of the best known cultural artefacts from Hitler’s Germany – Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 1934) – the Nazis too came to favour a style comparable to Hollywood’s, condemning much of modernist art as degenerate (*entartet*).\(^{12}\)

Bordwell adopts Luda’s and Schitzer’s classification of the most prominent Soviet montage filmmakers according to their politics (and the significant aesthetic implications

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\(^{12}\) Another major factor in the decline of montage-based films in the 1930s concerns a correlation between technology and aesthetics. The standardisation of sound film, which occurred between 1927 and the mid-1930s, limited the use of montage. The reasons for this lies in the perceptual difference between image and sound: while an experienced viewer can recognize the content of a single frame which stays on the screen less than a twenty-fourth of a second, it takes significantly longer for a sound to establish itself in the viewer’s mind. In addition, the objects perceived as unique for their aural qualities are fewer than those perceived unique for their appearance. While the introduction of sound limited the possibilities of opposing the linearity of Hollywood-style narration through juxtaposing cinematic signs consecutively as a film unfolds, it widened the possibilities for their simultaneous juxtaposition within the visual channel and its aural counterpart. A proposal for the contrapuntal use of sound - which, it should be noted, conforms to Brecht’s broader model of creating dialectical relationships between different aspects of an artwork - is articulated by Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov in their “Statement on Sound” (1928).
thereof) by associating, on the one hand, Kuleshov with Pudovkin as conservative cinéastes, and – on the other – Eisenstein with Vertov as extreme leftists. (1972: 11) The usefulness of this categorisation notwithstanding, the crucial differences between the members of the identified two pairs must not be overlooked. Kuleshov is today remembered less for his films than for the montage experiments he conducted between 1919 and 1924, which – despite Bordwell’s claim of their limited originality (10) – continue to be cited as a foundation of the Soviet montage theories. The other three filmmakers shall be briefly addressed in reverse order of importance for Brecht. Vertov, like Brecht and many other artist contemporaries of his, had a fascination with the scientific developments of the epoch and relativity theory in particular. The 1922 manifesto of the film collective “Kinoki” (cinema-eyes), in which Vertov was the leading figure, quotes the application of “[t]he theory of relativity on the screen” (Vertov 9) as an aesthetic mandate. As did Kuleshov in his “creative geography” experiment, Vertov created in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) a semblance of a single city by combining images photographed in various parts of the country, thereby “conquering space and time” (87-8). The metaphoric parallel with the theory that posits the relativity of space and time seems apt when considered in relation to the described example. The comparison between Vertov and Einstein seems less founded when we take into account the scientist’s work in the field of subatomic physics. Namely, Vertov’s aesthetic is based largely on the syllogism where the camera equals an improved human eye. The task he sets for the instrument can be compared to that which the microscope or telescope has in science – to enhance perception and, thereby, also knowledge. (Möbius 398) Unlike Eisenstein, however, whose intellectual montage is a means for rendering visible the truth
beyond the observable phenomena (of which our “scientific age” – as Brecht would have it – is providing increasing evidence), Vertov sets as a goal of his cinema “showing life as it is” (Vertov 45), “life caught unawares.” (41) Antagonistic to mimesis as a heritage of the obsolete bourgeois form he sees theatre to be, Vertov is unique among the Soviet montage filmmakers as a militant devotee solely of the documentary form. He conceives of his cinema as “the FACTORY OF FACTS,” (59) to which he contrasts popular genre cinema together with Eisenstein, (see Ibid.) a filmmaker with an eclectic style that borrows from the other art forms and builds upon the past traditions thereof extensively. Vertov conceives of montage, the other key term for him, as a broad notion that underlies all cinema’s formal operations from photography to projection, as well as the cognitive processes that govern film watching.  

The significant implications of Brecht’s special affinity for Pudovkin, the least stylistically radical of the identified four Soviet filmmakers, were largely ignored by both the film theorists and practitioner of the allegedly Brechtian provenance. As for his other Soviet peers, montage is, for Pudovkin, “the essence of cinema.” (Pudovkin 14) The crucial term in Pudovkin’s system is, however, neither Eisenstein’s “idea” nor Vertov’s “fact,” but plot (syuzhet, in the sense of fabula, rather than in the sense the term has in the syuzhet / fabula dichotomy established by Shklovsky and Propp). Pudovkin distinguishes between constructive montage (which provides a scene, episode, reel, and the script with verisimilitudinous coherence) and montage as an expressive instrument  

13 When the broad project of representation came under attack in post-1968 film theory, the name of Vertov gained new relevance for the self-designated Brechtian filmmakers such as Godard, who in the 1968-1972 period abandoned his status of a directorial star in favour of the supposed anonymity of collective work within the “Dziga Vertov Group” that he co-founded with Jean-Pierre Gorin.  

14 For more on the distinction as appropriated by film narratology, see Bordwell 1985: 49-56.
(which influences the viewer’s state of mind [62] through the use of medium-specific devices such as parallel editing.) By suggesting that the function of montage in this second sense is primarily to enhance the viewer’s emotions about the narrative as opposed to advance it, Pudovkin implicitly ascribes primacy to constructive montage as a principally dramaturgical device. This appears the first reason for the appeal of Pudovkin to Brecht, for whose entire artistic production the notion of *Fabel* is central. The second probably concerns the Soviet filmmaker’s special interest in acting. Pudovkin rejects Eisenstein’s notion of type casting and acting (it is due to the use of this method in *The Battleship Potemkin*, [1926] that Pudovkin assesses all roles in the film as “depressingly banal” [22]), advocating instead the use of Stanislavski’s method adjusted for film, with the close-up and breaking the performance into separate shots as the technology’s defining characteristics. (For more on this, see his *The Actor in Film*; Pudovkin 215-97.) The emphasis Pudovkin places on acting results from a view of the shot different from Eisenstein’s: the latter sees it as a cell that acquires its meaning only in juxtaposition with surrounding shots, while for Pudovkin the shot is a relatively independent agent of meaning.

Sergei Eisenstein, the most prolific and influential amongst the Soviet montage filmmakers, equates montage with conflict in his “The Cinematographic Principle”; not only between the elements in adjoining shots, but also between the elements within the shots: conflict of graphic directions (“[l]ines - either static or dynamic,” either actual or implied through the movement of an object in the shot); the conflict of scales (the relative size of objects in the shot); conflict of volumes (the absolute size and shape of objects in the shot); conflict of masses (“[v]olumes filled with various intensities of light”); and
conflict of depths (the positions of objects in the photographed space and in the film frame.) (39) Eisenstein distinguishes between several strains of the technique, of which intellectual editing is the most complex. He defines the concept as “combining shots that are depictive, single in meaning, neutral in content – into intellectual contexts and series.” (30) The theorist uses the example of Japanese ideograms to demonstrate the viability of a cinema whose formal operations would be based on the Hegelian dialectical triad, whereby synthesis arises from the opposition between thesis and antithesis. (45) Among the examples Eisenstein gives of images combined within the ideograms to create new meanings are water and an eye (signifying weeping), a mouth and a bird (signifying singing), and a knife and a heart (signifying sorrow.) A relatively rare practical application of the concept of intellectual editing in Eisenstein’s cinema can be found in October (1929), which juxtaposes the image of a bridge, being opened to kill the protesters against the regime of tzarism, with a still image of an Egyptian pharaoh’s mask. The scene suggests the regime’s obsolescence through the combination of the two consecutive images, which represents not their mere sum, but their sublation (or Aufhebung, to use Hegel’s original term): a (the image of the bridge) + b (the image of the pharaoh’s mask) = c (the idea of the obsolescence of the tzarist regime.) The originality of this concept becomes apparent in comparison with parallel editing, a cinematic technique pioneered in the late 1900s by D. W. Griffith. The Griffithian parallel editing conforms to the formula: a + b = ab (for example, the chaser, nearing the pursued during the course of a sequence, eventually catches her, thus bringing two parallel narrative lines together.)\(^{15}\) As later will be demonstrated, Brecht’s only feature
film as a co-director (with Slatan Dudow), *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), employs intellectual montage. It is this strain of montage that the title term refers to.

Since montage is, in film studies, often considered relationally, as an antipode of continuity editing and the ideological mores underlying it, it is easy to see why the technique is often regarded as intrinsically progressive. Writing about the style of Erich Engel’s and Brecht’s short film *Mysterien eines Frisieursalons* (*Mysteries of a Hairdressing Salon*, 1923), for example, Knopf criticises the absence of montage from the film (431) as a sign of aesthetic backwardness. Similarly, and more pertinently, the participants in the round-table discussion on montage organised and published by *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1968 – Jean Narboni, Sylvie Pierre, and Jacques Rivette – attribute a principally progressive role to the technique. (Lellis 92) This last commentator goes so far as to posit that montage is the only possible cinematic expression of what Brecht would call “eingreifendes Denken” (interventionist thinking):

> if all coherent thought on montage is de facto critical thought, all form of refusal or disdain of montage implies a theological mentality, that is to say the accepting of the world as it is, if not the resignation, or at very least the passive contemplation of the ‘being-there’ as pure presence, without history or mediation, and all the concepts of permanence and destiny related to this ideology. (as qtd. in Lellis 92)

Importantly, Brecht himself does not see montage as as inherently political. An artwork aesthetically distanced from reality is, to him, only a base to which a sense of political engagement needs to be added. (Curran 330)

I conclude the section with a brief commentary on the place of montage in Brecht’s dramatic theory and practice. Perhaps the most famous use of the term by Brecht is in “Anmerkungen zur Oper Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny” (“Notes to the

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15 Note that if the variables a and b are broadened to apply not only to characters, but also to objects and abstractions, the simple formula becomes applicable to the dramaturgy of all mainstream cinema.
Opera ‘Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny’, 1930), the writer’s earliest systematic articulation of the Epic Theatre concept.\textsuperscript{16} In the table of contrasts between Dramatic and Epic Theatre, montage – a principle associated with the latter theatrical model – is juxtaposed to growth.\textsuperscript{17} As John J. White notes in Bertolt Brecht’s Dramatic Theory, three pairs of terms that surround the cited one clarify the sense in which “montage” is used in the context (56):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRAMATIC THEATRE</th>
<th>EPIC THEATRE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>one scene makes another</td>
<td>each scene for itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linear development</td>
<td>in curves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evolutionary determinism</td>
<td>jumps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All three contrasts pertain to narrative structure, rather than the other codes of a performance, inscribed in the playtext or added in the process of staging. Elsewhere in his writings, however, Brecht uses the term “montage” more broadly, to describe the opposition to the classical and Romantic idea of stylistic organicity (Friedrich 1977: 156), which entails art’s concealment of artifice through imitating nature’s modes of production.\textsuperscript{18} Brecht sometimes refers to montage also in relation to realms other than

\textsuperscript{16} In his later theoretical writings, Brecht refers to a somewhat evolved version of the theatrical model presented in “Notes” as dialectical. To highlight the focus of my inquiry on the similarities, rather than differences, between Brecht’s different articulations of the concept, I use both terms in reference to it.

\textsuperscript{17} I borrowed the translation of this, and the terms from the below-quoted section of Brecht’s epic / dramatic theatre table, from Willett 1964: 37.

\textsuperscript{18} Brecht’s anti-Kantian stance, investigated by Jan Bruck in relation to the concept of realism in “Brecht’s and Kluge’s Aesthetic of Realism” (1988) is reflected also in the antagonism Brecht shows toward Kant’s dictum from his Critique of Aesthetic Judgment that “the finality in the product of fine art, intentional though it be, must not have the appearance of being intentional, i.e., fine art must be capable of being viewed as nature, is by the presence of perfect exactness in the agreement with rules prescribing how alone
artistic, a possibility suggested by the term’s inherent possession in German of such connotations as construction and assemblage.

For Brecht the theatre practitioner, montage allows, first, the subversion of the Aristotelian unities. Instead of aiming for the impression that scene b “naturally” follows from scene a, and scene c from scene b, an epic play juxtaposes scenes, often employing large chronological gaps to emphasise the changes undergone by the characters during the course of the narrative (to give but one example, Leben des Galilei [Life of Galileo, 1939] spans about three decades of the protagonist’s life.) Brecht’s second use of montage stems from his opposition to Wagner’s synergistic concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk (or the total work of art), which refers to merging of elements of different arts into a seamless whole. Abandoning this ideal, Brecht proposes their relative independence from each other (Prinzip der Trennung: the principle of separation.)

The last term that needs defining is BRECHTIAN. In the context of this dissertation, the term means: substantially influenced by Brecht’s theory of Epic Theatre, as acknowledged by the filmmakers themselves. Brecht’s theory advocates a theatre suitable for our “scientific era,” which enables – and calls for – the explanation of the human condition not in terms of a higher power and its whims, but in terms of (alterable) social forces. This task demanded a realism different from its traditional form, predicated on “a montage of discourses.” (Wollen 1980: 23)\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^\text{19}\) Wollen offers a useful summary of why Brecht considered a traditional form of realism inadequate for what he considered the task of modern art: “On a purely descriptive level it tended to be local rather than...
Goals and Structure of the Dissertation

To reiterate, in this dissertation I trace the shift in how Brechtian filmmakers negotiate the signifier-signified binary in their application of Brecht’s theoretical precepts. This shift, which occurs in different phases of the filmmakers’ careers, consists of an increased dependence on the pro-filmic event as a source of Brechtian estrangement at the expense of the techniques of editing and cinematography. I propose that the changes in the use of Brecht’s theories in cinema, whose commonalities are suggested in the previous paragraph, have been conditioned by transformations in the metalanguage of Hollywood since the collapse of the studio era in the 1960s. These transformations are widely considered to be a result of the proliferation of television, with self-referentiality as an important characteristic of that medium’s language, as well as the increased popularity of auterist international cinemas with their typically self-conscious style. David Bordwell considers these changes sufficiently extensive to be given a separate name: “intensified continuity.” He identifies the following four strategies as characteristic of the evolved Hollywood style: 1) increasingly rapid editing; 2) “forcing the perspective” through the use of bipolar extremes of lens lengths; 3) reliance on close shots; and 4) wide-ranging camera movements (2006: 121). All these strategies aim at distorting the everyday perception of “reality,” or – in the words of the Russian formalists and, in a modified form, Brecht – at making the familiar strange. I argue that mainstream cinema’s
global, and to show what was present simultaneously rather than past and future. It favoured the actual rather than the possible and the observable rather than the unobservable. It was descriptive rather than explanatory. It effaced contradiction.” (Ibid.)

To offer but one of many available examples of how estrangement is produced through the use of foregrounded editing, Marc Forster’s Quantum of Solace (2008) establishes a narrative connection between
adoption of a language that does not want to be overlooked – to invert Berthe Siertsema’s oft-quoted observation – necessitated the change of emphasis of Brechtian filmmakers, with their aim to estrange. As a logical consequence of their opposition to verisimilitude (in the sense of naturalism or surface realism) the later works of these filmmakers are progressively more theatrical.  

I conclude the introduction with a few words on the dissertation’s structure. The first chapter explores Brecht’s dramatic theory through an examination of its key terms, and offers a summary and critical commentary of key texts of the 1970s Brechtian film theory, as well as of the cognitivists’ critique of them. Chapter two explores Brecht’s adjustment of the theory to the medium of film through a survey of Brecht’s writings on cinema and formal analyses of the films in whose production Brecht participated as a co-director. The subsequent three chapters explore the relationship between Brecht’s dramatic theory and the cinemas of Straub and Huillet, Watkins, and von Trier, respectively.

the scene of a horse race and the sequence of an interrogation turning into a chase only after the film has crosscut between the two lines of action for a good minute. For the indicated period of time, then, the film keeps the viewer perplexed about the race scene’s relation to the diegesis.

21 Cinematic theatricality and Brechtianism are by no means inextricably linked; the former quality is found in several contemporary filmmakers whose work scarcely illustrates Brecht’s ideological beliefs (Peter Greenaway and Baz Luhrmann, for example).
Chapter 1: The Key Notions of Brecht’s Dramatic Theory

All literature on Brecht and cinema dedicates some attention to key notions of the writer’s dramatic theory. English-language works on the topic, however, often reflect a tendency to “cherry-pick” these notions, typically privileging the less abstract among them at the expense of the broadest one – dialectics – and the other notions’ elements that link them to it. The lacunae thus caused are often filled with biographical data on Brecht of dubious relevance, the results of free shifts from theoretical to historical methodologies. Possibly because much of still influential Brecht scholarship in English was produced during the Cold War era, when Brecht’s leftism sat particularly uncomfortably with the political agenda of academia in this part of the world, the scholarship often lays an undeserved emphasis on the ties between Brecht and the Eastern Bloc (particularly the Soviet Union). If one considers that the most effective way to dismiss communism altogether is to implicitly equate it with Stalinism and the related philosophies and policies – into which it was perverted in all countries where it became the official doctrine so far – this is easy to understand.

A point of further clarification is needed: what I deny is not the general relevance for Brecht of his ties to communist countries, but to his dramatic theory, to whose influence on contemporary cinema this dissertation limits itself. In other words, I object to weighing, for instance, Brecht’s acceptance of the Stalin prize (1955) against his critiques of the politician put forward in his Me-Ti: Buch der Wendungen (Me-Ti: The Book of Changes, 1934-1955). Because the “values” thus obtained are as arbitrary as the method itself, an image of him often arises that would neither flatter Brecht nor appeal to
his cinematic adherents – that of a dogmatist and conformer – arises despite Brecht’s heresies with regard to Comintern (for example, his refusal of Lenin’s theory of knowledge and Zhdanov’s socialist realism). As an ultimate result of this, the notion of Brechtian cinema can produce the same, undesired, associations.

This chapter attempts to remedy the situation by stressing to an equal degree the notions’ interconnectedness and uniqueness. The reasoning behind its inclusion in the dissertation even though it does not present new discoveries concerns the critical remark on the existing scholarship I made previously, as well as by the reader’s possible lack of access to German (the language of many of the sources I have used). Organised around the concepts of the epic, Verfremdung, Gestus, and dialectics, the chapter progresses from the narrowest to the broadest term. The middle two sections deviate from this pattern, so as to indicate the chronological hierarchy between the ideas to which they correspond.

As stated earlier, this study posits an evolutionary view of Brecht’s theoretical writings on theatre, regarding its final articulation as its most complete. Still, the chapter makes fewer references to “Kleines Organon für das Theater” (“The Small Organon for Theatre”, 1949) and Dialoge aus dem Messingkauf (The Messingkauf Dialogues, 1939-56) – the most extensive expressions of Brecht’s theoretical precepts on the medium – than the shorter texts that predate them. The reason for this derives from the following: 1) the former group of writings, with their relatively greater focus on stylistic procedures than on narrative, have had a greater impact on cinema than the longer ones (it is the 1930 version of the “Notes to ‘Mahagonny’” schema quoted by the protagonist of Tout va bien (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972), the only fictional film I have discovered that makes a reference to Brecht’s dramatic theory); 2) the longer writings,
while refining many of the ideas presented in the earlier ones, do not introduce any new concepts (naiveté, the last addition to the theory, originated after the completion of The Messingkauf and The Organon.)

The discussion does not purport to be exhaustive: it excludes those ideas that, while significant *per se*, are irrelevant for the films analysed in the subsequent chapters (for example, the concept of the Gesellschaftlich-Komische [the socially comic], of which this chapter makes but a passing reference).

**The Epic**

The term “epic” was, in the context of German theatre, first used by Thomas Mann in 1908, in a characterisation of the Ancient Greek and Roman theatres. Erwin Piscator, the one theatre practitioner besides Brecht with whom the term is widely associated, attributes its coinage to the poet, novelist and dramatist Alfons Paquet, who allegedly used it in 1924 to describe his play Fahnen (Flags, 1923). (Knopf 1980: 394) To Piscator, the term denotes primarily the disruption of the conventional representational models by an eclecticisation of theatre – its borrowing from the other media, and especially those heavily reliant on technology. Brecht, likewise, does not describe “epic” in terms of a strictly determined form, but as a quality that can be recognised in a variety of these. (398) He associates it with critical observation, with rejecting the notion of destiny and awakening of social activism, with demonstrating the dependence of thinking and language on the socio-historical processes, transmitting the materialistic thinking, and democratism (reflected in the attempts of lifting the boundary between the spectator and performance.) (Ibid.)
Juliane Eckhardt delineates similarities to and differences from Brecht’s epic theatre in different theatrical traditions antedecedent to the German writer (1983: 108-196). In the historical context of slavery, they include: 1) the Greek chorus, which – like Brecht’s songs – distances the dramatic action by its commentary thereof, and underscores the division between a given play’s scenes and acts; 2) the primacy Aristotle places on the play’s narrative (mythos); 3) theatre’s double goal of entertainment and instruction, formulated by Horace in *Ars Poetica*. The most essential difference between the ancient Greek and Roman theatres on the one hand, and Brecht on the other, concerns the emphasis in the former two traditions on the individual and her destiny. Brecht, in contrast, focuses on the societal forces that influence the individual’s actions. (The non-linearity of Brecht’s plays, Eckhardt suggests, can be productively seen not only as a calculated source of Verfremdung, but also as a spontaneous corollary of their focus on issue rather than characters.)

Besides various types of religious drama and morality plays (the other of which suggests their resemblances to Brecht’s didacticism already by the etymology), the European theatre of the feudal epoch that shares most characteristics with Brecht’s is that of Shakespeare. Drawing largely on Käthe Rülicke-Weiler’s observations in *Die Dramaturgie Brechts* (Brecht’s Dramaturgy), Eckhardt identifies the following similarities between the theatres of the two playwrights: on the level of narrative, the prominence of the socio-historical background; on the level of non-verbal codes, the use of interludes, episodes, comments, and frequent instances of metatheatricality. As in the case of Ancient Greek drama, one of the two major differences between Shakespeare and Brecht concerns the latter dramatist’s rejection of the notion of destiny, which crucially
informs Shakespeare’s worldview. The second difference – Eckhardt goes on to observe borrowing from Ilya Fradkin – concerns the type of characters that occupy the centre of the two playwrights’ dramatic universes: in the case of Shakespeare, these are large, history-making figures, whereas Brecht’s drama often focuses on the small man, the bearer of influences of the forces from above.

The key elements that Brecht’s theatrical practice shared with that of the feudal epoch – Eckhardt paraphrases Tschong Dae Kim – are: the self-conscious acting style (Noh theatre), the privileging of narration over acting (Chinese theatre), and the use of masks (various stage traditions of the continent), while the key differences include the worldviews that underlie Brecht on the one hand and Asian cultures on the other. Determined by various socio-historical factors, these are too numerous and intricate to be summarised here.

The key theorists and practitioners from the period of transition to capitalism that bear comparison with Brecht are Lessing – in whose drama the comedic elements aim at social criticism, and therefore correspond to Brecht’s concept of the Gesellschaftlich-Komische – and in particular Diderot. Like Brecht, the French writer uses a materialist basis for his theory of representation (Abbild), emphasises in his plays social circumstances (conditions) instead of characters, adopts Horace’s dictum for the need of a theatrical performance to provide both instruction and entertainment, and advocates the actor’s detachment from her character’s emotions. The main difference between the two

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22 The idea, it should be noted, is conceived differently in the Greeks and Shakespeare: whereas the former posit the dependence of destiny on the will of gods, Shakespeare sees it as relational to the individual’s character. This relates back to another Greek thinker, Heraclitus, and his famous maxim equating one’s destiny with one’s character.
theorists’ positions concerns this last strategy: while its aim for Diderot is the spectator’s empathising with the character, Brecht aims to prevent this process from occurring.

Left outside the scope of Eckhardt’s investigation, the relationship between Brecht and Diderot’s theory of the tableau also pertains to the discussion. Devised in contrast to the French classical tradition of the coup de theatre, the tableau denotes – like peripeteia – a sudden turn of dramatic events. Its only difference from the Aristotelian term concerns its applicability exclusively to theatre. Diderot defines it as a disposition of the characters on stage, so natural and true that it would please him on canvas. (Hollier 478) The tableau depicts dramatic characters not in flux, but in a situation of relative stasis. The tendency toward de-dramatisation that underlies the technique is present also in Brecht, who, of course, shares Diderot’s anti-Aristotelian stance. The main difference between Diderot’s theatre on the one hand and Brecht’s on the other concerns the former’s view of the family. Diderot sees the family as a social unit whereby the vicissitudes of politics can be transcended – a view incompatible with Brecht’s dialectical-materialist background.

The similarities and differences between Brecht’s epic theatre and the western theatrical traditions from Diderot’s to Brecht’s day are as follows: among the Sturm und Drang dramatists, the most noteworthy are Lenz and Schiller. The first of these, because of the comedic and estranging elements of his plays; Schiller, on account of his chorus theory and corresponding didactic intentions; Büchner, because of his “epic” disregard of the Aristotelian unities.

The parallels between Naturalistic drama and Brecht concern the focus on social factors in both. The difference Eckhardt singles out is the former’s essentially
illusionistic character (reflected, perhaps most importantly, in its following of the fourth-wall convention.) Another major difference is a corollary of the already identified one, and pertains to the relative disinterest of the Naturalist playwright in the causes of the social conditions he depicts in detail (hence Brecht’s describing this, and the historically subsequent realist style, with the derogatory umbrella-term “surface realism”). For instance, Hauptmann’s *Die Weber* (The Weavers, 1892) – the style’s exemplary play – bases itself on documentary material on the Silesian weavers’ strike in 1844 and employs the region’s dialect and the speech style characteristic of the class that constitutes its focus. Leaving outside its scope the weavers’ oppressors, however, it fails to explain the essence of the social relationship between the two groups.

The similarity between Expressionist drama and Brecht, Eckhardt goes on to write, lies chiefly in the anti-naturalistic stance in both, aimed at distancing the viewer from the theatrical representation. The differences concern the worldviews that inform the thematic and stylistic preoccupations of the two: while the expressionist playwright frequently uses the politics and mores of society as a background of dramatic action (as does, for example, Kaiser in his *Gas* trilogy of plays [1917-1920]), the Expressionist playwright invariably focuses on the individual. By bemoaning their inability to understand the changed social circumstances of a rapidly industrialised country just out of a global war, he inadvertently perpetuates the (originally romantic) myth of the possibility of achieving true and complete independence from it. Such notions as capitalism, war and industry maintain in Expressionist theatre a decidedly abstract quality, whereas the tumultuous processes within the individual’s soul are constructed as concrete, with a suggestion of ontological primacy. Conversely, Brecht changes the
paradigm by implying not only that transcendence is impossible, but also that the individual does not possess an essence, its characteristics being constantly reshaped by larger societal forces.

With the proletarian-revolutionary theatre of the 20th century (Piscator and the Soviets), Brecht’s epic theatre shares the proletarian-revolutionary artistic purpose, but not the aesthetic strategies of these traditions: Piscator’s reliance on technology and the Stanislavski-inspired sentimentalism of Soviet socialist realism, the country’s only Party-approved artistic style between 1932 and the break-up.

The basic tenets of Brecht’s dramatic theory are most succinctly articulated in the schema juxtaposing dramatic and epic theatres, whose first version appeared in “The Notes to ‘Mahagonny.’”23 Because of its brevity, as well as because of the increased concern in the theory’s later articulations (“A Short Organon for Theatre” and The Messingkauf Dialogues) with effects of the performance rather than its dramaturgical structure, I choose the schema as a basis for the following brief investigation of the principles of form in Brecht’s theatre.24

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dramatische Form des Theaters</th>
<th>Epische Form des Theaters</th>
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<tr>
<td>handelnd</td>
<td>erzählend</td>
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<tr>
<td>verwickelt den Zuschauer in eine Bühnenaktion</td>
<td>macht den Zuschauer zum Betrachter, aber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbraucht seine Aktivität</td>
<td>weckt seine Aktivität</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ermöglicht ihm Gefühle</td>
<td>erzwingt von ihm Entscheidungen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erlebnis</td>
<td>Weltbild</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der Zuschauer wird in etwas</td>
<td>er wird gegenübergesetzt</td>
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</table>

23 In concurrence with John J. White’s view of the Lehrstück as a dramaturgical model essentially different from that of epic / dialectical theatre, I leave the former – as the one less influential to Brechtian cinema – outside the dissertation’s main scope. However, I will acknowledge and discuss its relevance for two of my case studies, Watkins and von Trier.

24 In the dissertation’s introduction, I included that section of the Mahagonny table that pertains solely to montage as a structural principle of the Brechtian narrative. The broader context of the present discussion necessitates quoting the schema in full.
As White has noted, the focus of the schema oscillates between means and ends (2004: 59), between theatrical representation and spectatorship. I will discuss Brecht’s use of

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25 The subsequent versions of the schema omit the ambiguous term, as well as the final binary. In The Messingkauf Dialogues, feeling (Gefühl) is replaced with empathy (Einfühlung).
montage, as the notion most crucial for my study, in the next chapter. For now, suffice it to remark that the role the technique plays in Brecht’s stylistic system should not be exaggerated. While the meaning of montage has come to be associated primarily with a technique championed by various “isms” of the 1910s and the following decade, the primary associations it has in German are with mechanical engineering (White 56) and construction. Commenting on the schema in relation to the play Mann ist Mann (Man Equals Man, 1926), Werner Hecht establishes a link between the notion of montage as used by Brecht in this context, and alterability: “Die Veränderungen wurden in der ersten Fassung des Schemas noch als ‘Montage’ – Akte gesehen (in der Art, wie die Soldaten beispielsweise Galy Gay unmontierten’)” (as qtd. in Ibid.): “in the first version of the schema, the changes were still seen as acts of ’montage’ (in the same sense, for example, in which the soldiers ‘dismantle’ Galy Gay.)” Hecht’s example is not to imply that the concept of montage as applied in Brecht should be interpreted counter-intuitively, as denoting dismantlement and separation (although this can be the case, as in the principle of separation of elements [Trennung der Elemente]). Of course, neither did Hecht’s example mean to imply that montage finds a practical application in Brecht solely in the realm of characterisation. In fact, the concept can be productively linked to most features of Brecht’s theatre, particularly as it relates to dialectics, and the idea of unified opposite constituents that underlies the Hegelian-Marxist notion.

Every salient element of Brecht’s stage production stands in a dialectical relationship with another: the bare stage and painstakingly detailed props, the ephemerality of performance and the fixedness of the cinematic images and titles that often accompany it, the stage and the auditorium, at once connected and separated by a
half-curtain. The following paragraphs will discuss the more foregrounded amongst these elements in a somewhat greater detail.

The language of Brecht’s drama, for example, can be regarded as a “montage” of different styles, borrowed from sources as diverse as Luther’s Bible, German street ballads, the songs of the comedian Karl Valentin, the plays of Elizabethan dramatists, Georg Büchner and Frank Wedekind, the novels of Rudyard Kipling, Jonathan Swift, Upton Sinclair, the Danish novelist J.V. Jensen and Charles Dickens, as well as gangster films. (Esslin 1984: 96) Brecht’s plays frequently combine “high” and “low” speech styles, the goal of which strategy is – as Martin Esslin notes – “das Missverhältnis von erstrebtem erhabenem Schein uns dem wirklichen, niedrigen Sein aufzudecken” (1962: 158): “to reveal to us the discrepancy between the endeavoured lofty appearance and the real, low being” (as in the case of the characters in Die heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe [Saint Joan of the Stockyards, 1932]), but sometimes the opposite – to reveal the discrepancy between the socially-imposed low appearance and real, lofty being (as in the case of the elevated language of Grushe in Der kaukasische Kreidekreis [The Caucasian Chalk Circle, 1945].)

Likewise, songs and music, featured in a great number of Brecht’s plays, do not merge with the dramatic action to enhance its emotional undertone, but – on the contrary – to distance it, thus foregrounding the constructedness of the text and performance. Sometimes, they punctuate the scene where a major dramatic change occurs (as in The Days of the Commune, to give but one of many examples), and are in other instances used as a point of contrast and / or irony (for instance, in Trommeln in der Nacht [Drums in the
Night, 1920], a play set in the aftermath of the disastrous 1914-1918 war, the gramophone plays the anthem “Deutschland über Alles” [“Germany Above All”].

Brecht’s use of scene titles too possesses a twofold, dialectical function. On the one hand, they facilitate the spectator’s comprehension of the narrative by reducing it to its essence (Fabel: fable); on the other, they draw her attention to the “how” of the theatrical representation. (Knopf 1980: 396) By revealing to the viewer the narrative details of the forthcoming scene, the titles aim to relieve her of the emotional tension of anticipation, and enable a cool analysis of the event represented. By transposing the meta-narrative from the literary genre and medium of which it is a convention (XVIII century novel and silent film, respectively), the Brechtian play aims to produce Verfremdung.

The idea of a dialectical duality underlies also the acting style that Brecht proposes in his theoretical writings, and employs as a theatre director. Inspired largely by the Chinese actor Mei Lan-fang, whose performance in Moscow Brecht saw in 1935, the style runs counter to the contemporaneous tendency in the German theatre of valuing a performer for their intensity and ability to “disappear” in the role. Through epic acting, “der Zeigende gezeigt wird” (GW XVII: 997): “the showing one becomes shown.” The actor, therefore, “ist nicht Lear, Harpagon, Schwejk, er zeigt diese Leute” (GW XV: 343): “is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he shows them.” (Brecht 1964: 137) The resulting actor’s distance from her part, which she passes on to the spectator, is intended to prevent the spectator from falling into the state of empathetic fascination that illusionistic theatre seeks to induce, and to keep her critical capacities active. To help the actor accomplish the split into a dramatic figure and herself as a person, a narrator of the events and a
participant in them (Schacherreiter 76), Brecht the director employed a series of exercises for actors: narrating in the third person, narrating in the past, quoting the dramatist’s scene instructions and commentaries, as well as “Fixieren des Nicht-Sondern” (“fixing the not, but”) – a technique that involves the actor’s informing the chosen manner of representing an act by possible alternative choices. “Geht er auf die Bühne”: “When [the actor] appears on the stage,” writes Brecht, “so wird er bei allen wesentlichen Stellen zu dem, was er macht, noch etwas ausfindig, namhaft und ahnbar machen, was er nicht macht; das heißt, er spielt so, daß man die Alternative möglichst deutlich sieht, so, daß sein Spiel noch die anderen Möglichkeiten ahnen läßt, nur eine der möglichen Varianten darstellt”: “besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants.” (Brecht 1964: 137)

Showing that the individual “is alterable and able to alter” (the act that, it should be noted, also goes against the Aristotelian “Kontinuität der Seele” [Oh 194]: “continuity of soul”) requires breaking the unities of space, time, and action. The violation of the second of the pertinent precepts of *Poetics* facilitates violating the first: during the 12 years spanned by the dramatic action of *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (Mother Courage and her Children, 1939), the viewer sees the characters in Sweden, Poland, Bavaria… The breaking of the third unity in Brecht is a corollary of the shift of the dramatic foci from the characters and their actions (central in the works of what Brecht designates “surface realism”) to the social context by which these are conditioned. Brecht does not altogether abandon an interest in causality, but focuses on its “deeper”
manifestations: just like the physicist of the contemporary, subatomic era transcends the limits of our sensory apparatus and makes the invisible readily apparent, Brecht, a dramatist of the scientific age, uncovers the relations between phenomena that would otherwise pass unnoticed. (Knopf 1980: 406) Like the above identified stylistic devices, the implicit removal of the hero from the centre of the dramatic universe in Brecht, as well as the violation of the Aristotelian unities as its consequence, make obvious the “knots.”

Regardless of the recurrence of certain stylistic patterns in Brecht’s dramas and more manifestly – theatrical productions, the existence of a “genuinely Brechtian” form would be difficult to prove. The genres of drama that Knopf, drawing on a note from Brecht’s Arbeitsjournal, identifies as characteristic of the playwright (parable and historical drama), (405) are not associated with a distinct set of formal procedures. In addition, Brecht’s own classification of Galileo among his parables (Fradkin 367) – a play widely regarded by the commentators as a historical drama – renders questionable Knopf’s division of Brecht’s dramatic oeuvre into two basic genres.26 On a more abstract level, however, the parable reveals its uniqueness. Patrice Pavis defines it as “a narrative that conceals a moral or religious precept or truth” (Pavis 1998: 248) and is associated with two levels – that of the immediate narrative, and that of the hidden one, “whose ‘soul’ must be discovered by the [perceiver].” (Ibid.) As such, the parable is connected to

26 In the category of parables, Fradkin classifies Man Equals Man, Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny (The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, 1929) Saint Joan of the Stockyards, all Lehrstücke, Die Rundköpfe und die Spitzköpfe (Roundheads and Pointedheads, 1934), Das Verhör des Lukullus (The Trial of Lucullus, 1939), Der gute Mensch von Sezuan (The Good Person of Szechwan, 1942), Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui (The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui, 1941), The Caucasian Chalk Circle, Turandot oder Der Kongreß der Weißwäscher (Turandot or the Whitewasher’s Congress, 1954), as well as, “with a certain justification”, some other plays and play fragments, of which Untergang des Egoisten Johann Fatzer (The Downfall of the Egoist Johann Fatzer, 1930) is perhaps best known. (Fradkin 364)
the double goal of instruction and entertainment that links the theory of epic / dialectic theatre to those of Diderot and Horace. This opposition of aims can ultimately be said to represent yet another example of a dialectical “montage” in Brecht.

The tradition of the parable, of course, predates Brecht for centuries or millenia: Kim locates its beginning in the 16th century (47), while Pavis illustrates it with non-specific Biblical examples (248). In the case of Brecht, whose post-1926 plays are, to one degree or another, invariably informed by a Marxist agenda, Fradkin’s associating the form in Brecht with the dramatist’s introduction to Marxism seems correct. “Um Anschauungen zu propagieren, muss man Anschauungen haben. In den ersten Jahren schrieb Brecht keine Parabeln”: “To propagate views, one needs to have views. In the first years, Brecht wrote no parables.” (365)

Verfremdung

Each of the existing translations of the term Verfremdung to English – alienation, distantiation, defamiliarisation and estrangement – is only partly adequate. The first of these implicitly collapses the boundary between the Brechtian term and Entfremdung, which Marx uses to describe the effects on man of the capitalist mode of production: his separation from his labour and the products thereof, as well as from his fellow man. The other English translations of the Brechtian term fail to reflect the intended purpose of Verfremdung: to provide a new understanding of a given situation enacted onstage, thus closing the dialectical triad whose first two constituents are “verstehen” (to understand) and “nicht verstehen” (to not understand.) (GW XV: 360) This is what distinguishes Brecht’s project from those modernist avant-garde movements of the twentieth century
that likewise sought to astonish the recipient. Unlike Brecht, however, such artistic movements as Formalism and Surrealism often did not aim for more than a mere destruction of the mundanely familiar (Oh 180)\textsuperscript{27}

Some of the confusions surrounding \textit{Verfremdung} seem due to the theorist’s own changing understanding of the concept, as well as to the twofold meaning the term has in Brecht’s mature writings. There, \textit{Verfremdung} sometimes pertains to a particular epistemological category, sometimes to a set of distinct artistic practices, and in some other cases to both of these. To complicate matters further, Brecht interchangeably uses the terms \textit{Entfremdung} and \textit{Verfremdung} until 1936. The former term became part of the German philosophical vocabulary at the end of the eighteenth century, when it was first used by Wilhelm von Humboldt in a posthumously discovered fragment. (Knopf 378)

Much more widely referenced in scholarship is the link between \textit{Verfremdung} and the related Hegelian concepts of alienation (\textit{Entfremdung}) and externalisation (\textit{Entäußerung}). Introduced in his 1807 work \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, the terms – in the words of Michael Inwood – pertain to “(1) the fact that the social substance is alien to the individual; (2) the individual’s alienation or surrender of his particular self and identification with the universal substance.” (1992: 37) In its second sense, the Hegelian \textit{Entfremdung} is interchangeable with \textit{Entäußerung}. Hegel posits the inevitability of

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\textsuperscript{27} This applies to an even greater extent to the theatre of the absurd. While the pre-World War II avant-garde movements invariably aligned themselves with one political option or another (the frequent fissures between these and the theorists and practitioners of the movements notwithstanding), the most celebrated absurdist playwrights, Beckett and Ionesco, famously maintained decidedly apolitical stances. As a consequence, “Die ‘\textit{Verfremdung}’ des absurden Theaters bleibt bei der ‘\textit{Entfremdung}’ stehen: ‘verstehen - nicht verstehen (als \textit{Entfremdung})’” (Knopf 1980: 401): “the ‘\textit{Verfremdung}’ of the absurdist theatre remains at the ‘\textit{Entfremdung}’: ‘understanding – not understanding (as alienation).’” Significantly, Brecht wrote an (unfinished) rewrite of \textit{Waiting for Godot}, in which the protagonists are depicted in terms of their class positions. Thus, Pozzo receives an aristocratic “von” and is described as a landowner, Lucky is “a donkey or a policeman,” Estragon as a “prole,” and Vladimir as an “intellectual.” (371)
*Entfremdung* in its second sense, as the process of acquiring culture involves self-alienation. (37) The Hegelian *Entfremdung* in its first sense, however, can be overcome through the intensification thereof: enlightenment and revolution. (38)

A remark Hegel gives in his 1809 grammar school lecture reveals more readily the link between the meaning of *Entfremdung* in Hegel and the synonymous terms in Brecht. Therein, Hegel defines *Entfremdung* as “Negation, Auflösung des Bekannten, Verflüssigung scheinbar gültiger Wahrheiten, ihre Bewegung” (Kim 34): “negation, dissolution of the familiar, liquification of seemingly valid truths, their motion.” The philosopher’s more commonly quoted definition is as follows: “Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es *bekannt* ist, nicht erkannt” (as qtd. in Ibid. 34): “The well-known is unknown, precisely because it is well known.”

Attempts have been made both of a strict separation and a bringing together of Marx’s *Entfremdung* and the Brechtian *Verfremdung*. The most prominent representative of the latter school, the East German scholar Ernst Schumacher, interprets *Verfremdung* exclusively in the light of the Marxist concept (1984). An opposite example can be found in Lachmann (1984) and Jestrovic (2006), where the reason for the confusions of *Entfremdung* with Brecht’s theatrical concept of making the familiar strange are implicitly attributed only to the etymological kinship between the two terms. (21) While it is true that *Entfremdung* (alienation in the Marxian sense) constitutes the subject matter of Brecht’s theatre and *Verfremdung* the methodological procedure of representing and distancing that subject matter (Ibid.), this is not the case in all Brecht’s writings that precede the latter term’s introduction into his vocabulary. (28)

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28 For example, the use of the term Entfremdung in the following passage from the 1930 outline for Brecht’s “*Große und kleine Pädagogik*” (“Great and Small Pedagogy”) is unrelated to the Marxist concept:
Widely referenced as a third major influence on Brecht’s most famous concept is the Russian formalist school of literary criticism. Brecht reportedly discussed with Tretjakow, the school’s prominent member, Shklovsky’s concept of “priem ostranenija” years prior to the introduction of **Verfremdung** into the vocabulary of aesthetics and theory of knowledge. Still, Brecht scholarship is characteristically divided about the scope of the Russian formalists’ influence on Brecht. The thesis on the similarity between the two ideas was first put forward by John Willett, for whom “the purpose of ‘Verfremdung’, which Brecht launched immediately after his Moscow visit of 1935... is just that which Shklovsky had given for his ‘Priem Ostranenija’ or ‘device of making it strange’”. (1964: 209) Building upon Willett, Reinhold Grimm attributes to Shklovsky himself an influence of Hegel and Marx, and especially an agreement between the key concept of the Russian formalist and its equivalent in Brecht (Kim: 37) However, this commentator also stresses that “priem ostranenia” is but one source of **Verfremdung**. (Di Tommaso 4)

The most convincing arguments that challenge the notion of the centrality of the parallel between ostranenie and **Verfremdung** have been given by Jan Knopf and Luca Di Tommaso. For the former commentator, the dichotomy the Russian formalist theory posits between art and reality indicates its essential divergence from Brecht’s concept. Russian formalism presumes the ability of art to attain a relative independence from the

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[d]eshalb soll im zuschauer nicht an das gefühl appeliert werden das ihm erlauben würde ästhetisch abzureagieren sondern an seine ratio die schauspieler müssen dem zuschauer figuren und vorgänge entfremden so dass sie ihm auffallen der zuschauer muß partei ergreifen statt sich zu identifizieren.” (as qtd. in Kim 35)

therefore one should not appeal to the spectator’s emotion which would allow for aesthetic response but rather to their pure reason actors must estrange figures and action in order for these to grip the audience's attention the spectator must take sides instead of identifying with the character.
other social realms, and sets as its ultimate goal a recovery of “the sensation of life,” “[making] one feel things, [making] the stone stony”. (Shklovsky 12) The area of the Russian formalists’ interest, therefore, does not include cognition, as it does in Brecht, but solely perception. In Brecht, writes Knopf, “soll das allgemein Zutreffende der historisch-gesellschaftlichen Realität ‘eigentümlich’ werden, das Künstliche, das sich als Naturliches gebärdet, soll in einer Künstlichkeit, und zwar indem es mit der Realität konfrontiert wird, erkannt werden” (as qtd. in Kim 37): “what is generally true of the socio-historical reality should become strange, the contrived, which bears itself as natural, should be perceived as artificial, and confronted with reality at that. Di Tommaso bases his distinction of the two terms on Shklovsky’s understanding of ostranenie as a sine qua non of art, which only emphasises the uniqueness of the other concept, with its prominent political dimension.

Di Tommaso’s remark carries the implication that Verfremdung is primarily an artistic device or a set thereof, while Knopf emphasises its relevance to the theory of cognition. Brecht’s use of the same term in discussions of both categories is an expression of a refusal to divide the two. Because this study concerns itself with both theoretical and practical applications of the concept, the aspects of it pertaining to the theory of cognition and art will be discussed separately.

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29 Here, it must be noted that the above interpretation of ostranenie is underlaid by the view that the concept’s adjustment to the Zhdanovian doctrine of socialist realism in the 1930s, whereby it acquired an overtly political dimension, represents a betrayal of its original postulates, which makes it only nominally related to its original, 1917 formulation.

30 Tellingly, however, while Knopf describes the aim of the Russian formalists a restoration of an “ursprüngliche Naivität” (“primordial naivete”), this commentator’s otherwise painstakingly meticulous hierarchical taxonomy of Brechtian terms gives no place to “Naivität,” which holds a central place in the theorist’s later writings.
Verfremdung has been developed in contrast to the principle of empathy (Einfühlung), a central term of Aristotle’s Poetics, whose tenets, according to Brecht, have governed the Western theatre since ancient Greece to his days. (XV: 298).

Aristotelian theatre is a “Kunstmittel einer Epoche, in der der Mensch die Variable, seine Umwelt die Konstante ist” (300): “artistic device of an era in which the people are changeable, and their environment invariable.” The historical situation of late capitalism, however, which reverses the described relationship, calls for an alternative, scientific method. Brecht describes the method of its practitioner as follows:

Um das Ding zu begreifen, tun sie, als begriffen sie es nicht; um Gesetze zu entdecken, bringen sie die Vorgänge in Gegensatz zu überkommenen Vorstellungen; dadurch arbeiten sie das Krasse, Besondere der eben studierten Erscheinung heraus. Gewisse Selbstverständlichkeiten werden so nicht selbstverständlich, freilich nur, um nun wirklich verständlich zu werden. (GW VII: 362)

To comprehend a thing, they act as if they did not [already] comprehend it; to discover the laws, they bring the processes in contrast with traditional ideas; thereby, they carve what is stark and particular out of what they have just studied. Certain things that are taken for granted are thus rendered unnatural, of course only to be now made more understandable.

Another reference by Brecht to “das Selbstverständliche” brings the concept of the scientific method back to Hegel, and his above-cited quote from The Phenomenology of Spirit on the well-known, as well as to Francis Bacon, who writes that “for just as in politics each man’s character and the hidden set of his mind and passions is better brought out when he is in a troubled state than at other times, in the same way also the secrets of nature reveal themselves better through harassments applied by the arts than when they go in their own way.” (81) Brecht writes:

Das Selbstverständliche wird in gewisser Weise unverständlich gemacht, das geschieht aber nur, um es dann um so verständlicher zu machen. Damit aus dem Bekannten etwas Erkanntes werden kann, muß es aus seiner Unauflägkeit herauskommen; es muß mit der Gewohnheit gebrochen werden, das betreffende Ding bedürfe keiner Erläuterung. (XV: 355)
The obvious is, in a way, made incomprehensible, but this is done only so that it can then be made more comprehensible. In order for something well-known to become understood, it must come out of its inconspicuousness; it must break with the habit, the thing in question requires no explanation.

However, it is Marx who, by standing “on its feet” the Hegelian notion of Entfremdung (Knopf 1980: 378), gives it practical viability (Oh 177). The idea of a (dialectical) reconciliation of theory and practice frequently recurs in Brecht’s writings. While subscribing to Lenin’s view of the concreteness of truth, Brecht preserves in his thought traces of Hegelian idealism, if only inasmuch as he adopts the triadic model of dialectic as reworked by Marx.

Brecht the playwright has been criticised for failing to always meet the dialectical goals he intended for his theatre. While I do not want to posit that all Brecht’s plays are of equal aesthetic merit, nor is my concern here to evaluate his writings at all, I want to point out that these criticisms often result from a lack of attention to non-verbal elements of those productions of Brecht’s plays he directed or had a decisive creative influence on. The dialectics of a Brechtian production can, and indeed ought to, result from its performance’s different aspects rather than the playtext only. What appears to underlie widespread criticisms of Brecht the practitioner’s failure to conform to his own theoretical precepts is the assumption that the process of bringing together theory and practice should be one-directional, progressing from the former to the latter realm. What I am suggesting is that the unity of theory and praxis, which Brecht famously advocated, should perhaps be viewed as a methodological ideal rather than a fully realisable goal.

The definition of Verfremdung Knopf calls classical (Knopf 1980: 383) touches upon both the strictly epistemological and the practical aspects of the concept:

31 For a concise example, see the ninth point of “Dialectik und Verfremdung” (“Dialectics and Verfremdung”). (XV: 361)
Einen Vorgang oder einen Charakter verfremden heißt zunächst einfach, dem Vorgang oder dem Charakter das Selbstverständliche, Bekannte, Einleuchtende zu nehmen und über ihn Staunen und Neugierde zu erzeugen. [...] Verfremden heißt also Historisieren, heißt Vorgänge und Personen als historisch, also als vergänglich darstellen. (XV: 302)

To de-familiarise an event or character means first to, simply, take away what is taken for granted, what is familiar and obvious, and instead generate astonishment and curiosity. [...] To estrange means also to historicise, to represent the events and persons as historical and transient.

The first part of the definition, rather than asserting the originality of Verfremdung, emphasises the concept’s similarity to ostranenie. One can infer that Verfremdung deserves a separate name on account of the historicising its entails. Historicising (Historisieren) is itself yet another major term of Brechtian vocabulary, so much so that Klaus-Detlef Müller identifies it as an “umfassende inhaltliche Bestimmung der Verfremdungstechnik” [...] “deren wichtigste formale Ausprägung” (29): “encompassing substantial term of the technique of Verfremdung” [...] “its most important formal characteristic.” The term is not entirely intuitive, as it suggests only that aspect of the concept pertinent to the representation of a dramatic event as if it has already taken place. (The reasons for the widespread association of Historisieren solely with the mentioned artistic procedure should be sought not only in the term’s etymology, but also in the fact that a majority of Brecht’s plays are indeed set in the past.)

The other aspect of Historisieren involves representing the dramatic events as changeable. (Knopf 1980: 386) Kim, apparently building upon the distinction established by Knopf – and using the Benjaminian coinage Jetztzeit (now-time) – notes that historicising involves teaching the conception of “Jetztzeit als Historie und die Historie als Jetztzeit” (43): “now-time as history and history as now-time.” This evokes the third of the triad of 20th-century terms denoting estrangement in the arts, the Czech structuralists’ aktualizace, the terms interchangeably translated to English as
foregrounding and topicalisation. The first sense of the term *aktualizace* denotes the upturning of the conventional hierarchy of artistic signs within an artwork, whereas its second one denotes making the subject of an artistic presentation topical.

The most famous example of Brecht’s discussion of *Historisieren* as applied in artistic practice concerns acting:


The actor must play the incidents as historical ones. Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and ‘universally human’; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history, and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period’s point of view. The conduct of those born before us is alienated from us by an incessant evolution. (Brecht 1964: 140)

The need for Brecht’s addition of *Historisieren* to the existing arsenal of his terms arose, as White speculates, not from an ambition to claim the uniqueness of *Verfremdung* in relation to Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*, but because Mei Lan-fang, whose acting style prompted Brecht to use for the first time the term *Verfremdung* in writing, “did not “historicise” his material”. (White 95)

Brecht does not identify acting as the only possible vehicle of *Historisieren*. White points to Brecht’s emphasis on details in his commentary on Piscator’s adaptation of Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* as an instance of application of this concept. The historicising theatre, writes Brecht, “wirft sich ganz und gar auf das Eigentümliche, Besondere, der Untersuchung Bedürftige des so alltäglichen Vorgangs” (as qtd. in White 98): “casts itself entirely upon what is peculiar, particular, and in need of investigation about everyday processes.” I will offer examples of the particular and peculiar from
Brecht’s plays: the baby Michael’s fine linen in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the telescope in *Galileo*, Thiers’ glass of milk in *Die Tage der Kommune* (The Days of the Commune, 1949). The above words of Brecht reveal once again the anti-Aristotelian underscore of *Verfremdung*: namely, it is the universality of exemplary tragedies that *Poetics* celebrates the most; the ultimate purpose of all prescriptions the work offers is to transcend the locality of time and space to which a dramatic work is necessarily bound, in order to ensure their applicability regardless of the given socio-historical situation. Its specificity notwithstanding, Aristotle consistently implies, man remains powerless at the whims of gods. Brecht’s describes the purpose of *Historisieren* in precisely contrary terms:

Was ist damit [Verfremdung und Historisierung, d.V.] gewonnen? […] Damit ist gewonnen, daß der Zuschauer im Theater eine neue Haltung bekommt. Er bekommt den Abbildern der Menschenwelt auf der Bühne gegenüber jetzt dieselbe Haltung, die er als Mensch dieses Jahrhunderts der Natur gegenüber hat. Er wird auch im Theater empfangen als der große Änderer der in die Naturprozesse und die gesellschaftlichen Prozesse eingreifen vermag, der die Welt nicht mehr nur hinnimmt, sondern sie meistert. (XV: 302)

What is gained with [Verfremdung and Historisierung]? […] It is thereby gained, that the spectator acquires a new attitude. He now acquires from the stage the same images of the human world that he as a person of this century has towards nature. He also becomes conceived in the theater as a great modifier, able to intervene in the natural and social processes, someone who does not merely accept, but masters the world.

A later definition by Brecht of *Verfremdung* merits Reinhold Grimm’s attribution to it of “politisch-ästhetischer Doppelcharakter”(224): “political-aesthetical double character”:

“Echte, tiefe, eingreifende Verwendung der Verfremdungseffekte setzt voraus, daß die Gesellschaft ihren Zustand als historisch und verbesserbar betrachtet”: “Genuine, deep,
interventionist use of *Verfremdung* effects presupposes that the society regards its condition as historical and improvable.”

**Gestus**

Perhaps as a consequence of a relative disregard of non-linguistic signs in Brecht’s theatre (which, again, is a corollary of the common view of Brecht as more a playwright than a director, whose origins can be traced to the influential work of Reinhold Grimm), the concept of *Gestus* has been given considerably less attention than *Verfremdung*. *Gestus* is an equally elusive term, as the differences shown by the scholars’ investigations of the term’s etymological roots suggest. Fredric Jameson explores the original verb, *gerere* – for which he gives the following translations: “to carry on,” to wear, to bear, and to wage (99) – whereas Marc Silberman traces it back to the Greek *bastos*, the root of which, *bas*, “indicates coming or going in a specific, intentional direction.” (2006: 320) The verb *gerere* carries the allusion to a speaker’s or actor’s use of gesturing, and “the Latinate *gestus* refers to everything related to mime and mimicry, including facial expressions, body posture, and body language, which contribute to the telling of a story.” (321) *Geste*, a derivative of the Latin word, entered the German language in the 16th century. Originally restricted in meaning to clownery, the word was expanded over the

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32 My simultaneous dismissal of Shklovsky’s revised concept of *ostranenie* on account of the presumed influence on it of the political circumstances of Stalinism on the one hand and, embracing Brecht’s late definitions of *Verfremdung*, formulated in a country whose politics were significantly impacted by the doctrine, needs justification: unlike Shklovsky, who maintained a decidedly apolitical stance until becoming the object of criticism by the Party on account of the detachment of his theoretical position from the society’s social reality, Brecht shared the politics and methodology of Marxism ever since his introduction to the field.
centuries to encompass vocal characteristics and general behaviour. (Ibid.) The Brechtian
*Gestus* has a meaning much broader than this may suggest, hence the inadequacy of the
word gesture for rendering the term into English (implicitly acknowledged by John
Willett’s translating it with the archaic “gest”, which choice, however, carries
connotations hardly suggestive of the concept’s essence.)\(^{33}\)

In 1767, Lessing mentions *Gestus* in a sense similar to that the term has in Brecht.
Lessing writes about “‘the individualising *Gestus*’ as an actor’s tool that can make moral
symbolism or general moral principles perceptible and comprehensible.” (Silberman
2006: 321) There is a kinship between this idea and “*schöne Bewegung*” (“the beautiful
movement”), which Schiller developed a few decades later. The latter idea concerns a
non-intentional expression of a person’s character which proves their moral beauty.
(Ibid.) The earliest Brecht writing that makes a reference to *Gestus* is from 1929, and
slightly postdates the use of the term by Kurt Weill.\(^{34}\) Elisabeth Hauptmann, however,
claims that she heard Brecht use the word for the first time in 1926, in a discussion about
*Man Equals Man*. (322)

To John Willett, *Gestus* is “at once gesture and gist, attitude and point: one aspect
of the two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed.”
(1964: 175) Willett’s restriction of human interactions appears questionable in the light of
one of Brecht’s own examples of *Gestus*: “Die Abwehrhaltung gegen eine Fliege ist
zunächst noch kein gesellschaftlicher Gestus, die Abwehrhaltung gegen einen Hund

\(^{33}\) Importantly, after the development of the concept, Brecht never uses it interchangeably with related
German words *Haltung* and *Gebärde*.

\(^{34}\) “[Music] can reproduce the Gestus which illustrates the action on the stage, it can even create a kind of
basic Gestus which forces the actor into a definite attitude which precludes every doubt and every
minsunderstanding concerning the relevant action.” (Weill 62)
kann einer sein, wenn z.B. durch ihn der Kampf, den ein schlechtgekleideter Mensch gegen Wachhunde zu führen hat, zum Ausdruck kommt” (XV: 483): “The attitude of chasing away a fly is not yet a social gest, though the attitude of chasing away a dog may be one, for instance, if it comes to represent a badly dressed man’s continual battle against watchdogs.” (Brecht 1964: 104) Patrice Pavis’ definition of the concept – “the social relationship which the actor establishes between his character and the other characters” – (Pavis 1999: 177) avoids the problematic implication of Willett’s that both characters whose interaction shows Gestus need to be human. This definition, however, does not take into account the possible occurrence of Gestus in the relationships between characters and objects, and in particular in those related to work (consider, for example, the different manifestations of Mother Courage’s relationship to her wagon.) Finally, Brecht explicitly states in “Über gestische Musik” (“On Gestic Music”, 1937) that “Der Arbeitsgestus ist zweifellos ein gesellschaftlicher Gestus, da die auf die Bewältigung der Natur gerichtete menschliche Tätigkeit eine Angelegenheit der Gesellschaft, eine Angelegenheit zwischen Menschen ist” (XV: 483): “The gest of working is definitely a social gest, because all human activity directed towards the mastery of nature is a social undertaking between men.” (Brecht 1964: 104)

In his writings from the mid-1920s, Brecht still struggles to establish a distinction between gesture in the everyday sense of the word and Gestus. From the late 1930s onwards, Brecht uses the concept almost invariably in the sense of “social Gestus,” (Silberman 2006: 325) and in 1951 makes a statement closest to a definition of the concept: “Unter sozialem Gestus ist der mimische und gestische Ausdruck der gesellschaftlichen Beziehungen zu verstehen, in demen die Menschen einer bestimmten
Epoche zueinander stehen” (as qtd. in Becker 34): “As a social gestus, we should understand the mimical and gestural expression of social relationships, in which the people of a certain era stand together.” An example of *Gestus* Brecht gives in “On Gestic Music” extends the notion’s meaning to the linguistic realm:

Language is gestic when it is grounded in a gest and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men. The sentence “pluck the eye thay offends thee out” is less effective from the gestic point of view that “if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out. The latter starts by presenting the eye, and the first clause has the definite gest of making an assumption; the main clause then comes as a surprise, a piece of advice, and a relief. (Brecht 1964: 104)

The examples of *Gestus* in Brecht’s theatre include the use of masks to convey the changes of Peter Lorre’s Galy Gay in the 1931 production of *Man Equals Man*, the beggar teaching how to eat like a poor man in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and – perhaps most famously – the lack of Courage’s emotional reaction to the death of Kattrin in the 12th scene of *Mother Courage and her Children*, whereby the character, as Oh observes, elevates the death to a social fact. (117)

Brecht complicates the concept dialectically by adding to it that of *Grundgestus*, or basic *Gestus*. Referring – as Silberman phrases it – “to surprising reversals or the unexpected identity of opposites” (326), *Grundgestus* comprises various, and typically contradictory gestic material. The examples of it Brecht gives in “Short Organum” are as follows: Richard Gloucester courting his victim’s widow, Azdak deciding who Michael’s true mother is by using a chalk circle, God betting with the Devil for the soul of Dr Faustus, Woyzeck buying a cheap knife in order to murder his wife. (Brecht 1964: 200)

Importantly for the topic of this study, Brecht frequently makes use of cinematic tropes and examples in his discussions of *Gestus*. Writing in “Die Straßenszene” (“The Street Scene”, 1938) about how the witness of a traffic accident should go about
explaining the behaviour of the driver and victim to a group of bystanders who missed the accident or whose view of it differs from the witness’s, he remarks that the demonstrator achieves the *Verfremdungseffekt* by “executing his motions carefully, probably in slow motion.” (Brecht 1964: 126) Similarly, in the account of his collaboration with Lorre on the 1931 production of *Man Equals Man*, Brecht mentions a short film they made of the performance, and claims that the actor managed to convey in the silent film the basic meaning of each sentence of the play through miming. (55)

**Dialectics**

All Brecht’s major theatrical and filmic concepts converge toward dialectics. The “Great Method,” as Brecht often refers to it, informs the 1927 “Betrachtungen über Schwierigkeiten des Episches Theaters” and figures prominently as a term in a wide range of his later writings, from the 1931 “Notizen über die dialektische Dramatik” (“Notes on Dialectical Dramatic Art”; GW XV: 211-25) to the 1951-1956 series of writings under the common title “Die Dialektik auf dem Theater” (“Dialectics in the Theatre”; GW XVI: 867-941). To Brecht, dialectics is


> a practical doctrine of alliances and of the dissolution of alliances, of the exploitation of changes and the dependency on change, of the instigation of change and the changing of the instigators, the separation and emergence of unities, the unselfsufficiency of oppositions without each other, the unification of mutually exclusive oppositions. The Great Method makes it possible to recognise processes within things and to use them. It teaches us to ask questions which enable activity. (Jameson 117)
The scholarship attributes a decisive influence on the development of the concept of epic theatre – whose last evolutionary stage Brecht calls dialectical – to the work of the sociologist Fritz Sternberg (1895-1963). Seong-Kyun Oh, for example, observes that it was Sternberg’s Marxist-grounded theorems on the negation of the bourgeois illusionistic theatre that provided Brecht with a raison d’être of his dialectical theatre. (19) Brecht embraces Sternberg’s view, expressed in “The Cologne Radio Talk”, that the value of an artwork is inherently relative to the socio-historical circumstances of its production, for which reason “Es gibt keine ewigen Werte in der Kunst” (GW XV: 147): “there is no eternal value in art.” The merit of the individual-based drama – which, according to Sternberg, reached its pinnacle with Shakespeare – consists of its capturing the process of the feudal man’s breaking from the collective bonds that characterised the Middle Ages. (19) Although the individual-based drama, as Sternberg argues, has become obsolete in the mass society of late capitalism, it continues to dominate the theatre, which, in Oh’s words, exists as an enclave detached from the social reality. (20) In “Betrachtungen”, Brecht advocates a closure of the gap between the two, employing a distinctly Marxist binary: “Das Theater, die Literatur, die Kunst müssen im Gegenteil gerade den ‘ideologischen Überbau’ für die effektiven realen Umschichtungen in der Lebensweise unserer Zeit schaffen” (XV: 132): “it is precisely theatre, art and literature that have to form the ‘ideological superstructure’ for a solid, practical rearrangement of our age’s way of life.” (Brecht 1964: 23) For Matthias-Johannes Fischer, the above words betray a vulgar Marxist belief that the ultimate goal of the class struggle, a removal of the capitalist rule by the proletariat, can be achieved merely through interventions in the

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35 In the note accompanying the English-language version of the article, Willett defines ideological superstructure as “the whole body of art, ideas, morality, etc., of any given society, which Marx saw as resting on certain basic economic relationships.” (23)
domain of the superstructure. (179) As a natural corollary of allocating the implied role to the artwork, Brecht suggests that the latter’s assessment be removed from the realm of aesthetics, at whose poles stand the qualifiers “good” and “bad,” into the broader realm of the socially scientific, in which only the terms “correct” and “wrong” are applicable. (XV: 128)

Sternberg’s influence on Brecht’s changed view of theatre may have been decisive, but evidence exists that Brecht had an impulse to reform the medium even before he acquainted himself with the sociologist’s work. Brecht’s collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann testifies in her 1926 “Notizen über Brechts Arbeit” (“Notes on Brecht’s Work”) that Brecht “wußte, daß die bisherige (große) Form des Dramas für die Darstellung [...] moderne[r] Prozesse [...] nicht geeignet war” (as qtd. in Oh 20): “[Brecht] knew that the (big) form of drama so far is not useful for the representation of the modern processes.” Hauptmann follows the remark with a quotation of Brecht: “Wenn man sieht, daß unsere heutige Welt nicht mehr in Drama paßt, dann paßt das Drama eben nicht mehr in die Welt” (as qtd. in Ibid.: 21): “If one sees that our world of today does not fit in drama anymore, then the drama, likewise, does not anymore fit in the world.”

A key figure for the further development of Brecht’s understanding of dialectics was the heretical Marxist thinker Karl Korsch. Brecht was a reader of Korsch’s 1927 study *Marxismus und Philosophie*, and an attendee of his series of lectures entitled “Lebendiges und Totes im Marxismus” (“The Living and Dead in Marxism”), given in the Karl Marx Schule in Berlin-Neukölln in 1932-1933. *Marxismus und Philosophie* critiques Lenin’s reflectionist theory, which in the Comintern era (1919-1943) came to be
internationally recognised as the only correct Marxist theory of knowledge. In his 1909 work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin articulates the basic postulate of the reflectionist theory as follows: “The world is matter moving in conformity to law, and our knowledge, being the highest product of nature, is in a position only to reflect this conformity to law.” (170) To Lenin, the law governing the material processes is, therefore, unalterable. The postulate, then, carries the implication of a unilateral dependence of consciousness on the “actual” being, that is of unilateral dependence of the superstructure on the base. In his article “*Bertolt Brecht und Karl Korsch*” (“Bertolt Brecht and Karl Korsch”), Christian Schacherreiter suggests that the above postulate stems from the strict division Lenin establishes elsewhere in the work between what are, to him, two main philosophical outlooks: materialism and idealism. (61) In Lenin’s words,

Materialism is the recognition of “objects in themselves,” or outside the mind; ideas and sensations are copies or images of those objects. The opposite doctrine (idealism) claims that objects do not exist “without the mind”; objects are “combinations of sensations.” (as qtd. in Ibid. 69)

According to Schacherreiter, the answer to the question of primacy between mind and matter is, for Lenin, the criterion that separates idealism from materialism. (64) Korsch’s critique concerns the alleged implication of Lenin’s positing mind as merely a mirror of material processes (which itself implicitly answers the above-mentioned question): bringing the debate back to the pre-Kantian period, wherein it was still carried in religious terms. 36 (Ibid.) Furthermore, by locating the process of dialectics wholly in

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36 Schacherreiter summarises Wolfgang Röd’s explanation of the link between Kantian idealism and dialectics as follows: “Kant leugnet in ‘Kritik der reinen Vernunft’ keineswegs die Existenz des Dings an sich, die Existenz einer Objektwelt, aber er leugnet ebensowenig die Realität unseres Wahrnehmungs- und Denkapparates, über dessen Abbildungsfähigkeit wir keinerlei Gewißheit haben können, weil es für uns
nature, and designating knowledge as merely a passive reflection of “objective” being in
the “subjective” consciousness, Lenin destroys the dialectical relationship between mind
and matter – and, as an inevitable consequence – the dialectical relationship between
theory and practice. 37 (Schacherreiter 65)

In contrast to Lenin, Korsch assigns consciousness a decidedly active role in
dialectical relationships. To this thinker, consciousness is “realer, wirklicher, wenn auch
geistig-ideeller Teil dieser natürlichen und geschichtlich-gesellschaftlichen Welt in dieser
Welt mitten drin” (131): “real, true, even though spiritually-ideal part of this natural and
historico-societal world amidst this world.” This emphasis on consciousness stands in a
sharp contrast to Lenin, who characterises it as an approximately faithful image of being
at best. (Oh 25) Schacherreiter usefully illuminates the implication for the subject-object
relationship of Korsch’s understanding of consciousness:

Als materialistischer Dialektiker sieht Karl Korsch das Subjekt nicht nur als denkendes, sondern
auch als ein sich verhaltendes Wesen, ökonomisch, sozial, politisch, kulturell. Das Subjekt, das in
Modellen idealistischer Dialektiker hauptsächlich oder nur ein geistiges Wesen ist, erfaßt
Korsch als arbeitendes. (67)

As a materialist dialectician, Karl Korsch regards the subject not only as a thinking, but also as an
acting entity, economic, social, political, cultural. The subject, which is in the models of idealistic
dialecticians conceived chiefly or only as a spiritual entity, Korsch understands as
working.

nicht möglich ist, aus unserer subjektiven Begrenzung auszubrechen und unseres Wahrnehmungs- und
Denkapparates, über dessen Abbildungsfähigkeit wir keinerlei Gewißheit haben können, weil es für uns
nicht möglich ist, aus unserer subjektiven Begrenzung ausbrechen und unsere Erkenntnismittel objektiv zu
überprüfen” (as qtd. in Schacherreiter 64): “Kant by no means denies in *Critique of Pure Reason* the
existence of things as such, the existence of an objective world, but he also does not deny the reality of our
faculties of perception and thought, about whose accuracy we can have absolutely no certainty, while it is
for us impossible to break from our subjective limits and to objectively verify our means of knowledge.”

37 It seems worth noting that Georg Lukács, with whom Brecht famously debated about realism as a
methodological problem, shares Korsch’s position on the strict dualism between spirit and matter. In his
1923 work *Geschichte und Klassenbewuβtsein*, Lukács rejects it as “vulgar materialism.” (1970)
Korsch illustrates the notion of the subject’s agency by the phrase “geistige Aktion” (“spiritual action”), which enables Brecht to understand artistic practice as practice with the potential to change society. (Oh 23) Brecht’s stressing that culture is not a “thing” (“Ding”), enables him to implicitly classify it amongst social processes, (Ibid.) and thereby – to suggest its possession of agency. The “decisive” factor of the revolutionary superstructure corresponds also with the 11th Feuerbach thesis, according to which the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, whereas the point is to change it. (31-32)

Hyung-Ki Kim persuasively observes that Korsch’s phrase “geistige Aktion” corresponds with Brecht’s “eingreifendes Denken”, the latter being, to Brecht, identical to dialectical thinking. (9) What meaning does this phrase hold in Brecht’s system? Fredric Jameson, whose Brecht and Method puts forward an argument identical to Schacherreiter’s, Oh’s, and Kim’s, writes that it is characteristic of Brecht’s slyness that he does not offer us a positive theory of the consequences and the interests at work in ideology but, rather, a negative one: where the crucial term and leitmotiv (...) is indeed the key word ‘folgenlos’, without consequences’. What is thus ideological about a particular work of art or a philosophical school alike is that it should have no consequences, that it should be designed to avoid having consequences. (Jameson 159)

To Brecht, Interventionist thinking stands in contrast to non-empirical, and hence ineffectual thinking. Brecht designates “die bloßen Kopfarbeiter” (“mere headworkers”), (Jan Knopf, as qtd. in Oh 30) who embody the latter kind of thinking, as “Tuis” – the coinage consisting of the first letters of “Tellekt-Uell-In”, an anagrammatic form of
“Intellektuell” (the intellectual). If an intellectual’s connection with reality should be measured by their agency, the mechanicists of Leninist provenance themselves could be described as “Tuis,” for they posit dialectic not as a method, but as an ontology. The latter view of dialectic leads to “Verschlammung und Metaphysizierung”: “muddying and metaphorising” of “common Marxism,” (as qtd. in Oh 26) the result of which is a new ideology.

(26)

Brecht’s understanding of ideology is, in John J. White’s interpretation, identical to Marx’s and Engels’, who link it directly to the concept of “falsches Bewußtsein” (“false consciousness”):

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him are unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. [...] He works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, he does not investigate further for a more distant process independent of thought; indeed, its origins seem obvious to him, because as all action is produced through the medium of thought, it also appears to him to be ultimately based on thought.” (as qtd. in White 216)

38 Tuis are the subject of a series of Brecht’s works, most notably of Turandot, and of the unfinished Der Tui-Roman (The Tui Novel [1933-1943]).

39 This by no means implies that Brecht entirely rejects Lenin. Writing about the influences of Korsch and Lenin on Brecht, Dettlev Schöttker uses the powerful example of a text from Me-Ti, Brecht’s collection of anecdotes and parables, where Lenin (Mi-en-leh) is praised as an exemplary dialectician. (BFA: 18) However, in light of Schöttker’s explanation for the reason Brecht mentions Lenin’s, and not Korsch’s name, while employing the latter’s terms in a direction of his last production, The Days of the Commune, the title of the above-mentioned text from Me-Ti, “Widerspruch” (“Contradiction”), appears applicable to the relationship between Brecht’s assessment of Lenin and his alignment with Korsch’s position regarding dialectic. Schöttker writes: “Der Grund dafür [...] ist sicherlich darin zu suchen, daß Korsch wegen seines ehemaligen Parteiausschlusses zu jener Zeit in der DDR als marxistischer Theoretiker nicht rehabilitiert war” (Schöttker 131): “The reason for that [...] should certainly be sought in the fact that Korsch, on the account of his former exclusion from the party, was not rehabilitated in the GDR as a Marxist theorist.”

40 In a conversation on the subject with Walter Benjamin, Brecht remarks that “die Bekämpfung der Ideologie zu einer neuen Ideologies geworden [ist]” (as qtd. in Oh 26): “the struggle against ideology has become a new ideology.”
White persuasively links Brecht’s avoidance of direct use of the term, repeatedly alluding to it in his mature writings on drama, (White 269) to his considering this too dangerous a topic to handle in a treatise intended for East Berlin. (216) Jameson, in contrast, notes that the reason Brecht eschews classical and modern theories of ideologies altogether concerns his view that it is precisely the preoccupation of leftist thinkers with the various complex (‘Western-Marxist’) theories of ideology that marks them as Tuis in the first place. (158) Jameson emphasises that this does not imply that Tuis, to Brecht, must always be on the left, and illustrates the proposition with Brecht’s commentary on the Nazi ‘revolution’ as an affair of Tuis: “es war einfach der Aufstand der unteren (untüchtigsten) Tuis gegen die oberen’ (XII: 662): ‘simply the revolt of the lower – or most incompetent – Tuis against the higher ones’ (158)

White asserts the centrality of the idea of contradiction to Brecht’s understanding of dialectic materialism by pointing out its presence in different shorter writings, such as “[Notizen über] Die dialektische Dramatik” (XV: 211-25) and the frequent references to it in “Organum.” (217-18) In section 6, “stronger (complex)” theatrical pleasures are favourably contrasted to “weaker (simple)” ones, for the latter are, among other things, “more contradictory”. (Brecht 1964: 181) In 28, Brecht compares the spectator’s wish “to be put in possession of quite definite sensations” with a child’s wish to ride a roundabout, and concludes the elaborate simile with the remark that “the one important part for the spectators in these houses is that they should be able to swap a contradictory world for a consistent one, one that they scarcely know for one of which they can dream.” (Brecht 1964: 188) 64 too alludes to contradiction, describing the actor’s mastering of his character. For this process to occur, writes Brecht, it is “best [that the actor lets] himself
be amazed by the inconsistencies in its various attitudes, [...] then the story as a whole gives him a chance to pull the inconsistencies together.” (Brecht 1964: 200) The discussion of the idea in relation to *Verfremdung* culminates in 45:

This technique [*Verfremdung*] allows the theatre to make use in its representations of the new social scientific method known as dialectical materialism. In order to unearth society’s laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies. It regards nothing as existing except in so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself. (193)

Brecht here refers to *Verfremdung* by the word frequently employed in discussions of dialectics: “method”. The implicit near-conflation of the two terms, which appear aimed at countering the view of *Verfremdung* as a set of unchangeable artistic devices, works to partly obscure the concept. Despite Brecht’s references to it as a method, dialectics – in the Hegelian and Marxist sense – pertains to the contradictions underlying perceptible phenomena. As such, dialectics represents an instance of abstracting the structures and processes of the material world. Art, on the other hand – while ultimately aimed at creating the abstraction that is the aesthetic object (an artwork as perceived) – is a result of concretisation, of materialising. One criterion for measuring the success of an artistic form is the degree in which the form distracts the recipient from the alternatives to itself. There is therefore an inherently counter-dialectical element to art-making, an element that will survive every attempt of being countered. The notion of open form – used to describe the results of various artistic practices of the twentieth and current centuries – is a concealed oxymoron, as the “opening” it refers to cannot occur without the relegation of the process to the set of formal precepts to which the artwork in question conforms. It appears that Brecht implicitly acknowledges the contradiction that lies at heart of the
model of the dialectical artwork by pointing to the impossibility of their complete
overcoming also in society.

In the last years of his life, Brecht added to his aesthetic vocabulary the related
terms Naivität (naiveté), \footnote{Because of the negative connotation the word naiveté has in English, Karl-heinz Schoeps usefully
suggests its rendition in this language as directness, intuitiveness, naturalness, freshness, and vitality. (190)} plumpes Denken (crude thinking) and Einfachheit (simplicity).

Apparently developed in an attempt to relieve Brecht’s plays from the burden of his
dramatic theory, through the lens of which it had been increasingly approached, the
concepts can be seen as the ultimate instances of dialecticisation: that of the “great
method” itself. Brecht only offers a descriptive definition of the term:

\begin{quote}
Naiv ist die Darstellung der ganzen Bevölkerung von Rouen in Jeanne d’Arc durch eine kleine
Gruppe von sieben Personen.
Naïve is the representation of the entire population of Rouen by a small group of seven persons.

Naïve is the altered course of the third scene in the Commune.

Naiv ist das Auftreten einer Figur, wenn man sagen kann: Gerade jetzt kommt die und die. Oder:
Naïve is the appearance of a character, when one can say: that and that is coming right now. Or:

Gerade jetzt passiert das und das.
Gerade jetzt passiert das and this.

Die Darstellung historischer Vorgänge bei Brueghel ist naiv, zum Beispiel Der Sturz des Ikarus.
The representation of historical processes in Brueghel is naïve, for example the fall of Icarus.

Das Gegenteil naiver Darstellung ist der Naturalismus. (Schoeps 1989: 190)
The opposite of naïve representation is naturalism.

Naïve is the representation of the entire population of Rouen by a small group of seven persons.
Naïve is the altered course of the third scene in the Commune.
Naïve is the appearance of a character, when one can say: that and that is coming right now. Or:
that and that is happening right now.
The representation of historical processes in Brueghel is naïve, for example the fall of Icarus.
The opposite of naïve representation is naturalism.

For Brecht, then, the point of contrast to naiveté is therefore identical to that of realism,
the end goal of Verfremdung. If we agree with Johannes Goldhahn that Verfremdung too
produces naiveté (Schoeps 196), then we should regard the latter term as an expression of
distancing that element of a stage production whose estranging potential has been
diminished precisely by its ties to the theory.
Brecht’s Dramatic Theory and Film Studies: The Key Texts

In terms of its scope and longevity, the influence of Brecht’s epic / dialectic theory on film studies is greater than that of any other theatre theory. Evident already in the 1950s, this influence took hold two decades later. Sylvia Harvey and Nöel Carroll explain the attraction to Brecht of the 1970s film theorists (whose view of the world, and therefore also the medium, was significantly informed by the protests of 1968) by Brecht’s influence on Godard (Harvey 49; Carroll 91), as one of the most prominent, innovative and political filmmakers of the previous decade. Carroll mentions as a factor in these theorists’ appropriation of Brecht’s ideas also the influence they exerted on Roland Barthes, “the exemplary cultural critic of contemporary theorists.” (Ibid.) Harvey cites as additional influences the contemporary appearance of Benjamin’s “Conversations with Brech,” Brecht’s “Against Lukács,” and Russian formalists’ and futurists’ texts hitherto unavailable in English, (50) while Silberman cites as one further factor in the process the publication in 1969 of Brecht’s Texte für Filme (Texts for Films) (1997: 198) Finally, Harvey quotes as a factor in the return to Brecht a growing interest in the relationship between cultural production and social change, and the accompanying search for the protocols of a radical art. (49) Although my dissertation’s argument does not base itself on the “SLAB” theory’s appropriation of Brecht nor on the cognitivist critique of it, the former’s exceptional influence on film studies (best reflected in the cognitivists’ inheritance of the “SLAB” theory’s misapprehensions of Brecht), I consider it worthwhile to summarise, and offer a critique of, the key respective articulations: MacCabe 1974, Heath 1974, and Smith 1996.
In his “Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses,” MacCabe notes that a defining feature of the classic realist text (a term the writer applies to both literature and film) is its use of the metalanguage, which creates an impression of (merely) allowing reality to appear, and denies its own status as articulation. (9) The writer illustrates his point with a short excerpt from George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), where the omniscient narrator – its status as such concealed by the third person form the narrative uses – problematises a character’s attitude to his neighbours’ opinions about him. According to MacCabe, the metanarrative confirms its claim of axiomatic truthfulness precisely through the implicit invitation to the reader to evaluate the truthfulness of the juxtaposed views by the characters’ of each other. And yet – this metalanguage is necessarily ideological (it “ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularity.” [12]) As such, it “cannot deal with the real as contradictory.” [Ibid.]

The writer goes on to protract the argument by adding to the discourse Lacan’s concept of *méconnaissance* (misunderstanding), involved in the successful use of language or any other similarly structured area of the symbolic (18) (which is, along with the Real and the Imaginary, one of the orders that constitute the fundamentals of Lacan’s theoretical system.) As a result of this misunderstanding, the subject is “continually ignored as being caught up in a process of articulation to be taken as a fixed place founding the discourse.” (Ibid.) MacCabe further develops the idea of the individual’s inevitable transformation into subject (through each and every social institution in the broadest sense of the term) with the help of Althusser’s view of ideology, which – interpreted as illusory – “holds out the promise that the victorious conclusion to the class
struggle will result in the arrival of the new and true ideology which will correspond to
the real.” (23) MacCabe links Brecht with the above thinkers via the former’s view of
the film spectator, exemplified by his article “The Threepenny Lawsuit.” (Brecht 2000:
147-99) The cinema, as MacCabe summarises Brecht’s position on the medium,
possesses the “ability to place the spectator in the position of a unified subject that
ensures the contradiction between his working activity which is productive and the
leisure activity in which he is constantly placed as consumer.” (24) Finally, the author
acknowledges Roberto Rossellini for shaking the metalanguage through a replacement of
one dominant discourse with a multitude thereof. (19) However, as the only examples of
the films that fully oppose the metalanguage MacCabe cites Tout va bien and Kuhle
Wampe. The writer designates these films revolutionary texts, (21) or, elsewhere,
progressive realist texts. (22) For MacCabe, these works are worthy of such descriptors
because they do not privilege the narrative as against the characters, but use it as the
method through which various situations can be articulated together.

The main theses of the article indeed strongly evoke Brecht and his position on
realism in art as evidenced in his contributions to the debate on the topic with György
Lukács in the 1930s. But MacCabe’s unreserved embrace of this position is hardly
congruous with the commentary he makes on Eisenstein. MacCabe does not work from
any of the definitions of montage that Eisenstein gives, but instead infers one from the
dichotomy the Soviet theorist establishes between montage and ‘affidavit-exposition’ –
“representation shot from a single set-up” (as qtd. in MacCabe 14) This definition,
according to which “montage is the showing of the same representation from different
points of view” (Ibid.) ignores the difference between continuity editing and non-linear

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42 Note that MacCabe differs from Brecht in conceiving of ideology as potentially positive.
editing patterns for which Eisenstein and other Soviet filmmakers of his era were famous. MacCabe goes on to correctly conclude that there is no possible language of “affidavit-exposition” that could convey such abstract concepts as widowhood (to give the example from Eiseinstein that MacCabe uses), thus pointing to the incompatibility of the theorist’s supposed definition of montage and Eisenstein’s example. MacCabe objects to Eisenstein’s conception of montage as exemplified by the definition given, as it falsely presumes a stability of meaning of “the raw material of the montage” (13) – the images and sounds that comprise it – in effect obscuring the latter’s inner contradictions in an attempt to illuminate those between individual constituents of the montage. As a remedy, MacCabe proposes a modified view of montage “as the effect generated by a conflict of discourse in which the opposition available in the juxtaposed discourses are contradictory and in conflict.” (16) However, he fails to demonstrate the practical viability of cinematic signification without representation, which the above proposal appears to advocate. And indeed, even the attempts of departure from mimeticism in film as radical as Eisenstein’s own Capital illustrate the importance for film to retain a degree of representational verisimilitude at some level in order to convey a meaning (consider, for example, the importance of naturalistically representing the texture of the silk stockings from a test scene for the film – their smoothness, shininess etc. – for Marx’s idea of this object’s transformation into a fetishistic commodity to be effectively communicated.) Second, despite the convergences between Brecht’s and Eisenstein’s theories – or, rather, because of them – we should not underestimate Brecht’s preference for Pudovkin. Of all Soviet montage filmmakers, Pudovkin was the closest to Hollywood’s “invisible” style, which emphasises plot over story (in the neoformalist
sense). That *Fabel*, which corresponds to the latter notion, holds a central place in Brecht’s dramatic system is conspicuously unacknowledged by both MacCabe and Heath. As if aware that his view of narrative is not reconcilable with Brecht, MacCabe proclaims *Tout va bien* (where the narrative has arguably receded farther into the background than in *Kuhle Wampe*) more Brechtian than Brecht’s film. (25)

Heath radicalises MacCabe’s ideas, bringing together Freud (fetishism) Althusser (interpellation) and Brecht (the passivity of the spectator in Aristotelian theatre). All of these ideas are interpreted as metaphorical diagnosis of the same problem of our civilisation: we are all “set in position,” (106) not free individuals but dominated subjects. Heath opens his explanation of Brecht’s relevance for cinema by noting Jean-Luc Godard’s use of distancing (*Verfremdung*) formal strategies, whereby “the reality of our struggle in ideology against the representations it produces and the positions of the subject they hold” (104) – or more broadly, the relationship between reality and its representations – is thematised. The commentary on Godard announces two of the sources for the article’s main ideas: Louis Althusser (the key terms of whose concept of Ideological State Apparatuses – ideology, the subject, and interpellation – Heath adopts) and Sigmund Freud (on whose trope of sight in “Fetishism” he draws). Freud describes the case of his former patient, for whom the condition of sexual satisfaction was the appearance of “a shine on the nose.” The analysis deciphered “shine” (*Glanz*) into “glance” in English (the patient’s mother tongue, which he nearly forgot in Germany.) By glancing at a woman’s nose, the substitute for the penis whose lack in women the patient first recognised as a child looking up his mother’s legs, he alleviated anxiety from castration.
Heath takes up both “glance” and its displacement to German in the following parable of mainstream film spectatorship. The subject casts his (the Heathen viewer is male) glance to the photograph projected onto the film screen, which “[holds] him pleasurably in the safety of disavowal; at once a knowledge – this exists – and a perspective of reassurance – but I am outside of this existence.” (107) Heath links the fetish with representation via the term “Glanz” in the description of the former term as: “a brilliance, something lit up, heightened, depicted, as under an arc light, a point of (theatrical) representation.” (Ibid.) The writer’s view of the photograph’s structure as fetishistic, capable of “[subliming] anything into the security of beauty” (Ibid.) is supported by a reference to the historic resistance to the advent of sound in cinema in the name of sublimity and beauty. Behind the writer’s failure to acknowledge that the development of the microphone and the speaker was likewise governed by the ideal of verisimilitude, a bias can be detected for sound as the formal aspect seen as apposite for Brechtian interventions. This view, again, can be accounted for by the fact that the material of what is usually the main element of film soundtrack – dialogue – operates with arbitrary signifiers; their arbitrariness can be foregrounded, and the viewer’s disinterpellation thus facilitated. (In Heath’s words, “language is at once constitutive and not reducible to the ideological.”) (115)

Heath connects Freud’s concept of fetishism with Althusser’s concept of interpellation via the fixity of the subject, posited by both of the latter writers: “ideology” (embodied in ideological state apparatuses such as “family, school, church, press, art, etc.”) (Ibid.) “takes up individuals” and “subjects them.”43 (114) Distanciation requires

43 Heath’s definition of ideology as “a set of practical norms which govern the attitude and the practical stance adopted from men with regard to the real objects and the real problems of their social and individual
breaking down the separation, repositioning the spectator in a critical, (multi-) perspective, from which Heath concludes that most of Brecht’s criticism of Aristotelian theatre concerns identification (Einfühlung).

For Heath, fetishism and interpellation are related processes operating at both the levels of narrative and style. At the former level, they are supported by the adherence of the medium’s optical apparatus to the principles of Renaissance perspective, which confirms the eye’s unreliable vision, and by the architectural setup of conventional theatre and cinema, which separates the viewer from the spectacle. Empathy and its concomitant catharsis, the effects on the viewer fostered by Aristotelian theatre and mainstream cinema through an array of formal characteristics associated with realism as a style (not “the illusion as reality,” but “the illusion of reality”), (113) supports them at the level of style. Brecht sought to overturn the principles of Aristotelian theatre and their resulting techniques, finding them capable of representing only the effects and not the causes of social phenomena. Heath establishes a parallel between the fourth wall, one of the stylistic conventions of Aristotelian theatre, and mainstream cinema’s stylistic operations that emulate the ostensibly objective and neutral third-person narration, through a metaphor based on Barthes’ remark that “Aristotelian theatre and cinema are held together in this bond according to a series of shared aims (the effect of ‘Reality’) and

existence, and of their history” (ibid., 113-14) differs from Brecht’s, who describes ideology in terms of the break of ties between thinking and its material basis, as well as of non-dialectical thinking.

44 The Aristotelian sense of catharsis is not to be confused with that the term holds in Freud: the process of discharging an affect that was “strangulated” – diverted from the normal paths that lead to consciousness and movement, thereby causing psychical traumas, which again manifest themselves in hysterical symptoms. Freud maintains that the uncovering of the symptom’s meaning leads to their elimination. (Freud 108-09)
devices” (117) as the latter “disposes – […] lays out – the coherence of a subject-spectator whom it holds in position.” (Ibid.)

Being itself an ideological state apparatus, cinema cannot demolish ideology, but can attempt to displace its formations by posing the specific relations of those formations in the mode of production.” (124) More succinctly, it can complement the unavoidable interpellation with its opposite, disinterpellation through distanciation. Heath defines distanciation as a work of demonstrating contradictions, (119) which he singles out as fundamental elements of reality. Brechtian form thus becomes “the form […] of the domination of reality” (123), a term Heath distinguishes from “Reality,” (121) as the subject’s faulty impression of the real.

Heath identifies three broad strategies for achieving distanciation in film: 1) self-reflexivity; 2) montage; 3) theatricalisation (narrative references to the medium and the use of its stylistic conventions.) The writer’s discussion of the three principles effectively collapses the distinctions between montage and the other two. The examples of self-reflexivity he provides entail a process essential to montage: juxtaposing (the representation with its account of itself), and one of the definitions of theatricalisation is “critical heterogeneity” (119) (in other words, a montage of styles). By proposing both montage and theatricality as viable techniques of cinematic estrangement, Heath treats their compatibility as a given. But from the standpoint of perception, the two modes can alternate but cannot blend. Namely, if the intercutting between two or more images that represent objects of indeterminate mutual spatial and temporal relations alternates at such a speed that the hypothetic theatricality of those images is rendered inconspicuous, then
rapid editing that cognitively challenges us will take precedence over the mise-en-scène style.

Between narrative and the Brechtian form (predicated on montage and related principles), Heath posits a contrast, supporting this with Brecht’s note of narrative interruption as a must (122) (and thus implicitly conflating linear and non-linear narrative forms), and by interpreting Brecht’s remark on movement as a basic unit of film structure to be a tacit suggestion that film needs to “hold back the narrative.” (125) The “narrative / montage” dichotomy (121) the writer attributes to Brecht disregards the centrality of the notion of narrating (erzählen) in both versions of Brecht’s schema contrasting dramatic and epic theatre.

Heath establishes a link between the Freudian-Althusserian parable of the processes underlying dominant (mainstream) cinema to the project of counter-cinematic (which, for him, means also Marxist) theory and practice through a passing reference to fetishism as a concept in Karl Marx. The Marxist aspect of the reform of cinema called for by the writer manifests itself also through the resonance between the 11th of Marx’ Theses on Feuerbach (“the point is to change the world”) (as qtd. in Heath 110) and an argument from the article’s final segment, that “the real work is the attempt at a ceaseless transformation [of cinema].” (126)

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45 While the methodology of this study generally does not entail assessing the ideas it presents and discusses, an uncharacteristic feature of this influential theory necessitates a move tantamount to evaluation. Namely, the theory – considered from this historical standpoint – appears remarkably unoriginal: one would be hard pressed to find within the broad corpus of writings a crucial idea that could not be traced back to the predating poststructuralist contributions to such French film journals as Cahiers du cinéma and Tel Quel. Its significance, then, appears to lie chiefly in systematising these ideas for the English reader. For a historical survey of the take on Brecht by the most influential amongst these journals - Cahiers du cinéma - see Lellis 1982. English translations of many of the texts Lellis comments upon are available in the following anthologies: Hillier 1985, Hillier 1986, Browne 1990, and Wilson 2000.
That Brecht is first and foremost a realist is a fact on which Dana Polan (1975), Jan Bruck (1988), and Sylvia Harvey (1982) base their critiques of Screen theorists’ appropriation of Brecht. Nöel Carroll (1988) takes issue not only with the poststructuralist politics of sign on which MacCabe and Heath base their ideas, but also with Brecht’s original notion of illusionism as a decisive feature of Aristotelian theatre. Illusionism, writes Carroll, is a negatively biased term for representation, the defining process in cinema. (91)

Screen film theorists’ advancement of Brecht as a deconstructionist constitutes, as Sylvia Harvey notes, an error comparable to that made by the writer who represents an (unnamed) target of MacCabe’s attack: Lukács, with his association of realism with a style (that of the nineteenth-century novel), instead with an attitude to social reality that is as changeable as its object. As a consequence of the error, a problematic association has been created between Brecht and a set of stylistic strategies: distanciation, antiillusionism, deconstruction, the critique of identification processes and the dismantling of ‘classical’ narrative. (Harvey 58)

The critiques of “SLAB theory”, of course, contain their own problems. I will briefly comment upon the two that are directly relevant to Brecht. First, Nöel Carroll considers Brecht responsible for the theory’s conflation of illusionism and representation, even though these two terms are not synonymous in his system. Brecht uses the term “illusion” to describe the (possible) effect on the spectator of a theatrical representation in the vein of Aristotelian realism, whose appropriateness within the context Carroll questions on account of the fact that mimetic representations (theatrical and filmic) – unlike visual illusions proper – do not involve deception of the recepient. (93) Carroll is
writing from the position of a professional film analyst, immune to illusions of pictorial representations by virtue (or vice) of his déformation professionelle. While not all mimetic representations (conventional or not) possess a strong claim to being illusionistic in the quotidian sense of the term, some certainly do. To illustrate this with a personal anecdote, as an already experienced moviegoer exposed for the first time to the 3-D film effect, I found myself barely resisting the impulse to reach for the great white shark swimming towards the camera in the finale of Jaws 3-D (Joe Alves, 1983). The described effect of the film image was not a result of cognitive operations that accompany film viewing – and which constitute the focus of the school of thinking about the medium to which Carroll belongs – but rather in spite of them. To fully realise how precisely this sense of illusionism may have informed Brecht’s epic theatre ideas, the contemporary aesthetic and technological trends thereof need to be considered: for instance, the pseudo-naturalistic setting of Max Reinhardt’s influential 1905 staging of Midsummer Night’s Dream and the commercialisation the same year of sound-on-film technology. To be sure, novelty wears off fast, and the sensory impact on me of the 3-D films I saw subsequently was invariably smaller. But at the time of the most intensive development of Brecht’s epic theatre concept, technological innovations aimed at enhancing verisimilitude were introduced with an unprecedented speed, perhaps promising the trend to continue until the perceptual distinction between the referent and its representation.

46 Gregory Currie offers a more tempered view of the subject. While denying that illusionism – in the sense of the term used by Brecht and Carroll – is a standard feature of transaction between the film and viewer, he allows that this is possible. (331)

47 I should acknowledge that many would object to this characterisation of Reinhardt’s Dream. While it aligns itself with the style by the setting’s reliance on such natural objects as plants and trees, it diverges from it through the joyous and oneiric mood of the production, achieved through a combination of non-verbal elements and the drama itself.
could no longer be drawn. This point of Brecht’s becomes much less vulnerable to criticism if put in the correct historical perspective.

Murray Smith, for his part, critiques in his “The Logic and Legacy of Brechtianism” Brecht’s ideas and the interpretations of them by Louis Althusser and Stephen Heath. He focuses on the role played by emotion in the ideological and political functioning of narratives, (130) arguing that “the post-structural ideas on Brecht are an oversimplified account of the role and nature of emotional responses to fiction, and in particular of the political and ideological consequences of emotional responses to conventional narrative cinema.” (130-31) The writer defines “Brechtianism” as the strand of argument positing that “distanciatied” (Verfremdung) – as opposed to “emphatic” – response to narrative form “would lead spectators to tackle the real-world social problems that narratives represent, in the belief that such problems could be transformed and solved.” (130) Smith uses the distinct terms emotion (Gefühl) and identification (Einfühlung) interchangeably, and disregards the revisions of the epic / dialectic theatre theory pertinent to his focus: the omission of the binary between emotion and reason (Ratio) from the 1935 version of the dramatic / epic theatre schema, and Brecht’s 1938 journal note, according to which there exists “an acceptable kind of empathy” (“eine Einfühlung erlaubter Art”). (BFA 26: 236) However, the writer makes a useful clarificatory point concerning the natures of spectatorial response to narrative representation by making a distinction between narrative alignment and allegiance (the terms loosely corresponding to Brecht’s “identification” and “empathy”), noting that one does not necessarily entail the other.
Smith notes the causality that post-structuralist film theorists posit between the illusionism of mainstream films\(^{48}\) and spectatorial empathy with the characters they represent. (131) Smith traces the postulate back to Brecht, from whom he derives the following two premises:

1) Emotional response of the empathic type requires that the spectator mistake the representation for reality.
2) Having an emotional response of the empathic type deadens our rational and critical faculties. (132)

Smith disputes premise 1), on the ground that spectators do not mistake represented actions for real ones (if they did, they would respond by escaping or interceding), and notes the incongruity of premise 2) with the dominant view of contemporary cognitive science and philosophy of mind, according to which emotion and reason are interdependent rather than dichotomous.

Much of the persuasive power of Smith’s argument against premise 1) rests on the choice of the word “mistake”, which Brecht does not use in related discussions. As Heath reminds us, Brecht maintains that “the spectator never loses consciousness of the fact that he is at the theatre”, but “remains conscious of the fact that the illusion from which he derives his pleasure is an illusion.” (113) As to premise 2), Smith admits that it has ancient roots in Western culture. Neither premise, then, can be safely attributed to Brecht.

Smith embraces Kendall Walton’s distinction between emotions in everyday life and in the context of aesthetic response (“pseudo-emotions”) (133), and applies to cinema the view of the Russian Formalist Victor Erlich that the poetic context frees words as

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\(^{48}\) The writer borrows a definition of illusionism from Martin Walsh: “a mode of artistic experience that has as its most central characteristics: a desire to (psychologically) penetrate individual experience; its primary appeal is to the emotions rather than the intellect, desiring the audience’s empathetic involvement with the events presented before them.” (131)
“blood” from the associations they have in common usage. The latter theoretical move, based on implying a synonymity between Erlich’s “poetic context” and Walton’s broader term of “aesthetic context”, slights the perceptual difference between words (the material of literature) as symbolic signifiers, and photographed images (the material with which cinema usually operates on the visual plane) as indexical ones.49

The writer hints at a lack of originality of Brecht’s Verfremdung. He first states that Erlich is referring to Shklovsky’s ostranenie, a concept related to Verfremdung but differing from it its absence of a political dimension, and then proceeds to obfuscate the difference between the two by suggesting – in contradistinction to Shklovsky himself – that ostranenie shares Verfremdung’s relevance to such dimensions of existence as social (that within which political projects such as that inherent in Brecht can be realised). Smith then refines the implication that defamiliarisation is inherent to all art – and blurs further the distinction between Verfremdung and ostranenie – by observing that “the force of defamiliarisation is variable, but that is another question.” (134) For Brecht, however, who stresses that the difference between dramatic and epic theatre concerns a shift in degree and not in essence, the question Smith dismisses as irrelevant is key.

Smith goes on to examine two representative examples of the poststructuralist take on Brecht, with a focus on the logical fallacy at their respective cores: Althusser’s “The Piccolo Teatro: Bertolazzi and Brecht” and Heath’s “Lessons from Brecht.” Smith notes that Brecht’s goal of creating a “truly” conscious spectator, embraced by Althusser and Heath, is incompatible with the postulate of the latter’s structuralist framework,

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49 Evidence seems unnecessary that a sensitive recipient is more likely to avert her eyes in revulsion from the sight of blood – Erlich’s example that Smith adopts to illustrate how a sign, in the poetic context, “becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation rather than a catalyst of fear” (ibid.) and related feelings – than from its linguistic signifier on the page.
which denies the possibility of subjects’ gaining a consciousness of the structures
determining their existence. (134-35) This argument gets extended to Brecht, via the
following conjecture: “if traditional ‘indicative’ narrative form exerts this kind of power
over the spectator, and if only a revolutionary ‘productive’ textual form can produce a
critical spectator, then the critical spectator is as much an ‘effect’ of the text as the naïve
spectator.” (138) The conjecture predicates itself on the treatment of the qualities
“critical” and “naïve” as if they are of one order.\textsuperscript{50}

One element that the poststructuralist and cognitivist interpretations of Brecht
have in common is the view of Brecht’s position on cinematic realism and mainstream
cinema (with Hollywood as a key representative thereof) as antagonistic. The
questionability of this view is best evidenced by the fact that an example of \textit{Verfremdung}
Brecht gives in his last articulation of the epic / dialectic theatre theory derives from an

\textbf{Conclusion}

In the above examination of Brecht’s key ideas on theatre, I attempted to show their
interconnectedness and relation to the post-Kantian dialectical thought. As hopefully
suggested by my summary and critique of MacCabe and Heath on the one hand, and of
Carroll and Smith on the other, neither of these two essential characteristics of Brecht’s
work has received the due attention in film studies.

\textsuperscript{50} Smith’s wording is potentially misleading, since “ naïve” – the basis of a revised epic / dialectic theatre
theory Brecht announced late in his life – has a positive connotation in his system.
While nearly all examples of these ideas’ practical application I have given derive from theatre, their breadth well exceeds the boundaries of the medium. At the risk of a seeming contradiction to my focus so far on the similarities between theatre and film as (often) dramatic arts, I would here like to invoke Susan Sontag’s observation that the former medium – being live and evanescent and having no codes that are unique to it – is undeservedly called that (“Theatre is never a ‘medium’”). (363) The next chapter will investigate how Brecht put his concepts and ideas into his own cinematic practice, emphasising his use of medium-specific codes.
Chapter 2: Brecht and Cinema: the “Great Method” Adjusted

Not a believer in the modernist principle of medium specificity, Brecht applied many of the above-delineated concepts, originally intended for theatre, also to other media. Because of the kinship between theatre and film, detailed in the introductory section of this dissertation, the key concepts that underlie Brecht’s theoretical and practical work in theatre are particularly relevant for his work in cinema. This section of the chapter surveys 1) the influences of cinema on Brecht’s theatrical theory and practice, 2) the use of film in Brecht’s theatre, 3) Brecht’s theoretical work in the domain of film.

1) Brecht’s articles and journal entries show that he remained a relatively frequent moviegoer throughout his life. We know that Brecht saw such major films of the silent period as Golem (Paul Wegener, 1920), Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari (Cabinet of Doctor Caligari; Robert Wiene, 1920) and Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed (The Adventures of Prince Ahmed; Lotte Reiniger, 1926). The release of the former of these two films coincided with the peak of Brecht’s activity as a scriptwriter. Drei im Turm (Three in the Tower), the script Brecht co-wrote with Caspar Neher in July of 1921, reflects the influence of Expressionist films in its use of claustrophobic spaces such as narrow corridors and winding stairs, as well as in the motif of a horrifically disturbed marriage. Like his debut play, Baal (1918), the script shows a decidedly ambiguous stance towards the style it uses, constantly oscillating between earnestness and irony.

Crucial cinematic influences on Brecht, however, came from outside of Germany: on the one hand, Charlie Chaplin, and the Soviet montage filmmakers on the other. Brecht highly evaluated Chaplin’s artistry in a 1921 comment of the short The Face on

51 See also Brecht 2000: 100, and Witte 8.
the Bar Room Floor (1914, distributed in Germany under the title Alkohol und Liebe [Alcohol and Love]). The 1921 comment focuses on the comedian’s transformation into pure art of the frightening reality and sorrow. (Witte 64) The praise of the contrast between the film’s (comedic) form and its (tragic) content subtly anticipates Brecht’s later ideas pertinent to the “great method” of dialectics. In a short note from 1936, Brecht identifies the V-Effect in Chaplin’s Gold Rush (1925): “Eating the boot (with proper table manners, removing the nail like a chicken bone, the index finger pointing outward)” (Brecht 2000: 10) This scene is mirrored by that in The Caucasian Chalk Circle where the beggar teaches a rich man how to eat like the poor. Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti (Puntila and his Man Mati, 1940) offers another example of Chaplin’s influence on the narrative level: replicating the dynamic between the millionaire and the tramp in City Lights (Chaplin, 1931), the play features a wealthy protagonist affectionate for his servant Mati when intoxicated, and cruel with him when sober. Brecht’s Der Aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arfturo Ui (The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui, 1941), a parable on the Nazi regime set in the America of the 1930s, whose corrupt political and judicial system enabled the ascendancy of Al Capone during the period, bears a comparison with Chaplin’s The Great Dictator (1940). This work of Brecht’s is a result also of his documented fascination with American gangster films, such as William Wellman’s Public Enemy (1931), and Howard Hawks’ Scarface (1932) (Witte 65).

Chaplin’s cinema, American gangster films and the revolutionary Soviet dramas of the 1920s and the beginning of the following decade display an approach to character portrayal comparable to Brecht’s anti-Aristotelian view of the inner selves of people as essentially determined by the socio-historical circumstances of their lives. All three
groups of films stress the commonality of character features through various styles of non-psychological acting. These films appealed to Brecht presumably also because of their potentially subversive politics (one of these, *Scarface*, possessed the aura of a banned artwork at the time Brecht saw it), and – in the case of Chaplin and Soviet montage films – their episodic character, which runs counter to the principle of unities in Aristotelian dramaturgy. The above-mentioned conception of character and the shift of emphasis in early Soviet cinema from the individual to the collective come together in a comment on *Battleship Potemkin* in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. “In the Soviet film *The Battleship Potemkin*,” says the Philosopher, a character that thinly veils the playwright himself, “there were even some bourgeois who joined in the workers’ applause when the sailors threw their officer persecutors overboard.” (93) The line, which dispels the common view of separability between one’s action and one’s “essence”, evokes the theoretical position of Fritz Sternberg, the first major intellectual influence on Brecht as a fledgling theorist. Brecht’s focus on the commonalities in human behaviour does not preclude an interest in the individual and her uniqueness. In the essay “On Film Music,” Brecht praises the “real individuals” in the Russian films *Mother* (1926), *The Youth of Maxim* (1935), and *Baltic Deputy* (1937), which he contrasts to the characters in the cinema of the United States, a nation that, according to Brecht, has no individuals in their films despite taking pride in their individualism.\(^52\) (Brecht 2000: 13) As far as formal properties are concerned, the principal source of Brecht’s attraction to Soviet cinema of the period is undoubtedly its use of montage, a dominant Modernist technique that has a critical place also in Brecht’s work as a theorist and practitioner.

\(^{52}\) As an exception, Brecht cites Orson Welles, in whose cinema “damaged individuals appear.” (Brecht 2000: 13)
2) Brecht himself attributes the politicisation of his theatre to the influence of the leftist director Erwin Piscator, on whose several productions Brecht worked as a dramaturge, besides participating in his project of adapting for the stage Hašek’s novel *The Fortunes of the Good Soldier Schweyk During the War*. Piscator sought, in Brecht’s phrase, “das Theater zu elektrifizieren”: “to electrify theatre” (XV: 135) in order to adjust it to the contemporary industrial standards. Working in well-funded Berlin theatres – *Volksbühne* and, later, his own company – Piscator was able to employ a wide range of state-of-the-art technological tools. The deliberate formal eclecticism of his theatre, aimed at ensuring the viewer’s constant alertness, appears to have inspired Brecht’s concept of the separation of elements. 53

Unsurprisingly for an artist whose theoretical positions, as well as his practical work, abundantly testify to a somewhat naïve association of political and industrial progress, Piscator was strongly attracted to the then relative novelty of film. “Theatre,” he writes, “made itself uninteresting. The very paltry film would be more topical, and would

53 As is often the case with artistic techniques and their corresponding concepts whose elements can be traced back far into the past, there is no consensus about the ownership of epic theatre (in the sense that the term has in the context in the West of the twentieth century.) C.D. Innes, for example, suggests that Piscator is the true creator of Epic Theatre (193), supporting this view by a testimony from Caspar Neher which suggests that Brecht’s creative input in the Piscator productions on which Brecht worked as the dramaturge was minimal (Ibid.), by the observed similarity between the list of qualities that distinguish Piscator’s theatrical model from the conventional one – enumerated by the director in a 1929 issue of *Die Szene* – and Brecht’s “*Mahagonny*” table published two years later. (195) In contradistinction, George Buehler posits that the radicalisation of style in Piscator’s theatre occurred only after Brecht described his theatre in the “Notes to *Mahagonny*” as anti-culinary. (111) Buehler even goes as far as to deny Piscator’s originality by designating the style of his productions after 1929, the year when Brecht’s first Lehrstück was produced, as “eine Imitierung des Brechtschen Lehrtheaters: an imitation of Brecht’s learning theatre.” (Ibid.) Accusations of plagiarism have followed Brecht throughout his artistic career (for an elaborate articulation of this view, see Fuegi: 1994) The fact that Piscator was not spared such accusations either (from Meyerhold [Innes: 191]) may serve as an illustration of the futility of the attempt to cast the complex dynamic between the broad, related and contemporaneous ideas into the mould of linear development.
reflect the free actuality of our days, than theatre with its dramatrical and technical mechanics.” (as qtd. in Turovskaia 164; translation mine) The medium played a significant role in Piscator’s productions: for the staging of Ernst Toller’s *Hoppla! Wir Leben* (Hoppla! We’re Alive!; 1927), approximately 3000 meters of new film was exposed, while the compilation film used in *Rasputin* (1925) was edited down from more than 100,000 meters of footage. (Turovskaia 167) The film sequences in Piscator’s productions, as well as a variety of other audio-visual elements the director used, were almost invariably non-fictional. Juxtaposed with the live stage action, these elements alternately confirmed and denied the credibility of the dramatic action, thus questioning the boundary that separates presentation and re-presentation. This method characterises not only Piscator’s theatre, but the entire artistic era. It is hardly a coincidence that the term “documentary film” – which refers to a cinematic mode that has existed since the medium’s inception – penetrated the vocabulary of film criticism precisely in this decade.\(^{54}\) Significant examples of the adoption or a simulation of the mode can be found in the works of a range of modernist artists, from the sections of *Ulysses* that mimic the prose style of newspaper articles, to Eisenstein’s short *Glumov’s Film Diary* (1923), a parody of newsreel included in his debut work as a director, an adaptation of Ostrovsky’s *Enough Simplicity for Every Wise Man*. Unlike Eisenstein and – to a much lesser extent – Brecht, Piscator did not make a contribution to film theory. The place of cinema in Piscator’s system was equally shared with media that are seldom, or at least not necessarily, associated with the arts; for example, print and radio. Unconcerned with film’s kinship to theatre, Piscator only allowed film the status held in his productions by,

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\(^{54}\) The term is believed to have been used first by John Grierson, in his 1926 review of Robert Flaherty’s film *Moana*. 

for example, photographs and audio recordings of historic events. To Piscator, film was
but one amongst many significant contemporary phenomena, whose role in the director’s
theatre was entirely subservient to, and limited by, his interest in the documentary
mode.  

Brecht, aiming not at vaguely activating the viewer, but at enhancing her
cognition (Lang 35), considered the sensory overload Piscator imposed on the viewer
inadequate for the goal. For this reason, Brecht the theatre director used all technology,
including that of film, only sparingly. Projections first appeared in Brecht’s theatre in The
Threepenny Opera, The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, and the Lehrstücke.
They did not show moving images, but textual summaries of the forthcoming scenes, and,
in the case of Mahagonny, photographs. Brecht’s intention to use in the 1932 production
of Mother non-fictional film scenes from the October revolution was thwarted by a police
ban. (36) In a 1951 production of the play, Brecht used a montage sequence of film
scenes from the Russian 1905 and 1917 revolutions, as well as the Chinese liberation
struggle, consisting of both documentary and fictional material.  

The sequence, accompanied by the song “Praise of Dialectics,” was projected onto a large flag. (Ibid.)
For the opening of the 1952 production of Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar (Senora

55 Evidence needs to be acknowledged here that weighs against the above view. Piscator completed in
Soviet Union a feature-length film The Revolt of the Fishermen (1934), based upon the Anna Seghers
novella, and made plans for a series of other films: a film about education on a collective farm in the Volga
German Republic tentatively entitled Film der Wahrheit; The Kaiser’s Coolies, based upon the eponymous
Theodor Plievier’s novel; War and Peace, after the Tolstoy, as well as a screen version of Schweyk. (For
the last two mentioned projects, Piscator sought Brecht’s collaboration.) (Willett 1978: 131)

56 The sequence included shots from Eisenstein’s October).
Carrara’s Rifles, 1937) Brecht’s only attempt at the use of Aristotelian dramaturgy, the
director used documentary footage that showed scenes from the Spanish Civil war.

3) Brecht’s notes and essays on cinema comprise a relatively small part of his
body of work. 22 shorter ones, which span nearly Brecht’s entire literary career (1919-
56), occupy a mere 30 pages in Brecht on Film on Radio, the only compilation in English
translation of Brecht’s original texts on the media. Most of the 22 texts focus on
particular films and film projects, several of which are screen adaptations of Brecht’s
own plays. One such film, G. W. Pabst’s Die Dreigroschen Oper (The Threepenny
Opera, 1931), and the lawsuit Brecht, the writer of the original play, and Kurt Weill, the
composer of the original score, filed against the production company for its failure to
fulfill the contractual obligation of protecting the integrity of the artists’ work, (Brecht
2000: 147) occasioned the writing of Brecht’s only essay on cinema of considerable
ambition and length, “Der Dreigroschenprozeß” (“The Threepenny Lawsuit”, 1931). The
essay consists of five parts of uneven length, and includes documents of and newspaper
articles on the trial, followed by Brecht’s polemical comments. In the introductory
section of the essay, Brecht explains that the screen adaptation of The Threepenny Opera
provided an “opportunity to confront several ideas that are characteristic of the current
state of bourgeois ideology.” (148) Teasing these out necessitated the use of a method
different from objective, disinterested, passive contemplation. The method, the writer
goes on to state, is “demonstrated in what follows and is called a ‘sociological
experiment’.” (149)

The first section summarises the history of Brecht’s and Weill’s involvement with
the film project, the court’s verdict, and the reactions of the press to the trial. The next
section of the essay demonstrates that the intellectual property rights are, in the current social order, merely formal. “Large financial interests,” writes Brecht, “operate with the force of nature. Where contrasts still exist (they do where profits are distributed), their validity need only be appraised from financial perspectives.” (157) The third, longest part, represents a critique of fourteen ideological assumptions purportedly underlying the trial (Silberman 1997: 207), of which the following are most salient: “The cinema needs art,” (Brecht 2000: 163) “Film is a commodity,” (168) “A film can be regressive in content and progressive in form” (172), and “Capitalism’s contradictions are like the snow of yesteryear.” (180) All these ideas are, with varying degrees of directness, addressed in the following passage of the essay:

To understand the situation we must free ourselves from the widespread idea that only one part of art needs to be concerned with the battles for the modern institutions and apparatuses. According to this idea there is a part of art, true art, that – completely untouched by these new possibilities of transmission (radio, cinema, book clubs, etc.) – uses the old ones (the freely marketed, printed book, the stage, etc.) In other words this true art remains completely free from all influence of modern industry. According to this idea the other part, the technological art, is something else altogether, creations precisely of these apparatuses, something completely new, whose very existence, however, is in the first place beholden to certain financial expectations and therefore bound to them for ever. If works of the former sort are handed over to the apparatuses, they immediately become commodities. (163)

Brecht’s refusal of the distinction between high and low art forms, implied through the above words, appears unusual when compared to the comments on cinema of other contemporaneous exemplary modernists. Virginia Woolf, for example, writes in her 1926 essay “The Cinema,” about the inherent parasitism of cinema, (168-169) a view suggested also by Gertrude Stein’s remark that “the trouble with cinema [is] that it is after all a photograph.” (117) The essay’s next part points to the discrepancy between

57 On the other hand, the narrative strategies of such exemplary modernists as James Joyce and the writers he influenced (John Dos Passos, Vladimir Nabokov, and Malcolm Lowry, to name some of the best known ones) have often been compared with those employed in film. The indebtedness of Eisenstein’s ideas on
the commodification of art in capitalism as a result of a multiple people’s involvement in it, and the system’s perpetuation of the notion of art as an individual expression. With the discrepancy, “reality arrives at a point where the only obstacle to capitalism’s progress is capitalism itself.” (Brecht 2000: 195) In the concluding part of the essay, Brecht offers an explanation of the goals of the lawsuit: in the words of Marc Silberman, “to analyze how culture functions (…) and to construct a controlled public framework in order to trigger a collective thought process.” (1997: 207)

These are not the only texts that elucidate Brecht’s theoretical position on the medium. For example, a major short story, “Die Bestie” (“The Monster”, 1928), centred on the shoot of a film on the pogrom in South Russia, thematises the difference between dramatic and epic acting in the context of cinema, and offers an example of a performative Gestus that is, because of its subtlety, suited especially for the screen.58

The protagonist of the story, while auditioning for the role of the governor Muratov famous for his cruelty and his penchant for apples, suggests to the director to have the character offer an apple to the Jew who has come to “implore him to call a halt to the murders.” (Brecht 1983: 108) When the visitor makes the diplomatic gesture of starting to eat the fruit, the monstrous governor signs the death warrant for him, thus causing the apple to stick in the man’s throat. For an insightful discussion of Brecht’s aesthetic of cinema that focuses on the story, see Dyck 1974.

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Most of the points presented in Brecht’s texts on cinema written after 1930, the year that saw publication of the author’s first systematisation of his ideas on theatre in the *Mahagonny* notes, discuss film in relation to these ideas, typically emphasising their applicability also to the younger medium. To avoid repetition, in the rest of this survey of Brecht’s key writings on cinema, I will focus not on the many parallels he makes between the epic dramaturgy and the dramaturgy of mainstream cinema, but on those aspects of it that pertain strictly to the cinematographic apparatus: photography and montage.

Brecht’s attitude toward photography is characteristically ambiguous. In “The Threepenny Lawsuit,” he makes a comment on the medium entirely applicable also to his critique of naturalism in comparison to realism, briefly discussed in the previous section of the chapter: “the simple ‘reproduction of reality’ says less than ever about that reality. A photograph of the Krupp workers or the AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions.” (Brecht 2000: 164) This position is, as Joachim Lang observes, characteristic of the 1910s, the decade of the rapid ascent of cinema as an entertainment industry, but also of a proliferation of various modernist “isms,” which yielded significant theoretical debates around the dichotomies between the superficial and deep, appearances and essences, and, in relation to this, between art and non-art.” (17-18) A typical modernist in many respects, Brecht, in accordance with his habitually oppositional stance, appears to have been attracted precisely to cinema’s “triviality,” its properties as an entertainment form. A remark on the contemporary German poets Brecht makes in a different text suggests a view of photography diametrically opposite to the one implied by the quotation from “The Threepenny Lawsuit.” Brecht criticises “jene ganz unkontrollierbaren romanhaften Erzeugnisse unserer Dichter, in denen nichts
Brecht’s choice of the adjective “petty-bourgeois” is telling: it is not the ontological nature of photography that he questions, but the truthfulness of its claim to objectivity as long as it is subservient to the goal of maintaining the ruling class’ control of it. Brecht elaborates on this point in an article published in the “Arbeiter-Illustrierten-Zeitung”: “The truth regarding the prevailing conditions in the world has profited little from the frightening development of photo-journalism: photography has become a terrible weapon against the truth in the hands of the bourgeoisie. The immense amount of photo-material that the presses spew out on a daily basis and which does not have the appearance of truth really only serves to obscure the facts. The camera can lie just like the typesetting machine.” (as qtd. in Soldovieri 143)

Brecht’s literary and theoretical works offer two kinds of examples of the attempt to penetrate by the means of photography beneath the surface of observable phenomena. The first of these involves the use of linguistic commentary, as in many of Brecht’s journal entries illustrated with newspaper clips and pictures as well as in Kriegsfibel (War Manual, 1945), a collection of 69 epigrams accompanied by the photographs that inspired them. The method applied in the work, which owes a lot to Hans-Joachim Schlegel’s idea of montage as a “Denotation durch Konnotationen” (as qtd. in Bogdal 263): “denotation
through connotations,” illustrates Brecht’s general view of the image.\textsuperscript{59} A majority of his references to painting – for example, the famous one on Brueghel from \textit{The Messingkauf Dialogues} – concern themselves with the subject matter of the visual representation in question, rather than its formal properties. Yet, it is particularly the latter that are unorthodox: Brueghel challenges the rules of perspective as known in Western art since the Renaissance, refusing a single visual dominant – for which the European painterly tradition had been characteristic since the spread of the mentioned cultural movement – in favour of a compositional policentrality. The absence of a readily discernible centre of interest in Brueghel forces the beholder of his painting to search for one, as well as for the connections that exist between the relatively independent microcompositions within the large, macro one. Because of the ambiguity of the perspectival relations in his canvases, the “Bilderbogentechnik” – the term Joachim Schacherreiter, referring back to the XVIII and XIX century European tradition of coloured prints showing thematically connected images of popular subjects, uses to describe Brecht’s episodic dramaturgy (1988) – can apply also to Brueghel. Not coincidentally, Brecht – whose references to art are otherwise rare – mentions the painter in a discussion of the fragmentary dramaturgical model: for example, he praises the non-reconciled contradictions in Brueghel’s paintings as sources of \textit{Verfremdungseffekte} (1964: 157-159) and uses the artist’s \textit{The Fall of Icarus} as an example of the late concept of naiveté. (Schoeps 1989) As suggested by his

\textsuperscript{59}Stefan Soldovieri points out that Brecht’s article “Fotografie” (“Photography”) from the same period “suggests Brecht’s interest in the photograph as a space for experimentation. (…) The first investigation envisions a collection of portrait photographs of men and women taken over the years. (…) Brecht outlines the experiment as a gamelike exercise whose object is to assign husbands and wives to their respective partners, the assumption being that ‘physiognomic adaptations’ occur between partners who have been married a long time. A second experiment dealing with “functional images” proposes a collection of hands: workers’ hands holding hammers and various machine parts; the hands of intellectual workers, holding the tools of their trade; workers holding pens and design plans: finally, photos of intellectuals’ hands holding the tools of manual laborers.” (146)
acknowledgment of the narrative quality of Brueghel’s paintings, it is their *readability* that is a source of appeal to Brecht.

The purpose of the textual components in Brecht’s illustrated journal entries and *Kriegsfibel* is to provide a new perspective on the images, and are therefore directly related to *Verfremdung*. Brecht’s other notable idea on photography appears informed by the same concept. In “The Threepenny Lawsuit,” he questions the common association of the continual technical improvement of the camera and aesthetic progress, and suggests that the latter result would more likely occur from an opposite trend. Brecht praises the imperfect apparatuses of the past, and the relative unfaithfulness to the photographed objects of daguerotypes, which present obstacles to identification (as qtd. in Mews 150).

In his discussion of Brecht’s relation to photography, Soldovieri usefully points to the similarity between Brecht’s and Benjamin’s comparison of the photographic practices of their own time, and the uniqueness and historical specificity of the early photograph. In the essay “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (“Small History of Photography”, 1931), Benjamin makes a distinction between the auratic *Bild*, as picture or image, and the *Abbild*, its technically reproduced copy. Like Brecht, he “associates singularity and duration with the former and transience and repetition with the latter.” (as qtd. in Soldovieri 145)

The technique of montage suited Brecht’s artistic purpose largely because of its inorganic quality. (Oh 183) In the *Mahagonny* table, Brecht contrasts it to growth in the dramatic (Aristotelian) theatre, an idea elaborated on in the “Katzgraben Notate” (Notes on *Katzgraben*, 1953) as follows: “Das Aufbauen einer Aufführung darf nicht betrachtet
werden wie ein Wachstum, sondern wie eine Montage” (as qtd. in Oh 184): “Building-up a performance should be considered not as a growth, but as a montage.”

In the context of theatre and cinema, art forms that possess both spatial and temporal aspects, the principle pertains primarily to violation of the corresponding unities. Following the rule of the unities represents a basic tenet of Aristotelian dramaturgy, which maintains its dominance in mainstream theatre and film to this day. The goal of this dramaturgical model is to create an impression that the narrative events unfold by themselves, naturally, as if without the artist’s intervention. This is facilitated by the interrelated formal operations of emphasising the causal relationship between the dramatic events, and denying the status of the artwork’s metalanguage as such. In Brecht’s epic / dialectical theatre, the unities are broken with the goal of revealing the inherent contradictions of societal phenomena, including the aesthetic structure itself. (Ibid.) Brecht’s use of montage, then, directly relates to the concept of Verfremdung and, more broadly, to that of dialectics. The formal complexity it provides to the artwork aims to parallel the complexity of reality: not on the level of the readily perceptible phenomena (as is the case in Aristotelian dramaturgy, with its focus on the individual), but on the level of social institutions these individuals form. The spectator’s understanding of the relationships between these social institutions is a prerequisite for their intervention in them.

How does montage – in the strictly cinematic connotations of the term – function in Brecht’s theatre? The example that follows, while not purporting to be exhaustive, is typical in that it resembles the instances of montage found in mainstream cinema: its sole function is to compress dramatic time. In scene four of The Caucasian Chalk Circle,
Grusha brings the baby Michael to the home of her brother Lavrenti’s family. After Lavrenti tells her that she cannot stay long, two songs are consecutively sung: the first, the singer’s, comments on the dramatic situation and informs the viewer that “the autumn passed” and “the winter came,” while the other, Grusha’s, is addressed to her fiancée Simon, who is fighting in war. Following the end of the song, Grusha tells the baby Michael that if the two of them make themselves “really small, like cockroaches, the sister-in-law will forget [they are] in house.” In that case, they can stay there until the snow melts. A dialogue between Lavrenti and Grusha ensues, during which sounds of the melting snow’s drops from the roof become prominent, their beat gradually growing faster and steadier. The scene follows the rule of the unity of space (Grusha and the child are on the stage throughout its duration), which only emphasises the violation of the rule of the unity of time (six months pass during what amounts to but a few minutes of the playing time.) Significantly, both of the elements that compress the dramatic time (the songs and the dripping) belong to the audio channel of the performance.

Joachim Lang offers a similar example, concerning Brecht’s use in scene eight of *The Good Person of Szechwan* of a theatrical equivalent to the cinematic flashback:

1. Frau Yang wendet sich direkt zum Publikum und kündigt einen Bericht über ihren Sohn Sun an. Sie will damit zeigen, wie ein “verkommener” Mensch in einen “nützlichen” verwandelt wurde.
3. Wieder in der Gegenwart berichtet Frau Yang über die schwierige Anfangszeit ihres Sohnes.
5. Mit Frau Yangs kurzer Unterbrechung in der Gegenwart wird ein Tag der Vergangenheit übersprungen.
8. Der vierte Rückblick zeigt Sun als Menschenschinder.
10. Die Arbeiter singen das “Lied vom achten Elefanten.”

1. Madame Yang addresses the audience and announces an account about Sun, her son, that will depict how a “dissipated” person was transformed into a “model” one.
2. The first “illustration” takes place three months prior to the announcement, when madam Yang took her son to Shui Ta’s factory.
3. In the dramatic present, madam Yang narrates about her son’s difficult beginning there.
4. The second “illustration” of the account depicts the period following Sun’s first three weeks in the factory. Sun pushes himself to the fore at the expense of a coworker. Madam Yang comments on this.
5. One day in the past is skipped with madame Yang’s short interruption in the present.
6. The third “illustration” of the account shows how Sun advanced through his ruthless behaviour.
7. Madame Yang talks about the “true miracles” that her son accomplished.
8. The fourth flashback shows Sun as a slave-driver.
9. Madame Yang narrates further that none of her son’s hostilities could deter her from fulfilling her duty.
10. The workers sing “The Song of Eight Elephants.”
11. The account ends: Madame Yang praises the progress of her son, whom Shui Ta “compelled to more honest work.” (32)

Because of the simultaneity between the production and reception of a stage performance, the flashback – common in cinema and the narrative forms antecedent to it – becomes in the context of Brecht’s theatre an estrangement device. In the newer medium, the very possibility that a scene referring to the fictional world’s past was indeed shot before the one referring to the fictional world’s present will arguably endow it with a degree of credibility. As Lang observes, the flashback, conventionally used in cinema as a proof of the accuracy of an account narrated by a character, produces the opposite effect in theatre. (33) In the case of Madame Yang’s account, her address to the audience enhances the effect. In dramatic theatre, this method exists only in the form of the discourse of raisonneur, a heir to the Greek chorus intended to instruct the spectator

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60 So much so that the film narratives opposing the convention are often famous precisely for that: for example, *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950), *Stage Fright* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1950), and *Usual Suspects* (Brian Singer, 1995).
how to interpret the action (Pavis 1998: 15). It is, however, common in both the
twentieth-century epic theatre (Brecht, Wilder, Giraudoux) and in religious theatre of a
more distant past (Jesuit plays and medieval morality plays). (15) The raisonneur does
not have a parallel in cinema: because film, unlike theatre, is not a live medium, the
screen actor’s address to “the viewer” – examples of which can be found in a wide range
of filmmakers from Woody Allen to Michael Haneke – is only ostensible. The actress in
the role of Madame Yang, then, exists on two levels, demonstrating both the character
and her demonstration of it.  

Invoking Eisenstein – certainly the most important theorist and practitioner of
cinematic montage among Brecht’s contemporaries – does not seem productive in
relation to these, and many other examples of the playwright’s use of the technique, as
they bring to mind classical Hollywood much rather than the foregrounded style of the
Soviet filmmaker’s films. The existence of a breakdown of scenes from the epilogue of
Enough Simplicity for Every Wise Man, Eisenstein’s 1923 Proletkult production based
upon the play by Ostrovsky, allows for an easy comparison between his, and the
theatrical dramaturgy employed in Brecht’s The Good Person of Szechwan. Below
reproduced are the descriptions of the first ten segments of the epilogue, prepared by
members of the production under the leadership of Maxim Straub, and published in the
original language in the six-volume edition of Eisenstein’s Selected Works. (Richard
Taylor, in Eisenstein 1988: 37)

1. On stage (in the arena) we see Glumov who, in an (‘explanatory’) monologue, recounts
how his diary has been stolen and he has been threatened with exposure. Glumov decides to

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61 For more on this, see Brecht’s “The street scene”. (1964: 121-129)
marry Mashenka immediately and so he summons Manefa the clown on to the stage and asks him to play the part of the priest.

2. The lights go down. On the screen we see Glumov’s diary being stolen by a man in a black mask – Golutvin. A parody of the American detective film.

3. The lights go up. Mashenka appears, dressed as a racing driver in a bridal veil. She is followed by her three rejected suitors, officers (in Ostrovsky’s play there is just one: Kurchayev), who are to be the best men at her wedding to Glumov. They act out a separation scene (“melancholy”). Mashenka sings the ‘cruel’ romance, “May I be punished by the grave.” The officers, parodying Vertinsky, perform “Your hands smell of incense.” (It was Eisenstein’s original intention that this scene should be regarded as an Eccentric music-hall number (“xylophone”) with Mashenka playing on the bells sewn as buttons on to the officers’ coats.

4.5.6. Exit Mashenka and the three officers. Enter Glumov. Three clowns – Goroudin, Joffre, Mamilyukov – run out from the auditorium towards him. Each performs his own curious turn (juggling with balls, acrobatic jumps, etc.) and asks for his payment. Glumov refuses and leaves. (The ‘two-phrased clowning entrées’: for each exit there are two phrases of text, the clowns and Glumov’s rejoinder.)

7. Mamayeva appears, dressed in extravagant luxury (a ‘star’), carrying a ringmaster’s whip. She is followed by three officers. Mamayeva wants to disrupt Glumov’s wedding. She comforts the rejected suitors and after their rejoinder about the horse (“My friendly mare is neighing”) she cracks the whip and the officers scamper around the arena. Two imitate a horse while the third is the rider.

8. On stage the priest (Manefa) begins the wedding ceremony. Everyone present sings, “There was a priest who had a dog.” Manefa performs a circus turn (the ‘rubber priest’), imitating a dog.

9. Through a megaphone we hear the paper-boy shouting. Glumov, abandoning the wedding, escapes to find out whether his diary has appeared in print.

10. The man who stole the diary appears. He is a man in a black mask (Golutvin). The lights go out. On the screen we see Glumov’s diary. The film tells us of his behavior in front of his great patrons and accordingly of his transmogrifications into various conventional figures (into a donkey in front of Mamaev, a tank-driver in front of Joffre, and so on.)

Eisenstein greatly exaggerates the farcical dimension of the original through the following stylistic procedures: first, by writing into the scene the wedding, thus enhancing the comical effect of the abruptness with which Glumov had decided to marry Mashenka, and the speed with which the decision is carried out; second, by saturating the scene with mise-en-scène elements associated with the circus (the xylophone, the clowns, the whip), and fragmenting its space-time in a fashion characteristic of the medium (through the use of the song and film, as relatively “stand-alone” elements). In
comparison with the scene’s exuberancy, the one from Brecht seems restrained in terms of its style. Granted, Brecht’s scene derives from a play written in the late 1930s, when even Eisenstein had tempered his use of montage under the pressure of the Socialist realism doctrine. But the relevance of the vast difference between the respective cultural contexts within which the two works were produced appears questionable when one considers the fact that not even Brecht’s 1920s plays show the degree of formal playfulness that characterises Eisenstein’s production.

Still, the two artists are often compared to one another (perhaps most notably, by Roland Barthes in his “Brecht, Diderot, Eisenstein” [1974]). For the problematics of this comparison in the context of cinema to become fully apparent, a brief examination needs to be undertaken of the type of montage most commonly associated with Eisenstein: intellectual. The concept involves the creation of “an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots – shots even opposite to one another.” (Eisenstein 1977 [1929]: 49) Eisenstein’s idea breaks with the tradition of the previous major innovator in the domain of film editing, D. W. Griffith. In Griffith’s cinema, the spatio-temporal relationship between shots or series of shots is invariably subservient to the narrative and, therefore, readily evident: this applies to any example in his cinema of parallel editing, a technique he pioneered, but also to what is perhaps the director’s narratively most complex film, the 1916 *Intolerance*. The viewer’s orientation in the multiple narrative set in different cultures and spanning different historical epochs is ensured by the difference between the costumes of the characters in each of the thematically linked episodes, as well as by the meta-discourse conveyed through the intertitles. Eisenstein’s intellectual editing, by contrast, often combines non-diegetic images with diegetic ones (an example would be

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62 Consider, for example, Griffith’s trademark chase sequences.
the juxtaposition in *October* of the image of an opening bridge and a pharaoh.) A more abstract, and therefore also more comprehensive, illustration of the concept can be found in Eisenstein’s essay “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram” that discusses the “representation of something that is graphically undepictable” (Eisenstein 1977 [1929], 30) through a combination of images within a Chinese ideogram. The examples that Eisenstein gives include the combination of a picture for water and the picture of an eye to signify weeping, the combination of the picture of a knife and the picture of a heart to signify sorrow, and the combination of a picture of a mouth and a picture of a bird to signify singing. (30) Schematically, the difference between Griffith and Eisenstein can be represented as follows: the editing pattern in the former filmmaker conforms to the formula $a + b = ab$ (for instance, the chaser, nearing the prey throughout a sequence, eventually catches her, thus bringing two parallel narrative lines together);$^{63}$ Eisenstein’s intellectual editing, on the other hand, follows the formula $a + b = c$ (an abstract concept arises from the collision of concrete images). (37) Although the method clearly draws on the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, which substantially informs Brecht too, its similarity to the montage in Brecht is limited. As stated earlier, Brecht’s complication of the concept of dialectics results, paradoxically, in a simplification of its practical expression: *Naivität*, among other things, pertains to the perceptual freshness that survives the convoluted operation of double negation involved in the dialectical process of *Verfremdung.* Intellectual editing, however, hardly has a use for *Naivität.* The implicit invitation to disregard the specificity of a cinematically represented object that underlies the theory (the shots of an Eisensteinian intellectual montage invite us to see the mouth as “not

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$^{63}$ Note that if the variables $a$ and $b$ are broadened to apply not only to characters, but also to objects and abstractions, the simple formula becomes applicable to the dramaturgy of all mainstream, goal-oriented cinema.
belonging to anyone in particular,” and the bird as not representing a, say, canary, but “simply a bird”.) Effectively, this amounts to a control of vision not readily reconcilable with the medium’s photographic nature, or – to use the term introduced by Christian Metz – its indexicality. Metz, building upon Peirce’s triadic model of the sign, describes the mentioned feature of the photographic image as “an actual contiguity or connection in the world: the lightning is the index of the storm.” (156) By asking the viewer to understand them as images not of things, but of classes thereof, the “montage cells” in Eisenstein’s intellectual editing patterns diminish the process of reading, crucial for Brecht’s understanding of the image.⁶⁴

Brecht’s penchant for the documentary, the mode that insists on the particularity of an image, can be said to contrast, or even dialecticise, the technique of montage itself. Both the technique and the mode are of utmost importance for Brecht’s and Dudow’s Kuhle Wampe.

**Brecht the Filmmaker: Towards Kuhle Wampe**

Brecht realised few of his film projects. The ones belonging only to the former group comprise over 40 texts, of which most of the extant ones date from 1921. Commentators

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⁶⁴ Significantly, in “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form,” published a year before Brecht’s “Notes to ‘Mahagonny,’” Eisenstein uses the dichotomy between epic and dramatic, albeit in a manner almost diametrically opposite from Brecht’s: comparing Pudovkin’s understanding of montage to his own, Eisenstein writes that the technique is, for the other filmmaker, “the means of unrolling an idea with the help of single shots: the “epic” principle,” whereas for him, it is “an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots - shots even opposite to one another: the “dramatic” principle.” (49)
explain Brecht’s unusual productiveness this year by financial need,\textsuperscript{65} and the synopsis and three film scripts that it yielded – Robinsonade auf Assuncion (Robinsonade on Assuncion), Das Mysterium der Jamaika-Bar (The Mystery of the Jamaica Bar), Der Brilliantenfresser (The Jewel Eater) and Three in the Tower – have been assessed mostly favourably by commentators.\textsuperscript{66} Besides being more suggestive of Brecht’s view of the contemporary cinema than his theoretical writings, these texts are particularly valuable as sole examples of the application of young Brecht’s dramaturgy into an image-based medium. Thematically, they can be separated into two pairs: the first and the last use the motif of rivalry between men for the same woman, whereas the other two are detective stories, each featuring an unusual criminal gang. Robinsonade is set in the simultaneously exotic and post-apocalyptic milieu of Assuncion Island after the volcanic eruption, whose streets are scoured by a hungry tiger. The screenplay, as Maia Turovskaia observes, literalises the central metaphor of Im Dickicht der Städte (In the Jungle of the Cities, 1921-4) the play Brecht wrote immediately after the script. (37) The narrative of Three in the Tower (co-written with Caspar Neher) is widely seen to be drawn from Strindberg’s Dance of Death (Gersch 1969, Hinck 1971, Silberman 2000), which Brecht saw in Munich two years prior to writing the script. The story of a captain who, upon discovering that his wife is having an affair with his lieutenant, commits suicide in a cupboard, and continues to haunt the couple with the odor of his decaying corpse, is replete with trademarks of the Expressionist style. A focus on lighting (the script contains several references to lanterns and candles, as well as allusions to Goya’s paintings) and the architecture of the setting (throughout the script, there are references to winding

\textsuperscript{65} See, for example, Silberman 1997.

\textsuperscript{66} See, for example, Hinck 71.
staircases and narrow corridors) betrays the painterly hand of Neher, who collaborated on productions of Brecht’s plays as a set designer. As Walter Hinck observes, the film conveys its ironic stance toward the Expressionistic style mainly through intertitles, such as the announcements of each of the five “acts” (“‘Toiletries in the house of death’ or ‘Lime is not enough’ or ‘A corpse in the lovers’ bed’”). (Brecht 2000: 106) “These are,” writes Hinck, “provocations that kill off all cinematic sentimentality, comparable with ‘gawk not that romantically’ from *Drums in the Night.*” (70) *The Mystery of the Jamaica Bar*, intended for the Stuart Webb detective film series, produced in the early 1920s by an eponymous Munich film company, has a convoluted storyline that involves vanishing guests of a party. While this script too suggests the use of broad gestures and mannerisms associated with Expressionist theatre and film (the manner of a coat-check lady is described as *overly* obsequious [Brecht 2000: 50], the playfulness of a group of gentlemen in club rooms as *exaggerated* [52], Paduk’s gesticulation as wild [57]), it rejects the tradition’s interest in interiority. Turovskaia considers the genre’s action-driven nature the reason for Brecht’s attraction to the criminal film: the realism it provided, while primitive, was compatible with Brecht’s understanding of realism in its opposition to psychologism. (42) The same applies to *The Jewel Eater*, which stands out from the four projects for its numerous comedic elements, as well as the reliance of its narrative on a uniquely cinematic trick. Via the latter, the body of a character becomes transparent, and the swallowed jewel inside it thus revealed.

*Die Beule* (The Bruise), the screen adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* Brecht wrote for Nero-Film in 1930 in collaboration with Caspar Neher, Slatan Dudow and Leo Lania, resonates with the *Lehrstück* theory Brecht was developing at the time. In its
didacticism and radical political tendency, the screenplay significantly departs from the original play. Having realised that Brecht failed to fulfill the contractual obligation of following *The Threepenny Opera* in content and style, the producer attempted an accommodation. Brecht refused the offer, but the production continued nonetheless with a new version of the script, authored by Béla Balász and Ladislaus Vajda. The resulting film – widely seen as betrayal by Brecht scholars (Turovskaia 1985, Elsaesser 2000, Silberman, in Brecht 2000) – downplays the play’s satirical aspect, emphasising instead the role of erotic attraction in power relations. (1997: 205) Stylistically, it features none of the estranging devices of the original stage production. While the director Georg Wilhelm Pabst retained the Weill-composed songs, he eliminated the contrast between their intentional sentimentality and the irony that underlies the play’s paralleling the Victorian England’s underworld with its judicial system. Thus, the formal tension of the original production – which corresponds to the principle of separating the elements – has given way in the film to a uniformly romantic vision of the milieu of poverty and crime, which works to obscure the narrative’s topicality. Conversely, *The Bruise*, conceived in the climate of inflation, joblessness and class struggle that had intensified since the play’s original production in 1928, brings these issues further to the fore. Most important of the pertinent changes concerns Macheath and his gangsters being bank owners – the detail glossing the equation between the ruling class and criminals present in both Brecht’s and Gay’s versions of the drama. The motif suggested by the script’s title appears on the head of one of the beggars, Sam, a result of his being thrashed by Macheath’s gangsters for informing the police about them. Peachum, determined to separate his daughter Polly from Macheath, whom she just secretly married, takes the injured man to Tiger Brown,
the police chief, hoping to prompt his arrest. Brown, however, turns out to be protective of Macheath, as well as relatively disinterested in the subject, being busy developing the plan of renovating the “eyesore” (Brecht 2000: 136) of Old Oak Street, by which the Queen will pass upon her imminent arrival. But when Peachum threatens to spoil the festivity of the royal visit with the assistance of his many employees, ready to “do anything for a piece of bread” (140), Brown agrees to arrest Macheath. Shortly thereafter, Peachum learns from the newspaper about the public’s revolt over the “completely unfounded arrest of the National Bank Deposit owner.” (141) In order to prevent Macheath’s release under the pressure of the clients of his bank, Peachum personally renews Sam’s bruise. Next, a group of beggars start agitating for justice for Sam, showing the bruised man to the inhabitants of the slums of the West India Dock. Mrs Peachum, however, warns her husband against the probable repercussions of his initiative: “They will come forth from the slums, why not, but for whom will they come? They will hang Mr Macheath, lynch the chief of police, do who-knows-what to the Queen, will they spare us?” (142) An oneiric sequence follows, showing the miserable taking over the city, despite the attempted resistance of the police and army: “teeming misery in a mute march, transparent and faceless, they march through the palaces of the wealthy, they march through the walls of art galleries, the royal residence, court chambers, parliament.” (143) The narrative ends with Macheath’s, Peachum’s, and Tiger Brown’s realisation of their interdependence in the threat of the beggars’ rebellion.

The script shows its medium-specificity in two ways: a spectacularisation of the narrative, which endows it with the proportions of a *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927): “no less than twenty major robberies” (133) committed by the gang that, in the unrealised
film version, numbers 120 people, bring together the necessities for the newlywed Macheath and Polly, “no less than three entire oxen” (134) are prepared for the wedding banquet meal in the hall that holds 150 guests (134), and the sequence of Tiger Brown’s dream calls for tanks rolling the streets of London. Another peculiarity of the screenplay concerns planned visual style for the film: it was to employ intertitles, a convention of narrative film rendered redundant by the advent of sound. More importantly, the three “chapters” into which the intertitles would divide the film would employ

[diffrent techniques] in terms of photography, rhythm of events and images, and the particular camera shots they require, etc. The first chapter should flow without editing and cuts. (The spectator does not see Polly Peachum’s face before Macheath does.) The second chapter introduces two regularly alternating and mutually qualifying activities: the falling-in-love (soft focus, indolent) and the organising of the trousseau (sharp, montage editing). The third chapter shows single, unconnected still lives; the camera searches for motives, it is a sociologist. (135)

The narrative parallels the juxtaposition of stylistic conventions associated with melodrama (for example, soft focus) to those of a documentary (somewhat vaguely suggested by the equation of camera with a sociologist): as much as the cinematographic style intended for the third “chapter” was to foreground the artificiality of the cinematic representation of Macheath’s romance with Polly, the vividness and epic scope of the oneiric sequence was to render the “happy end” unsatisfactory and calculatedly unconvincing.

The group of films on which Brecht collaborated as a co-director comprises mere two titles: Mysteries of a Hairdressing Salon (co-directed by Erich Engel, 1923), a short comedy featuring Karl Valentin, and Kuhle Wampe. The films contrast with each other

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67 It is worth noting that Brecht’s directorial involvement in both films has been disputed. Although the credits identify Brecht as co-director, Marc Silberman, for example, cites Engel as the sole director of Mysteries. (1997: 201) In the case of Kuhle Wampe, the disagreement over the authorship of the film seems to stem largely from the discrepancy between the credits on the one hand - which list Dudow as director -
in terms of their respective stylistic dominants. The short attempts to emulate the style of contemporary Hollywood fare, and hence predicates itself on the technique of continuity editing. *Kuhle Wampe*, on the other hand, heavily employs Soviet-style montage. Narratively, *Mysterien* is closer to the tradition of German humour of violent pranks associated with the caricaturist and poet Wilhelm Busch than to Brecht’s literary works.

Because of the film’s unavailability in North America as of this writing, I include below a detailed synopsis. The employees of a hairdressing salon, an unnamed young woman (Blandine Ebinger) and a middle-aged man (Karl Valentin) are shown to neglect the customers waiting for service: he reads a newspaper and smokes, while she is daydreaming and glancing at the poster for the book *What Shall I Do to Get Attractive*, hung on the door that separates the room of Valentin’s character from hers. The drama begins with the appearance in the salon of the book’s author, in whom the lady hairdresser has a romantic interest, in company of his beautiful wife. The writer (identified by the intertitles as “the Professor”) declares that he “muss genau aussehen wie mein Plakat”: “must look exactly like his poster.” The lady hairdresser, upon borrowing a tool from the room where Valentin’s character is foaming the professor’s face, accidentally flips around the poster, on whose opposite side hangs an ad for “Odol” oral care products, featuring a bald Chinese with a tuft. Next, the lady hairdresser tortures her rival with electro-shocks, while Valentin’s character is fashioning the professor after the Chinese. Ashamed of his new looks, the professors hides in a restaurant, where no one knows his identity. Valentin’s character decides to see what the Chinese is doing, and

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and the censorship card, which lists Brecht as director, and Dudow as assistant. In the heyday of Brecht-inspired film criticism in the 1970s – which the re-release of *Kuhle Wampe* in in East Germany in 1958 helped initiate – the direction of the film was often attributed solely to Brecht.
leaves the salon. A woman recognises the voice of the professor, who – talking on the phone behind her back – is offering “a kingdom for a hat.” This prompts the professor to borrow the first hat within his reach. Valentin’s character appears and, greeting the professor, takes his hat off. When the professor fails to reciprocate the gesture, the hairdresser blows his hat away with a blast of soda. The owner of the hat states that the theft must be washed with blood, and goes to the hairdressing salon to shave and have his duel sword sharpened. While Valentin’s character, now back in the salon, is performing the first task, a waiting customer peers into the room. This startles the hairdresser, causing him to accidentally decapitate the man from the restaurant (Figure 2).

When Valentin’s character revivifies him by tying his head to his neck, the man from the restaurant shoots him. He then leaves for the duel carrying the case, unaware that the lady hairdresser, fainted from seeing his head removed from his body, is part of its contents. During the duel at a Senegalese salon, Ebinger’s character regains consciousness and helps the professor win by fishing off the head of the man from the restaurant. As the two passionately kiss, the shot hairdresser comes to life. He takes a bullet the size of a tennis ball out of his chest and looks at it, puzzled.
While crude in terms of the organisation of filmic space and the editing rhythm, the film hardly deserves Knopf’s implicit dismissal, supported by Engels confession that the crew did not know anything about filmmaking (2001: 431) Knopf is right to imply that the film’s cinematography is not particularly imaginative, with its reliance on the static camera at the eye level, but his suggestion that the camera’s optical axis typically coincides with the characters’ eyelines (thus resulting in flat compositions) is hardly accurate. In many cases, the film’s decoupage testifies to a (perhaps instinctive) adherence to the rule of Hollywood editing whereby the angle between the optical axis of the camera should, at the transition from one shot of an object to another, best be between 30 and 90 degrees. This is not the only fact that renders questionable Knopf’s implication that the filmmakers’ theatrical background burdens the film. In fact, the film’s abundant use of parallel editing and the accelerated narrative tempo as its result, as well as the use of the stop-motion camera in the scene where the cut-off head of the man from the restaurant crawls away from Valentin’s character, only to be fetched back by his whistling, testify to a genuine fascination with cinema, much rather than to its use as a mere recording device for a narrative that could be accommodated equally well in the principal medium of the crew’s work. Rather than because of its structural flaws, the film appears to have a problematic status within Brecht’s oeuvre as a result of being a work of modest ambition, thematically and stylistically discontinuous from the artist’s literature and Kuhle Wampe, and lastly – being out of circulation for decades.68

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68 In North American Brecht scholarship, the film continues to be described as deleted, a decade and a half after the re-discovery of the negative in the DEFA archives.
Unlike that of *Mysteries*, the narrative of *Kuhle Wampe* is deeply rooted in the peculiar political and historical milieu of the Weimar Republic. Therefore, a historical contextualisation seems in order here. The October 1929 stock market crash had a harsher impact on Germany than it did on the other Western European countries. The United States’ credits, on which the fragile economy had been dependent, were now increasingly unavailable. Between 1929 and 1932, industrial production dropped by 40%. While the official sources cite seven million unemployed in the latter year, the historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler suggests that the actual number – which takes into account also the unregistered workers – was significantly higher. A dispute between the liberal nationalist DVP and the social democratic SPD over state support for the jobless (the former demanded a reduction of welfare, and the latter its increase) led to the collapse of Grand Coalition. The chancellor Hermann Müller of the SPD was replaced by Heinrich Brüning, a Center Party politician who secretly aimed to restore the Hohenzollern monarchy. President von Hindenburg, a self-professed hater of the republic, had promised Brüning to use the power that Article 48 of the constitution gave him, and issue an emergency decree whenever a bill he supported was voted down. Hindenburg’s and Brüning’s anti-democratic stance notwithstanding, the mathematical assignment of Reichstag seats, in combination with the contemporaneous rise of splinter parties, made the achievement of a parliamentary majority virtually impossible. As a result of these factors, the role of the Reichstag gradually diminished: it gathered 94 times in 1930, 42 times in 1931, and only 13 times in 1932. While the number of laws passed fell from 98 in 1930 to a mere five in
1932, the number of emergency decrees issued rose from 5 in 1930 to 66 in 1932. The operation of the Reichstag was further hampered by the representatives of the KPD and NSDAP, whose number grew dramatically after the elections of September 1930 from 12 to 107 for the former, and from 54 to 77 for the latter party: they regularly interrupted parliamentary debates, and even physically fought each other in the building.

The Communists considered the SPD an enemy as fierce as the NSDAP. In fact, in the summer of 1931 the KPD followed the instructions from Moscow to join forces with the right-wing parties by participating in the popular vote the latter organised against the Prussian government, under the slogan ‘All party forces must be thrown into the battle against social democracy.’ The reason for the Communists’ denunciation of the SPD as “socialist fascists” derived from the latter party’s collaboration with certain reactionary politicians in the Clerical Centre Party and the Bavarian People’s Party. On the 1928 May Day demonstration, the police force controlled by the Socialists fired on the demonstrators, killing 31 persons and wounding hundreds more. This was not the first SPD’s involvement in a violent and politically questionable act: the gruesome Free Corps intervention in the 1919 Spartakist uprising was orchestrated by a minister from the party.

The police forces tended to be more lenient with the NSDAP than the party at the opposite side of the political spectrum. Between March 1931 and March 1932, fifty-four Communists were killed and 677 arrested. 700 Communist meetings were broken up and over 4000 of them banned. The working class answered to the oppression by further mobilisation.

Such was the political climate in which Slatan Dudow, a Bulgarian émigré who had worked as an assistant director for Lang’s *Metropolis*, a collaborator in different
capacities on a series of Brecht’s didactic plays and *The Bruise* screenplay, as well as the director of a short documentary entitled *Wie der Berliner Arbeiter wohnt* (How the Berlin Worker Lives, 1930), conceived *Kuhle Wampe*. In 1931, Dudow approached “Prometheus Films,” an independent company founded in 1926 by Willi Münzerberg, a KPD representative in the parliament, with a synopsis for a feature-length film involving the suicide of an unemployed Berlin worker. At this time, UFA was under the ownership of Alfred Hugenberg, a media magnate of rightist leanings; with UFA holding a virtual monopoly within the German film industry, the marginal position of “Prometheus Film” was increasingly difficult to maintain. The company, once a successful distributor of Soviet films and a producer in its own right (perhaps most notably, of Piel Jutzi’s *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* [Mother Krausen’s Journey to Happiness], 1929), was now at the verge of bankruptcy. Averaging 15 productions a year between 1927 and 1930, “Prometheus” made only four shorts in 1931. *Kuhle Wampe*, the company’s last film, could not have been produced without the financial assistance of an entrepreneur who, according to the producer Georg Höllering, provided the bulk of the film’s modest budget on condition that Brecht write a song for him, and the Swiss company “Praesens-Film”, which bought the unfinished production and enabled its completion after “Prometheus” had gone bankrupt in 1932. (Brewster and MacCabe 1974) Along with the extraordinary financial difficulties – which demanded that about a quarter of the footage be shot within the period of two days – the production was plagued by a dispute with the “Tobis-Klangfilm” concern over the use of sound technology, on which the concern claimed exclusive rights, as well as by censorship. After reviewing the film twice, on April 9, 69

69 After World War II, Dudow participated in the establishment of the East German film production company DEFA, for which he directed several films.
1932, Berlin’s Film Inspection Board proclaimed the film unsuitable for public release “because of its emphatic propagandistic tendencies” (Silberman, in Brecht 2000: 203) As a result of the ensuing protest meetings, petitions, newspaper debates and the expressed readiness of “Praesens Film” to cut the scenes the Board found inappropriate, the Board allowed the film to be released. Perhaps as a result partly of the heated debate that preceded its German premiere (Turovskaia 99), Kuhle Wampe attracted 14000 spectators during the first week of its run in 15 Berlin cinemas. Immediately after the Nazis’ seizure of power in March 1933, the film shared the lot of all left-wing artworks, and was eliminated from circulation.

While the original idea came from Dudow, its development is the work of a collective including also Brecht, Hanns Eisler, and Ernst Ottwalt. The first three artists had previously worked together on the staging of Die Maßnahme (The Measures Taken). Ernst Ottwalt, a proletarian-revolutionary playwright and novelist, was brought into the creative team by Brecht, on account of his firsthand knowledge of the working class milieu. Brecht creatively participated in all stages of the film’s production. However, the principal responsibility for the shooting script appears to be Dudow’s, while the acting style seems to have been determined by Brecht. (Production photos show him working with the actors, and the anecdote the producer Höllering told Screen supports the general claim that it was this aspect of directing with which Brecht was principally concerned.)

The film’s three parts, divided by montage sequences showing “images of apartment buildings, factories and natural landscapes” (Brecht 2000: 205) and accompanying songs form a hierarchy that can be designated as dialectical.\footnote{In his article “Tonfilm ‘Kuhle Wampe’ oder Wem gehört die Welt’” (“The Sound Film Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?”, 1932) Brecht mentions the film’s four parts, the last one consisting of the S-Bahn}
part, centering on a labourer who commits suicide after a vain job hunt, represents one answer to a manifestation of the crisis of the capitalist system (suicide as thesis). The second episode, where the dead labourer’s family – upon their eviction from their Berlin home due to unpaid rent – moves to the film’s eponymous tent colony, represents another answer (eviction as antithesis). While the first two parts are centred on the concerns of the individual, the third one, showing a leftist sports manifestation, focuses on the collective. It is constructed as the only satisfactory answer to the problem of the crisis of capitalism established in the film’s exposition (the workers’ mobilisation as a synthesis.) All formal operations that assist the dialectics of the content can be safely associated with montage and “documentariness,” once we broaden the former concept to include the sound-image relationship (as in Eisenstein’s “vertical montage”) and the latter to include all elements of the film that oppose the principles of Aristotelian dramaturgy. This is not to imply that montage, as applied in Kuhle Wampe, does not interact with the film’s dramaturgy, and does not have a role in the process of thwarting the viewer’s identification with the characters. (Brecht himself leaves no doubt about this, when he contrasts the Aristotelian growth to Epic Theatre’s montage in his “Mahagonny” tables.) Neither is the conjecture about the dialectical relationship between montage and “documentariness” in Kuhle Wampe to imply that the applications in the film of the two concepts do not coincide. But while the two are inseparable from each other and often share a narrative purpose, their ontological purposes are diametrically opposed. The potential of montage to denote through connoting (to once again refer to Schlegel’s idea),

sequence. This division appears problematic, because the penultimate song featured in the film – which precedes what Brecht implies to be the film’s final part – is diegetic, unlike the first two. For this reason, the structural function of the three songs should not be considered identical. The literature on the film typically identifies three, and not four parts of the film (Gersch 1974, Happel 1978, Turovskaia 1985).
limits the potential of “documentariness” to connote through denoting, and – in the cases when it is applied together with the former concept – suggests its purpose within a narrative form. Silberman’s observation about the counterbalancing of the film’s rhetorical effects, which establish a relationship between seeing and persuasion (Silberman 1995: 41), fully applies also to the relationship between “documentariness” and montage. In what follows, I will analyse Kuhle Wampe’s use of montage and “documentariness” as defined above, as exemplified by the film’s selected sequences.

The film opens with a brief shot of the Brandenburg Gate, which locates the narrative in Germany’s capital. Four shots that gradually shift the focus from the public to the private sphere follow the described image: the first two are dominated by factories, while the third shows a train moving towards the camera, the smoke of its engine surrounding the apartment building in the background. Connecting an industrial motif with a residential one, the shot announces the next series of images, which show the buildings and back courtyards of the city’s working-class area. James Pettifer is right to conclude that the cluster of shots of newspaper headlines showing the disastrous effects on the unemployed of the economic crisis, which follow the expository sequence, represents an important Gestus,71 (57) but the rest of his discussion of the montage appears problematic. In interpreting the emphasis in the film on the newspaper “as a means of communication among the unemployed” (Ibid.) – which observation is further supported by the remark that “few were likely to own radios” (Ibid.) – Pettifer disregards the relative prominence of the motifs of the radio and gramophone in the film: in the sequence showing the arrival of the Bönike family to the tent colony inhabited mostly by unemployed workers, military marches and a radio-voice that announces them are heard.

71 Pettifer uses Willett’s rendition of the term as gest.
while the engagement party sequence shows Anni winding up a gramophone and playing yet another march: Fucik’s “Entry of the Gladiators.” More importantly, Pettifer’s remark that the headlines sequence reveals its problematic through the absence of politics—which makes the effect of the collage methodology synthetic rather than analytic—(Ibid.) ignores the shift in emphasis from the political to the purely economic that occurs in the sequence: among the headlines in the first part of the montage is “Westfalia South splits off.” Finally, Pettifer does not take into account the political connotations of the shot of the Brandenburg Gate as the historic site of battles between soldiers and revolutionaries in 1849 and 1919. Crucially positioned at the very opening of the film, the image tightly anchors the economic crisis, whose implications on the working class constitute the narrative’s foci, to the realm of the political.

The next segment, introduced through the intertitle “the job hunt,” has been insightfully commented upon by Gersch (1974), Pettifer (1974), Turovskaia (1985), Silberman (1997) and – in particularly great detail – by Reinhold Happel (1978) and Roswitha Mueller (1995). Rather than repeating the points made in the analyses of the imagery in what is stylistically the most virtuoso, but also a rather simple sequence in terms of the narrative and structure, I will make a few remarks on the sequence that immediately follows it.

The sequence in question shows the young Bönike’s return home after the unsuccessful attempt to find work, and offers the first two examples of the film’s disruption of the diegesis through the visuals. A crossover from Weisler’s unharmonic, and therefore also unsettling and estranging score, to the diegetic sound of street music, marks the beginning of the sequence, showing the young Bönike with his bicycle at the
front door of an apartment building. Upon entering the building, the young Bönike pauses in front of two musicians playing in the back yard. The two shots are separated with an insert of a low-angle shot of the building’s façade. Evocative of the series of shots of buildings in the workers’ district seen previously, the image represents an associational link between this, and the film’s segment that precedes the job hunt sequence. The shot has little movement, thus contrasting the hectic pace of the previous sequence. Through its relatively long length (13.3 metres, compared to 5.5 and 3.1 metres, respectively, of the preceding two), the shot places an emphasis on the back yard – the space where Bönike the son will jump to his death later in the sequence. It will also become a point of comparison with the other scene of a public performance in the film – that of the agit-prop theatre group “Das rote Sprachrohr” (“The Red Megaphone.”) Significantly, the situation enacted by the “Sprachrohr” is parallel to the one the Bönike family experiences after the suicide of the young Bönike: it concerns a tenant facing eviction due to being behind in rent. The next shot introduces Bönike the father. Lying on the sofa with a newspaper in his hands, he says that “the boy” will not get financial welfare any more. When his wife, occupied with setting the lunch table, remains silent, Bönike the father makes a reproachful remark on account of her alleged indifference. Because of its unorthodox composition, the next shot has a deliberately jarring effect. It shows the young Bönike tying the pulley rope of his bicycle to a nail. The bicycle, suspended in the air and occupying the foreground, allows only for a limited view of the character. The perspectival distortion of the shot, a property of the wide-angle lens employed, contributes to the impression that the young Bönike is but an accessory to the transportation device (the metonymical relation of which to the idea of job seeking has
been clearly established by the sequence of the character’s and his fellow-workers’ anxious riding from one factory to another.) The image previously seen in the job hunt sequence interrupts the conventional editing pattern of the next five-shot segment, which shows the young Bönike’s and his sister Anni’s entrance into the living room and the beginning of lunch. The cut to it shows the entire group of unemployed workers following the camera on bicycles, and is prompted by Mrs Bönike’s words: “’The early bird gets the worm.’ If you don’t try anything, how can you be surprised when things go to pot.” The shot – whose content highlights the erroneousness Mrs Bönike’s remark carries – here appears outside of the context of the diegesis. The absence of audio enhances its estranging quality: neither Eisler’s music, nor the ambient sound of the Bönike home accompanies the image. The shot prevents the possibility of being interpreted as a flashback through the use of different formal strategies that thwart the viewer’s identification with the young Bönike. First, the introduction of the character is calculatedly inconspicuous. He first appears in a long shot following the newspaper headlines montage, along with several other figures, and is neither the first, nor the last to enter the frame. Second, close-ups of other job hunters and the distributor of the classifieds surround that of the young Bönike, tempering the emphasis on the latter character that the mentioned shot scale provides. Third, none of the shots in the job-hunting sequence emulates the young Bönike’s point of view. Fourth, the character is absent from some of the scenes of the film’s first part. Fifth, he never speaks.

The shot of the pedaling workers punctuates the scene two more times (its appearances in the sequence equaling three – the number of cases necessary for creating a pattern.) Importantly, the content of the line that prompts the cut to the second of the
three inserts (“There are no jobs”) is almost diametrically opposite to the one that served
the mentioned purpose in the previous instance. It is Anni who delivers the line, in
reaction to her parents’ suggestions that the reason the young Bönike is unable to find
work concerns his alleged impoliteness. Related to these words, the insert shot here has a
different function – it shows not the falsity, but the accuracy of a character’s claim. In is
final appearance, the shot of the unemployed riding bicycles is coupled with that of the
young Bönike’s bicycle hanging from the ceiling. The latter shot, in combination with the
one whose connotation of strife has already been established, itself becomes a
connotation: of giving up. The young Bönike’s suicide retrospectively asserts this.

A scene from the film’s second part further foregrounds editing as the film’s
dominant technique. In terms of dramatic action, it echoes with the beginning of the
previously discussed scene: set in the tent where the Bönike family now resides, it again
shows the father reading a newspaper, while Mrs. Bönike is working (Figure 2). This
time around, she is not preparing to serve a meal, but is calculating the prices of food
items. The content of the article the father is reading aloud has a sensationalistic and
apolitical tone – a fact that resonates disturbingly in light of the link between the
newspaper article the character was reading earlier in the film, and the motive for his
son’s suicide. The slight low-angle shots of the couple, of Mrs Bönike and finally of her
hand as it is compiling the list, are interspersed with non-diegetic shots of food items with
price tags, photographed through a store window (Figure 3).
Unlike the shot of the riding workers from the earlier example, these do not confuse the spatio-temporal relationships of the scene, as they leave Bönike’s monologue uninterrupted. Its continuity, however, as well as the small scale of the shots, renders the inserts of food items near-abstract.\footnote{Still, the destabilisation of the signifiers / signifieds relationship in the film never proceeds as far as it does, say, in Eisenstein’s intellectual montages. The shots of groceries, for example, are unmistakably coded as belonging to the same time frame as the Bonike family’s activities and the space of their immediate environment. The slightness of Brecht’s divergence from the dominant stylistic practices, of which the above is but one example, has led Peter Wollen to situate Brecht between what are – to him – polar views of cinema’s ultimate aim as a medium. One pole is represented by André Bazin who envisions a cinema “in which there would be an ‘effacement’ and ‘transparency’ of technique” (as in technologically perfected 3D or holographic cinema), wherein “content would re-assert its primacy over form” (Wollen 1982: 190). At the other pole are materialist filmmakers and theorists who stress “the materiality of the filmic support” (193) thereby shifting the emphasis on subject matter shared by all narrative cinema to that...}
It is this quality that facilitates their adjustment to the narrative context. The sequence contrasts the luxurious life of the dancer and courtesan Mata Hari (the article quotes her as saying that she received as much as thirty thousand for her favours) to the illustration of the family’s daily monetary struggle. The contrast is facilitated by a significant point of similarity between Mata Hari and Mrs Bönike – their gender. Signified as the scene’s primary character by the comparatively close shot scales in which she is photographed, Mrs Bönike embodies domesticity, contrasting the exotic sex-appeal of Mata Hari. (The absence from the scene of the dancer’s and courtesan’s image only enhances the contrast.) Importantly, the purpose of the insert shots does not stay unchanged for the entire duration of the scene. The newspaper quote – “The rich connoisseurs admired her as a delicacy of the rarest kind” – is accompanied by an ironically literal illustration: an image of pickled fish, marked by the tag as “best German herring.”

Imagery similar to that punctuating the “Mata Hari” sequence appears in the visions of the film’s other protagonist, Anni. Upon learning that she is pregnant, the character has a distorted vision of children that is designed to illustrate the character’s anxiety at the prospect of motherhood (superimposed images of children looking at the camera lens convey the distortion). The ensuing montage sequence includes a variety of ads for baby products and the actual items they advertise, photographed – like the food of the medium itself. Most film materialists assert a relationship between their project and the conceptual framework of historical materialism; this postulates the primacy of economic factors in the development of society and its concepts. The perspective of historical materialism, of course, informs most of Brecht’s work after his discovery of Marxism in 1926. Brecht’s frequent reliance on montage in the sense of the term broader than filmic, and a confusion of Brecht’s materialism as a thinker with what Wollen refers to as “materiality” seem the reasons for film critics’ common invocation of Brecht relation to films that employ unconventional editing.
items in the “Mata Hari” scene – through the store window. While the sequence stands out as the film’s only attempt to convey interiority, Silberman’s observation that it represents a “concession to realist conventions of psychological motivation” (1995: 45) may be somewhat overstated. Namely, the similarity between the images of baby products with the insert shots used in the “Mata Hari” sequence, as well as the association of the former’s content with the world of material goods, work to objectify and depersonalise Anni’s vision, thus mocking – rather than affirming – the conventions of “surface realist” art.

*Kuhle Wampe* uses montage not only as an editing technique, but also as a structuring dramaturgical principle, applied at the respective levels of its three parts and the scenes these consist of. The parts are relatively independent from one another, each one centering on a separate issue: the first, on unemployment (suggesting that the crisis of capitalism renders futile all its methods); the second, on undesired pregnancy (suggesting that dire economic circumstances cannot be transcended through marriage); the third, on the agency of the dissatisfied to change the world. Significantly, each of the three parts is resolutely open-ended: the subsequent ones never refer to the death of the young Bônike, who constitutes the narrative focus of the first part. Similarly, the final part drops the motif of Anni’s pregnancy, central for part two. Finally, the narrative provides a confirmation that “those who do not like the world will change it,” as Kurt and Gerda say will happen in the subway scene. The end is left open, the impression of “spilling into the real” thus created functioning as a *Verfremdung* device.

The continuity is often resisted also in the transitions from one scene to the next, and within the given narrative line. As an illustration, let me consider a part of the
narrative line concerning Fritz’s relationship with Anni, and the prospect of their marriage and parenthood.

1. The woods. The couple is shown walking, with the accompaniment of Helene Weigel’s singing of the erotic song “On Nature in Springtime” (“The play of the sexes renews itself / Each spring. That’s when the lovers / Come together. The gently caressing hand / Of her lover brings a tingle to the girl’s breast. / Her fleeting glance seduces him. // The countryside in spring / Appears to the lovers in a new light. / The air is already warm. / The days are getting long and the fields // Stay light for a long time. // Boundless is the growth of tress and grasses / In spring. / Incessantly fruitful / Is the forest, are the meadows, the fields. / And the earth gives birth to the new // Heedless of caution.”)

2. The “Mata Hari sequence.” Towards its end, Anni appears in the tent, only to leave it after greeting her parents.

3. The couple is in front of the tent. After Mrs Bönike makes a circle around them and goes to the back of the tent, the following exchange takes place: “Were you there?” (Fritz); “It’s too dirty there. I’m not going to ruin my life” (Anni.)

4. Anni and her father are at the table in the tent, eating. When he threatens to “beat [her] to a pulp” in case “anything happens,” Anni angrily leaves.

5. The factory where Anni works. Women are testing electrical units. Gerda (to Anni): “Don’t lie, something is the matter with you.” Anni: “Don’t make trouble here at work, otherwise I’ll be fired tomorrow.”

6. The auto repair shop where Fritz works. He is spraying an engine, while a coworker of his is greasing it. Co-worker (to Fritz): “Paying alimony and single taxes, you might as well get married.” Fritz: “Nonsense. I want my freedom.”

While the series of scenes described above does not leave unclear the progression of the couple’s relationship, it does not exploit the emotional turns within it either, as a film based on Aristotelian dramaturgy would. Instead of the viewer’s emotions, the film mobilises her intellect, by creating narrative gaps and inviting her to make the cognitive effort of filling them.

A structural unity of what is a narratively fragmentary work is sustained through the repetition of certain character actions. Evident already in the job hunt sequence, which shows three instances of the unemployed workers’ inquiring about the availability

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All quotations in this section are based on Marc Silberman’s translation of the scene segmentation of the film, prepared by Wolfgang Gersch and Werner Hecht, and included in the Silberman-edited Brecht on Film and Radio (2000).
of factory work, this tendency is most overt in the film’s penultimate sequence, with its elaborate montage of the workers’ sports activities. The sequence, which, as Brecht himself puts it, “shows the search for work as – work” (2000: 205) continues in *Kuhle Wampe*. The scene of the party, thrown at the occasion of Fritz’s and Anni’s engagement working, repeatedly shows Fritz carrying crates of beer bottles and piling them by the tent. The three shots that show him perform the action or talk about it with his father-in-law, temporally define the relationship between the interior shots, which depict different phases of the party. Photographed from the same angle and employing similar shot scales, the three shots that punctuate the party scene function also as rhythmic constants, each one marking the end of a visual cadence.

In addition to the already mentioned ones, the film employs a series of devices borrowed from Brecht’s theatrical practice: intertitles, songs, narration (which in this cinematic version, has the form of the voice-over), and epic acting. The features of this last stylistic peculiarity – the actor’s apparent distantiation from the character she plays and the characters’ apparent emotional detachment from themselves and each other – rest in *Kuhle Wampe* to a considerable extent on the use of the actors’ / characters’ eyelines. Ordinarily the pivot of our focus in interactions with fellow humans, the eyelines and the relations between them quite logically became a basis for the grammar of Hollywood. In *Kuhle Wampe*, however, the characters look at each other relatively seldom. Mr and Mrs Bönike do not look at each other during the “Mata Hari” sequence; Fritz and Anni do not look at each other while discussing the possibility of getting married; Fritz and Mr Bönike do not look at each other in the scene where Fritz announces the wedding – to give but three examples. (A rare moment of a silent exchange of glances occurs in the
film’s first part, and involves Bönike the son and Anni. The ambiguous moment functions to transfer the attention from young Bönike to Anni, a protagonist of the film’s subsequent parts.)

With its sparse narrative and overt political agenda, Kuhle Wampe resembles Brecht’s Lehrstücke – the most famous among which, The Measures Taken, was written shortly before the film’s production (in 1930). Its real drama, however, plays out on the level of style, which combines, on the one hand, austere dialogues and restrained acting, and, on the other, oneiric and humorous montages and seemingly unrehearsed, documentary scenes. In light of the width of the stylistic range shown by Brecht’s scripts and the occasional brilliance of Mysteries and Kuhle Wampe, Bernard Dort’s statement that “A priori l’oeuvre de Brecht n’a pas affaire avec le cinema. Je dirais plus: elle repoussée, elle refuse violement le cinema: Brecht’s ouvre has nothing to do with cinema [:] I would say even more: he rejects, he violently refuses cinema” (as qtd. in Witte 62) appears unfounded.\textsuperscript{74}

Conclusion

Brecht’s many film projects, realised or not, can be classified according to the originality of their scripts: some were conceived specifically for the screen, whereas the other ones derived from pre-existing texts. The former are extraordinarily diverse and include projects that, had they been produced according to the writer’s planned design, would

\textsuperscript{74} Brecht’s practical dealings with cinema did not end with Kuhle Wampe. Besides a number of unproduced film adaptations of his plays as well as original scripts, he went on to co-write Fritz Lang’s anti-Nazi epic Hangmen Also Die (1942.) Brecht’s Hollywood and East German film projects are, however, left outside of this investigation, as I see them as either deeply compromised by the production circumstances, or not illustrative of a further development of Brecht’s film aesthetic.
share salient characteristics with Expressionism. (That this would occur despite Brecht’s
dislike of the style situate these projects alongside Baal, a play that is – although intended
as a ridicule of Expressionist drama – often regarded as an example of it.) Kuhle Wampe,
which belongs to the same group of film projects, is paradigmatic in being the only
Brecht film that substantially embodies his aesthetic, production, and political principles
presented in such writings as “The Threepenny Lawsuit” and the different articulations of
epic / dialectic theatre theory. The most notable projects from the other group, the
adaptations of The Threepenny Opera and Mother Courage, are linked also by their
troublesome productions. The largely improvisatory nature of the production of Mysteries
and Kuhle Wampe on the one hand, and the rigid one that characterises the production of
the play-based films on the other, makes one tempted to hypothesise about Brecht’s
personal role in the sharp contrast. Could it be that it was partly the success of the theatre
productions that thwarted the films’ success, by imposing on Brecht the hard-to-reconcile
imperatives of staying true to the “originals”, and of ensuring the same status for the
screen adaptations by making them sufficiently different from the theatre productions?

Brecht’s disagreement with DEFA, which was to produce a screen version of
Mother Courage, concerned its intention to give the play an epic treatment (not in the
sense the term has in Brecht, but in the sense of “impressively great” [“Epic”]): the use of
an international film star (Simone Signoret), intricate settings, a widescreen aspect ratio
and colour stock.\(^{75}\) What appears to underlie Brecht’s reservations about cinema in
general and the screen version of Mother Courage in particular (which led to his halt of
the project) is the conduciveness of photographic representation to “surface realism”.

\(^{75}\) For more on this, see Lang 228-234.
Both this, and the problem of original versus adapted works are crucial to the film poetics of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet.
Chapter 3: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet: the Caveman’s Avant-Garde

The emergence of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet as filmmakers has been situated variably between the contexts of the French *nouvelle vague* and New German Cinema. They belong to the former context by their original citizenship, and – in Straub’s case – on account of the developmental trajectory that preceded the production of their first film, *Machorka-Muff* (1962). Like some of the other best-known *nouvelle vague* filmmakers, Jean-Marie Straub participated in the 1950s culture of ciné-clubs, semi-formal groups of film enthusiasts organised together for the purpose of studying the medium. According to Richard Roud, Straub’s decision to pursue film professionally – first as a critic and later as a practitioner – resulted from the experience of exhibiting Robert Bresson’s *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (Ladies of the Park, 1945.) (19) Straub claimed he would never have made *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach* (Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach, 1968) if it were not for Bresson’s *Journal d’un curé de campagne* (Diary of a Country Priest, 1951.) (Albera: 48) 77

Roud identifies the following commonalities between Bresson and Straub: 1) both base their films on literary works (the former, in the first three films and the latter, 

76 Huillet was creatively involved in all Straub films after *Machorka Muff*, but has only received directorial credits for *Les yeux ne veulent en tout temps se fermer, ou Peut-être qu’un jour Rome se permettra de choisir à son tour ou Othon* (Eyes Do Not Want to Close at All Times or Perhaps One Day Rome Will Permit Herself to Choose in Her Turn or Othon, 1969), and the films produced between 1975 and 2006 (her death). For simplicity’s sake, I follow the editors of the “Editions Montparnasse” DVD edition of the filmmakers' selected works – the only release of its kind so far – who attribute the authorship to all films on which the Straub and Huillet collaborated to both filmmakers.

77 In the interview with Joel Rogers of *Jump Cut* (no. 12/13, 1976., pp. 61-64), Straub denies the information – provided by Richard Roud in *Straub* – that he assisted Bresson on *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (A Man Escaped, 1956)
throughout his career); 2) both filmmakers’ screen adaptations show fidelity to the original texts; both reject the methods of “psychological acting” in favour of restrained, distanced techniques that emphasise the properties of the playscript in a manner reminiscent of Brecht; 3) both depart from what Brecht calls “surface realism” by shifting the relationships between the audio-visual constituents of the shot; 4) both show a predilection for sparse, uncluttered compositions. (21-23) Roud seems to have a point in attributing the roots of Bresson’s visual style to religion (describing it, the writer invokes Jansenism, Calvinism and Protestantism), with which entire Bresson’s oeuvre shows a thematic concern. Bresson is, along with Yasujiro Ozu and Carl Theodor Dreyer, a subject of Paul Schrader’s study Transcendental Style in Film (1972), which investigates the relationship among the three filmmakers’ audio-visual styles and religious metaphysics. However, while Straub and Huillet’s films share salient features with those of the other filmmaker Schraeder’s study focuses on, they do not seek to “express the Holy” (3) – which phrase the writer uses to describe the deepest aim of Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer. On the contrary, Straub and Huillet’s perspective is materialist: through various strategies discussed below, it stresses the concreteness of the photographed objects, and on the other, the technical basis of their images and sounds.78

The Algerian war and the prospect it had brought of Straub’s being drafted prompted the couple’s exile to West Germany. The fact that they made their first several works there, debuting at the time of the country’s introduction of the film subsidy system and the penetration of the term Neues deutsches Kino into critical discourse, explains

78 Recent scholarship has challenged the view of Bresson as a transcendental filmmaker, arguing instead that his films, in fact, exemplify a materialist perspective. For examples, see Le Dantec 1998, Prédal 1998, Quandt 1998, Reader 1998, and Rosenbaum 1998.
their frequent classification in that context. When one considers the less literal sense of
the adjective characterising the two respective film movements – the one concerning the
originality of the works in question – the placement of Straub and Huillet in both contexts
seems questionable. In their writings and interviews, the filmmakers often compare their
work with that of the pioneers of film as a narrative medium. Oft-quoted is the anecdote
from the Berlin Film Festival, where Alexander Kluge described a new film of his as
“entirely new”, and – having spotted Straub in the audience – extended the description to
the work of his peer. Straub reacted by saying that “the things [he does] are not new at
all, they are traditional.” (as qtd. in Byg 1995: 41) Most commentators implicitly concur
with the filmmaker’s assertion. Thus, Hans Hurch describes Straub and Huillet as the last
great primitives of the medium and compares them with Griffith and Stroheim, (226)
while Roy Armes makes a comparison between the directorial tandem and Louis
Lumière. (209) Barton Byg’s observation that Straub and Huillet’s cinema “evoke[s] the
photographic immediacy of the early cinema” (22) may serve as an explanation of the
above comparisons. Peter Handke, writing about the filmmakers’ Die Antigone des
Sophokles in der hölderlinschen Übertragung für die Bühne bearbeitet von Brecht
(Sophocles’ Antigone in Hölderlin’s Translation as Reworked for the Stage by Brecht,
1992), takes this view further by describing Straub and Huillet’s cinema entirely in terms
of the older medium: “The Straubian cinema and ancient Greek theater are for me
virtually one in the same, of like form.”79 (as qtd. in Byg 1995: 217) Handke sees the
presence of “Brecht’s rhetoric” as aesthetically detrimental to the Hölderlin, implicitly

79 The filmmaker’s reservations about the quality of novum in the arts is redolent of Brecht, who –
discussing in The Messingkauf Dialogues the theatrical traditions resemblant of his own project within the
medium – more readily acknowledges the practitioners from the past historical eras (such as Shakespeare)
(57-63), than his immediate antecedents (such as Piscator.) (64-67)
dismissing the former’s trace in the film. And yet, commentaries of Straub and Huillet’s work consistently invoke Brecht. The relation between the two filmmakers and Brecht is the special focus of book chapters by Martin Walsh (1981) and Barton Byg (1995), and a segment of the introduction to Ursula Böser’s The Art of Seeing, the Art of Listening (2004). Straub and Huillet themselves acknowledge indebtedness to Brecht in their films, film projects, theoretical writings, and interviews. Brecht is one of the dedicatees of Machorka-Muff, and the opening credits of Not Reconciled are followed by a quotation from him. The latter film also bears as a subtitle a quote from St. Joan of the Stockyards: “Only violence helps where violence rules.” Straub also authored “‘Filmcritica’, Eisenstein, Brecht” (1973), a programmatic essay that includes a dramaturgical poem by Brecht in its entirety. Geschichtsunterricht (History Lessons, 1972) is based on Brecht’s novel fragment Die Geschäfte des Herrn Julius Caesar (The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Caesar), Antigone uses Brecht’s adaptation of Hölderlin’s translation of the Sophoclean tragedy, and Corneille / Brecht (2009) combines texts by the eponymous writers. Straub and Huillet also planned a screen adaptation of The Measures Taken, which project remained unrealised due to copyright issues (Byg 1995: 10).

As can be inferred from the above examples, Straub and Huillet and Brecht have common political leanings. In festival announcements of Chronicle and Othon, Straub and Huillet dedicated the films to Viet Cong and French workers, respectively. In Straub’s comments following the premiere of the first incarnation of his and Huillet’s Antigone as a Berlin’s Schaubühne production in May 1991, the work was dedicated to the one hundred thousand Iraqi victims of George H. Bush’s new World Order. (Ibid.: 84) Most provocatively, Moses und Aron (Moses and Aaron, 1974) is dedicated to Holger

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80 See, for example Brady 2006, Elsaesser 1990, and Byg 1997.
Meins, a cameraman who died from a hunger strike during his imprisonment on account of his suspected involvement with the Red Army Faction.

The filmmakers’ relation to the left has not been unambiguous, though. In an interview, Straub remarked that he does not know if he is a Marxist (Fairfax 2009). Objections to the filmmakers’ alleged detachment from true political involvement – of which Godard’s observation on the ideological ineffectiveness of *Chronicle* is perhaps most famous – have followed their work since the beginning. Helmut Färber objected to the moderation of the political stance displayed in *Machorka-Muff*, while Martin Walsh remarked in regard to *History Lessons* that Straub and Huillet’s “claims for a specific radical content are in some respects undercut by the formal investigations of language which are aimed at the elimination of meaning.” (105) Straub’s response to Färber by a letter to the editorial board of *Filmkritik* appears applicable also to criticisms concerning the insufficient political explicitness of his later films: “even supposed leftist intellectuals react to *Machorka-Muff* as if they had expected pornography and were shown a marble Venus.” (as qtd. in Byg 1995: 84)

The filmmakers’ relationship to Brecht is controversial too. Straub declared that John Ford – a filmmaker of infamously rightist politics – “is the most Brechtian of all filmmakers, because he shows things that make people think, damn it, is that true or not.” (as qtd. in Ibid. 41) Also, he distances himself from the broad project of *Verfremdung*, stating that he “[does] not believe that the so-called alienation is transferable to the film.” (as qtd. Ibid. 224)

The similarities and differences between Brecht and Straub and Huillet will be investigated in the remaining sections of this chapter. The next section enumerates the
general characteristics of narrative and style in the filmmakers’ work, while the subsequent four ones offer the analyses of the filmmakers’ works Machorka-Muff, History Lessons, Antigone and Sicilia! (Sicily!, 1999). The analyses put a special focus on the shifting role of the once privileged technique of montage as a source of Brechtian estrangement in favour of theatricality. While not suggesting that theatrical elements are absent from the early films and that the later ones do not use montage, the analyses treat Machorka-Muff and Geschichtsunterricht as examples of montage films, and the other two films as reliant on theatrical conventions.

**General Characteristics of Straub and Huillet’s Cinema**

1) Like Brecht, a vast majority of whose plays – from Baal to Pauken und Trompeten (Trumpets and Drums, 1955) – are reworkings of pre-existing texts, Straub and Huillet never work from original scripts. Their films are based on works of art in different media (Bach’s music in Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach, Heinrich Böll’s fiction in Machorka-Muff and Nicht versöhnt oder Es hilft nur Gewalt, wo Gewalt herrscht [Not Reconciled or Only Violence Helps Where Violence Rules, 1965], the Schönberg opera in Von Heute auf Morgen [From Today Till Tomorrow, 1996], to give but a few examples. Interestingly, four of the 24 films the couple produced between 1962 and 2004 are based on unfinished artworks: Moses and Aaron, based on the opera by Schönberg, Klassenverhältnisse (Class Relations, 1983), based on Kafka’s unfinished novel Der Verschollene (Amerika) (The Missing One [America]), and the films based on two
different versions of Hölderlin’s play *Der Tod des Empedokles* (The Death of Empedocles, 1986) and *Schwarze Sünde* (Black Sin, 1988).

2) The narratives of Straub and Huillet films are frequently set in epochs other than ours. Ten of the films they produced in the period between 1962 and 2004 employ historic costumes. A frequently concomitant characteristic of the filmmakers’ period films is their use of anachronistic elements. Examples include the 20th century buildings in the background of Sicily of the 4th century B.C. in *The Death of Empedocles*, and of the 1st century Rome in *Othon*, and – more conspicuously – the combination of a protagonist in modern-day dress and toga-clad Romans in *History Lessons*.

3) Straub and Huillet’s films invariably use direct sound. The unorthodoxy of this feature in the contexts of German and Italian cinemas from the 1960s onwards becomes clear when one considers the fact that many filmmakers in Germany and Italy – the countries where Straub and Huillet produced their 1960s and 1970s films – usually opted for re-recording and, typically, stylising sound in the studio, during the post-production process. Straub and Huillet’s use of direct sound represents a return to previous technological standards. Its “avant-gardism” is, then, comparable to that of Greg Toland’s

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81 At the time of this writing, the films Huillet and / or Straub have produced since 2004 are commercially unavailable, for which reason the information I possess on their narratives and styles are scant.

82 James Franklin, commenting on *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, notes that Straub and Huillet insist upon accuracy of those details that could be verified (among the ones he mentions are the wigs and costumes, musical instruments and methods of playing them), while disregarding the details that could not be verified as historically correct. (85-86) Straub and Huillet also ensure that the historical accuracy of their period films avoids the pitfall of illusionism. “Bach and his wife,” writes Franklin, “do not age, since the viewer should be aware that these people are only representing Bach and his wife.” (85)
return to deep-focus photography – a stylistic feature predominant in Hollywood of the silent era – in the 1940s films of William Wyler and Orson Welles.83

4) The filmmakers often set their scenes in nature (examples include *Othon* and *Dalla nube all resistenza* [From the Clouds to the Resistance], 1979.) As with the filmmakers’ other aesthetic predilections, they explain this one in terms of politics: “For me,” Straub remarks, “industrial society is barbarism.” (as qtd. in Byg 1995: 229)

5) As a corollary of the filmmakers’ taste for exteriors, their films frequently rely on natural available lighting. Examples of this aesthetic choice include *Othon, History Lessons, Moses and Aaron, From the Clouds to the Resistance* and *Antigone*. The nouvelle vague filmmakers in France and direct cinema filmmakers in England typically use this style of lighting to facilitate a greater mobility of the camera and – in the case of the former group of filmmakers – to bring the acting closer to the naturalistic ideal (as the simplification of the technological apparatus the use of available natural lighting brings arguably makes it easier for the performer to immerse herself in the role.) However, neither mobile framing nor naturalistic acting characterises Straub and Huillet’s films. Nor is the fixity of the camera position in Straub and Huillet counteracted by an increase of figure movement, as one might intuit would be the case. Finally, the landscapes in Straub and Huillet are typically denied integration into the narrative. The dialogues in *From the Clouds to the Resistance*, for example, are entirely unrelated to the setting.

6) The performances in Straub and Huillet films share little with the styles of acting associated with Hollywood and other mainstream cinemas, and developed along the lines

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83 Toland, however, used the technique more emphatically than the silent era filmmakers and Straub and Huillet, thereby emphasising the inherently distorted perspective of the wide-angle lens. I am indebted to Charlie Keil for this insight.
of naturalism. In opposing them, Straub and Huillet draw on Brecht, but also on ancient
Greek theatre, with its emphasis on the aural (rather than visual) aspect of performance.
The oft-disregarded divergences between Aristotelian dramaturgy and non-textual aspects
of Greek theatre partly enable the coexistence of the opposite influences in the
filmmakers’ work.

The opening credits of *Not Reconciled* are followed by a quotation by Brecht:
“Anstatt der Eindruck hervorrufen zu wollen, er improvisiere, soll der Schauspieler lieber
zeigen, was die Wahrheit ist: er zitiert”: Instead of wanting to create the impression that
he is improvising, the actor should rather show what the truth is: he is quoting.” Putting
the programmatic sentence in practice, Straub and Huillet have created an acting style
more austere and restrained than that employed in, for instance, Brecht’s own production
of *Mother Courage*, as documented in Peter Palitzsch’s and Manfred Wekwerth’s film
version of the play (1961).84

7) Straub and Huillet’s cinema frequently uses shots configured through the
narrative context as empty (hence Gilberto Perez’s observation that every Straub and
Huillet film may be called “lacunary”) (324): for example, the cloudless sky in
*Machorka-Muff* and *Moses and Aaron*, or the Italian landscapes in *Fortini / Cani* (1976)
and *Sicily!* Such shots bring into the thematic scope of the films the blurriness of the
relationship between form and content, making the viewer ask herself not only the usual
question of what they are presented with is *about*, but also the more rudimentary one of

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84 Richard Roud recounts that Straub first approached Helene Weigel about the role of Johanna. According
to this writer, the filmmaker abandoned the idea due to the actress’ Viennese-Jewish accent, unsuitable for
the narrative set in Rhineland, but also because he wanted to thwart the possibility of the actress’
premeditating the role, and imposing on him an undesired acting style. (53)
what it is. (“A film that signifies something,” observed Straub in an interview, “can only be trash, since it confirms people in their clichés.) (as qtd. in Franklin 80)

Because of its emphasis on the films’ physical aspect, commentators often situate the cinema of Straub and Huillet in the context of materialist cinema.85

But how aligned with Brechtian artistic theory and practice materialist cinema is, if Peter Gidal – a major representative of this strand of filmmaking – is right in his assertion that the politics of materialist cinema is to cause and maintain “a conflict between the attempt to see, to make a scene, to imagine a time and place, and the simultaneous impossibility, the endless meaninglessness of all signifiers, any meaning-construction thereby presented as construction, as production-process”; (47-8) in fewer words, to replace filmic representation with presentation of film’s own making? A critique of the use of Brecht by the adherents of the politics of the sign – of which the above words are an articulation – has been offered in the section dedicated to the Screen theory. Gidal allows for further association of Straub and Huillet with Brecht by convincingly arguing against the view of the former as materialist (that is, non-representational) filmmakers, despite their self-professed animosity toward signification. (26-31) To explain the distinction between materialist filmmakers and Straub and Huillet, of course, does not automatically illustrate the latter’s Brechtian affinities. Briefly, these are manifested in the filmmakers’ consistent thematic and stylistic concern with dialectics, in the implicitly or explicitly political content of their films and their deliberate stylistic complexity that invites the viewer’s cognitive effort. This last characteristic does not sit comfortably with the filmmakers’ claim that their films are for “cavemen and children,” (as qtd. in Fairfax

85 See, for example, James Monaco’s How To Read a Film (2000) and Ian Aitken’s European Film Theory and Criticism (2001)
n. pag.) but the same dialectical aims characterise Brecht too. Brecht’s *Verfremdung* predicates itself partly on deliberately complicating (from the standpoint of “surface realism”, at least) theatre’s stylistic operation, so as to prevent the viewer’s passive immersion in the fictional world and instead stimulate her active rational thinking. Simultaneously, however, he aims for narrative simplicity (“Even I must understand it”, read the Brecht-written sign around the neck of a wooden donkey in Brecht’s study). (2003: 108)

*Machorka-Muff: Challenging the Language / Film Analogy*

*Machorka-Muff* is adapted from Heinrich Böll’s short story “Haupstädtisches Journal”: “Capital Diary”, whose rendition into English as “Bonn Diary” somewhat diminishes the title’s political resonance. The story was first published on September 15, 1957, the day of the 3rd German federal election, which – in Barton Byg’s phrase – “‘consecrated’ the remilitarisation of West Germany.” (1995: 74) Written in the first person and in the form of five journal entries, the story follows the visit to Bonn in an unspecified post-war era of Erich von Machorka-Muff, a former Nazi major. In the course of four days the narrative spans, the protagonist lays a foundation stone to the Academy of Military Memoirs, an old brainchild of his,

where every veteran from the rank of major up is to be given the opportunity of committing his reminiscences to paper, through conversations with old comrades and cooperation with the Ministry’s Department of Military History. (Böll 59)
The other central events of the story are Machorka-Muff’s promotion to general, and his marriage to Inniga von Schekel-Pehnunz, a woman seven times married, each of her husbands a military man higher in rank than the previous.

The film, produced independently after Straub and Huillet’s failure to raise funding for the feature-length *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* and the medium-length *Not Reconciled*, is narratively unique in Straub and Huillet’s oeuvre as their only work that visually depicts a character’s interiority. The brevity of the scene in both the short story and the film allows it to serve as an example of the filmmaker’s method as adapters.

Entitled “Night jottings”, the scene describes the dream Machorka-Muff has upon his arrival in Bonn:

I was walking through a forest of monuments, straight rows of them; in little clearings there were miniature parks, each with a monument in the center; all the monuments were alike, hundreds, thousands of them: a man standing ‘at ease,’ and officer to judge by the creases in his soft boots, yet the chest, face and pedestal of each monument were covered with a cloth – suddenly all the monuments were unveiled simultaneously, and I realised, without any particular surprise, that I was the man standing on the pedestal; I shifted my position on the pedestal, smiled, and now that the covering had dropped off I could read my name thousands of times over: Erick von Mackarka-Muff [sic!] I laughed, and the laugh echoed back to me a thousand times from my own mouth. (54-55)

Figure 4 shows how the film renders the scene:
The use of chiaroscuro, the unique lighting style perhaps intended to illustrate the difference from the protagonist’s perception in the wakeful state, sets off the scene from the rest of the film (and Straub and Huillet’s cinema in general). The hundreds and thousands of monuments the narrator of the story mentions are reduced to six (shown in two shots separated by a medium close-up of Machorka-Muff turning his head from one
row of monuments to another.) As Straub and Huillet otherwise tend to adhere to the
minutest details of the story, it seems a safe guess that this departure from the original is
due to the budgetary constraints rather than purely aesthetic reasons. It is, however,
entirely to the latter that the absence from the screen adaptation of the protagonist’s
laughter should be attributed.

The somewhat heightened emotionality of the story’s characters (of which Barton
Byg offers a convincing illustration by pointing out the frequency with which Böll uses
the word “ergriffen” [moved]) (1995: 78) is suggested neither by the acting nor the music
– often the principal sources of a dramatic situation’s affectivity. The subdued acting
style the film employs evokes Brecht and his caveat about the correlation between the
arousal of the spectator’s emotion and identification, this latter process posited as an
impediment to understanding the social aspect of a dramatic situation. In the case of
*Machorka-Muff*, however, the strategy adds to the political radicalism and subversiveness
already inherent to the short story. As a result of Straub and Huillet’s stylisation
dramatically diminishes the humour of the satire: the narrative presents itself as earnest.

One can argue that the Brechtian distance created by the acting and that which
results from Böll’s use of the satirical mode cancel each other out to a socially disturbing
effect.86 A segment of the sentence that follows the description of the dream – “it is only
here in the capital that one has dreams like that” (Böll 55) – is stressed by the pause in the
actor’s delivery and the quick fade-out that precede it. (The latter device is consistently
used throughout the film as an equivalent of the gaps between the entries and their titles,
which graphically segment the story.)

86 The potential for such an effect was recognized by a producer whom the directorial couple had
approached about financing the film. The collaboration did not materialize, due to the producer’s fear that
the film would be banned and his investment wasted. (Byg 72)
The word “dream” appears not only in the narrator’s voice-over, but also in the Straub-handwritten and signed note that follows the opening credits, according to which the film is “ein bildhafter abstrakter Traum, keine Geschichte: an abstract pictorial dream, not a story.” When considered in retrospect, the remark seems to foreshadow Straub and Huillet’s formal experiments, in which the exaggerated style sometimes represents a threat to the narrative’s intelligibility (a case in point are the long sections in History Lessons that show the protagonist riding the streets of contemporary Rome.)

Written text is foregrounded also in the film’s other montage sequence, which at once exemplifies Brechtian Literarisierung and Historisierung. The sequence comprises images of different articles on West Germany’s 1950s rearmament. Deriving from national newspapers, they mark historical time as powerfully as the short story itself, the coincidence of whose appearance with the mentioned elections was hardly a matter of chance. The 18-shot montage of newspaper headlines (and, in a few cases, parts of the articles, often highlighted by a combination of tilting and zooming) occupies the middle part of the film. The following remark by the protagonist triggers the montage: “I looked through some newspapers, glanced at a few editorials on defense policy, and tried to imagine what Schnomm – if he were still alive – would have said had he read the articles.” (Böll 58) The occasional appearances in the frames of the articles’ publication dates testify that they are drawn from the period of time of at least three years (the earliest date shown in the articles is 1951, and 1953 the latest.) Also, they are not ordered chronologically, but according to the thematic links between them. Part of the caption for a drawing of a man in a suit reads: “Da das Gesetz über die allgemeine Wehrpflicht in diesen Tagen in kraft getreten ist, fragen sich viele junge Männer, wann sie wohl
einberufen warden”: “As the law of general compulsory military service is coming into effect these days, many young men are probably asking themselves when they will be drafted.” The rest of the titles concern mostly the benefits that the reestablishment of army will bring the country. More than one of the highlighted sentences has a religious connotation, thereby suggesting the role played in the rearmament by the Christian Democratic Union, the party with most representatives in the Bundestag during the era. It is in such terms that the montage ends: “Darf ein Christ töten? Muß ein Christ töten? Weshalb schlug Gott uns zweimal die Waffe aus der Hand?”: “Is a Christian allowed to slay? Must a Christian slay? Why did God knock the weapons off our hand twice?”

The short story and the film associate Christianity and military also elsewhere. The protagonist reports about the multiple divorcee Inniga’s skepticism about marriage as an institution, and adds that a difference in their backgrounds and outlooks separates them further: she comes from a strict Protestant family, and he from a strict Catholic one. (Böll 58) What links the couple symbolically, the protagonist goes on to conclude, are the numbers: “she has been divorced seven times, I have been wounded seven times.” At the wedding ceremony in church, Machorka-Muff says to the bride that: “Your eighth [husband] will be a general”, thus completing the line of the voice-over narration that identifies three of Inniga’s former husbands as military men. In the scene following the wedding, the priest, walking along with the newlyweds, says that “since none of [Inniga’s] former marriages was solemnised in church, there is no obstacle to you and General von Machorka.” In the world of Machorka-Muff, where form is everything, everything is also merely form.
The newspaper headlines in the montage sequence are not the only example where the film transforms the meaning of a pre-existing cultural product through recontextualisation. In the relatively long sequence where Machorka Muff is walking the streets of Bonn, he is twice shown stopping at store windows. In one of these shots, the camera tracks toward the window with fashion garments displayed, the accompanying slogan reading: “Im Husarenstil: in the style of hussars.” The uniform-inspired clothing thus becomes a metaphor for the film’s topic of rearmament. The other of the two shots opens with a dissolve to the inscription reading: “Alt werden – jung bleiben / das ist unser aller Wunsch”: “grow old – stay young / that is all we want”. The camera tracks away to reveal a bearded mechanical acrobat turning on the trapeze, and bottles of the medical lotion the toy advertises. The link between sexuality and warfare, perhaps most clearly established in the story by Machorka-Muff’s remark that – during a walk before his romantic encounter with Inniga – he “had the impression of a sword dangling at [his] side”, “although [he] was in civilians” (Böll 57) here receives a visual presentation.

In his letter to Straub sent à propos Machorka-Muff (a rare positive critique the film initially received), the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen praises the film for its resemblance to music. (Roud 37) Stockhausen’s assessment is well-founded, but the observations that accompany it do not reflect the peculiarity of the film’s rhythmic organisation. Namely, the primary agents of the film’s musicality is not the “inside” component of acting (as is customarily the case), but the “outside” components of the interacting cinematography and editing. The editing is considerably independent from the narrative: no action takes place in relatively long parts of several shots. For example, in the scene at the foundation of the Academy of Military Memoirs, the screen at one point
remains occupied for several seconds solely by the uniform whiteness of the sky. This example illustrates Straub and Huillet’s broader thematic and stylistic strategy of challenging the usual dominance in narrative cinema of human (or human-like) figures and their actions, a strategy that might be designated as “de-anthropocentrising.” The strategy seems motivated by the filmmakers’ fondness of nature, as well as in their interest in exploring the limits of photographic representation. The latter is reflected, for example, in the perceived similarity between images in Straub and Huillet’s cinema of perceptible physical phenomena such as the sky (Machorka-Muff, Moses and Aaron, and the “non-image” of black screen (History Lessons, Einleitung zu Arnold Schönbergs Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene [Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg’s ‘Accompaniment for a Cinematographic Scene,’ 1972].)\(^7\)

Thus, Machorka-Muff invites a reflection on the relationship between the logic of literary and film syntaxes. Machorka-Muff is the only one of the early four black-and-white films by Straub and Huillet (including, beside the debut short, also Not Reconciled, Chronicle, and Der Bräutigam, die Kömodiantin und der Zuhälter [The Bridegroom, the Comedienne, and the Pimp, 1968]) that utilises a voice-over drawing entirely on the

\(^7\) Machorka-Muff includes other shots that feature ponderous pans of little narrative significance. In the sequence of scenes showing Machorka-Muff in a walk through the city, for example, we see the Rhine with a few ships and boats on its surface. The camera then pans to the left, to reveal the protagonist in a medium shot. Leaned against a fence, Machorka-Muff straightens up and goes away from the camera. In the film’s penultimate scene, the same movement is performed in the opposite direction after Inniga declares that she “always feel[s] this […] when [she is] a bride,” to reveal a hazy landscape. Both images are of low-contrast, with the kind of photographic inexpressivity associated with newsreels. The mentioned feature seems to be precisely the point: potentially earth-shattering processes (such as the re-armament of West Germany) start peacefully. Some other Straub and Huillet films, however, reverse the suggested relation between cause and effect. Thus, in Fortini / Cani (1976), the camera pans over a tranquil landscape where civil populations were once massacred by the Fascists. No evidence of the crime is visually perceptible to the viewer: it is the testimony of Franco Fortini, the writer of the book on which the film is based, that we need to turn for the grim truth of the landscape. The filmmakers direct us to the human-inscribed, literary aspect of an image.
original text (the only difference between it and the original concerns the change of tense and certain deletions, performed mainly for the purpose of concision.) The organisations of narrative time by Böll on the one hand and Straub on the other vastly differ. The actions of Machorka-Muff’s shelling a breakfast egg and drinking coffee, for example, are separated by a few inconclusive remarks on the dream of the monuments he had, the brief series of these ending with the question: “I wonder whether the psychologists have really plumbed all the depths of the self?” In the film, the temporal relation between the simple events of the protagonist’s breakfast gets confused as a result of the scene’s linking the imagery through dissolves (traditionally used to indicate passage of relatively longer periods of time), as well as by the symmetrical camera movements employed in its two consecutive shots of the scene (a track away from the character and toward him, respectively.)

Straub and Huillet’s debut short marks the beginning of their practical investigations of the relationship between the linguistic syntax, and the syntax of film, the results of which foreground the arbitrariness of both. *Machorka-Muff* achieves this through the use of Böll’s prose as a base for the voice-over, which the imagery attempts to “illustrate” literally. The cases when it succeeds raise the question of redundancy of each of the film’s two basic aspects – visual and aural. When, in contrast, a discrepancy appears as a result of this strategy between the “logics” of language on the one hand and, on the other, of film as a medium considered to be primarily visual, the result are the editing patterns that complicate the organisation of the represented space and time, thus calling attention to the work’s artifice. The filmmakers’ exploration of the relationship
between the two syntaxes continues in their feature-length films, and is carried out perhaps most radically in *History Lessons*.

**History Lessons: The Dialectics of Image and Sound**

In certain respects, *Geschichtsunterricht* is comparable with previous Straub and Huillet’s films. Like *Machorka-Muff* and *Not Reconciled*, the film is based on a literary text intended to be read, not performed; like *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, it uses a (pseudo)biographic mode; like *Othon*, it is (partly) a period piece; like *The Bridegroom*, it employs materials heterogeneous in terms of both narrative and style. No earlier work of the filmmakers, however, possesses this many qualities in combination that actively impede passive spectatorship allowed and promoted by mainstream cinema. Instead, *History Lessons* invites the viewer to actively participate in the production of its meanings. Paradoxically, the film is structurally rather simple, as the ensuing analysis will demonstrate.

*History Lessons* is based on Brecht’s unfinished novel *The Business Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar*. Written in 1938 and the following year, the period of Hitler’s rise to international prominence, the narrative traces Caesar’s ascent to power through the accounts of his contemporaries given to the novel’s narrator, a young man preparing to write a biography of the Roman political and military leader. The novel contains four books, of which the second and fourth are written in the form of diary of Caesar’s secretary Rarus. Although much of the work is written in dialogue form, its prose vastly differs from that of Brecht’s plays: first, in its relatively greater density, and second, in its
centering on a character absent from the immediate time-space continuum of the novel. The effects of Brecht’s mediating the portrayal of Caesar through others manifest themselves in both the narrative and stylistic aspects of the work. The mediation works to indirectly implicate anonymous people in Caesar’s career, thus dispelling the myth of the strong, extraordinary individual as a maker of history.  

*History Lessons* parallels the novel’s dual structure in an oblique way: it consists of the young man’s interviews with representatives of different classes and professions who knew Caesar personally, and of shot-sequences showing the interviewer driving the streets of (contemporary) Rome. The latter parts are, like Rarus’ diaries in the novel, marked by the contingency of everyday life as observable in the public.

Shot from the camera fixed in the backseat of the protagonist’s convertible (Figure 5), the driving scenes do not obey the logic of narrative build-up that governs mainstream narrative cinema: none of the micro-events seen in the background is configured as dominant, none seems more important than the other. Because of the scarcity of linguistic and visual signs within the scenes (their audio consists entirely of street noises), one is tempted to take the image of the hammer and sickle, which appears on a wall poster in one of the scenes, as the “key” to the meaning of all three of them. If the symbol’s resonance with the dialogue recommends this, the brevity of its on-screen

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88 The biographer’s interviewees make numerous suggestions of Caesar’s ordinariness. In the dialogue included also in the film, for example, the peasant replies to the young man’s question if Caesar was loved as follows: “He was considered smart.” (65) Asked a little later if “the simple man had confidence in him,” the peasant answers: “The provisions were not bad.”) (65)

89 In the novel, the contingency is, of course, only simulated: every detail it includes was invented, or at least selected from historical material, by the writer himself. Straub and Huillet’s presence in the described scenes, and in *History Lessons* in general, is incomparably less overt than that of Brecht in *The Business of Mr. Julius Caesar* – a possibility granted to the filmmakers by the medium’s photographic nature.
presence does not: the image is legible for only a few seconds, whereas the duration of the shot is close to ten minutes.\textsuperscript{90}

Martin Walsh aptly observes that the scenes, with its refusal to signify, serve as an index of the unintelligibility of history. (65) They invite, he writes, “to seize moments for analysis, draw knowledge out of chaos: systematise flux, immobilise flow, in order to attempt to comprehend it.” (61) The task the film poses is, in Walsh’s formulation, a problem (Ibid.), not only because of the arrangement of the mise-en-scène elements, but also because of the editing pattern they employ. The viewer’s expectation for the protagonist to eventually reach a destination proves to be in vain. Just as the first of the three scenes does not show the young man starting the car, the last of them does not show him stopping it. In retrospect, one gets the impression that a random reordering of the driving scenes would leave the narrative unaffected.

Whereas the background of the shot-sequences constantly shifts, the foreground remains unchanged, save for the occasional turnings of the young man’s head and the small movements of his hands at the wheel. The body of the open-windowed car, as photographed in the film, forms a grid that breaks the frame into distinct segments, its diagonals (as well as the one suggested by the driver’s eyeline) pointing toward the composition’s golden cut. In Perez’s words, “built into photographic image are the rectangular frame and the perspective of an individual viewing point.” (283)

\textsuperscript{90} The viewer conversant with film technology will likely guess during the second ride scene that its duration too, as well as that of the anticipated similar scenes, will approximate 10 minutes (the length of a film reel when exposed at 24 frames per second). By adjusting its aesthetics to an industrial standard, the film points to its materiality.
The “frames” within the frame evoke the cinematic technique of split screen, conventionally used to suggest simultaneity of occurrence between two or more narrative events. This appears relevant with regard to the organisation of the film’s time, incorrect from the standpoint of what Brecht refers to as “surface realism”. Namely, the time that the narrative is set in is uncertain. While the young man is dressed in modern clothing, his interviewees wear Roman togas. By the former character’s appearance in both groups of scenes, the film configures him as the protagonist (although his status is constantly questioned through the film’s other formal operations, to be enumerated shortly.) The fact that the interview scenes are set in spaces that do not readily reveal their contemporaneity (Roman-built structures or landscapes) suggests that it is the protagonist, not the interviewees, who has access to both the Rome of 50 years after Caesar’s death, and the Rome of the 1970s; it is he who travels through time, hinting at the continuity of history, of its repeating itself. But the anachronisms of the costumes can be interpreted also as a signal of a fissure within the space-time continuum. Seen this way (which reading is encouraged by the already mentioned allusion to the technique of split screen), the young
man’s trajectory is simpler than it appears at first: he is travelling between the spaces
where history is made, and those where it has to be merely endured.

The duality of the image of the young man in the car exists also on the level of
action. In the context of the film that – like Brecht – challenges the notion of history as a
matter of the past, the character’s simultaneous moving and resting becomes a trope for
agency. Riding through the kind of Roman streets not shown on tourist flyers for the city,
the young man’s role fluctuates between that of a participant in and a mere observer of
his surroundings. The car’s windshield distances him from the environment, but this
distance gets closed by the turning wheels. If the prerequisite for the young man’s taking
political action is to synthesise the information collected from his interviewees and the
sights and sounds perceived during the ride, the prerequisite for the viewer’s synthesis of
the film’s material can be said to be a perceptual shift that will allow her to accept the
ride scenes as action proper, equal in importance with the interviews.

The film invites a parallelism between the young man and the viewer, but it
simultaneously discourages the process of identification promoted by mainstream cinema
with its Aristotelian roots. The camera shows the young man from the back, its vantage
point preventing the viewer’s interpretation of the sights and sounds of the streets in
terms of his reactions to them. However, the rear-view mirror in front of the character
returns his look. The rear-view mirror, thus, calls attention to the film’s artifice, to the
fact that what the viewer perceives as the character is merely an image, equal in flatness

91 The scene where the otherwise silent character tells the banker an anecdote of Caesar’s being captured by
the pirates as he walks alongside him further suggests the association of moving through space and agency,
or at least of the mentioned activity and the young man.
to the character’s reflection in the rear mirror. Showing an object in a manner that would appeal to Cubist painters, from opposite directions, appears to mock the very phenomenon of the Brunelleschian perspective, otherwise emphasised through the lines both present and implied by the shot. The spatial split beside the direction of the man’s look (returned at the viewer) and the direction in which he is moving rhymes visually with the temporal split indicated through the combination of modern and period costumes, thus subtly connecting the two groups of scenes.

Contrary to the standards of professional narrative cinema, the scene with the peasant does not employ the sound bridge – the technique whereby a portion of the audio is carried from one shot to the next. As a result, the shots abruptly cut from one to another in terms of both audio and video. It seems an intended paradox that the filmmakers’ use of direct sound, whose most common purpose is to facilitate a perfect continuity in the post-production between the separately recorded video and audio channels, here becomes related also to the concepts of montage and *Prinzip der Trennung*.

The film’s use of the other, verbal, language represents a perceptual challenge of a different kind. The film couples the density of Brecht’s prose, estranging in itself, with a relatively rapid delivery style. One understands that the dialogue consistently points to the connections between economy and politics, money and power, but is not given sufficient time to fully understand the relationships between the two realms. While the ride scenes will give the impatient viewer of the DVD edition of the film the impulse to fast forward through them, the dialogue scenes will prompt them to occasionally press the

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92 The parallelism between the viewer and the young man is promoted by the film’s other instances of self-referentiality. Aside from the use of a reformulated shot-countershot syntax – which will be discussed shortly – perhaps the most conspicuous of these is the use of black leader to break the banker’s monologue in the third scene featuring the character.
pause button so that they can digest the dense material. The first group of scenes, from
the standpoint of a viewer with typical spectatorial habits, can be said to contain too little,
and the other – too much. This impression (which the film at once presumes and attempts
to overthrow) points to yet another dialectical split in the film – that between images
(which the ride scenes can be said to be primarily “about”) and words (which the
dialogue scenes can be said to be primarily “about”). As the film uses throughout its
duration both the video and audio channels, this impression can also be challenged: is the
viewer’s tendency to rely on their hearing during the interview scenes, and on their sight
during the ride ones, a sign of perceptual laziness? Would she be able to understand the
workings of history if she mobilised both senses?

That this poses a challenge (as aptly illustrated by the commentaries on the
tedium of the ride scenes) serves as a reminder of cinema’s domination by language –
verbal or visual. The verbal language is Brecht’s prose; the visual one is the language of
mainstream cinema. Writing about *History Lessons*, Maureen Turim invokes Jean-Pierre
Oudart’s concept of suture, “a primary means by which cinema binds its discourse,
concealing its construction.” (239) In Oudart’s view, the key element of mainstream
cinema’s syntax whereby suture is achieved is the shot-countershot. Turim notes that
Straub and Huillet develop in *History Lessons* an alternative to the technique, which
“calls attention to itself as system, to the process and effects of camera work and
montage.” (240) Martin Walsh’s analysis of the first scene with the banker and the scene
with the peasant shows that the film does not reject the technique entirely, but rather
reformulates it. In the scene with the banker, the film cuts back and forth between the
interviewer and the interviewee facing each other, as a film made in the “invisible style”
would. However, the camera’s position changes between each two shots of the same character, its overall trajectories suggesting the shape of a semi-circle. This strategy subverts the technique’s role of ensuring the maintenance of the viewer’s spatial continuity through the juxtaposition of complementary perspectives.

*History Lessons* can be said to exemplify the strain of montage Eisenstein calls intellectual editing better than this filmmaker’s own cinema and *Kuhle Wampe*: while Eisenstein uses the technique only in certain scenes, the juxtaposition of two kinds of material in *History Lessons* that form a dialectical relationship occurs throughout the film. Moreover, while Brecht’s and Dudow’s film offers a synthesis of the dialectical opposition represented by the film’s two parts (the episode showing the workers’ mobilisation through sport), *History Lessons* is resolutely open-ended. As such, the film leaves the task of interpreting the relation between the two opposed kinds of material, and the narrative and stylistic elements within them, entirely to the viewer. Byg’s commentary of Straub and Huillet’s *Moses und Aaron* applies here with particular force: “A parallel to Straub / Huillet and Brecht emerges here. There is no “resolution” in their work, according to the hierarchical rules of a traditional organisation of its materials to these traditional forms implies a resolution outside the work itself.” (1995: 156) The principle of dialectics tends to subsume the entire form of *History Lessons* within itself. Perhaps paradoxically, this tendency is controlled “from inside,” by the fact that it occurs not only at the level of narrative – as sometimes happens in mainstream cinema – but also at the level of style. The dialecticity of the elements within this latter aspect of form works to prevent the “smoothing” of its “seems” which the artistic traditions governed by the idea of organicity (for example, Aristotelian and Wagnerian theatre) strive for. The
pieces of the puzzle that is *History Lessons*—and Straub and Huillet’s cinema in general—are designed not to fit perfectly. Tied to its physical properties (to which the film hints by its use of sub-standard, grainy 16 mm stock, its unorthodox syntax and the black screen), the imagery resists the Eisensteinian synthesis. This appears to be the reason that Straub expresses a disbelief in Alexander Kluge’s concept of “the film created in the minds of the spectators.” (Franklin 76)

In no other Straub and Huillet film, however, does a narrative issue converge with that of spectatorship as tightly as in *History Lessons*: the cognitive agency that the film demands from the viewer parallels that of the various accounts requested by the young man. This agency, the film seems to suggest, can acquire a political dimension if the comparability is understood between the two pairs of timeframes within *History Lessons*—the narrative ones (the era of Caesar’s contemporaries and that of the young man) and the timeframes concerning the film’s production and exhibition (the latter one being a constantly changing variable). In other words, for the societal factors to be experienced as changeable, history needs to be approached as being always in the making.

*Antigone: The Aristotelian Unities Put to a Brechtian End*

The title Straub and Huillet chose for their screen version of the Greek tragedy foregrounds the film’s palimpsestic character. Unlike a typical rendition of a classic literary text, which tends to justify its existence by a claim of finality, this *Antigone* configures itself not as the reading, but as a reading of the play. The inclusion in the title of the names of three artists who have had a hand in the playtext functions as a marker
more of the narrative’s openness to interpretation than of the extent of its historical-cultural relevance, its canonical status. But the title does not acknowledge all the authorial voices that contributed to the work’s shape: first, the voices of anonymous storytellers that had perpetuated the myth of Antigone before Sophocles wrote a play of it, and second, Straub and Huillet’s. Pertinent to this is the question Robert Savage raises in his discussion of the question of authorship of Brecht’s adaptation of the Greek tragedy – whose title too invokes the original playwright (*The Antigone of Sophocles*):

> If Sophocles owns Antigone, who owns *The Antigone of Sophocles*? Not Brecht, surely, otherwise the title would be meaningless or disingenuous; but not Sophocles, either, for then the authorship of the title would still remained unaccounted for. By invoking what Brecht once called “the question of ownership, which in the bourgeoisie, even as far as spiritual matters are concerned, plays a (quite bizarre) role,” the citation of ownership in the title problematises the ownership of citation. (101)

There are at least two ways to approach Savage’s question in relation to the *Antigones* I am concerned with here – Brecht’s on the one hand, and Straub and Huillet’s on the other. A more obvious approach would be to align with John Fuegi in the view of Brecht as essentially a plagiarist (1994), and to dismiss Brecht’s words quoted by Savage as a lame attempt to give an entrepreneurially-oriented strategy a veneer of progressive politics. Extending this view to Straub and Huillet would not be difficult: Heinrich Böll, on whose works the directorial tandem based two of their films, gives it authority by observing that the reliance of the couple’s films on other artworks is a shortcoming.

93 The other possibility is to approach the blurred authorship of the two *Antigones* not as typical of Brecht on the one hand and Straub and Huillet on the other, but as unique in the artists’

93 Böll comments on the subject as follows: “Ich glaube, Herrn Straubs schwacher Punkt ist die Tatsache, daß er, um seine Vorstellungen von Film zu realisieren, fremde Stoffe braucht” (as qtd. in Böser 25): “I think Herr Straub’s weakness is that he needs other people’s material to realize his own cinematic ideas.”
respective oeuvres. The titles reinforce the plausibility of the latter approach: no other among Brecht’s plays based on a pre-existing literary text, nor among Straub and Huillet films, includes the name of the original work’s author. This other approach seems more productive also because the two Antigones, in my view, lead to different conclusions on the question of their authorship.

The title of Brecht’s adaptation announces the work’s Verfremdung devices. It makes a reference to only one of the writers authorially present in the work: the dramatist that figures as an exemplary model in Aristotle’s Poetics, the validity of whose theoretical precepts for our age Brecht consistently denies. In his comparative analysis of Anouilh’s Antigone and The Antigone of Sophocles, Hugo Schmidt rhetorically asks whether Brecht’s adaptation should be considered epic theatre, implying that there is too much of the Greek dramatist in it for the work to be considered a sufficiently radical departure from Aristotelian dramaturgy. (208) I would argue that the use of a Sophoclean play as a base for application of epic theatre techniques foregrounds Brecht’s textual interventions on the “original,” facilitating – rather than hindering – a comparison between the two dramaturgical models. The title of the Straub and Huillet film works, like that of Brecht’s adaptation, to distance the viewer from the narrative, but its function does not stop there. By acknowledging also the author of the translation from which Brecht the adaptor worked, it encapsulates a (partial) history of the play in the German cultural context. This examplifies Historisieren as understood by the filmmakers: for

94 Perhaps significantly, the writing of “Small Organon for the Theatre,” a key programmatic text of epic / dialectical theatre, coincided with the staging of The Antigone of Sophocles.
them, the term history encompasses the arts, while Brecht treats it as pertinent predominantly to the development of politics in relation to economy.  

The number of Brecht’s interventions to Hölderlin’s translation of the play has been variably emphasised (Savage) and de-emphasised (Schmidt). The ambiguity of the play’s ownership results also of its nature as a text intended for the stage. While he was preparing the adaptation for a production to be directed by himself in the town of Chur in Switzerland in 1948, Brecht was certainly aware of the possibility for the text to receive other productions – that is, interpretations. Mentioning the obvious seems in order here, as it represents a point of contrast to Straub and Huillet’s work. The differences in perception of a film that will result from varying viewing circumstances are negligible when compared to the similarities: in theatre as a live medium, however, the differences between two performances of the same production can be considerable.

Brecht, as I will shortly demonstrate, gives Hölderlin’s translation of the play a Marxist slant, the very “unfaithfulness” to the “spirit” of the original being a rationale for the adaptation’s existence. But what do Straub and Huillet aim to accomplish by transposing the adaptation to film almost without changes (the unorthodoxy of this choice becomes apparent when it is compared by, say, the many cuts in every cinematic version of Hamlet, including that advertised as “full text” – Kenneth Branagh’s William Shakespeare’s Hamlet)? Furthermore, what are the implications of the filmmakers’ resolute refusal of many possibilities the medium offers (apart from those that

95 It seems apt to point here to the fact that Brecht’s plays often center on small men in historical turmoil [Schweyk, Mother Courage] and scientists [Galileo, the unrealized Einstein project], but not on the arts and their practitioners. In contrast, the filmography of Straub and Huillet includes such titles as Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach, Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg’s ‘Accompaniment for a Cinematographic Scene, and Ein Besuch im Louvre [A Visit to the Louvre, 2004.]}
characterise Straub and Huillet’s entire oeuvre, Antigone is unique in relying on fixed camera, the film’s variety of angles and shot scales achieved solely through horizontal movements around the axis and lens changes)?

Straub and Huillet’s narrative and stylistic minimalism, which in such films as History Lessons works to foreground both aspects of form, produces in Antigone a curiously twofold impression: of transparency on the one hand, and of self-consciousness on the other. There is merit to Peter Handke’s observation that “die Maschinerie, womit Straub/Huillet ihren Film erzählen, wird gar nicht so viel anders von ihnen gehandhabt als eben von Hawks oder Raoul Walsh im goldenen Hollywood” (Handke 118): “the machinery through which Straub/Huillet narrate their film is not handled that differently from Hawks or Raoul Walsh in the golden era of Hollywood […]” Modernist and avant-garde cinemas, within which contexts Straub and Huillet are often situated, are more frequently associated with stylistic excess than with restraint. Beside the flamboyance of a Fellini, however, there is the ascetism of a Dreyer, or of Straub’s chief influence, Bresson. The tradition of self-effacement in cinema goes back in two directions: that of minimal cinema of the Warholian kind, and that of Hollywood cinema of the studio era and other mainstream cinemas the industry inspired. Straub and Huillet’s Antigone can be said to reconcile the two directions.

Before I delve into the film, I will say a few words on Hölderlin’s translation of the tragedy, and the changes Brecht made to it. The reception of the translation, written at

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96 See, for example, Elsaesser 1989.

97 Referred here are Warhol’s early 1960s, plotless films of extreme length (for instance, nearly six hours for Sleep [1963], and nearly nine for Empire [1964]), photographed in static, long takes (their duration equaling that of a 16 mm film roll), within which little movement occurs (for example, the occasional wiggling of a sleeping man in Sleep, and the passing of airplanes through the frame in Empire), showing no variation in shot scale.
the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, has been controversial. It was praised for the translator’s poetic use of the language and his portrayal of German sensibility (Wannamaker 342), but also criticised for its many inaccuracies. (Writing about the poet’s rendition of the tragedy, Ulrich Weisstein – for example – describes some of his solutions as a translator as “idiotisms” [588]). According to Brecht himself, the appeal of this translation to him lay in “swabian accents and grammar-school latin constructions” (as qtd. in Wannamaker 342) Robert Savage notes that Brecht kept many localisms from the Hölderlin despite the audience’s potential unfamiliarity with them, (114) and goes on to suggest that Brecht was attracted to “the earthy, vernacular quality” (115) of the translation, which makes it “practically an example of the V-Effect before the letter.” (Ibid.) Brecht also broke the meter of Hölderlin’s verse, thus creating complex and surprising rhythmic patterns.

The play uses the strategy the Czech structuralists designated as topicalisation (aktualizace) (whose commonalities and differences with Brecht’s Verfremdung were explored in chapter one). In the Antigonemodell 1948, the earliest of Brecht’s model books, Brecht states that

the drama of Antigone was selected for the following theatrical endeavour because its content ensured it a certain actuality and because it set interesting formal tasks. As far as the political content is concerned, the analogies to the present, which after the thoroughgoing rationalisation [of the fable] had become surprisingly powerful, proved disadvantageous on the whole: the great figure of resistance in the ancient drama does not represent the fighters of the German resistance who must appear most important to us. (as qtd. In Savage 102)

This caveat regarding the character appears necessary when one considers Brecht’s topicalisation of the play. It is achieved mainly through the added prologue, set in Berlin
in April 1945.\textsuperscript{98} The prologue features two nameless sisters who find out that their brother has been hanged for deserting the army. As they are preparing to cut out the brother’s body from the rope (an act that was, according to George Steiner “punishable by instant execution” [as qtd. In Wannamaker 338]), an officer appears. After the sisters’ denial that they know each other, the officer asks: “Then what is she doing with the knife?” (Brecht 1990: 14) The prologue ends with the uncertainty of the second sister’s next act. “Would she now,” asks the first sister, “under the penalty of death / try to free her brother?” (Ibid.) By substituting a closure to the scene with the first sister’s words: “If only he had not died” (Ibid.), Brecht diverts the focus from the narrative to the question of heroism – both of the second sister and of the heroine in the play proper. Brecht confirms the implication carried by the prologue’s final line, that second sister is complicit in her brother’s death, by a remark made elsewhere: “Antigone’s deed can only consist in helping the enemy […]”, which is her moral contribution; she, too, has eaten all too long of the bread which was baked in the dark (as qtd. in Savage: 103)

The prologue holds true more than the play proper to the point in the revised version of the epic vs. dramatic theatre schemata concerning narrating vs. enacting. Stylistically, the text is characterised by abrupt switches from the one mode to the other, from a dialogue between the two characters to a recounting of the event to the audience. For instance, the first sister’s line “I didn’t want to worry you” (Brecht 1990: 12) is followed by one that begins with “And as we were sitting there silently.” It should be noted, though, that an element equivalent to the described one is present already in the

\textsuperscript{98} Besides the Brecht-written prologue, the play contains also a series of additions of verses by other authors, including Pindar and Goethe. For an analysis of the Pindar quotations in the adaptation, see Pohl 1988.
Sophocles, and Greek drama in general: the chorus. Its commentaries on the action both “epically” interrupt the flow of the narration and distance the viewer from it.

The play proper transforms the chorus into the elders financially benefitting from Kreon’s war. Their first line in the adaptation is “The wagons of booty are coming! The victory loaded with plunder to make Thebes forget the war!” (20) It is the elders and their hunger for profit Kreon identifies as the reason for the war. “When I attacked Argos, /” he says, “who sent me? The metal spears went out / to bring metal from the mountains / at your request; for you know Argos / is rich in metals.” (56) Brecht diverts focus from Argos to its exploiter Thebes by making Polynices and Eteokles soldiers of the same, Kreon’s army. After seeing his brother killed on the battlefield, Polynices runs away to the desert, where Kreon himself punishes him by death. The adaptation eliminates the relatively complex backstory, the result being a concentration of the viewer’s attention to the mechanism that links capitalism, war and tyranny, as embodied in Kreon.

The script for Straub and Huillet’s film differs from Brecht’s adaptation in two respects: it entirely omits the prologue and changes the order of lines 467-470. Antigone’s line: “How stupid you are! I’m in no mood / for winning arguments” is followed in the film by the line of the elders “Pity her. Don’t hold her words against her,” instead of Kreon’s” “When have I ever concealed the sacrifice made for the victory? The rest of the lines conform to the original order: the elders warn Kreon not to “disparage Thebes’ glorious victory (…) in [his] ravings.” (Ibid.) The word “ravings” appears to be the key to the logic behind the described textual intervention. The change of the original order of lines weakens the already dubious semantic links among the characters’ utterances, making the characterisation seem appropriate.
Antigone was shot in the Teatro de Segesta, a Greek theatre in Sicily from the fourth century B.C. The film’s theatricality, however, stems less from the setting than the style of delivery and blocking – both bearing traces of the production’s initial incarnation as a theatre show staged at Berlin’s Schaubühne in 1991. Characteristically, Straub and Huillet combine actors of varying degrees of experience and ability, casting in the role of the title character and Ismene first time actresses Astrid and Ursula Ofner. The figures’ movements and gestures are extremely measured, and employed mostly for emphasis. Kreon, for example, when faced with Hamon’s criticism of his rule, asserts his power by swinging his scepter as he dismisses his son’s words on the account of his ignorance of the case, and raises his arms high in the air upon receiving the news of Megareus’ death (Figure 6).

![Figure 6](image)

Similarly, the characters often turn their heads to mark the appearance of a new character. To give but two examples, the elders do this upon Kreon’s entrance, and Kreon himself upon the entrance of a guard. The entrances themselves usually occur off-screen. If this works to alleviate the theatricality of the mise en scène, another salient feature of the
delivery produces an opposite effect. Namely, the actors invariably follow the caesuras of Brecht’s verse, pausing at the end of each line. To realise the peculiarity of this directorial choice, it is useful to consider again the tradition of Shakesperean directors and actors in both theatre and cinema, whose innovativeness is often measured by the new meanings they endow to the Bard’s lines through unexpected emphases and pauses. Straub and Huillet do not allow their actors this possibility. Their faithfulness to the meter as inscribed in the playtext functions – like the title – as a device of Literarisierung, the term that Brecht, perhaps echoing the Russian Formalists’ literaturnost, used to denote an array of estranging techniques that “denaturalise” a given discourse by foregrounding what enables it: language. The intended result of the strategy is, as Walter Benjamin summarises, “’make what is shown on the stage unsensational’”. (7)

The only deviation from the original suggested by the delivery of lines, concerns the elders. By not distinguishing between the elders and invariably using the plural form of the noun when indicating their lines, Brecht’s adaptation suggests that these segments of the dialogue should be delivered in unison. The film, however, often assigns portions of this material to individual members of the group, thereby dynamising the dialogue’s rhythm.

The dialogue often determines the pace of the cutting. The beginning and ending of a shot typically coincide with the beginning and ending, respectively, of the portion of the dialogue delivered by a character or a group thereof. When applied to quick exchanges, this logic – as Laurence Giavarini has observed – works to enhance the effect of stychomitia, already created by the dialogue. (Byg 1995: 223) The earliest example of
this sort occurs when Kreon asks for the elders’ approval to leave Polyneikes unburied. Their reply – “We approve it” – marks the beginning of a series of seven brief shots, in all but one of which the character(s) shown in the image speak a single sentence. Shot-reverse shot technique here employed is, of course, used also in continuity editing, the editing style dominant in Hollywood and other mainstream cinemas. But while a mainstream film would smooth the cuts through the use of sound bridges, Antigone – like Geschichtsunterricht – rejects this essentially illusionistic device.

Carrying to an extreme the use of off-screen space in the instances where the film refrains from cutting for a relatively long period of time produces the same effect of drawing the viewer’s attention to the cinematographic apparatus. For example, for the entire section of 13 lines of the dialogue between Kreon and Antigone that starts with the former’s question: “So you think there are others who see things as you do” (Brecht 1990: 30), the camera holds Kreon in close-up. A little later, it privileges Antigone for the portion of dialogue that begins with her following words to the elders: “And you take it and let him shut you up”, (32) which in the printed version occupy over two pages. Even more overt is the use of off-screen space in the portions of shots that feature no human figures. Used also in several other Straub and Huillet films, such compositions are employed in Antigone with utmost consistency. Namely, the four images that belong to the described category invariably show a stone formation in the ground that appears to represent the boundary between the orchestra and skene spaces (Figure 7). Second, the audio such images are accompanied by always consists of an ode of the elders. Third, they are unfailingly introduced not through a straight cut, but through a pan.
Accordingly, the pan, equivalent to the aversion of the theatre spectator’s eyes from the dramatic spectacle further enhances the inherently “epic,” distantiating character of the chorus (alias the elders). The literariness with which the scene applies the Verfremdung device appears to carry a trace of irony – an impression reinforced by Straub’s view of the device as non-transferrable to film. (Byg 1995: 224) Paradoxically, it is this stance that makes Verfremdung all the more efficient: distance is, after all, a sine qua non of irony.

Relevant to the described stylistic device as used in the film seems also the original function of the stones in the ground. As mentioned previously, the line represents the boundary between the playing space of orchestra, and skene, the place occupied during a performance by a temporary construction with double purpose: to represent the location of the drama, and to serve as the changing-room for the actors. By at once temporarily abandoning the transparency of the film’s style and pointing to the dividing line between the space in the theatre of Segesta where the actors appeared in character, and the space where they were allowed to step out of it, the film invites the viewer to a
meditation on the relationship between representation and presentation, between illusion and reality.

Byg remarks that “the camera [in Antigone] divides the theatre into three views, somewhat more than 180 degrees.” (227) The semi-circle it covers informs also the camera placement and movement in other Straub and Huillet films, including two of those analysed in this chapter: Machorka-Muff and History Lessons. In the former film, the semi-circle is most prominent in the short scenes that show the protagonist walking the streets of Bonn before his rendezvous with Inniga. The pans, at first configured as point of view shots, end on Machorka Muff, thus denying their initial status. Martin Walsh demonstrates the centrality of the circle for the framing of History Lessons too. In the scene featuring the young man and the peasant, as well as in that featuring the former character and the banker, the camera performs a “twin circling” (75) of the characters.

The camera placement can be visually represented as follows:
As Walsh observes, the camera as used in the two scenes is not supporting the dialogue, but performing its own choreography of the pro-filmic event. (75) If the shot-countershot syntax attempts to emulate the impression an observer gets when turning their head back and forth between two centres of attention, the reformulated version of the syntax Straub and Huillet use in *History Lessons* can be said to perform an opposite function. The singularity of perspective that shot-countershot ordinarily mimics is here replaced by a shifting, multiple, dialectical perspective, which can be graphically represented thus:

![Figure 8](image_url)

*Figure 8*
The variety of angles and shot scales in *Antigone* is achieved solely through the use of lenses with different focal lengths and horizontal movements around the axis. The many camera pans explore the diegetic space freely, while simultaneously keeping the taboo, as Byg observes, of the space where the camera stands. (1995: 226) The camera’s fixity invokes that of the viewer of traditional film and theatre, consequently implicating them in the narrative. It is as if the theatrical fourth wall is crossed not by the actors, as was the case in Brecht’s productions, but by the technological apparatus itself: the camera announces its presence by denying the spectator a view of its position within the setting.

A thematic link between *Antigone* and the anti-military world of Machorka-Muff becomes obvious when we consider Straub and Huillet’s few additions to the textual base by Sophocles, Hölderlin and Brecht. These include the collage of classical compositions that accompany the image of the Teatro de Segesta, and the 1952 pacifist and programmatic Brecht quotation that ends the film. “Das Gedächtnis der Menschheit für erduldete Leiden ist erstaunlich kurz”: “Mankind’s memory of the endured suffering is
astonishingly short,” reads its beginning. “Ihre Vorstellungsgabe für kommende Leiden ist fast noch geringer. Diese Abgestumpftheit ist es, die wir zu bekämpfen haben”: “Its premonition of the suffering that is yet to come is even smaller. It is this apathy that we must fight.” The sound of a helicopter that accompanies the image, combined with the most prominent part of the musical collage from the beginning – “Ritt der Walküren” from Richard Wagner’s Die Walküre – produces a (perhaps undesired) intertextual association to Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (1979). In Coppola’s film, the music theme can be heard as a squadron of helicopters is attacking a Vietnamese village.

As mentioned previously, Straub and Huillet’s first feature was dedicated to Viet Cong, while the stage version of Antigone was dedicated to one hundred thousand Iraqi victims of George Bush’s new World Order. The two quotations themselves can serve as an index of the continuity of American imperialism. Commenting on the film, Byg brings up a different kind of continuity: that concerning the unification of Germany, another major political event that nearly coincided with the film’s production. Byg rightly sees Straub and Huillet’s Antigone as a response to the event, much like Machorka-Muff is a response to the rearmament of West Germany in the 1950s. (231)

**Sicily!: Rebellion as a Conspicuous Non-Event**

*Sicily!* is based on Elio Vittorini’s novel Conversazione in Sicilia (Conversations in Sicily). Published in book form for the first time two years after its completion in 1939 under the title Nome e lagrime (Name and Tears), the book was withdrawn from circulation by the censors. The edition published in 1942 in a slightly altered version
under the book’s other, final title, escaped the censors’ attention and remained available throughout the fascist reign.

Already the fact of Vittorini’s censorship problems within the historical and cultural context speaks about the writer’s politics. While anti-Fascist, these politics do not conform entirely to a Marxist programme. In his study Three Italian Novelists: Moravia, Pavese, Vittorini, Donald Heiney describes the novelist’s political position as twofold: revolutionary (“something is wrong with the world” and “something fundamental must change”) and collectivist (the novelist attributes the sense of losing oneself in another to common human efforts). (153) In his divergence from an orthodox Communist platform, the novelist is similar to Brecht.

Another point of similarity between the two is their common interest in the musical aspect of language. The novel achieves a musicality of its prose largely through an unconventional use of punctuation, as well as by frequent repetition and variation of phrases. Commentators have attributed the latter technique to American influences, and especially to Ernest Hemingway, the author of the introduction for the English-language edition of Conversazione, In Sicily (1949). A remark Vittorini makes in a 1933 article, distinguishing “between two kinds of writers: those who make you think, ‘Yes, that’s the way it is,’ and those who make you think, ‘I had never supposed it could be like that,’ and in this way suggest a new mode of experience, a new ‘how’ to existence” (152) brings Brecht to mind even more strongly. The second schema in Brecht’s “Vergnügungstheater oder Lehrtheater” (“Theatre for Entertainment or Theatre for

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99 See, for example, Heiney’s discussion of the subject. (159)

100 See Heiney 161, and Potter 79.
Learning,” 1935), contains formulations similar to the above in terms of both content and style:


(GBA, 22:109-10)

The audience in the dramatic theatre says:

Yes, I have felt that too. – That’s how I am. – That is only natural. – That will always be so. – This person’s suffering shocks me because he has no way out. – This is great art: everything in it is self-evident. – I weep with the weeping, I laugh with the laughing.

The audience in the epic theatre says:

I wouldn’t have thought that. – People shouldn’t do things like that. – That’s extremely odd, almost unbelievable. – This has to stop. – This person’s suffering shocks me, because there might be a way out for him. – This is great art: nothing in it is self-evident. – I laugh over the weeping, I weep over the laughing. (Martin and Bial 25-26)

Brecht’s aesthetic and political systematicity rests on that of the thinkers and writers with whom he engages in dialogue: from Aristotle to Wagner, from Hanns Johst (the writer of *Der Einsame* [The Lonely, 1917], the play on which *Baal* is based) to Samuel Beckett (whose *Waiting for Godot* Brecht planned to rework through the lens of dialectical materialism.) As far as his implied theoretical position is concerned, Vittorini shows comparatively less rigor, hence the greater breadth (but also vagueness) of his classification of writers in terms of the reader’s response. This observation applies also to Vittorini’s politics, which can be described as ambivalent. His belief in communion, for example, rests on a sentiment that informs also the doctrine of Fascism, but the writer nowhere persuasively explains how his understanding of the notion differs from that of the politics to which he is antagonistic.
The narrative of *Conversations in Sicily* is about homecoming: the protagonist and narrator, Silvestro, who has for a long time been tormented by unidentified, “abstract furies” (Vittorini 13), receives a letter from his father stating that he left Silvestro’s mother in Sicily for another woman. Answering the father’s appeal to visit his mother, Silvestro ventures on a trip home, during which he engages in talks with other travelers. The topics of these conversations concern largely the cultural specificities of the islanders, many of which the protagonist has forgotten during his decade-and-a half long absence from Sicily. Two of these characters, Coi Baffi (Moustache) and Senza Baffi (No Moustache) express their scorn at the poor, stating that “every starving man is dangerous,” (33) capable of stealing, murder, and perpetrating political crime. These characters are – one can infer – police agents. Their anonymity and the tendency to finish each other’s lines make them consonant with the literary tradition of de-individualised representatives of the state, of which most famous examples from the 19th and 20th centuries are, perhaps, Dobchinsky and Bobchinsky from Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*, and the unidentified agents from Kafka’s *The Trial*.

The central part of the book is occupied by Silvestro’s reunion with his mother, Concezione, at the family house. During the dinner with her, Silvestro inquires about a range of subjects, including the circumstances of his father’s departure, her and other Sicilians’ dietary habits, and the political and religious beliefs of his ancestors. Next, Silvestro accompanies his mother, a village nurse, in her daily visits to the sick and often severely underprivileged. These scenes have an unexpected erotic undertone: the mother insists that Silvestro be present when her female patients receive injections from her, to see how “well-made” (Vittorini 158) they are. After growing weary of accompanying his
mother, Silvestro parts from her and meets a knife-grinder, Calogero, who complains about not having much to grind in the village. Heiney notes the anti-fascist insinuation carried by Calogero’s words (186) (“Ah, if only everyone always had a true blade!” [181] exclaims the character at one point), strengthened by the reference to a firearm in the questions Calogero says he habitually asks the villagers: “What have you got for me to sharpen? Have you a sword? Have you a cannon?” (Ibid.) An anti-fascist innuendo is, Heiney goes on to observe, made also by Ezechiele, a harness maker and the owner of an awl, whom Silvestro and Calogero subsequently visit. Ezechiele spends his days writing into a little notebook about “the terrible outrages against humanity and the world.” (213) A scene at Porfirio’s, a clothier who owns half a pair of scissors follows a conversation between the three men. Together, they go to a tavern, where all the present except Silvestro get intoxicated on wine. The near-hallucinatory atmosphere created through the scattered polilogue in the tavern prepares the ground for the scene that follows, unique in its possession of a magical touch. In the scene, Silvestro meets, and has a conversation with, the ghost of his brother Liborio, who has been killed in the war. Finally, the last scene features the mother and a crying old man hiding his face with his hand: Silvestro’s father. To the mother’s question: “Don’t you want to greet him?” Silvestro replies: “I’ll greet him another time” (255) and silently leaves the house.

The film does not incorporate any of the material contained in the non-dialogue parts of the novel, including Silvestro’s confession on the abstract furies that haunted him the winter when the narrative takes place, and that which hints at the nature of these furies 25 chapters later: “Some time before this,” the narrator informs us, “I had been very ill for months. I had a profound knowledge of what it meant, that profound miseries
of the working class (…)” (139) More importantly, the film eliminates the series of scenes that carry the themes of eroticism, religion and the supernatural. As a result, the symmetry of the novel (formed by the father’s letter in chapter two on the one hand, and its writer’s appearance in the epilogue), is lost. Thus, the film leaves the impression of open-endedness, similar to that made by the group of Straub and Huillet films based on unfinished literary works or musical compositions – The Death of Empedocles, History Lessons, and Aaron and Moses. The narrowing of the narrative’s spatial and temporal scope adds emphasis to the characters in the included episodes, thus bringing it closer to the Aristotelian ideal of the unity of space and time. However, the film does not aim at unity of action. The inhabitants of the narrative are caught in stasis of political biases or poverty (which gradually comes to be associated with the Fascist rule): deprived of agency, they spend much of their energies in alcohol-fuelled conversations. The subjects of these vary from historical to erotic, from culinary to philosophical. As they are led in a meandering fashion, the word “conversations” – as opposed to “dialogues” – is an entirely fitting descriptor of these verbal exchanges. When the scenes are categorised on the criterion of their primary thematic concern, a tripartite structure evocative of Kuhle Wampe becomes apparent.

The first part shows Silvestro’s travel to Sicily and his different encounters with the locals, while the subsequent two parts show the protagonist in conversation with his mother and Calogero, respectively. The political dimension of the narrative, introduced already in the expository scenes through the characters of Moustache and No Moustache

101 It is this dramaturgical decision that facilitated the subsequent incarnation of Sicilia! as a theatrical production. Produced at the Teatro Francesco Bartolo in Buti in April 1998, the production employed some of the actors from the film, minimalistic setting consisting predominantly of white blocks, and coloured lighting.
(the first of which characters does not conform to his novelistic name), becomes prominent in the scenes with the mother, who speaks of her grandfather as a Socialist who believed in St. Joseph. (81) When Silvestro observes that the two positions are incongruous, Concezione makes a series of vague remarks suggesting a separation of the grandfather’s religious belief from the official Church, and goes on to contradict herself repeatedly: she first says “that when the man fell ill it meant the end,” and then “that when the woman fell ill it meant the end” (134); at one point, she says “that it was better to have a touch of malaria than a touch of consumption,” and at another, that “a touch of consumption was better than a touch of malaria.” (134-135) Both the novel and the film localise and concentrate the theme of contradiction in Concezione’s character. In the scene with Calogero, the political aspect of the narrative culminates with the above-discussed innuendos of a nascent militancy of the impoverished. The film’s stylistic operations, however, do not emphasise the film’s political aspect. Thus, they implicitly point to the repressive circumstances of its publication that necessitated such aesthetic decisions. As is often the case in Straub and Huillet, the film achieves Historisieren through intertextuality. Namely, the history that the film hints at is that of another artwork, the novel. In this respect, too, Sicily! resembles the group of Straub and Huillet films based on unfinished artworks. All invite the viewer to speculate on the alternatives to their present form: Moses and Aaron, Death of Empedocles and Class Relations on their missing endings, and Sicily! on how the narrative and style of Conversations in Sicily would be influenced by a set of socio-historical circumstances different from those of Italian Fascism.
Stylistically, the film is marked by the use of humour. Uncharacteristic of Straub and Huillet in general, the humour in *Sicily!* is unique in the context of their cinema. In some other works by the filmmakers, humour is incited by the use of relatively inept actors (for example, Werner Rehm in *Antigone*, who has been described as “hammy” and “provincial” (*Schmierenschauspieler*) (Winfried Günther, as qtd. in Byg 1995: 222), or the performance in combination with other stylistic elements (for example, the standing in silence with eyes cast down of Klaus Traube, the captain in *Class Relations*, while the anthem of the United States of America is resounding from a source unidentified by the narrative.) The humour of *Sicily!*, in contrast, stems from the actors’ physical appearance (the bulging eyes and a slight lisp of Giovanni Interlandi, the Catania in the novel and the moustached passenger in the film), as well as the comedic acting style employed in certain scenes (for example, the broad gesturing of the actor playing the part of Calogero.) In spite of these examples, the performances are – like those in the montage-based Straub and Huillet films discussed above – centred predominantly on the aural, rather than visual, aspect. But whereas the delivery in early films is “cinematically small,” it is “theatrically heightened” in such films as this, and *Antigone*. In impressionistic terms, while the actors in *Machorka-Muff* and *Geschichtsunterricht* are performing for the camera, in the later films they are performing for the imaginary person in the last row.

In terms of its visuals, *Sicily!* belongs (together with *En Rachâchant* [1982], *Class Relations*, and *From Today Till Tomorrow*) to the group of black and white films Straub and Huillet have made since 1982, after making eight consecutive films in colour. The absence of colour from *Sicily!* provides additional emphasis to the placement of figures
and objects within the frame. In terms of shot composition, *Sicily!* is redolent of the filmmakers’ most ambitious work from the first phase, *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*. Certain shots in both films achieve a compositional balance by treating human figures (ordinarily privileged as a presumed centre of the viewer’s attention) as even with other, narratively inconsequential elements of the frame. The high angle image of *Chronicle*’s title character at a window vividly exemplifies this strategy: the figure of Mrs. Bach is, in terms of both its light value and relative size within the frame, comparable to the window.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 10*

The parallel lines of the bottom line of the window frame, the top line of the armchair, and Mrs. Bach’s neck and shoulder enhance the geometric similarity between the two surfaces, in addition to diagonally dividing the frame in two. The composition deviates from the norm of mainstream cinema whereby a character should be set off centre toward the direction opposite the one they are looking at offscreen, although the overall composition is hardly “emphatically decentred,” as Ursula Böser describes it. (37)
Sicily! offers similar examples. Two consecutive shots from the film’s middle part feature a meticulous, albeit unemphasised, symmetry. The first of these is a medium shot of Silvestro, who – leaned against the table on his fist – occupies the bottom left part of the frame (Figure 11). The diagonal of the upper line of the door frame in the background complements the opposite one of Silvestro’s shoulder. Likewise, the diagonal lines of the table are complemented by the opposite ones of the cabinet in the bottom right part of the frame. The next shot, also in a medium scale, shows Concezione with one arm akimbo, looking offscreen toward the right side of the frame (Figure 12). The factors of the shot’s vertical symmetry are the figure and the line where the walls behind it join; the axis of symmetry falls right between the two. The diagonal symmetry is achieved through a predominantly black mantelpiece on the wall at the upper left edge of the frame, and the black bottle at its bottom, close to the right corner. The blackness of Concezione’s shirt, the visual dominant of the frame’s central area, strengthens the effect.
The unorthodoxy of the described procedure is, like that concerning the film’s editing patterns, subtle. Like some other Straub and Huillet’s films (for example, *Fortini / Cani*), *Sicily!* uses slow panoramic shots of landscapes devoid of human figures. The first two of these occur between the sequence of travelling scenes and the scene involving Concezione. The camera pans right, across the hills with vineyards and a town in the far background, to a road with a living fence and white tombstones behind it. No sooner than the movement ends does the camera start panning again in the opposite direction, to finally stop in the middle phase of its trajectory, with the vineyards and the town occupying the frame. Next, the camera performs the same two movements, their speed, the shot scale, the angle and – most importantly – the subject, remaining unchanged. The only readily perceptible difference between the two consecutive shots concerns the lighting: its intensity and the shadows cast by the objects within the frame reveal the shot to have been photographed at an earlier time of the day than the previous one. The described reverse of chronology is, like the absence of sound from the travelling shot that
precedes the described two, narratively unjustified. The two examples represent the film’s rare metafilmic, and estranging, moves.

The film departs from the norms of continuity editing also in its use of black screen in the scene with Concezione. It employs the device in three instances, the duration of none of which exceeds a fraction of a second. The brevity of black screens in *Sicily!* makes them less conspicuous than those employed in earlier, montage-based Straub and Huillet films, such as *History Lessons* and *An Introduction*. The black screens in *Sicily!* are different from those in the latter group of films also in terms of function: they merely emphasise the pauses between the characters’ exchanges (which average at 10 seconds in length), while in the earlier films they typically serve as a source of pauses. *Sicily!*, therefore, relies more heavily on the performances as agents of the film’s rhythm and tempo, than Straub and Huillet’s earlier works.

The Brechtian overtones of *Sicily!* are subtler than those of the other three Straub and Huillet films analysed in this chapter: unlike those, it is not based on a text of his nor it does refer to Brecht through the filmmaker’s commentaries thereof. Moreover, the film concerns itself with the theme of fascism – which informs also much of Brecht’s work – only indirectly: the characters appear affected by it only in a manner that is not unique to the regime. This may be precisely the point: if the obliqueness with which the theme was treated by Vittorini was a way to circumvent censorship, the relevance of the film’s use of this manner lies in the gap between the Western fascism until the end of World War Two from that of today. While the influence of overtly fascist political entities in this part of the world is currently limited, many actions of prominent parties of the centre and left
are in line by fascist attitudes and ideas. Fascism is all the more threatening because it has become harder to situate: the answer about its position depends on whom one asks.

**Conclusion**

All general characteristics of Straub and Huillet’s cinema identified earlier in the chapter are, to one extent or another, related to the Brechtian notion of *Historisieren*. Serving as a reminder of the alterability of social phenomena, the process of *Historisieren* does not direct itself to the past as much as it constructs the present as a time in between, in constant flux. Deleuze’s remark that the camera movements in Straub and Huillet “trace the abstract curve of what has happened,” (234-235) applies also to other elements of the filmmakers’ style. The use of direct sound and, frequently, available natural lighting, limits the possibilities of stylisation through technology. The implicit claim to genuineness of the pro-filmic event in their cinema rests upon the asceticism of Straub and Huillet’s camera and sound recording equipment, along with the historical accuracy of their narratives. The narratives construct their status as documents, as testimonies of the past, by being crucially shaped in terms of style during a single time span – that of the shoot. The acting style, subdued in earlier films (for example, those based on Böll fiction) and theatrically heightened in some later ones (especially in *Antigone* and *Sicily!*, which were initially produced as theatre shows) performs the same distancing function. Byg is correct in identifying the interrelated elements of the use of language and work with the actors as Brecht’s most significant influence on the filmmakers. (1995: 24)

Seemingly paradoxically, a result of the rejection of the possibilities of image and sound manipulation in post-production is the frequent autonomy of segments of Straub
and Huillet’s films, which – in rare, but significant instances – allows for their use as Eisensteinian (but also Brechtian) montage cells. For example, it is the sharp temporal fissure between the interview scenes in *History Lessons* and those of the young man’s ride through Rome, and the absence of bridging audio such as voice-over or non-diegetic music, that facilitate the dialectical juxtaposition of the two kinds of material. And because the editing in Straub and Huillet is overt, their films give the impression of stylistically operating within two separate time spans: that of photography and sound recording on the one hand, and that of editing on the other. On the meta-level of the filmmakers’ works, a negotiation takes place of the relationship between the films’ two “presents.”

The filmmakers’ fondness for landscape interiors in relation to *Historisieren* can be accounted for in the light of a Rousseauian nature-society dichotomy: it is within this dichotomy where the true drama of Straub and Huillet’s cinema often realises itself. Just like the rejection of continuity editing functions as a reminder of the films’ constructedness, the natural settings the filmmakers use emphasise the man-made quality of social relationships and mechanisms, and – therefore – of their alterability.
Chapter 4: Peter Watkins: Intuitive Brechtianism

The early work of Peter Watkins (1935) is often associated with the dominant contemporary cinematic trends in Britain, the Free Cinema – which concerned itself with the documentary – and the British New Wave – which produced fiction films. With his trademark style of using the narrative and stylistic conventions of the documentary genre in feature films, Watkins falls somewhere between the two trends, rather than adhering to either of them specifically. That is where the comparisons end: Watkins does not share the Free Cinema’s primary aim of capturing the lyrical quality of everyday life, nor the focus of the British New Wave filmmakers on working class issues.\(^{102}\) While he – like the members of the latter group – has consistently shown a flair for probing taboos, his choice thereof distinguishes him from such figures as Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz, to mention two of the most celebrated filmmakers associated with both the Free Cinema and British New Wave. The taboos touched upon by Reisz’ *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1960) and Richardson’s *A Taste of Honey* (1961) – which count amongst the most influential British New Wave films – are social: abortion, promiscuity, homosexuality. The controversial subject of Watkins’ first film, *The Web* (1956) – as well as of most of the subsequent ones – has a more overt political dimension: it deals with compassion shown by a French civilian toward a fugitive Nazi soldier. The film was shot on 8 mm stock and funded by Watkins himself. The recognitions he received for this, and his subsequent amateur films (most notably *The Diary of an Unknown Soldier*, which centers on an English WWI soldier dying in a trench, and *The Forgotten Faces* [1961], on the Hungarian 1956 revolution) landed him an opportunity to produce for the

\(^{102}\) For an insightful discussion of the two trends in British cinema, see, for example, Hill 1986: 127-76.
BBC his first professional films, *Culloden* (1964) and *The War Game* (1965). After his resignation from the company in protest of the internal ban on *The War Game*, Watkins went on to pursue an international (and, it should be added, increasingly intermittent), career as a film practitioner and educator.

Commentators have pointed to the similarities between Watkins’ and Brecht’s projects. (Lajtha 1981, Wayne 2002) Watkins replied to a *Cahiers du cinéma* interviewer’s question about his relation to Brecht by stating to be “toujours très frappé par ses idées sur la distance”: “still quite struck by his ideas about distance.” (Méranger 82) Watkins acknowledges the elements of Brechtian stylistic procedures in *Edvard Munch*, but marks the 1980s – the years of preparation for, and production of, *The Journey* (1985) – as the period when he started to make true cinema of distantiation. (Ibid.) “Pour *La Commune,*” he continues, “j’ai cherché cette alchimie de la distance par des moyens différents, car je n’ai jamais voulu refaire le même film”: “I looked for the alchemy of distance through different means, as I would never have liked to remake the same film.” (Ibid.) In the same interview, Watkins obliquely suggests the usefulness of the concept of Brechtian distance in opposing the content and form of the MAVM (mass audio visual media). A critique of the MAVM constitutes also the filmmaker’s contribution to *Brecht plus minus Film* (2003), a collection of textual and visual documents from a conference, an exhibition and a series of screenings dedicated to the topic of Brecht’s relation to photographic media, where Watkins was represented with a screening of *La Commune (Paris 1871)* (1999.) In section eight of “The Media Statement” on his website (“Public-alternative Processes and Practices”), Watkins himself acknowledges Brecht’s role in his project as a media practitioner and critic: “The
principles underlying my attempts,” he writes, “owe a lot to the work of Berthold [sic!] Brecht and others […]”

Some of the ideas expressed elsewhere in the document, while not acknowledging Brecht, read like paraphrases of “Notes to ‘Mahagonny.’” In the third segment, for instance, entitled “Role of American MAVM, Hollywood and the Monoform,” Watkins criticises the “authoritarian basis” inherent to “the Aristotelian monolinear narrative structure,” which “desires nothing more of the spectator than his or her passive submission to a process of manipulated catharsis.” The shortest, ninth segment of the statement resonates with the above. Entitled “Lena Israel and the Epic Cinema,” it summarises a chapter of the book by the identified Swedish cultural critic. Israel distinguishes “between two separate filmic processes – the Anglo-Saxon narrative, with its relationship to the Cartesian way of seeing the world, and the ‘Epic-lyrical’, with its direct relationship to Hegel. In the view of Israel as interpreted by Watkins, Hegel aims to overcome the Cartesian dualism “by giving the individual an active role in the knowledge-creating process.” Watkins, summarising Israel’s book chapter, comes close to equating the latter dramaturgical model – oppositional to the dominant, “Cartesian” one – with Hegelian dialectics, a concept that also crucially informs Brecht’s dramatic theory. Significantly, however, “The Media Statement” does not syntactically highlight the kinship between the broader postulates of Watkins’ critique of the MAVM and Brecht: the three examples thereof given above derive from different segments of “The Media Statement.” In often progressing through implications and suggestions rather than through unambiguous points carefully connected to one another and hierarchised on the basis of their contribution to a central argument, Watkins the essayist resembles Watkins
the filmmaker: both his prose and his films oppose the linearity of discourse – that is, narration – he associates with Aristotle.

By way of further introduction, I will offer a brief list of recurring thematic and stylistic features of Watkins’ films:

1) They are often set in the past or in hypothetical near future (for example, *Punishment Park* [1971] and *The Gladiators* [1971].)

2) They frequently have for their main subject war or the threat of it (for example, *The Gladiators*, *The Diary of an Unknown Soldier* [1959] and *The Journey*.)

3) As mentioned previously, they often push the boundary between documentary and drama.

4) The feature films often include documentary material (such as historic images, objects, and music.)

5) The feature films usually use non-professional actors.

6) Watkins’ actors often acknowledge the camera (never for a comical effect, unlike, for example, Woody Allen or early Godard.)

7) The feature films often use improvised dialogue.

8) They typically rely on non-continuity editing.

9) All films prior to *The Freethinker* (1994) use the voice-over.

10) In *Culloden* and *La commune*, Watkins’ consciously uses anachronistic elements.

11) The duration of Watkins’ later films often exceeds the industry standard (*The Journey*, to give but the most radical example, is fourteen hours and thirty minutes long.)
A major part of Watkins’ work are his essays on what the writer sees as a crisis of mass audio-visual media. A summary and a critical commentary of these texts constitute the first segment of this chapter. The chapter then proceeds to investigate the editing in the filmmaker’s two Scandinavian works: Edvard Munch (1974) and The Freethinker (1994). The segment dedicated to Edvard Munch argues that there is a correlation between the film’s use of a variety of editing types and the voice-over narration as a technique characteristic of Watkins’ earlier works, whereas the part about The Freethinker notes the film’s reliance on a single type of editing – intellectual – and argues that it is enabled by the film’s rejection of the voice-over narration.

The chapter then proceeds to analyse Watkins’ most recent film, La commune. It notes the film’s theatricality operating in concert with the long take, the latter technique facilitating the use of improvised dialogue, which – I argue – allows for a work truer to the spirit of dialectical materialism than Brecht’s own The Days of the Commune (1948/49).

Watkins’ Media Critique

Watkins’ “Media Statement,” published in its entirety only on his website, concerns itself mainly with what the author sees as the ongoing crisis of the mass audio visual media (referred throughout the statement with the acronym the MAVM.) In Watkins’ view, this crisis – whose beginning he traces to the 1970s – is to a considerable extent responsible for other major societal issues of today, such as those concerning the

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103 An older version of the statement was translated into French and published as The Media Crisis (2004).
processes of globalisation, imperialistic warfare, and environmental devastation. Early in
the statement, Watkins asks:

Is the role of the MAVM to overtly entrap / offend the public with mono-programming and lack of
choice, and with the most simplistic and crude commercial programming possible? Is it to create
violence in society? Is it to set aggressive, pro-government, pro-military, pro-consumer-society
agendas? (As well as keeping all of its decisions and methods secret?) ("Media Crisis")

The writer’s ensuing conclusion that “Television reality, in global terms, has become the
latter” (Ibid.) confirms the rhetorical character of these questions. The culprit for the
current state of the MAVM is, in Watkins’ view, the formal operations on which they are
predicated: the universal clock, the Monoform, and the standard Aristotelian narrative.
The last of the three terms (the only one not coined by Watkins) pertains – in his
description – to monolinear narratives with a beginning, middle, and (typically happy)
end. The term the universal clock denotes the practice of standardising the length of all
TV programmes, so as to facilitate an easy scheduling: in case of the appearance of an
“unexpected empty ‘slot,’ there is no problem finding a replacement programme, since all
films are now precisely the same length – regardless of theme or subject matter.”
("Statement") The Monoform is the term Watkins uses in reference to the language of all
films and TV programmes (with the exclusion of some documentaries), based on “the
standardised and rigid form which had its nascence in the Hollywood cinema.” (Ibid.) As
Watkins sees it, the characteristics of this language are “spatial fragmentation, repetitive
time rhythms, constantly moving camera, rapid staccato editing, dense bombardment of

104 While Watkins’ criticism falls upon the mass audio-visual media in general, he condemns for the global
media crisis the aggressively dominant American MAVM, which – in the writer’s view – “now hold
precisely the same position regarding Washington, as Dr. Goebbels’ propaganda machinery held vis-à-vis
the Reich Chancellery in Berlin, and the Nazi Party.” ("American MAVM")
sound, and lack of silence or reflective space.” (Ibid.) To these can be added the purportedly disappearing indexicality (to borrow for a moment a term from the semiotics of Charles Sanders Pierce, even though Watkins does not use it) of the moving image in the contemporary MAVM. Commenting upon the CNN representation of the air raid in Iraq, Watkins criticises the use of digital effects, distorted video-phone images and ghost-like scenes filmed with green night-vision lenses, as they “lent coverage of the war a distinctly video-game appearance.” (“American MAVM”)

In discussing the increasingly rapid editing patterns of the MAVM, Watkins acknowledges the historical significance of montages of Eisenstein and Pudovkin (he remarks that “The juxtaposition of two seemingly disparate images to create a third image in one’s mind was a startling break from the rigidity of the traditional narrative process at that time”), (Ibid.) but cautions against its use today. Usually implying brevity, speed – when it is the central aspect of a language-form – becomes, in Watkins’ view, anti-process: instead of enabling a two-way communication with the audience, speed renders it impossible by establishing itself as a definite voice whose authority is not to be questioned. Watkins visually represents the rhythmic structure of the Monoform by a combination of vertical lines and dashes, the former signifying editorial cuts:

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105 The term denotes the defining quality of the index, one of three types of sign that Pierce distinguishes (the other two are the icon and the symbol). The index is characterized by an actual connection to its referent, which - in analogue photography (still and motion-picture) – consists of the physical relationship between the photographed object and its image (the light rays that have exposed the negative were reflected from the object; the negative was in its proximity.)
Watkins observes that the MAVM apply and perpetuate the same structure MAVM regardless of the demands of “the living tissue of the story.” (Ibid.) The result is a uniform impact that the writer likens to uncontrollable reflex jerks that occur when a healthy individual’s knee is tapped by a small hammer. Watkins remarks that the notion that professional filmmaking should have the described kind of simultaneous effect on the audience needs to be challenged, as it bases itself on a hierarchical – and therefore undemocratic – relationship to the public. Accordingly, for Watkins, stylistic operations of the MAVM of today are intrinsically linked to ideology, despite the long-time denials of Hollywood executives that their films have anything to do with politics or social situations. This same connection purportedly exists also with regard to the narratives of the MAVM, which – overtly or implicitly – perpetuate “imperialistic visions and stereotypes.” (Ibid.)

The consequences of the international dominance of the Monoform Watkins identifies are diminished attention spans, “a lack of tolerance for sustained process or for any form of communication that takes longer than ten seconds,” (Ibid.) and growing ahistoricity and need for incessant change. In the writer’s view, these are a factor in society’s increasing privatisation, insecurity, and restlessness. Watkins sees “competitive thinking, egotism, personal gain, and an indifference to violence and suffering as increasingly the ‘norm’” of the society of the present, whereas “genuine plurality and community interaction are vanishing into the past.” (“Five Years Later”)

For Watkins, complicit in the state of affairs with the governments – of which the MAVM are but extended arms – is professional media training, which “systematically indoctrinates young media professionals in the practice of the Monoform.” (Ibid.) As a
remedy for the situation, the writer proposes that community groups demand the implementation of a system of genuinely critical and holistic media education or – should this prove impossible – the creation of ad hoc universities or schools in people’s homes. Watkins also encourages the filmmakers working in the MAVM to address the question of length, space, structure and rhythm in the form of their own work, and of pluralism in their relationship to the public, and consider the expansion of “our truncated and fragmented message” into “slower, longer, less aggressive and more complex rhythms which allow the public to ‘enter’ the material, to reflect, to form alternative and critical interpretations, etc.” (Ibid.)

“The Media Statement” concludes with a summary, quoted below in full, of factors and ideas the writer considers “essential to keep in mind when forging a new relationship between the media and the public.” (“Processes”)

- That to communicate indicates a two-way process of sharing and dialogue between parties, and that this meaning should apply equally to the process known as ‘mass communications’.

- That the meaning of what we show on film and video is shaped by the filmic language forms that we use.

- That time, space, rhythm, and process all play an essential role in determining whether ours is a democratic, or a hierarchical relationship with the audiovisual material.

- That the executives who run TV and the commercial cinema, and the filmmakers and producers who supply them and the MAVM with material, have not been elected to their position.

- That the concept of objectivity does not, and should never claim to exist in the mass audiovisual media. All we can strive for is responsible subjectivity.

- That media violence is not only images portrayed on a screen – it also exists in the editing process, in the use (misuse) of space, time, rhythm, sound, etc.

- That history is our life-blood. It is what we choose to call the ‘past,’ ‘present’, and ‘future’. The way we perceive these phases in the affairs of mankind now depends almost entirely on the role of the MAVM.

- That ethics, morality and spirituality play a vital role in our development and very being, and thus need to have a place in the process of the MAVM.
- That teachers should have the right to teach alternative, critical media education, without hindrance or marginalisation.

- That every man, woman and child has a basic right to alternative forms of non-violent, non-commercial, non-hierarchical mass or local audiovisual media. And should they so desire – to create such. (Ibid.)

Watkins’ critique, laudable for its precisely formulated and well-documented diagnosis of the current state of the MAVM, for the viability of its propositions with regard to it, and for the humanism and non-conformist courage that underlie it, is vulnerable to three criticisms.

1) Watkins identifies the 1970s as the time when the present media crisis began, and when he first realised the shortcomings of the Monoform. It is hardly a coincidence that the mentioned decade was the heyday of ideological film criticism, which model had been introduced to the field in the aftermath of the 1968 student protests. In this period, the attention of the contributors to such influential journals as *Cahiers du cinéma* shifted from strictly aesthetic questions to those of the interconnectedness between these and politics. In their seminal 1968 essay “Cinema / Ideology / Criticism,” Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni put forward the thesis that the style of mainstream cinema is inherently ideological, regardless of a given film’s subject matter. The production circumstances too entered the equation of film analysis, leading to the famous call by Godard – a filmmaker whose work in the decade was substantially informed by current theoretical trends – “not for political films, but for films made politically.” Godard’s *Tout va bien* was, along with Brecht’s and Dudow’s *Kuhle Wampe*, held up as a model film by Colin MacCabe in the introductory article to the 1974 Brecht-dedicated issue of *Screen*.  

106 See also Wayne 63.
There are points of convergence between the ideological film critics of the Commolian / Narbonian provenance and Watkins’ “The Media Statement.” However, the “Statement” does not address the former strain of film criticism, and its relation to the practitioners who inspired it. One would expect Watkins to hail, for example, Godard, whose films from the period consistently display anti-imperialist and pacifist ideas, as well as a concern for those suffering from various kinds of oppression, and who dedicated much of the decade to seeking alternatives to the existing model of the medium of Watkins’ primary interest, television. But Watkins nearly dismisses Godard by referring in one interview to his radicalism as “chic” (1983: 229), and – in another – by stating that Godard has fallen into traps by believing that the problems of manipulating the pro-filmic event can be worked out within films. (MacDonald 1992: 412)

Interestingly for a filmmaker who has produced many films exclusively for TV broadcast, nowhere does Watkins acknowledge Godard’s experimental television work. The “Statement” fails to refer also to “The Threepenny Lawsuit”, with which it shares several key points. To give but a few examples, Watkins’ critique of the standard Aristotelian narrative as a formal element inherent to the MAVM echoes Brecht’s discussion of the former (2000: 170-175); the filmmaker’s view that the MAVM maintains an undemocratic relationship to the public is reminiscent of the ideas put forward in the segment of “The Lawsuit” entitled “A film must be the work of a collective”; the analysis in “The Statement” of the various aspects of production and distribution of the MAVM resonates with the segments of “The Lawsuit” that constitute the article’s bulk.
In addition to this, neither Watkins’ discussion of the Monoform, nor his timeline with regard to his alleged abandonment of it, are devoid of confusions. He identifies vastly dissimilar elements of film syntax such as constant camera movements and the zoom as different attributes of the Monoform, but fails to elucidate their position and role within the alleged formal model. A quick comparison of the two should exemplify the methodological error this move carries. A basic camera movement, the pan (the pivoting of the camera around its vertical axis) can be considered an equivalent to a person’s turning their head to either side to shift her centre of attention. The zoom shot, however, does not correspond to any physiological process, as it entails the change of focal length during the course of a shot – something the eye cannot perform. The implications of the use of the mentioned two techniques are therefore vastly different, but Watkins’ classification of the two within the same category obscures this. As to the writer’s statements regarding his own use of the Monoform and the purported shift to an alternative formal model, he tellingly does not identify the film that marks the transition. If the transition occurred gradually – as one can infer was the case from Watkins’ discussion – the question naturally arises of what characteristics of the Monoform are essential. If the alternative formal model Watkins implicitly claims to have adhered to in the second phase of his career shares important features with the Monoform (and it must, since otherwise the stylistic change of his work could only have come about abruptly), identifying the other, defining features of the Monoform should be easy to accomplish. Yet Watkins never does it, thus raising questions of what constitutes the parameters of the dominant formal model, and his alternative to it.107

107 Tellingly, a vast majority of examples of alternatives to the formal model that “The Media Statement” offers and discusses belong to the category of avant-garde cinema: Larry Gottheim’s Horizons, J.J.
2) Despite the above, Watkins hints that the ever-growing speed of the Monoform should be regarded as its essential quality: the writer singles it out as a new required ‘norm’ of the MAVM, and points out to its role in forging “an increasingly hierarchical relationship, in the past decades, between TV-makers and the public.” (“American MAVM”) The latter remark appears informed by the experimentally provable inability for reflection on the part of the recipient of audio-visual content when exposed to a sensory overload. In order for complex ideas to be grasped, slow pace and sustained length are needed instead of aggressive speed. (Ibid.) This view is open to attack on two grounds. First, the relaxed pace of Watkins’ late films and their non-standard length can easily be regarded as aggressive. While the 14½ hour *The Journey* is divided into several parts, allowing a viewing in the increments of approximately 45 minutes, *La Commune* – the duration of whose shorter version nearly equals that of a regular job shift – is designed to be seen in one sitting. The film’s very length, thus, places a demand on the viewer that is hardly commensurate with the lifestyle imposed upon the participants by a typical modern economy. Second, while one cannot but concede the obvious point on the relation between the complexity of an idea and the time required for its processing, Watkins’ insistence on it begs the question of the advantage that grasping fully upon a single viewing a work like *La Commune* offers over a hypothetical shorter, but also faster and denser work that requires multiple viewing. An argument could easily be made that the latter model is more viewer-friendly. The question could be pushed even further, into **Murphy’s *Print Generation*, and Anthony McCall’s *Line Describing a Cone*. The implicit comparison Watkins makes between the formal strategies employed by the three filmmakers and himself appears indebted to Scott MacDonald’s classification of *The Journey* as an avant-garde film. While MacDonald’s classification is justified by the radically non-linear structure of *The Journey*, the film lends itself equally well to being classified as a rhetorical form. Moreover, applying the label of “avant-garde” to the entire Watkins’ oeuvre seems problematic, as many of the works it comprises fall under the category of narrative film.
the realm of medium specificity. If the non-standard length of *La Commune* is
necessitated by the complexity of ideas it presents, is the choice of television film as a
form suitable for the realisation thereof?

3) The above question, when considered in relation to Watkins’ interest in
restoring and realising the potential of television to forge a democratic relationship to the
public and begin to function again as a means of communication rather than one-
directional impact, brings about that of the artist’s choice to produce *La Commune* in the
film format, and not as a TV broadcast. The latter choice would have added an aesthetic
and political edge to the work, the liveness that accompanies it allowing for
unpredictability and, therefore, transgression.

The difference between the Monoform and the alternative to it Watkins adopted in
a later phase of his career can be explored best through a comparison of examples from
the filmmaker’s cinema of the two formal models. What complicates such an endeavour
is the fact that Watkins, while suggesting more than once in his “Media Statement” that
the narrative and stylistic patterns of his films underwent a substantial change in the
period between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, does not delineate the essence of this
occurrence. Moreover, Watkins tends to emphasise the continuities rather than
discontinuities in his work, while simultaneously acknowledging his own former use of
the Monoform. *La Commune*, being the filmmaker’s latest work, appears a logical choice
of an example of the alternative formal model. Because Watkins, in his discussion of the
Monoform, dedicates more attention to the questions of style than those of narrative, and
because no film of his exemplifies this formal model in both of its aspects, I will briefly
compare in what follows *La Commune* with *The War Game*. The latter film, a dramatic
enactment of a nuclear war on England, is – in terms of its audio-visual style – closest to the writer’s description of the Monoform.  

108 *The War Game* and *La Commune* have a similarly unfortunate distribution and reception history. James Michael well substantiates the claim that *The War Game* is the most controversial film ever made in Britain. (125) *The War Game* was originally planned to be telecast on the twentieth anniversary of the bombardment of Hiroshima, during the week of August 6 in 1965. Its producer, the BBC, had indefinitely postponed the television premiere by late July of that year. A few months later, the company issued the following explanation of the decision: “The effect of the film has been judged by the BBC to be too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting.” (Gomez 46) During the postproduction, Watkins decided that the originally planned duration of 90 minutes was exceedingly long, given the film’s depressing content, and reduced it to approximately 45 minutes. He also agreed to accommodate the requests made upon him by Cawston and his predecessor, Huw Wheldon (who was responsible for allowing the film to be produced), concerning the incorporating within the structure of verbal reminders to the audience that what they are watching were not actual events but enactments of hypothetical ones. The ban came despite these interventions, prompting Watkins to resign from the BBC and begin a public campaign aimed at making the film available to the public. As a result partly of Watkins’ own efforts, and partly of the public protests and pressures, the BBC allowed *The War Game* in March 1966 to be released theatrically through the British Film Institute. The film was subsequently shown in theatres also in Europe and the United States, where it was awarded an Oscar for the Best Documentary of 1966. The film’s international success did not affect the BBC’s position toward it: the station refused to sell the film to the interested TV stations in Sweden, West Germany, France, and Canada, and even omitted the information on the Award the film had won from their newscast on the Academy Awards. While the BBC insisted that the government pressure played no role in banning *The War Game*, it is indicative that the Foreign Office fought against allowing it to be the official entry for the tele-documentary section of the 1966 Venice Festival. (Gomez 54) The evidence of government interference with the film’s distribution was confirmed in September 1980, when Michael Tracey, who had seen BBC documents not available to other researchers up until then, published an essay in *The Guardian* detailing the matter. (Welsh 127-8)

Similarly, *La Commune* had been – according to Watkins – hailed for its originality during the pre-production by its producer, La Sept ARTE, which went on to deliberately marginalize it after the film’s completion. Watkins claims that the Commissioning Editor praised the film highly immediately after seeing a rough cut of it, and declared he would broadcast not the shorter, theatrical version, but the original long one, to as broad an audience as possible. The Commissioning Editor afterwards requested a removal of certain scenes, to which Watkins readily complied, but when it became clear that he “was expected to eliminate more and more – to the point where the essential process of the film would have been compromised – the producer Paul Saadoun and [he] informed ARTE that the editing was completed.” (“La Commune”) ARTE now announced that they would only show the shorter version of the film, explaining the decision by the alleged incompleteness of the longer version. When Watkins and Saadoun agreed with this decision – on condition that the TV network inform the public about their reasons for not showing the original version – the ARTE representatives reconsidered their decision and decided to screen the original version after all. However, the time slot the film was given (22:00 to 04:00) ensured it would be seen in entirety only by extremely few viewers. When Watkins and Saadoun asked ARTE to schedule the broadcast for an earlier time of the day, or in two parts over successive evenings, they refused, thereby “not only [marginalising] the film as effectively as if outlawing it, but also [perpetuating] the long-standing marginalisation of the historical 1871 Paris Commune by the French media and education system.” (Ibid.)
i) *The War Game* contains graphic scenes that appear to aim for a controlled shock effect. An example of these is the fast forward movement of the camera to a screaming face of a boy whose skin has burned as a result of the heat wave suddenly spread after a nuclear missile has airburst over the area. In contrast, *La Commune* – parts of which deal with extremely bloody historical events – does not show but only implies violent content. It is signified via off-screen sounds or reported through dialogue or intertitles.

ii) Neither *The War Game* nor *La Commune* has a central character serving as a link between the various episodes of the films’ respective narratives. In this vital respect, both films can be said to conform to the norms of Brechtian Epic dramaturgy. It can be argued, however, that the relatively great length and slow pace of *La Commune* and the plurality of voices that characterises it are correlated. Because the overall narrative “epically” opposes the coherent cause-and-effect model, the first appearances of certain characters leaves the viewer unsure about their narrative function. This, however, typically gets incrementally clarified with their subsequent appearances. The very length of the film, then, facilitates the narrative’s collage structure.

iii) The multiplicity of voices in *The War Game* (the alleged experts on military affairs and the questions of nuclear radiation, representatives of various governmental agencies, the church, etc.) are tied together by the authoritative narration performed by Michael Aspel, the BBC television news reader, and Dick Graham, who lent his voice to many documentaries of the era. *La Commune*, conversely, does not possess such a unifying element. As such, it exemplifies the abandonment of what James Michael Welsh
refers to as “the Watkins narrator” – the voice-over narration characteristic of earlier works by the filmmaker, both documentary and fictional.

iv) The previous point is already indicative of the generally pluralistic principle underlying the narrative structure of La Commune. The principle manifests itself further in the difference concerning the respective scripting methods applied in the two films. With the exclusion of the interviews conducted with townspeople on the effects of Strontium 90 and about whether England should retaliate if Russia attacked it, all dialogues in The War Game were precisely scripted (including the pauses in the characters’ lines.) (Gomez 48) In contrast, the dialogues for La Commune were entirely improvised from the rough indications prepared by Watkins and his collaborator.

v) The shots of The War Game vary in length considerably. Thus, the duration of the film’s first live action shot, depicting a messenger’s delivery of the Government’s communiqué regarding the ensuing evacuation of the London civilians to the non-military region of Kent, is one minute and 30 seconds. This constitutes approximately three per cent of the film’s entire length. In contrast, the average length shot for the fire storm sequence is about five seconds. La Commune, on the other hand, is – with the exception of the above-mentioned brief scene showing the journalist of the TV Versailles smiling at the camera – predicated entirely on long takes.

vi) The War Game uses lenses of various focal lengths, as exemplified by the two sequences discussed above. The opening shot of the first of these employs a wide-angle lens, whereas the second of these sequences relies primarily on a zoom in the telephoto mode, occasionally closing out or in. La Commune does not show this kind of variety: it uses mostly a wide-angle lens for the scenes in the 11th arrondissement, and a normal lens
for the TV Versailles news (in this, it complies with the actual stylistic norms of broadcasting.) The relatively few zoom shots in La Commune are made inconspicuous by the slowness with which they are performed. As such, they mark a sharp contrast to the rapid camera movements in the other film.

In conclusion, the elements of the respective narratives and styles of The War Game and La Commune – the former being an example of the Monoform as understood by Watkins, and the latter of an unnamed alternative to this formal model – differ more in degree to which they are utilised than in kind.

**Editing Patterns in Watkins’ Biographical Films**

Watkins’ *Edvard Munch* (1974) and *The Freethinker* (1994) mark both a continuity and discontinuity with the filmmaker’s other works. Like *Privilege* (1967), the two films center on artists with tumultuous careers, and carry prominent autobiographical overtones.¹⁰⁹ Unlike *Culloden* and *La Commune*, for example – which focus on significant historical events – and *The War Game* and *The Journey* – the films concentrating on vital political issues – *Edvard Munch* and *The Freethinker* center on famous artists. The similarities between the respective narratives of *Edvard Munch* and *The Freethinker* do not end there: the eponymous visual artist from the former film and August Strindberg, the central character of *The Freethinker*, were contemporaries who shared a Scandinavian cultural background. Moreover, the two men were acquaintances

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¹⁰⁹ Watkins himself testifies to the sense of biographical kinship he felt between Munch and himself as being a decisive factor in his pursuit of the project. He recalls that he decided to make a film about Munch after seeing his work at the artist’s museum in Oslo, knowing that this would be a way to make a film also about himself. (Welsh 169)
during their common exile in Berlin. In fact, Strindberg is an episodic character in

*Edvard Munch*.\(^{110}\)

What follows attempts an analysis of the editing patterns the two films employ. The expressionistically affective mode of Watkins’ earlier works, based largely on the use of select genre conventions and mainstream cinema syntax, are replaced in the filmmaker’s later phase by a mode that bases itself on cerebral associations. If the earlier phase merits a comparison with Eisenstein’s *Potemkin*, the later one evokes the Soviet filmmaker’s unproduced *Capital*, the film intended to be based entirely on intellectual editing.

*Edvard Munch*

Commenting on *The War Game*, Joseph A. Gomez speculates that the key reason for the controversy around the film concerns Watkins’ blurring the difference between the alleged “subjective” and “objective” approaches to documentary filmmaking.\(^{111}\) (57) Gomez’ lack of hesitation in classifying *The War Game* – a film entirely enacted for the camera – as a documentary\(^{112}\) already speaks about the effectiveness of this blurring. The strategies behind it characterise not only *The War Game*, but Watkins’ docudramas in

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\(^{110}\) According to James Michael Welsh, the longer, TV version of *Edvard Munch* (which I have not had the opportunity to see) places additional emphasis on the connection between Munch and Strindberg.

\(^{111}\) In “The Media Statement,” whose publication postdates that of Gomez’s study on Watkins by nearly two decades, the filmmaker expresses disbelief in the possibility of objectivity in cinema, it being a medium of artistic, and therefore personal expression, and adds that all the filmmaker can aim for is a responsible subjectivity. (“Processes”)

\(^{112}\) The view of *The War Game* as a film that uses a non-fictional mode was previously expressed by Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which awarded the film an Oscar in the documentary category.
general. Yet *Edvard Munch* represents a special case in this respect: through rejection (for the most part) of the continuity editing syntax, the film highlights its own “subjectivity.” This feature, which manifests itself most conspicuously in the film’s shuffling of different timelines, appears inspired by the style of Munch’s diaries – on which the voice-over is loosely based – as well as on the narrative circumstance of the memories haunting their protagonist. Welsh rightly notes that “the psychological structuring” of *Edvard Munch* approximates the structuring process of the human mind. However, the observation does not take into account the dynamic the film maintains throughout its duration between the “subjective” (or “first person”) and “objective” (or “third person”) modes of narration. Its oscillations between the two can again be attributed to the style of Munch’s diaries. (Significantly, the film opens with “the Watkins narrator” communicating over an intertitle that “in the diaries which he is to write later in his life, Edvard Munch often refers to himself in the third person”. This is followed by a shot of the young Munch tying his shirt while Sophie is making the bed in the background.)

The complexity of the film’s editing can be evidenced best by tracing the variety of relationships – and their connotative implications – formed by shots similar in terms of

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113 The following entry from Munch’s diaries is typical of their style, marked by syncopated verses and, frequently, unfinished sentences that display an arbitrary use of punctuation:

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39
O my dear ladies bohemians and pigs
...What have you gone and done
Yes I must say that
I have shit...
  a hell of a trick habit
  a fanfare of virtue
the act was (Munk 69)
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dramatic action with the images and sounds that surround or are simultaneous with them. The film’s first shot, the beginning of whose narrative action has already been described, continues with Munch taking a seat in the armchair. After the two characters have discreetly glanced at each other, Sophie leans to whisper into his ear that he “can meet her after dinner.” This last major movement in the shot motivates the film’s first cut – to a close-up of the characters’ heads. The cut follows the rule of invisible editing whereby approximately one third of a movement motivating the cut is to take place in the first of the two shots that are being joined together. However, the film avoids the establishment of a “Hollywood” pattern of editing by disrupting the time-space continuity immediately thereafter. The film juxtaposes the described image (after the protagonist has looked into the lens, at once suggesting his identity to the viewer and announcing the film’s other estranging effects) with that of a woman coughing blood in bed while her relatives give her assistance. (The postponed identification of the character as Munch’s mother characterises the narrative operations of the film as a whole.) The scene then cuts to the intertitle with the words “Edvard Munch,” at the point when the third figure blocks our view of the mother, the colour of her dress matching that of the background of the intertitle. In retrospect, it will turn out that the themes of the two brief scenes – which might broadly be called Eros and Thanatos – are central for the film as a whole. To be sure, the antagonism and affinity between the two Freudian notions, and the influence of the tension between them on the central character’s maturation as an artist, informs the groupings of many other images and sounds in the film. Consider, for example, the following series of shots:
1. Medium close-up, over-the-shoulder shot. Munch, the sound of whose coughing bridges the shot with the previous one, puts his hand down on the self-portrait he is holding. As his fingers travel across the painted lips, the voice-over commences: “Hans Jaeger has told Munch that the human function of sex is the most important single process known to man. It is a source of…”

2. Extreme close up. The narrative action from the previous shot and the voice-over continue: “…pleasure, a wave of sweetness and warmth through which man is elevated and made less lonely.” At the end of the sentence’s first phrase, the camera pans left, following Munch’s hand. He is now touching his lips. After a beat following the end of the voice-over, the off-screen voice is heard of a woman saying: “In her testament, Mamma asked us to be good…”

3. Medium shot. Munch’s brother and sister are at a table, shown en face. He looks at her as she finishes the sentence that has begun in the previous shot: “…and to love Jesus.”

4. The camera angle and shot scale are identical to those from the second phase of shot 2. Munch touches his lips while looking at the off-screen self-portrait. Another woman can be heard saying: “Sophie…” off-screen.

5. Close up. Munch’s mother, photographed in right profile and partially obscured by glistening objects out of focus (which will, later in the film, turn out to be Christmas tree ornaments), finishes the sentence whose beginning was heard in the previous shot: “…shall we sing a Christmas carol?”

6. Medium shot – close up. Sophie is now standing by her mother’s right side, a few candles twinkling in the foreground. (The cut violates the scene’s spatio-temporal continuity.) As Sophie turns away from the mother and starts singing, the camera zooms in to the child’s face. Her eyes meet the lens for a moment. When she looks away, the scene cuts.

7. Close up. Sophie, now a couple of years older, is lying in bed, her face pale and her chin red from blood. (Figure 13) The hands of a female figure, whose face remains unrevealed to the viewer for the whole (extremely brief) duration of the shot, are adjusting the child’s head on the pillow. Sophie glances at the camera. The sound of the Christmas carol continues throughout the shot.

8. The camera angle and shot scale are identical to those from the second phase of shot 6. The song continues. The camera pans right and stops on Munch as a boy, who appears to be sitting in his mother’s lap. He is looking up into his mother’s face (off-screen) as she caresses him. The Watkins narrator can be heard again: “And suddenly something opened, and we could see far, far into heaven….”

9. Medium long shot. Munch as a young man writes sitting in a chair facing the camera, while the relative is dusting a lamp in the background. The voice-over continues: “…and so angels float, quietly smiling.” Sophie coughs as she travels the frame to exit it right. Munch stops writing and looks at her askance, his expression and the jittering of his leg suggesting distress. Having continued to write, he coughs, and Sophie reappears in the frame for a moment, this time travelling it in the opposite direction. Her movement coincides with a zoom in to Munch’s face.
The basic factors of the sequence’s rhythm are the images of Munch’s face from different phases of his life – the first one being his own artistic representation thereof, and the subsequent ones being photographic representations that purport to be unmediated. Functioning as the “frames” of the sequence are the voice-over (heard at its beginning and towards its end), as well as the theme of eroticism, dominant in the first and the last shots. In the case of the latter, the film puts forward the theme through association to the opening shot, which features the same characters in a similar domestic scene, and makes the eroticism overt via the words that Sophie whispers to Edvard.

It should be noted that the scene, besides the principal, sexual undertone, possesses an element that subtly links it to the theme of illness. The theme finds an illustration in Edvard and Sophie’s coughing, which dominates the two preceding scenes. Besides elaborating on the basic Eros-Thanatos dualism established already by the shots that precede the appearance of the film’s title, the sequence complicates the dynamic between Eros and Tanatos by introducing an element that stresses a similarity between them. This new element is the realm of the spiritual, connoted through the theme of
Christmas, as well as the line from Munch’s diary with its reference to heaven and angels. In comparison to it, both sexuality and illness – to put the aforementioned principles in the concrete terms that the sequence’s imagery suggests – reveal themselves as but different aspects of corporeality. The shots of Munch observing the self-portrait, now touching the painted lips and now his own, assert themselves in this narrative context as images of the kind of paradox that underlies all serious artistic practice, the paradox of art making as an instance of concretisation that aims at transcending the concrete. The associative logic that governs the sequence can be subjected to a finer analysis, to reveal the mechanisms that motivate the connections of images and sounds within it. The example of the last pair of shots described above should suffice. The Christmas carol sung by Sophie motivates the other component of the soundtrack, the voice-over starting in shot eight, with its religious references. Deriving from Munch’s diary, it motivates the cut to the image of Munch writing.

The interpretative possibilities for the sequence become limited after the two related juxtapositions have unfolded. The first of these involves a shot of vermillion red paint cascading out of tube in an extreme close-up and a shot of Munch as a boy coughing blood into a handkerchief. An image similar in both form and content to this one is part also of the other related juxtaposition: it precedes a shot of Munch as an adult, lying in bed with closed eyes and motionless after freezing from an accidental winter fall into a pond. All these groups of images interweave the tropes of sexuality and mortality, and point to the rootedness of Munch’s art in them. As another testimony to the complexity of Watkins’ editing, each of the three pairs of images involving a sick member of the Munch family exemplifies one of the five methods of montage Eisenstein
identifies in his 1929 article “Methods of Montage”. The first of the three pairs of shots, showing Sophie singing a Christmas carol and coughing blood, exemplifies the most complex of the methods: overtonal editing. The two images have relatively opposite tones (relatively, because the otherworldly imagery of Christmas carols resonates on a subtle level with the image of Sophie presumably dying, departing this world.) They are united by contrast, whose narrative implication emerges only at the level of the entire film. The second pair of images, featuring a graphic match between the redness of the paint being squeezed out of the tube and the blood Munch the boy coughs out, exemplifies, in Eisenstein classification, both overtonal and rhythmic editing: overtonal, because the film establishes a narrative link between the two actions only gradually, and alters and interrogates this connection throughout the film’s duration; rhythmic, because the durations of the two shots and the relative speeds of the movements within them are comparable. The third pair of images is, in Eisenstein’s terms, an instance of tonal editing, the two shots being similar in content and the atmosphere they exude. But Watkins, while employing in Edvard Munch a variety of techniques that evoke Eisenstein, hardly shares the theorist’s cerebral attitude.\textsuperscript{114} In Watkins’ own account, the process of editing the film was based entirely on instinct, and not on theoretical principles of any kind. Working from a loose script, the filmmaker claims to not have known from one day to another how the next day’s cutting would develop. (Welsh 181) Even for the era still influenced by the paradigm of auteurism, which challenged the norms of

\textsuperscript{114} It needs to be noted that Edvard Munch extensively utilizes, in addition to the identified methods of editing, what Eisenstein referred to as vertical editing – the term denoting (primarily) the sound-image relationship. Many of the film’s dialectical juxtapositions are predicated on the use of the two different aspects of film shot. To give but one example, the sound of Munch’s crying, and the occasionally murmured expressions of his inability to “go on,” accompanies the montage consisting of scenes featuring Munch and his fellow painters, as well as his encounter with a prostitute.
conventional film production, this mode of working and the resulting product – a film based entirely on associative editing – constitute a transgression in themselves. This becomes obvious in the comparison of *Edvard Munch* with a film of the internationally most acclaimed Scandinavian filmmaker of the era, Ingmar Bergman. In Bergman’s films, associative editing always connotes interiority, its use typically justified by a given protagonist’s dreaming.\(^{115}\)

As stated previously, *Edvard Munch* fluctuates throughout its duration between the “objective” and “subjective” modes. The above-discussed sequence can serve as an example again. The scenes chronologically predating that with Munch at his self-portrait are configured as flashbacks, and are therefore equivalent to first person narration in literature (flashbacks always representing a character’s memory, always “belonging” to someone.) The voice-over, however, challenges the status of these scenes as representations of Munch’s recollections. The narrator’s introductory note on Munch’s diaries as a key source of material in the voice-over cues the viewer to assume that the sentence referring to angels and heaven is the painter’s. Yet the quotation does not merely further the depiction of Munch’s interiority that has begun with the first flashback, but also distances and objectifies it, its speaker being the same one who previously referred to Munch in the third person. In addition, the same (Watkins’) voice punctuates the entire biopic with information on the contemporaneous world events not directly related to the narrative. (This last strategy corresponds to Brecht’s principle of *Historisieren*, even though Watkins suggests in an interview that he discovered Brecht only after *Edvard Munch* was made.)

\(^{115}\) The only exception that I know of is the introductory sequence in *Persona* (1966), whose status as a recollection is made uncertain by the ambiguity of its narrative elements.
The other sequence too unfolds in a non-linear, meandering manner. I begin the analysis by offering a shot-by-shot breakdown of the sequence:

1. Medium shot. Munch the boy sits in his father’s lap, his face buried in the man’s shoulder. The aunt is standing in the background, eyeing the camera. The Watkins narrator: “Illness, insanity and death were the black angels that kept watch over my cradle, and accompanied me all my life.” The aunt goes frame left and reaches for something, as the father is saying to his son inaudible, but presumably comforting, words. The camera zooms to a close-up of the two; Edvard’s face now revealed. Father: “We can sit by the fire before you go to bed.” The boy looks at the camera.

2. Close up. Left profile of Mrs. Heiberg discreetly smiling in a dark interior, her features “softened” by what appears to be a veil of tobacco smoke. She turns her head to the camera, and – the smile now gone – shows it the left profile again.

3. Close up. Sophie, shown en face. There is an expression of guilt and sadness on her face. She spends a few seconds with her eyes cast down (perhaps in prayer before a meal) before looking off-screen right. Coughing can be heard. Throughout the shot, a blurred segment of another character’s head occupies a fraction of the screen’s left side. (The first three shots suggest eyeline matches between the three characters; Figure 14)

4. Close-up. Edvard coughs into his shoulder (thus making the viewer perceive the shot as spatially and temporally connected to the preceding one) and looks screen right.

5. Long shot – close up. Edvard the boy, the camera behind his back, peeps through the ajar door where Sophie, her hair wet and her body barely covered with towels, is sitting in a chair, apparently unaware that she is being watched. The sound of splashing water. The camera rapidly zooms to the girl’s crotch. As it tilts up to her face, the third sister starts speaking off screen: “My sister Sophie…”

6. Medium close up. Karen, photographed frontally and looking at the camera, continues the sentence from the previous shot: “…also died from tuberculosis.”

7. Medium close up. Karen is sitting in the lap of Sophie. They are both looking just beside the camera, at the blurred, barely recognisable figure of the father looking down. Karen (off-screen): “She was 15 years of age.” Immediately thereafter, the father can be heard reading aloud: “And I saw the dead standing before the throne and books were opened.” The camera pans right, to reveal Laura sitting in the lap of her aunt. The reading continues: “The Book of Life was opened and the dead were judged in accordance with their deeds and the sea gave up its dead…” Karen (off-screen): “My sister Laura was very talented.”

8. Medium shot – medium close-up. Karen, seen from the same angle as in shot 6, continues the narration: “She learned languages and mathematics effortlessly.” The camera starts slowly zooming in. “She got honours in Latin. But she was born with a nervous disposition so she could never…”
9. “…make use of her education.” Close-up. Laura, slightly frowning and shown in half-left profile, looks up to screen left. Another character’s shoulder, out of focus, is seen at the lower left side of the screen. Off-screen, Edvard’s father says: “Edvard, I want to talk with you.”

10. Medium shot – medium close-up. Reacting to the father’s words from the previous shot, Edvard the boy straightens up in bed, looking up and right at his father (off-screen), as the camera rapidly zooms in. Father: “Your aunt said that a plate was broken.”

11. Medium long shot – medium close up. Sophie is sitting at a bed, looking screen up and right. Father: “Was it Peter Andreas?” The camera pans left to Peter Andreas, who is being tucked in bed by the aunt. Peter Andreas: “No, it was Laura.” Karen and Laura (off-screen): “No, it was Edvard.”

12. Close up. Edvard as a young man, veiled by smoke, his eyes cast down. He looks up in reaction to the words of Hans Jaeger (off-screen): “The Bible says that you’re punished. Onan was punished. It also says that man…” (At one point during the course of the shot, Jaeger’s gesturing hand enters the frame.)

13. As shot 2. Mrs Heiberg takes a puff of her cigarette. Hans Jaeger: “…must replenish the earth. One doesn’t do that by masturbating!” As she looks down, the aunt can be heard saying: “That was nice and warm, isn’t it?” Mrs Heiberg, smiles coyly as she glances off-screen right, just beside the camera, presumably at Edvard.
Throughout the sequence (and, for that matter, the entire film) Watkins uses continuity editing techniques to smooth the connections between the imagery drawn from vastly disparate time-space continuums of the narrative. The first eyeline match in the sequence, occurring between the ending and beginning, respectively, of shots 1 and 2, does not conform to verisimilitude: the Munch from the present of the scene featuring Mrs Heiberg is over a decade older than the Munch whose glance the editing configures as being directed to the woman. The shots joined through the glance-object cut (the editing technique where the look directed off-screen by a character is not returned) between the subsequent two shots appear to belong to the same scene: the identical lighting in shots 3...
and 4 and the fact that the blurred head seen in the latter shot is male – a fact that reveals itself only upon close, frame-by-frame viewing of the shot supports this conclusion. The scene, however, preserves a degree of ambiguity as to the spatial relations between the figures, as it refrains – in accord with the film’s general avoidance of the conventions of “invisible style” – from using a master shot.

Occasionally, the film betrays this principle. The scenes central to the film’s narrative concerns of Munch’s sexual and artistic maturation abandon the dominant technique of montage for continuity editing. Thus, the first prolonged use of continuity editing occurs in the brief series of scenes depicting the beginning of Munch’s affair with Mrs. Heiberg, and the second – in the scenes showing the preparation of the painter’s first solo exhibition, and the public’s denigrating reactions to it. While films of conventional formal operations often emphasise a narrative moment by foregrounding its cinematography, sound, or editing, Watkins’ film achieves this by temporarily reverting to the syntax of mainstream cinema.

The film subtly alternates between the “third person” and “first person” modes of narration from the beginning to the longest and most polyphonic montage sequence towards the end, whose status in terms of the categories of “objective” versus “subjective” narration remains resolutely and deliberately ambiguous. The alternations are, however, less frequent in the segment of the film where the narrative shifts from the protagonist’s interiority to the artistic endeavours he undertook as an already established artist. These involve mostly the acquisition of various new painting techniques, the reports of which are given through the Watkins narrator. In this segment of the film, the voice-over is as formal and detached as the style thereof associated with educational
documentaries. The Watkins narrator, then, parallels the shift of imagery in the segment to a more “objective” mode, which predicates itself on the significantly diminished “intrusions” of flashbacks in the narrative’s present.

The effect of the pseudo-expressionist editing patterns in *Edvard Munch* is more visceral than intellectual. They can be associated only vaguely with Brecht’s method of structuring an artwork: they are dialectical insofar as they employ contradiction, but not necessarily and not predominantly in the sense of the term that refers to the “art of practice of logical discussion as employed in investigating the truth of a theory or opinion” (“Dialectic”), and not at all in the sense of dialectics that pertains to the philosophical tradition of dialectical materialism.

*The Freethinker*

While *Edvard Munch* narratively justifies the use of montage by configuring it as a reflection of the nonlinearity of memory and the protagonist’s diary prose style, *The Freethinker* does not make a similar gesture. If *The War Game*, as Joseph A. Gomez suggests, fell victim to the doctrine in the 1960s British media against “subjective” documentary filmmaking, *The Freethinker* can be said to mark an unexpected return by Watkins to the “objective” mode, albeit in the sense of the word much different than that normally employed by TV producers. The film also does not use the voice-over, which in *Edvard Munch* and other Watkins’ films of similarly kaleidoscopic structure acts as an agent of unity. Finally, it entirely rejects continuity editing – the elements of which system are consistently used in *Munch* to alleviate the estranging effects of the film’s
dominant technique. Below offered is a shot-by-shot breakdown of a sequence that exemplifies the above points.


2. Intertitle: “The drama does not please the critics and Siri’s performance is judged the only redeeming feature. Strindberg feels that Siri, succeeding where he has failed, has humiliated him.”

3. Medium long shot. A historic photo of Strindberg as a middle-aged man, looking at the lens as he sits on a bench in front of a house with a hand buried in his coat. (Figure 15)

4. Medium shot. Strindberg as an old man hangs a framed photograph of his daughter on the wall. Having adjusted the position of the picture, he steps back, leaving the frame.

5. Close up of Strindberg’s handwriting. An underline emphasises the word “beröringen” (contacts). (Figure 20)

6. Medium shot, slightly high angle. Strindberg, shown from the back, leafs through a book on the desk at which he is sitting.


9. As shot 6. Strindberg munches as he reads, a fork with a piece of cheese in his hand. The sound of his humming, which begins in the middle of the shot, continues in the next two shots.

10. Medium close-up. Harriet Bose, Strindberg’s second wife, faces the camera, looking straight into the lens. (Figure 21)

11. Extreme close-up. A slow pan across the spines of books in different languages and on a variety of subjects. One of the titles mentions the Tibetan language. Off-screen voice of Strindberg’s second wife: “While I was pregnant with Ann-Marie, Strindberg was kind and thoughtful to me the whole time. He couldn’t help stirring up the matter of women’s rights occasionally. Strindberg’s whiskers quivered. He walked away to a washstand in his room. He washed his hands a number of times, nervously and quickly, which he always did when he was upset.” A trickling of water can be heard. It will continue, along with the above-identified sounds, until shot 16. “Then the storm was over.”

12.-16. Shots showing fragments on Strindberg’s manuscripts on the subjects of the Chinese and Hebrew scripts. The word “Tibet” dominates the middle shot. In the first of the shots, a military march starts with a slow fade-in, and continues throughout the sequence.

17. Medium long shot. Still image showing about a dozen members of a military orchestra, playing as they march a street. The music becomes louder as the shot progresses.
18. Intertitle: “Around the turn of the century, the Swedish authorities erect elaborate triumphal arches to celebrate the arrival in Stockholm of Important Personages’...”

19. Intertitle: “...such as Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, President Fallières of France, King Frederik of Denmark and the explorer Sven Hedin on his return from Tibet.”

20. Intertitle: “Some of the costly receptions are staged around the time of the Great Strike of 1909.”

21.-29. Historic still images of the above-mentioned festivities. The music stops at the end of the last shot.

30. Medium shot. Strindberg as an old man at his desk. He occasionally looks at the camera as he writes.


32. Intertitle: “Strindberg is angered by the recognition given to his rivals the explorer Sven Hedin and the writer Verner von Heidenstam, and by their reactionary stand against the labour movement.”

![Figure 15](image1)

![Figure 16](image2)
I begin the analysis of the sequence with a word about its key thematic concerns. No live action shot it includes features more than one character. Its “drama” is abstract, the conflicts within it Eisensteinian (or Brechtian) rather than Griffithian (or Aristotelian) – to use somewhat simplifying comparisons for the sake of brevity. The main contrast within the sequence is, broadly, that between Strindberg’s private life and his public endeavours. The film’s already mentioned focus on the continuities rather than discontinuities between the two allows for the sequence’s dramaturgical development and climax. The information on Strindberg’s professional jealousy toward Siri links to the writer’s infamous misogyny, thematised also elsewhere in the film and in Munch. However, the decidedly unfavourable picture of the writer gets complicated no sooner than it is made. The historic image of Strindberg that follows the first intertitles appears chosen precisely because of its unrelatedness to the link between his marriage and profession. The subject appears self-conscious: he is looking at the camera in a contrived pose, as though actively trying to conceal his true self, with which the viewer has just been acquainted through the intertitles. The next shot, however, disturbs the established
relationship: the suggestion of of Strindberg’s tenderness and affection for his daughter somewhat alleviated the earlier one of the writer’s conceit. The shot of Strindberg’s manuscript segment with the word *beröringen* (contacts) underlined furthers this move. If considered in the context of the entire narrative, however, the image can be said to carry the opposite suggestion. Namely, one can attribute his loneliness to his earlier decision to leave the family in pursuit of alchemy experiments. Neither of the two possible interpretations has a greater claim of accuracy than the other: through its peculiar ordering of story material, the film consistently maintains a degree of ambiguity. This feature – frequently singled out as key in critical commentaries of European art cinema of the 1960s – differs from that which one finds in Bergman, Fellini and Antonioni, to mention some of the most celebrated representatives of this kind of filmmaking. The ambiguity of *The Freethinker* is not a structural corollary of characters’ confusion, trauma or some other peculiar mental state, nor a demonstration of the filmmakers’ demiurgic powers (as both are often the case in the films of the mentioned art cinema filmmakers.) On the contrary, this quality of the film represents a tacit acknowledgment of the limits of the filmmaker’s knowledge of the story world, an expression of a refusal to totalise the narrative by subjecting its elements to the Hollywood logic of cause and effect. (It should be noted that the lacunae of the story – to borrow the term Perez uses in reference to Straub and Huillet [324] – function also as a proof of its accuracy: in not providing definite answers to all questions it raises, *The Freethinker* can be regarded as true to the untidiness of life.) The somewhat redeeming quality of the protagonist, suggested by the shot where he hangs his daughter’s photo, subsequently becomes relativised by the series of shots that explain Strindberg’s progressive social activism in
terms of his professional jealousy. If the explorer Sven Hedin and the writer Verner von Heidenstam were not given the recognition Strindberg had vainly desired, one is led to conclude from the choice and order of the related information in the intertitles, the protagonist would not have minded their reactionary stand against the labour movement. The sequence thus makes a twofold dialectical move in opposite directions from the realm of public into that of private life, at the same time stressing the connection between them. First, the sequence juxtaposes a demonstration of Strindberg’s professional jealousy to that of his love for his daughter, and then creates an association between the writer’s politics and his professional jealousy. There lies the sequence’s subtle symmetry, whereby its various elements cohere together.

As the sequence unfolds, certain images – in line with the film’s general dialectics – acquire meanings that cancel the ones they had initially. The shots of Strindberg’s manuscripts and their temporal position, for example, first connect merely to the negative critical response to Sir Bengt’s Wife. The connection can be literally represented thus: the protagonist finds consolation from his public failure in the solitary studying of languages and reminiscing about his daughter. But after the information has been conveyed that one of the celebrations hosted by the Swedish authorities at a triumphal arch was in honour of the explorer Sven Hedin upon his return from Tibet, the word “Tibet” that dominates shot 14 gains a relevance. In retrospect, the image can be interpreted as evidence that Strindberg too explored Tibet, albeit in a different (perhaps more substantial) manner. Understood this way, the shot complicates the question of Strindberg’s jealousy, making his anger more humanly acceptable.
If we figuratively divide the principles according to which a film sequence organises together images and sounds into the “outside” and “inside” ones – the former group concerning the filmmaker’s intentions with the material, and the “inside” ones on the intrinsic narrative and stylistic properties of the “raw” video and audio recordings – it becomes apparent that the sequence under analysis owes something to both. I am stressing what might seem obvious in order to make a distinction between the editing pattern of *The Freethinker* and the concept of intellectual editing as theorised and practically applied by Eisenstein. While Eisenstein freely combines in the bridge sequence in *October*, for instance, diegetic and non-diegetic shots whose salient graphic properties are hardly comparable, the above outlined sequence and *The Freethinker* as a whole carry out the abstracting process only to an extent. Besides the already cited contrasts within the sequence, there are also key similarities between its constituents: its structure predicates itself on the latter as much as on the former. For example, the film edits the historic image of Strindberg next to that of the character hanging his daughter’s photograph not *simply* with the goal of conveying the discrepancy between the writer’s public persona (which the photograph embodies): Strindberg’s character and the motif of the photograph found in the two consecutive shots provide a thematic link between them. Beside the foregrounded discontinuity from the one shot to the next in terms of space, time, and action, there are two unemphasised continuities. Similarly, beside the obvious difference between the documentary material in the sequence and the shots featuring actors there is a significant similarity: the movements of the figure in this latter group of shots are very limited (most strikingly in that showing Harriet Bose as she poses for
Watkins’ video camera, much like the real Strindberg poses for the still camera of the unknown photographer in his historic portrait.)

In conclusion, the most conspicuous feature of the sequence’s style – in comparison with *Edvard Munch* – is the replacement of the voice-over narration with intertitles. In the earlier film, “the Watkins narrator” functions as a structuring anchor, supplementing the voice of the taciturn protagonist and conveying an array of other information on the narrative and its historical context. And while the detachment of the voice-over from the diegesis inherently carries the implication of objectivity, the fact remains that the technique entails a performance. As such, the voice-over cannot be emotionally neutral. One could easily make an argument that Watkins, whose voice is the film’s central organising device, is more probable a point of spectatorial identification than the protagonist himself. The filmmaker’s repeated statements on the film’s autobiographical dimension serve this argument well: the viewer aware of it may identify with Munch by identifying with Watkins and vice versa. *The Freethinker*, with its reliance on intertitles instead of “the Watkins narrator” – a device that simultaneously serves and dominates the narrative – theoretically allows its characters to come closer to the fore, thereby enabling an easier Aristotelian identification. However, the film circumvents this possibility by the following means: 1) the disruption of the story’s chronology and, consequently, a blurring of the causal connections amongst its elements; 2) the use of historic visual material, which works to emphasise the gap between the actors and the characters they portray; 3) the use of an acting style that entails the distancing acknowledgment of the camera; 4) the use of an editing style that counters the idea of organic character representation through separating its visual and aural aspects; 5)
the use of metafilmic excursions (the scenes of the actors’ commenting on and debating their characters). The above-outlined sequence offers examples for all but the last of the four identified strategies (the second and the third of which directly correspond to Brechtian ideas of Verfremdung, Historisieren, and Prinzip der Trennung.) And while all but the last strategy are employed also in Edvard Munch, their combination with the other most prominent narrative and stylistic features of the film – its disinterest in visual representation of character interiority and the rejection of continuity editing – is unique in the corpus of Watkins’ feature films.

The last two, broadest salient characteristics of The Freethinker, are directly correlated. The former one naturally stems from the principle according to which biographical facts on August Strindberg and his time are explored less in terms of their emotional, than their intellectual implications. Even the writer’s well-known psychological turbulences concern the film only inasmuch as they are reflected in his art, whose narrative and stylistic properties are – again – relevant to the film only to the extent to which they inform Strindberg’s thought system, its contradictions and its evolution. The film achieves its overall emphasis on the protagonist’s intellect (signaled already by the title) largely via the editing pattern whereby images and sounds are organised around ideas rather than the characters’ life trajectories. In this respect, the film radically departs from the conventions of the Hollywood subgenre of biopic. This departure is radicalised by the deliberate and controlled oscillations throughout the film in the logic behind this basic organisational pattern, which configure the filmmaker’s editorial reasoning not as monolithic and superior to the reasoning of his protagonist and the other characters, but as equally contradictory and prone to change. In rejecting the
largely “first person mode” of Edvard Munch, then, The Freethinker does not adopt the “third person mode” of Hollywood cinema, which predicated itself on the use of continuity editing. If we accept Colin MacCabe’s view that this syntax implies a singularity of perspective whose existence it simultaneously works to conceal, (MacCabe 1974) continuity editing would be ill-suited for the film’s dialectical maneuvering. Hence the film’s use of intellectual editing.

The Paris Commune as a Brechtian Lehrstück

Watkins’ most recent film, La commune (Paris 1871), is also his most ambitious docudrama to date. In both its thematic scope and length, it surpasses all previous works of the filmmaker within the category. While Watkins’ early epic film, Culloden, focuses on a single event in British and Scottish history, which fully unfolded in a matter of days, La Commune spans the entire two-month history of the world’s first socialist republic, making – through its frequent metafilmic excursions – references also to a number of related socio-political events and facts of the time of the film’s production. A viewer of La Commune whom Watkins quotes praises the film for “[containing] everything: emotion, a sense of struggle, poetry, psychodrama […]” (“La Commune”) The attribution of this last “ingredient” to the work is owed to Watkins’ peculiar combining of historical reenactment with improvised dialogue. Yet while the function of psychodrama, a technique developed in the early 1930s by the Austrian-American psychosociologist Jacob L. Moreno, is strictly therapeutic, the result of the cast’s work on

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116 The film’s original, TV version - from which the analysis was made - is 5 hours and 45 minutes in length, while the shorter, cinema version runs for three hours and 30 minutes.
La Commune – one concludes from the interviews with them incorporated in the work – is their enhanced understanding of the short-lived political entity, and its relation to the present of the film’s production. On this basis, then, it would be more apt to compare La Commune and the Brechtian Lehrstück – a move made in none of the commentaries I have managed to access.

Brecht first used the term Lehrstück in reference to Das Badener Lehrstück (The Baden Learning Play), premiered in 1929 at the Kammermusikfest in the play’s eponymous city. Most of the other plays Brecht classifies as Lehrstücke were written before 1939. While Brecht’s epic plays too are non-Aristotelian, antimetaphysical and dialectical, the Lehrstücke are formally more radical in terms of the dynamic they establish between the performer and the spectator. Namely, instead of the occasional crossings of the Antoinian fourth wall – one of the most widely cited Verfremdungseffekte of epic theatre – the Lehrstück entirely does away with it. Not requiring an audience, the Lehrstück exists for the benefit of the participant as opposed to the spectator, and is – as such – contrasted to the Schausstück. (Wirth 116) Because they fall within the same category as Aristotelian plays, Brecht sometimes referred to epic ones as compromises. Brecht deemed the pedagogy of the Lehrstücke grand, as it could turn the participants and observers into statesmen and philosophers, and that of the Schausstücke small, as it merely upturned the hierarchy between the performer and the spectator, democratising the theatre in the pre-revolutionary period. (BFA 21: 396)

117 These are: Der Flug des Lindbergs (Lindberg’s Flight, later retitled to Der Ozeanflug [The Ocean Flight], 1929), Der Jasager (The One Who Says Yes, 1929-1930) and its variant Der Neinsager (The One Who Says No, 1929-1930), The Measures Taken, Die Ausnahme und die Regel (The Exception and the Rule, 1930-1937), Die Horatier und die Kuriatier (Horatii and Curiatii, 1934), and the play-fragments Der böse Baal der asoziale (The Evil Baal, the Asocial One, published in 1968) and Fatzer. (Steinweg: 15)
The first commentator to attempt a systematisation of Brecht’s thought on the play type into a coherent theory, Rainer Steinweg, points to the misleading quality of the name *Lehrstück* (literally rendered into English by Martin Esslin as the didactic play.) Contrary to what might be intuited from its name, the *Lehrstück* is not conceived as a means of transmitting a lesson contained in the text to its players and observers, but as a means of investigating an issue (which, in all six completed and a few unfinished *Lehrstücke*, concerns the relationship between the individual and society, the contradiction between social responsibility and a fulfilled private life [Vaßen 202 and Steinweg, as paraphrased in Ibid.]) In its primary aim for the player rather than the observer, the *Lehrstück* challenges the principle of *Verfremdung* (in the sense of spectator distanciation), as developed in epic theatre. (Rainer Friedrich notes the paradox that Brecht, whose epic theatre project conforms to “the Benjaminian program of emancipating art from its parasitic dependence on ritual”, [1999: 52] returns with the *Lehrstück* to the ritual drama, as testified by his instructions on how the plays of this type should be performed: “spirituell, zeremoniell, rituell.”) (Brecht, as qtd. in Ibid.) To avoid the widespread – but obviously unintended by Brecht – associations of the *Lehrstück* with vulgar Marxism, Agitprop and political indoctrination, Steinweg introduces the term *Entdeckungsstück* (discovery play) to describe Brecht’s intention for the play type (19), while Florian Vaßen considers the rendition of the term as learning play (and its reverse translation as *Lern-Spiel*) as more true to the spirit of the dramaturgical model. (201)

Apart from the abolishment of the performer / spectator dichotomy, characteristic for the Brechtian *Lehrstück* is its heavy use of music, and – more particularly – a chours. As this latter element suggests, a performance of a *Lehrstück* would involve a relatively
large number of individuals – a fact in accordance with Brecht’s intention of the plays for schools, factories and political groups. The intended malleability of the Lehrstücke playtexts in performance is enabled partly by the form’s use of types as opposed to characters, one of several features of Brecht’s theatre that appears inspired by Eastern theatrical traditions. For example, in The Measures Taken – the Lehrstück Brecht singled out in a late interview as an exemplary play for the future (Hertoffer 214) – the characters are identified solely in terms of the role they hold within the social formation that the narrative portrays: the Young Comrade and Four Agitators. The Young Comrade, disregarding the Party’s directives to refrain from emotionally reacting to the injustices toward workers and attempting to fix them instantaneously, inadvertently contributes to the premature beginning of a revolutionary protest. In addition to this, he discloses his identity, as a result of which the authorities trace him. The Four Agitators, neither able to take him with themselves nor to leave him without further endangering the mission, decide that the only solution for the problem would be Young Comrade’s execution. He agrees to die for the benefit of the revolutionary cause. The characters’ disguising themselves by masks before entering China, where their mission of organising workers is to take place, emphasises the play’s narrative focus on the subservience of individualism to a common cause. Once they put on masks, the Party Secretary tells them they “are all without name and mother, blank pages on which the Revolution writes its instructions.” (Brecht, as qtd. in Friedrich 1999: 56) In disputing the dialectical nature of Lehrstücke, aimed for – if not achieved – also by other Brecht plays written after his discovery of Marxism in 1926, Friedrich cites the enthusiastic reception the first

118 For a discussion of the relation between the Lehrstück and the noh play Taniko, see Friedrich 1999: 52-54.
performance of the play in Berlin in 1931 enjoyed by the Right. (53-54)\textsuperscript{119} This view can be easily challenged: Brecht’s handling of the narrative element of the play cited by Friedrich as the reason for its critical success with the Right – the sacrifice of the Young Comrade to a Great Custom of which no rational account could be given – (54) can be said to successfully oppose ideological petrification, hence its ability to attract audiences from the part of the political spectrum opposite to the playwright’s. Indeed, one can easily imagine the narrative of the play remoulded as to fit a doctrine that surpasses the Left-Right dichotomy: for example, that of liberal capitalism. In such a version of the plot of \textit{The Measures Taken}, the five protagonists could, for instance, be turned into representatives of a soft drink company investigating the possibility of erecting a bottling plant in a country with cheap labour. The Young Comrade could be replaced by an agent whose discovery of the unionising issues underlying the enterprise gives him / her second thoughts about the political correctness of the company’s policy…

To return to Watkins’ film: in what ways does it correspond to the characteristics of the \textit{Lehrstück}? One of these is thematic. Vaßen points to the prevalence of the topics of violence and bodily destruction in \textit{Lehrstücke}, both of which marked the short-lived Parisian government of 1871. (Vaßen 204) True to the aesthetic principle suggested by his critique of the increasingly violent content in the MAVM expressed on his website, Watkins avoids graphic depictions of the violent acts perpetrated by both the Communards and the Versaillaise. For example, it is an intertitle that conveys the information on the execution of the archbishop Darboy. Instead of showing the mass executions of the citizens of Paris affiliated (or believed to be so) with the Commune, the

\textsuperscript{119} Friedrich attributes the political group’s enthusiasm for \textit{Jasager I} to the play’s supposed hostility to the subject, antirationalism and antihumanism. (54)
film synecdochally represents them through off-screen sounds of the rifle shots. Save for the oft-reproduced photograph of the bodies of twelve Communards in lined-up coffins, none of the visual documents that the film includes shows a scene of death, despite the ample availability of such imagery: two of the relatively few illustrations in David A. Shafer’s *The Paris Commune* (2005), one of most recent English-language books on the subject, depict killed national guardsmen and children. Perhaps wary of the potentially melodramatic (and, therefore, un-Brechtian) effect of graphic imagery of the mentioned kind, Watkins relies mostly on intertitles to communicate the grim facts of the Commune. (These are by no means ignored: in fact, the amount of information the film offers by far surpasses that which an average viewer can retain. The cognitive challenge this poses works in tandem with the film’s anti-melodramatic move, mobilising – much like *Lehrstücke* and, often, Brecht’s epic plays – the viewer’s rationality rather then her emotions.) The film, then, thematises the exceedingly violent historical events in an oblique way, insisting on them narratively but stylistically evading them. Violence in *La Commune*, therefore, operates as a Lotmanian minus device.¹²⁰

The film resembles a *Lehrstück* also in terms of its characterisation, dialogue and acting style. About 60 per cent of the cast, comprising over 220 people, had no prior experience as performers. While the credits cite Peter Watkins and Agathe Bluysen as the writers of the script, the dialogue was – as in the case of many earlier works by the filmmaker – provided by the actors themselves. The accuracy of the cast’s verbal

¹²⁰ In this respect, the film is comparable to two other relatively recent ones that have been commented upon in terms of their indebtedness to Brecht: Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* (1993), and its 2008 shot-by-shot remake. As in Watkins’s film, the excessive violence in both versions of *Funny Games* occurs off-screen. As in *La Commune*, the mode of its depiction functions as a critique of the violence-saturated popular media of our time. In addition to this, Haneke’s films – like *La Commune* – possess metafilmic elements tightly intertwined within the narrative.
contributions was enabled by the research they had been required to conduct on their own (thus compensating for the marginalisation of the Paris Commune within the French educational system.) To evoke the multiplicity of accents and dialects that had been spoken in the Commune, Watkins and his casting crew enlisted people from different regions of France. The conviction is genuine of both the actors performing sympathisers of the Commune and of those playing their opponents: the film’s casting crew engaged, through the conservative press in Versailles and Paris, people of conservative politics.\textsuperscript{121} In a later phase of the pre-production process, the cast formed groups (on the basis of their respective characters’ occupation and social position) to discuss the background of the people they were portraying, as well as the relevance of the Commune for the present socio-historical conditions.

A corollary of the dialogue’s improvisatory character is its erratic pace, controlled by Watkins’ and Bluysen’s editorial interventions, and – in terms of narrative action – by the journalists of the Commune TV (Gérard Watkins and Aurélie Petit).\textsuperscript{122} A majority of \textit{La Commune}’s scenes are configured as footage recorded by these characters and their cameraman (who remains unseen and unheard throughout the film.) The potentially estranging effect of this anachronism represents another point of continuity with Watkins’ earlier work: the filmmaker’s first feature, \textit{Culloden}, uses the

\textsuperscript{121} Watkins here repeats the strategy used in \textit{Punishment Park}, whose performers “held views that at least approximated those of their characters.” (Rapfogel 22)

\textsuperscript{122} The sometimes questionable results of Watkins’ method of directing the dialogues are easier to accept when considered in relation to the democratic stance that underlies it. Scott MacDonald’s commentary of \textit{The Journey} applies here too: “The focus of \textit{The Journey} [ ] is the thoughts and experiences of average people, and Watkins’ commitment to the people who agreed to talk with him was nearly absolute: he would give them an opportunity to respond to his questions and would treat their responses with respect, not simply in a metaphorically sense, but in terms of the allocation of screen time.” (MacDonald 1998: 367)
same technique. In his “Media Statement,” the filmmaker explains this aesthetic choice for his debut feature as follows: “I employed the style used in Vietnam War news broadcasts in order to bring a sense of familiarity to scenes from an 18th century battle, in the hope that this anachronism would also function to subvert the authority of the very genre I was using.” (“Introduction”) The journalists in La Commune wander through the 11th arrondissement of Paris (one of the city’s 20 administrative districts, populated mostly by the working class), interviewing people about the situation, often moving from one group to the next in the midst of a debate they have initiated. This strategy requires long takes, which are, again, enabled by the use of a mobile, handheld camera in combination with a unique lighting scheme and sound-recording technique. The former predicates itself on neon lights, regularly spaced on the ceiling of the improvised studio to give an even illumination, while the sound was recorded using a portable mixing system, which followed the actors through the set. (Ibid.) As can be inferred from the above, the film mimics the style of documentary reportage. This means that it rejects continuity editing and the various elements of its syntax – conventions of mainstream cinema – in favour of those of the related medium of television, which represents the writer’s primary concern as a critic of the MAVM. This is reflected also in his aesthetic choices; for example, in his penchant for bigger shot scales and the dramaturgy of numerous “low peaks” instead of few high ones, the latter tracing back to ancient Greek tragedy and Aristotle’s Poetics. One should, therefore, be cautious about applying the descriptor “Brechtian” to the stylistic operations of Watkins’ films. In deviating from the syntax of mainstream cinema, the filmmaker does not – as does, for instance, Godard in his Marxist phase – deconstruct it so as to lay bare its arbitrariness, but merely replaces it with the syntax of
another medium, albeit hypertrophied one. In this sense, it does not seem a stretch to characterise the style of Watkins’ films as pastiche (in the sense of the term used to describe Godard’s homages to various film genres and styles.)\textsuperscript{123} Watkins’ cinema – and \textit{La Commune} in particular – compensates for its timidity in probing the medium’s conventions by an effective use of the estranging devices that can best be described by the Czech structuralists’ term \textit{aktualizace} (topicalisation). The use of the device is common in theatre: examples include the allusions in Adrian Noble’s 1984 RSC production of \textit{Henry V} to the Falklands Crisis; to the war in Bosnia in the 1995 Mark Wing-Davey’s staging of \textit{Troilus and Cressida} at the Delacorte Theater in New York; to the Iraq war in Deborah Warner’s 2005 production of \textit{Julius Caesar}. In film, whose inherent high mimeticism the practitioners more readily embrace than interrogate and reject, the use of \textit{aktualizace} is less common. However, all of the filmmakers I examine in this dissertation employ it. The examples from the cinema of Straub and Huillet are its frequent anachronisms, which work to draw the viewer’s critical attention to the continuities and discontinuities between the present of a given film’s narrative and that of its production and / or reception. Lars von Trier uses \textit{aktualizace} in the final segment of \textit{Dogville}, a film analyzed in the next chapter of this study, where images of the American poor are shown, accompanied by David Bowie’s 1975 song “Young Americans.” Apart

\textsuperscript{123} Consider, for example, the addressing of the camera in any Watkins’ film that employs the pseudo-documentary style in comparison with the use of the technique in a film from Godard’s later phase \textit{Tout va bien} (with Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972), a film that makes a direct reference to Brecht’s “Notes to ‘Mahagonny’”). In \textit{La Commune}, for example, the use of the technique is justified narratively by the identification via voice-over of the state of contemporary media as one of the film’s thematic concerns, and – therefore – also stylistically. In contrast, a television crew is absent from many of the scenes in \textit{Tout va bien} where a character addresses the camera. The described estranging move made by Godard and Gorin can, therefore, be considered more drastic.
from the already mentioned anachronistic presence of television in Peter Watkins’ *Culloden* and *La Commune*, the latter film contains an example of a different kind of *aktualizace*. After the film has made numerous but indirect references to the present of the production (through its commentaries on the medium of television), the relatedness of its narrative to the socio-historic circumstances of today comes to the fore. This takes place approximately three hours into its duration, in the first of the improvised scenes with the performers out of their characters. A remark by a citizen on the media’s producing the false understanding that “economic problems come before social ones,” and the example of Japan’s economic decline in the late 1980s, triggers an intertitle with statistics on the continually widening gap between the world’s rich and poor since the days of the Commune, a scene opens showing five *fédères* and citizens of the 11th *arrondissement* sitting at a table in a wine pub. The actor playing a *fédère* says: “There are problems everywhere: outcasts, illegal aliens, destitute people who need help. Now’s the time to open the phone book, call, do something.” The narrative excursion the scene represents owes its effectiveness to the relative lateness of its occurrence. The comparisons via intertitles of the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, of the conditions of the first and third world, and so on, do not quite prepare the viewer for the complete merging between the two timelines (that of the Commune and that of the recent history of France and the world) represented by the described scene, for so strong an intrusion of thematic material without a direct relevance to the narrative’s central concerns.

The film’s dominant technique of pulling the dialogue forward, the interviews the Commune TV journalists conduct with people connected to the government in one way
or another, has both advantages and disadvantages. The former concern the film’s focus on a group of historical events in which many thousands of people took part, and its antagonism – suggested through off-screen commentary at the beginning – toward the dramaturgy of mainstream cinema, with an individual character figuring as the axis that connects the other ones as well as all narrative events. The technique of the interview enables a quick introduction of the characters and – used in conjunction with the long take (in which the journalists are often seen moving between spaces and groups of characters within them) – establishing their relationships to each other. In addition to this, the technique functions as a major agent of the film’s stylistic unity. Like the identified advantages, the limitations concern also the film’s dramaturgy. Even when the interviewers manage to incite a debate between the interviewees, the viewer is left with the impression that their microphones’ presence is thwarting the full development of the dramatic situation’s potential. The performers often appear reluctant to express themselves with the intensity they seem capable of, possibly as a result of the frustrations they previously experienced (during the rehearsals or filming of other scenes) by the camera and microphone’s abandoning them in the middle of their improvising. The entirely improvised scenes where the performers are commenting not only on the Commune, but also on its legacy and the current global socio-political landscape, are – in the mentioned sense – superior to those that constitute the film’s bulk. The very beginning of one of these has already been described. To the remark of the actor performing a \textit{fédére} concerning the need to “open the phone book, call, do something,” another actor in a \textit{fédére} costume replies: “So you open the phone-book, what page?”
Following this, the first actor mentions the many NGOs in existence, thereby starting a genuine debate.

This aspect of Watkins’ method evokes Fredric Jameson’s reflection on Brecht in the terms of the narratologist André Jolles. Jameson uses Jolles’ term *casus*, which – broadly – refers to an instance of a character’s making a judgment. To specify the sense in which the term is to be taken in the context of Brecht’s literature, Jameson points to the etymological kinship between this term and casuistry: “the arguing back and forth, the attempt to specify, particularly thorny legal issues and matters of judgment.” (120) The example of *casus* from Brecht’s – that Jameson offers – concerns Shen Te’s judgment (in singular, although Shen Te judges repeatedly during the course of the play). A perhaps clearer example of *casus* from the play would be the transferring of judgment to the audience in the final scene. Jameson stresses the link of *casus* to the broader project of Brechtian dialectics. “[O]nce a *casus* is settled and a judgment made,” writes Jameson, “the ‘case,’ as it were, drops out of the form, and we have merely a simple empirical narrative. It is the contradiction which makes for the uniqueness of this simple form […]” (121) (According to this criterion, then, the decision of Grusha to relinquish the young Michael in order to save him being torn into pieces by the Governor’s wife in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* does not qualify as a *casus*.)

The dialectics of the debates in *La Commune* lies in their open-endedness, which, again, owes to the filmmaker’s editorial interventions of balancing arguments and counter-arguments, of treating antagonistic views as if their weights are equal. The actors with conservative political views (performing the representatives of the Versailles government and its television station, as well as its troops) are conspicuously absent from
the debates. A direct confrontation between the politically antagonistic groups of
performers would, perhaps, result in a demonstration of either side’s militancy, or a
necessity for such stance for the achievement of a social upturn of the Commune’s scope.
But Watkins, who has consistently shown a pacifist agenda in most of his films, from the
amateur shorts to *The Journey*, would have problems reconciling such conclusions with
his own politics.

Commentators of the Paris Commune from Engels onwards have identified as key
factors that contributed to the quick demise of the political entity the failure of the
revolutionaries to seize the Bank of France, to prevent the evacuation of Thiers and the
members of his government to Versailles, as well as two military decisions. The first of
these was to take no military action against Versailles (even though on the second day of
the Commune’s existence, when calls for such a move were first made, the National
Guard numbered 200,000 soldiers in contrast to Versailles’s 12,000 to 20,000 troops,
dispirited from the loss of the war with Prussia.) (Shafer 65) The second military decision
that played a decisive role in the ultimate loss of the fédérés against the Versaillaises was
not to occupy one of the forts surrounding the city – that of Mont-Valérien, described by
Shafer as arguably the most strategic one. (64) To be sure, Brecht – entirely in
accordance with the views of scientific socialism, according to which the liberation of the
oppressed cannot occur without a violent revolution – echoes the above detailed
criticisms of the Communards’ strategy in his *The Days of the Commune*. Brecht
highlights them by frequently ending a scene with a representation of their occurrence.
Two examples should suffice. The scene 7 c focuses on the negotiations of Beslay, a
member of the Central Committee, with the Governor of the Bank of France. The latter,
having dismissed Beslay after deflecting his threat to loot the bank if the sum of ten million francs is not redirected from Versailles to the Central Committee, opens the door to the room where a priest has been hiding and ends the scene uttering the following words: “You may tell the Archbishop, the ten million francs will go by way of the usual route to Versailles.” (61) 11 a, which shows a session of the Commune, follows a similar procedure. Towards the scene’s end, Delescleuze gives a monologue against violence. “Let us continue peacefully to bring harmony into human relationships and to end man’s exploitation of man,” he says, convincing a majority of the Committee members to vote against reprisals. The stage direction: “Loud gun fire” (75) follows Delescleuze’s summing up the mentioned decision. The last line in the scene is Delescleuze’s: “Let us continue with the matter in hand.” (Ibid.)

Watkins’ film too includes the facts considered to be the causes of the Commune’s failure. However, it does not give them the hierarchical position they hold in historical accounts or artistic representations of the short-lived government. This is clearly evidenced in a comparison of a scene from La Commune with the above-discussed one from Brecht’s play. Filmed in one long take in medium shot, with the camera occasionally panning to reveal the figures at the opposite sides of a table, the scene in question also shows a meeting of the Central Committee (Figures 18 and 19). An intertitle identifying the Committee members in attendance (Eugène Protot, Edouard Vaillant, Eugène Varlin, Augustin Avrial, Leo Frankel, Francis Jourde and Augustin Verdure) sets the scene up. Below is the scene’s entire dialogue, in the translation provided in the First Run Features DVD edition of the film.124

124 The lines are not accompanied by the names of their respective speakers, as the narrative fails to identify all characters in the scene.
“Concerning the artillery, there’s no shortage of cannon, ammunition, even gunners. What’s lacking is organisation. We always come back to this. Instead of endless discussions and quarrels, the Commune should split into 2 groups. One would stay here, and the other would go and fight. That’s our role and our duty. Enough discussion and waste! We must act!”

“You might recall how enthusiastic I was about a month ago. Today I can’t hide my despair. Being so close to the cause of women, I find, we’ve done nothing for them… even though they have such dire needs.”

“Sorry to come back to this again… We’re talking about organisation, wasted time, our failure towards women and education. But I believe that it’s due to our lack of clarity regarding the central political question. We can tackle social progress with strong republican institutions, and a firmly established power and administration. Instead we tried to handle everything in one go.”

“No. It’s a question of time. You can’t say that!”

“We’re assessing 40 days’ work. We can’t do everything!”

“So we need an executive power.”

“Yes. A strong executive power. Right now we have an assembly of 85 members. Everyone debates, no one obeys.”

“We’re often fewer than 85.”

“True, and probably so much the better!”
“What are our priorities? We can make long-term plans, but if the Versaillais arrive, it’s finished.”

“We’ve lost Fort Issy now! So let’s not forget the urgency of the military situation.”

“But wait a minute. I was the first to talk about priorities. The National Guard, feeding the people, keeping alive trust, etc. But we should not go against our own principles. We’ve been chosen to organise a government, a Commune, to be as democratic as possible. Circumstances are difficult. We know that. We did our best. If we don’t succeed, it will serve as a lesson for others. And I’m not at all in favor of handing over power to a dictatorship, just because the situation is extreme.”

“You prefer not to make the necessary means to save a revolution because of your principles? What other solutions do we have? None. People getting ruffled if it’s called a Committee of Public Safety is of no importance compared to what will happen to us if we’re not swift and efficient.”

Both scenes prompt the same conclusion of the necessity of the Parisians’ mobilising against the Versaillais. But while The Days of the Commune allows the viewer to infer the conclusion herself, La Commune makes it on her behalf. Hence the arguably weaker effect of the latter work in comparison with that of Brecht’s scene.

As has been implied, the principal source of theatricality of La Commune is not the acting style, which evokes documentary reportages, but the setting and – as the corollaries of it – the props, the lighting and the figure placement. In his discussion of the film, Watkins explains that
The set was carefully designed to ‘hover’ between reality and theatricality, with careful and loving detail applied for example to the texture of the walls, but with the edges of the set always visible, and with the ‘exteriors’ – the Rue Popincourt and the central Place Voltaire – clearly seen for what they are – artificial elements within an interior space. (“La Commune”)

The first half of the remark applies also, for example, to the loaves of bread on a shelf the camera glimpses while travelling through the deserted set in the first sequence. These props are convincing from the standpoint of verisimilitude, but too few to meet the pertinent criterion of “surface realism.” Similarly, the neon lighting often successfully disguises its artificiality in the interior scenes, only to reveal it blatantly in the exterior ones. In the same vein, the figure placement follows the criteria of verisimilitude in the interior scenes, which employ relatively small numbers of figures, but fails to do so in the exterior scenes, as a consequence of the theatrically simplified setting they use.

The interconnectedness of spaces that constitute the setting facilitates the use of the long take, the predominance of which technique in the film is already suggestive of its editing scheme. The descriptor “Bazinian” James Michael Welsh uses to describe the aesthetic of later Watkins’ films (341) is only partly valid. Like the Greg Toland–photographed films that Bazin celebrates, La Commune does rely for much of its duration on the wide angle lens of a video camera, which provides a considerable depth of field. (Figure 20):
Figure 20: Different phases from the opening shot of La Commune
However, the editing scheme of Watkins’ film does not conform to Bazin’s anti-Eisensteinian view, which ranks the creation of meaning through juxtaposition of elements within an image (via depth of field) over its creation through juxtaposition of individual images (montage). Although the cutting pace of *La Commune* is slower than that of any Eisenstein film, it abounds with examples of associational editing, a technique akin to that which the Soviet film theorist designates as intellectual. Below I offer an example of Watkins’ organising the material according to the principle of association, rather than dramatic action. Towards the end of a debate scene with the actors out of character, a young woman testifies about her personal gain from the participation in the production. “I had that feeling of giving and receiving,” she says. “Especially receiving, a lot and from everyone…” Next, we see two consecutive intertitles with the following text:

> The participation of the cast in the making of this film is precisely what the global media are afraid of, and probably one of the main reasons why the TV channels which were asked for support, refused to finance this film. What the media are particularly afraid of, is to see the man in the little rectangle, replaced by a multitude of people, by the public…

The film then cuts to an image of a “man in the little rectangle,” the TV Versaille news presenter, who announces that news have reached their teleprinters that a court-martial has been set up to rule on cases of insubordination among the National Guard officers. The announcement is followed by a moment of black screen, after which a scene opens with the officer Charles de Beaufort demeaning the guardsmen by characterising their fighting the Versaillais as “brave, but foolish,” and describing them as “half-undressed, badly shaven, drunkards!” Next, we see an intertitle that describes the officer as an aristocrat sharing the political views of his cousin Edouard Moreau, whose dandyism and position as Aide-de-camp arouse animosity.
The scene featuring the news presenter has a twofold function: to illustrate the statement contained in the intertitle that precedes it, and to establish a new theme. The announcement by the TV Versaille news presenter also marks the beginning of a sequence that exemplifies a dominant structuring principle of *La Commune*: contrasting the TV reports on different Commune-related events with the images and sounds of the events that the film codes as actual. As the above example demonstrates, the shots of *La Commune* often acquire additional meaning in conjunction with the preceding or subsequent ones, while functioning as self-sufficient sources of their respective primary meanings. This constitutes the greatest difference between the editing patterns of *La Commune* and Watkins’ earlier works.\(^\text{125}\)

In conclusion, both the originality and the lack of it in *La Commune* appear to stem from the disregard the film displays of the history and yet unexplored potentials of the medium for which it was initially intended (television), as well as of the medium whose stylistic conventions it uses (theatre). Bringing up the trope of originality appears apt in the light of Watkins’ statement that the film was made in reaction to the postmodernist state of affairs. (“La Commune”) While the focus of Watkins’ pertinent criticism falls on political and economic issues, its seems relevant – considering his vocation and the nature of the work here discussed – that the cultural tendency which preceded postmodernism was marked crucially by an evolutionary view of art. The

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\(^{125}\) The film contains an exception to this rule, notable mainly for its singularity. It occurs after the scene where the Polish members of the National Guard are interviewed by a TV Commune journalist. One of them declares the following: “If you want to change Europe, you must change its unjust social order. It’s our goal.” Next, the film cuts for about a second and a half to black screen, which is followed by an image of the TV Versaille anchor. He lifts his eyes from the sheets of paper on the desk before him to the camera, smiles coyly for a moment, and looks down again. As in the famous Kuleshov experiment, the film codes the otherwise “neutral” smile (presumably shot before “action” was called) as an expression of mocking irony.
modernists valued novelty, and considered its achievement the artist’s primary goal. To be sure, claims of it (explicit in varying degrees) are prominent in Brecht’s discussions of epic theatre and the Lehrstück.

Evoking the playwright seems appropriate in light of the above-demonstrated stylistic similarities between La commune and the Lehrstücke, and the narrative ones between the film and The Days of Commune. The progressive aspects of the film (its participatory, democratic nature and its political radicalism) bring it close to the Lehrstücke, while the narrowly imposed limits of these features make it comparable to The Days of Commune. This play – its meanings fixed and its apparent purpose too overt of “artistically softening” the truth of the Commune as formulated by the classics of scientific socialism – well exemplifies a didactic, as opposed to a learning, play. With improvisation as its acting technique, the difference between La Commune the film and the work’s hypothetic live telecast would be infinitely greater than that separating Delbert Mann’s Marty (1955) from the original, live version of Paddy Chayefsky’s drama (1953). If the film stops short of the avant-gardism of the Lehrstück, it does so because it does not acknowledge the tradition and engage with it, but arrives at its techniques intuitively.

**Conclusion**

In its professional aspect, Peter Watkins’ trajectory as a filmmaker bears comparison with that of Orson Welles: like the maker of Citizen Kane (1941), Watkins found himself at the pinnacle of career success with his first features (the controversy around The War Game notwithstanding), only to get slowly but steadily marginalised
with his subsequent efforts. In its artistic aspect, the trajectory of Watkins has zigzagged from the films that predicate themselves on Eisensteinian montage of attractions (*The War Game, Culloden*) to *The Journey* and *The Freethinker*, whose editing scheme frequently corresponds to Eisenstein’s concept of intellectual editing. All the while, the filmmakers’ thematic preoccupations (war, nuclear armament, different forms of social oppression and famous rebel artists) have remained constant. In Watkins’ latest work, *La Commune*, the stylistic emphasis shifts to acting: the cinematography, sound and editing seem to adjust to the mise-en-scène – with the improvising performers as its central elements – more than in the earlier films.

Such details from the pre-production histories of Watkins’ films as the drastic diversion of the finished *The Journey* from its originally planned length of ninety minutes (Watkins 1983: 230) give rise to the thought that the figure of a misunderstood and martyred artist Watkins has configured himself to be through his writings and the autobiographical elements of his films (*Privilege, Edvard Munch, The Freethinker*) is not simply a product of the repressive production and distribution media system – as he consistently suggests is the case – but partly a result also of a self-fulfilling prophecy. A feature that logically accompanies the position Watkins has been forced into (or chosen) is that of “the last Mohican” of modernism – as suggested by the filmmaker’s critique of the cultural tendency that followed the mentioned one. (“La Commune”) While he is in general a highly original figure, his individual films and writings do not always meet the modernist demand for the novum. Both kinds of his creative output fall between rather than within the contemporary theoretical and practical currents in cinema. That Watkins is, as Paul Arthur observes, less prone to intertextual homage than any other major director whose career began in the 1960s,

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126 See also Welsh 345-346.
(63) is not as much an expression of a radical departure from the medium tradition, as a mere
disregard of it. This characteristic of the filmmaker’s work merits the same writer’s note that
Watkins “has never ventured far from his amateur roots.” (59)

Like Brecht, Watkins is less convincing when he presents his (admirable) political
stance overtly (*The War Game, The Gladiators, Punishment Park*) than when he does so “in
passing”, while focusing on a thematic area only tangentially related to politics (*Edvard
Munch, The Freethinker.*) The aspects of his work that link him to Brecht most strongly are
documentariness in its various aspects (a feature that obliquely reminds one also of Piscator’s
legacy in Brecht), and the dialectical relationships forged among different formal elements of
his films.
Chapter 5: Lars von Trier: Brechtian Cinema in the Postmodern Era

Because of the lack of ideational and aesthetic consistency in the cinema of Lars von Trier (1956), determining with certainty the filmmaker’s relationship with Brecht poses a difficulty. The films of the USA - Land of Opportunities trilogy (Dogville [2003], Manderlay [2005], and the yet unproduced Wasington [sic!]) directly allude to Brecht through their narrative preoccupations and stylistic procedures. Seen through the prism of the overt Brechtianisms of Dogville and Manderlay, certain stylistic devices used by Dancer in the Dark (2001) and Breaking the Waves (1995), too, recall Brecht: for instance, both films are divided into “chapters” and punctuate the narrative action by songs. One can attribute obliquely Brechtian resonances also to The Idiots (1998), von Trier’s contribution to Dogme 95, an emphatically realist, and implicitly “anti-bourgeois” film movement. The filmmaker’s familiarity with Brecht’s artistic practice and theoretical concepts – which his interviews demonstrate – further supports the view of certain von Trier films as Brechtian. Commenting upon Dogville, for instance, von Trier uses the term Verfremdung to describe the desired impact of the film’s unorthodox framing. (“Commentary”)

Some other titles in von Trier’s filmography, however, diverge from all defining characteristics of Brecht’s thought and art. To use the example of von Trier’s most recent release at the time of this writing, Antichrist (2009) narrows the realm of the social to the nuclear family, depicting the institution as seemingly resistant to the influence of outside
factors. Stylistically, the film frequently operates by the principle of shock, about whose effectiveness for activating the audience’s awareness Brecht was leery.  

Considering the common perception of von Trier as a postmodern artist, and the importance for the cultural trend of Lacan’s concept of decentred subject can help us understand the gap that separates the political escapism of Antichrist from the political activism of Dogville. Developed in contrast to the notion of the Cartesian subject, which achieves and maintains unity through reasoning, the decentered subject refers to a dispersed subjectivity and polyvalent identity. The deliberate thematic and stylistic variety of von Trier’s cinema, the filmmaker’s theoretical awareness, and the self-image of a mad genius he has constructed all link him to Lacan’s concept. I will argue in this chapter that von Trier’s use of a distinctly modernist rhetoric in the Dogme 95 manifesto, as well as his references to Brecht as an artist exemplary of late modernism, are postmodernist strategies of paraphrase aimed at making strange postmodernism itself.

127 For an articulation and explanation of Brecht’s position regarding the aesthetics of shock, see Brecht 1978: 77-78.)

128 Brecht’s position that the individual is never autonomous, but inherently conditioned by a web of societal factors, allowed for the poststructuralist linking of his thought with the described conception. Still, the reasons for classifying Brecht within the preceding cultural paradigm are more numerous.

129 Already the fact that his filmography so far includes films in genres as disparate as horror (Epidemic [1986], Kingdom I [1994] and II [1997]. Antichrist), comedy (The Boss of It All, 2006), musical (Dancer in the Dark), and melodrama (Breaking the Waves) illustrates the thematic variety of von Trier’s cinema. In terms of style, von Trier’s oeuvre includes a film predicated on the use of black and white stock, rear projection, and elaborate camera movements (Europa, 1991) but also a film that mimics the style of home videos (The Idiots).

130 For examples, consult “Lars von Trier’s Depression” and Chaos Reigns at the Cannes Film Festival.

131 For an early example, see Forst 1998; for a recent one, see Bainbridge 2007.
I continue the introduction with a few words on the commonalities of von Trier’s cinema:

1) The narratives of some of the most influential von Trier’s films center on the themes of religion (*Breaking the Waves* [1996], *Dogville* [2003]) and the United States of America (*Dancer in the Dark* [2001] and the *U.S.A. - Land of Opportunities* trilogy [2003-present].) Unlike many European filmmakers’ films about America (for example, Wim Wenders’ *Alice in dem Städten* [Alice in the Cities, 1973] and Werner Herzog’s *Stroszek* [1977]), von Trier’s “American” films do not concern themselves with the country’s optical “otherness”, but focus instead on the abstract social forces shaping the culture.

2) Von Trier’s films often depict rituals of various kinds: Svend Ali Hamann’s hypnotizing a medium “into the film” in *Epidemic* (1987); the initiation of Dr. Stig Helmer into the secret society Sons of the Kingdom Lodge in *Kingdom I* (1994); von Trier’s prescription of formal rules which the director Jørgen Leth must satisfy in remaking a film of his in the essay film *The Five Obstructions* (2005).132

3) The “high” visual style of Von Trier’s films is frequently contrasted with pop culture elements: pop songs (*Epidemic, Europa, Breaking the Waves, Dancer in the Dark, Dogville and Manderlay*) and select genre conventions: of horror (*Epidemic, Kingdom I and II, and Antichrist*), of melodrama (*Breaking the Waves*), and of the musical (*Dancer in the Dark*).

4) A stylistic dualism lies at heart of every title in von Trier’s filmography. For instance, *Epidemic* uses static camera and fast, grainy 16 mm stock for the

132 The first amongst the identified rituals is a recurring theme in von Trier’s cinema. For an extensive discussion of this topic, see Stewart 2005.
(pseudo)documentary portions of the film, whereas its film-within-the-film scenes rely on mobile framing and the use of 35 mm stock. Similarly, *Breaking the Waves* combines the Cinemascope aspect ratio, hand-held camera and a desaturated colour scheme for the scenes that constitute the narrative proper, and an oversaturated palette and static camera for the shots dividing the film into “chapters.”

Finally, a brief description of the chapter’s structure. The first section investigates *Dogme 95*, using as illustration von Trier’s only contribution to the movement, *The Idiots*, a film whose relevance for the topic concerns also its narrative’s themes of role playing and irrationalism. These themes tie into two interrelated foundations of my argument for the chapter: von Trier’s public image of craziness on the one hand, and the postmodern notion of the decentred subject on the other. The last section traces the Brechtianisms of *Dogville*, and investigates the political implications of adopting and adapting these for an aesthetic informed by a postmodernist referentiality.

**Dogme 95: Feigning Radicalism**

March 20, 1995 saw the first-time presentation of the *Dogme 95* manifesto to the public. Following his contribution to the panel discussion on the future of cinema held that day at the Parisian Odéon Theatre, Lars von Trier asked for permission to digress from the panel’s topic. He then read the manifesto aloud, threw copies of it into the audience and departed the venue, (Stevenson 102) leaving behind a trail of calculated mystery. The presentation’s histrionic flair notwithstanding, no point of the manifesto – quoted below
in full save for its introduction – evokes theatre: central for each point are specifically filmic terms.

VOW OF CHASTITY

‘I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by DOGME 95:
Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where the prop is to be found).
The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa (music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).
The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted (the film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).
The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable (if there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp attached to the front of the camera).
Optical work and filters are forbidden.
The film must not contain superficial action (murders, weapons etc. must not occur).
Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
Genre movies are not acceptable.
The film format must be Academy 35mm.
The director must not be credited.
Furthermore, I swear as a director, to refrain from personal taste. I am no longer an artist, I swear to refrain from creating a ‘work’, as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of my good taste and any aesthetic considerations.
Thus, I make my VOW OF CHASTITY.’ (as qtd. in Hjort and Mackenzie: 199-200)

The manifesto, signed by von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, marked the beginning of an international film movement that yielded almost 40 full-length feature films certified to be made in compliance with the rules.

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133 The board that issued the certificates included, beside the authors of the manifesto, Danish filmmakers Kristian Levring and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen.
Commentators on the *Dogme 95* manifesto have singled out the document’s unstated yet consistently implied concern with realism.\(^{134}\) It is in this aspect of the manifesto that Brechtian resonances show themselves most obviously. The notion of realism is central also in the earlier film movements most frequently cited in discussions of the Danish film movement: the *Nouvelle vague* and Italian neorealism. One can compare the latter two movements on two grounds: the similarly great influence they have had, and – predominantly – an allusion to the former in the manifesto’s paragraphs that precede the “Vow of Chastity”. These segments of the text reference François Truffaut’s famous indictment of the aesthetic that dominated contemporary cinema of his country as formulated in the critic’s 1954 essay “A Certain Tendency of French Cinema”, as well as the year 1960, when a foremost representative of the country’s cinematic New Wave was produced: Godard’s *À bout de souffle*. Neils Weisberg, in his contribution to the *Dogme 95*-dedicated issue of *p.o.v.*, delineates similarities and distinctions between the Danish-conceived film movement on the one hand, and, on the other, the *Nouvelle Vague* and Italian Neorealism. (“Great Cry and Little Wool”) The strongest similarities Weisberg draws amongst the three corpuses of films are the mutually linked ones that concern the rejection by all of studio shooting, as well as the insistence of the adherents of Italian neorealism on contemporary stories, or – as Weisberg would have it – “topical scripts inspired by concrete events” (Ibid.)\(^{135}\)

\(^{134}\) See, for example, Mackenzie 2003, Gaut 2003 and Bainbridge 2007.

\(^{135}\) This principle is famously betrayed in numerous neorealist films, due to the inability of reconciling the cinematographic style favoured by neorealist filmmakers – predicated on the use of elaborate camera movements and artificial lighting – with space limitation that is often intrinsic to location shooting.
The absence from the former of a claim to novelty limits their comparisons with *Dogme 95*. In contrast to Neorealism and *Nouvelle vague*, the perspective of *Dogme 95* can be described as backward. While its manifesto at first glance appears to urge two irreconcilable moves – a return to tradition and a break away from it – a closer reading reveals that the text’s underlying sentiment is a yearning for the “goode olde dayes” of the past. Evidence scarcely needs to be provided that the Western world of today, of which and for which *Dogme 95* is a product, is predominantly secular. This fact accounts for the estranging power of the religious and clerical associations that the document evokes. Those aspects of the “Vow of Chastity” rhetoric that allude to the historic avant-garde movements, and the genre of the text, imbue the document with the same kind of energy. Namely, a majority of today’s programmatic texts belong to the category of the personal statement, written after the artist has finished working “without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done.” (Lyotard 1984: 81) This, in combination with Hayden White’s insight that the manifesto is an inherently radical genre, presupposing a time of crisis and – usually – a call for action, (220) may suggest that *Dogme 95*’s use of the manifesto is itself intended as an estranging device. This variety of estrangement, however, should not be equaled with *Verfremdung*, with its prominent political dimension. The manifesto’s accusation of bourgeois cinema, then, appears disingenuous; not a radical political statement, but rather an expression of nostalgia for political radicalism, the frequency of whose expressions in the context of institutionalised art has waned. The edge formerly possessed by the historical avant-gardes and the politics of most of its representatives, communism, had been blunted by the time of the manifesto’s appearance as a result of their respective failures: the avant-
gardes did not achieve their goal of destroying the very institution of art; their products are today collected in museums, alongside the art they once rebelled against. Likewise, socialist countries did not achieve the goal of transition to communism; virtually all of them have reverted to capitalism. With regard to this, the Dogme 95 manifesto and the USA – Land of Opportunities trilogy (which recreates the style of Bertolt Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble productions) demand to be understood as expressions of postmodernist referentiality, irony, and nostalgia.\textsuperscript{136} Besides, the Cannes Film Festival, which has supported von Trier from the beginning of his career and cultivated him into the directorial star that he is today,\textsuperscript{137} has proven unshakable by actions more politically subversive than Dogme 95.\textsuperscript{138}

Von Trier’s own acknowledgment that some of the manifesto’s rules are impossible to follow (Knudsen 119) betrays the half-jesting spirit of the Dogme 95 project too. This broad paradox comprises a number of other ones, many of which have been identified by Achim Forst, the author of the first book-length study on von Trier in a major language. (171-2) First, while the tenth rule forbids the director to credit herself (presumably with the idea of replacing her privileged status as an artist to that of a humble artisan), the Dogme filmmakers satisfy it only technically. Even though the credits of The Celebration do not include Thomas Vinterberg’s name, no other attempt

\textsuperscript{136} Caroline Bainbridge describes the manifesto’s style as “playful and highly ironic.” (87) For an insightful discussion of the relationship between the latter two attitudes in the context of Postmodernism, see Hutcheon 2000.

\textsuperscript{137} For an explanation of the role of Gilles Jacob, the programming director of the Cannes Film Festival, in von Trier’s career, see Stevenson 154-155.

\textsuperscript{138} In 1968, for example, a group of filmmakers led by François Truffaut attempted to shut down the festival in support of the student protests.
was made to conceal the filmmaker’s identity. On the contrary, he personally received the prize that the Cannes Festival jury had awarded to his film. Second, while the ninth rule specifies the 35 mm format as the only acceptable one, a vast majority of Dogme 95 films are shot on digital video (the fact enabled by the filmmakers’ interpretation of the rule as pertinent to the distribution format.) Third, while rule eight proclaims unacceptable all film genres, some Dogme films can be categorised in these terms (for example, Lone Scherfig’s comedy *Italian for Beginners* [2001]).

The text’s other dubious aspects are its tacit equating of the ascetism of a narrative and the technological means needed to convey it cinematically, and especially its lack of interest in editing, the aspect of film style that has traditionally been regarded as a territory for manipulation (for reasons too obvious to enumerate). One can infer from the document’s latter characteristic that its writers deem the “Vow of Chastity” rules capable of neutralising the technique’s power for deception. Envisioned from the perspective such a conclusion lends, the cinema of *Dogme 95* appears to favour mise-en-scène, recommending it as a primary field of stylisation. (Those restrictions imposed by the manifesto that concern mise-en-scène are much narrower than those pertinent to sound and cinematography, making the former relatively easy to circumvent.) The other inference one can make from the manifesto’s disregard of editing is that the signatories’ view of the technique diverges from the popular one.

Indeed, one can argue that an average viewer of today is sufficiently sophisticated to recognise editing techniques as such, and to distinguish between the “lies” that can be constructed through their use, and actuality. (After all, the term “invisible editing” has always been a bit of a misnomer: even a classical Hollywood film, which – in accordance
with the imperative of its style’s self-effacement – wants the splices to go unnoticed, does not want their effects to be missed.) The practice of Dogme 95, as The Idiots exemplifies, renders the second inference unviable. Namely, the film’s editing style simultaneously disrupts and reconfigures the illusion of the spatio-temporal continuum within a given scene. The earliest example of this effect occurs in the restaurant scene. As the waiter, off-screen, lists available gourmet additions to the salad that Karen has ordered, we see her in a close-up, looking up, screen left (Figure 21). The film then cuts to a wider shot of the same character, whose eyeline indicates that the off-screen waiter now occupies a different position (Figure 22).

Figure 21

Figure 22
Similarly, in the exterior scene where Katrine complains to Axel about being neglected by him, the camera maintains its position at the same side of the “invisible line,” but the figures switch positions between the scene’s cuts (Figure 23).

![Image of Axel and Katrine](image1)

![Image of Axel and Katrine](image2)

*Figure 23*

This strategy is curiously inconspicuous: it was only on a second watching of the film that I noticed that the jarring effect of the described two scenes is not a result of violating the 180 degree rule, but of manipulating figure position. If considered alongside the manifesto’s critique of both art and commercial cinemas, the lack of the described technique’s impact on the viewer’s orientation in screen space can be seen as a hint at the obsolescence of the continuity principle.

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139 The broad application of the terms evokes Godard’s Dziga Vertov group the “Vow of Chastity,” thereby meriting Schepelern’s comparison between the two. (58)
The first of the possible two inferences from the manifesto’s disregard of editing – that adhering to the other rules of the “Vow of Chastity” suffices to counteract and neutralise editing’s power of deception – appears dubious in light of the predilection of the Dogme 95 filmmakers for a technology that greatly facilitates image manipulation: digital video. (“How can one trust what one sees” in our digital culture, asks Mark Williams in an essay on the contemporary crisis of indexicality of moving image media [172].) The Idiots illustrates the related contradiction between the manifesto and its practice. The fifth rule of the “Vow of Chastity” tends to limit the possibility of manipulating the pro-filmic event by forbidding optical work and filters. However, the erratic results of The Idiots’ reliance on the automatically controlled camera divert the viewer’s attention from the pro-filmic event to the technology, perhaps causing her to question the film’s indexicality as she might that of a CGI-heavy Hollywood film. To sum up, The Idiots – a film publicised through its relation to the manifesto as a work of rebellion against the falsity of the contemporary cinema – consistently “lies”: about the spatial relations between the figures, about the identity of its actors (doubles were used

140 The choice of digital video as a format for most Dogme 95 films can be partly explained by the near-concurrence of the manifesto’s launching and the commercialisation of low-cost digital video technology. In 1995, Sony started to market the DCR-VX1000 digital camera. The relatively inexpensive device was directly connectable to the home computer, enabling the non-professional to post-produce image and sound without quality loss. The camera used three-chip technology, which gave sharper and more vibrant colours than its analogue counterpart, and its capacity for time-base correction allowed for a greater stabilisation of the image. Smaller than a VHS camcorder, the camera had nearly two times the resolution of the amateur format, sufficient to meet the broadcasting standards. It was this camera that von Trier went on to use for The Idiots (Vinterberg’s Dogme 95 film, which premiered earlier, was shot with a yet simpler camera, Sony’s PC-7E one-chip handycam.)

141 The censor bars covering the genitalia of the male characters in the version of the film distributed theatrically, as well as in the VHS format, in North America aid the result. As the culmination of the narrative - the slap Karen receives from her husband - lends itself to be interpreted as an assertion of patriarchal power, the mentioned interventions of the distributor of the film for the countries where films are still censored perhaps appropriately transform the penises into phalluses.
for the shots of sexual penetration) and the accuracy of its representation of such aspects of mise-en-scène elements as colours and lighting. Thereby, the film points to the manifesto’s inherent paradoxes.

The Idiots: Feigning Realism

I previously noted that the irony of the manifesto lends it to being understood as an expression of postmodernist irony. Further alignment of the movement’s programme with the postmodern can be found in the final point of the “Vow of Chastity,” according to which Dogme 95 entails a transcendence of personal taste and humbling oneself at the pro-filmic event. On the more obvious level, the statement calls for abandoning the view that informs much of film and other typically representational arts, according to which the goal of an artwork is to show the observable real as refracted by the artist’s personal vision, in favour of the related goals of objectivity and collectivism. Von Trier’s theoretical awareness, as well as the characteristically postmodernist ideas and artistic devices his films employ, allow this point of the manifesto to be associated also with the aforementioned idea of the decentred subject or – in the terms of Ihab Hassan – the espousal of selflessness, an idea that resonates with the film’s themes of performance and irrationalism. This idea is, according to Rainer Friedrich (1990), unique to postmodernism. In what follows, I will approach the film as a critique of this broad cultural trend using Friedrich’s insights as a point of departure.

In “The Deconstructed Self in Artaud and Brecht: Negation of Subject and Antitotalitarianism”, Rainer Friedrich builds on Gerald Graff’s thesis that there is
continuity rather than rupture between modernism and postmodernism. (282) Friedrich notes that in the “definiens” of postmodernist practices Ihab Hassan offered at the 1985 ICLA Congress in Paris (of which he cites as key “fragmentation, with its preference for montage, collage, pastiche and open form, constructionism; decanonisation; irony; hybridisation of genres; ritual participation; and carnivalisation, (...) roughly equivalent to Dionysianism”), one recognises the central characteristics of modernism. [Ibid.; emphases author’s] In the previous section, I established that the only “definien” that pertains more readily to postmodernism than to modernism is the “espousal of selflessness,” the tendency that “culminate[s] in the postmodernist negation of subjectivity and the deconstruction of the subject.” (Ibid.)

Friedrich uses two theatrical models he sees as conforming to the aforementioned tendency to illustrate the contradiction between postmodernism and its avowed antitotalitarianism. The first of these models is Artaud’s théâtre de la cruauté, celebrated by the adherents of postmodern thought for its re-creation of the ritualistic culture of tribal man, “the blissful regression to a pre-reflective and pre-rational age, before individuation, according to Nietzsche the fons et origo of all suffering, set in.” (286) The second is the Brecht of Baal, with its celebration of “carnivalisation” and “polymorphous perversity,” and particularly of the Lehrstücke. (284-5) The dissolution of the performer’s and spectator’s self in Artaud relates to the ancient religious and mythical traditions, with their practices aimed at the achievement of communal ecstasy and the

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142 Friedrich’s association of Baal and postmodernism on the basis of the “espousal of selflessness” is acceptable, if not entirely original: it is this play and Im Dickicht der Städte (In the Jungle of Cities, 1924) Elisabeth Wright uses as examples to provocatively construct a postmodern Brecht in her 1989 study that uses the phrase for the title. Wright’s omission of the Lehrstücke from her (exceedingly few) cases in point seems well-founded in the light of the many demarcation points between the principles of operation and the respective goals of the Artaudian theatre of cruelty on the one hand, and the Brechtian learning-plays on the other.
feeling of Nietzschean *Einheit* (oneness), nostalgically delineated in his *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (The Birth of Tragedy, 1872). Brecht’s “theatre for the scientific age” seeks to sever all links with the identified traditions, replacing ecstasy (which Nietzsche sees as a precursor to Aristotelian catharsis) with individual enlightenment, a prerequisite for society’s enlightenment and, concomitantly, betterment. Artaud’s upsetting of the hierarchy that the developed contemporary societies have established between *logos* (as a symbol of Western civilisation, which his project was aimed at reforming) and *mythos* (as a symbol of the lost paradise of unity: with nature, with one another, and with themselves) manifests itself already in the relatively inferior place that verbal language – with which *logos* is irrevocably connected – occupies in his theatre. When one considers the effects of unsettling the boundary between the performer and the spectator in both theatrical models – which Friedrich highlights as a primary point of similarity between the theatre of cruelty and Brecht’s learning plays – another crucial difference between the two theorists and practitioners becomes evident: while Artaud’s theatre of cruelty seeks to abolish the spectator by transforming her into a participant whose experience of the performance will transcend the experience obtainable through the process of cognition, the aim of the aforementioned transformation in Brecht is to enhance this process. And the foregoing of self that Friedrich identifies as a defining feature of postmodernist art seems irreconcilable with it.

While one might dispute that the *Lehrstück* should be considered an example of a proto-postmodernist artistic model, and that it possesses the “totalitarian bent”, I find convincing the part of the writer’s argument that concerns Artaud, with a clearly drawn

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143 The same argument is put forward in Friedrich’s “Brecht and Postmodernism,” commented upon in the previous chapter of this study.
line between his “vision of an ecstatic liberation from the burden of reason” (287) and totalitarianism. In support of the latter connection – and the possible implications of the postmodern, antihumanistic view of the tyranny of reason in general – Friedrich cites, on the one hand, Artaud’s semitophobia, his genocidal fantasies about the necessity of exterminating seven to eight million human beings as useless parasites (288) and his dedicating a 1943 work to Adolf Hitler. On the other, Friedrich gives the example of the “antropophugal philosophy” of the contemporary German philosopher Ulrich Horstmann, who “advocates the instant nuclear destruction of mankind on the grounds that the present arsenal of nuclear weaponry in East and West provides the unique opportunity to return the planet to the ‘beauty and freedom of the inorganic.’” (Ibid.)

To relate these ideas to The Idiots, the film’s narrative can be regarded as anti-postmodernist insofar as it critiques the dissolution of the subject (and its aggressive reassertion demonstrated in Stoffer’s will to power [Smith 2003: 115]) – a constituent of the film’s central theme, and a defining feature of the broad postmodernist project. Because of its subject matter of feigning mental disabilities in public, The Idiots has been described in terms of therapeutic play (Müller 247), psychodrama (van Laak 312), Dadaism (Smith 2003: 119), Surrealism (Ibid.) avant-garde performance art (Müller 247), a 1960s happening (Gaut 93), and Situationism. (Walters 46-7) The film’s politics have been variously reviled (for example, by Artforum critic Howard Hampton, whose review of The Idiots characterises the film’s principal characters as a “scraggly bunch of sadist-idealists” comparable to “slacker descendants of the Baader-Meinhof gang”) (as qtd. in Walters 49) and hailed (for example, by Tim Walters, whose reading emphasises the self-
reflexive aspect of the film, and suggests that the film’s themes are inextricable from the limitations of Dogme 95, the movement whose anti-bourgeois stance the writer sees as applicable also to the domain of politics in the term’s narrow sense.) The film’s style has been likened to that of cinema verité (Gaut 92), presumably because of its use of interviews, handheld camera, available lighting, and the frequent deviations from the patterns of continuity editing – stylistic characteristics commonly employed in the mentioned strain of documentary filmmaking. Simultaneously, commentators have stressed the film’s emphasis on the performances (Chaudhuri 155 and Laakso 203-14), whose “immediacy” (Chaudhuri) and “intimacy” (Laakso) have been attributed to the unobtrusive “prosumer” cameras used for its filming. While similar observations have been made in regard to Dogme 95 films in general (see, for example, van Laak 310 and Lessard 103), The Idiots is unique in making performance its primary narrative concern.

As mentioned in this chapter’s previous section, the notion of realism – although absent from the Dogme 95 manifesto – has been central in the critical commentaries on the text. Since three full years separate the publication of the manifesto and the premiere of the first two certified Dogme 95 films at Cannes in 1998, Vinterberg’s The Celebration and von Trier’s The Idiots, one can speculate that these commentaries have informed the two works. They were presumably anticipated as “litmus tests” not only of the viability and validity of the “Vow of Chastity” rules, but also of the claim to enhanced realism at

144 The prominence of the film’s metafilmic aspect has been noted also by other commentators, such as Müller (245, 250) and Gaut (94-6).

145 “It is not solely out of aesthetic revulsion that [the Dogme 95 brethren] aim to make antibourgeois films,” writes Walters, “but they are surely equally motivated by a recognition that the hegemony in whose interests such films operate is itself a thing to be challenged and changed.” (Ibid.)
Dogme 95’s programmatic base. The Idiots, a work that explores the concept of realism at the levels of both narrative and style, supports this speculation particularly well.

The film focuses on a group of men and women from different walks of life, united by a common engagement in “spassing” – feigning mental disability in public for a vaguely explained reason of rebellion against the society whose incessant accumulation of wealth does not contribute to anyone’s happiness. Interwoven with The Idiots’ implicit theme of the espousal of selflessness is the film’s theatricality. It corresponds to the first type thereof in Jacques Gesterkorn’s classification cited in the dissertation’s introduction: the film references theatrical practice. (Hamon-Sirejols et al. 1994) The correspondence is, however, limited, as the “idiots” never invoke theatre when talking about their public actions with each other or the off-screen interviewer (von Trier). In addition, the film repeatedly suggests that they do not spass for the benefit of the naïve “outsiders” – spectators – but for their own. (The nature of this benefit becomes increasingly unclear as the film progresses: such remarks as that concerning Axel’s libidinal motives for joining the “idiots” will later weaken the link between the group’s public actions and social rebellion, to which Stoffe points in the forest scene.) The group’s spiritus movens, Stoffer, an arrogant choleric in the house of whose relative the spassers reside, cites the embracing of one’s “inner idiot” as the goal of spassing, while Katrine – lamenting the group’s disbanding in an interview scene – emphasises the “thing” the members had amongst themselves, and not its potentially positive effect on the “outsiders.” Most importantly, since the “outsiders” are unaware of the performative status of the behaviour of Stoffer and the others, their reactions to it are presumably identical to those they have to the manifestations of genuine mental disability. As such, they are not comparable to
the perception of a theatrical performance (or, for that matter, of an artwork of any other kind.)

Yet there are other grounds for regarding the spassing as theatrical. First, the existence of a witnessing “outsider” seems a fundamental condition for it. Stoffer sometimes assumes Susanne’s usual function as a “minder” (for example, in the scenes where different visitors come to the group’s residence.) The group members are, then, not merely “losing themselves in the moment” as Josephine suggests happened to her at the factory. Unlike the participants in a ritual, they need to be watched by a non-participant for the action to be meaningful to them (although this last adjective hardly befits a discussion of the narrative action whose very point seems a rejection of the sense.) As in all traditional acting methods, the spassers perform also the function of observers. In the scene following that of spassing at the factory, the group members discuss the performances we have previously witnessed, transforming the “Stanislavskian” identification into a “Brechtian” distanciation. The spatial logic underlying their primary actions too connects the group’s dynamics and theatre. The house the group shares is the place where its members, like the ancient Greek actors in the space of the

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146 Here, a reminder seems useful that the key technique of Stanislavski’s method is not simply antithetical to Brecht’s. The latter’s method of actor preparation includes three stages, comprehensively described by John Rouse. (239-41) In the first stage, the actor gets acquainted with the character through asking herself about the reasons for the character’s actions. The second phase “continues the work (...) but in an antithetical direction” (239): in accordance with the key Stanislavsky’s principle, the actor here searches for the character’s truth in a subjective sense and explores her or him “in all the detail demanded by the most naturalistic director,” (240) while remaining tied to the Brechtian theatre’s broad goal of social change by using the character’s social behaviour as a criterion for selection among her discoveries. The final phase entails an examination of the character from the society’s point of view, and attempts to bring back the “mistrust and astonishment of the first phase” (Brecht, as qtd. in Ibid.) Rouse concludes his commentary on the tripartite process of the Brechtian actor’s preparation by referring to an appendix to the Organon where “a dialectical unity between the gestural presentation of the character in his social relationships and a realistic emotional foundation won through identification” (Ibid.) is the actor’s ultimate goal in performance.
skene, are allowed to go out of their respective characters and be what they are: an employee in an advertising agency cheating on his wife (Axel), the employee’s girlfriend, demanding that he abandon the family and devote himself entirely to her (Katrine), or an art history lecturer (Gabriel), about whose intimate life no substantial details are revealed to the viewer. In the instances when spassing occurs within the house, the described spatial configuration gets complicated by the former’s subdivision: Karen, reluctant to join Stoffer and the others in group sex, leaves the room where the event is taking place. Less hesitant to join the orgy, Susanne moves upon the event’s beginning away from the naked bodies of the group members, near a window (highlighted as a place for distancing reflection – but also emotional outbursts – by two scenes with Karen staged at the same element of the setting). Most importantly, the progressive blurring of the boundary between the group members’ spassing and their normal behaviour culminates in a small and intimate space of one of the house’s small rooms, where the naked Jeppe and Josephine withdraw to make love while the others are engaged in group sex (Figure 24). Unlike that of the latter group of characters, the young man’s and woman’s lovemaking is devoid of irony and humour. Josephine’s proclamation of love for Jeppe from a “place” between her persona as an “idiot” and her true self highlights the earnestness of their feelings: namely, the words “I love you” are the only ones we hear the young woman say while spassing. This scene, where the dichotomy between the “performance space” and the “auditorium” finally collapses, touches upon the inseparability of logos and language, the assumption of which – as I will demonstrate later – underlies the film’s key themes.
Carried away by a mutual attraction of the kind evidently surpassing the merely physical, neither Jeppe nor Josephine functions as a “minder” here. Yet it is the latter character’s embrace of language – an instrument of logos – that the narrative configures as a factor that enables the newborn love of the couple.\textsuperscript{147}

The dissolution of the group can be said to occur as a result of its members’ increased uncertainty between meaningfulness and purposefulness on the one hand and “something more” than that on the other; between rationality and irrationality, mental ability and mental disability, sanity and insanity. The film touches more than once upon the permeability of the boundary between the above identified opposites. For instance, in a scene shortly preceding that of the sexual orgy, Stoffer – upon seeing the group prepare party decorations on the occasion of his birthday – notes that it is not his real birthday. Henrik replies with: “Well, we’re not real retards, are we?” After we learn that Josephine has a true psychological issue, Henrik’s question acquires a different tenor. The broader dichotomy between the real and the appearance that this scene addresses ties in closely

\textsuperscript{147} Murray Smith offers an entirely different interpretation of the scene. In this commentator’s view, the couple “appear to sustain, mutually, the spassing act, as they embrace each other and make love; but as with Stoffer’s outbursts, Josephine’s state of being slips imperceptibly into what now seems an authentic state of nervous breakdown. (117)
with the various commentaries on the realist mandate of the Dogme 95 movement.

Related to this, the process of the group’s disbanding – which will reach its final stage with Josephine’s departure – begins when the spassers experience a “reality check” during the (unexplained) visit by a group of Down syndrome sufferers, much earlier in the story (Figure 25). Josephine’s strong reaction to the visitors (she withdraws into the house and, approached by Jeppe, asks to be left alone) in retrospect seems a hint of her mental problems, whereas Stoffer’s rage at the others’ curiosity and sentimentality shown towards the guests underscores the scene’s narrative importance. The “idiots’” leader responds to each of the group’s crises with this kind of reaction. What qualifies the situation as such is the fact that the Down syndrome sufferers, without even trying, manage to shake the status of the spassers’ performances. Because they genuinely are what Stoffer and the others are only pretending to be (mentally disabled), the Down syndrome sufferers’ presence amongst the “idiots” annuls the difference between the (potential) spectator and the (potential) performer necessary for this relation to be justifiably established. Ironically, it is the visitors’ rendering spassing purposeless through their presence (purposeless, as the activity presumably would not provoke the reactions of repulsion that Stoffer and the others look for) that bounces back amongst the group the idea of “purpose” and the unavoidability of it in relation to controlled behaviour. The group’s main mandate, as a group member suggests in an already mentioned interview scene, is to reject this idea.
The sole realm to which the film connects the idea of purpose is that of political activism. As we shall see, it does so with the same vagueness that characterises the references to the political of the “Vow of Chastity.”

The equation that Gaut rightly establishes in his commentary on *Dogme #1, The Celebration*, whereby the bourgeois family on which the narrative centers parallels the bourgeois cinema (96), and whereby the class (and gender) revolt of the film’s characters parallels the revolutionary impulse of the film movement’s manifesto, does not, then, neatly apply to *The Idiots*. The politics of the film under analysis here are more complex (but not, I shall argue, ambivalent, as Müller describes them [253]). Indicative of the film’s politics – and therefore good starting points for an analysis – are some of the lines Stoffier directs at Karen. In the forest scene, when Karen asks about the point of the group’s spassing, he replies:

> They’re searching for their inner idiot, Karen. What’s the idea of a society that gets richer and richer when it doesn’t make anyone happier? In the stone age, right, all the idiots died. It doesn’t have to be like that nowadays. Being an idiot... is a luxury, but it is also a step forward. Idiots are the people of the future.
Gaut is right to observe that the reasons Stoffer cites – evoking the *Dogme 95* manifesto via his prophetic tone and the theories of Foucault and R.D. Laing by his unorthodox view of sanity and its opposite – are “singularly unconvincing.” (93) But a different explanation of spassing would be difficult to conceive of, if we accept John Roberts’ view that the activity is motivated by “the infantilised pleasures of regression, loss of ego and lack of self-consciousness,” (149) all of these implying a rejection of logos and – consequently – language. Karen’s critique of spassing, put in more narrowly economico-political terms, is met with an even clearer example of irrationality as a mode that underlies the group’s principles of operation. In response to Karen’s criticism of the group’s spassing with outrageously expensive food items while “there are people starving,” Stoffer replies: “There aren’t any people starving. That’s the whole thing.” Stoffer’s observation is not simply an escapist denial of a fact as constant as it is disturbing, but a vague rejection of the rational and – by extension – also of the self.

I have noted that Stoffer’s rages occur at the narrative’s climactic points. The first and the last of these (caused, respectively, by the arrival at the house of the Down syndrome sufferers, and by the group members’ refusal to spass in front of those they know) have already been commented upon. The second of the character’s fits of anger is the fiercest of the three the narrative includes, and is allocated the most screen time. The event that triggers the fit – the offer of a grant for the relocation of Stoffer’s group made by the district council representative – distinguishes it from the other two. Despite the validity of Murray Smith’s comment that the scene undermines the viewer’s ability to distinguish authentic and fake derangement, (2003: 117) the relationship between the real and the appearance and the different above-identified derivatives of this dichotomy are
not the scene’s central thematic concerns. Here, at issue is the question of economic sustenance of a society within society, organised around the idea of protesting bourgeois rationality while indulging in cigars and Iranian caviar – paradigmatically bourgeois corporeal pleasures. In light of the multiple reminders the narrative offers of the group’s dependence on money and the constant lack of it (to mention but one, their spassing at the restaurant is calculated to make the waiter ask the “idiots” to leave without charging them), Stoffer’s furious protest against the city council representative’s offer can be interpreted as a sign of understanding the impossibility of entirely breaking free from such social ties.

As Stoffer chases the district representative away, he takes off his clothes (symbolically rejecting his social self, and returning to the primordial one) and shouts curses, the recurrent among which is “Søllerød fascists!” The scene, of course, implicitly likens the district council’s initiative with the ghettoisation of minority ethnic groups in fascist regimes. It is, however, this vague critic of various societal institutions that ends up being narratively configured as a fascist authoritarian figure. (The film repeatedly shows him controlling the group’s dynamic, often at the cost of its members’ embarrassment and humiliation. Consider, for example, his insistence that the entire group engage in a sexual orgy.) Commenting on the film, von Trier singles Stoffer out as a culprit for the group’s demise: “The idea has been corrupted by him, you could say, in the same way he tries to corrupt the other members of the group. You can draw parallels to politics or to people who, for various reasons, work in groups.” (Björkman 205)

Two scenes that immediately precede the above-described one support its theme of performing. In the earlier of these (which roughly mirrors that with the Down
syndrome sufferers), Stoffer lies to the potential buyers of the house where he and the others reside that there is a mental institution in the neighbourhood. To prove this, Stoffer asks Susanne to “line up the retards,” who ostensibly happen to be visiting. The figure placement in this scene, where the “idiots” are spatially marked off from the “minding” Stoffer and Susanne as well as the visitors, evokes the theatrical stage / auditorium separation, and configures the former group of characters as a spectacle. The spassers’ attempt to break the invisible barrier that separates them from the potential buyers of the house results in awkwardness and the latter’s hasty departure. The next scene is a “talking head” shot where Ped, the group’s analyst, acknowledges the superiority of the “performances” by the Down syndrome sufferers: “They were highly credible,” he admits almost grudgingly; “they were really good at it.” The commentary relativises the distinction between mental ability and mental disability, but also the distinction between the performer and the spectator, reminding – in a manner reminiscent of Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) – that performance is inherently a two-way process. To elaborate on the association in regard to the narrative’s narrow context, Ped’s comment lends itself to being interpreted as a hint to the “idiocy” of social organisation and its hierarchy – the notions central for Goffman’s study.

The work’s self-reflexivity, based on the subject matter of an activity that is, in certain aspects, comparable to artistic endeavours, as well as its status as one of the first two practical applications of the “Vow of Chastity” rules, led to the views of *The Idiots* as a film on the *Dogme 95* movement (Müller, Gaut, Walters), and of Stoffer as von Trier’s double. (Walters 49) If we combine the latter view with that of Mackenzie, according to which a filmmaker’s willing subjection to the “Vow of Chastity” rules
represents an instance of self-flagellation, then the narrative’s critique of Stoffer’s authoritarianism can be said to double this process, and – by doing so – critique the movement’s theoretical foundation. In its implicit celebration of the rational, the film shows its modernist (and, more precisely, Brechtian) resonances, against the grain of Friedrich’s view of the Lehrstück, but also of the broad postmodernist project.

_Dogville: The Techniques of Brechtian Theatre in Film_

Achim Forst (1998) makes multiple references to Brecht in relation to the style of _Europa_. If few critics noted the Brechtian dimensions of _Europa_, many more noted Brecht’s influence on _Dogville_: the elements of the work’s narrative and style are compared with the theatre of Brecht in – among others – the following texts: Bainbridge 2007, Elbeshlawy 2008, Fibiger 2003, van Laak 2009, Penzendorfer 2010 and Schepelern 2003. Von Trier himself acknowledges Brecht as a source of inspiration for the film (Björkman 243-244), and uses Brechtian terms to describe its formal operations. (“Commentary”) Both the filmmaker’s own and the others’ commentaries variably emphasise the similarity between Brecht’s theatre and the film’s narrative and style, a possibility granted by the eclectic nature of the cited influence.

As far as the thematic preoccupations of _Dogville_ are concerned, the first major resemblance between the film and Brecht manifests itself in the geographical and historical coordinates of the narrative. Namely, the film is set in the eponymous and fictitious mountain town in the United States of America, the land where the narratives of some of Brecht’s major plays are also situated: _In the Jungle of Cities, The Flight Across the Ocean, The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui._
and *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*. The commonality the five plays share is by no means accidental. Because the reasons that underlie Brecht’s long-term interest in the country are relevant also for this reading of von Trier’s film, a brief summary of its development – as delineated in Patty Lee Parmalee’s study *Brecht’s America* (1981) – seems in order. Parmalee notes the existence of an Anglo-Saxon mythology and, more narrowly, a fascination with American culture (“jazz, Chaplin films, the Charleston, skyscrapers and neon lights, boxing, clothing styles” [9]) amongst the German artists of Brecht’s generation in the years of and around World War I. (11) From the evidence of this fascination on the one hand, and Brecht’s impression of Germany as a boring country dominated by “a degenerate peasant class” (6) on the other, the commentator develops an equation where, for the dramatist, “country = backwardness = Old World, and city = progress = America.” (24) Brecht’s interest in the New World had another side, marked by a realisation of “the sharpening of the contradictions of [the country’s] reality,” (8) as exemplified in the side-effects of ‘Fordism’: the increased unemployment and exploitation of the workers. (Ibid.) It is the economic nature of such issues that increasingly constitute the foci of Brecht’s plays written after his discovery of Marxism in 1926. (220) Parmalee goes on to argue that the moment when Brecht turned away from his view of the United States as a healthy and productive reaction to the decadence of Europe occurred in 1929. Fritz Sternberg places the writer’s dedication to the Party’s cause in May of the cited year, when Brecht witnessed the police shoot twenty participants in a May Day demonstration. (238) The commitment to communism was cemented a few months later, as a result of the stock market crash and the world economic crisis caused by the event. (225) From this point onwards, it was socialism and
the Soviet Union that became symbols of the new for Brecht, whereas capitalism came to symbolise the old. (275) Consequently, Brecht was no longer interested in the American myth but only in America as an example of capitalism. (265)

Von Trier’s cinema shows a similarly consistent concern with the United States of America: it represents the setting not only for the first two installments of the trilogy of films entitled USA – Land of Opportunities (which includes Dogville, Manderlay, and the still unproduced Wasington), but also of Dancer in the Dark. With this acknowledged, the differences between the choice of themes and the manner of their handling in the two artists’ respective “American” works are vast. First, while von Trier’s films often contain explicit or implicit references to the country, they never suggest an enthusiasm about it comparable to that expressed by the young Brecht. In addition to the supposed quote of Earl Butz mentioned in this chapter’s previous section, Epidemic – to give the example of but one film – refers to the United States through an episode where Niels Vørsel, appearing as himself, sarcastically comments on the audio letter sent to him by his American teenage pen pal, as the letter is playing in the background. Considered alongside the scathing critiques of the United States implied by von Trier’s “American” films, the example of the girl – whom the correspondence from Vørsel has led to believe that they are of similar age – calls to be interpreted as a synecdochal mockery of the alleged Americans’ naïveté. Understood this way, the episode seems underwritten by a reversal of Parmalee’s formula that illustrates Brecht’s view of the cultural superiority of the United States over Europe. Second, von Trier’s interest in the country’s contradictions – unlike Brecht’s – goes beyond the domain of the economic: Dancer in the Dark, for example, explores the interactions of the country’s economic principles
with its health and law systems, whereas *Manderlay* places its narrative focus on the racial relationships in the South.

While the immense poverty of the setting and the narrative’s temporal coordinates (the “New Deal” era) have considerable thematic implications, *Dogville* concerns itself primarily with an issue of a different, ethical order, framed in a religious context.¹⁴⁸ In the view of different commentators (for example, Hermes 2003 and Kothenschulte 2003) the Old Testament moral code of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21-24) informs the narrative’s motif of revenge (taken from the “Pirate Jenny” song from *Die Dreigroschenoper* [Björkman 243-4]). Bo Fibiger formulates this observation in a more elaborate manner, singling out as the film’s main point (60) the dialectic between the Old and the New Testament, with Matthew’s replacement of the above dictum with “whosoever smite thee on thy right cheek, turn him the other also.” (5: 39) Ahmed F. Elbeshlawy further develops this idea by noting that “[t]he film seems to communicate to the viewer that the idea of the ultimate sacrifice, the core of Christian thought and the constituent of its *Aufhebung*, or its (anti)thetical departure from Judaism, seems to be alien to itself due to its incompatibility with [religious] eschatology.” (n. pag.) The incompatibility in question, Elbeshlawy goes on to argue, is demonstrated through the discourse of Grace’s father (James Caan), which suggests that “God sacrificing himself, or part of himself, purposefully for alleviating the sin of humanity, i.e. to make humanity sinless or innocent, seems to be a sacrifice of himself for himself.” (Ibid.)

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¹⁴⁸ The topics of economy and religion are subtly brought together by the motto “*Dictum ac factum*”: “No sooner said than done” (Nobus 24) above the entrance to the town’s mine. In the narrative context premised on a principal dialectic of *The Bible*, these words seem an allusion to John’s “In the beginning was the Word.” (1:1)
In von Trier’s “American” films, the formal strategy evident already in *The Element of Crime*, *Epidemic*, *Breaking the Waves* and *Kingdom I* and *II* becomes radicalised: the assimilation of different genre elements and stylistic conventions associated with other forms (the novel and Brechtian theatre) for the aesthetic effect of betraying what Hans Robert Jauss, in the context of his reception theory of literary criticism, calls the horizon of expectations. Broadly, the term refers to the set of loosely defined cultural norms and circumstances that inform the manner in which one perceives and evaluates a literary text. Defining the concept more narrowly, Jauss mentions *Don Quixote*, *Jacques le Fataliste* and *Chimères* – the novels that “evoke the reader’s horizon of expectations, formed by a convention of genre, style, or form, only in order to destroy it step by step.” (as qtd. in Holub 60) The observation applies also to *Dancer in the Dark*, the films of the *USA – Land of Opportunities* trilogy and *Antichrist* (2009). If it were described entirely in terms of its narrative, the first of these films would bring to mind Ken Loach’s social dramas (it centres on an earnest immigrant single mother who falls victim to the law system of her adopted homeland). In von Trier’s hands, the story receives an unorthodox stylistic treatment: it borrows extensively from the genres of melodrama and – particularly – the musical. *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, conversely, betray the horizon of expectations formed by what Jauss refers to as conventions of form: the films reject the style of mainstream cinema, with which their star-saturated casts are associated, in favour of a Brechtian theatricality and baroque narration evocative of the 19th century novel. *Antichrist* achieves the effect Jauss mentions in relation to the works of Cervantes and the others not as much by combining narrative and stylistic elements that would appear discordant from the perspective of mainstream cinema, as by
significantly deviating from the narrative and stylistic patterns shown by all earlier von Trier films, while simultaneously maintaining a continuity with them. In other words, the film draws its estranging power from elements outside of it. A hypothetical viewer oblivious to von Trier’s previous work, but acquainted with the tendencies in contemporary cinematic horror (and especially Japanese contributions to the genre), would hardly be shocked by *Antichrist*’s mixture of elaborate, “high art” visual design and extreme graphic content. It is largely the “tuxedo and gown” context of the Cannes Film Festival – where von Trier knew that the film would be premiered (Charlotte Gainsbourg, in *Charlotte etc.*) – that enables much of the film’s scandalising effect. In its essence, the strategy behind the effect is metafilmic, even though *Antichrist* never points to itself as a construct.

In the context of von Trier’s oeuvre, thematically marked by an animosity toward some of the key social paradigms of the United States of America, and – in the films from *Kingdom I* onwards – for the most part stylistically in line with an indexically-based understanding of cinematic realism, *Antichrist* constitutes an exception. First, the narrative consequences of situating the film’s narrative in the United States are – unlike von Trier’s previous “American” films – negligible at best. Despite the canonical status of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), there is nothing about the United States that would qualify it as a setting more germane than any European country to the film’s themes of witchcraft and infanticide. The film reduces the number of cultural markers for the country, always small in von Trier, this time reduced to merely two: the address on the autopsy report the parents of the deceased child receive, and the male protagonist’s accent. The fact that an internationally well-known performer (Willem Dafoe) plays the
role, makes one suspect that the true reason for setting the film in the United States is economic, rather than aesthetic: it provides a narrative justification for working with “bankable names”. This conclusion diminishes the credibility of von Trier’s critique of the United States as a society that mercilessly subjugates the individual to the laws of economy. Second, Antichrist – which relies heavily on computer-generated imagery – finds itself at odds with the rules of Dogme 95 and the aesthetic principles underlying von Trier’s films that either foreshadow or echo the film movement: Kingdom I and II, Breaking the Waves, and the earlier “American” films. The paraphrases in Antichrist from Tarkovsky’s Mirror (1974) and its dedication to the Russian filmmaker (who famously favoured stylising the image through the choice of stock and lighting rather than through the use of filters and special effects available in his time in the post-production) further invite us to ponder the film in relation to the question of indexicality.

As has been pointed out in the introductory segment of this chapter, Judeo-Christian themes pervade von Trier’s cinema. These seem irreconcilable with Brecht in light of the common view of the writer as an atheist. However, Brecht was not being simply ironic when he cited The Bible as the strongest influence on his work. (Esslin 1961: 106) References and allusions are omnipresent throughout Brecht’s body of literary work, as G. Ronald Murphy, S.J. painstakingly demonstrates in the only book-length work on the topic in the English language. (1980) Murphy questions the perception of Brecht as an atheist by pointing out that the mystery of God is a constant presence in the writer’s works, (90) and elaborates on the observation as follows:

The God whose existence [Brecht] denies is the God of explanations, the God who is supposedly behind conventional moral conduct and against progress, the God of Job’s friends. There is indeed no God for the people and the founders of Mahagonny – but is there a God to receive the dying weak, a God of the innocent, the God of the dying Baal, Paul Ackermann, Katrin, and Jesus.
Christ? That is the question from which he can never seem to separate himself even though he is never able to give a definite ‘yes” answer to it. (Ibid.)

Using *Die Bibel* (The Bible, 1913), *Baal, Mahagonny* and *Mother Courage* as case studies, Murphy persuasively modifies the common view, originally put forward by Reinhold Grimm, “that Brecht’s use of the Bible is a device of Verfremdung, an attempt to revive a cliché by the shock of seeing it either “slightly” altered or in an entirely different situation from its original context.” (7) Murphy allows that this holds for a majority of Brecht’s plays, but demonstrates that those he analyzes in detail – the plays “characterised by the use of some variation of the ‘city’ or ‘besieged city’ motif,” (11) with “the hero and heroine ultimately confronted with abandonment and death in a way that evokes the Crucifixion” (Ibid.) – constitute exceptions. Murphy observes that the Old Testament sources Brecht most frequently uses in the selected plays are Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Psalms – books commensurable with the writer’s general worldview in “[operating] under the assumption that there is no real afterlife [...] for man, and have a dominating awareness of death and abandonment, unrelieved by their belief in God and His immortality.” (11) As to the New Testament, the writer notes that Brecht’s empathetic use of the source in the four plays limits itself almost entirely to the events of the Passion and Death accounts, and St. Matthew’s Passion in particular. (Ibid.) Significantly, the death of Jesus is, as Murphy concludes in his analysis of *Mahagonny*, for Brecht “a sacred event, an archetype [...] of the mystery of the death of the good man.”

149 While the methodology of this study does not involve a biographical approach to the artists discussed, a detail from von Trier’s adult life fact may be relevant for the contrast between the Old Testament and the New Testament ethical codes *Dogville* thematizes. Namely, von Trier embraced Christianity relatively late in his life, following his discovery of the identity of his biological father and, consequently, the fact that he is not half-Jewish as he had believed to be.
The third group of narrative elements of *Dogville* bearing association with Brecht consists of what Ahmed F. Elbeshlawy sees as direct allusions to and borrowings from Brecht’s plays. (n. pag.) Beside the play containing the song acknowledged by von Trier as an inspiration for the film (alongside sources as diverse as the Winnie the Pooh tales and poems and a TV version of the RSC adaptation of Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby*) (Björkman: 245), the most important of these is *Aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*. More precisely, Elbeshlawy points to the semantic kinship between the name of the play’s character Dogsborough and Dogville, as well as to the similarity between the morals of the town inhabitants and the Brechtian character, who is “‘reputed to be honest’” but “whose ‘morals go overboard in times of crisis.’” (n. pag.) Whether this is a coincidence or not seems impossible to determine, as von Trier – in his commentaries on the film – alternates between emphasising and de-emphasising the scope of Brecht’s influence on the film: a case in point is the remark that he experienced Brecht’s dramas at a fairly young age and has never returned to him or his work, and that they exist in his memory mostly as feelings and atmospheres. (Björkman 244)

Similarities between *Dogville* and Brecht’s theatre are numerous also at the level of style. Most broadly, the work’s fusing of the conventions of different arts – as von Trier describes the film’s stylistic operations (241) – corresponds to Brecht’s *Prinzip der Trennung*. The most prominent among the non-filmic conventions that the work adopts are theatrical ones, and the Brechtian filmmakers’ theatricalisation of cinema is – according to Maia Turovskaiia – a tendency concomitant with cinematisation of theatre, characteristic of an array of influential theatre practitioners of Brecht’s artistic generation, including himself, Meyerhold, and Eisenstein. (170-187; 210-244) The other art von Trier
identifies as fused within the work (Björkman 241) is literature: the prose of the film’s voice-over narration, with its use of long sentences and many adjectives, lends itself to being read silently rather than aloud. The voice-over evokes nineteenth-century fiction more readily than that of the major American representatives of the generation of writers termed “lost” by Gertrude Stein (Hemingway iv), the generation that includes – beside herself – Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John Dos Passos. The styles of these writers, beside exhibiting great differences, show a crucial common characteristic: they are all informed by one or another novel and dominant cultural phenomenon of their time. At the risk of oversimplification, they can be described as follows: the speech idiom and – more precisely – the immigrants’ influence on it critically influences Stein’s prose; Faulkner’s prose is characterised principally by a prolonged, meandering sentence structure reminiscent of jazz improvisations; Hemingway employs a comparatively limited vocabulary and syncopates his prose in the manner associated with journalism; the prose of John Dos Passos draws on the techniques of different mass media, including film. In its deliberate dissimilarity from these, modernist examples, Dogville additionally removes its voice-over narration, with its air of old-fashionedness (which aligns it that much more with Verfremdung), from the cultural and temporal contexts of the film’s narrative. While the American “lost generation” writers sought alternatives to the “literariness” of pre-modernist fiction, von Trier re-creates it in the manner conforming to the concept of Literarisierung in Brechtian epic theatre.150 A common aim should be acknowledged behind the indicated various strategies of the listed American writers on

150 To a considerably smaller extent, the same applies to the dialogue. In a conversation with the film’s director of photography, von Trier discloses that he instructed the translator from Danish (in which the screenplay was originally written) not to entirely adjust the text to English, the language of the film’s production. The choice of not “smoothing the seams” of the translation - to use the Brechtian phrase - is presumably aimed at producing an estranging effect.
the one side, and of Brecht and von Trier on the other: to break the transparency of the styles modeled along the lines of naturalism.

The theatricality of *Dogville* manifests itself mainly in the interacting domains of characterisation and the design of set and lighting. Both show a minimalist reduction uncharacteristic of mainstream cinema (in which category *Dogville* can claim to have a place on account of the Hollywood stars its cast includes, as well as its modes of production and distribution.) First, the mere couple dozen characters represent the entire population of the town: the film features no extras; there are no parts in it but speaking ones. The fact that most of these are of equal narrative significance adds to the film’s “epic” quality. *Dogville* does not have a heroine in the conventional sense: Grace (Nicole Kidman) is too passive for the whole portion of the film preceding the massacre in the final “chapter” for the descriptor to fit her. Rather than advancing the narrative herself, for most of the film’s duration Grace merely catalyzes the others. Second, the significance of some of the characters’ names is unusually great for a work that belongs to the broad category of mainstream cinema, where “surface realism” continues to prevail. When film is used as a photographic medium, it achieves stylisation through subtraction as much as through addition. Put more concretely, a film practitioner designs the shot by removing from her frame and the microphone’s range the elements whose visual or aural presence conflicts with the shot’s intended function, as much as by bringing into the frame the objects whose visual or aural presence performs that function. On the other hand, theatre, in the typical cases when it uses a pre-built venue generally based on the ancient Greek model of the sharply divided performance and audience spaces, operates exclusively through addition: for something to “speak” to the spectator,
for a visual or aural element to become a sign, it needs to be added to the pre-existing space and recognised by the spectator as an addition. For this latter process to occur, the element in question needs to be removed from the context of the venue: in other words, a sign will go unnoticed unless its constructedness is highlighted to one degree or another, by one means or another. A hypothetical example: in order for the practical function of an exit sign above the theatre venue door to be replaced with an aesthetic one, in order for it to be perceived as a part of the theatrical presentation, the sign would need to assert itself as such by some form of estrangement: for instance, by being spot-lit or interacted with by the dramatic figures. Not showing life “simply as it is” is, therefore, the theatre’s must. Even the most credible performance of a tranche de vie play constantly reminds the spectator of the work’s constructedness, through the (perhaps involuntary) comparisons between the sights and sounds of the on-stage spectacle and those of the other audience members. Significantly, film escapes this process by virtue of two of its properties. First, it is first and foremost an image, too dissimilar from the three-dimensional, real world of the spectator for a comparison between the two to be feasible. Second, unlike a theatre narrative, a film narrative cannot claim to occur simultaneously with the audience’s reception of it: an experienced film viewer knows that she is going to see a document of a pro-filmic event that has already transpired, upon entering the movie theatre or pressing a button on her TV set, computer, or mobile phone. The reception of a theatre performance, in contrast, occurs simultaneously with its production. So essential is the category of liveness to this medium that some commentators (see, for example, Phelan 1993) single it

151 While this does not necessarily have to hold also for 3-D cinema, which is currently experiencing a revival, in practice it does: the world of Avatar, to mention the most popular amongst the recent films utilising the format, emphasizes the audio-visual differences, and not the similarities, between the spatio-temporal coordinates of the auditorium and itself: the audience, unsurprisingly, is still paying to see a world different than theirs, and not for possible use of the technology for blurring the boundary between the two.
out as the foremost theatrical notion. This lengthy diversion was necessary to set up the observation that character naming, which in mainstream cinema tends to conform to the norms of verisimilitude theatre often uses as a space for stylisation, for meaning creation. One finds examples of this throughout the history of Western theatre: from Sophocles’ Oedipus (swollen foot) to a range of Shakesperean characters, such as Caliban (an anagram of “cannibal”) and the hard-drinking tandem of Sir Toby Belch (whose last name does not require an explanation) and Sir Andrew Aguecheek (the first part of whose last name denotes strong fever); from Calderon’s Segismundo – a victorius protector – to Beckett’s Godot, as the diminutive form of God. Such strategies are, in the context of mainstream cinema, comparatively so rare that a concrete one comes to mind easily: the names in Hitchcock (perhaps most overtly, Psycho, with the names of the protagonists, Marion and Norman, being anagrammatic forms of each other. This exception almost proves the rule, and confirms the relative uniqueness of Hitchcock within the context of Hollywood cinema.) To finally return to characters’ names in Dogville, that of Thomas Edison Jr., for instance, is a clear allusion to the American inventor, whose long list of patents includes some of the earliest devices for filming and projecting motion pictures. To give an even more obvious example, Grace’s name connotes a range of related but distinct meanings, of which “mercy; clemency; pardon” (“Grace” 826) is most overtly ironic.

The other domain through which Dogville achieves its theatricality is the set design. The town is represented by a large map that emphasises its significatory quality by including the names of streets, significant structures, and the owners of households (Figure 27). The map and the captions on it are written in white (the choice a
commentator compares with the chalk circle from the Brechtian drama), and the floor and its entire surrounding are dominated by the alternating colours black (denoting night time) and white (denoting day time.) The film abandons this schema only in the penultimate scene: after the gunmen of Grace’s father have burned the town. The dominant lighting is top, hard and of colour temperatures different from sunlight and gas light (two primary diegetic sources of light in the film), thus readily revealing its artificiality. Many of the town’s walls and doors are indicated by the figures’ movements and by sound effects: an off-screen knocking on wood and the squeaking of a door can be heard when a character mimes the actions. Similarly, the film denotes Moses the dog through naturalistic barking and a combination of linguistic and visual signs (Figure 26).

Along with the identified minimalist elements, the mise-en-scène uses naturalistic costumes and props, which combination evokes the photographs from Brecht’s Modellbücher: a reduced colour palette, authentic and well-worn props and setting elements, and pitiless white lighting.

Figure 26
The visual design, therefore, broadly evokes theatre and, narrowly, Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble productions. However, the size of the map that constitutes its base exceeds that of the largest conventional theatre stage, and the placement of the figures does not presuppose the fixity of the spectator’s vantage point. These two features of the setting counteract the theatricality suggested by its other aspects. Von Trier recounts that during the pre-production he decided that the film should not look like they were filming a theatre stage, but should have a sense of theatre to it. (Björkman 246) The “stage” of the film is, then, purposely unfeasible. As such, it produces the same effect that Rosalind Galt identifies in her discussion of von Trier’s *Europa*: the film “brackets the mise-en-scène as a spectacle that refuses authenticity.” (9)

The use of the 360 degree space, characteristic also of a number of earlier von Trier films from *Kingdom I* onwards, here seems an extension of the architecture of the setting, with two rows of houses separated by Main Street being at the core of its scheme. Save for a few notable exceptions to be described and commented upon in what follows, the film uses a handheld and calculatedly negligent camera: in the audio commentary of the film’s DVD edition, von Trier describes the allegedly estranging effect of shots that are “pointed” as opposed to “composed,” and even refers to it by the term *Verfremdung*. As in the case of *The Idiots*, von Trier operates the camera in an “amateurish” manner that configures the cinematography as being of secondary importance in relation to the pro-filmic event.

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152 For a comprehensive, richly illustrated volume on Brecht’s theatre productions, see Ensemble and Weigel 1961.
153 Despite the similarity of the overall impressions given by the two films’ respective cinematographic styles, the differences between them are worth acknowledging. *Dogville* shows consistency within a given scene in terms of colour temperature and aperture value, and seems to employ the manual focus mode. More importantly, the image possesses a greater sharpness, suggesting the use of a fully professional
As mentioned earlier, there are a few notable exceptions to the described cinematographic style: the aerial shots of the town (which create an impression of flatness and emphasise its similarity to a geographic map), and of Grace hidden in Ben’s cart of apples. The former group of shots serves a twofold function. First, they enable a comprehensive view of the societal structure that constitutes the film’s setting, emphasising – in a manner that strongly evokes the “doll house” setting (Figure 28) of perhaps the most devoutly Brechtian film ever, Godard and Gorin’s *Tout va bien* – that the entire town, rather than a single character, represents the narrative’s focus.

![Figure 27](image)

*Figure 27*

![Figure 28](image)

*Figure 28*

camera, as opposed to *The Idiots*’ “prosumer” VX-2000. All these qualities make the cinematography of *Dogville* appear more controlled, that is, professional, than that of *The Idiots.*

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Second, they dialectically resonate also with the film’s biblical overtones, lending themselves to be interpreted as God’s perspective. Relevant to this, the sole instance of acknowledging the camera in the film occurs in the shot immediately preceding the montage sequence: the shot shows the drawing of the dog with the weighty name of Moses (hitherto “animated” solely through off-screen barking) being transformed into a real animal. Moses stands up and bares its teeth at the camera, connoting its divine quality and literalising the metaphor from the announcing caption that summarises the action of the film’s “chapter six”. The symmetry of the camera movements occurring in this, and the opening shot of the film, suggests the overall dialectical move from a socio-political analysis to a religious-ethical meditation.

The montage sequence, drawing on images from the Farm Security Administration-commisioned photographs by Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Jack Collier, Arthur Siegel, Ben Shahn, Carl Mydans, John Vachon and Arthur Rothstein, and from Jacob Holdt’s *American Pictures* (Römers: n. pag.), reverses this move. The two groups of images, different in terms of visual properties and the eras from which they derive (the former, black and white images derive from the era that the narrative is set in, while the latter, colour photographs were taken in the 1970s), are thematically connected: they all show the destitution, squalor, and alcoholism of anonymous inhabitants of the United States. Michael O’Sullivan’s holds a view of the sequence as an allegorical version of America and its citizens (as qtd. in Ibid.) at once typical and questionable. A filmmaker of von Trier’s intelligence and subtlety would hardly impose a blanket accusation on the entire nation of the United States, which O’Sullivan holds the sequence to be. Juxtaposed with the rest of the narrative, the sequence appears in line with Brecht’s “erst kommt das
Fressen, dann kommt die Moral: first grub, then ethics.” The depravity and social injustices of the “land of plenty” leads to moral aberrations, its combination suggests, despite the vulnerability to criticism of this simplistic conjecture.

The scene is accompanied by David Bowie’s song “Young Americans”. Deriving from the 1970s and characteristic of the decade in its arrangement, the song constitutes an instance of aktualizace.\textsuperscript{154} The sequence is irritating, as Römers describes it, not simply because it recontextualises “one of the most famous bodies of work in the history of photography (...) within a surrealistic pandemonium of rape and massacre,” (Ibid.) but also because it constitutes an estranging stylistic shift from a theatrical representation to the documentary mode. The elements of the sequence do not contrast one another: all of them suggest a similarly narrow range of themes and moods. Its relation to the greater, preceding part of the film, however, can be described as dialectical: the two parts of the film concern themselves with the respective and related, albeit irreconcilable themes.

The USA - Land of Opportunities is narratively and stylistically the most consistent of the three von Trier film trilogies up to date. Its second installment, Manderlay (2005) – continues the story of Grace, here found on a Southern plantation whose owners are keeping secret the abolishment of slavery from their black workers. The film exactly replicates the audio-visual style of the trilogy’s first part, down to the montage sequence at the end (which, this time around, encapsulates the history of the American blacks, emphasising their continuing social deprivation), and its musical accompaniment, “Young Americans.” The comparatively small critical reception the film

\textsuperscript{154} The pop song is as central a structural element in von Trier’s cinema as it is in Brecht’s dramatic artworks. He is the lyricist for many of the original ones amongst these (\textit{Epidemic, Europa, Dancer in the Dark}.)
has had can be attributed to the film’s problematic strategy of repeating a pre-existing style. As a result, the film falls short of the Brechtian aim that the style signals. As Brecht himself suggests, habit diminishes the power of an estranging device to fulfill its intended function. The only major stylistic change the film introduces, the replacement of Nicole Kidman by Bryce Dallas Howard, further contributes to the undesired effect. *Dogville* drew much of its power to astonish from casting in the role of a multiply raped woman turned multiple avenging killer an actress from Hollywood’s A-list, whose fame considerably surpasses that of Bryce Dallas Howard.

One can speculate that the reason for the trilogy’s being at a halt at the time of this writing (the the release of its last part, *Wasington*, was originally announced on the Internet Movie Database for 2007, but the title has since been removed from von Trier’s filmography on the website) has to do with the mentioned lack of aesthetic and political efficacy of *Manderlay*. The choice von Trier may be facing with *Wasington* is whether to relinquish the trilogy’s stylistic unity, or to aggravate the risk – unsuccessfully borne by *Manderlay* – of its being seen as a series of mannerist exercises.

Von Trier’s most recent theatrically released film, *Antichrist*, with its rejection of the realm of the political (at least in the term’s vernacular sense) in favour of the mythical and archetypal, retrospectively casts doubt about the earnestness of the filmmaker’s Brechtianism. In light of the postmodernist playfulness that characterises the narrative and stylistic operations of this, and the previous two von Trier films (*The Boss of It All* and *The Five Obstructions*), the filmmaker’s embrace in toto of Brechtian theatrical techniques in *Dogville* and *Manderlay* appears ambiguous. Could it be that what informs the strategy is a twisted logic according to which following Brecht to the letter in our
time estranges precisely because his aesthetic and political views are obsolete? Yes, if we accept Heiner Müller’s view that to use Brecht without criticising him is to betray him; no, if we consider that *Dogville*’s appropriation of another artist’s style can be considered Brechtian not only in terms of what is obvious (and superficial), but also in terms of what is hidden (and essential).

**Conclusion**

Like the other filmmakers this dissertation focusses on, von Trier has a unique relation to Brecht and the film criticism Brecht’s theoretical texts inspired. Straub and Huillet’s most influential films and the latter corpus of texts were produced contemporaneously and appear to have influenced each other. Watkins, on the other hand, who prolifically produced films during the heyday of the Brecht-inspired film criticism in the 1970s, does not engage with it at all, and even confesses to having discovered Brecht only late in his career. Von Trier’s films, for their part, make gestures that can be interpreted to implicitly emphasise the split between Brecht’s dramatic theory and the mentioned interpretations of it. The films of *The USA – Land of Opportunities* trilogy, on the other hand, apply many of Brecht’s theatrical techniques directly, largely disregarding the uniqueness of film as a medium, thereby hinting at both Brecht’ position on the characteristically modernist notion of medium-specificity and the rejection of it, widely associated with postmodernist artistic practices.

Von Trier’s subsequent films represent a departure from the political impulse and effect of *The Idiots* and the films of *The USA – Land of Opportunities* trilogy, and a
return to a distinctly postmodernist poetics. This latter fact supports the impression that even the seemingly Brechtian von Trier films are, in fact, parodies thereof, pastiches (Fredric Jameson describes the latter genre as “parody that has lost its sense of humour” [1988: 195]). To an auteurist-inclined viewer, interested in the continuity of a filmmaker’s thematic and stylistic preoccupations from one film to the next, von Trier poses a deliberate challenge. A politically minded viewer in our era of growing global inequality and continuing political oppression will find troubling the possibility that the expressions of the political in the *Dogme 95* manifesto, *The Idiots*, *Dogville* and *Manderlay* are, in fact, but a tacit mockery of Brecht and the cause he stands for. After seeing von Trier change aesthetic directions so many times during his career, one has difficulties resisting the feeling that whatever the filmmaker has “up his sleeve” will turn out to be but a trick. This diminishes the political efficacy of von Trier’s Brechtianism.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Has theatricality dislodged montage as the principle source of Verfremdung it formerly was in Brechtian cinema? A final summary of how the two techniques are deployed in the films of Brecht and other filmmakers on whom I have focused will hopefully suggest an affirmative answer to this question with additional force.\textsuperscript{155}

Most examples of montage in \textit{Kuhle Wampe}, the only film where Brecht makes consistent use of the technique in the term’s medium-specific sense, can be situated somewhere between the traditions of Vertov and Eisenstein. Like Vertov’s, some of Brecht and Dudow’s montage sequences are realised in the non-fictional mode, and serve as narratively – albeit not ideationally – neutral dividers between the film’s three episodes. The Eisensteinian aspect of the film’s editing evidences itself in the interior scene following the job hunt sequence, where a previously seen shot of the pedalling workers is recontextualised to suggest not a character’s memory of the event (the function the described stylistic procedure would serve in a mainstream film), but to problematise the conceptual relationships among them. Still, Eisenstein’s use of individual images as “montage cells”, whose juxtaposition with each other fundamentally alters their original meaning, is not compatible with Brecht’s many aesthetic principles and techniques centred on and derived from his work with the performer. (To illustrate the pertinent distinction between the two practitioners, some of the famous \textit{Gesten} in

\textsuperscript{155} For the sake of brevity, what follows is not concerned with the many thematic resonances between Brecht’s own theatre and the cinema of Straub and Huillet, Watkins and von Trier, to which I have intermittently pointed throughout the dissertation. I will, however, identify some of them here: the fascination with America of both the young Brecht and von Trier, the shared topic of Brecht’s \textit{Days of the Commune} and Watkins’ \textit{La Commune (Paris 1871)}, and – most obviously – the use of Brecht’s texts as bases for Straub and Huillet’s \textit{Antigone} and \textit{History Lessons}. 

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Brecht’s theatre were created in rehearsals as a result of trial and error; in contrast, Eisenstein cast his actors on the basis of one’s physical features rather than her acting abilities.)

More conspicuously than in *Kuhle Wampe*, the centrality of the actor for Brecht’s film aesthetics – with theatricality as its concomitant – manifests itself in such post-World War II projects as the screen adaptation of *Mother Courage*. Brecht’s notes about the film’s visual design suggest a dominance of cinematographic (Daguerreotype) effect as an intended source of *Verfremdung*. It seems a safe guess that this stylistic choice was intended also to secure an easy transfer onto celluloid of many ideas developed for the play’s earlier, stage incarnations that Brecht had directed. To the viewer familiar with those works, the film’s theatricality would appear as the stage productions’ “shadow”, an instance of adaptation from one medium to another that has not run its complete course. As such, it must not be confused with the theatricality shown by the films of Straub and Huillet, Watkins, and von Trier I discussed with regard to the notion. The latter films allude to theatre directly, through their narratives (*The Idiots*) or style (for example, *Antigone*), foregrounding what would only incidentally characterise the screen adaptation of *Mother Courage* made in accordance with Brecht’s ideas for it.

Straub and Huillet use montage in a series of earlier films (to mention but a few, *Machorka-Muff, Bridegroom, Comedienne, and the Pimp*, and *History Lessons*), and a version of continuity editing in their later output. Courtesy of the filmmakers’ radical modifications of the style, continuity editing in Straub and Huillet functions as an arena for self-reflexive commentaries. *Antigone*, for instance, implies the parallel between the immobile camera and the theatre spectator, while simultaneously questioning it through
stylistic operations that deviate from our visual perception (the use of lenses dissimilar from that in the human eye, and of the cut as a device of transition between two points of interest). Sicily! “lays bare the device” of mainstream cinema whereby time passage is portrayed through select aspects of space (the film’s two consecutive shots showing pans across a landscape in two different times of the day). Finally, Machorka-Muff interrogates continuity editing by inviting comparisons between the language of the medium and that of the short story upon which the film is based, resulting in revealing the arbitrariness of both. As far as theatricality is concerned, Straub and Huillet use it in most of their films, typically in conjunction with other estranging techniques: the compression of the full-length Ferdinand Buckner play into approximately ten minutes in one of the segments of Bridegroom, the use of the jump-cut in Othon, and of a single camera set-up in Antigone.

Peter Watkins’ films show a steady chronological growth of their editing patterns’ variety and complexity, culminating in The Freethinker, a work predicated largely on what Eisenstein designates respectively as associational and intellectual editing. The long-take aesthetic of Watkins’ most recent film, La Commune, diminishes further the role of editing in the filmmaker’s overall stylistic system: the importance for meaning creation of the relationships among the film’s shots there recedes behind the importance of the dialogue. To further elucidate the relationship in Watkins’ cinema among the average shot length, editing style, and theatricality, I offer the following example: if the acting style in the anachronistic interview scenes in Culloden, an earlier Watkins’ film, is less theatrically heightened than their equivalents in La Commune, it is so at least partly because the former film uses as the basic structural unit not the scene (in the sense the word has in Aristotelian theatre and cinema), but thematically – meaning not necessarily
spatially and temporally – related clusters of shots. This principle, which can be found at work in much of documentary film practice, does not facilitate lengthy dialogue improvisations that constitute \textit{La Commune}’s stylistic core.

As is the case with Watkins, Brecht’s influence on von Trier shows itself unambiguously only in the filmmaker’s later works. Like Watkins, von Trier uses an array of principles and techniques today associated with Brecht even in the films that predate the overtly Brechtian \textit{Dogville} and \textit{Manderlay}. Examples include the frequent acknowledgment of the camera by the protagonist of \textit{Breaking the Waves} (as the supposed filmic equivalent to Brecht’s technique of breaking “the fourth wall”) and the film’s division into “chapters” (which corresponds to Brecht’s techniques of \textit{Literarisierung} and montage in the term’s dramaturgical sense). The films of the \textit{USA – Land of Opportunity} trilogy reject most medium-specific Brechtianisms in favour of historical techniques for which the former were an inspiration (albeit with a twist: the Brechtian stages of \textit{Dogville} and \textit{Manderlay} are not feasibly theatrical, since their respective architectures and sizes preclude the possibility of the viewer’s visually absorbing them in their entirety from a single vantage point.)

While the theatricality of Straub and Huillet’s films illuminates the often disregarded affinities between Brechtian and Aristotelian theatre and whereas the theatricality of \textit{La Commune} sheds light onto the relationship among epic / dialectic theatre, the \textit{Lehrstück}, and psychodrama, von Trier’s \textit{Dogville} and \textit{Manderlay} follow historical Brechtian techniques to the letter. The implications of von Trier’s use of Brecht, a paradigmatic representative of late modernism, as a source of material for works that radicalise the postmodernist genre of pastiche are open to opposite
interpretations. The positive one is obvious: von Trier renews the relevance of Brecht. The negative one is that Dogville and Manderlay are mere exercises in cultural archaeology, which blunt the political edge of Brecht’s art by uncritically recycling its style.

Beside the narrative and stylistic differences among Straub and Huillet, Watkins and von Trier briefly reiterated above, these filmmakers – as well as the other ones that deserve the descriptor Brechtian as I define it – share crucial similarities in terms of broader narrative preoccupations and formal principles. As for the former, the themes along the lines of resistance and rebellion pervade the films of the four filmmakers I focused on, as well as Brechtian cinema in general. In Straub and Huillet, these are sometimes overt (as in the case of Antigone), while their relevance for a given film can sometimes be understood only through exploration of pertinent extratextual material (for example, the significance for Sicily! of the publication history of the novel on which the film is based.)\(^{156}\) Watkins’ Edvard Munch and The Freethinker share the theme of rebellion against societal norms, which in La Commune receives an overt political dimension. Finally, von Trier’s The Idiots and the films of his USA – Land of Opportunities trilogy have for protagonists individuals who have deliberately placed themselves outside the mainstream of society.

In terms of style, all films of the four filmmakers make evident the rootedness of Verfremdung – as the broadest aesthetic notion of Brecht’s theory – in dialectics. Brechtian films tend to contrast and compare the elements of their visual and audio material abstractly (that is, ideationally) as much as concretely (that is, narratively). To

\(^{156}\) The filmmaker’s predilection for adapting unfinished works of art (Moses and Aaron, The Death of Empedocles, History Lessons) enhances the demand for “reading around” that these works place on the viewer.
reiterate some of the examples given in the preceding chapters: the relation between the narrative of *Dogville* and the photographs of the American poor from the film’s final sequence; the relation between the events of the Paris Commune and the socio-political state of affairs in France at the end of the twentieth century, established in one of *La Commune*’s debate scenes; most abstractly, the exploration by Straub and Huillet’s films between sound and image, story and plot, and filmic and geographical space / time. One can best realise the peculiarity of the described formal principle by comparing a Brechtian film with one whose politics are compatible with Brecht’s, but which follows the norms of Hollywood classicism. The illustration of a similar point that the journal *Screen* used was Costa Gavras’ *Z* (1969); a recent one that qualifies is Steven Soderbergh’s *Che* (2008).

Before concluding, I would like to indicate two avenues for further pertinent research. The first is the application of Brechtian dramatic theory in non-fictional films, the mode I avoided because it uses the actor only atypically, and therefore has little relevance to my concern with theatricality, of which the actor is a principal source. But since non-Brechtian documentaries often employ the techniques that are, in the context of fictional cinema, commonly associated with Brecht (to mention but one, organising the material according to the ideational, as opposed to spatio-temporal, connections among its constituents), film studies would benefit from a systematic exploration of the ways in which documentary filmmakers who align themselves with Brecht’s artistic and political project seek alternative ways to produce *Verfremdung*.

The other avenue is the relationship between the theatricalisation of Brechtian cinema and the growing reliance on technology of certain theatre traditions. Challenging
the common view of the actor as the central element of a theatre production, which has informed also my dissertation, this trend may profoundly change the way we think about the medium. When the politically and aesthetically revolutionary Stephen Heath was proposing theatricality as another technique of Brechtian cinema beside montage, he presumably had in mind the period’s most prominent avant-garde practices, many of which shared the aim of despectacularising the medium and back-to-the-basics aesthetics (for example, the Living Theatre, with its nods to Brecht and Artaud, and Jerzy Grotowski, the ritualistic dimension of whose theatre derives from the latter of the two practitioners.) As a point of contrast, *Stifters Dinge* (*Stifter’s Things, 2007*) by Heiner Goebbels, a foremost German stage director, uses no performers, but only a combination of visual and audio effects produced by technicians off-stage. Productions like this challenge the actor’s pre-eminence in theatre – which underlies also my methodology in this dissertation – and destabilise the meaning of “theatricality” as a set of fixed stylistic traits.

To risk stating the obvious, as change in relation to the dominant socio-political trends is Brechtian cinema’s defining imperative, the phase of its development I described in this dissertation is not final. Having spent many pages discussing the past and present of Brechtian cinema, I will allow myself a speculation about its future. If the growing popularity of various portable media players prompts Brechtian filmmakers to start making films specifically for the small screen with which these devices are typically equipped, the current aesthetic trend may decline. Namely, the small screen is better suited for the close-up than for the long shot, which – being comparable to the perspective of the theatre spectator – facilitates or even conditions the use of theatricality.
In what formal procedures exactly would Brechtian filmmakers seek alternatives to theatricality, with montage long having been rendered aesthetically and politically inefficacious by mainstream media’s appropriation of it, cannot be predicted. What seems certain, however, is that the direct causality between the use of a single stylistic technique and *Verfremdung* as its result – posited by the Brechtian film theorists of the 1970s and the following decade – has been abandoned (hence the appropriateness of the plural form “cinemas” in this dissertation’s title).

After acknowledging the problems of the coexistence of theatricality and montage, I want, as a final proposition, to emphasise its possibility. To paraphrase Brecht’s footnote to the dramatic versus Epic Theatre schema, what I have discussed concerns a shift in emphasis rather than in substance.
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