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Adaptive adaptabilities: Notes on Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*

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About a week after its August 1928 premier, Bertolt Brecht wrote of *The Threepenny Opera* - his collaboration with Kurt Weill - that:

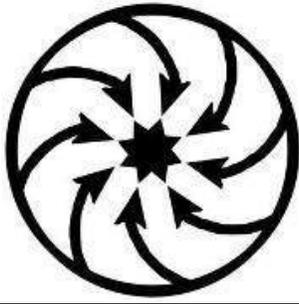
What we do still have [...] is the same sociological situation as [John Gay's] *The Beggar's Opera*: just like two hundred years ago, we have a social order in which virtually all strata of the population, albeit in extremely varied ways, follow moral principles - not, of course, by living *within* a moral code but *off* it. ("Threepenny" 122).

Certainly, the echoes between the Brecht/Weill play and the source text from which it is adapted resounds with much social and political observations, both of their specific historical contexts, as well as a larger, more universalised reality of human society. In fact, *The Threepenny Opera* offers a psychological vision of human society that continues to resonate, particularly in the kind of economic (and social) climate that we inhabit.

The Threepenny Opera is not merely an update of Gay's very well-received ballad opera and its inherently expansive and adaptable satirical impetuses - with the Brecht/Weill version itself a case in point.

The Beggar's Opera's premise, a kind of carnivalesque depiction of - among other things - the London society of its day, has the effect of overturning expectations and established assumptions of behaviour, mores and even of contemporary tastes - and of an insurmountable human proclivity for survival in the face of restrictive norms and mores. Indeed, a common critical consideration of Gay's work largely involves its subversion of the highly stylised - and conventionally prescriptive - Handelian operatic form. One result of *The Beggar's Opera's* success is the diminishment of attraction for what is, after all, an imported (Italianate) artistic form, thus mounting a credible challenge to its dominance, long perceived as insular and exclusive - hence elitist - with an alternative that is, by design, accessible. Gay's play is also stylistically radical, less stylised, and more amenable to improvisation - dealing, as it does, with subjects and characters that are recognisable, if uncomfortably familiar. These are the source of the play's endearment to its public.

The Beggar's Opera's power lies firmly on the satirical underpinnings that are derived from a vision of humanity that is, if not utterly cynical, then at least deeply suspicious. This is also a view taken by Brecht in *The Threepenny Opera*; one that is further complicated by the apparent sophistications derived from an additional two hundred years of complications in the collective (European) human psyche and cumulative experience. By casting the



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underside of society as a fully-formed ecology, Gay pre-empts the Brechtian sentiment - "Food is the first thing. Morals follow on." (Brecht *Threepenny* 57) - and locates the socio-ideological strain as one based almost solely on a self-driven impulse. Near the end of the play, Gay's Beggar can summarise for us, that:

Through the whole piece you may observe such a Similitude of Manners in high and low Life, that it is difficult to determine whether (in the fashionable Vices) the fine Gentlemen imitate the Gentlemen of the Road, or the Gentlemen of the Road, the fine Gentlemen. - Had the Play remain'd, as I first intended, it would have carried a most excellent Moral. 'Twould have shown that the lower sort of People have their Vices in a degree as well as the Rich: And that they are punish'd for them (Gay)

All this is not to say that *The Threepenny Opera* does not delve as deeply into the complexities of moral psychology within society - and between its inhabitants. Nor is the later play an articulation of political naïveté on the part of its then-only-thirty-years-old playwright. In fact, we might argue that Brecht adopts an even darker view of human society than Gay does. The world of *The Threepenny Opera* is one where criminal complicity is omnipresent - much like Mackie Messer and his deeds, as described in the "Moritat of Mackie Messer" - throughout all strata of society, where love and life can

be traded as commodities, where the legitimacy of human enterprise can find no clear delineation, and where even codes of honour (albeit mostly amongst thieves) are in serious malfunction:

Mac: Well, Mr Warder, I suppose these are the heaviest [handcuffs] you've got? With your kind permission I should like to apply for a more comfortable pair. *He takes out his cheque book.*

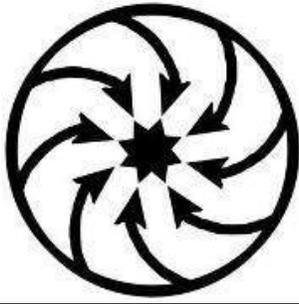
Smith: Of course, Captain, we've got them here at every price. It all depends how much you want to spend. From one guinea to ten.

Mac: How much would none at all be?

Smith : Fifty.

Mac : *Writes a cheque...* (Brecht *Threepenny* 48)

In such a world, all that the individual can cling to is the recognition that each person shares a common plight as the next - and collectively, they are subject to the whims of a kind of superstructure about which they can do nothing to influence, nor change. Macheath in Gay's play is ultimately pardoned on the basis - if absurd and comic - of fraternity with his constituency, and as an artistic resilience that is set against easy subjection to a darker vision "for an Opera must end happily" (III.xvi). *The Threepenny Opera*, on the other hand, gives reprieve to Mackie Messer



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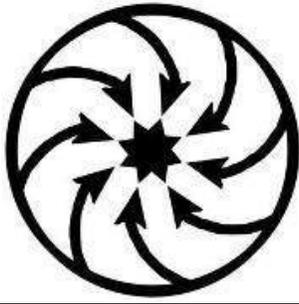
on a seemingly equally arbitrary instance of *deus ex machina* - the best of deliverances that society's despairing classes can wish for. It is, however, this arbitrariness that, amid questions of narrative contrivance, raises pressing questions of complicity between those in positions of authority and those who would subvert the common weal for personal gains. The reversal of Mackie's fate by dint of a royal pardon and, additionally, elevation (to nobility) points to an entire society that is enmeshed in its cynical relationship with behaviour that is highly questionable, if not criminal. In fact, in a moment of clarity that will strike our modern, post-financial crisis sensibility as astonishingly prescient, Mackie opines:

You see before you a declining representative of a declining social group. We lower middle-class artisans who toil with our humble jemmies on small shopkeepers' cash registers are being swallowed up by big corporations backed by the banks. What's a jemmy compared with a share certificate? What's breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank? What's murdering a man compared with hiring a man? (Brecht *Threepenny* 48 78-79)

And still, Brecht's play has often been accused of lacking a sufficiently politically-critical position, unlike much of his later work, and especially unlike the pointed, and immediately recognisable satirical instances that John Gay had worked into *The Beggar's Opera*. The richness of *The Threepenny*

Opera is derived not from satirical specificity but instead from its - arguably deliberate - absence of ideological invective. *The Threepenny Opera's* social or moral intent attains a kind of universal appeal and psychological resonance precisely because it is sustained by its own thematic ambivalence, where its flaws can be identified as a series of unresolved ethical contradictions - the beggar gang boss (Peachum) who disdains 'legitimate' authority but imposes his own over his crew; the promiscuous Mackie who preaches a skewed form of sexual morality; the Judas-like corrupt police chief who has a genuine conscience. In all these, Brecht's characters assume a dual role familiar to our sensibility, but which is possibly thematically challenging to his contemporary audience: the tensions between public and private identity - the 'prepared faces' that Eliot and Pound, among other high modernists, had so intently scrutinised merely a decade or so before. All this is obviously a long way from Gay's Georgian London and the Jack Sheppard-Jonathan Wild-Henry Walpole triumvirate that informs the satirical heart of *The Beggar's Opera*. And for that matter, the Victorian London setting that Brecht and Weill have opted for also releases *The Threepenny Opera* from the pressures of immediacy that is their own Weimar Berlin context.

Where Gay's play is carried forth by a wave of popularity that, in no small measure, can be attributed to the folk-mythology of Jack Sheppard, *The Threepenny Opera* goes beyond the social inversions enacted in Gay's



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work. In the latter play, this tendency speaks of the aspiration towards upward social mobility. While its implicit class consciousness is - whether intentional or not - consistent with its Victorian English social setting, this is not merely superficial nor ornamental. The social aspiration that motivates Brecht's characters is not easily dismissible as bourgeois pretensions, but has validity unto itself. Be they beggars or thieves, the poor are sustained by a survival instinct whose legitimate end - to stay alive - is often overshadowed by its means: questionable conduct, potential criminality, etc. What this ignores is the reality of a perception that recognises gentrified comfort as being an attractive condition. In the "Pirate Jenny" interlude, for example, Polly, the bride whose wedding is taking place in a hastily made-up stable, sings of this shared aspiration:

You may tip me with a penny, and I'll
thank you very well

And you see me dressed in tatters, and
this tatty old hotel

And you never ask how long I'll take it.
(Brecht *Threepenny* 21)

Indeed, her wedding, while incongruently set, exemplifies that thin line between envy and aspiration:

Ned: Beautiful dishes, [stolen from]
Savoy Hotel.

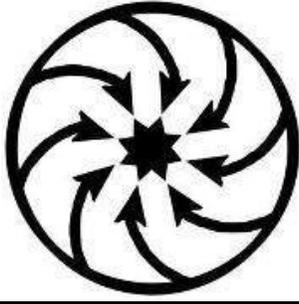
Jake: The plover's eggs are from
Selfridges. There was supposed to be a

bucket of foie gras. But Jimmy ate it
on the way, he was mad because it has
a hole in it.

Walter: We don't talk about holes in
polite society. (Brecht *Threepenny*
17)

In all these, the perception of respectability is a necessary by-product of the success out of which the individual's struggles for survival develops. If it is to be achieved through violence - as Peachum, more so than Mackie, is willing to resort to - then this violence is instrumental rather than consequential. This is not to excuse the underlying violence, but to affirm the ambivalence with which Brecht treats the matter in the play. Mackie admonishes his crew: "My orders were: avoid bloodshed. It makes me sick to think of it." (Brecht *Threepenny* 13) And while the play is not explicitly violent, violence nonetheless resides within it as imminence - at the very least, the shadow of the gallows is never too far in the background, itself always and almost a psychological inevitability. And the play, we remember, opens with the scene of a character (Filch) interviewing to join Peachum's gang, having been assaulted for operating on the latter's turf without leave.

Having said that, if violence is instrumental, what then is it instrumental to? What are its behavioral ends? Here, we are reminded that violence is not a force unto itself; it is exercised with intent. And as a force, it speaks of two things: excess and change - in that, an act of violence, if



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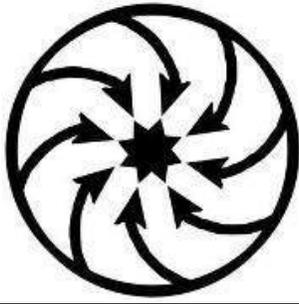
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enacted, is the exercise of (often excessive) force in order to effect change. It is indeed change (and our innate apprehensions of it), then, that propels the action of the play, even as each succeeding scene plays up moments of conflict that threaten to blow over into violent confrontations: the confrontation between Lucy Brown and Polly, followed almost immediately by Mrs Peachum boxing Polly in the ear; the chase-and-apprehension scenes involving the law enforcers and Mackie. This violence is circumscribed throughout by larger impulses for change - at its most basic, a change from poverty to *NOT* poverty. The Peachums and Mackies of such a landscape operate from extra-judicial conditions, and also manifest pretensions to legitimacy, governed, as they are, by codes of conduct, however tenuous and malleable. While they are criminals driving criminal operations, they do these as entrepreneurs, relying on commercial methods: commissions, accounting, hierarchical organisation, acquisitions, expansions, peddling of influence, etc. Theirs, by all accounts, are commercial enterprises ready to take on the world, giving to everything a commoditised quality. Throughout, the element of apparent legitimacy, in the form of the police chief, Tiger Brown, remains problematically complicit with the workings of those with whom he should rightfully confront, curtail. (Yet, this is a world where the goodwill of the criminal boss must be bought, his whims appeased - longstanding friendships notwithstanding). While the deployment of the corrupt official here works to narrative

type and also has precedence, by way of John Gay's source material, and reaching back to the Jack Sheppard-Jonathan Wild ("Thief-taker General") exploits of 18th century London, *The Threepenny Opera* also makes a point about the forces of influence that effect (or prevent) change within the socio-economy - and a closed economy at that. Mackie, in particular, is seen throughout the play to be ready to consummate that most significant change of all: the leap into the realm of legitimacy, to lend his lucre the lustre of respectability: "Between ourselves it's only a matter of weeks before I go over to banking altogether. It's safer and it's more profitable." (Brecht *Threepenny* 38) In an essay, "The Threepenny Lawsuit", Brecht observed that:

The capitalist mode of production smashes bourgeois ideology. [The Ideologue's] lunch is now provided only by corruption, a roof over their heads serves only to cover a bad conscience. What disappears with them is the type of petty-bourgeois that originally created the ideological construction called "*Humanity*" (*Film* 195).

This is as much an indictment of his characters as it is his evaluation of the commoditising impetus of art production, more about which, later. In the meantime, Mackie's plans, we remember, can hardly be achieved without the use of force - or at least suggestions or threats therein - and in the case of Mackie, a planned betrayal of all his henchmen - "all that human scum will be



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safely in the cells at the Old Bailey.” (Brecht *Threepenny* 38) This, of course, has been set up as a premise right from the start, with the framing identification of Mackie’s violent propensities, in the “Moritat”, his murder ballad.

Here, it may be timely to remember that the “Moritat of Mackie Messer” - or the “Murder Ballad of Mack the Knife” now most recognisable to us as the standard jazz song, “Mack the Knife”- is by far the most significant testimony of the play’s overall achievements as one of 20th century theatre’s most successful work, one that has become global art, and a product of great commercial value. *The Threepenny Opera’s* genesis has entered the annals of modern theatre as a kind of myth of coincidence, near still-birth, and unexpected eventual success. Out of the latter arose various other intrigues and controversies involving the issue of adaptation. At the heart of these are the twin lawsuits initiated by Brecht and Weill, against the film production Nero-Film Company - a global enterprise involving America’s Warner Bros and Germany’s Tobis Film. At their most basic, the two lawsuits were about money - and both Brecht and Weill have acknowledged as much, despite the ostensible claims to issues of intellectual property rights involved in the adaptation of theatrical creation to the then-new medium of sound film.

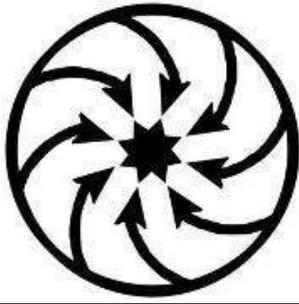
In the event, Weill won his case, and Brecht lost. The latter then wrote a lengthy essay - called “The Three Penny Lawsuit” - explaining (not convincingly) the lawsuit as a

sociological experiment necessitated by a need to expose the impossibility of collaboration in filmic adaptations: “This goal was achieved when I lost the suit. Everyone can see that the lawsuit demonstrated the deficiencies of the film industry *and* of the administration of the law.” (*Film* 156) While much of this essay is flawed, Brecht does put forth a significant argument that reiterates a commoditised approach taken about art - that is in turn further reinforced by the rise of the filmic medium:

No one apparently can imagine this means of entering the market [as, for example, the adaptation of a stage play to cinema] could be beneficial for a work of art. Yet they defeat with a gesture of ‘heroic realism’ [...] something which never escapes the businessman: the fact that a thing is marketable. (*Film* 169)

And then again: “However the art-work is conceived and whatever the reason for its existence, it is sold and this selling plays a new role of great importance in the global system of human relations.” (*Film* 194)

The Threepenny Opera has itself already demonstrated the essential commoditised quality of every experience in life and performance. In explaining the dismissal of one of his beggars, Peachum explains the diminished use value of said beggar’s unconvincing role - too fat: “Between ‘giving people a shock’ and ‘getting on their nerves’ there’s obviously a difference



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[...] I need artists [...] If you'd work properly, your public would be forced to appreciate you" (Brecht *Threepenny* 30). And so it is with the rise and rise of *The Threepenny Opera* as profitable art, and one in global circulation at that. Its ability to 'work properly' in eliciting its public's appreciation has resulted, by 1929, a year after its Berlin premier, in productions and adaptations in Austria and Switzerland. In 1930, these extended to France, Russia and Italy; and by 1933, USA. (Hinton) The latter debut, while a relative failure, also prepared it for an eventual comeback, albeit only in 1954, off-Broadway, that saw its popularity cemented by a run of six years. Out of this, of course, came the resounding popularity of the "Moritat". In 1956, Louis Armstrong made it into a jazz record as "A Theme from the Threepenny Opera (Mack the Knife)", with Armstrong's signature muted-trumpet introduction. By 1959, Bobby Darin had adapted it and transformed "Mack the Knife" into a hit song (number 3 on the Billboard chart). Over the succeeding decades, the song has taken an existence all of its own. In 1986, McDonald's started an advertising campaign to highlight its evening business, introducing a moon-faced character called Mac Tonight, singing an adapted version of "Mack the Knife", with altered lyrics. This advertisement soon went international. And where the various successes of *The Threepenny Opera* have made the play into globalised artefact, its hero has not so much been transformed into citizen of the world, as has been elevated to become an ambassador of that most

recognisable emblem of globalisation: the hamburger. And so it is that *The Threepenny Opera* has managed to survive and thrive - as its characters have - and continue to offer a deep collective psychological insight to the social and economic landscape that we, its audience, inhabits. Its success has been its ability to echo the critical sentiments of its age, of any age.

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