Mack the Knife—Brecht's Threepenny Film: The famed "play with music," and the controversies surrounding it, brought to life

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11 October 2018

Recently released in Germany, *Mack the Knife—Brecht's Threepenny Film* [*Mackie Messer—Brechts Dreigroschenfilm*], directed by Joachim A. Lang, deals with the failed attempts by left-wing German playwright Bertolt Brecht in 1930 to make a film according to his liking based on his successful "play with music [by Kurt Weill]," *The Threepenny Opera*.

The theatrical piece, which opened to great success in Berlin in August 1928, was loosely adapted from English poet and dramatist John Gay's ballad opera, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), which ridiculed the upper classes and prominent figures in the government.

The Brecht-Weill version, with contributions by Elisabeth Hauptmann, is a bitter satire on contemporary capitalist society and its morals, although the piece is set in Victorian London. The central figure, Macheath (Mackie, or "Mack the Knife"), is a vicious, amoral thug who sees himself as nothing more than a legitimate entrepreneur. When he marries Polly Peachum without the permission of her father, Jonathan Peachum, the "beggar king" of London and a fellow businessman, the latter determines to see Macheath arrested and hanged.

The Threepenny Opera has been revived countless times in various parts of the globe since 1928. In New York City, for example, it played off-Broadway for 2,707 performances in the mid-1950s. The piece produced some of the most famous popular songs of the 20th century, including "Mack the Knife," "Pirate Jenny" and the "Cannon Song."

In any event, Lang, his collaborators and cast are to be congratulated for making *Mack the Knife—Brecht's Threepenny Film*, an entertaining and sensuously appealing film of great contemporary relevance. Today's global ruling elite, faced with increasing political and social divisions, marked by immense wealth on the one hand and increasingly severe poverty on the other, is responding, as it did in the early 1930s, with the promotion of right-wing extremism, xenophobia, the strengthening of the state apparatus, militarism and preparations for war.

At the same time, *Mack the Knife—Brecht's Threepenny Film* raises thoroughly contemporary issues regarding artistic production and its social impact and influence. Without sacrificing aesthetics, the film shines a spotlight on Brecht's goal, which remained unrealised at the time: "Based on the current status quo in the film industry, *The Threepenny Opera* could be turned into a *Threepenny* film [only] when its social tendency forms the framework for its adaptation." [1]

The film's opulent decor and remarkable costumes, the evident enthusiasm of the cast, Brecht's grotesque irony in his scenes with representatives of Nero-Film AG (the German film production company), the contrast between romance and alienation, all of this captivates the viewer. The delightful dance scenes and the intriguing transformation of old-fashioned, formal and obscure black-and-white photos into vibrant mass scenes are wonderfully done.

Even though the principal performer (Lars Eidinger) is obliged to speak Brecht's actual words, which generally limits an actor, they fit each moment like a glove. Eidinger bears little physical resemblance to Brecht and does not try to imitate the dramatist's well-known poses and mannerisms—with the exception of wielding his obligatory cigar—let alone his Augsburg dialect. Nevertheless, the actor manages to bring to life the essential features of Brecht's personality. At the same time, he achieves the "alienation effect" so valued by the dramatist, i.e., utilising the "artificial" to make reality visible.

The performances of the various actors, who—in line with the intention of Brecht and Weill—each sings his or her own songs, also enhance the end result. Noteworthy are the performances by Eidinger (Brecht), Tobias Moretti (MacHeath), Hannah Herzsprung (Polly and Carola Neher), Claudia Michelsen (Mrs. Peachum), Robert Stadlober (Weill), Peri Baumeister (Elisabeth Hauptmann), Britta Hammelstein (Lotte Lenya and Pirate Jenny), Meike Droste (Helene Weigel), Christian Redl (Tiger Brown) and Max Raabe as a street singer.

Joachim Król is particularly effective and convincing as the beggar king Peachum, who sets out his business philosophy in his bizarrely equipped factory, where beggar outfits hang from the ceiling. He artfully transforms the merely poor into truly pathetic beggars and then pockets the lion's share of the income they bring in.

An entertaining movie

Despite the reputation created by some of his less successful and more didactic plays and his rigorous theoretical polemics, Brecht (1898-1956) was anything but a dry, doctrinaire playwright. He repeatedly stressed that an audience should have fun in the theatre. At the same time, he was an uncompromising foe of trite commercial entertainment. Instead, audiences were to be encouraged to reflect on their social situation and urged to take action.

The opening scenes of the film compellingly illustrate Brecht's way of working, as rehearsals take place in advance of the Berlin premiere. He is always demanding changes, occasionally driving his collaborators to desperation—in this case, theatre manager Ernst Josef Aufricht (Christian Hockenbrink). Despite all the last-minute changes, the premiere of *The Threepenny Opera* takes place as scheduled on August 31, 1928.

The audience initially responded to the play with scepticism and restraint. The ice was first broken with the performance of the famous "Cannon Song." Cheers broke out, the audience stamped their feet and the song even had to be repeated. *The Threepenny Opera* became the greatest theatrical success of the Weimar Republic and remains one of the most

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widely performed pieces to this day.

It was probably no coincidence that the “Cannon Song” was so warmly greeted. The vast majority of the population were still suffering the after-effects of the First World War and many were aware of the looming dangers of renewed militarism and right-wing radicalism.

Nero-Film’s film project

Following the huge success of *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht’s publisher, Felix Bloch Erben, smelled the chance to make a killing with a movie version. Brecht and Weill signed a contract with Nero-Film AG. However, almost as soon as work on the screenplay and the rehearsals began, fierce arguments broke out between the author and Nero, as Brecht repeatedly introduced changes to the film script. These changes are then featured in Lang’s film in a series of lavish sequences.

When the producer raises the immense costs of filming a scene requested by Brecht, the latter counters that the whole thing could also be related orally, a reference to his epic theatre. “For the film, the sentences of non-Aristotelian drama (which do not draw on empathy, mimesis-based drama) are quite acceptable,” Brecht wrote in one of his essays on the film. [2]

In September 1930 Brecht wrote the treatment, “The Bruise—A Threepenny Film.” Shooting began the same month, but Nero then terminated its contract with Brecht after rejecting his proposals to insert new political content. The company was solely interested in earning money from the successful opera version featuring Brecht-Weill’s hit songs. The conflict between commerce and political art was inevitable.

On May 1, 1929, Brecht had stood alongside left-wing economist and sociologist Fritz Sternberg and watched from the latter’s window as Berlin police, on orders from Social Democratic police chief Karl Zörgiebel, opened fire on a peaceful workers’ demonstration—an event represented briefly in the film. In the three days of police repression and street-fighting that followed, 30 workers were killed, 200 wounded and 1,200 people arrested.

With the Wall Street Crash, the global economic crisis came to a head. Already high levels of unemployment swelled. Brecht insisted on his planned political changes to the film script. He was moving to the left under the impact of economic and political events.

The *Threepenny* Trial

According to the contract with Nero, the author was allowed to work on the script, but not on the actual film. The film company categorically rejected Brecht’s intended “definite political tendency.” It insisted on “only making the movie as sellable as possible without us. So we had to call upon the courts.” [3] Brecht and Weill filed a lawsuit against Nero. Brecht lost his case in November 1930, while Weill won his. Brecht then settled out of court with the film company rather than appeal.

For Brecht, the priority in the court case was not the issue of copyright, but rather the author’s right to change his work in the course of switching to another medium, film, and to determine his own political and aesthetic orientation.

Entitled “The Threepenny Trial: A Sociological Experiment,” Brecht wrote an analysis of the legal dispute, which he published together with the film treatment and the text of *The Threepenny Opera* in volume 3 of his *Versuche* (essays, or “experiments”). The film, directed by G.W. Pabst, was completed according to the film company’s wishes, without the political insertions and updating of the action urged by Brecht. It premiered in Berlin on February 19, 1931.

In his new film, Lang is not content with allowing Eidinger to cite a number of passages in Brecht’s essay—the entire film effort revolves around the artistic and political questions raised by Brecht, which are of great relevance today, not only for filmmakers, but for artists in general.

The correctness of Brecht’s political warnings about the danger of fascism was soon revealed. Nero was able to complete and release its version of the Brecht-Weill work, but the film, along with the theatrical original and the rest of Brecht’s work, was banned by the Nazis after they came to power in January 1933. A scene in Lang’s *Mack the Knife* features Helene Weigel singing the “Lullaby of a Proletarian Mother” as SS men storm in.

Lang then inserts historical footage of the Nazi book burnings, which included Brecht’s works, in May 1933. In the background, we hear Brecht’s voice in an original recording, reciting his well-known poem “To those born later” (1940).

Lang’s movie would have pleased Brecht

Mack the Knife, both written and directed by Lang, would probably have pleased Brecht, in contrast to the Pabst version completed by Nero-Film AG. His film not only deals with Brecht’s aesthetic conceptions, but above all with his political views and attempts to relate them to the present day. The parallels between the early 1930s and today are obvious.

Lang is extremely well-versed in Brecht. In his master’s thesis, he examined Brecht’s *War Primer* poems and his dissertation was devoted to film adaptations of Brecht’s work. For many years, he directed the renowned Augsburg Brecht Festival.

Lang’s concept and its implementation are faithful down to every detail, and spark renewed interest in Brecht’s work. One hopes it will encourage those active in theatre and film to make more use of his pieces. Brecht has become a rarity on German stages in recent years.

Regarding the use of the Brecht quotes in *Mack the Knife*—which he undoubtedly found no shortage of—the director said: “I try to get closer to his thinking by letting him speak in actual quotes, 100 percent Brecht. And how can one get closer to a poet or his art than by employing his own words, i.e., his art?”

This film stands on its own as an independent art work: scenery and décor (Benedikt Herforth, Astrid Poeschke, Merijn Sep), costume design (Lucia Faust), camera work (David Slama) and so forth, every element is harmonious and, at the same time, genuinely “Brechtian.”

Mack the Knife—Brecht’s Threepenny Film is a topical, multilayered film about an opera and a trial, a film about the drama of a never-realised film from the last years of the Weimar Republic, which also shows how the film as conceived by Brecht could be made.

Lang and his total ensemble of 300 people have succeeded in linking different episodes and problems with one another: the premiere of the Brecht-Weill opera in 1928, the dispute between Brecht and Nero and the trial rejecting his version, and finally the completion of a film in the manner desired by Brecht.

At the same time, Lang draws distinct parallels to the present, especially at the end, through the image of an unending line of arms raised high, slick crooks in their slick suits, against a background of soaring bank towers. One immediately thinks of Brecht’s oft-cited adage: “What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a bank?”

The criminal activities of the banks and the financial aristocracy, which led to the near-meltdown of the world financial system a decade ago,

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continue unabated, threatening to topple the economy into an abyss. The current mass demonstrations in Germany against right-wing extremism, anti-immigrant demagogy and austerity are a clear indication that the majority of the population is beginning to resist.

Notes:

[1] Bertolt Brecht, “Der Dreigroschenprozess. Ein soziologisches Experiment,” in *Gesammelte Werk e*, Vol. 18, Frankfurt, 1967, 179.

[2] Ibid., 171.

[3] Ibid., 141.

[4] Joachim A. Lang, *Episches Theater als Film: Bühnenstücke Bertolt Brechts in den audiovisuellen Medien*. Würzburg 2006.

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