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Authenticity, Copying and the Critical Gaze.

The Crisis of Representation

Introduction

One recurrent phenomenon in the Western acting tradition is the quest for emotional truthfulness and authenticity. It takes on various forms, it appears and reappears in different facets; it is valued within different contexts, but it does not seem to ever completely. Actors' identification with their roles, highly esteemed in 19th and 20th century psychological realism, emphasis on personal emotional expression in certain forms of the avant-garde movement,[1] the stress on individual authenticity within particular approaches in the performance art, but also descriptions of what good acting means by certain contemporary theatre and film icons: all exemplify how the phenomenon cyclically returns in the discussions of actor's work.

Today, there is one important facet of the quest for authenticity and scenic truth which is relatively new in its form. It concerns the possibilities and limits of actors' representation, a theme that is a part of a wider, societal discourse, usually labelled as *identity politics*. The discussion is connected to the issues of cultural appropriation, gender and racial representation on the stage.[2] In this latter discussion, criticism is formulated against role-taking or casting where a privileged individual – typically heterosexual, white, middle-class – performs roles from e. g. lower classes, sexual minorities or people of colour. This quest for authentic representation and the differing standpoints taken in this discussion reveal identity-based and ideological arguments, the likes of which have rarely been seen in methodological discussion about acting before – acting methods are in this way now a part of a wider, societal discussion: the *crisis of representation*.

The examples above all share – in spite of their differing ideologies and/or positions in the cultural hierarchy and artistic agendas – a view where the actor's individuality and her or his authentic or unique expression, often based in personal experiences, are the methodological basis for the scenic presentation. It is also well-known that this view has been challenged and criticised from different artistic approaches. Acting methods and traditions developed and practiced during the 20th century have been questioned during the last decades by post-dramatical approaches and by approaches using a constructivist view on personality, or even declaring the death of the character. The theatre plays

1 Christopher Innes. *Avant Garde Theatre 1892–1992*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 4. My use of the term *avant-garde* refers here basically to the aspects highlighted in Innes' book.
2 Under the headline "Identity Politics Forum", six theatre researchers, among them Elin Diamond, present an overview of the global discussion in *Theatre Research International*, see: *Theatre Research International*. 2012, volume 37, issue 1.

where the play "refuses to attribute character names to the spoken text"[3] counterbalance the approaches based on the actor's identification with the role. Historically older, but without any doubt a highly influential critical approach that resonates even in contemporary debate, is represented by the German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht.

The aim of this article is to focus on Brecht's practical and theoretical work in order to grasp and exemplify how this author and director, in interplay with 20th century radical philosophy and criticism, is relevant in a discussion about representation. As is well known, Brecht aimed, in his historical context, at de-constructing the basic principles of Aristotelian-based theatre. He developed a dialectical approach to acting, and he demanded a new kind of spectatorship on the part of the audience. I argue that regardless of the fact that Brecht's own criticism is focused on psychological realism and to some degree the experimental theatre of his time, his ideas of a societal, changeable identity, a positive view on copying and imitation, and a belief in the actor's production of knowledge can be re-used nowadays, in order to refine and complicate a *contemporary discussion* about identity, authenticity and the crisis of representation. In this discussion, where theatre practitioners are able to find themselves facing an ideologically coloured criticism or even attacks, these well known Brechtian provocations can show themselves to be of use.

Of course, I am not the only one who considers Brecht relevant for the contemporary debates. His theories resonate, or are more or less implicitly present, in the approaches of many contemporary artists – among them directors Milo Rau, Thomas Ostermeier, Anne Bogart or playwrights Tony Kushner and Mark Ravenhill. His legacy concerning the social construction of identities has also been found to be useful in contemporary feminism.[4]

In order to contextualise my argument and to elucidate it historically, I present some artistic examples, mainly from the 20th century. I examine the aspect of *copying* in the actor's work, with the aid of some examples from Bertolt Brecht and German philosopher Walter Benjamin. I also exemplify how the quest for authenticity, personal sacrifice and affective expressions, often in interplay with each other, is realised differently in differing historical epochs and acting traditions. The actor's work and methods are always developed in interplay with the audience, and I therefore comment upon the critical gaze that Brecht solicited from his audience, as well as upon the commodity aspect of the general spectator's need for emotions and authenticity.

3 David Barnett. When is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts. *New Theatre Quarterly*. 2008, volume 24, issue 1, p. 16. Barnett exemplifies his thesis with Martin Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* (1997), and Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis* (2000). See also: Philip Auslander. *From Acting to Performance. Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1997; Hans-Thies Lehmann. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. London: Routledge, 2006.
4 Phil Cleaves. Brecht's legacy and influences. Thinking Together About Theatre. In: *Essential Drama*. http://essentialdrama.com/2016/09/06/brechts-legacy-and-influence/. Accessed 2020-07-22.

True or False?

I start my analysis on a broader, metaphorical level. Interest in the authentic is a strong, prevailing characteristic of our contemporary gaze at reality. In contemporary society it is important to distinguish true from false, and this ability is today part of basic social skills. The tourist, the gourmet or the consumer at large, are looking for the original and the genuine – an approach also including the ability to distinguish the original from the copy, be it local handicraft, saffron or Louis Vuitton bags. Distinguishing the real thing from the false requires a certain kind of gaze, a gaze that is grounded in a critical and perhaps suspicious attitude. This attitude, I claim, includes a heightened physical or sensory sensitivity in relation to the commodity, while the viewer at the same time must resist the product's seduction, in order not to be deceived. As is known, copies are often signified by their accumulation of concrete and tangible details, like when the liar reveals himself through his conspicuous thoroughness; or when scrutinising plastic imitations of leather, plastic is characterised by being exaggerated leather. Our fascination with authenticity also interacts with a strong fascination with and an ambiguous attitude in relation to copying. Copying can be considered as stealing the commodity value of a product, material or immaterial, but it can also be seen as a refined contextualisation and appraisal of a work, like in *sampling*, the musician's answer to quoting. There is thus a need for a curious and sensitive evaluative scepticism to see through and differentiate the genuine from the false, and the original from the copy, in the current age of reproducibility.

When encountering an artwork, the spectators or the audience are supposed to open themselves up to being seduced, moved or convinced by the artistic experience, at the same time as they are expected to observe the artwork critically, in reflecting upon its qualities: the spectator accepts the emotional and intellectual impact if the artwork is up to a certain standard. Different art forms treat these divergent tasks in different ways. I address some questions related to the theatre, more specifically how the issues of self-expression, copying, imitating and the spectator's critical gaze are discussed by, among others, Bertolt Brecht, Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin.

In discussing the gaze of the theatre-goer, the spectator, I indulge in some generalisations; the generalised spectator does not exist. Indeed, the spectator is often present in discussions about theatre aesthetics, usually with no quantitative or qualitative study supporting the discussion. In the following I restrict my understanding of the spectator to the contemporary middle-class spectator, in line with the generalisations offered by Barthes and Brecht concerning their contemporary audience.

The Critical Gaze

One of the aloof stances, the critical, but not negative gaze, is usually associated in the theatre world with Bertolt Brecht's aesthetics. Brecht, of course, is not alone in this attitude towards the phenomena around us. Since Sigmund Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), we know, according to the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, the importance of examining the everyday stream of perception with a different gaze.[5] A pun or a joke and the laughter they evoke; the slip of the tongue and erroneous actions; mistakes and forgetfulness: all these are seen by Freud as carriers of repressed material, which, by using certain techniques, can be revealed and made visible, but using more associative tools than those of Brecht.

Brecht's epic theatre seeks to estrange what is widely accepted and familiar, an act known as *Verfremdung*. What public opinion considers to be obvious or random events were in Freud's or Brecht's eyes to be scrutinised and stripped, and the repressed material – be it the unconscious or the social relations of production – be given over to critical scrutiny. There is a similarity between psychoanalytical and Marxist thought in viewing the mundane as the carrier of a dialectically coloured truth to be revealed. Marxism and psychoanalysis are, as we know, also classic examples of what is usually called the *hermeneutics of suspicion,* a phrase coined by philosopher Paul Ricoeur.[6] Freud is engaged in a kind of Verfremdung technique and maintains a critical, but empathetic, distance when he reveals trivial and everyday behaviour. It seems to me important to recall that the distance is not necessarily to be seen as intellectual or signified by rationality, but primarily characterised by sensuality and sensitivity, and in Brecht's case also marked by pleasure and enjoyment:

> There is a general perception that a very sharp distinction exists between learning and amusing oneself. The first may be useful, but only the second is pleasant. So we have to defend the epic theatre against the suspicion that it is a highly disagreeable, humourless, indeed strenuous affair.[7]

There is, however, also something unsettling in this revealing look: both Brecht's and Freud's approaches contribute to undermine the overall cosiness, the socialising and laughter, all that creates fellowship between people in social life and in the theatre. Brecht wanted the spectator to look with critical curiosity at the actor's work, especially considering their valuation

5 Walter Benjamin. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Gesammelte Schriften 1.2.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980, p. 498.
6 See e. g.: Paul Ricoeur. *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*. Translated by Denis Savage. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.
7 Bertolt Brecht. *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic*. Edited by Marc Silberman – Steve Giles – Tom Kuhn. 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 112.

of the actor's knowledge about human and societal relations, including the manipulative use of emotions that can manifest themselves on the stage.[8] But the critical and curious gaze is associated with wonder, just as when we are trying to reveal the tricks and art of a magician. In Brecht's theatre the actor welcomes, even facilitates, this distanced position of the spectator, and they are open in showing their work as based in an observation and an imitation of the world.

The Commodity Value of Sacrifice and Emotions

In one of his *Mythologies* from the 1950s, the author and critic Roland Barthes points to the symbiotic relationship between the actor and the bourgeois audience. He suggests that the actors' work with their emotions and how they are expressed has a commodity value – the emotion is a commodity among other commodities, and the spectator's readiness to appreciate the performance of the actor is coloured by this. The audience requires tangible value for their ticket money, tangible proof of the actor's dedication and sacrifice, so that only physical manifestations, like sweat or tears, will do. The bourgeois, writes Barthes, cannot resist such a sacrifice. Barthes points more specifically to how the avant-garde actor's theatrical expression must demonstrate its materiality, the bourgeois want matter in exchange for the ticket price. He expresses his thoughts on the values of acting: "In one new play [...] the two male partners spread themselves in liquids of all kinds, tears, sweat and saliva." The purpose of this, according to Barthes, is

> to make "psychology" into a quantitative phenomenon, to compel laughter or suffering to assume simple metrical forms, so that passion, too, becomes a merchandise like any other, an object of commerce, inserted in a numerical system of exchange: I give my money to the theater and in return for which I demand a clearly visible, almost computable passion.[9]

Barthes goes on to describe how the actor's bodily devotion means a sacrifice to the audience:

> the actor gives himself over to the demon of theater, he sacrifices himself, allows himself to be eaten up from inside by his role: his generosity, the gift of his body to Art, his physical labor is worthy of pity and admiration; [...] No bourgeois public resists so obvious a "sacrifice," and I suppose that an actor who knows how to weep or sweat on stage is always certain to triumph: the obviousness of his labor makes it unnecessary to judge further.[10]

Barthes' critical reasoning brings to mind some lines of poetry in Brecht's letter to the workers' *Theatre Union* in New York, when they were rehearsing his play *The Mother* in 1935. In the poem Brecht displays his dissatisfaction with the American actors' traditional, emotional acting:

> Like a business man
> Investing money in a concern, you suppose, the spectator invests
> Feelings in the hero: he wants to get it back
> If possible doubled.[11]

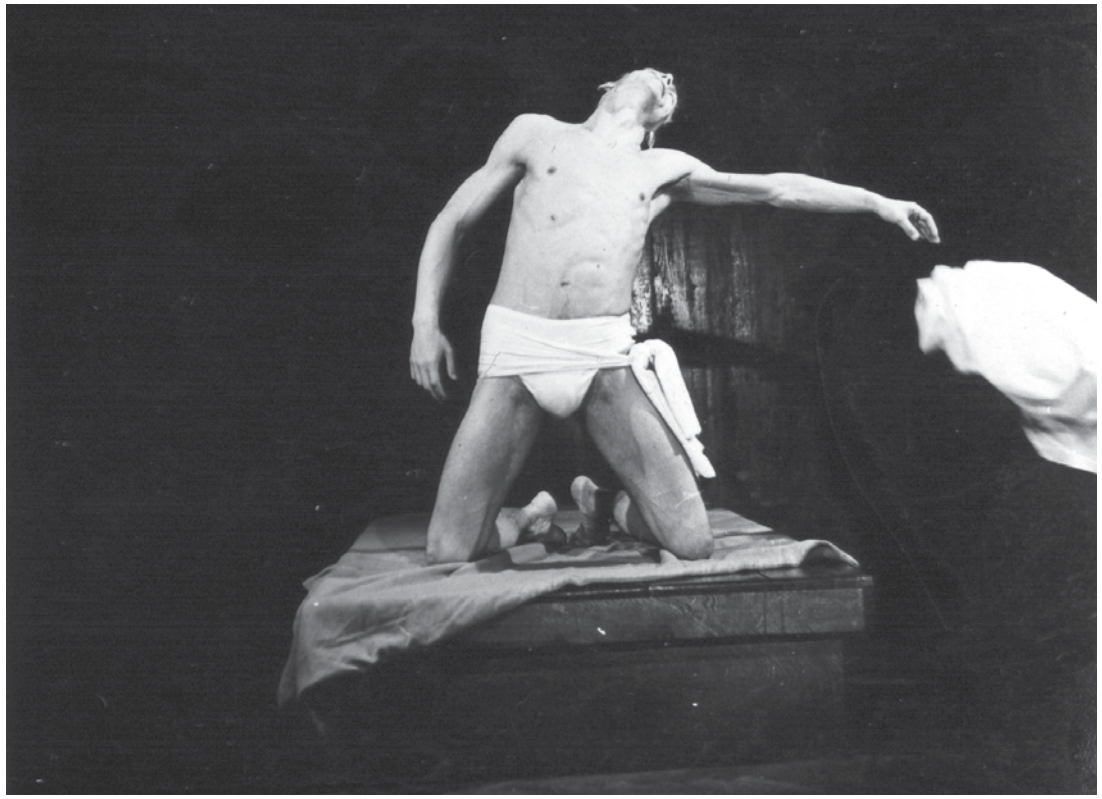
Here Barthes, and even Brecht, connect emotions, commodity value and the willingness to sacrifice in, and for, the theatre arts. In the following, I present differing perspectives on this approach, and in this way I hope to both deepen and broaden this discussion.

The Sacrificial Actor – *The Creature*

Firstly, I see passion as a basic requirement for sacrifice to be possible. The example is from the US in the 1930s, where the actor Richard Boleslawski worked as a teacher and director. As Konstantin Stanislavski's student, Boleslawski had studied various techniques for emotional memory, techniques from which Stanislavski himself increasingly distanced himself in the 1920s and 1930s.[12] As a teacher of director Lee Strasberg, Boleslawski had a decisive influence on the creation of the well known American acting tradition, Method acting. He summarised his thoughts on the actor's work in a book designed as a dramatic dialogue. It begins with a young woman – called *The Creature* by Boleslawski – consulting a teacher, here called *I*, to get acting lessons. The first stage direction describes how the woman looks at the teacher with wide open, frightened eyes and how she holds her purse in a convulsive grip:

> THE CREATURE: I... I... I hear that you teach dramatic art.
>
> I: No! I am sorry. Art cannot be taught. To possess an art means to possess talent. That is something one has or has not.[13]

8 Brecht gives an example of how he was emotionally manipulated by the movie *Gunga Din*. *Ibidem*, pp. 209–210.
9 Roland Barthes. Two Myths of the New Theater. In: R. Barthes. *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*. Translated by Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California, 1997, p. 75.
10 *Ibidem*, p. 76.
11 Bertolt Brecht. Letter to the New York workers' company "Theatre Union" about the play "The Mother". In: B. Brecht. *Bertolt Brecht. Collected plays. Three.* Edited by John Willett and Ralph Manheim. Translated by John Willett. London: Methuen Drama, 1998, p. 378.
12 The most comprehensive overview of Stanislavski's out-spoken criticism of his own, earlier working methods is found in Vasily Osipovich Toporkov's diary from his rehearsals with Stanislavski. See: Vasily Osipovich Toporkov. *Stanislavski in Rehearsal. The Final Years.* Translated by Christine Edwards. New York – London: Methuen Drama, 2008.
13 Richard Boleslavsky. *Acting. The First Six Lessons*. New York – London: Routledge, 2003, p. 3.



Pedro Calderón de la Barca – Juliusz Słowacki – Jerzy Grotowski: *The Constant Prince*, directed by J. Grotowski, Teatr Laboratorium 13 Rzędów, Wrocław, premiere 25. 4. 1965.

Following this brusque introduction, the dialogue continues: I, that is Boleslawski himself, specifies what theatre requires from its practitioners:

> I: [...] To consecrate oneself to the theatre, to devote one's entire life to it, give it all one's thought, all one's emotions! For the sake of the theatre to give up everything, to suffer everything! And more important than all that, to be ready to give the theatre everything – your entire being – expecting the theatre to give you nothing in return [...]
>
> THE CREATURE: [...] I understand that the theatre brings suffering. I am not afraid of it. I am ready for anything if I can only play, play, play.[14]

The actual prelude to the dialogue has an air of religious revivalism and doomsday preaching, and it also emphasises the actor as the chosen one. Theatre art from this perspective seems to require that actors sanctify or consecrate themselves to it totally, and, interestingly enough, without expecting anything in return – other than suffering. Sacrifice for the aspiring actor is total, it is about your whole being and overall physicality, and the devotion to suffer for the arts, as *The Creature* expressed, is for a contemporary observer more ominous than promising. The dialogue can be seen as one of the possible basic concepts for the relationship between master and disciple in the art of acting.

What is the narrative in *The Creature's* passion for the theatre, or rather in her passion for her life as an actress? What explains her readiness for suffering and her readiness to do anything, if only she gets to act? Theatre art and its requirements are described as bigger than the individual, and this thinking has consequences. The approach has parallels in how individuals can sacrifice themselves – or be sacrificed by others – for a greater cause, such as a nation or an ideology. The power of a Utopia, and how it is described, corresponds to the sacrifices necessary to guarantee that the Utopia will be realised. The greater the importance of the Utopia, the more legitimate the idea of sacrifice becomes. I claim that it is not about the private, psychological orientation of young people who want to become actors, but about a culture of passion and sacrifice that has been handed down among generations of actors, more or less clearly manifested and handled differently in different theatre cultures. Especially the avant-garde theatre of the 20th century has been characterised by spirituality, ritual, and the willingness to make sacrifices, often with the final aim of *freeing*

14 *Ibidem*, pp. 3–4.

the body from the impact of modern society.[15] Furthermore, if there is an idea of artists sacrificing themselves for the arts in their profession, this idea has emerged and has grown in concert with an audience, otherwise it would not be viable.

Polus and the Urn

In a discussion about actors' willingness to sacrifice themselves and the value of authentic emotions, one finds a sort of primal scene in a story from Roman times. The Roman writer Aulus Gellius retells an anecdote about the Greek actor Polus and his interpretation of Electra in the play by Sophocles from about 300 B.C.E. In a well-known scene, the young woman Electra carries an urn which she believes contains the ashes of her dead brother Orestes, and in the scene she regrets his death.

This is the full text by Gellius:

> There was in the land of Greece an actor of wide reputation, who excelled all others in his clear delivery and graceful action. They say that his name was Polus, and he often acted the tragedies of famous poets with intelligence and dignity. This Polus lost by death a son whom he dearly loved. After he felt that he had indulged his grief sufficiently, he returned to the practice of his profession.
>
> At that time he was to act in *Electra* by Sophocles in Athens, and it was his part to carry an urn, which was supposed to contain the ashes of Orestes. The plot of the play requires that Electra, who is represented as carrying her brother's remains, should lament and bewail the fate that she believed had overtaken him. Accordingly Polus, clad in the mourning garb of Electra, took from the tomb the ashes and urn of his son, embraced them as if they were those of Orestes, and filled the whole place, not with the appearance and imitation of sorrow, but with genuine grief and unfeigned lamentation. Therefore, while it seemed that a play was being acted, it was in fact real grief that was being enacted.[16]

Here, it is not a question of an actor's work on emotional *memory*, as we know it from Stanislavski's early work or from American method acting. When Stanislavski experimented with emotional memory in acting in

15 C. Innes. *Avant Garde Theatre 1892–1992*. pp. 3–4. In *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, I present an overview of how 20th century bodily culture influenced actor's training. See: Kent Sjöström. Bodily Education in Modernist Culture – Freedom and Commodification. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*. 2015, vol. 6, iss. 1, pp. 72–84.

16 Mark Ringer. *Electra and the Empty Urn. Metatheater and Role Playing in Sophocles*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998, p. 2.

the first decades of the 20th century, he stressed that it was a work with *secondary* or repeated emotions. Polus, on the contrary, presents a personal emotion that is lived and experienced in real time. He can be said to be the first actor to launch his commodity value, based on authentic and truly expressed emotions. Reasonably, Polus made sure that the story of his emotions' authenticity became publicly known. When Brecht commented on this anecdote in the half-fictitious dialogue *Conversation about Coerced Empathy* (1953), he said: "We truly must characterize this as a barbaric action." Brecht's assistant Manfred Wekwerth added: "Take Polus, for example. Maybe his son was a villain. He might suffer nonetheless, but why should I?"[17] From these comments, we can understand how the story of Polus and his urn has served throughout history as a watershed for the perception of the actor's work.

Here, I highlight Polus's creation of the *aura* that adheres to an authentic creative moment, and also the view of the actor as an artistic "original." As I discuss below, Walter Benjamin's concept of *aura* is applicable in a discussion about this approach to acting. This aura is present in the ritual relationship to the actor's creation out of his own personality, and in the approach to seeing acting as an act of self-expression. It is also this attitude that forms the essence of contemporary, well-known narratives about screen actors, mostly American men, who sacrifice their well-being and sometimes even risk their lives in grandiose, well-publicised gestures of sacrifice in the metamorphosis that aims to *become the character*. Nothing promotes an American film as effectively as the actor's demanding or painful transformation, about which the producers make sure the press is informed. When American actor Robert de Niro played Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull,* he gained 27 kilos, and Christian Bale almost doubled his weight after first performing a starving character and then transforming himself into Batman. In other cases, actors have removed teeth, by surgery, or put themselves into jail or under torture. As I will consider later, an actor who imitates or copies will not be subject to the ritual position that the creator, distinguished by their uniqueness and originality, receives, especially when the process is grounded in a personally based sacrifice. The sacrifice seems to demand an authentic and consistent *I* as a guarantee, and the outcome is not only individual heroism, but also added economic value to the commodity.

With the above-mentioned examples, I want to demonstrate a tradition of reciprocity between the actor and the spectator concerning the values – also the commodity values – of authenticity, the desire for "truth" and self-sacrifice for art. These aspects of the actor's working process are – somewhat surprisingly – common factors for totally differing theatre genres and acting methods.

17 B. Brecht. *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 306–307.

Aura and the Copy

It is this discussion, here exemplified with samples from different epochs, which Brecht refers to, but without directly criticising the need for theatrical truth and authenticity. Epic theatre is, according to Brecht, more truthful and realistic than traditional theatre, based on Aristotelian dramaturgy. Brecht criticises the more traditional view of the actor's work from several different perspectives: first of all the view of the role as an act of self-expression and as an original act of creation, but he also questions the quality that is considered to be in the *here and now* of the actor's work. This stance includes a distancing from the view of theatre as a *momentary art*, an expression that can have a sentimental as well as an appreciative function. This free thinking is close to the German philosopher and writer Walter Benjamin's broader discussion in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1936). In the 1930s there was mutual inspiration between the two friends, not least through the social intercourse developed during Brecht's exile in Denmark from 1933 to 1939.

The starting point for Benjamin's essay is the impact of modern mass reproduction technology on art's functions. With the introduction of the modern technologies created during the 1800s, such as lithographic printing and photography, pictures could be reproduced, reach new users and have different functions. Benjamin also uses the film medium as an example of this development, and highlights how film technology helps us to view an event from different perspectives and thus also to analyse it critically.

In his essay, Benjamin describes how mass reproduction technologies are challenging the idea of the work of art as a unique *original*. When the work of art in the modern age can be reproduced in an industrial way, the aura that has adhered to the artwork, in its capacity as an authentic and unique work of art, disappears: "In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place."[18] In this way, the artwork leaves its ritual function, which is rooted in its uniqueness. Instead, possibilities open up for using art politically – authenticity is hardly the decisive quality that determines whether a work of art can be used politically or not. Authenticity can, however, be regarded as decisive in the cultic use of art, Benjamin states.[19]

As I mentioned earlier, there is a widely accepted view of the actor as a creator signified by authenticity and uniqueness. In this lies an almost ritual devotion to what is created momentarily, to what is created *here and now*, to what is born in the moment of acting. With his epic theatre, Brecht

18 Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin. Translated by Edmund Jephcott et. al. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 21.
19 *Ibidem*, p. 24–25.

questions this quality: he suggests that the actor ought rather to present the scenic situation as if it took place *there and then*, the actor portraying the scenic event from an omniscient point of view, from a position where the process is completed and transparent.[20] He seeks to have the actor openly highlight physical as well as verbal expression as imitations, or as some sort of demonstrative material. The actor finds his gestic material through observations of society and of human relations.[21] In this way, the actor presents verbal, physical, social and mental attitudes – summed up in the concept *Haltung* – in their capacity as quotes or copies. The purpose is quite the opposite of showing them as if they were created in the scenic moment. Somewhat influenced by Benjamin, Brecht here sees the opportunity for a political, not a ritual, use of art. It is unnecessary to add that this distinction between cult and politics has not always been maintained, neither today nor in history.

However, a transparent and openly declared copy is not the same as a fraudulent copy – one that is produced with a manipulative purpose. Facing a copy, openly recognised as such, the audience is urged to have a more sensual, scrutinising gaze than when confronting an original. A copy or a quote is double-checked, they are compared. From a broader perspective, one may add that a lie is so much more interesting to scrutinise than a truth, as the lie is constructed in the presence of a listener. The lie is – in its essence, but not in its morality – more empathetic than the truth. With his demonstrative exhibition of theatre as staged and reconstructed reality, Brecht has a strong truth claim: he welcomes the spectators to take part in a kind of test, to participate in a demonstration. Unlike the audience that is looking for authentic and sacrificial expression, as described by Roland Barthes, Brecht wants to create another gaze from his audience: that of wanting to investigate the copy and the quotation, and then compare it with the original.

Mr. K.

In several different contexts, Brecht tried to show how the use of the quote and the copy carries a decisive and fruitful approach to culture and tradition. In Brecht's *Stories of Mr. Keuner* – a total of about 130 pieces – one will find a sort of manual of different attitudes to art, contemporaries and politics. In one of his stories about Mr. K., "Originality" Brecht writes:

20 B. Brecht. *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 109–115.
21 *Ibidem*, p. 271.

> "Nowadays," complained Mr. K., "there are innumerable people who boast in public that they are able to write great books all by themselves, and this meets with general approval. When he was already in the prime of life the Chinese philosopher Chuang-tzu composed a book of one hundred thousand words, nine-tenths of which consisted of quotations. Such books can no longer be written here and now, because the wit is lacking. As a result, ideas are only produced in one's own workshop, and anyone who does not manage enough of them thinks himself lazy. Admittedly, there is then not a single idea that could be adopted or a single formulation of an idea that could be quoted. How little all of them need for their activity! A pen and some paper are the only things they are able to show! And without any help, with only the scant material that anyone can carry in his hands, they erect their cottages! The largest buildings they know are those a single man is capable of constructing!"[22]

If one dares to transfer this approach to the actor's work, some generally accepted truths about the art of acting are challenged, primarily that of the actor's *I* as a basis for the creation of the role. Actors are customarily expected to create their expressions from within themselves, from their experiences, memories and personal emotions. The Keuner text apparently diminishes or trivialises the value of creation from within one's self, and instead highlights creativity in relation to history, culture, tradition and the world at large, and the use of quotes can be seen as a condensed version of such an approach. As I mentioned earlier, the art of imitation is essential in Brecht's theatre pedagogy, and imitation can, of course, simply be categorised as a bodily quote.

By emphasising the actor's role as a copy and also as a carrier of quotations, Brecht is thus generating a sharper and more critical gaze from the spectator: "People will observe you to see / How well you have observed," he says in his speech to Danish working class actors.[23] The actor is a reproductive artist, but as such an expert on what is original and what is a copy. The actor cites most often what has been written by others. The actor, in his reproductive function, is also aware of other actors' interpretations of the role, previously and in other places. In this way, the actor is included in a reproductive process, a simultaneously heightening and ennobling chain, and I consider this an important aspect of the actor's creative work.

22 Bertolt Brecht. *Stories of Mr. Keuner*. Translated by Martin Chalmers. San Fransisco: City Lights Books, 2001, p. 13.
23 Bertolt Brecht. Speech to Danish working-class actors on the art of observation. In: B. Brecht. *Poems 1913-1956*. Edited by John Willett – Ralph Manheim. New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 235.

Peachum's Instruction

If one looks at the Brechtian actor's choice of expressions and the values found in these, one finds in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) a kind of programmatic statement of the actor's relation to the role, in terms of authenticity, imitation and the impact on the spectator's emotions. The businessman Peachum has the function of pedagogue and director, and in the opera's initial scene he lectures about man's indifference to the suffering of others. Peachum stresses how the citizens of London are easily jaded when confronted with the poverty that his beggar employees portray in the city streets:

> There are a few things that stir men's souls, just a few, but the trouble is that after repeated use they lose their effect. Because man has the abominable gift of being able to deaden his feelings as well, so to speak.[24]

Peachum directs his beggar employees, he theatricalises them into an ensemble and he says, surprisingly, that it is not authentic suffering or true misery that brings in the money: "Of course natural scabies is never as good as the artificial kind."[25] When a new employee wonders why he cannot have his own rags as workwear while begging, he is reprimanded by Peachum: "Because nobody can make his own suffering sound convincing, my boy. If you have a bellyache and say so, people will simply be disgusted."[26] With the help of this dialectical screw, Peachum can confiscate the recruit's rags and then rent them out to another beggar. Peachum speculates in aesthetics as well as economics when he claims that authentic misery does not arouse man's compassion, and with rhetorical elegance he can commence the employment by fleecing the employee.

Peachum's instruction carries within it an acting method and aesthetics. It includes a request to the prospective actor to let his own person stand aside, in favor of theatrical effect. Peachum's army of beggars is a bunch of generalised types, ones who aim to arouse sympathy among the general public – and emotions in their minds – but not by being absorbed by the private or the authentic in one's own person, but by presenting an imitation of typical examples. Interestingly, Peachum here seems to be influenced by Aristotle. Evidently, the personal material is not true enough, it is carefully observed and imitated behaviour that produces a more effective or more useful truth. This view of the actor takes a lot of educational effort if it is not to appear as derogatory or blasphemous. In discussions about art, the term *copy* seldom carries positive connotations.

24 Bertolt Brecht. The Threepenny Opera. In: B. Brecht. *Collected Plays. Two*. Edited by John Willett – Ralph Manheim. London: Methuen Drama, 1994, p. 95.
25 *Ibidem*, p. 119.
26 *Ibidem*, p. 99.

B. Brecht: *The Threepenny Opera*, directed by E. F. Burian, D 34 Theatre, Prague, premiere 21. 9. 1956. Photo unknown author. © Arts and Theatre Institute Archive.

One can, if one prefers, see Peachum as Brecht's spokesperson concerning the actor's working aesthetic in relation to the personal and in the understanding of how easy and quickly sentimentality as a tool for compassion is overused. However, it must be added that the analogy is not sustainable in detail: Peachum's purpose is, unlike Brecht's, to manipulate people's behaviour by means of sentimentality, and here Brecht notoriously takes a different position. Although *The Threepenny Opera* is an early piece in Brecht's work, it shows that even as early as 1928 he had developed a criticism of theatrical authenticity and a discussion about the usability of the actor's expression.

Conclusion

Theatre researchers Hans-Thies Lehmann and Helene Varopoulou declare in their letter to Brecht, written in 2016, that his stance has won general acclamation during the latter decades:

B. Brecht: *The Threepenny Opera*, directed by Karel Pokorný, S. K. Neumann Theatre, Prague, premiere 24. 11. 1971. Photo Jaromír Svoboda. © Arts and Theatre Institute Archive.

> Epic theatre has triumphed. Your call for an epic theatre – an intelligent theatre – has become the natural measure for anyone who matters artistically. Your ideas are effective even in places where your own works have never been shown. The epic style as a game of alienation has become habitual for many of the best contemporary actors.[27]

When British-born director Declan Donnellan concludes his book *The Actor and the Target* with the exhortation "Don't go home," it should be understood as a warning for the actor not to look for his working material inside himself.[28] Donnellan is not talking directly in favour of copying, but he recommends the actor to externalise his impulses: "Transfer all inner functioning, all drives, feelings, thoughts and motives etc. from inside and re-locate this impulse in the target."[29]

These contemporary examples display how the discussion about authenticity, self-expression and role-playing is ongoing and handled differently in different theatre traditions, genres or markets. As discussed earlier, the popular and most commercial traditions, here exemplified by film and American method acting, might share central aspects of actor's working approaches with parts of the 20th century avant-garde, while contemporary post-dramatic theatre seems influenced by, among others, Bertolt Brecht.[30] The art of acting has always, according to theatre researcher Joseph R. Roach, been influenced by different scientific and psychological paradigms.[31] In a parallel movement, acting has been discussed, judged or condemned from a moral perspective differently in different epochs, and by different agents.[32]

On a concrete level the question arises of whether actors are obliged to represent merely themselves and their own personal experiences on the stage. I consider this stance to be grounded in an essentialist approach, in which an authentic self and personal experience are seen as the guarantees for the scenic truth and the artistic investigation and presentation: art as self-expression. Or can actors approach their roles with a distancing, even playful attitude, embracing what is strange, peculiar and un-familiar, including cultural appropriation? This process, in line with Brecht's aesthetics, is based in an epistemological process gained through observation of the world and a critical discussion about what constitutes mankind. I consider

27 Hans-Thies Lehmann – Helene Varopoulou. Letter to Brecht. In: Theodore F. Rippey (ed.). *The Brecht Yearbook / Das Brecht-Jahrbuch 40*. New York: Boydell & Brewer – Camden House, 2016, p. 13.
28 Declan Donnellan. *The Actor and the Target*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2002, p. 272.
29 *Ibidem*, p. 22.
30 For a thorough discussion about the relation between post-dramatic and post-Brechtian theatre, see: David Barnett. Performing Dialectics in an Age of Uncertainty. Or Why Post-Brechtian ≠ Postdramatic. In: Karen Jürs-Munby – Jerome Carroll – Steve Giles (eds.). *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 47–66.
31 Joseph R. Roach. *The Player's Passion. Studies in the Science of Acting*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993, pp. 12–15.
32 Jonas A. Barish. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

these two divergent stances to be based in ideological and philosophical positions, and in need of further research. Finally, the debate about representation and authenticity in the theatre can be seen as an extended, even concentrated, variant of a heated debate in today's Western society: the crisis of representation.

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Abstract

In contemporary Western theatre and actor's training there is a tension between different traditions in the actor's work, concerning the bodily practices that are related to representation, construction of identities, authenticity and self-expression. One aspect of the actor's methodical tradition – the openness to suffering and sacrificing oneself in the name of the arts – will be displayed and scrutinised through examples from ancient theatre, European avant-garde and the Method acting tradition. I will argue that this aspect is aimed at exposing the artist as a unique original, and in this way also serves the commodification of the artist's self-presentation. In contrast to the abovementioned moods of representation, 20th century artists and philosophers like Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin practically and theoretically challenge concepts such as originality, authenticity and artists' self-representation. They instead investigate the creative and political potential in phenomena like quoting and copying, and above all a playful and critical role-taking process, not based in self-expression. I will finally argue that Brecht's stance is in accordance with a non-essentialist view of humans and that his views are in line with certain tendencies in the post-dramatic tradition.

Key words: Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Acting, Actor's training, Representation, Identity politics, Acting methods, Original, Copying

Michael Wehren

The Institution of Class and Collective.

Remarks on *Fatzer* and *The Measures Taken*