

# Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)  
is the institutional research repository for  
Goldsmiths, University of London*

## Citation

McAuliffe, Sam. 2022. The Changeability of the World: Utopia and Critique. In: Kathrin Thiele; Birgit M. Kaiser and Timothy O'Leary, eds. *The Ends of Critique: Methods, Institutions, Politics*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 57-75. ISBN 9781786616470 [Book Section]

## Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/29833/>

## Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk).

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk)

## *The Changeability of the World: Utopia and Critique*

Sam McAuliffe (Goldsmiths, University of London)

The Ends of Critique

Methods, Institutions, Politics

**EDITED BY KATHRIN THIELE; BIRGIT M. KAISER AND TIMOTHY O'LEARY**

Rowman & Littlefield International, 2022

978-1-78661-647-0

\*

*Central to the Brechtian conception of critique and the encounter with reality for which it prepares the ground is a concern with Veränderbarkeit, changeability. The efficacy of what Brecht calls a “critical stance” (kritische Haltung) rests on this capacity to envisage the state of affairs under interrogation as something variable in nature. Indeed, a stance becomes critical insofar as its viewpoint onto reality makes apparent that the latter’s current configuration is not definitive. “Criticizing the course of a river means improving it, correcting it” (Brecht 2015, 195). How is this task undertaken? By isolating the conditions that maintain a state of affairs in its given form and taking aim at their purported “naturalness.” The course of a river has not been fixed once and for all. To stay with this metaphor, which Brecht often favors when working through this problem: “It is the same as when a river engineer looks at a river together with its original bed and the various hypothetical [fiktiven] courses it might have followed had there been a different tilt to the plateau or a different volume of water... while he in his mind is looking at a new river” (2015, 241). As an exercise in variability, a tabling of differential forms and prospective scenarios, critique therefore makes use of a certain fictive register and the series of simulations it puts to the test do not simply represent reality but exert a pull on it, re-directing its course. “We will now go further,” we read in a late fragment, “turning to the light we must cast on the events among people that we wish to portray so that the changeability of the world becomes visible and gives us pleasure” (2015, 284).*

*Now, of all the characteristics associated with this form of critical practice, arguably it is this emphasis on pleasure that is most striking, at least when reading Brecht today. On this point he is unwavering: critique should be a source of pleasure. It is not undertaken for pleasure’s sake, but pleasure is what it nevertheless gives rise to,*

*supplementing every critical endeavor as something like the latter's signature. "A critical attitude of this type is an operative factor of productivity; it is deeply enjoyable as such" (2015, 195). It should also be noted that this standpoint is taken up by Brecht in full recognition of the fate that has otherwise befallen enjoyment in the age of "late capitalism," that in its "contemporary historical form" pleasure cannot be experienced as anything other than a commodity (2015, 64). In this sense the Brechtian critical stance is itself an attempt to develop a practice that channels pleasure through a different configuration, assigning it a different set of social functions.*

*This brings us back to today. Can it be said that pleasure has retained this role for critique? Is pleasure something a critical endeavor still lays claim to? If not, how has their dissociation come about, with what consequences, and how might their association be re-imagined?*

Any utopian projection, over and above the particular vision that it brings into view and regardless of the specific field in which it comes to be articulated, is always engaged in a work of critique. The impulse that animates such projection, the contexts it finds itself drawn towards, the materials it tests itself upon, and the configuration it ultimately culminates in: all this participates in a critical impetus of sorts, in the formation of a critical perspective. This perspective may not be thematically treated by the projection in question, it may not be explicitly foregrounded there, but it cannot be dissociated from the prospect that this projection brings forth. "The essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present," says Bloch in the course of a well-known exchange with Adorno, the title of which already announces the matter at hand: 'Something's Missing' (Bloch and Adorno 1988, 12). Inasmuch as it traces the contours of something irreducible to what is in existence here and now, something that extends beyond the present in its given state, utopia announces the possibility that what is could be otherwise. Whatever it brings forth is constituted in and through this difference. In this sense the possibility it harbors is not something that can be drawn from the reserve of what is actual; it is not sustained or supported by anything that already exists. The fact that it cannot be realized in accordance with the actual is what situates it on the other side of the latter's limits, in the form of the unattainable. It is in this sense that the prospect held out by utopia always points to a gap in the existing order of things. It shows that within the latter's present arrangement "something's missing," something that, were it to come about, would leave this arrangement fundamentally reconfigured,

having set the present upon an entirely different course. “Whatever utopia is,” Adorno says in this discussion, “whatever can be imagined as utopia, concerns the transformation of the [social] totality” (1988, 3). However fantastic a utopian projection ostensibly appears – and utopia is, by definition, a discourse tied to the register of the fantastic, the fictive or the imaginary – it can always be traced back to an unresolved antagonism in reality, which its configuration thereby indicates in inverse form. As such the wish-images over which a utopia presides are never indiscriminate. And this is why, whether explicitly or not, utopia levels a charge against the existing order of things. It calls this order to account for leaving this possibility unacknowledged and occluded, for failing to give this possibility its due. That the given order of things should persist in its current form is what a utopian prospect suddenly calls into question, demanding a decision from the present one way or another. It is in this sense that utopia could be said to constitute a crisis for the present to which it is tied.

In *The Principle of Hope*, and again in the course of a discussion of utopia’s function, Bloch conceives of this tendency in terms of a “counter-move.” This movement becomes discernible through a double gesture. On the one hand, it shows utopia acceding to itself through a process of negation, in the form of a *turn against* the present, a “counter-move to the badly existing [*des Gegenzugs gegen das schlecht Vorhandene*], the mobilization of contradictions which occur in the badly existing, for the purpose of undermining it completely, bringing about its collapse” (Bloch 1986, 148). On the other hand, this same movement precipitates an advance, a turn towards that which lies beyond the present’s scope. The counter-move, this passage continues, “is not only negative but equally *contains within it the forward surge of an achievement which can be anticipated and represents this forward surge in the utopian function*” (1986, 148; italics in original). This, then, is what constitutes the specificity of utopian critique: it is undertaken on the basis of “the being of That-Which-Is-Not-Yet” (1986, 237). Only insofar as it is itself without place within the present, its *topos* irreducible to any determinable locality, only as such is it capable of indicating here and now that “something’s missing.” Paul Ricoeur, similarly concerned with utopia’s “functional structure,” draws attention to the same tendency when he states at the outset of his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*:

What must be emphasised is the benefit of this special extraterritoriality. From this ‘no place’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks

strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living... May we not say then that imagination itself - through its utopian function - has a *constitutive* role in helping us *rethink* the nature of our social life? ... Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorisation 'nowhere' work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is? (Ricoeur 1986, 16)

The critical perspective traced out here is subject to more than one paradox. If this capacity for "exteriorisation" is what lends utopia its critical impetus, at the same time it is also what deprives this impetus of its force. First of all, is it not true that the prospect traced out by utopian projection only ever appears at a remove from us as though blocked off to us? That we do not know how to access the possibility it harbors, how to render this possible something actual, or even how to provisionally situate it as a possibility in relation to where we ourselves are, since it is always elsewhere, or rather, *nowhere*? If it belongs to utopia to appear as a place without determinable locality, then it is always in danger of being nothing more than this: mere appearance, semblance without substance, a shadowland. As Bloch also insists, there is no way of ensuring in advance that the counter-move through which a utopian tendency makes itself known will not ultimately lend itself to the perpetuation of reality in its present state.

The question is now, whether and to what extent the anticipating counter-move coincides with a merely embellishing one. Especially when the merely embellishing element, although it definitely does highlight things, has for the most part no counter-move in it at all, but merely dubious polishing of what exists. (Bloch 1986, 148-49)

Unable to locate a point of entry for itself onto the real, incapable of propelling itself across the threshold that separates the possible from the actual, utopia always carries the risk of leaving the present order of things unchanged. (Hence Bloch's concession here that as mere appearance it can end up being reduced to an "apology" for what exists. This is what gives utopia a necessary share in ideology (1986, 149)). In Ricoeur's terms, this sees utopia caught within a logic of "all or nothing": "No connecting point exists between the 'here' of social reality and the 'elsewhere' of the

utopia. This disjunction allows the utopia to avoid any obligation to come to grips with the real difficulties of a given society (Ricoeur 1986, 17).

One of the most far-reaching analyses of this prevarication to which utopian critique is subject can be found in Louis Marin's *Utopics: Spatial Play*. "Utopia," he writes there, "is an ideological critique of ideology" (1984, 195). What does this mean? Firstly, that utopia places in circulation a representation that disrupts the discursive operations underwriting a particular reality's supposed legitimacy:

Utopia is a critique of dominant ideology insofar as it is a reconstruction of contemporary society by means of a displacement and a projection of its structures into a fictional discourse. It is thus different from the philosophical discourse of ideology, which is the totalizing expression of reality as it is given, and of its ideal justification. (Marin 1984, 195)

A utopian projection is thus the point at which this "totalizing expression" falters. Having brought something altogether other into view it prevents reality from achieving its complete self-determination, standing in the way of the latter's full and final coincidence with itself. And yet at the same time a utopian standpoint is itself ideological inasmuch as it cannot secure the ground of its own elucidation, "does not allow for the exposure of the methodology that would legitimate it," Marin writes. It may well be an instrument of critique, but it cannot give an account of its own application: "the discursive position it necessarily implies, the operations it sets in motion in order to exist, and the historical and theoretical presuppositions that govern it are not presented in the criticism" (Marin 1984, 196). Said otherwise, utopia remains opaque to itself as a critical practice, which is why the "figure" around which its representation is organized is always "blinded" (198).

For Marin this situation has consequences for utopia's discursive form, for the particular way it finds itself situated in discourse.

Utopia is a fictional construction... The utopic figure is a discursive object, not without reference, but with an absent referent, as its name will tell us: it is not the 'without-place,' 'the imaginary' or 'unreal place'; rather it is the no-place, the in-determined place, the neutral figure. It refers to a reality that is not said *within* the figure, that is not taken up in discourse as its signified. (1984, 196)

That is to say, a utopian projection makes reference to both a prospective presence and a real absence at one and the same time. Whatever it manifests at the level of discourse, as fiction, is the inverse form of what will have thereby been marked as lacking in reality, the “something’s missing.” On this account the utopian work finds its referential function split in two, and in such a way that the resulting distribution of relations and their respective operations are not in alignment, cannot in fact be situated in relation to one another. The “distance between the indication of the absent term and the signifying figure” is, Marin insists, “unlocatable”: “Utopia is the systematic figure within discourse of a strategy for spatial play: it is between the text’s signifying and signified spaces” (197; 198). This is the referential arrangement that constitutes the specificity of utopia’s discursive operation, and this, as we have seen, is both its strength and its weakness.

“When it is transposed into the future, not only am I not there, but *utopia itself is also not with itself*,” says Bloch in ‘Something’s Missing,’ in a formulation that encapsulates this double bind (Bloch and Adorno 1988, 3; emphasis added). The specific vision it lends expression to seems always to remain in abeyance, as if estrangement from itself or being out of kilter with itself was ultimately utopia’s proper form; and yet it is only on account of this situation that it is able to undertake a critique of what is present. Irreality is not an impediment to this undertaking, but its condition. And this is nowhere more evident than when the possibility borne by utopia does achieve a form of realization: “the fulfillment of wishes takes something away from the substance of wishes,” Adorno insists here; “Above and beyond this one could perhaps say in general that the fulfillment of utopia consists largely only in a repetition of the continually same ‘today’” (1-2). Or, said otherwise, “Not only is utopia not ‘realizable,’ it cannot be realized without destroying itself” (Marin 1984, 274). It is in view of this state of affairs that Adorno announces an imperative here, which for him the work of utopian critique should at all times adhere to, if it is not to forfeit its own possibility from the outset. Stated in essence: “One may not cast a picture of utopia in a positive manner” (Bloch and Adorno 1988, 10). Whenever the prospect of utopia acquires a definite, readily identifiable form, whenever the something that is missing is explicitly named and decided upon, then the difference from what exists, on which utopia hangs, inevitably finds itself reduced and the potency of the possibility it carries diminished. Having conceded to the terms of what is already, the possible is made to speak in the language

of the actual, thereby contributing to the latter's continuation.<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this, incidentally, that accounts for Bloch's insistence on the phrase "something's missing" here: "This sentence, which is in *Mahagonny*, is one of the most profound sentences that Brecht ever wrote, and it is in two words" (15). Its importance consists in having indicated that something is missing without saying what this something is, only that it is missing. Which is not to say that the something must remain unknowable or unsayable; as Bloch also insists here, its openness does not preclude its being able to express a definite wish, which is, after all, what will have led to the sentence being uttered in the first place. Paradoxically, then, a utopia's critical force is exerted to the degree that the figure it delineates remains withdrawn from any recognizable form; its capacity to exercise a hold over reality, to intervene in the course along which reality is unfolding, depends upon maintaining itself in this state. "The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it... objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization" (Adorno 1998, 292-93).<sup>2</sup> This is the aporia to which every utopian effort is subject and that demands from its projection not a solution – it is irresolvable – but a response.

\*

It is against this background that I want to turn to Brecht once more, and a particular model of critique that takes shape across his wider work, one that is explicitly tied to the question of utopia understood in this sense. This enigmatic model is long in the making and appears in more than one configuration. It develops out of Brecht's interest in pedagogics, his experiments in instruction and learning, and the new social functions envisaged for a theatre that has been re-designed to provide these processes with a frame. And if it remains tied to the question of utopia, this is first and foremost because it tends to be treated by Brecht in an anticipatory mode. "The way in which superstructure comes about is: anticipation," he writes in a short text on the political function of culture, and this is one reason for "the revolutionary significance of superstructural work" (Brecht 2015, 107-08). A provisional form of this model can be found, for example, in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (1937-51), where the idea of a theatre that would be analogous to a "scientific institute" is broached in some detail by "the Philosopher," the character that Brecht has speak as the proselytizer for this new theatrical operation. As is made plain in his exposition, the context of such a performance would be not so much "art" as a "science of people's social life":



Science scans every field for openings for experiments or the plastic representation of problems. They make models showing the movements of the planets; they make ingenious apparatuses to demonstrate how gases behave... So it struck me that your art might serve to imitate people for the purposes of such demonstration. Incidents from people's social life, demanding an explanation, could be imitated in such a way as to confront one with plastic representations whose lessons could be practically applied. (Brecht 1965, 35)

The institution tasked with housing these representations would therefore have instruction as its primary purpose. "I thought we might use your imitations for perfectly practical ends," says the same character, "simply in order to find out the best way to behave. You see, we could make them into something like a physics (which deals with mechanical bodies), and so work out a technology" (1965, 17). Or, as Brecht suggests in a working note that accompanies *The Messingkauf*, at issue here is a

theatre for purely didactic purposes, which simply models people's movements (including psychological movements) so that they can be studied, showing the workings of social relationships in such a way that society can intervene... Criticism of the theatre leads to a new theatre. The whole thrown open to learning, with exercises and experiments. (106-07)

And to be clear, the intention informing such demonstrations is not simply to provide a means of making the structure of reality "recognizable," but something that can in turn be "seen through" (17). "One has to be able to see the laws that decide how the processes of life develop" (27). To see through a structure is to see it in light of the conditions that constitute it, but also to see these conditions in their contingency, as something that can therefore be refashioned.

Now the proposal for an institute devoted to the critical study of social life does indeed appear intermittently in Brecht's theoretical writing on the theatre and its contexts, in the form of what he refers to as *the pedagogium*. When, for example, the call is made in *A Short Organon for the Theatre* (1948) for a technical means of representing reality that sees "the theatre edge as close as possible to the apparatus of education and mass communication," the pedagogium could be considered the projection in which this network of relations has been realized (Brecht 2015, 236). It is by assembling this particular combination of functions in a single institution that a new practice of social

critique can be anticipated. Here is Ben Brewster on the nature of this critical apparatus and the protocols that would characterize its use:

The ‘pedagogium’... was to be an institution within a society of the future that would hold in some archived form models of every known and classified form of behavior. Members of the society could go into the pedagogium and draw out a particular action which for some reason concerned them, see it demonstrated and try it out for themselves. ... But Brecht also thought that its stock should by no means be restricted to socially useful actions... but should also include quite directly anti-social forms of behavior, models of which would be available on exactly the same basis (that is, the pedagogium would make no judgement as to what is or is not a socially useful action). (Brewster 1991, 199)

Envisaged as such, Brecht’s pedagogium would do nothing less than reproduce, in all its intricacy, the overarching social totality to which it is tied (a totality of which it is itself, of course, a part). It would form an immense storehouse of the social order’s various concretions, the vast array of behaviors and manners of which the latter is comprised. But it would do so in a space *set apart* from this order, under conditions that facilitate a “critical attitude” by offering up this or that incident of social life as an object of interrogation. Within the pedagogium the immediate, self-evident quality of a behavior or action would be stripped away. It would no longer appear as an unchangeable fact of nature – “milieu as fate,” Brecht says somewhere else, “immutable and inescapable” – but as the consequence of a specific organization of social relations (Brecht 2015, 53). And on account of the critical distance it opens up onto the social, the pedagogium prepares the way for the latter’s alteration.

In this sense the representations on which the pedagogical transfer depends here would be analogous to that key constituent of epic theatre, *the Gestus* (arguably the institution in question could just as easily be referred to as a “gestarium”) (Brecht 2016, 40). This form of demonstration is defined as follows: “By social gestus is meant the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period”; “the social gestus is the gestus relevant to society, the gestus that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances” (Brecht 2015, 187; 168).<sup>3</sup> This is what each model of action gives to be read, the point of view it has been constructed to be observed in light of, and in such a way that the act of observation elicits a judgment

from the one observing. In the pedagogium, an action would be detached from the field of social reality, bracketed off in this space apart, precisely so as to let the socially determinant element within it become discernible, since ordinarily this element remains dissimulated. The critical perspective onto this action rests with this “ability to abstract,” a prerequisite “for grasping societal processes” (Brecht 2003, 259).<sup>4</sup>

A key feature of the demonstration undertaken for the purpose of instruction is the technical innovation referred to by Brecht as the *alienation effect* (*Verfremdungseffekte*). “The V-effect consists in turning the object of which we are made to be aware, to which our attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected” (Brecht 2015, 192). Alienation, making strange, is thus a technique “designed to free socially-conditioned phenomena from the stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today” (242). Detachment and displacement, the operative principles around which this representational form is structured, are the means by which the social process is made explicit and knowledge concerning this process is produced. “The object of the V-effect is to estrange the social gestus underlying every incident” (187). It follows that the deployment of this technique is necessarily disruptive, “combative” Brecht says (2015, 261). The idea is central to a short text of Roland Barthes devoted to establishing a typology of the various critical practices found within Brecht’s work. For Barthes this technique makes contact with reality in a highly particular way: by opening up the received discursive order within which the subject’s social existence is inscribed. He writes:

All that we read and hear covers us like a layer, surrounds and envelops us like a medium: the logosphere. This logosphere is given to us by our period, our class, our métier: it is a ‘datum’ of our subject. Now, to displace what is given can only be the result of a shock... Brecht’s work seeks to elaborate a shock-practice (not a subversion: the shock is much more ‘realistic’ than a subversion); his critical art is one which opens up a crisis: which lacerates, which crackles the smooth surface, which fissures the crust of languages, loosens and dissolves the stickiness of the logosphere; it is an epic art: one which discontinues the textures of words, distances representation without annulling it. And what is this distancing, this discontinuity which provokes the Brechtian shock? It is merely a reading which detaches the sign from its effect. Have you ever seen a

Japanese pin? It is a dressmaker's pin whose head is a tiny bell, so that you cannot forget it once the garment has been finished. Brecht remakes the logosphere by leaving the bell-headed pins in it, the signs furbished with their tiny jingle... (Barthes 1989, 213-14)

This is one way of envisaging how reality would be modelled by the pedagogium. Each discrete action or behavior would appear bearing the critical mark which punctures the "smooth surface" that everyday experience ordinarily lends it. Through this mark its constructed nature would be made conspicuous. The question then becomes how to find the precise point at which to "pin" an action, such that the social mediations determining its given form are brought to the fore. This "shock-practice" entails a marked change in the way that discourse functions: "Hence, better than a semiology, what Brecht leaves us with is a seismology" (Barthes 1989, 214). Such is the form of knowledge required for the critical study of social life undertaken by the institute in question, and it shows the extent to which Brechtian critique derives an understanding of its object by drawing the latter into this state of "crisis."

There is more to say on the nature of the pedagogic practice envisaged by Brecht here. If the demonstrations in question are composed with a view to instruction, they only function as such through the active engagement of the participating subject.<sup>5</sup> The pedagogium's demonstrations would not simply be contemplated at a remove, but taken in hand, tried out, *practiced*. This recalls the terms of an early fragment, "Theory of Pedagogies" (1930), and its proposal for an educational exercise based around "play-acting" (*Theaterspielen*), in which participants would stage a course of action in such a way that at the same time they themselves could scrutinize it (Brecht 2003, 89). The aim of this practice is not to achieve the greatest possible degree of verisimilitude with the representation in question. The model of instruction is neither treated as a template nor imitated as an ideal. Rather, in the learning situation it takes on the function of a prop, a means for probing the composition of the action under interrogation, the reasons for its given form, what gives this form its apparent consistency, but also the extent to which this form can be reworked, and on what basis. The *Short Organon* gives a further intimation of how this exercise might function in this institutional setting:

The laws of motion of a society are not to be demonstrated by 'perfect examples' [*Idealfällen*], for 'imperfection' (inconsistency) is an essential part

of motion and of the thing moved. It is only necessary – but absolutely necessary – that there should be something approaching experimental conditions, i.e. that a counter-experiment should now and then be conceivable. Altogether this is a way of treating society as if all its actions were performed as experiments. (Brecht 2015, 245)

It is in this sense that the model of instruction around which the critical exercise revolves here would not have a fixed form. It is variable in essence. Indeed, it must be capable of tolerating a degree of variation that allows it to be treated as its own counter-case. This is what it means for a representation to be *praktikabel*, to use Brecht's favored term here, "workable." It is structured to facilitate a practice and an understanding as to how this practice can insert itself into reality. And to reiterate, the critical exercises through which this practice is tested and refined are a source of pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere in the *Short Organon*, in the course of discussing the ways in which a dramatic character is handled through the application of the V-effect, Brecht gives a further indication as to how this demonstration would actually manifest itself. The very particular efforts that go into building up the depiction – the character assessed and assembled by the actor through a process of "hypothetical adjustments [*fiktive Montagen*]," its lineaments drawn from the resulting table of variants, each the concretion of a "motive force" – these experiments should not, Brecht argues, simply underwrite the performance. Rather, as the latter's condition they should be integrated into the staging itself, the test material conscientiously left on display:

The [stage] image that gives historical definition will retain something of the rough sketching which indicates traces of other movements and features all around the fully-worked-out figure. Or imagine a man standing in a valley and making a speech in which he occasionally changes his views or simply utters sentences which contradict one another, so that the accompanying echo forces them into confrontation. (Brecht 2015, 240-41)

Again, the model of action in the pedagogium would have something of this structure: a figure that hangs together but does not necessarily cohere, a figure that constitutively remains *in process*. For Brecht the formation of a *kritische Haltung* – the "attitude" or

“bearing,” “stance” or “posture” to which this idea of critique is tied – is drawn out of this differential configuration, and one of the institutional functions required here would be to maintain a record of the “traces of sketching” generated by the pedagogical exercise.

At the same time, it is important to note that this learning situation should not be considered free of the social contradictions it is tasked with analyzing. The span of Brecht’s writing concerned with instruction in the theatre draws attention to this circumstance on more than one occasion. On the one hand, the mode of participation required by a theatre designed to instruct implies a “qualitative change” in the nature of spectatorship. In a collection of notes on “Dialectical Drama,” for example, Brecht anticipates a point at which such a performance would no longer be subject to the commodity relation. Its spectators would cease to form “a purchasing collective”: “Individuals are not just consumers any more – they have to produce” (Brecht 2015, 58). Instead, the theatre would become “a public concern,” a means by which the collective would be brought before itself with a view to determining what its concerns as a collective are. With this theatre of instruction (*Lehrtheater*), he writes in a striking formulation, “Subject matter is declared common property, it is ‘nationalized,’ a prerequisite for study, and formal principles – as the means of putting the subject matter to use – are also a crucial aspect of the spectator’s work (and study)” (59).<sup>7</sup> This on the one hand. But on the other, and Brecht insists on this with equal force, the collective with which this pedagogical practice is concerned is not reconciled with itself: “Learning has a very different function for different social strata” (113). Thus, in “On Experimental Theatre,” a text that looks back over the rapid development of the theatre in this direction, he writes: “Such productions split the audience into at least two mutually hostile social groups, and thus put a stop to any common experience of art. The fact is a political one. The pleasure of learning depends on the class situation” (138). The disharmony to which “bourgeois society” is subject extends to encompass the idea of learning itself. It is a feature of this society, Brecht insists, as well as the process of production governing it, that any connection between learning and enjoyment has been severed. For this society, these are mutually exclusive terms: learning is unenjoyable, enjoyment cannot be learnt from (95). The many and varied efforts on his part to develop a pedagogic practice that contests this arrangement – “there is such a thing as pleasurable learning” (113) – is itself a fundamental feature of his own “critical stance.”

Returning to the institutional setting envisaged for this study of social life, for the pedagogium to fulfil its critical function, it must reproduce social reality in its totality. It provides a template for all actions, not simply those that are generally presumed to be favorable (To reiterate: the pedagogium's "stock should by no means be restricted to socially useful actions... but should also include quite directly anti-social forms of behavior, models of which would be available on exactly the same basis" (Brewster 1991, 199)). Here it is worth recalling the inventory of behaviors drawn up by the Philosopher in *The Messingkauf* as possible points of focus for the science in question (not least for the way it passes back and forth between the "good" and the "bad"). It includes but is of course not limited to

The way [people] get along with each other, the way they develop friendships and enmities, sell onions, plan military campaigns, get married, make tweed suits, circulate forged bank-notes, dig potatoes, observe heavenly bodies; the way they cheat, favor, teach, exploit, respect, mutilate and support one another; the way they hold meetings, form societies, conduct intrigues. (Brecht 1965, 17)

The pedagogium therefore provides the framework through which the antisocial character of an action could be submitted to interrogation, just as a laboratory provides the setting for a scientist to study a virus within controlled conditions, with a view to developing a vaccine. As with any other action, it too would be actively tried out, but in a forum that cuts it off from its consequences when undertaken in reality. A means of drawing poison from the wound, by allowing the action's motivating force to come into view and a judgment to be formed about it. The "Theory of Pedagogies" fragment also insists on this aspect of the pedagogical practice:

[I]t is precisely the representation of antisocial behavior by the state's developing citizens that is very beneficial to the state, particularly if that representation is enacted according to exact and magnificent models. The state can best improve upon humanity's antisocial drives - which derive from fear and ignorance - by forcing them out of everybody in the most complete form possible, a form which is almost unattainable by the individual on his own. This is the basis for the idea of using play-acting in pedagogies. (Brecht 2003, 89)<sup>8</sup>

As ever, the "form" that this exercise gives rise to is something to be studied, and the aim of this study is to re-fashion the subjective arrangement out of which this form was

forced. “There is a great deal to human beings, we say, so a great deal can be made out of them. They do not have to stay the way they are; they may be looked at not only as they are now, but also as they *might be*” (Brecht 2015, 243; emphasis added).

This brings us back, finally, to the explicitly utopian aspect of Brecht’s proposal. Of course, the pedagogium remains, now as then, a prospect yet to be realized, even if the schema of critique guiding Brecht’s vision is discernible in an array of contemporary cultural contexts.<sup>9</sup> To take up Ricoeur’s understanding of the critical function of utopia once more:

Perhaps a fundamental structure of the reflexivity we may apply to our social roles is the ability to conceive of an empty place from which to look at ourselves... From this ‘no place’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted... The nowhere puts the cultural system at a distance; we see our cultural system from the outside precisely thanks to this nowhere. (Ricoeur 1986, 15; 17)

With respect to the reality it has been tasked with interrogating, the pedagogium occupies a site analogous to the *nowhere* conceived in these terms. It is utopian as the embodiment of this exterior glance, “an empty place from which to look at ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> But what must also be recognized here is the extent to which the critical practice undertaken in the pedagogium appears to operate in strict adherence with the paradoxical imperative to which utopia is subject, as Adorno understands it in “Something’s Missing.” “Utopia,” he suggests there, “is essentially in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what should be” (Bloch and Adorno 1988, 12). Carried to this extreme, “utopia” stands for nothing other than the open-ended contestation – the *determinate* negation – of reality’s present form, a process by which the latter is taken apart on its own terms, without ever looking beyond it. “Insofar as we are not allowed to cast a picture of utopia, insofar as we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is” (1988, 12). Now this is precisely how society’s existing arrangement would be treated by the pedagogium. Its “critique of what is present” sets in place the conditions for another world only insofar as it purposely refrains from indicating what the actual content of this transformed world would consist in. That is to say, if the pedagogium coincides with the empty place of utopia, it does not fill it in. It does not cast a picture. Instead, it simply concerns itself



with dismantling the “false” forms of life through which the present social order would otherwise continue to reproduce itself. By placing the utopian function exclusively in the service of critique, the pedagogium would ensure that society henceforth had an apparatus through which to observe itself and a site from which to transform itself. To recall our point of departure: “Criticizing the course of a river means improving it, correcting it. Criticism of society is ultimately revolution: there you have criticism taken to its logical conclusion and achieved” (Brecht 2015, 195).

All this implies a redistribution of the categories that organize the utopian effort. In her critical study of the classical canon of utopian discourse, Grosz writes the following:

Utopia, like the dialectic itself, is commonly fantasized as the end of time, the end of history, the moment of resolution of past problems... The ideal society, society in its perfection, is represented as the cessation of becoming, the overcoming of problems, a calm and ongoing resolution. While a picture of the future, the utopic is fundamentally that which *has no future*... (Grosz 2001, 138-39)

Contrary to this understanding of utopia, Brecht’s proposal constitutes a singular experiment, inasmuch as its projection of the future does not close off the future’s further development in the name of a finally attained ideal. Rather, the pedagogium’s primary purpose is to keep the future open and in process, with critique understood as a means of maintaining the variability of social forms. It is this that makes *Veränderbarkeit*, changeability, the watchword of utopian critique.

\*

A final question, by way of conclusion. How would a critical practice devoted to the study of socially inflected action be undertaken today? What would be the historically specific typology of behaviors that constitute the object of such a study? In short, what, today, should the critical attitude be brought to bear on? The work of French artist Julien Prévieux has taken significant steps to develop a response to these questions. Of particular interest here is a series of works brought together under the title *What Shall We Do Next?* (2007-11).<sup>11</sup> The series is based around a number of applications made to the US patent office by various corporate concerns, registering the set of discrete movements required to engage with the interface of newly invented technical objects. These “patented gestures” are then modelled by Prévieux in a variety of forms, from a 3D animation (*Sequence #1*) to a physical performance where the patents are used as a

dance score (*Sequence #2*). As the artist explains in a discussion of the work, in each case these demonstrations concern a prospective behavior, an anticipated use of the body (since the device that supports the gesture is not yet in production): “The assumption was that these gestures patented today are the movements we may have to do in the future: patents as an archive of gestures to come” (Will Brown 2016). What Prévieux brings into view with these demonstrations is therefore the extent to which present day “techniques of the body” are determined by market forces in increasingly refined ways, administered according to a technical standard that is not in common ownership, and which makes of bodily movement itself a prospective expression of exchange value. Structurally speaking, then, these demonstrations are synonymous with the Brechtian *social gestus* (“the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period” (Brecht 2015, 187)). They display human motion in relation to the technical, economic, legal network that conditions it. At the same time the meticulous staging of this gestic performance, in its own way a form of “play-acting,” is immediately recognizable as a source of enjoyment for performer and spectator alike, and it is this juxtaposition of pleasure and instruction, achieved through collective endeavor that places Prévieux’s “archive of gestures to come” in the same critical lineage as Brecht’s pedagogium. “Why do we move the way we do?” asks the artist in the same discussion, “Who owns our gestures? How will we move in one, 10 or 100 years?” (Will Brown 2016) The critical attitude discernible in these questions is Brechtian inasmuch as it seeks to open up a future different to the one that is being prepared by today’s social order.

### *Bibliography*

Adorno, Theodor W. 1998. “Resignation.” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Translated by Henry W. Pickford, 289-93. New York: Columbia University Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1989. “Brecht and Discourse: A Contribution to the Study of Discursivity.” In *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard, 212-22. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bloch, Ernst. 1986. *The Principle of Hope*. Vol. 1. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephanie Plaice and Paul Knight. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Bloch, Ernst, and Theodor W. Adorno. 1988. "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing." In *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, 1-17. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland. Dijon: Les Presses du réel.

Brecht, Bertolt. 2003. *Brecht on Art and Politics*. Edited by Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles. Translated by Tom Kuhn, Steve Giles and Laura Bradley. London: Bloomsbury Methuen.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1992. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Edited and translated by John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2015. *Brecht on Theatre*. 3rd ed. Edited by Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn. London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2016. *Journals, 1934-55*. Edited by John Willett. Translated by Hugh Rorrison. London: Methuen.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1965. *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. Translated by John Willett. London: Methuen.

Brewster, Ben. 1991. "The Fundamental Reproach (Bertolt Brecht and the Cinema)." In *Explorations in Film Theory: Selected Essays from Ciné-Tracts*, 191-200. Edited by Ronald F. Burnett. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Grosz, Elizabeth. 2001. "Embodied Utopias: The Time of Architecture." In *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, 131-150. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Guattari, Félix. 2000. *The Three Ecologies*. Translated by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton. London and New York: Continuum.

Kracauer, Siegfried. 2012. "Talk with Teddie." In *Siegfried Kracauer's American Writings: Essays on Film and Popular Culture*, 127-132. Edited by Johannes von Moltke and Kristy Rawson. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Marin, Louis. 1984. *Utopics: Spatial Play*. Translated by Robert A. Vollrath. Amhurst: Humanity Books.

Mauss, Marcel. 1973. "Techniques of the Body." Translated by Ben Brewster. In *Economy and Society*, 2:1. 70-88.

Mueller, Roswitha. 2006. "Learning for a New Society: The *Lehrstück*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 101-17. Edited by Peter Thompson and Glendyr Sacks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Préviex, Julien. 2009. *Gestion des stocks*. Lyon: ADERA.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1986. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. Edited by George H. Taylor. New York: Columbia University Press.

Will Brown, A. 2016. "Julien Préviex: 'Humour is a good fighting trick.'" *Studio International*, February 22, 2016.

<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/julien-previeux-rachel-cook-interview-what-shall-we-do-next-diverseworks-houston>.

---

<sup>1</sup> For Elizabeth Grosz this tendency threatens the tenability of utopia as a mode of critique: "The utopian is not the projection of a future at all, although this is how it is usually understood; rather, it is the projection of a past or present as if it were the future. The utopian is in fact a freezing of the indeterminable movement from the past through the future that the present is unable to directly control" (Grosz 2001, 143).

<sup>2</sup> Certainly, this axiom has its detractors. See, by way of example, Siegfried Kracauer's account of an exchange with Adorno on this question: "*Concept of Utopia*: I argued that he [Adorno] uses this concept in a purely formal way, as a borderline concept (*Grenzbegriff*) which at the end invariably emerges like a *Deus ex Machina*. In my opinion, I told him, Utopian thought makes sense only if it assumes the form of a vision or intuition with a definite content of a sort. T. was inclined to admit the justice of my argument... His intention is then to show that the concept of utopia is a *vanishing* concept when besieged; it vanishes if you want to spell it out" (Kracauer 2012, 127).

<sup>3</sup> Here Brecht's method shows several points of convergence with Marcel Mauss's understanding of the *habitus*: for Mauss, even in its most prosaic modes of comportment the human body must be understood as a social artefact. Its habitus is shaped by an open-ended exercise in "collective and individual practical reason." Furthermore, the techniques that govern the body, stipulating how it is used, imply a process of "*education*": "In every society, everyone knows and has to know and learn what he has to do in all conditions... The individual borrows the series of movements which constitute it from the action executed in front of him or with him by others" (Mauss 1973, 85; 73).

<sup>4</sup> Looking across the body of research materials assembled by Brecht on this theme, it is possible to envisage how this act of observation might actually take place *in situ*: for example, the proxemics it implies could be said to resemble the structure of engagement associated by Schiller with the epic form, in contrast to the dramatic, as outlined in a letter to Goethe that remained a critical point of reference for Brecht in his work on this theme: "A dramatic plot will move before my eyes; an epic seems to stand still while I move around it. In my view this is a significant distinction. If a circumstance moves before my eyes, then I am bound strictly to what is present to the senses; my imagination loses all freedom; I feel a continual restlessness develop and persist in me; I have to stick to the subject; any reflection or looking back is forbidden me, for I am drawn by an outside force. But if I move round a circumstance which cannot get away from me, then my pace can be irregular; I can linger or hurry according to my own subjective needs, can take a step backwards or leap ahead, and so forth" (Schiller, quoted in Brecht 1992, 210). Observation achieved through the mobility of perspective, the ease of transition from one perspective to another, allowing the representation to be seen from a variety of angles, at a tempo determined by the observer themselves: the pedagogium's spatial arrangement would have to be structured with a view to facilitating these processes.

<sup>5</sup> As Brewster notes in his outline of the proposal (199), the idea can be said to have developed out of that singular mode of theatre to which Brecht gave the name *learning play* (*Lehrstück*), and which forms its own unique canon within his theatrical work as a whole. For an expansive survey of the "structural innovations" associated with this experiment – a theatre without set text or definitive form, undertaken through a set of exercises that abolish the "performance/audience gap," so that the theatrical operation extends well beyond the confines traditionally reserved for it – see Roswitha Mueller's "Learning for a

---

New Society: The *Lehrstück*,” not least for her suggestion that in their given context these innovations make the learning play a “genuinely utopian project” (112).

<sup>6</sup> See the early article “More Good Sport” (1926) in support of this point: what the theatre has to learn from the sporting event, Brecht argues, is that in the latter’s case the performer’s demonstration of skill is undertaken primarily for the performer’s own enjoyment. For Brecht this is what makes the sporting performance involving to the onlooker. If traditional theatre lacks “sport” in this sense, one sign of a critical theatre’s emergence is its attempt to cultivate a participatory practice within which pleasure has a role to play (2015, 25).

<sup>7</sup> The sense of “common property” invoked here is further elucidated by a closing statement made by the Philosopher in a variant ending to *The Messingkauf*: “The art of acting needs to be treated simply as an elementary human utterance which contains its own purpose. That’s where it differs from the art of war, whose purpose is external to itself. The art of acting is one of society’s elementary capacities; it is based on a direct social asset, one of humanity’s pleasures in society; it is like language itself; it’s really a language of its own.” (Brecht 1992, 172)

<sup>8</sup> This thesis has its counterpart in Félix Guattari’s analysis of social practice in *The Three Ecologies*: “Any persistently intolerant and uninventive society that fails to ‘imagine’ the various manifestations of violence risks seeing this violence crystallized in the Real.” (Guattari 2000, 58)

<sup>9</sup> To take just one of several possible points of reference here, see Nicholas Bourriaud’s study of the *relational turn* in aesthetics and the emergence of a model of art production built around “the realm of human interactions.” For Bourriaud this new aesthetic form has not developed arbitrarily, but as a counter-tendency to the “general reification” imposed by contemporary society: “The social bond has turned into a standardised artefact,” he writes, and on this account “artistic praxis appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments, like a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns” (Bourriaud 2002, 9). This could be Brecht speaking. Furthermore, utopia has its role to play in this relational model of art, albeit with a further qualification made by the author: in its “universalist” form utopia must be considered obsolete. It can no longer serve as a grand narrative. Any efficacy it still has rests with its capacity to intervene in reality itself, here and now. A “hands-on utopia” in the parlance of *Relational Aesthetics*. “These days, utopia is being lived on a subjective, everyday basis, in the real time of concrete and intentionally fragmented experiments. The artwork is presented as a social interstice within which these experiments and these new ‘life possibilities’ appear to be possible.” (45)

<sup>10</sup> This association can also be understood through Marin: “Utopia as a figure inscribed within a fable-producing discourse puts ideological discourse and its representations into play in a double sense – implicitly but critically questioning them and setting them apart in order to reflect upon the presuppositions of their internal systems” (Marin 1984, 195). This motion of *setting apart* in order to *see through* is the Brechtian gesture of critique in essence, the V-effect in action.

<sup>11</sup> For the schematization underlying the various manifestations of this work, see the artist’s *Gestion des stocks* (Prévieux 2009, 48-53).