

Staging “Impossible Tension”:
The Brechtian *Gestus* as a Disruptor of Progress
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Angel Novus by Paul Klee. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Introduction

In 2009, my all-girls high school in Los Angeles eliminated boys from participating in the productions. This way, the female students had the opportunity to perform a wider variety of roles. Thus, each November and April we would bravely saunter out on stage donning the fake beards glued to our faces with our newly formed breasts bound to our chests and deliver our lines in front of our peers and parents. It was gravely serious to us and utterly hilarious to everyone else: fifteen-odd pubescent girls from Hancock Park playing the great heroes of the western cannon. These productions deeply investigated theatrical artifice and formed my fascination with Brecht and his belief in the double-headed nature of reality.

This fascination culminated when my sophomore year of high school, when my best friend Emma was double cast as Old King Theseus and the fairy servant Peaseblossom in our production of a *Midsummer Night's Dream*. On opening night Theseus got her period onstage for the first time ever in front of an auditorium of people. It was a horrific and hilarious surprise that epitomized the spontaneous and contradictory goal of Brecht's Epic Theater. Time halted as every parent, student and cast member was confronted with the stakes of the present moment: a teenage girl with a beard and a cane menstruating for the first time.

Critical theorist and theater practitioner, Bertolt Brecht, believes that to interpret reality by a singular, predetermined order is to sell out to some banal and dangerous illusion. Beloved American playwright and Brecht fanatic, Tony Kushner, describes Brechtian illusion-shattering techniques as moves that "make the familiar

strange and the strange familiar”.¹ Therefore, his theater seeks to depose illusion in order to highlight theater’s inherent tension between artifice and reality: an “impossible tension” that he claims is just like life.² The theater develops our awareness of this tension, as it constantly holds us in belief and disbelief, asking us to experience both realities (epic Shakespearean tragedy and monotonous high-school play) at once.

Emma’s traumatized glance down at her blood-soaked trousers, 500-year-old Shakespearean words in her mouth and 16-year-old raging hormones in her brain is the most specific way I have come to understand the spectacle of Brecht’s “impossible tension.” This moment holds both realities together at once, epitomizing the double-headed nature of reality that Brecht uses Theater to realize. We were not instructed how to feel or what to do. This brief glance and communal pause commanded everyone in the room back into the present: a surprise, a hiccup, a bated breath. We were suspended in the contradictory discomfort of life.

In this essay I highlight moments of communal pause or disruption and how they relate to Brecht’s concept of *Gestus*. Through theatrical praxes like narratively dissonant plots with un-tragic heroes, a closer audience/actor proximity, and a system of citational gesture known as *Gestus*, Brecht’s Epic Theater interrupts many traditional conventions of “the dramatic” (i.e. canonical western theater).³ This theater rejects the Western prioritization of “emotional empathy” and instead seeks to keep audiences at a distance so they can remain critical of the actions and choices

¹ Tony Kushner, interview by Jill Taft-Kauffman, January, 2004, interview 1, PDF.

² Kushner, *A TPQ Interview*, 54.

³ Walter Benjamin, "What Is the Epic Theater?," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003).

being played out before them. This “distance” is what Brecht calls *Verfremdungseffekt*.

Verfremdungseffekt is also known as the “Alienation Effect”⁴ or the “Distancing” or the “Estrangement Effect.”⁵ Different scholars and translators interpret the term differently, which I point out in order to further the comprehension of this translated philosophy. Tony Kushner, translates the term as an effect of “strangeness” instead of “distance.” Kushner makes this distinction in order to clarify Brecht’s relationship to the audience, he emphasizes how Brecht actually wanted to close the divide between passive audience and engaged performer: “it's not a lack of feeling on either part.”⁶ Walter Benjamin cites the French classical theater tradition of putting the audience in armchairs onstage as an arrangement that could most closely resemble “what Brecht had in mind... intimately associating the audience with the action onstage.”⁷ Brecht’s experiments with didactic language, stripped down sets, and moral-less parable plot structures is not an abandonment of the audience. Instead such strange-making strategies seek to re-orient the hierarchy of priorities within the theater space: a relationship with the audience that is “not primarily emotion, but a kind of theatricalization of the intellectual process.”⁸

In Spring 1935, Brecht travelled to Beijing and attended the Chinese Opera.⁹ Historians assume this period was his foray into many of his theoretical beliefs about the theatre. “Chinese theater”, he writes, “discourages the involvement of the

⁴ John Willet & Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 1 ed. (New York: New York, Hill and Wang, 1964), Theater.

⁵ Kushner, *A TPQ Interview*, 51.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Benjamin, *What is Epic Theater*, 303.

⁸ Kushner, *A TPQ Interview*, 51.

⁹ Stephen Parker (Stephen R.), *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life* (London: London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

audience in an illusory world and in the emotion of the characters,” through several conventions like symbolism and mask work.¹⁰ In his essay, *The Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting*, Brecht positions Eastern and Western art in opposition to one another, purporting that Western theater is heavily invested in illusion with the goal of the actor and audience feeling the same thing.¹¹ It seeks to draw the audience as close as possible while Eastern theater “does not try to make the audience feel anything other than what the audience is feeling.”¹² *Verfremdungseffekt*, however, does not garner “emotionlessness.”¹³ The spectator is encouraged to laugh when the actor cries, or cry when they laugh. It is at this juncture, that the theater, for Brecht, becomes a political and critical experience: “not a mirror with which to reflect society, but a tool with which to shape it.”¹⁴ The criticality occurs when audiences are held at enough of a distance so that they can see themselves and how they influence society (and society influences them).

This illusion-less approach to acting rests on the fact that the actor clearly demonstrates that he is being looked at. As a result, the audience can no longer reside as unseen spectators. Brecht hoped the Epic Theater would startle awake the “cowed hypnotized mass” of bourgeois theatergoers.¹⁵ He believed theater should never be mistaken for reality and therefore the techniques must make it possible to give an

¹⁰ Bertolt Brecht & Eric Bentley, "On Chinese Acting," *The Tulane Drama Review* 6, no. 1 (1961), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1125011>.

¹¹ Though Brecht garners many political and aesthetic inspirations from the experience and refers to it often with some tone of expertise, there is no record of him ever formally studying Chinese theater, as he refers to its aesthetics very superficially.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Bentley and Brecht, *On Chinese Acting*, 133.

¹⁴ National Theatre Discover, "An Introduction to Brechtian Theatre," (Youtube, 2012).

¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for Theater," in *Brecht on Theatre: Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: New York, Hill and Wang, 1949).

accurate representation of the labor, finances, and all others circumstances that produced the piece onstage.¹⁶ This objective can take many forms, for example the design of the sets should reveal the money and labor that went into building the theater piece (the commodity).¹⁷

Here we find the “thinking spectator,” who can consume the art before them as a politically critical subject. This prioritization of the “thinking subject,” as Adorno puts it, is also a theme in Brecht’s theatrical characters and plots as well.¹⁸ Brechtian protagonists are “un-tragic” heroes that dispassionately muddle their ways through his sporadic, episodic plots.¹⁹ Un-tragic heroes do not assist in the great Aristotelian project of “catharsis” by stirring empathic identification between actor and audience. Instead *Verfremdungseffekt* only uses empathic familiarity in order to then make it strange. As a result, the audience is astonished at the atrocities they can happen in even the most ordinary of circumstances. These practices of defamiliarization hopefully stir audiences to reevaluate their ordinary lives.

In its most basic form, *Gestus* is a gestural interruption in the flow of the plot. These gestures are employed as a citational tool. Similar to a footnote’s function in an essay, their use and repetition simultaneously interrupt the actor’s speech and explain the plot. The *Gestus*, like the didactic plainspoken verse achieves alienation through “simplification.”²⁰ Brecht’s linguistic didacticism supports the actors’ task of having

¹⁶ Emma’s onstage menstruation is another example of how *Verfremdungseffekt* can be employed. It reminded the audience that the play was being performed by teenage girls at an elite all-girls prep school.

¹⁷ Brecht. *A Short Organum*. 15

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arata and Eike Gebhardt (New York: New York: Urizen Books, 1978).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

to doubly perform themselves and their characters. Adorno notes that the clunky, straightforward tone of Brecht's verse articulates the theoretical duplicity that he is trying to achieve, "its language shows how far the underlying poetic subject and its message have come apart."²¹ In other words, there is no pretending that the actor is the character himself. This process of repetitive and intentional elimination of artifice serves Brecht's greater goal of teaching his audience to look at the theater doubly. Tony Kushner finds the double-ness to be the most poignant aspect of Brecht's theory as it also emphasizes the unique magic of the theatrical medium. In order to explain how he employed this convention in his most famous play *Angels in America* Kushner discusses the challenges of adapting the stage play for the screen:

With *Angels in America*, we had a big discussion about [the doubleness of Brecht] for the film because they were going to digitally remove the wires, but onstage, of course, you can't do that. That's why the stage, in its way, is a radically different form. And people are always getting upset because they can see the wires. But the wire, of course, is the point. You know that some unfortunate actress's back is going to be broken by the end of the run, being lowered in a harness. But if it's a really great production of it, you have a feeling at the same time that you know that it's not real, that you're seeing something kind of supernatural and magical. And that doubleness—that's the only way to get through life.²²

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kushner, *A TPQ Interview*, 53.

Kushner points out the essential contradiction of the theater that Brecht also adamantly defends. The stage creates an illusion that is both effective and not effective at the same time because it asks you to believe deeply in the angel's supernatural flight while also being totally aware that she is an actress being held up by an artificial wire. Therefore, the wire is the most important part. The wire (and the theater in general) helps us comprehend the ways in which life routinely demands this doubleness. As I laid out before, it asks us to hold these two contradictory awarenesses, belief and disbelief, together in one "impossible tension."²³

The "impossible tension" of Brechtian theater prioritizes contradictions, unpredictability, and open-endedness. His plays do not offer solutions, as much as pose observations about society for the audience to take away and decipher. One of his seminal theoretical texts, *Theatre for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction* addresses this tradition of Aristotelian theater resolving in one ontological moral.²⁴ But in Brechtian theater, "instruction" manifests not as a heavy-handed solution passed down from playwright to spectator. Instead it is a formal instruction of how to instruct oneself. Thus, Brecht eliminates the moral altogether. The final epilogue of one of his most famous plays, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, exemplifies this desired open-endedness as the actors halt the climatically dooming finale. The Gods are about to exit and leave helpless Shen Te stranded and ill-equipped to carry out their ancient commandments:

²³ National Theater Discover.

²⁴ Bertolt Brecht, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," in *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willet (New York: New York, Hill and Wang, 1936).

Honorable audience, don't feel cheated

If as we end you feel defeated....

In order for our message to work, please send your friends.

But our story, dear patrons, how would you resolve it?

The world's a conundrum! Don't ask us to solve it!

Are you disgruntled? Do you disapprove?

Should people be better? Should the world improve?

Should we have better Gods, or perhaps, none at all?

Well we've have our say. Now, our backs to the wall,

We're turning to you to redeem this defeat.

Should you as you sit in your theatre seat,

Choose to take on yourselves the need to defend

The good of the world, we might make a good end.²⁵

Here, we see Brecht's intimate awareness of History and Progress.²⁶ Many of his contemporaries in the Frankfurt School of theorists, were principally concerned with the trajectory and pace of History. Disillusioned from the human-driven catastrophes of World War II, theorists like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno began to theorize about Progress not as a situation of inevitable positive improvement, but as a

²⁵*The Good Person of Szechwan* = *Der Gute Mensch Von Sezuan*, Parallel Text ed. ed. (London: London: Methuen Drama, 2010).

²⁶ For the purpose of my analysis, I capitalize these two words, Progress and History, in order to distinguish them from their more humble and neutral noun-form (and in the case of Progress also its verb conjugation, 'to progress'). Capital-P Progress and capital-H History invokes the hegemonic structures that monopolize our ideological and societal understanding of these words. The History that is written by the white Western colonizers and the Progress enforced by the technologized Capitalist economies. Capitalization is a signifier of superior power designed by said language-making colonizers and thus it is the grammatical tool that I use to talk about them.

socio-temporal condition of History. Twenty-first century philosopher Peter Sloterdijk furthers this pessimistic Frankfurt School critique, proposing that a “philosophical discourse of modernity is not possible except as a critical theory of mobilization.”²⁷ In other words, the way we come to use and define the concept of Progress since the Enlightenment is first and foremost its character of continual movement (mobilization). The “storm of Progress,”²⁸ as Benjamin calls it, is more preoccupied with always moving forward with “its kinetic impulse”²⁹ than with genuine social betterment. First used into the 15th century, the word ‘Progress’ emerges contemporaneously with the Modern Era as nation states were increasingly preoccupied with trans-Atlantic conquest, technological development and non-theocratic rulers. Progress is woven into technology, colonialism, industry, democracy and Capitalism. The colloquial ‘making progress’ is the way we articulate whether our ‘time-spent’ living is productive or not.

I argue that today we define Progress as an inescapable kineticism and such a definition has become both a requirement for success and an expectation for our everyday lives. Is Progress truly as inevitable or as “irresistible”³⁰ as we have made it out to be? If we are always progressing as a society, why do we repeat ourselves or make the same historical mistakes? Is the singular trajectory Progress a one-size-fit-all? If not, is holistic Progress even possible? What happens when/if it ends or even

²⁷ André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York ; London: New York; London : Routledge, 2006).

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

²⁹ Lepecki, *The Political Ontology of Movement*, 3.

³⁰ Sarah Beth V. Kitch, "The Immovable Foundation of the Infinite and Immortal: Tocqueville's Philosophical Anthropology," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4 (2016).

just momentarily pauses? I further argue that the Brechtian *Gestus*, challenges the kinetic rigidity of Progress by imagining a pause, a stillness. Translated by John Willet as a “gist of an attitude”, the *Gestus* serves as a textual, temporal, and kinetic disturbance in which the entire stage halts in stillness. The insertion of a completely still, static gesture, amidst the didactic narrative plots of Brecht’s plays proposes new ways of understanding time and Progress.

In order to write more specifically about *Gestus*, I analyze Faye Driscoll’s dance theater piece *Attendance: Thank You For Coming* and the ways in which her experiments with choreographing “live stop motion” accomplish the same disruptive and anti-kinetic possibility as Brecht’s *Gestus*.³¹ Paired with the theoretical framework laid out by Brecht, Driscoll’s choreography will usher his 20th century musings into a 21st century Late Capitalist relevance. Driscoll defines dance as an “embodied antidote” to loneliness and an alternative to Language (“which often falls short”).³² She sets her work in a “kind of contemporary ritual space,” where we lose track of History as “we might sense and feel that we are co-creating something together in real time.”³³ Through Driscoll’s *Attendance*, I investigate the ways in which these experiments with duration and stillness in “real time” function like the Brechtian *Gestus* to disrupt the homogenizing flow of Progress. In her work, Driscoll theorizes about what can happen upon the execution of such kinetic disruptions, when an audience full of strangers turns off their phones, sits with their knees touching, and

³¹ Faye Driscoll, *Thank You for Coming: Attendance*, 2015.

³² interview by Philip Bither, 2016, video.

³³ Ibid.

unites in laughter and attention. “It is curiosity. It is recognition” she says.³⁴ The stillness, an “embodied antidote” to the kinetic perpetuity of Progress, is not just an aesthetic choreography or a narrative convention to clarify Brecht’s character-dense plays but a disruptive relational imagining that prioritizes inter-personal “recognition” as an alternative to the modern project of Progress.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter One, I define *Gestus* in terms of Brecht’s greater theoretical framework. I will analyze the ways in which this 20th century aesthetic principle fits in with our current Late Capitalist modernity and can be re-oriented past its priority of mere criticality and towards a disruptive, social remedy against Progress. I outline the aesthetic conventions of *Gestus* drawing from the Brecht’s own work (*A Short Organum for the Theater* and *Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction* primarily). This thorough summary of *Gestus* is broken down into several tenets that focus particularly on its relationship to time and motility. The notes of Walter Benjamin and Fredric Jameson, who write fondly of Brecht’s theater and further assists me in connecting his aesthetic description of the “social gest” with his political critique.

Chapter Two begins by defining what I mean by the term Progress and why it merits disruption. Reading the observations of the Frankfurt School theorists Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno with 21st century dance theorist Andre Lepecki and philosopher Peter Sloterdijk trace how society’s understanding of Progress has

³⁴ Ibid.

become inextricably aligned with continual movement. These theorists help me articulate how the *Gestus* is relevant to political Progress and lend theoretical language to what occurs when “the flow” of Progress is interrupted. Walter Benjamin’s famous *Theses of History* and Adorno’s *History and Freedom* both look at History and Progress as inevitable but detrimental forces. Lepecki’s book *The Political Ontology of Movement* calls upon the ways in which “embodied stillness” onstage could disrupt the flow of Western dance and propose the possibility of more autonomous futures. To bolster my theoretical analyses, I perform a close-reading of Faye Driscoll’s dance-theater piece *Thank you for Coming: Attendance*. Applying Emmanuel Lévinas’s theory of Recognition, I specifically assess how Faye’s choreography investigates time (duration and speed). Her “stop-motion” section, as she names it, exemplifies the way in which still-acts like the Brechtian *Gestus* disrupt the “flow” of conventional gestures or movement that constructs our everyday social experiences. This series of interruptions rethinks Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* in Late Capitalism’s digital age and repurposes the *Gestus* as a disruptive yet benevolent opportunity for interpersonal connection.

Chapter One: The Social *Gestus* and its Contradictions

The Brechtian *Gestus* is a highly contested convention amongst Brecht scholars—its definitions range from the broadest conceptualizations to the most specific of technical choreographies. This dissolution of agreed-upon understanding feels apropos for Brecht who consistently emphasizes non-essentialism throughout his aesthetic theory and practice. He condemns all art that relies on one “central notion or trait” for sense-making, highlighting the importance of “deliberate obfuscation” in the broad narrative structures of his plays.³⁵ In this vein, Brecht changes his mind about the meaning or usage of the *Gestus*, throughout his career. He first mentioned *Gestus* in an inconsequential theater review he wrote in 1920 for a local Augsburg newspaper.³⁶ This primary usage was defined as a body gesture that stood in place of the spoken word. By 1929, however, Brecht began to use *Gestus* and the *Gestik* as a tool for the actor to perform or embody his theory of *Verfremdungseffekt* through their character.³⁷ In this way, the *Gestus* stands as one of the primary agents of Estrangement, a moment frozen for display, that invites audiences to form an opinion about the actor/character’s social behavior and adjust their behavior in society abroad, accordingly.

³⁵ Brecht. *Short Organum for Theatre*, 7.

³⁶ Carol Martin; Henry Bial, *Brecht Sourcebook* (London; New York: London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

³⁷ Carl Weber, "Brecht's Concept of Gestus and the American Performance Tradition," in *Brecht Sourcebook*, ed. Carol Martin & Henry Bial (New York; London: Routledge).

To represent: the historical power of the social Gestus

The etymology of Brecht's own term offers a discursive complexity when analyzing the physical qualification and theoretical goals of *Gestus*. In French, *le geste* means "gesture" while *la geste* means "epic."³⁸ The proximity of these nouns fabricates a kind of grammatical precedent in which the body and the epic are linguistically related. Brecht scholar John Willett translates it as "gest," connoting a humorous or entertaining dimension to its definition while many English speakers understand it as the noun "gesture."³⁹ In his book *Brecht and Method*, Fredric Jameson claims the English noun "gesture" is much "too-restrictive" for the philosophical goals of *Gestus*. Because of this ambiguous translation, an equal consideration of the term's translations and etymologies is useful for a complete realization of seeing the world through the distinctly relational frame that Epic Theater requires. Jameson illustrates the gestural power and purpose of *Gestus* best when he writes:

[*Gestus*] shows us how an involuntary movement of the hand, say, could under certain circumstances (when executed by Louis XIV during a particularly decisive interview, but also when performed by an insignificant shopkeeper during the elaborate and unforgivable negotiations of village life) count as a fateful historical act, with momentous and irreversible consequences.⁴⁰

³⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998).

³⁹ Brecht, *A Short Organum for Theater*, 7.

⁴⁰ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 98.

Gestus depends on several dimensions of consideration for viewers and performers as it culminates in one brief moment where social, historical, and physical stakes all implicate one another. In *Short Organum for Theatre*, Brecht explains the role of *Gestus* as “a mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period.”⁴¹ Brecht’s definition states three concrete pillars that I want to highlight. First, the *Gestus* must be “mimetic,” meaning that it can be repeated and imitated throughout the course of the piece (thus creating a gestural mimetic language singular to the piece and its audience), or they must be imitative of the society in which the piece is occurring. Second, the *Gestus* expresses the “social,” the status of the individual defined by their social relationships to others present (fellow characters in the plot, actors onstage, and the audience). And third, the interpretation of *Gestus* is governed by History. Brecht condemned the popular practice of staging historical theatre pieces (he uses Ancient Greek and Renaissance examples) as if they hold permanent truths that resonate with equal timbre throughout the ages: “we must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods then stripping them of everything that makes them different [...] instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence before our eyes so that our own period can be as impermanent too.”⁴² Respecting history as an ongoing process is imperative in order to develop a “critical attitude” toward the present moment. Otherwise, the historical becomes a kind of representational

⁴¹Brecht, *A Short Organum for Theater*, 6.

⁴² Brecht. *A Short Organum for Theater*, 7.

advocate for universality, ignorant of the present political moment and incapable of being influenced by society.⁴³

The Brechtian *Gestus*, as it is most widely performed and theoretically defined, conjures a moment of stillness-- a frozen gesture, where the entire stage, score, and narrative momentarily pauses. The stillness, theatrically emphasizes the content of the gesture and lends the audience a moment to absorb its impact and develop Brecht's desired critical attitude. Walter Benjamin uses the example of the "frozen frame" in cinematography, when the action is suspended at the precise moment of a particular gesture that is critical to the perception of the piece. For aesthetic context, he compares to the frozen likeness of a "*Tableau*-- as they used to call it in 1900."⁴⁴ Yet, the Brechtian *Gestus* remains unique from the filmic freeze frame or the French *Tableau* as it possesses its own political agenda which is to purposefully interrupt theatrical illusion and make the familiar strange. While Brecht hopes the *Gestus* interrupts a passive perception of society and influences audiences towards critique, he is also aware that the *Gestus* in turn is wholly socially conditioned by society itself.

Dance theorist, Andre Lepecki, is deeply invested in investigating how gestures are bred by our social identities as he questions our inescapable predisposition towards representation in dance. Dance as a fine art form is typically understood as a representational exercise that utilizes movement and gesture to signify some greater meaning. Some of these systems are more codified than others: in Ballet an angle of one's foot or arm can represent a dancer's motive, class, or

⁴³ Ibid. *A Short Organum for Theater*, 7.

⁴⁴ Weber. *Brecht's Concept of Gestus and the American Performance Tradition*, 44.

identity while more contemporary dance styles do not carry the same system of named moves, positions, etc. Due to these pre-existing myriad systems of how-to-dance in a skilled, graceful way, dance and other gestural forms/styles/genres carry numerous representational burden. These burdens are tied up in History and systems of power that non-consensually trap the dancing/moving-subject into that system of semiotics. Lepecki demands us to consider representation as “an ontohistorical force, a power.”⁴⁵ This “force” or “power” derives from the hegemonic prowess of capital-H History and its divisive catalogue of specific events and human experiences that prioritize white, male, Western ways of being (yet claims to be ‘universal’ and ‘cumulative’).⁴⁶ Lepecki claims this force (which is representation), dictates the way we move and the way our movement is perceived by others. Such perceptions adhere to History’s pre-existing systems of gestural or bodily comportment that are unjustly advantageous to some and lethal to others.⁴⁷ This practice of representation seeps into art and theater so that only certain lives receive holistically complex portrayals and recognition, while non-white, non-cis, non-European bodies etc. exist in the margins as one-dimensional caricature-like representations of themselves.

As I mentioned before, the Brechtian *Gestus* acknowledges the homogenizing power of gestural semiotics and purposefully highlights these stereotypes for satire and/ or critique. To extend Jameson’s aforementioned example of King Louis XIV’s

⁴⁵ Lepecki, *The Political Ontology of Movement*, 7.

⁴⁶ B. Bowden, "Colonialism, Anti-Colonialism and the Idea of Progress," *History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* (2011).

⁴⁷ One present and bleak example being, a black man confronted by the police, motions to reach into his pocket, gets interpreted as a motion to reach for a weapon. This interpretation is due to the “ontohistorical force” of how black men are represented in the US media as violent and delinquent. In the case of Alton Sterling, a black man shot by the police in 2016, such a gesture, cost him his life.

hand, this gesture can simultaneously enact immediate change in the narrative of the play while also invoking the myriad associations of other hand flicks of other world leaders throughout time and across cultures.⁴⁸ The dualism that exists within one slight gesture invokes Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (Estrangement Effect). Brecht says Estrangement occurs by the staging of the "historical" and the "the social" within one moment. The actor playing King Louis, for example, satirizes the ridiculously overwhelming power of European monarchs by invoking his "historically" recognizable gestures, while the audience giggles and squirms in their seats. They are called to think critically about the social ramifications of one individual wielding such authority. For Brecht, identifying a historical piece as specifically historical while simultaneously acknowledging that the present "social" abolishes the pre-supposition of universality that Western society strives for: "we are liberated from an eternal human nature, but also from archetypes as well [...] so that not-yet-existing archetypes from out of the future, might be better accommodated."⁴⁹ In other words, Brecht condemns universality through historical critique and seeks to make theater that stands singularly within the present social climate.

To disrupt: Gestus as a dialectical disruption

In addition, the brief non-verbal gestural existence of *Gestus* naturally lends itself to the dualism of these theoretical parameters due to the more translatable reach of physical acts versus spoken ones. One harrowing example of gestural malleability occurred this past summer in the Public Theater's production of *Julius Caesar*.

Artistic Director, Oskar Eustis, staged a white man with a red tie and a yellow-ish

⁴⁸ Jameson. *Brecht on Method*. 103.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

comb-over in Shakespeare's titular dictator role.⁵⁰ When actor Gregg Henry (who played Caesar) walked out onto the Delacorte Theater stage in his blonde wig, bombastically gesturing his hands with outstretched fingers, audiences in New York City and beyond took sides. Corporate Sponsors withdrew, Fox and Friends attacked the NEA, and two far-right activists even ran onstage mid-performance in protest. One conservative media executive pronounced "you can't assassinate the President onstage."⁵¹ True, you cannot legally assassinate the president on a stage. However, The Public Theater did not even come close to committing a presidential assassination. Oskar Eustis's bold costume choices and gestural choreography transformed this Renaissance text about a Roman dictator into a viscerally recognizable and provocative theatrical moment. Here we see how a costume choice and repetitive gesture transform from an abstract artistic nuance to a disruptive political sedition. The *Gestus*, as it is performed on the stage, necessitates a moment of scrutiny, of confusion, of pause as one familiar or banal gesture can be made strange or accomplish unexpected significance.

Gestus does not always register so soundly with the political state of an entire city. Its effects can also be localized, applying only to the audience or community present in the room. According to Brecht, *Gestus* achieves significance depending on how gestural meaning adjusts to the other bodies' relational social standings (onstage, in the audience, and finally society abroad). It is a physical action that serves to

⁵⁰ David Von Drehle, "Why Donald Trump Was Low-Hanging Fruit for the Public Theater's Julius Caesar," op-ed, *Time* (2017), <http://time.com/4817390/public-theater-shakespeare-donald-trump-julius-caesar/>.

⁵¹ Michael Paulson and Sopan Deb, "How Outrage Built over Shakespearean Depiction of Trump," Theater, *The New York Times* (2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/12/theater/donald-trump-julius-caesar-public-theater-oskar-eustis.html>.

simultaneously visibilize the social consequences of a character's behavior while also noting the actor's opinion of the character they are embodying. John Willet, scholar, translator and friend of Brecht, defines *Gestus* as the "gist of an attitude."⁵² The word "attitude" is important because of the nature of "dialectical drama": theatre that does not strive for universal timelessness, but instead concurrently considers the time, space, and society in which it is being staged. Attitudes are much more superficial and malleable as they are based on socio-political circumstances. In contrast, 'character' connote permanence, an essential truth that defines one's subjecthood.⁵³ Essential characteristics and core truths do not exist for Brecht or his characters: "One should never start from the character of a person, because man has no character."⁵⁴ Brecht believed, like Karl Marx and the neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School et al., that one's character is based on his economic situation. He saw each "circumstance" through his belief that money has been the principal force determining politics and power "since the dawn of Time."⁵⁵ Brecht thinks historically about aesthetics and culture always in service of critically highlighting socio-economic inequality.

To provoke: the critical audience of Gestus

In one of Brecht's most successful plays *The Good Person of Szechwan*, the economic circumstance of his protagonist Shen Te directly dictates her identity. It is necessary to lie to her friends and her lover and lead a secret life as her selfish and shrewd alter-ego Shui Ta, because she cannot do good if she cannot also

⁵² Willet & Brecht, *Development of an Aesthetic*, 42.

⁵³ "Character." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/character>.

⁵⁴ Brecht, *A Short Organum for Theater*, 7.

⁵⁵ Willet & Brecht, *Development of an Aesthetic*, 42.

economically support herself. Shen Te's contradictory identity seems to point out more about the complexity of greater society than any individual's core character. Shen Te's dishonesty is not an implicit evil in her essential character; it is a fault of the world in which she lives that has made goodness impossible for her to accomplish. This opportunity for recognition redefines the relationship between audience, performer, and the theatre space. In the Public Theater's 2013 production of *The Good Person of Szechwan*, the third character introduced is "Man #1."⁵⁶ His singular action is to walk onstage and solicit Shen Te, the town prostitute. His sole given circumstance is that he wants to have sex immediately and is willing and able to pay for it. Therefore, his *Gestus* upon entering is choreographed as a lubriciously lustful thrust of his pelvis which is also musically punctuated by a cartoonish trombone slide. Man #1 has no spoken text, but the audience immediately recognizes his objective due to the actor's simplistic representational gesture of lust. The audience can laugh or scoff, but most importantly the audience forms an opinion about the disruption: i.e. a judgement of Man #1's morality or disgust for the low brow humor of the play etc.. This gestic moment disrupts the accelerating tempo of the piece and the otherwise formal tone of the narrative so far. Thus, Man #1's thrust culminates in a moment of suspension and surprise between the actor and the audience. The disruptive action of the *Gestus* also reveals the actor's attitude in concert with their character's attitude. Brecht was invested in acknowledging the actor's opinion of the action of the play and the political and social biases that they are bringing to the experience of performing it. This palimpsestic "attitude" from

⁵⁶ Lear deBessonet, "The Foundry Theatre's the Good Person of Szechwan," (The Public Theater: NYPL for Performing Arts, 2013).

writer to character to actor to audience is what Brecht calls “the showing that is shown in the showing.”⁵⁷ He identifies this theory as a key to ensuring his plays are primarily political and always rooted in *Verfremdungseffekt*. German director and Brecht’s successor as the leader of the Berliner Ensemble, Heiner Müller, talks about these techniques as a “distribution of labor” in which “the process is shown” in the design and the acting, “rather than just a result (a commodity) being delivered.”⁵⁸ He continues, “The audience takes part in the production instead of consuming a product.” Müller’s language of consumption complements Brecht’s own thinking. In these terms the actor is the laborer. Giving the actor a gesticulative moment to exist and comment as themselves actively obliterates the illusion between the laborers (players, designers etc.) and the consumers (audience). Exposing “the showing that is shown in the showing” implicates the audience as co-creators of the piece’s performance, allowing them to glean from it whatever they desire instead of telling them what to see, learn, or feel.

The Good Person of Szechwan ends with another moment of suspension as it abandons its audience amidst an unresolved climax and an amoral Epilogue. Protagonist, Shen Te, utters her final single and desperate line: “Help”.⁵⁹ The audience leaves the theater unsatiated and unresolved. This pause is a critical moment which imbues the audience with a responsibility to take action. Aristotelian theater ends with a moral, that instills audiences with wisdom and advice. The Greek Chorus, for example, acts as a moral compass in their ancient narratives that uses the mistakes

⁵⁷ Brecht, *A Short Organum for Theater*, 19.

⁵⁸ Heiner Müller, "The Geste of Citation: Three Points (on Pilocetetes)," *Germania* (1978).

⁵⁹ Brecht and Kushner, *The Good Person of Szechwan = Der Gute Mensch Von Sezuan*.

and triumphs of tragic heroes to instruct audiences about how to be more obedient and productive citizens. *Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction* notes how the theater (as well as other artistic and literary modes) was co-opted by the ruling class as a tool for instructing viewers about one singular “right” or “moral” mode-of-being. In this essay, Brecht warns against the ways in which “dramatic theater”⁶⁰ (by which Brecht means classical Western theater) instructs its audience by way of empathy. He writes, “The dramatic theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too- It’s only natural- It’ll never change...it seems the most obvious thing in the world- I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.”⁶¹ Moral instruction is thus disguised by seductive emotional identification and the audience shuffles out of the theater satisfied, uncritical and ready move on with their lives under the rouse that we all share the same suffering. The epic theater does not participate in this trajectory of “moving on” as its spectators says “I’d never have thought it- That’s not the way- It’s got to stop- the sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary- there’s nothing obvious in it- I laugh when they weep, I weep then they laugh.”⁶² If the “moral” narrative is just a covert operation serving the homogenized ideology of the ruling class, the Epic Theater’s lack of a clear moral disrupts this agenda. Instead of teaching us how-to-be, Brecht asks us to learn from our mistakes.

Not long before his death in 1956, Brecht publicized his dissatisfaction with his term “Epic Theatre” due to its inability to carry his principle beliefs of ongoing historical/political investigation.⁶³ He condemned the “cowed hypnotized masses”

⁶⁰ Brecht, *Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction*, 71.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Parker. *A Literary Life*.

who attend the theater to consume the “predetermined” way of life forced on us when we restage *Oedipus* for comfort instead of scrutiny. Brecht wanted his theater to be consumed by audience members who were “explorers” and “researchers,” who would “love to see people in situations that cannot be grasped easily,” because he said human relations “in our time” cannot be grasped easily.⁶⁴ Therefore, he renamed his theatre “dialectical,” because everything is contingent upon the multiplicitious social and political factors of the present moment. For example, restaging Julius Caesar in New York City in the aftermath of the 2016 election invites audiences to consider the threat that absolutist leaders pose to democratic republics. Such a production reinvigorates a canonical text by its dialectical considerations of the current polarized political climate of New York City.

To contradict: the dual possibilities of Gestus

Returning now, to Shen Te’s final moment upstage left. Isolated in a tight spot light, she peers into the eyes of the audience members and whispers, “help.” She stands still; she is stuck. Abiding by the God’s Commandments will render her unable to pay her rent or feed her child; following her own interests will condemn her to a life of selfishness causing her to betray her lover and her friends. Thus, she stands stagnantly between ideology and survival; “to be good and to live” proves to be an impossible contradiction of the human condition. Jameson writes, “a contradiction is not an opinion or an ideology in that sense,” but an expression of Estrangement, an example of how quickly all that we “know” to be true (from God's’ commandments, national Constitutions, literary morals etc.) becomes distant or impossible.⁶⁵ The

⁶⁴ Brecht, *Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction*. 71.

⁶⁵ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 115.

Gestus is the formal method within Epic Theater that expresses “the contradiction” of life through embodiment. The gestural capacity of the *Gestus* succeeds not by telling or narrating an action but by “simply identifying the nature of the act itself.”⁶⁶ A flick of the finger or a slump of the shoulders can explode the narrative capacity for dualistic contradiction within a narrative, as a character’s speech tells us one thing, their corporeal gestures reveal the opposite. Shen Te’s Gods pronounce their omnipotence as they recite their eternal verities, yet their shifting eyes and casual postures expose their un-godly mediocrity. The hyperbolized and frozen stylization of *Gestus* makes visible the multiplicitous nature of reality that contradicts the notion that fools are always foolish and Gods are always great. It further proves the inadequacy of the one-moral-fits-all model and encourages us to get to know one another outside of our assumptions and ideologies.

Gestus suggest that to think about History and the present in terms of its contradictions necessitates a moment of pause, or even a glance backwards. Theodor Adorno writes in the wake of Auschwitz that modern humans are “incapable of even looking horror in the face,” and this chosen negligence and perpetual mission to move-on from disaster “thereby perpetuates it.”⁶⁷ There are few devices left in our society that encourage hesitation, except perhaps when it is forced upon us. Stillness or stagnancy occurs in moments of contradiction or crisis. We go on strike, we shut down, we mourn. Brecht’s theatrical methods enable audiences to hone in on the contradictions and re-evaluate their learned social assumptions. The *Gestus* theoretically and kinesthetically demands moments of disruption amidst the “storm of

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Commitment*, 308.

Progress".⁶⁸ This retrospective pause for the actors and the audience prevents absorption in illusion, which in turn renders an opportunity to consider one another, as contradictory, immoral, yet surviving somebodies.

⁶⁸ Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 263.

Chapter Two: Facing Progress

Walter Benjamin, in his ninth *Thesis of History*, famously analyzes Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, the piecemeal mechanical angel figure with spread wings and a distant gaze. Benjamin names the figure the "Angel of History."⁶⁹ She flies forward while helplessly staring back at the catastrophic wreckage of the Past, piling up. "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed!" But such recollection is impossible, Benjamin writes, for a storm with "ceaseless winds" is blowing in from Paradise, propelling the Angel violently towards the future: "This is the storm of Progress".⁷⁰

In my estimation, Progress is the primary pillar of Western society that the *Gestus* works to disrupt. As I stated in the previous Chapter, one of the defining functions of the *Gestus* is to invite viewers to pause and think critically about society. My analysis will more specifically focus on how *Gestus* disrupts Progress, as opposed to Brecht's more ambiguous term of "society."

To move: the habit

Progress is defined as a noun (and verb) by two definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary: 1. Move forward or onward in space or time; 2. Advance or develop toward a better, more complete, or more modern state. The first definition addresses the practical matter of linear time moving forward inevitably, accepted by positive and negative historians alike. The second definition addresses an assumption

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰ Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*.

perpetuated by Enlightenment ideals that dub, technological advancement as a basic human necessity and an inevitability. To be “modern” is to be “complete” is to be “better” is to be in perpetual motion “forward and onward.”

Benjamin does not see Progress as a situation of inevitable positive improvement, but merely as a socio-temporal condition of time and history. Adorno follows Benjamin’s impulse to let go of this positivist Enlightenment definition of modernity and Progress. In his musings in *History and Freedom*, Adorno declares that “all talk of progress towards freedom seems ludicrous” as long as we continue to disregard this mound of historical catastrophes piling up behind us.⁷¹ Living during the genocidal catastrophe of World War II, Adorno deems all progressive war efforts trivial compared to the extreme loss of human life. He believes ignoring this wreckage—not pausing to mourn the loss or communally care for the survivors—prevents us from achieving Progress because we have still not learned from our past mistakes. Though they don’t explicitly acknowledge it, both Benjamin and Adorno theorize about History and Progress with a pressing preoccupation with movement in their prose. The condition of our present moment in the social media-soaked 21st century, only distances us further from the capacity to pause and reflect. Furthermore, progressive tendencies have only accelerated with the advent of the Internet as information becomes increasingly accessible and instances of face to face encounters and physical presence dwindles.

⁷¹ Theodore Adorno, *History and Freedom* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

Andre Lepecki addresses our dwindling capacity to be present amidst this perpetual forward movement in his 2003 book *The Political Ontology of Movement*. Like the Frankfurt theorists he seeks to think critically about the seemingly insatiable continuity of Progress. Lepecki analyses the habitual motility of Progress in terms of dance and gesture. He claims that dance's identity is grounded in a "being-in flow," an inextricable bind between dance and continuous movement.⁷² He tracks how dance's emergence as a fine art form (read: codified, consumed by the elite, economically engaged) is contemporaneous with the solidification of the Modern Era. "As the kinetic project of modernity becomes modernity's ontology (its inescapable reality, its foundational truth), so the project of Western dance becomes more and more aligned with this... unstoppable motility."⁷³ Sloterdijk reinforces this claim defining the "kinetic" as "the mode of being where modernity is most real".⁷⁴ Therefore, dance's "flow" becomes increasingly aligned with this unstoppable motility of modernity and to interrupt it with stillness or stasis (like that of the Brechtian *Gestus*) challenges all of these social expectations of movement.

Lepecki demonstrates how kinetic disruptions express the helplessness felt amidst moments of political strife, or "wreckage" as Adorno calls it. He describes a month long choreographic laboratory entitled SKITE, that he attended in France. The performance was a series of still acts performed by choreographers, dancers, and musicians who laid, stood, or sat in different locations in complete stillness. The curator, Jean-Marc Adolphe, explained that these 'still-acts' were intentional

⁷² Lepecki, *Political Ontology of Movement*, 3.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

reactions to the abundance of violence in the world at that time (Fall 1992). The tragic current events made it such “that they could not dance.”⁷⁵ Similar to the way in which the Brechtian *Gestus* disrupts the flow of the play’s plot, Adolphe’s still-acts serve as a disruption in the homogenized continuity of dance. Both choreographies enact moments of stillness that imaginatively interrupt the greater political mobility of Progress and offer opportunities to acknowledge and reflect upon historical atrocities.

As my analysis of Progress reveals the ways in which Progress is inextricably linked to Capitalism, I must historicize the foundational fantasies and systems of labor that form this Western ideology of Progress. The usage of the word began at the dawn of the 15th century as many Western European ships were beginning to cross the Atlantic Ocean in search of more land, resources, and colonies.⁷⁶ Thus the fantasy of Progress is inextricably linked to the colonizing mission of the West and the millions of people that were dominated, exterminated, or assimilated in order to fuel these nations’ expansive quest for power. These colonized/enslaved bodies and cultures are mythologized as the antithesis to Progress and its futures. They are also systemically excluded from participating in Progress’s social or temporal processes of Progress. In her book, *Firsting and Lasting* postcolonial theorist Jean O’Brien talks about the project of antiquating colonized subjects through language and cultural myth. “Firsting” constructs modernity through a myriad of linguistic maneuvers and naming rituals while “Lasting” constructs “extinction” by fabricating racial and

⁷⁵ Lepecki, *Political Ontology of Movement*, 16.

⁷⁶ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Progress," in *Merriam-Webster* (2018).

political narratives that re-orient history around a myth of faux-indigeneity.⁷⁷ “Firsting” and “Lasting” exclude colonized subjects from participating in either definition of Progress. They are disabled from being able to participate in the development of new technologies (except as a labor force) while also mythically placed in the past and deemed unable to be thought of as contemporary subjects. This forces a kind of stasis. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha describes modernity as an “ideology of beginning” that is wholly constructed and privileged towards the white heteronormative male experience.⁷⁸ Only from this position of privilege does the ceaseless “kinetic project” of Progress operate. This Progress is invisibly fueled by the seemingly static colonized bodies of the other. The project of colonialism seems to make stasis an indicator of morbidity or inadequacy, yet I challenge preference for privileging movement over stillness and the conception that movement is a necessary component for change.

To arrive: the antidote

The Frankfurt theorists crave some kind of pause, in order to achieve their ultimate goal of critical thought about the present moment. Adorno paradoxically says, “Progress begins where it ends.”⁷⁹ Benjamin craves an opportunity for the Angel to close her wings and rest. Many of the Frankfurt Theorists looked to art, like Brecht’s plays, to realize this moment for social critique. Twenty-first century philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, also wishes for a critical moment to press pause on the

⁷⁷ Jean M O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁷⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁷⁹ Adorno. *History and Freedom*. 159.

Progress continuum. He calls this imagined critical pause an “arrival”.⁸⁰ Writing distinctly within the latter half of the twentieth century, Sloterdijk observes a very different age of technological advancement and its relation to the human experience than the Frankfurt School theorists. Sloterdijk’s “arrival” is less concerned with pausing Progress for critical reflection and more about finding a moment to acknowledge what we have achieved. Reading the Frankfurt School’s critical anxiety about Progress alongside Sloterdijk’s call to locate its philosophical limits will clarify the ways in which the Brechtian *Gestus* critically disrupts Progress and what happens when we “arrive” in this disruption.

Sloterdijk reorients the inflated ideology of Progress back to its original definition which is “to move forward in time or space.”⁸¹ When asked if “progress has human beings under control now,” Sloterdijk laments the ideological conflation of the word ‘progress’ and the West’s modern preoccupation with perpetual improvement, “progress is about moving forward not about control.”⁸² Up until the 19th century on, human ambition was perceived as heretical, a threat to God’s omnipotence. “The greatest break made by the modern era is that human beings conceived an absolute movement of a new type that constantly moved upwards from the less valuable to the more valuable,” Sloterdijk states. This break can be traced to a number of 19th century phenomena, such as the canonization of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the race to Colonization, and the prioritization of the Individual. Sloterdijk observes that today, this bourgeois modern concept of Progress

⁸⁰ Peter Sloterdijk, "On Progress the Fire of Dissatisfaction," in *Selected Exaggerations* (172).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 169.

has reached its saturation point, where no further phases of industrialization are critically necessary for survival. So Progress manifests as a series of micro-optimizations that continue not out of necessity but habit. For example, the invention of the ballpoint pen initially achieved a significant improvement that made for a more smooth and swift writing experience. However, pen companies continue to release “new and improved” ballpoint pen models that are merely just superficial variations of the original product.⁸³ This is because ballpoint pen technology has reached a saturation point of improvement where “things come to a standstill and can only be superseded aesthetically.”⁸⁴ Now, we can wander the aisles of Staples choosing between a wide variety of differently styled and priced ballpoint pens, from clickable, to cappable, to colored. There’s even one “for him” and one “for her.” Whichever pen we pick, there will be a new edition within the next year. To Sloterdijk, this trajectory of senseless improvement is where Progress has landed under the reign of Late Capitalism. Sloterdijk regards the ways in which new technologies have exponentially increased Progress to a point where people will be forced to acknowledge the saturation point of technological progress. “Sooner or later people will understand that being able to recognize a “standstill” at the highest level is an extremely valuable asset... to arrive at what you have achieved.”⁸⁵ I wish to use Sloterdijk's positive view of the “arrival” to illustrate what happens within the site of this ontological disruption. The “arrival” is an act of acknowledgement or recognition

⁸³ Ibid., 169.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

of what you have achieved, where you are, how it tastes, who you are with. The theater survives as one of the most ancient examples of arrivals.

It seems that as a Capitalist society, we have forgotten there is an end to our means. Perhaps this is because Progress can be comforting for those in transitional periods who need to believe they are going in the right direction, that there is some more satisfying freedom ahead of them. The philosophical link between Progress and Freedom is written into our Constitution and cemented into the American Dream. As a society, we have become very skilled at rising up, moving on, setting off, without ever allowing ourselves to settle into a feeling of completion. What could this feeling look like?

When several progressive gentlemen sit together in a really excellent haute cuisine restaurant for a few moments, they forget progress and realize that now is the time for perfection. They praise what is on their plates so lavishly that we understand: those people are not setting off; they have arrived.⁸⁶

Otherwise we eat our pizza slices on-the-go, answer emails on the train, and struggle to keep up with this perpetual automatic mode of progressing forward, a habit.

In her performance piece *Thank you for Coming: Attendance*, Faye Driscoll bends time and confiscates cell phones as she effectively disrupts habitual Progress through her *Gestus* driven choreography and stages a Sloterdijkian “arrival.” *Attendance* marks the first installment in the *Thank You for Coming* trilogy which she

⁸⁶ Ibid., 169.

began working on in 2014. The 80-minute piece heightens reality and “distorts familiarity” in order to reveal the tangled inter-dependency through which we “co-create” our present historical moment. Through durational stillness, physical touch, and direct eye contact between audience and performance, *Attendance* dissuades viewers of the social entitlements or expectations that they carry into the theater space out of habit. The work is not simply participatory but rigorously ritualistic as the finale culminate with everyone in the room chanting in unison and skipping barefoot. When I saw *Attendance* in 2015, I had barely just removed my shoes and placed my phone in the collection box as six performers urgently hurried to a halt on the balcony stage of the ‘92 Theatre and belted out in unison: “We Need You AAALL To Ourselves.” I promptly and obediently sat down on the hardwood floor. Melodically they requested that each audience member make the effort to be present for the duration of the performance and to “please TAKE NO recOO-ordings.” Each of their arms rested by their sides: relaxed, though their mouths moved in impeccable unison: rehearsed. Jarringly simplistic and absurdly logical: dubious attendees were nudged out of their expectations of dance concert nap-time. The whole room transformed into a space of care, curiosity, or concern. Everyone sat barefoot and phoneless, stripped of their ability to plug back into the Progress-paced outside world for the duration of the performance. It was immediately clear that everyone had *arrived*.

Setting out to build the *Thank You for Coming* trilogy, Driscoll sought to “extend the sphere of influence of performance to create a communal space where the

co-emergent social moment is questioned, heightened, and palpable.”⁸⁷ Her goal resounds deeply within the Brechtian legacy of analyzing the present moment by making the familiar strange (*Verfremdungseffekt*). But unlike Brecht’s socio-economic driven worldview, Driscoll possesses a different agenda once this critical attitude is in effect: an “obsession” with “the problem of being somebody in a world of other somebodies.”⁸⁸ Driscoll’s work furthers the spirit of the *Gestus* as a kinetic and theoretical disruptor of Progress by not only thinking critically about society but considering the way we all take part in crafting it.

After 15 minutes of wiggling and wavering to the sporadic croaks of the wooden platform stage, the dancers attached themselves hand to ankle and squirmed on their bellies, slowly extending into one line across the space. The line of bodies stretches offstage and bled into the audience. They reached out their hands and glances, offering and asking for touch. Viewers begin to accept the pleas, practicing bravery and generosity. Viewers touched the dancers as they roledl across their laps, tried on their glasses, and borrowed their scrunchies. This sensual intervention that disobeyed the limits of the Fourth Wall did not demand enthusiasm, the way “audience participation” usually does, instead it eased us in. As more and more audience members accepted the performers’ touch and proximity, my shoulders relaxed out of their tense discomfort and my trepidation turned into desperation for just one of their gazes. Embarrassment melted into exhilaration. The entire audience settled into the tactile slowness.

⁸⁷Faye Driscoll, "Faye Driscoll," <http://fayedriscoll.com/projects/thank-you-for-coming-attendance/>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Suddenly, two dancers stage left sprang up to their feet. They violently gasped, forcibly embraced each other, and froze. Their frozen pose of surprise, or horror, as highly theatrical and punctuated compared to the sustained subtlety of the choreography preceding it. The whole stage was still, as the audience waited in suspense, until finally a guitarist, stage right, begins to strum a simple and cheerful G-major chord. All seven dancers erupted into a vibrant movement score that rhythmically adhered to the guitar's 4/4-time signature. The steady coordinated movement endowed the space with a specificity that felt especially satisfying, following 20 minutes of durational white noise. This transition marked the beginning of what Driscoll calls her "stop motion" score.

The stop-motion score cycled through familiar everyday gestures that make up our social interactions, like a wave, a hug, a snuffle, a slump. However, each gesture is broken up into six or seven increments: the dancers slightly adjusted their postures between every freeze. The result was a choppy series of starts and stops, gestures that were momentarily suspended in stillness and then continued to form a cohesive stream of micro-gestures that read as recognizable social encounters. The dancers' faces were heavily choreographed as well, as they gradually inched their faces from exaggerated friendliness, to miserable despondency to smug pride to unabashed rage. Every down beat, paused the performers' facial expression and bodily gesture in a new and different stage of their affect which proved hilarious and sometimes startling. Each dancer performed their own individual choreographic score as they greeted, argued, and fell in love with one another.

The lanky dancer in front of me exuberantly waved to the crying moustached dancer to her right as he gradually inches his shoulders down into a depressed slump. The way in which these gestures were routinely paused and unpaused with the rhythm read as a series of *Gestuses* strung together in a score. Driscoll's score achieved two layers of Alienation (*Verfremdungseffekt*). Stylistically, she used the stop-motion rhythm motif to distance the audience, by dissecting these interactions and make familiar gestures, strange. Conceptually, the score staged how one individual negotiates two contradictory desires at once, in "impossible tension." Choreographing the "image of saying hello" in this fragmented rhythmic mode allows the audience to critically observe the sweat, labor, and genuine experience of an archetypal greeting; one might be signifying a friendly hello with their hand but feeling another emotion of insecurity or sadness with their face. Every stop and start, grants the audience a moment to notice how these emotions coexist in our everyday relations; a critical tension between how we feel and how we perform. Thus, this section reveals how we are alienated from ourselves and each other as we try to abide by these obligations. Driscoll taps into the contradictory duality, that I outlined in the previous chapter as one of the principle critical goals of Brecht's *Gestus*. Driscoll's chopped-up choreography hyperbolizes each stage of superficial social interactions and reveals dichotomous desires that are normally hidden by nuance or civility. The score reminds spectators that smiles can be grotesque and salutary waves can be exhausting.

When the lanky dancer finally reached the sobbing moustached figure, she placed her hand on his shoulder. Beat by beat she inched her head into a

compassionate tilt and moved her arm back and forth to represent an empathetic pat on the back. Over the course of the next two minutes, the sobber's expression transformed from a wallowing frown to grateful grin towards his new confidante. He gradually inched his puckered lips towards her cheek for a kiss. Spotting this advance, the corner of her lips immediately lost their peaceful closed-mouth smile position as she crinkled the bridge of her nose and dodged the advance with disgust. Close-up on the nose-crinkle *Gestus*: suddenly the audience erupted into unanimous laughter. A "freeze frame" of awkward disgust. Though we had observed every instant of this couple's interaction at a lethargic stop-motion pace; it was here, within this moment of immense predictability and exceptional satisfaction, that we laughed perfectly in unison. We acknowledge our collective recognition of a crinkled nose. By observing this couple's misunderstanding performed in this alienating slow pace, we came to understand each. We *arrive*. At the heart of the arrival sits recognition.

To recognize: to laugh, to leak

Driscoll describes laughter as "a physiological response, a spontaneous leakage."⁸⁹ She attributes people's tendency to frequently laugh at/with her work: "*a deep recognition*."⁹⁰ Driscoll explains that she is never intentionally going for laughter, but when it happens, she attributes it to moments of heightened recognition between the audience and the work. To illustrate the final realm of how *Gestus*

⁸⁹ Driscoll, "Walker Stage: Faye Driscoll in Conversatoin with Philip Bither."

⁹⁰ Ibid.

a/effectively disrupts Progress, I trace these “leaks” like laughter to bring forth Driscoll’s theory of “recognition.”

Hegel first coined the phrase “the struggle for recognition” in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, thus inaugurating Recognition as a mainstream philosophical concept. Hegel argues that individuals are formed “intersubjectively” to mark the social construction of individual identity.⁹¹ Hegelian recognition describes the ways in which we identify ourselves and each other according to our surroundings, other subjects, and society as a whole. This belief in intersubjective identity formation (which opposes the idea that all humans possess an essential core being) is an important pillar of Brecht’s Epic Theater.⁹²

While numerous theories of Recognition rose to popularity in the social movements of the 1960s-1990s, Emmanuel Lévinas theorizes Recognition in terms of embodiment and time. Educated in France during the rise of Nazi Germany, Lévinas is principally concerned with the ways in which embodied social relations are more likely to produce benevolent behavior or ethical lives.⁹³ The specification of embodiment is imperative to Lévinas’s analysis which highlights the intimate impact of physical presence. Lévinas theorizes that the face-to-face encounter predates all linguistic, moral, or historical imperatives.⁹⁴ When two faces gaze upon one another, Lévinas argues that each subject necessarily exposes their vulnerability to one another

⁹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1977).

⁹² “Man has no character” Brecht says in his *Short Organum*. This non-essentialist belief lies at the core of his distaste for American Realism and motivates his stylistic preference for more oblique and illusion-less acting/design methods.

⁹³ Bergo Bettina, “Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2017).

⁹⁴ Séan Hand, *Emmanuel Lévinas* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).

and says, “do not kill me.” This survival-based supplication, often void of any discursive content, impacts us as an affective moment, which Lévinas calls an “interruption.”⁹⁵

Similar to *Gestus*, “interruptions” are specific events of social relation that summon the subject into the present moment for perspective and critique. But what is truly significant about Lévinas’s philosophy is the way he thinks about these encounters in their relationship to time. Lévinas suggests that the only perceivable time is social time, a durational chronology void of clocks and calendars. He argues that time is made up of a series of “interruptions” strung together, as opposed to the traditional conception that chronicles time by world-wide political or social events (like war, or elections, or disasters).⁹⁶ The Brechtian *Gestus* performs a type of Lévinasian interruption as the actor pauses the plot, assumes a momentary still pose, and confronts the audience face to face. To value “time” according to small interpersonal “interruptions” re-thinks Progress’s responsibility to History, and refocuses on the embodied present. Interacting with Progress in terms of small personalized experiences debunks its place as a hegemonic ideology that mandates the way we exist and decentralizes those white Western colonial forces that govern its pace and its power.

⁹⁵ Ibid., *Emmanuel Lévinas*, Chapter 3 (*Totality and Infinity*).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion: Still...In Progress

“The greatest lie we can ever believe,” Kushner says, “is that the world is commonsensical.”⁹⁷ To resign to a one-dimensional order of the world is not only a stark falsity but a pitiful cop-out that ignores the ironic, hilarious, and insufferable unpredictability of life. Brecht’s *Gestus* employs pedestrian gesture and stillness to disrupt our societal habit of subscribing to cosmetic ideologies.

Every morning this past January, I commuted forty minutes on the L train at 9 am. At rush hour, every subway car was packed to the brim, far beyond capacity. On the days when I was not lucky enough to make it to a coveted hand rail, I would press my fingertips to the ceiling to avoid falling onto my fellow commuters. Every stop was an emergency and a routine. The automated doors of the New York subway only open for an average of thirteen seconds per stop. Within these thirteen seconds, everyone who wishes to enter or exit the car, must do so, no matter the time of day, the volume of commuters, or the stress level of any one individual. During rush hour, thirty plus preoccupied New Yorkers spatially negotiate their way around another without almost any verbal communication or eye contact. This rapid series of entrances and exits that occurs every morning underneath the streets of New York City between millions of commuters is a high stakes event of precise improvisation and generous recognition. It is a routine and a miracle, an isolating inconvenience and an intimate interpersonal negotiation. To see the double headed nature of reality, is a means of recognizing the mundane and the miraculous: as they coexist.

⁹⁷ Kushner. 53.

Therefore, *Gestus* embodies this notion of duality that lies at the core of Brecht's theory and helps us critique the hegemonic ideologies that frame History and Progress. As exemplified in Faye Driscoll's dance/play *Thank You for Coming: Attendance*, the theoretical framework of *Gestus* imagines alternative routes for escaping Capitalism's perpetual hustle and offers opportunities to acknowledge the present moment, think critically about our place in it, and then eventually connect with those we are sharing it with.

In conclusion, I want to return to stillness. The embodied stillness proposed by Brecht's *Gestus* lies at the core of its disruption. Anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis invests in stillness as the antidote to the "ceaseless winds"⁹⁸ of Progress. Still-acts subvert the easy flow of Progress and disobey the kinetic requirements of time. The stillness of *Gestus* imagines our ability to control systems of History and Progress that base their survival on the constant motility of Capitalism. Seremetakis writes, "stillness is the moment when the buried, the discarded and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust."⁹⁹ This exit from historical dust defies the notion that History settles into neat layers that are meant to be ignored and tread upon. The exit resurrects those who have been buried under the wreckage of History: it is the moment of rest and reflection that Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" longs for. Here, the Angel will be able to close her wings and "make whole what has been smashed."¹⁰⁰ The

⁹⁸ Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 263. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*.

⁹⁹ Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), Cultural and Social Anthropology.

¹⁰⁰ Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 263.

Gestus as a disruption of Progress does not solve the politically wrought present moment or ameliorate the atrocities of our historical past. It merely suggests a moment for recognition and collectivity during which we can defamiliarize ourselves from the ideological regimes that dictate our day to day. A bated breath which can we use to laugh, argue, and exist.

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