

Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 31

September 2015

Editors:

Sarah Lohmann and Sreemoyee Roy Chowdhury

Blurred Identities: *The Threepenny Opera* between Stage-Play, Musical and Film

Judith Wiemers

Queen's University Belfast

Blurred Identities: *The Threepenny Opera* between Stage-Play, Musical and Film

Judith Wiemers

Queen's University Belfast

Postgraduate English, Issue 31, September 2015

Anybody who advises us not to make use of such new apparatus just confirms the apparatus's right to do bad work.¹

Bertolt Brecht's statement, written in 1931, proves that despite an unfortunate dispute over the film adaptation of his *Threepenny Opera* stage production, which arose between the authors Brecht/Weill and the film production company Nero Film-AG, the writer did not dismiss or even regret the collaboration with the film industry. The *Threepenny Opera* - or *Dreigroschenoper* as Brecht named his stage play in 1928 - is based on the English *Beggar's Opera*, a play written by John Gay (1665-1732) with interpolated ballads by Johann Christoph Pepusch (1667-1752), first performed in 1728. Brecht rewrote the original text with the invaluable help of his translator Elisabeth Hauptmann and equipped the play with original songs and instrumental music by the composer Kurt Weill. Less than three years after the play's premiere in Berlin's Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, this extremely successful production was adapted for the screen by the renowned expressionist film director Georg Wilhelm Pabst. The film of the same name was first screened in Berlin in February 1931. Moving from stage-play to sound film in such a

¹ Bertolt Brecht, 'The Film, The Novel and Epic Theatre – from the Threepenny Lawsuit,' *Brecht on Theatre – The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen Drama, 1964), p. 47.

short time-span, the *Threepenny Opera* lends itself well to discussions about genre boundaries and transitions. Several factors make it unique. Firstly, never before had the authors of a stage play been involved with a film production of their own work. Secondly, the arrival of sound technology in 1929 completely transformed the film industry and cinema culture, demanding the renegotiation of genre demarcations between stage and screen. The *Threepenny Opera*'s film adaptation vividly reflects the territorial fights between theatre and sound film, not least because Brecht and Weill's conflict with Nero Film-AG resulted in a heated court case. Recapturing the dispute, this article will explore questions about the autonomy of theatre and sound film, which were discussed extensively in the contemporary press and also elicited a critical essay by Brecht himself ("The Threepenny Lawsuit", 1931). Whereas much has been said about Pabst's film adaptation in the critical literature, less attention has been paid to historical sources as useful tools to track gradual changes in genre formations. Whereas contemporary voices may be tinted with highly subjective opinions, they do allow valuable insights into a historical context and *Zeitgeist* which is otherwise difficult to recreate. Particularly in times of cultural transitions, these underrepresented sources offered a running commentary. In accordance with the young sound film practice, the *Threepenny* film's significance and role in the context of the formation and establishment of the new genre of German musical film will also be drawn upon.

From Page to Stage

Bertolt Brecht enjoyed the cinema, and he liked films. With his interest in socialist and Marxist theories, he believed that film and its reliance on collaborative work countered

the traditional bourgeois notion of the autonomous artist.² In Brecht's eyes, film as a bearer of modernity departing from traditional values was a welcome phenomenon and had great potential for becoming a truly proletarian art form. It was in this spirit that he had approached the project of staging the *Threepenny Opera*. The original stage production that premiered in Berlin on 31st of August 1928 was the result of the combined efforts of many contributory hands and minds – a fact that Brecht was all too happy to admit.

The playbill of the premiere indicates various people sharing the artistic responsibility for the production, with Brecht and Weill appearing as equals among valued contributors. Interestingly, the names of John Gay and the authors of some ballads that Brecht had adapted for his song lyrics feature more prominently than the production team itself. In a rather self-effacing manner Brecht merely appears as “adaptor”.³ The emphasis on the collaborative nature and multiple authorship of the *Threepenny Opera* reflects Brecht's attitude, which he called a “fundamental laxity in matters of intellectual property.”⁴ Even more opinionated, Brecht elsewhere called the whole concept of copyright bluntly “medieval.”⁵ This belief seems surprising in the light of the disagreement between Brecht/Weill and the film production company Nero three years later. After the play's premiere, which was poorly attended, Berlin soon was in the grip

² Marc Silbermann, ‘17 October 1930: Bertolt Brecht's Threepenny Opera Lawsuit Identifies Contradiction Between Individual Creativity and Collective Production in Cinema’, *A New History of German Cinema*, eds. Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michael D. Richardson, (Rochester: Camden House, 2012), p. 213.

³ Stephen Hinton, *Kurt Weill – The Threepenny Opera*. Cambridge Opera Handbooks, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 9.

⁴ *Berliner Börsen-Courier* 6 May 1929, quoted in Hinton, p. 11.

⁵ “Brechts ‘3 Groschen-Oper’ – Klage vor der Weigert-Kammer”, *Film-Kurier*, 247 (1930), p. 3. During the court process solicitor Dr. Fritz Fischer, representing Nero-Film, reminded the court of Brecht's standpoint. Original quote: “Die Brecht [sic] habe seinerzeit bei der Übernahme der Ammer-Villon-Lieder erklärt, daß das Urheberrecht mittelalterlich sei, und daß er seine Laxheit in diesen Dingen betonen müsse.”

of a *Threepenny*-fever. Already in its first season, the number of new productions exceeded fifty, and in due course the work was translated into most of the world's major languages.⁶

The Film and the court case

Based on this extraordinary success on stage, the *Threepenny Opera* attracted the attention of Berlin's film industry. Sound technology had become economically viable in 1929 and swiftly conquered the city's cinemas. As film learned to speak and sing, producers were keen to emulate stage genres. Competition between theatre and film was not new, but the technological advances of sound film challenged the stage in an unprecedented way, particularly in cases in which music and song were a vital part of the production. Many contemporary critics were sceptical or even outright dismissive of sound film. They feared that film would lose its focus on the visual, and resort to compromising cinematographic skills with cheap sound effects and catchy music. In their eyes, sound technology meant that film regressed to its roots in the Variété shows where it first emerged. Indeed, many early German sound films showcased the new technology by oversaturating the screen with incidental music, incorporating completely unrelated songs and dance numbers while neglecting the integrity of the plot. However, sound film also challenged the industry to find a new language and aesthetic that wedded visual and aural elements. In the case of the *Threepenny Opera*, sound film - or more specifically music film - asserted itself as a young genre setting itself apart from the stage.

⁶ Hinton, p. 50.

Less than two years after the curtain first opened on the theatre production, the production company Nero Film-AG, which ran under the auspices of Tobis and Warner Brothers, acquired the exclusive film rights for the *Threepenny Opera* from Brecht's publishing firm Felix Bloch Erben. It included a clause whereby "the production company accords the authors the right of participation in adapting the material for the screen." Additionally it stated "neither the publisher nor the copyright holders [...] may raise any legal objection to the form and content of the film as produced by the production company on the basis of the screenplay adapted in consultation with the authors."⁷ In short, the contract stipulated that Brecht and Weill had a say in the production of the film. In a further supplementary clause Brecht committed himself to writing a draft for the screenplay.

Problems started emerging as soon as it became apparent that Brecht had not understood or taken seriously the binding nature of the contract. Having never worked for film before, he soon learned that the medium he had previously lauded worked very differently from his home territory, the stage. Above all, the industrial-technical and collaborative form of production, which Brecht praised, also stifled his influence as a single creative practitioner. Additionally, film's existence in the cinema had further repercussions on the reality of film production. Cinema was arguably a product of mass culture, consumerism and modern life in the metropolis. From its very start, it was dependent on the audience's approval and driven by market interests, and it was taking over from the monopoly of printed literature. As the film historian Anton Kaes argues in his article 'The Debate about Cinema', the "transition to a mass public corresponds to the progressive industrialisation

⁷ Quoted in Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, *Photo: Casparius. Filmgeschichte in Bildern*, eds. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek in Zusammenarbeit mit Landesbildstelle Berlin, Berliner Festspiele GmbH. (Berlin: Jürgen Kleindienst, 1978) p. 211. f. Translated by Hinton, p. 44.

and increasing technical complexity of the media: photographs superseded paintings, LP and radio supplanted the concert, and film, it seemed, replaced both theatre and the novel.”⁸

Other than the literary domain, with its long and famed history in Germany, film willingly embraced its existence as mass commodity in the capitalist marketplace, providing audiences with fleeting images and impressions mirroring the ever-changing cityscape of the metropolis, Berlin. Naturally, as a modern institution, cinema had its own laws, imposed by powerful production companies, which Brecht might have underestimated. In 1922, he had written,

The writer on the outside doesn't know the needs and means of the individual [film] studios. No engineer develops a complicated water project for the proverbial rainy day, in hopes that at some point a firm will be found that desperately needs precisely that project.⁹

Despite his awareness of the film industry's commercial nature, Brecht was initially willing to cooperate with it – for financial reasons, as he admitted, and also out of his interest in film. For Nero, the screen adaptation of the *Threepenny Opera* was similarly motivated by the stage production's astonishing success, promising a prosperous endeavour in times of economic hardship. In order to benefit from the play's reputation, the film's timing was crucial. It would have to be produced swiftly and get past the censor to enter cinemas as soon as possible. Both delivering his work on time and tailoring it to the criteria of an external censor board were not Brecht's strong points – not least because the theatre was not subject to censorship. Firstly, despite working on a screenplay for the

⁸ Anton Kaes, 'The Debate about Cinema: Charting a Controversy (1909-1929)', trans. David J. Levin. *New German Critique*. Spec. issue on Weimar Film Theory No.40 (1987), p. 11.

⁹ Brecht, Bertolt. 'Über Film'. *Gesammelte Werke in 20 Bänden*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969). Translated by David J. Levin in Kaes, p. 19.

film, which he dubbed *Die Beule* (the bruise), he failed to deliver the script on time for the start of shooting, thus breaching his contractual duties and effectively losing his right to participate in the production. Secondly, the repeated negotiations with the company's hired team of scriptwriters regularly ended in hefty arguments and were subsequently abandoned.

Ultimately, Nero went on to shoot the film to a script that Brecht had not approved, which motivated him to sue the company subsequently. It can be argued that the nature of film and its commercial use lies at the very core of this dispute. Film as a product is rather inflexible and cannot react to external or internal change as easily as a staged production is able to. For Brecht, this immobility proved difficult. The *Threepenny Opera* stage production had only been completed on its opening night and underwent numerous revisions after its premiere and in preparation for publication. As the musicologist Stephen Hinton puts it, "The business of making the piece stage-worthy was as much a matter of trial and error as of expediency."¹⁰ Similarly, the full score by Kurt Weill was only completed after the premiere and the play's most famous song "Mackie Messer" (or "Mack the Knife"), was a last-minute addition.¹¹ Film by its very nature did not allow for tinkering of that kind, and it also did not allow Brecht to change his mind about the political message of his art. Written during the summer of 1928, the original script for the *Threepenny Opera* did not contain any reaction to the harsh economic realities Germany faced after the New York Wall Street Crash in October 1929. It was also written before Brecht had engaged with his experiments in Epic Theatre and written his didactic texts *Lehrstücke*. However, by 1930, his views and his understanding of what his work should

¹⁰ Hinton, p. 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

entail had changed, and thus his film scenario for the *Threepenny Opera* adaptation differed strongly from what Nero had envisioned. Brecht's interpretation of his *Threepenny Opera* shifted to a more critical and political focus, which prompted him to adapt the screenplay accordingly. He intercalated passages that function as social commentaries and changed the play's characters to "construct a radical image of class struggle."¹²

Nero had not predicted the substantial changes and feared that the overt political tendencies of Brecht's screenplay would harm their hopes for a box office hit. With the onset of the worldwide economy crisis following the stock market crash in New York, cinema admissions dropped significantly - roughly one third between 1928 and 1933.¹³ Understandably, Nero could not risk losing out on what had promised to be a most successful endeavour. They also had the censor in mind when refusing to accept Brecht's alterations, which gave the *Threepenny Opera* a very grave and heavy touch. Nero consequently proceeded with producing the film in autumn of 1930 and ultimately also won the court case against Brecht. Eleven days after the start of production he had sued the company for copyright infringement. He hoped to prevent the use of the name *Threepenny Opera* and place an injunction on the film's production and distribution. He lost the case since he had sold his rights, including the name, to Nero and had also refused to cooperate with the writing team (consisting of Ladislaus Vajda, Léo Lania and Béla Balázs) in the agreed manner. Brecht was furious, not least because he regarded the finished film as a "shameless botch."¹⁴ Retrospectively, Brecht published a pamphlet

¹² Silbermann, p. 214.

¹³ Heidt, Todd, 'Double Take: Béla Balázs and the Visual Disorientation in G.W. Pabst's Dreigroschenoper'. *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, Vol.50 No.2.May 2014, p. 178.

¹⁴ Brecht, Bertolt, 'Der Dreigroschenprozess – Ein soziologisches Experiment' *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 18 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 149. Translated and quoted in Hinton, p. 44.

entitled *The Threepenny-Lawsuit*. In it he conceptualises the court case as a sociological experiment, which one may also interpret as a post-mortem attempt to restore his damaged dignity. According to Brecht, he sought to settle the dispute in a state institution, the court, to make a point about intellectual property rights and accuse the film industry as well as the law system of shameless capitalism and exploitation of creative practitioners respectively. Acting in this mission, Brecht allegedly intended to lose the court case all along.

Press reaction

Brecht's prominence and activity as a critical observer and polemicist made the lawsuit fascinating for the press. Film critics had been following the plans for a screen adaptation all along and over the four days of the court case and beyond, they reported feverishly on the news from the courtroom and its implications. The press also recognised the dispute as a precedent, as one author writes in the film-magazine *Film-Kurier* on 1 October 1930, "This matter of dispute is of great interest for the problem of authorship in sound film." The question about authorship, copyright and intellectual property links in with issues in genre formation. For Brecht, apart from the financial lure, the appeal of working on a film must have been its outreach and potential impact. For Nero and Pabst, however, the project was also a chance to create a powerful and lasting artwork in its own right and with its own aesthetic. As a matter of fact, for them it was a sheer necessity to inject the *Threepenny* material with their own vision and, above all, their knowledge of cinematographic tools.

Reporting on the first day of the court case, the *Kinematograph* quotes the defendants' plea, "The defendants claim that Brecht's ideas for the film manuscript were

unfeasible. They had no alternative to writing a manuscript themselves. They assert that a script for the stage differs greatly from a film manuscript since they are completely opposed genres.”¹⁵ This observation tapped into many film lovers’ frustration about repeated allegations that denounced film as shallow, unaspiring and in general unworthy in comparison to the stage. In his review of the film premiere, an author for the *Kinematograph* comments on the film’s independence, which “must be mentioned, since there is always the risk that again, somebody will write that the cinema violates the art of the stage.”¹⁶

The film indeed reveals significant changes to Brecht’s revised manuscript, both in terms of tone and narrative. However, it also makes use of some of his alterations, most apparently the different ending, in which Mack’s bride Polly buys a bank and the gangsters join ‘high society.’¹⁷ The film also stays true to Brecht’s film script regarding the suggested changes concerning some songs. As the most prominent example, Brecht re-assigns the song of “Pirate Jenny” to the prostitute Jenny herself and leaves Polly to perform the “Barbara Song” at her wedding with Mack.¹⁸ The point where Pabst truly deviates from Brecht is in his cinematic aesthetic. In an interview with the *Reichsfilmblatt* during the process of production, Pabst asserts that his vision for the film is entirely visual and does not aim to adopt a theatrical style. A quote reads,

You see, ideally, the Threepenny Opera as a sound film should have nothing in common with the theatre. [...] If my work is successful I will be able to show the stylistic direction that sound film is taking – so far nobody has found it yet.”¹⁹ In

¹⁵ ‘Der Tag der Prozesse – Die Dreigroschenoper vor Gericht’, *Kinematograph*, 244 (1930), p. 7.

¹⁶ Ibid.,

¹⁷ Panja Mücke, *Musikalischer Film-Musikalisches Theater: Medienwechsel und szenische Collage bei Kurt Weill*. Münster: Waxmann, 2011, p. 120.

¹⁸ Ibid.,

¹⁹ Hans Taussig, ‘G.W. Pabst und die Dreigroschenoper’, *Reichsfilmblatt*, 44 (1930). Quoted in Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, *Photo: Casparius. Filmgeschichte in Bildern*, p. 190.

order to treat the original *Beggar's Opera* in a manner appropriate for sound film, Pabst produced a film that musicologist Panja Mücke calls a “gangster comedy.”²⁰

Fundamentally, Pabst departs from Brecht's concept that was theorised as ‘Epic Theatre’ in the years to come. Brecht's hope for the medium of film was to assist with his aims in de-emotionalising art. He wanted to break the illusion of the stage and disrupt the audience's urge to identify with characters. Pabst, on the other hand, did not subscribe to that school of thought. Having started his career in silent film production, he said “I remain convinced that in the cinema, the text counts for little. What counts is the image.”²¹ Consequently, Pabst created vivid visuals which aimed to recreate or at least appropriate realistic milieus, and were meticulously planned and arranged. Nothing in his imagery aimed to disrupt the illusion it evoked. Befittingly, for many reviewers the *Threepenny* film evoked a “fairy-tale world” or displayed “an elevated reality.”

The trade press's reaction to the film's premiere in Berlin on the 19th of February 1931 was mostly positive, sometimes even enthusiastic. The rare critical review, however, also surfaced, and culminated in the prolific critic Herbert Ihering's article in the newspaper *Berliner Börsen-Courier*. Here, he dubbed the film “Millionenfilm” (meaning both a film that cost millions and a film for the masses) - a horrifying verdict for the former “*Beggar's Opera*”. Ihering's allusion to the abhorrent production costs is echoed by the *Film-Kurier*, which writes “The money is visible – it would be unimaginable if you couldn't see the millions spent on this beggars' opera.”²²

²⁰ Mücke, p. 118.

²¹ G.W. Pabst, *Le rôle intellectuel du cinéma*, 1937, quoted in Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen – Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Translated from the French by Roger Greaves. 2nd revised edition, p. 295.

²² Ernst Jäger, ‘Die 3-Groschenoper’, *Film-Kurier*, 43 (1931). Original quote: Man sieht das Geld wieder. Es wäre nicht auszudenken – wenn man einer Bettler-Oper, ich bitt' Sie 3 (drei) Groschen, nicht die Millionen-Kosten ansehen würde.’

For many others, however, the *Threepenny Opera's* triumph (both artistically and economically) was evidence of the sound film's "coming of age" and its independence from literature and stage genres. In its review, the *Film-Kurier's* correspondent wrote,

Film cannot be examined from a literary point of view, it has to be contemplated as it shows on the screen, and as it sounds through the speakers. This is a great, independent, extra-ordinary film, and the masses of people from many countries will not be interested in how far it reflects the spirit of Brecht-Weill. This film has its own spirit, its own value.²³

Various authors attempt to describe the very specifics of this "value". Ernst Jäger, again writing for the *Film-Kurier*, highlights a series of short scenes that Pabst enhanced through his use of visuals, namely those which build on the romance between Mack and his bride Polly. Through a camera shot on a bridal dress in a shop window, as well as other "rich decorations", the film becomes what critic Jäger describes as "beautiful". Both the images and Weill's music reportedly moved Jäger to tears.²⁴ One reviewer admitted that the film does indeed smoothen out the severity and energy of the Brecht production in favour of a more "easy-going" tone.²⁵ He is, however, all praise about what he assumes to be a meticulously replicated harbour-scenery of London Soho. Another author writes, "This film, practically glorifying a criminal, has been transformed into a timeless, placid

²³ '3-Groschen-Oper in Uraufführung', *Film-Kurier*, 43 (1931). Original quote: 'Film ist nicht zu betrachten von der Literatenecke, er ist anzublicken, wie er auf der Leinwand erscheint, wie er aus den Lautsprechern tönt. Ein großer Film ist entstanden, bei dem es die Publikumsmassen in allen Ländern wenig interessieren wird, ob er von anderem Geist als dem der Brecht-Weill ist [...]. Dieser Film hat seinen eigenen Geist, seinen eigenen Wert.'

²⁴ Ernst Jäger, 'Die 3-Groschenoper', *Film-Kurier*, 43 (1931). Original quote: 'Unsagbar schön die sentimentale Herzstelle beim Abschieds-Melodram der Vermählten. Schemenhaft, tränennah. Ach ja, das gute alte Herz.'

²⁵ Dammann, "Dreigroschenoper," *LichtBildBühne*, 44 (1931). Original quote: 'Es mag bedauert werden, daß so die unmittelbare Härte, die frappierende Kraft des Brechtschen Stückes ins Episch-Breite, ja Zuständlich-Gemächliche gewandelt wird.'

and almost magical tale [...].”²⁶ These and many more accounts hail the *Threepenny Opera* film as pleasing to the eye and realistic in its decorative detail.

The Use and Role of Music

With regard to the use of music and song, the film again presents a unique stance while taking the original stage production as well as Brecht’s screenplay into what appears to be careful consideration. Some of the visual framing is in keeping with the stage production, namely in those instances when the plot is visibly interrupted for a music performance that is announced as such. This diegetic use of music in the on-screen setting is fundamental to Brecht’s notion of the Epic Theatre. In his essay “On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre” written in 1935 as part of his *Schriften zum Theater*, Brecht asserts that his concepts’ “[...] most striking innovation lay in the strict separation of the music from all the other elements of entertainment offered.”²⁷ In the theatre production at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, Brecht had separated music performance from the dramatic plot with a set of techniques: a change of lighting (lighting up the on-stage orchestra), having the actors assume a new position before starting to sing, and projecting song titles and lyrics onto large screens for the audience to read. In his understanding, it was pivotal that the Aristotelian imitation of reality (or mimesis) was to be broken, which was only possible if singers visibly underwent “a change of function” and portrayed the act of singing as exactly that, instead of pretending that the music was an extension or

²⁶ ‘Die Dreigroschenoper’, *Kinematograph*, 24 (1931). Original quote: ‘Man hat diesen Film, der eigentlich den Schwerverbrecher glorifiziert, in das Gemütliche, Zeitlose, man möchte fast sagen Märchenhafte übertragen [...]’

²⁷ Bertolt Brecht, ‘On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre.’ *Brecht on Theatre – The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen Drama, 1964), p. 85.

intensification of their characters' emotions.²⁸ He instructed, "In no case therefore should singing take place where words are prevented by excess of feeling. The actor must not only sing but show a man singing."²⁹

For the transition to film, Pabst mostly followed Brecht's example, maybe instinctively, since Brecht's essays on the practice of Epic Theatre had not yet been written. Most music of the film occurs as diegetic performances (which the stage script asked for) and similarly to the original stage version, music neither functions as "acoustic background" nor provides the visual with musical illustration, as was traditional in silent film practice.³⁰ Several songs can be picked out which demonstrate a similar approach to music performance as exercised by Brecht. In the wedding scene between Mack and Polly, Pabst lets Polly perform a party piece (the "Barbara-Song"), which she announces herself and performs on a stage-like platform with an illustrious but attentive audience – Mackie's henchmen. As in the original, the musical performance and the narrative are clearly set apart, even if a complete alienation or disillusion is spared since Polly remains in character and does not reveal herself as the actress Carola Neher. However, Neher, having been part of the original stage cast, still manages to adhere to one of Brecht's alienation techniques, namely to speak and sing her part decidedly monotonously and with an emotional distance to her character Polly. What Brecht found desirable, one film critic subsequently mistook as a lack of temperament and expressiveness on the part of the actress.³¹ Even if Pabst does not break the illusionary barrier of the screen or what

²⁸ Bertolt Brecht, 'The Literisation of the Theatre – About the Singing of the Songs'. *Brecht on Theatre – The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen Drama, 1964) p. 44-45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*,

³⁰ Mücke, p. 122.

³¹ Dr. Kurt London, 'Die 3-Groschen-Oper', *Der Film*, 8 (1931). Original quote: 'Ihre [Carola Neher's] Polly ist um einige Nuancen zu stilisiert. Dennoch sympathisch, aber viel zu unbeweglich.'

Todd Heidt calls the “accepted relationship between audience and actors,” his directions on the camera work of Fritz Arno Wagner certainly evoke a sense of flexible spectatorship that may confront the cinema audience with their own act of watching. While Polly performs her song, the camera assumes the viewpoint of the on-screen audience as well as the cinema spectator, catching Polly with a low angle shot and in profile. It then switches to imitate Polly’s view towering over her audience and looking down at her admiring listeners and a richly decorated table. Here the camera is not acting as an unnoticeable medium to record live action, but its angle and stillness double as the eyes of the viewer, both on-screen and off. While this might be in the spirit of Brecht, Pabst does not go so far as to make the source of music completely visible. As Polly sings and is filmed doing so, her instrumental accompaniment remains elusively invisible, thus undermining the Brechtian ideal of complete transparency and disillusion.

As this example and other song renditions (notably Jenny’s song “Pirate Jenny”) illustrate, the diegetic nature of music performance, as far as the singers are concerned, remains intact in the transition from stage to screen. This may be due to Pabst’s respect of the Brecht original, or simply the outcome of a practical issue. Staging music as performance in sound film is an easy solution to an intricate problem which directors and writers of film musicals have been familiar with from the earliest days of sound film. In order to integrate music and song into the plot in tradition of narrative cinema, they must be woven elegantly into dialogues and actions. Unlike operetta and opera stages, where singers regularly break into song on cues, film seems to expose the awkward transitions between quasi-realistic actions/dialogue and songs in potentially ridiculous, crude and contrived ways.

Rather than attempting to justify sudden outbursts of song in emotionally heightened moments, placing the music in a context of on-screen performance is relatively straightforward and provides justifiable causes while minimising additional complications with sound technology (musical performance as contained entities in film could be pre-recorded much more easily than music occurring amidst a dialogue or action shot). Despite the compromise of combining elements borrowed from the stage production and fitting it into the filmic interpretation, for critic Ernst Jäger, the adaptation did not go far enough with regard to the treatment of songs. While he praises the instrumental arrangements by Mackeben, he criticises the solution to present the songs as diegetic performances. He emphasises, “A film song must be originally composed for the film and originally montaged.”³²

Weill’s original score was shortened in the process of the adaption of the stage production to film script and only 28 ½ minutes of music remained in the finished film.³³ However, the most iconic songs (most from Act I) were only marginally altered, if at all, among them the famous “Moritat of Mack the Knife”, the “Wedding Song”, the “Barbara Song” and the “Cannon Song”. Other songs, including the three Finali, did not make the cut. Nero not only had the contractual obligation to leave Weill’s songs virtually untouched and to abstain from adding any new music.³⁴ It was also in the company’s interest to stay true to the Weill originals, since the *Threepenny Opera*’s songs had become instant “Schlager” (popular songs) in Berlin’s streets and taverns. As such, the

³² Ernst Jäger, ‘Die 3-Groschenoper’ *Film-Kurier*, 43 (1931). Original quote: ‘Auch die filmische Lösung der Song-Vorträge ist ein Not-Behelf. Ein Film-Song muss original komponiert und montiert sein.’

³³ Hinton, p. 46.

³⁴ Any instrumental music not included in the stage production derived from the song material and was used for transitions between scenes or to place musical reminders – reminiscences – at dramatically important points. See Panja Mücke for an analysis of Weill’s “Reminiszenz-Verfahren”.

songs would be effective promotional devices drawing people to the cinemas to hear the famed music in the setting of a new film. Film and theatre production not only shared the same musical material, they also employed the same music band (The Ruth Lewis Band) and its musical director, Theo Mackeben. Mackeben was to become one of the most prolific composers of film music in the 1930s, and arranged the *Threepenny Opera* songs for film with Weill and their collaborative work in mind. Being able to advertise his involvement was another beneficial factor for the Nero officials, who tried to make the most of the popularity of the stage production and its associated people.

Despite the film being true to Weill's songs (and Brecht's lyrics for them), their embedding in a film that was so beautifully crafted that it facilitated a shift in their perception and interpretation. Most strikingly, *Film-Kurier* critic Ernst Jäger criticised Weill's stage music as "domineering" and "moralising", while concluding that on screen it was "an interesting number."³⁵ Arguably, Brecht had wanted Weill's songs to be anything but pleasant and interesting. He envisioned songs functioning like ballads of a "reflective and moralizing nature" which would stir the comfortable passivity of audiences.³⁶ Simultaneously, songs had to be simplistic, repetitive and even crude in order to be memorable and representative of the beggars and rogues performing them. The intended impact and critical edge the songs were designed to provoke seemed softened in the film treatment, hence Jäger's verdict. However, this effect might not be a direct result of Pabst's cinematography but rather due to the songs' popularity following the *Threepenny Opera*'s success on stage. Additionally, by 1931, cinema audiences had

³⁵ Ernst Jäger, 'Die 3-Groschenoper' *Film-Kurier*, 43 (1931). Original quote: "Unvergleichbar dem dominierenden Eindruck der Weill-Musik für das Bühnenstück. Dort war es eine 'moralische Musik'. Hier ist sie interessante Nummer."

³⁶ Willett: 84.

been accustomed to a type of sound film that complemented narrative with songs merely for amusement's sake, which could explain why spectators felt entertained rather than lectured upon watching the film.

Beyond the questions of comparability between stage production and film, the *Threepenny Opera* film should also be approached and understood as a representative of a newly emerging genre in Germany, that of the "Musikfilm" – films using music and song in a way that is central either to the narrative (in the so-called backstage plots) or significant for the film's understanding and "identity" in any other way. This may take the shape of films that intersperse the plot with musical fragments, songs and dances commenting or developing the storyline further. Music can also provide emotional signposts, characterise protagonists, and connect scenes by means of musical reminiscences. Alternatively, music and song can also merely act as burlesque-like parody numbers in the tradition of German operetta or American Vaudeville (such as the song "Ich wollt' ich wär ein Huhn" in the 1930 film *Einbrecher*).

The advances in sound technology triggered a wave of films making use of music – logically justified or not. For a few years after 1929 it seemed impossible to encounter a feature film that hadn't added at least a few songs. The reasons were mostly practical. As outlined above, songs were exceptionally good tools for production companies to attract viewers and also to exhibit the novel technological possibilities. As a music film, the *Threepenny Opera* joined the ranks of some popular productions of the same and the previous years, which aimed towards a more integrated style of music and script in pursuit of the new genre of musical film that was termed "Tonfilmoperette" (sound film operetta). Most of these films were light-hearted musical comedies that emulated the style of Hollywood's musicals as well as implementing traditions of the stage operetta, such as

using frantic choruses, frivolous lyrics, ballets and general grand spectacles while often neglecting the plot's logical structure. This trajectory in filmmaking served the *Threepenny Opera* film well, since its production fell into a time that very much favoured films using songs and dances to enhance their appeal or simply to distract from a drab story.

However, the *Threepenny Opera* with G.W. Pabst as its ingenious director also took part in actively developing a film practice that supported and facilitated musical performance to enrich the visual component while preventing these additions becoming gimmicks. In his film, the songs do not sit uncomfortably and disconnectedly from the plot as in so many German and American music productions (most notably and unashamedly in the Busby Berkeley films of the 1930s where spectacle was almost never used to advance the plot but merely served an ornamental purpose). Instead they coexist with the script and blend in smoothly with stylistic expression while retaining their depiction as diegetic performances. These function as self-sustained, informative and declamatory intersections rather than expressions of emotions or demonstrations of technological ability.

Pabst's insistence to keep the basic illusionary structure dividing imaginary screen-world from the reality of the cinema auditorium helped in this endeavour. However, it is also pivotal that Pabst did not resort to attempting a complete integration of song into the plot, which almost undoubtedly would have disrupted the underlying sincerity of the *Threepenny Opera*'s aspiration of raising social awareness. Films from the same period depicting musical performance as spontaneous and outrageously exaggerated outbursts amidst the narrative, such as Ernst Lubitsch's early film musicals *Love Me Tonight*, *Monte Carlo* or *Love Parade*, usually attest to their close relationship

with operetta and are almost invariably of an equally satirical nature. Avoiding any unwanted comical effects inflicted by misplacing songs, Pabst managed to maintain the sharp political satire Brecht had intended, targeting the dramatic core of the narrative, which reveals the perfidious pretence of a corrupted and amoral society.

Despite the *Threepenny Opera* film's cinematic beauty, most contemporary critics recognised the social criticism and ironic undertones the original stage production had been peppered with. Many of the reviewers were familiar with both versions, and their comparisons and verdicts allow the reader a detailed if sometimes anecdotal account of contemporary opinions and general Zeitgeist at a time when the entertainment industry underwent significant changes. For Brecht, the film was much too slick and anodyne. The perfect illusion created by impressive use of mise-en-scène was all he detested in art (he passionately opposed Wagner's notion of "Gesamtkunstwerk"), and had counteracted in his own production. Critic Paul Wiegler recalled that Brecht's stage sets "remove any memory of operatic scenery by means of fantastic naturalism. The innards of the stage are laid bare."³⁷ The opposite is true for Pabst and his lavishly decorated sets (created by designer Andrej Andrejews). The film's reception history shows that some shared Brecht's view: a renowned German film critic in the 1970s called the film "romantic gangster-folklore,"³⁸ and some contemporary reviews, especially those with a socialist point of view, echoed that sentiment.³⁹ Despite the critique, the film has gained a reputation as one of Pabst's finest works. In tailoring Brecht's script and Weill's music specifically to the needs of film, Pabst and his team succeeded in creating an acclaimed

³⁷ Paul Wiegler, 'Die Dreigroschenoper: Einst und Jetzt'. *Musik für alle*, (1929), p. 247. Revised reprint of the same critic's review first published in *B.Z. am Mittag* 1 Sept. 1928, trans. in Hinton, p. 53.

³⁸ Ponkie, 'Dreigroschenoper.' *Abendzeitung* (1973).

³⁹ See Heidt, p.187.

piece of art that values its sources but also asserts itself as unique. In terms of social criticism, it “succeeded” in so far as it was deemed subversive by the Nazis, who banned the film in August 1933 upon their rise to power.

Works Cited:**Monographs, journals**

Brecht, Bertolt. *Gesammelte Werke. Bd. 18 Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst I*. Ed. Elisabeth Hauptmann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Grosse kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe. Bd. 16 Prosa I*. Eds. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, Klaus-Detlef Mueller. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990.

Eisner, Lotte H. *The Haunted Screen – Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Translated from the French by Roger Greaves. 2nd revised edition, 2008.

Heidt, Todd. “Double Take: Béla Balázs and the Visual Disorientation of G.W.Pabst’s Dreigroschenoper”. *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 50.2 (2014): 178-196.

Hinton, Stephen. *Kurt Weill – The Threepenny Opera*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Cambridge Opera Handbooks.

Kaes, Anton. “The Debate about Cinema: Charting a Controversy (1909-1929)”. Trans. David J. Levin. *New German Critique*. Spec. issue on Weimar Film Theory No.40 (1987): 7-33.

Mücke, Panja. *Musikalischer Film, Musikalisches Theater – Medienwechsel und szenische Collage bei Kurt Weill*. Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2011.

Silbermann, Marc. ‘17 October 1930: Bertolt Brecht’s Threepenny Opera Lawsuit Identifies Contradiction between Individual Creativity and Collective Production in Cinema’. *A New History of German Cinema*. Eds. Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michael D. Richardson. Rochester: Camden House, 2012: 213-218.

Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek. *Photo: Casparius. Filmgeschichte in Bildern*. Eds. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek in Zusammenarbeit mit Landesbildstelle Berlin, Berliner Festspiele GmbH. Berlin: Jürgen Kleindienst, 1978.

Willett, John, Ed. and trans. *Brecht on Theatre – The Development of an Aesthetic*. London: Methuen Drama, 1964.

Newspapers, magazines

Berliner Börsen-Courier 20 Feb. 1931 Nr.63. Web.

Berliner Börsen-Kurier 6 May 1929. In Hinton: 11.

“Brechts ‘3 Groschen-Oper’ – Klage vor der Weigert-Kammer.” *Film-Kurier* 8 Oct. 1930 Nr.247, 3. Beilatt. Repr. in Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin.

Jäger, Ernst. "Die 3-Groschenoper" *Film-Kurier* 20 Feb. 1931 Nr.43 Film-Kritik. Repr. in Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin.

"3-Groschen-Oper in Uraufführung" *Film-Kurier* 20 Feb. 1931 Nr.43: 1. Repr. in Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin.

„Bert Brecht klagt: Der Autorenstreit um die ‚Drei Groschen-Oper‘“ *Film-Kurier* 1 Oct. 1930 Nr.232. Repr. in Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin.

„Der Tag der Prozesse – ‚Die Dreigroschenoper‘ vor Gericht“ *Kinematograph* 17 Oct. 1930 Nr.244 24.Jg Beilage Nr.39: 7. Repr. in Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin.

„Die Dreigroschenoper“ *Kinematograph* 20 Feb. 1931 24.Jg. Repr. Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv Berlin.

Dammann. "Dreigroschenoper" *LichtBildBühne* 20 Feb. 1931 24. Jg. Nr.44. Print Repr. in Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv Berlin.

London, Dr. Kurt. "Die 3-Groschen-Oper" *Der Film* 21 Feb. 1931 Nr. 8. Repr. in Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin.

Ponkie, „Dreigroschenoper.“ *Abendzeitung* 10 Mar. 1973:

DVD

Pabst, Georg Wilhelm. *3-Groschen-Oper*, Tonbild-Syndikat, Warner Brothers, 1931.

Key Words

Brecht

Weill

Sound Film

Film Musical

Threepenny Opera

Reprint 'Brecht's 3 Groschen-Oper Klage vor der Weigert-Kammer' and 'Weshalb Brecht abgewiesen wurde' from the trade magazine 'Film-Kurier' 247, 282 (both 1930) courtesy of Verlag für Filmzeitschriften Christian Unucka, 85241 Herbertshausen, www.unucka.de



Figure 2: Article appearing in the *Film-Kurier* on 29 Nov 1930: ‘Why Brecht was turned down’.



Figure 1: Article appearing in the *Film-Kurier* on 18 Oct 1930: ‘Brecht’s Threepenny Opera- suit before the Weigert court’.

