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Capital in the Mirror

CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY AND
THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION

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Chapter 2

Marxist Aesthetics, Realism, and Photography

On Brecht's War Primer

CHRISTIAN LOTZ

Those at the top say:
It leads to glory.
Those down below say:
It leads to the grave.

—Bertolt Brecht

Introduction: Iconophobia in Critical Theory?

Critical aesthetics in the tradition of the Frankfurt School has often been accused of being elitist, in distance to popular culture, and overtly hostile to pictorial art traditions. The accusation of iconophobia intensified in recent decades during which photography has emancipated itself from painting and established itself as one of the major forces in contemporary art. Most recently, this critique has been forcefully put forward by Susie Linfield in her popular and well-received book *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, within which she opens her reflections

on the sociopolitical dimension of contemporary photography and photojournalism with a harsh critique not only of photography criticism from Sontag through Barthes, but also of the Frankfurt School aesthetics, such as Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer, and Brecht. She writes: "Benjamin was highly suspicious of the passive, aestheticized society that he feared photography was helping to create" (Linfield, 2010, p. 18). In relation to Kracauer and Brecht, she writes:

it was Kracauer's mandarin, often censorious tone that would flourish among successor generations of cultural critics who write about photography. Most of all, though, it is Brecht whose shadow hangs over photography criticism and whose sensibility continues to define it. Brecht, I think it's fair to say, really loathe photographs. (Linfield, 2010, p. 20)

These statements are not only factually wrong,¹ but more importantly also display a deep misunderstanding of Brecht's overall aesthetic positions and philosophic ideas. It is factually wrong that Brecht despised photographs, which can easily be seen in his use of them in his decades-long journal, in which he collected ideas and daily notes in connection with press photographs. It is true, however, that both Brecht and Benjamin did not think of photographs as isolated things; instead, they thought about them as being embedded in social and political practices that were based on specific uses and developments of the modern media. Accordingly, photographs for Benjamin and Brecht do not exist as isolated entities; instead, they are analyzed as parts of social relations. Linfield underestimates the critical aspects of the type of aesthetics that she attacks, insofar as she does not understand that the critical aspect in thinkers such as Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno is not based in their critical attitude toward images; rather, being critical toward any kind of social praxis is derived from a larger theory of society. Accordingly, Brecht and Benjamin do not take on a critical position toward images or photographs in general; rather, they criticize specific artistic and nonartistic practices in which images are used and, as a consequence, are related to capitalist society as a whole. Both were interested in developing different practices in which diverse media would be produced and apprehended in a better—that is, emancipatory—way, and, hence, would, via cultural changes, foreshadow a different, postcapitalist, world.

Moreover, Linfield distorts almost all of Brecht's famous quotes on photography, which are presented in an isolated fashion, without reflecting on the proper context of these quotes. This proper context is Brecht's Marxist aesthetics and his work as a whole. One of these famous quotes reads as follows:

The tremendous development of photojournalism [*Bildreportage*] has scarcely yielded any *truth* about the world's current conditions: in the hands of the bourgeoisie, photography has become a terrible weapon *against* the truth. The enormous amount of pictorial material that is spat out daily from the printing press and that appears to bear the character of reality actually serves just the obfuscation [*Verdunkelung*—literally: darkening] of facts. *The camera can lie just as the typewriter.* The task of the AIZ is to serve the truth and to reconstruct the true matters of fact. (Brecht, 1993/21, p. 515)

As we will see in what follows, what Brecht had in mind is not that photographs could not be used for non-bourgeois purposes, such as the labor movement or for revolutionary goals. On the contrary, he envisioned a photographic practice that could be used in a critical fashion and function even within a critical artistic practice. He saw this foreshadowed in how the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (AIZ), which was a news magazine for the labor class and based on photo montage, worked with images. As I will argue in the following, Brecht's *War Primer* is such a critical project in which photographs are embedded in a different practice that imply a different relation to war, to the past, and to society, and therefore function within a critical and realist art practice. Consequently, though it is true that for a long time the left tradition was skeptical about the mass media, iconophobia is not *per se* the consequence of Marxist aesthetics. What is at stake is not a rejection of images and photography, but the social practice and the social relations in which they are embedded.

This task of developing different critical perspectives in both artistic and theoretical practices has reached a new urgency in our neoliberal times, and we can observe that questions related to the concept of realism have reemerged in contemporary art, film and photography. As I have argued elsewhere (Lotz, 2017a), a critical and realist concept of art is confronted with the problem of how to make that which (invisibly)

rules and dominates us, such as the market and capital, visible. As Anita Chari in her *The Political Economy of the Senses* has it:

I suggest that artistic representations of capital emerging now in response to the political antinomies of neoliberalism are themselves signs of an alternative critique of political economy, one that is better able to negotiate between political experience and economic form. The key for me is that new ways of representing and inhabiting the economy, what I call *econopoiesis*, are crucial for challenging dominant representations of the economy by mainstream economics, which is both undialectical and in service to financial capital, feeding off the incomprehensibility and unalterability of finance to citizens and political theorists alike. (2015, p. 169)

The problematic relation between the socially visible and the socially invisible has been reflected in Marxist inspired art and aesthetics before the arrival of neoliberalism throughout the 20th century, which includes theorists such as Brecht, Eisenstein, Kluge, Beuys, Benjamin, and Adorno, as well as artists such as Rosler, Farocki, Schlingensief, Sekula, Burtynsky, the Center for Political Beauty, and Pagen. Brecht's *Kriegsfibel* stands in this tradition that runs from Eisenstein's idea to make a film about *Capital* to Pagen's photo series of night photographs of NSA facilities and security companies that spy on all of us. All of these projects, especially since they are defined as "critical realism," are confronted with the problem of visibility and invisibility because artworks cannot remain within the conceptual and theoretical realm alone, insofar as they are in need of the sensual presence of meaning. Representing the socially invisible becomes here a sensible task. The problem becomes more difficult, however, when artists either explicitly work from a critical and Marxist standpoint or implicitly want to address capital, capitalism, globalization, economic issues, and the like in their work. The question, then, is very simple: How can something socially and actually abstract, such as money, capital, exchange, global structures, trade flows, banks, and financial speculations, be made perceptible? Put plainly, how can that which is invisible be rendered visible? The problem of the photograph, at least as long as it is not embedded in a *critical* media praxis, falls into the same category, insofar as isolated photographs have a meaning and can, as Barthes argued, be read on some level internally; however, being

placed in media practices, such as newspapers, magazines or blogs, implies that these photographs are representing "invisibly" certain social relations.

As we will see, in the *War Primer* Brecht encounters a similar problem, which in his work is treated in relation to war, insofar as those who, according to Brecht, wage wars *on the people* in the name of power and capital remain as invisible as capital as a dominating principle. In the *War Primer*, the problem of visibility and invisibility is "echoed" by modern warfare, since the war from the air (air planes, long distance missiles, drones, satellites, virtual warfare) is itself fought as one in which the aggressors and their deadly tools remain as "invisible" as the millions of victims who died during World War I and World War II. As a famous line from the *Threepenny Opera* has it, "There are some who are in darkness / And the others are in light / And you see the ones in brightness / Those in darkness drop from sight." It is precisely this problem of the visible in regard to photography, memory, war, class, and war that Brecht tackles in his *War Primer*.

The Visible and the Invisible in Marxist Methodology and Aesthetics

Let me start with a reminder that the problem of the visible and the invisible not only runs through the Marxist tradition, but also through the entire main body of modern philosophy, which is especially visible in the genetic conceptions of philosophy developed post-Hegel. As I have dealt elsewhere with this issue in more detail and in regard to Lukacs's concept of realism (Lotz, 2017), here I only sketch the most important aspects. As Foucault demonstrates in his *Order of Things*, with the downfall of Hegelian metaphysics, the transparency of being and essence, of word and meaning, as well as of knowledge and concept, falls apart. Instead, conceptions of reality, meaning, and knowledge move to the forefront that are largely characterized by their emphasis on genesis and genetic reconstruction. For example, Nietzsche tries to trace morality back to embodied practices, Freud traces the surface of consciousness back to earlier developments and psychic functions, Husserl offers an account of how abstract knowledge of nature goes back to the lifeworld, and, finally, Marx most famously develops a genetic method of how to conceive of the categories of political economy in *Capital*. He thereby sets up the entire problem of the visible and the invisible for the Frankfurt School

tradition. In fact, one could argue that the aesthetic problem of how to depict something that, as totality, is inaccessible, such as the totality of capitalist social organization, is already implied in Marx's method, which the work of early critical theorists, such as Adorno and Benjamin, extend. For example, Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* and Adorno's early attempt to appropriate Benjamin's concept of dialectical images explicitly take on the problem of how to render the invisible visible in the realm of theory.

The view of photography in early critical theory is just the consequence of the larger problem in Marxist methodology, which is not very clearly understood in the noncritical contemporary discourse on these issues. What is particularly missed is that all of this goes back to Marx. Here is what Marx says in *Grundrisse*:

In present bourgeois society as a whole, this positing of prices and their circulation etc. appears as the surface process, beneath which, however, in the depths, entirely different processes go on, in which this apparent individual equality and liberty disappear. It is forgotten, on one side, that the presupposition of exchange value, as the objective basis of the whole of the system of production, already in itself implies compulsion over the individual, since his immediate product is not a product for him, but only becomes such in the social process, and since it must take on this general but nevertheless external form; and that the individual has an existence only as a producer of exchange value, hence that the whole negation of his natural existence is already implied; that he is therefore entirely determined by society; that this further presupposes a division of labor etc., in which the individual is already posited in relations other than that of mere exchanger, etc. (Marx, 1993, p. 247)

What Marx has in mind here are two things: It remains hidden at the surface of market transactions and the simple commodity circulation that not only the entire production and distribution process is *contained* in the surface, but also that the individual market agent who appears at the surface of these transactions as an isolated contractor and exchanger is already determined by the entire process of social (re)production (by which Marx means the structural determination of *what* an agent is). Accordingly, the genetic method of Marx's thinking is supposed to reveal

the social relations that make up what *appears* to be isolated entities. Similarly, Marx conceives of the categories presented and developed in *Capital* as a process throughout which the origin of the categories and their relational genesis disappears after each step. For example, the money mystery is based on the structural problem that the genesis contained in money (and which *Capital* is supposed to reconstruct) disappears in its results and "leaves no trace behind." As Marx puts this,

What appears to happen is not that gold becomes money, in consequence of all other commodities expressing their values in it, but, on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values in gold, because it is money. The intermediate steps of the process vanish in the result and leave no trace behind. Commodities find their own value already completely represented, without any initiative on their part, in another commodity existing in company with them. These objects, gold and silver, just as they come out of the bowels of the earth, are forthwith the direct incarnation of all human labor. Hence the magic of money. (Marx, 1990, p. 187)

Accordingly, even without going into the details of Marx's method and the problem of research and presentation of the economic categories, we can see that the problem of visibility and invisibility not only is deeply embedded in the genetic method of Marx's thinking, but also that the problem can easily be transferred to an *aesthetic* problem, namely, how the conceptual reconstruction of the capitalist social organization as a whole can be transferred into the problem of how in given artistic practices this capitalist social organization can be "presented" [*darstellen*].

Brecht's Critical Aesthetics

It is clear that Brecht's entire program is based on this problem of presentation. More specifically, he is concerned with the problem of how to deal with the break between the visible and the invisible and the attempt to "bridge" it via a genetic method. This is most prominently visible in the problem of how photographic images hide or reveal the social reality that they are supposed to depict. As Brecht has it in a famous statement (of which unfortunately usually only the first two sentences are quoted)²:

The situation [in capitalist society as a whole] is now becoming so complex that a simple "reproduction of reality" says less than ever about reality itself. A photograph of a Krupp factory or the AEG says practically nothing about these institutions. Reality itself has shifted into the realm of the functional. The reification of human relationships, such as the factory, no longer betrays anything about these relationships. And so what we actually need is to "construct something," something "artificial," "posed." What we therefore equally need is art. But the old concept of art based on experience is invalid. For whoever reproduces those aspects of reality that can be experienced does not reproduce reality. For some time reality has no longer been experienceable as a totality. But speaking in this way, we speak about an art with a completely different function in social life—that of depicting reality. (Brecht, 1993/21, p. 469)

Accordingly, Brecht does not talk only about photographs here; in addition, he tasks art, at least in the critical fashion in which Brecht envisions it, with what theory is supposed to do in Marxist philosophy. Instead of revealing the reality in what only appears as surface through theory, art has to "deal" with the reality in its own forms of existence, which, for Brecht (and Benjamin), are *social practices of media* uses. Conceiving art as dealing with media practices is the proper materialist approach to what, in traditional aesthetics, was conceived as a problem of art "genres." As we need critical theory in a society that as a whole is intangible, not given, and not directly present (although its abstractions are real),³ we are in need of critical art and media practices. If Adorno's claim that critical theory is "society's consciousness of itself" (Adorno in Demirovic, 1999, p. 465) is true, then, from Brecht's perspective, the highest possibility of critical aesthetics and art practices should be conceived in a similar fashion. Art, in Brecht's case mainly poetry and theater, is society's consciousness of itself. Since we are living in a social reality characterized by the capitalist mode of production and capitalist social form, critical media practices need to reflect and express this fact, too. Hence, Marxist theory and Marxist aesthetics are based on the attempt to reverse the process of forgetting and to reverse the misconception of society of itself. The *War Primer* can therefore be understood as a contribution to this project, now developed in the form of critical

mimesis and memory of World War II and its underlying social system of production and power.

Brecht's concept of realism is, accordingly, the coherent consequence of what determines the overall framework of Marxist aesthetics. As he puts it:

The problem is the following: It is only one goal of true realism that the reality is recognized [*wiederkennen*] on the theater stage. However, the reality has to be understood [*durchschauen*], too. The laws that govern the developments of the life processes should become visible. These laws are not visible in photographs. (Brecht, 1993/22.2, p. 792)

Accordingly, the Marxist concept of mimesis (for this, see Lotz 2017) as the *recognition* of reality cannot be understood as a simple naturalism, insofar as the *presentation* [*Darstellung*] of the reality is supposed to be, at the same time, a consideration and rational reflection of this reality. Again, given that the social reality is determined by capitalist society, critical realism is based on the presentation and, *in and through* this presentation, a consideration of this reality. As a consequence, the audience must be kept in a critical distance to the presentation in order to allow for judgments about what is considered in these critical art practices.

This, however, *does not* mean, as Linfield argues (2010, p. 22) that the sole focus of Brecht's aesthetics is based on rationality alone. The opposite is the case: Brecht tries to find the proper balance between the emotional and rational relation of the audience to the work of art. As Didi-Huberman puts it, Brecht's work is based on the assumption that works of art transmit "emotions, *in order to think*, and even to call for action instead of dreaming on" (Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 219). Emotions, we might say, *become* critical throughout the confrontation with the poetic, dramatic, or image work. This is even more true for photographs. As Benjamin puts it:

... photography is unable to convey anything about a power station or a cable factory other than, "What a beautiful world!" The World Is Beautiful—this is the title of the well-known picture anthology by Renger-Patzsch, in which we see New Objective photography at its peak. For it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty—by apprehending it in a

fashionably perfected manner—into an object of enjoyment. (Benjamin, 2005, p. 775)

This statement by Benjamin has often been interpreted as hostile to popular culture and “enjoyment.” Though this interpretation is not false, we should read it in the larger context of how to rethink the relation between emotion and rationality through the lens of a critical concept of mimesis and realism. Being against enjoyment does *not* mean that the work remains at the rational level alone; instead, what is desirable is an enjoyment that is not based on good “feelings” alone; instead, it is based on the *transparency* of the emotional relation between work and audience or readership. The emotions must be liberated from being dominated, too. According to Brecht, what we need is a *different type* of enjoyment, namely, an enjoyment that is not based on art as a means of *consumer* enjoyment, insofar as consumer enjoyment is *passive*, whereas Marxist aesthetics operates with an audience that is emotionally *and* rationally *active* throughout its reception. This structure underlies the *War Primer* project, at least insofar as the reader is forced to actively engage with the images that Brecht put together for the publication. Consequently, enjoyment *per se* is not a problem for critical aesthetics; instead, it is only the *immediacy* of enjoyment, which does not allow the revelation of the underlying structures and social determinations of what each specific work is about.

What emerges here and elsewhere in Brecht’s (and Benjamin’s) writings is an expanded understanding of cultural production. It is no longer a question of supplying the market with attractive artifacts or *Genußmittel*. It is, rather, a question of developing new cultural forms that encourage active involvement in the production of political consciousness rather than passive consumption of artistic commodities. Long argues, in my view correctly, that Brechtian aesthetics, which makes both author and audience into a producer, “shifts the whole emphasis of literary epistemology from a reflected ‘content of knowledge’ to an active, ‘critical’ reorganization of experience.” (Long, 2008, p. 205)

The Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung

Finally, decisive for a proper understanding of Brecht’s *War Primer* is also the principle of montage. I will come back to the principle of montage in connection with memory in the next section of this chapter. I will

here just briefly point to the background of how Brecht appropriates montage in the *War Primer* and how this underlies the work. Brecht was very fond of the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (AIZ), a daily newspaper targeting the German working class that contained collages produced by avant-garde artists. The AIZ tried to break through the official suspicion of the Communist and Social Democrats during the Weimar republic. As one scholar puts it:

The AIZ’s inventive practice may have arisen, therefore, when this near iconoclastic distrust for the surface of appearance met photography, the medium most attentive to precisely that same surface. Again, this would form the origin of what I wish to describe as photo ambivalence—a simultaneous suspicion for and attraction to the medium’s documentary capacity. (Zervigón, 2010, p. 151)

Brecht’s practice of combining poems with photographs from World War II in the *War Primer* should therefore not be seen as an invention; instead, in this work Brecht transforms a given social practice of combining text with photographs into his own art by carefully selecting images and poetic “commentaries” that reflect the problem of visible surface and invisible social determinations, such as the relation between the power of Nazi leaders and the suffering population and the relation between war ideologies and the underlying weapon production by the German military industry.

Accordingly, the methodological problem of invisibility, the representation of capital, as well as the Marxist attempt to reverse the process of social forgetting, has a political side, insofar as one of the goals of right-wing conservatism, especially in the form of the fascist bourgeoisie and industrial capital, tried to do everything in order to make their own class position, the domination of the population, as well as surplus value production, invisible. Hence, invisibility is not only a socioeconomic concept, but also, if not primarily, a political concept. As the AIZ was based on revealing that which the German ruling classes tried to hide, the *War Primer* tries to deal with the same structure through memory and mimesis.

Accordingly, critical aesthetics here means that the *real* process behind the appearances and behind the societal and economic surface should be rendered visible and, at the same time, critically challenged

and interrogated. Since the *War Primer* was published after World War II, it should be conceived of as an attempt to push the critical project into the critical mimesis and memory of the Second World War. This problem of memory is of course also deeply embedded within the critical practice of appropriating and dealing with photography.

Photography and Mimesis as Memory

Siegfried Kracauer made a distinction between photographs and what he calls "memory image" in his widely read essay on photography. Whereas the photograph remains on the level of facts that are serially organized, the memory image is based on a different temporal logic mainly characterized by *synthesis* and filling in what can never be simply taken as a linear series of events. As he argues, the photograph remains on the level of historicism, which does not really grasp the *meaning* of history. History, according to Kracauer, can emerge only through the destruction of historicism and the linear ordering of photographs. What he has in mind—and this is important for Brecht's montage practice—is that photographs should be taken out of their isolation and re-integrated into a *different*, higher, unity. Kracauer writes:

On the whole the advocates of such historicist thinking believe that they can explain any phenomenon purely in terms of its genesis. That is, they believe at the very least that they can grasp historical reality by reconstructing the series of events in their temporal succession without any gaps. Photography presents a spatial continuum; historicism seeks to provide the temporal continuum. According to historicism the complete mirroring of a temporal sequence simultaneously contains the meaning of all that occurred within that time. (1993, p. 424)

What Kracauer has in mind here is the assumption that the meaning of events is internal to the linear ordering of events, but, as he argues, this is an illusion because the mere reconstruction of facts, which are not *united* through meaning, remain mere positivistic repetitions. Historicism assumes that historical events are meaningful through simply *repeating* them. Similarly, the photograph remains on this level of repetition, since it cannot go *beyond* the past. History, as opposed to historicism, however,

is on a different level. This level can be achieved only through a different (art) practice of dealing with photographs in a different temporal fashion. As Kracauer has it:

In order for history to present itself the mere surface coherence offered by photography must be destroyed. For in the artwork the meaning of the object takes on spatial appearance, whereas in photography the spatial appearance of an object is its meaning. The two spatial appearances—the "natural" one and that of the object permeated by cognition—are not identical. By sacrificing the former for the sake of the latter the artwork also negates the likeness achieved by photography. This likeness refers to the look of the object, which does not immediately divulge how it reveals itself to cognition; the artwork, however, conveys nothing but the transparency of the object. (Kracauer, 1993, p. 427)

What Kracauer calls here the "transparency of the object" is precisely what I have elsewhere described as "bracketing" the underlying photograph and as opening it up for a new temporal synthesis in which the image does not remain tied to the past; instead, the past as past is opened up to the full synthesis of the entire dimensions of temporality, that is, to the synthesis of past, present, and future.⁴ As he argues, the photograph, especially the everyday photograph and magazine illustration, are not really seen. For we see too many of these every day and we do not really look most of the time (unless we see them in special places, such as the museum, but then they are on the verge of being conceived in a different mode). As Kracauer argues:

[. . .] the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory. The assault of this mass of images is so powerful that it threatens to destroy the potentially existing awareness of crucial traits. [. . .] In the illustrated magazines people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving. The spatial continuum from the camera's perspective predominates the spatial appearance of the perceived object; the likeness that the image bears to it effaces the contours of the object's "history." Never before has a period known so little about itself. (1993, p. 432)

We should see the *War Primer* in this tradition of how to conceive the relation between photography and history. As I have argued elsewhere (Lotz, 2015, 2017), mimesis is not simply a process of imitation; rather, it is a process through which we gain insight into something. Mimesis can thus be viewed as a form of recognition. Mimesis is a material process throughout which the image is mimetically and empathetically developed out of the material. The material process in Brecht is the principle of montage, which allows him to reach unity through and via dispersion, rupture, and reordering of the material. Mimesis should then be conceived as a process because Brecht develops his material into an image of the war through the forming principle of montage; he thereby also presents a new appropriation of the "means of artistic production" that Benjamin called for. Let me now move on to the *War Primer* itself.

The Visible and the Invisible in the *Kriegsfibel*

The *War Primer* has a politically interesting publication history. After Brecht had sporadically worked since the 1920s on his working journals, this work on the combination of text and press photographs intensified during Brecht's exile. He sent a first version of the *War Primer* to Karl Korsch in 1945, and Korsch reacted enthusiastically; Brecht's epigrams were "the very best we have about this war up to this day" (see Meyer in Kebir & Hörnigk, 2005, p. 80). In 1948, his Munich publisher did not want to print the book and, ironically, even the publication committee of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* that ruled over the GDR rejected the publication of the book in 1950 because it was "too pacifist" (!). This rejection was based not only on the aesthetic preferences of the GDR authorities that were conservative and based on petty bourgeois taste, but also because it did not fit the official party propaganda rhetoric of the central committee. The committee was also seemingly suspicious of Brecht's American background and the attempts of the West Allies to "re-educate" the German people (see Meyer in Kebir & Hörnigk, 2005, p. 82). For East German authorities this was just another attack on the "anti-imperialist" stance of the SED. Brecht, as someone who was suspicious of any kind of state bureaucracy, reacted furiously about the authoritarian attempt to eradicate his autonomy as an artist by the party committee (Wizsla in Kebir & Hörnigk, 2005, p. 160), but he could not change the committee's mind. The rejection of the publication of

the *War Primer* goes along with the suppression of the artistic Weimar avant-garde in Germany. For example, earlier books based on critical photomontage (such as Tucholsky, Heartfield, and Russian constructivism) had disappeared behind the veil of East European and Soviet propaganda machineries. However, finally, the *Kriegsfibel* was published in 1955 since the GDR authorities could no longer dismiss Brecht after he received the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954 nor after Brecht reestablished himself internationally as a leading artist of the 20th century. The book was over-dimensional in its size, contained large black-and-white press photographs with short press commentaries and Brecht's own four line poems, which he called "photo-epigrams."⁵ The cover features an image of four returning and visibly suffering soldiers, one of whom appears to have lost his eyesight.⁶ Though they do not directly look into the camera, their "look" and the framing and perspective of the photograph produces a tense closeness to the viewer. Brecht wanted the book to be distributed in high numbers to the entire population. As such, the book would have functioned as what is called in the United States a "coffee table book." It is safe to assume, though, that the book would not have ended up in middle-class bourgeois households, given that it is based on a deep contempt of propaganda and the rejection of heroic appropriations of World War II à la the History Channel.

The (In)Visible I: Memory

Leaving the concrete political context and the publication history of the 1950s aside, the *War Primer* was published at a time when most Germans had not yet started to mourn their past and instead busied themselves with rebuilding the country. The *War Primer* is produced from the perspective of a poetic and memorial practice, which, following Brecht's overall vision, was not only moral and poetic, but also based on his avant-garde artistic appropriation of the modern mix of media. As Benjamin, Brecht thought about art through the new media developed at the beginning of 20th century and, as such, he remained in distance to Adorno's focus on classical music, as well as Lukacs's rather conservative taste for bourgeois literature. We should not underestimate this fact, since otherwise we miss the point that the *War Primer* is not just "any" work on World War II, but, instead, is based on a precisely defined artistic task of appropriating modern media for the purpose of the arts, as Kracauer called for (see last section). Whereas Adorno, at

least for some time, took Schönberg's *Survivor from Warsaw* (Op. 46, composed in 1947) as the only (!) work that deals properly with the atrocities of the Second World War, Brecht's aesthetics never lost sight of the "normal" people and of critically dealing with the fascist reality in Germany. Accordingly, Brecht's book, as Berlau reminds us in her foreword, functions as a critical reminder and critical form of *working through* the past that the Germans at that point of their history tried to suppress. Consequently, the concept of realism that underlies the book, is transformed into the attempt to mimetically appropriate the past via the explicit act of remembering the war and to practice memory. The book demonstrates how to confront news media practices with poetic praxis in order to achieve a higher unity of enlightened reflection of the past. To some extent, one could even argue that Brecht was well ahead of what then became the explicit political and cultural appropriation of the German past in the 1960s and '70s. In Brecht's *War Primer*, art becomes a critical counter-strategy to hiding the reality. Given what I have said in the first part of this chapter, we might say that the book is based on the concept of a *realism of the invisible*. As Brecht underlines in his essays on realism and in response to Lukács's critique of avant-garde modernism, realism for him means that a work of art is more realistic when it is able to master the reality within and with the means of the artistic process. Applied to the *War Primer*, this means that we are not supposed to simply remember the past; rather, we are supposed to *work through* it and thereby "repeat" the working through of the work itself in our mimetic and critical appropriation. Overcoming "historicism" in Kracauer's sense could then be achieved by art as a critical praxis. The result of this conception is a de-fetishization of the reality that the images in their original function as propaganda are hiding and covering up. As a consequence, the process of forgetting, as philosophically done in Marx, is matched by the work of Marxist art, that is, with the means of art and its material. When Brecht published the *Kriegsfibel* in 1955, he speaks of the suppression of the past [*tolle Verdrängung*] in a letter (Brecht, 1993/30, p. 472). I do not need to point out that the word *Verdrängung* stems from Freud's vocabulary.⁷ However, as Freud, Brecht is not interested in an exclusive mimetic process based on rationality; rather, he fully understands that this process must contain both rational judgment and emotional "working through." As such, the *War Primer* reacts to the *silence* of the Germans about their horrific past, although

it should be noted that Brecht neither thematizes the murdering of the European Jews in general, nor the concentration camps as such.

Critical art is here directly opposed to war. We can easily see that Linfield's criticism, to which I referred in the first part of this chapter, is misguided, insofar as Brecht's memorial practice is based on a deep compassion with what he deals with in his works. Although Brecht knew that Hitler was supported by many Germans, he never shows any harsh judgments on the "normal" people, as long as they do not become exploiters, torturers, class oppressors, or the like. His solidarity with "the" people remains intact. In this vein, we should also remember that in her famous essay on Brecht, Arendt makes the point that Brecht's work is based on gesture of compassion (Arendt, 2013, p. 292), which is expressed in his closeness to normal people, his appropriation of the everyday German language and its tradition in some parts of the German literature, his love for the world, and, as Arendt says, his thankfulness for heaven and earth (Arendt, 2013, p. 286). All of this is prominently featured in the *War Primer*, although it is a deeply critical work. As Didi-Huberman has argued, Brecht's concept of "alienation effect" [*Verfremdungseffekt*] is a dialectical concept that contains both pathos and compassion (Didi-Huberman, 2011). It is astonishing that so many commentators dismiss the concept as being too rationalistic; however, for Brecht all writing emerges from a deep sympathy with those who suffer. In the *War Primer* this is most visible in the distinction between above and below, that is, the power interests that drive the war and those who suffer from it. Brecht maps the social distinction between poor and rich onto the structure above/below in two regards: (1) the *War Primer* shows leading Nazis in relation to "normal" people, and (2) it shows special attention to the centrality of warfare from the air in contrast to the destruction on the ground. The distinction between the interests of the people and its suffering is contrasted with the interests and artificial behavior and rhetoric of the dominating group in power. All of this is translated in a reversal of the emotional relation between work and viewer, insofar as the emotional quality of the work turns into one that is based on judgment and reflection. For Brecht, emotions and, in turn, the empathy and "feeling in" (*Einfühlung*) that audiences develop in their reception of works is a concrete social relation determined on social factors, such as class and politics. They are not timeless. In order to achieve this, however, the relation between audience and work needs

to be unsettled. This is achieved in the *War Primer* primarily through breaking through news photographs as displaying "facts" by confronting them with the epigrammatic function of the commenting poems.⁸ Following Kracauer in this regard, Brecht tries to turn pictures that are equal to a loss of history into *images of history*. The poetic four-liners transcend the positivistic quality of the picture, unsettle the referent of the photograph, and turn the picture into an image.⁹

The (In)Visible II: Montage

The working through the *War Primer* is most visible in the principle of montage that underlies the work. Given the long debate on the principle of montage in Marxist aesthetics, I will only briefly mention its aspect of relevance to the *War Primer*, namely, the assembly character of the work in relation to the problem of mimesis and memory. One commentator describes the assembly character of Brecht's works in the following way: "The practice of real-life remembering emphasizes the finished product and pays little attention as possible to the assembly stage. The work of art, on the contrary, concentrates on the process of establishing images" (Mueller 1989, p. 69). In my view, Mueller nicely describes the core of the "montage" process since she points out that the montage principle leads to seeing the reality as a *process* (in this case the reality as remembered). This conception of reality as a process is central for Brecht and underlies his conception of realism. Let me briefly develop this point.

We often forget that montage is a practice done by *hands* and involves manual activities, such as sticking, moving, cutting, and ordering. Montage is therefore not, as Lukacs once thought, a helpless attitude toward a no longer understood social totality; rather, its material activity is the *concrete* reconstruction of a totality with other means that are, in opposition to abstract concepts, based on "handy" work, which was essential for Brecht's idea of what it means to be an artist (see Geyer in Kebir & Hörnigk, 2005, p. 78). The journals on which the *War Primer* is based are an ongoing reflection on the material by organizing and shaping the material itself. Montage is the opposite of a mindless potpourri of anything goes. The fact that Brecht adds to the image material textual strategies is of course based on the assumption that images, if they want to be understood, need some kind of distance by the viewer, which in Brecht's case is established through the commenting function of the text as well as by isolating the press photographs from their original propa-

ganda context. The act of isolation is itself the result of a practical task of cutting out and preparing the photographs for their new "neutral" black paper background (which is how the images are presented in the book).

This distance through process, however, does not simply equal the distrust of "iconophobic" Marxist intellectuals; rather, it is itself an aesthetic praxis that is more complex than simply adding controlling text to images. For example, the relation between text and image is here characterized by an entire arsenal of techniques such as poetic alienation, contrast, surprise, (un)familiarity, irony, newness, break, shock, attention to aspects, contradictions, analogies, and metaphorical relations. *Contradiction* is by far the most important aesthetic principle for Brecht, insofar as both the aesthetic praxis *and* the reality are for him characterized by contradiction. A contradictory reality, as we might say, one in which "nothing hangs together," can only be appropriated by an aesthetic praxis that is *in its form* based on contradiction. As Brecht aptly puts it, "reality not only is everything that is; rather, it is everything that becomes. It is a process. This process is contradictory. If one does not acknowledge its contradictory character, one does not know it at all" (Brecht, 1993/22.1, p. 459). And further: "[Flat, shallow, are poems if they take away the contradictions from their material and if the things with which they deal do not appear in their living and all-sidedness, and if they are not formulated in their finite, and non-finalized form]" (Brecht, 1993/22.2, p. 129). Consequently, Brechtian montage

carries with it an emphatic break between units, leaving the audience free to "confabulate." It interrupts the continuity of space and time and in this way prevents the equivocation between reality and its representation. Brechtian realism is not based on a direct correspondence between sign and referent. (Mueller, 1989, p. 89)

Brecht follows this idea of montage as a systematic juxtaposition of opposites and the structural determination through contradictions in many of his works, including the arrangements of scenes and characters in his plays. Opposing Lukacs on this point, Brecht argues that true realism is not based on what he takes to be a bourgeois idea of "totality," but rather on the inner reflection of the breaks and incoherences of that totality. Consequently, he comes to the conclusion that true realism is the artistic realization and *recognition* of the reality as contradictory. The

mimetic process of art is the logical consequence of the reality itself, the point of which is also recognized by Benjamin in his reflections on Brecht. In relation to poems written in the context of the *War Primer*, Benjamin writes:

The first line of this poem could be placed at the head of each of the *War Primer* poems. These inscriptions are not, like those of the Romans, intended for stone but, like those of underground fighters, for fences. Accordingly, the character of the *War Primer* may be seen in a unique contradiction: these words, whose poetic form implies that they are meant to survive the forthcoming end of the world, contain the gesture of a slogan scrawled in haste on a plank fence by a man being pursued. In this contradiction lies the extraordinary artistic achievement of these sentences constructed out of primitive words. (Benjamin, 1998, p. 66)

The (In)Visible III: War

Brecht's work is in important respects related to war. This fact is not only the result of his biography and the times during which he wrote; rather, with his firm footing in the Marxist tradition, Brecht always remained interested in critically analyzing the relationship between capitalism and war. As we know, the main line of thinking about the relation between war and capital has its origin in Luxemburg's and Lenin's theories about the necessary expansion of the capitalist system through colonialism, imperialism, and expanded commodification of areas that have not yet been subsumed under capital. Whenever the accumulation process comes to an exhaustion, capital must either expand its reach through an ongoing primitive accumulation, that is, war and violence, or destroy capital in order to get the process of surplus value generation flowing again. In addition, wars themselves can be very profitable for capital. As Herfried Münkler has argued (in Kebir & Hörnigk, 2005, pp. 16–33), Brecht's take on the 17th-century peasants war in Europe, which Brecht deals with in his play *Mother Courage*, is a very contemporary play, insofar as the peasant war was not structured by the confrontation between nation-states. Additionally, Brecht shows how individuals, once they are part of the war, can live and profit from war in many ways. Economy and war, according to the Marxist tradition, do not necessarily exclude each other,

but instead, feed on each other.¹⁰ Brecht is an astute observer of these relations during World War II, and his journal entries, which ultimately lead to the *War Primer*, are full of observations related to the relations between power, the dominating class, industry, and war. Among others, themes are the industrialization of war, the reduction of the individual to a functioning cog in the machine, and the destruction of individual characters and virtues (which, in turn, must be reflected in a theater proper to its times).

According to Brecht (following Marx), capitalism, and here we are returning to the problem of the relation between visibility and invisibility, is a social system that *suppresses* its own crimes and is based on making its own past invisible. As Berlau writes in her foreword to the *War Primer*:

Why do our workers of state-owned industry, our communal farmers, our progressive intellectuals, why does our youth, who already enjoys the rations of happiness, why must they all at this moment hold in front of them these grim images of history? He who forgets his past does not escape it. This book [*Kriegsfibel*] wishes to teach the art of reading images. It is as difficult for the novice to read images as it is to read hieroglyphics. The great ignorance about societal relations, which the forces of capitalism carefully and brutally perpetuate, turns the thousands of photographs in the media into true panels of hieroglyphics, indecipherable to the unsuspecting reader. (Brecht, 1993/12, p. 129)

Images and photographs are used within a propaganda machinery that distorts the truth for the purpose of those who have an interest in prolonging the war. Brecht's strategy in the *War Primer* is to counter this production of images for the purpose of distorting the reality through a production of images that is truth oriented. In order to establish this different goal, a break and distancing from the pictures is necessary; the four-line poems that Brecht wrote in connection with the images are supposed to establish the critical distance to the referents of the pictures in order to enable the viewer to come to her own judgment about the images. "The thinking human," as Brecht writes, "tries to correct everything that he reads or hears. With each sentence, he replaces untrue assertions with true assertions. This exercise lasts as long as he is no longer able to read or hear otherwise" (Brecht, 1993/22.1, p. 90).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we might say that Brecht's *War Primer* is the best example of an artistic practice that proves *in actu* that some of the skeptical suspicions the Frankfurt School's handling of the modern mass media are unwarranted, insofar as Brecht does find a way of dealing with this material critically. The *War Primer* introduces mimesis as a process of emotional cognition and emotional remembering; it thereby "translates" the problem of Marxist methodology, as outlined by Marx himself in *Capital*, in artistic categories and as *aesthetic form*. As such, it turns the photographic picture and abstractions from being a tool of forgetting into the process of critical remembering and re-appropriation of the past on a reflective level. As Berlau points out in her foreword to the work,

The great ignorance concerning social relations, an ignorance nursed carefully and brutally by capitalism, reduces thousands of photos in illustrated journals to hieroglyphs which are undecipherable for the unsuspecting reader. Like an ancient hieroglyph, the press photograph is "undecipherable" for anyone who lacks the appropriate training. Brecht's book is offered, therefore, as a practical manual, demonstrating how to "read" or "translate" press photographs. At the same time, it seeks to provide some basic lessons about the nature of modern warfare. (Brecht, 2008, n.p.)

The accompanying poems function as a mimetic recognition of what is forgotten in the images. The goal of this work is not the elimination of emotional responses; rather, it is supposed to lead to proper compassion in order to open up venues toward a different future.¹¹ To be certain, Brecht is a poet in the best tradition of the enlightenment and therefore differs from much a-political and uncritical art that has, with important exceptions, flooded many Western art markets after World War II. As one commentator has it:

The *Kriegsfibel* activates historical awareness; it instructs the reader/viewer to critically engage with and question the many images of war; it also offers a practical example for the claim that history is conceived as images corresponding to the metaphorical language of photography—a claim made famous

by Brecht's fellow exile and collaborator Walter Benjamin. (Imbrigotta, 2010, p. 29)

Notes

1. Brecht engaged with different image media throughout his work life; his decade-long journals show a deep interest in photographs, and he also worked early on with film. Moreover, images were included early on in his practical theater work. For example, he considered his *Modelbücher*, which contained series of photographs of his theater production, as essential for his work. As Mueller has it, "Brecht considered this kind of visual instruction indispensable and not to be replaced by conceptual formulas" (Mueller, 1989, p. 78).
2. The shortening of the quote is one reason some contemporary commentators do not understand what critical aesthetics and Marxist aesthetics is struggling with. For example, Linfield (2010) in her attack on Brecht quotes only the first two lines and, as a consequence, misses the entire problem of what is behind Brecht's critical media practice.
3. For this, see Lotz (2014).
4. I have called this process *essentialization* (for this, see Lotz 2015, pp. 130–133).
5. The oversize of the book might go back to the AIZ. As Zervigón writes: "Less noticeable in this reproduction yet key to the impact of its furiously unveiled history is the picture's size, splashed across a centerfold surface nearly double the dimension of today's American tabloids. This aggressive lurching forward of repressed history, therefore, operates as a photographic revelation taking place only inches in front of the reader's face" (2010, p. 153).
6. On a side note, *Verso Books* has just recently (2017) republished the *War Primer*; unfortunately, the entire black-and-white aesthetics as well as the cover image has been changed. The removal of the soldier image distorts the role of empathy in Brecht's aesthetics. One could argue that this is, ironically, based on some kind of censorship, too, since Verso apparently did not take seriously that for Brecht *how* the material is presented is essential for *what* is presented and how it is to be understood.
7. See my remarks on Marx's method in relation to Freud (Lotz, 2017b).
8. There is controversy over the origin of Brecht's "photo-epigrams;" insofar as some argue that Brecht goes back to the Baroque epigram tradition and others argue that this Brecht invented it for Marxist aesthetics (for this, see Knopf 1986, 213).
9. For a detailed conception of this process of turning photographs into images as a hermeneutical process, see Lotz (2015).

10. The Marxist tradition is opposed to the Kantian tradition that argues that capital cannot be interested in expansive wars, as this hinders the further development of exchange and the establishment of stable structures needed for capital and investment.

11. In this vein, the musical appropriations of the *Kriegsfiel* by composer Hans Eisler and singer and actress Kathrin Angerer even more intensively reveal the dialectic between the rational and compassionate nature of the *War Primer*. For the sake of the main topic of this chapter, I left these complex interpretations of Brecht's work aside.

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