

BRECHT, HEGEL, LACAN: BRECHT'S THEORY OF GEST AND THE PROBLEM OF THE SUBJECT

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Brecht's theory of gestic acting has been neglected in favor of the more widely known "alienation effect." But the gest merits consideration in its own right for at least three reasons. First, it is in some ways a rudimentary preparation for the more carefully conceived and more systematically presented theory of alienation, which receives its most unified exposition in *The Short Organum for the Theater* (1947). The theory of gest is thus an important element in Brecht's development as a dramatic theorist, a topic explored by Reiner Steinweg. Second, the theory of gest was devised during Brecht's work with amateur and student actors in his learning theater, and so belongs to the period of Brecht's most intense political activism and dramatic experimentation. As a corollary to the learning plays and Brecht's pedagogic theories, the theory of gest supported Brecht's most concerted effort to supersede the habits and forms of the traditional theater. It is thus part of a minor but important chapter in the history of the modern theater, one of the curiosities of radical political culture of the Weimar Republic.¹

Finally, the theory of gest is an examination of the dramatic spectacle as a means of human interaction and communication. In particular it asks how the theater—as an arena for such interaction—may contribute to the formation of active, critical adults. In this light Brecht's theory of gest is revealed as an inquiry into the composition of human subjectivity or, as we shall see, inter-subjectivity. And it is on this last count that I examine here Brecht's comments on gest and compare his theory to Hegel's and Jacques Lacan's accounts of human inter-subjectivity. This comparison aims not so much to judge the merits of Brecht's theory as philosophical discourse, but rather to evaluate its significance for a much broader philosophical project,

what can be called the “problem of the subject.”² This theoretical problem has been addressed in this century as often by other disciplines—psychoanalysis, psychology, literary criticism—as by philosophy per se. Brecht’s theory of *gest* has special interest in this context because it was also an intervention, on aesthetic grounds, into the social process by which humans become subjects.

I. Brecht’s Theory of *Gest*

Brecht’s first use of the term *Gestus*, or *gest*, appears around 1929 as a rather inexact description for the basic components of social behavior. It denoted for him “the realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another. . . . Physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression all are determined by a social *gest*” (*Theatre* 198). It described such generic social actions as wrinkling one’s brow, and the way that such actions were demonstrated by actors on the stage. *Gests* were the foundation of the theatrics of daily life, but they were exposed most readily to our perception by actors on a stage. Brecht used the term *gest* most frequently in his work with amateur actors and the learning theater, during the years 1929-33. Later, the term was used as an adjunct to the more famous “alienation,” although even in his *Short Organum for the Theater* Brecht reserved a somewhat particular meaning for *gest*.³ The term also appears in Brecht’s essays on poetic language and music, but there too it is an essentially dramatic concept: “A musical or literary phrase must act out the emphatic gesture that it describes, as in the Biblical maxim ‘If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out!’ ” (*Theatre* 117). The application of the *gestic* method was a means of analyzing ordinary social actions. Brecht thought that seeing social action as theatrical, as one dramatic “hypothesis” among many alternatives, would give his actors a greater command over their actions outside the theater. The actor, whether professional or amateur, could experiment by substituting one *gest* for another and thus throwing into question the necessity of certain actions under certain circumstances. Brecht comments in the *Organum*: “[The actor] has again and again to make what one might call hypothetical adjustments to our structure, by mentally switching off the motive forces of our society or by substituting others for them; a process which leads real conduct to acquire an element of ‘unnaturalness,’ thus allowing the real motive forces to be shorn of their naturalness and become capable of

manipulation" (*Theatre* 191). By distinguishing between the "hypothetical" actions of the stage and "real conduct" of human life, Brecht hoped to train the actor (and the spectator) to act in both realms. In the fictive realm of the stage, one action (or gest) could be imaginatively substituted for another and the results tested for their efficacy in hypothetical situations. Such substitutions fostered the sense that the dramatic action was removed from the real and hence, in Brecht's word, "unnatural." But, Brecht reasoned, the conscious substitution of one action for another in the theater should also encourage the belief that all human behavior was "hypothetical"—that everyone was always acting a part.

The first postulate of Brecht's theory of gest was this fundamental equivalence of theatrical action and "real conduct." Brecht defined the gest as a generic action or attitude which people commonly adopt toward one another and which is chiefly motivated by habit or custom. Gests were things that everyone did: furrowing one's brow in thought, cooing over a baby in a crib—in general, things done habitually or compulsively. In Brecht's words, the gest was a "complex of gestures, mimicry, and customary manners which refer one or more persons to one or more [other] persons" (*Werke* 15: 409). People drew on a stock of such gestures and mannerisms in their daily intercourse with others. Gests had well-established social meanings and often were proven ways of eliciting certain responses from others (a smile from an infant, for example). The audiences for such gests had seen them before and recognized them as acts with conventionalized meanings. In this sense gests constituted a genuine language, a medium for the communication of social meanings.

Brecht intended for gestic acting to make these dramatic attitudes (*Haltungen*) perceptible both to the actor who adopted them and to the spectators who witnessed them. Brecht cited the example of a fish peddler who acts out a "selling gest": the enticing tone of voice, the hand movements, the body leaned forward toward a reluctant customer, all of which a peddler must constantly manipulate if he or she wants to make a living. The peddler's gest was an art born of necessity—the same necessity that would probably compel a youngster to master the same basic gest in hawking newspapers.

Brecht encouraged his actors to adopt such attitudes "hypothetically," to shed the compulsion of necessity, and to create a dramatic catalogue of such generic human attitudes. Freed from the exigencies of real life, the theatrical gest of selling could be

interchanged with that of, say, "buying" or "washing one's hands." Brecht was especially fond of applying a familiar gest to an extraordinary situation: for example, purchasing an elephant with the same aplomb as one pinches a head of cabbage. The purpose of gestic acting was not only to clarify such basic gests (*Grundgestus*) but also to establish a basic dramatic vocabulary that an actor could intentionalize as easily as the words in a speech.

Brecht realized that, in drawing attention to the gestic substratum of a play's action, gestic acting was bound to affect the coherence and continuity of the fictive plot. This problem was not so acute so long as the gestic method was applied to plays for amateurs, to be acted in schools and factories. But the method's disruptive effect upon traditional dramatic values was evident in Brecht's first attempt to introduce gestic acting onto the commercial stage, in the 1931 production of *Mann ist Mann*. This was a grotesquely staged commentary on mass society, featuring actors on stilts towering over the diminutive Peter Lorre, in the leading role of Galy Gay. Brecht had schooled Lorre in the gestic method and encouraged the cast to decide for themselves which were the decisive gests and how they should be emphasized to the audience.

The result was controversial in the extreme. Brecht had to defend Lorre's technique in a public letter, in which he proposed new, *gestic* criteria for judging an actor's performance. The playwright argued that a play must be "decomposed" into its gestic components, as if gests were the dramatic molecules from which the entire play was compounded. This decomposition required the subordination of certain speeches so as to attain the necessary gestic emphasis. Brecht admitted that Lorre's declamation of speeches in the play's second part "seemed monotonous and to hamper the sense," because they were so obviously decomposed into gests. But, the author pleaded, the audience should recognize the net gain in sacrificing individual sentences: "For over and above the meaning of the individual sentences a quite specific basic gest was being brought out here which admittedly depended on knowing what the individual sentences meant but at the same time used this meaning only as a means to an end" (*Theatre* 54).

To put it another way, the acting italicized certain moments in the play, leaving others to be regarded with less attention. Such italicizing was achieved by an agreement among the actors and playwright as to which were in fact the crucial gests. For example, Brecht recounted

the debate concerning when Lorre's face should be whitened by chalk, signifying the moment of Galy Gay's greatest fear:

The character's development has been very carefully divided into

four phases, for which four masks are employed—the packer's face, up to the trial; the “natural” face, up to his awakening after being shot; the “blank page,” up to his reassembly after the funeral speech; finally the soldier's face. To give some idea of our way of working: opinions differed as to which phase, second or third, called for the face to be whitened. After long consideration, Lorre plumped for the third, as being characterized, to his mind, by “the biggest decision and the biggest strain.” Between fear of death and fear of life he chose to treat the latter as the more profound. (*Theatre* 55-56)

Brecht admitted that such divisions might create the appearance of an actor who could not sustain a character's development throughout the play, who was a “short-range episodist.” The sacrifice of certain continuities in both character and plot was necessary, however, if the epic actor was “to make particular incidents between human beings seem striking (to use human beings as a setting)” (56). Brecht hoped, on the one hand, that his audience would conclude that the distinct actions from which a character was built—“this way of joining up,” “this way of selling an elephant,” “this way of conducting the case”—might just as well be recombined or altered to produce a different character. On the other hand, Brecht expected his audience to recognize when the same *gest* was applied to different situations. He asked, “How many spectators can so far discard the need for tension as to see how, with this new sort of actor, the same gesture is used to summon him to the wall to change his clothes as is subsequently used to summon him there in order to be shot, and realize that the situation is similar but the behaviour different?” (56).

From Brecht's own comments it is apparent that his audience was reluctant to comply. The gestic method demanded of an audience a special kind of visual attention to the action on stage: not only in following the sequential actions of the plot but also in fixing on certain actions as separate from the fictional story. Few audiences were up to the task, and Brecht repeatedly found himself advising audiences on how to watch his gestic action. He often had recourse to film as a

metaphor for observing the gest. In the letter on *Mann ist Mann*, Brecht noted that they "made a film of the performance, concentrating on the principal nodal points of the action and cutting it so as to bring out the gests in a very abbreviated way, and this most interesting experiment shows surprisingly well how exactly Lorre manages in these long speeches to mime the basic meaning underlying every (inaudible) sentence" (*Theatre* 55). A note from the *Messingkauf*, Brecht's unfinished theoretical dialogue, offers another example of the film metaphor. After filming Helene Weigel during rehearsal, Brecht claimed that each frame revealed an entire gest. "Every frame [*Bildchen*] showed a complete expression," he wrote, "complete in itself and with its own meaning" (*Werke* 16: 606).

The criteria for judging a gestic performance required the audience to watch a performance by mentally filming the action and snipping apart the frames, revealing the partial images from which the whole visual experience was composed. But these gestic images were not only the discrete parts of the dramatic action. They were also dramatic copies of "real conduct," trivial actions normally witnessed uncritically in daily life but exposed by the performance as poses. In this way, Brecht demanded that his audiences see "double." The audience needed to see each gestic element in its fictive function, as a part of the play's plot, and in its mimetic function, as a semblance of some ordinary act commonly witnessed in daily life. It is small wonder that Brecht found few audiences to match his expectations.

Yet only by such a relentlessly analytic approach could the lexicon of social gests be exposed, for Brecht was primarily interested in *social* gests, actions that revealed something about social relations. In a comment on gestic music, he noted that "the attitude of chasing away a fly is not yet a social gest, though the attitude of chasing away a dog may be one; for instance, if it comes to represent a badly dressed man's continual battle against watchdogs." Certain other kinds of gest are always social, for example the gests of labor, because "all human activity directed towards the mastery of nature is a social undertaking, an undertaking between humans" (*Theatre* 104). But the gest was social in another respect. Because it had to be witnessed by others, the gest defined an axis of social communication. Gests were actions addressed toward other human beings, performed in front of them, and eliciting a response in turn from that audience. In this dialectic of display and recognition, wrote Brecht, "characters are created out of the knowledge of their behavior to other people" (*Werke* 15: 408).

In other words, gestic action required gestic interaction. Brecht offered a striking example of this interaction in a comment on his collaboration with the British actor Charles Laughton. The two were translating the German text of *Galileo* into English, even though Brecht spoke poor English and Laughton spoke no German at all. Under these circumstances the translation was, we might expect, an enterprise fraught with difficulty from the very beginning. But the two devised a working method that sacrificed literary nuance in favor of dramatic essentials. According to Brecht, "we had to decide the gest of each piece of dialogue by my acting it all in bad English or even in German and his then acting it back in proper English in a variety of ways until I could say: that's it" (*Theatre* 165). Failing to achieve an understanding in words, the two fell back on that dramatic attitude which Brecht believed was also the foundation of poetic speech—the gest: "We were forced to do what better equipped translators should do too: to translate gests. For language is theatrical in so far as it primarily expresses the mutual attitude of the speakers" (165-66). This must have been one of the great unremembered scenes of the modern theater: the setting, Laughton's beach house; the players, the portly actor and the ascetic playwright; the script, this labored negotiation of lines, each actor alternately acting out a passage while the other watched with a critical acuity gained from years in the theater. The success of their efforts depended not only upon their ability to copy a gest in German with a gest in English, but also to alter what they had seen acted by the other until they both had arrived at the truest gest—when Brecht would have cried, "That's it!"

This example shows how the gestic interaction establishes a reciprocity similar to that of speech. The poles of speech are reversible, as is evident in the ease with which the "I" of one speaker becomes the "you" of the second speaker.⁴ In the gestic interaction exemplified by Brecht and Laughton, the actor and spectator alternate their roles, first observing the attitude of the other, criticizing its accuracy, and then proposing their own gestic hypothesis, which is observed and criticized in turn. Brecht described this as a process of testing actions on and through the other. Of the work with Laughton he wrote, "This system of performance-and-repetition had one immense advantage in that psychological discussions were almost entirely avoided. Even the most fundamental gests, such as Galileo's way of observing, or his showmanship, or his craze for pleasure, were established in three dimensions by actual performance" (165). The gestic performance was in fact a performance shared between two

actor-spectators. The truth of the performance depended upon the critical attention with which the audience tested out the accuracy of the dramatic spectacle, and then were tested as actors in their own turn.

Brecht lamented that audiences in the commercial theater—what he termed disdainfully the “culinary” theater—were especially ill-equipped to engage in the active reciprocity of gest. Partly for this reason perhaps, Brecht applied the gestic method primarily with amateur actors in productions of the learning plays, or *Lehrstücke*. The *Lehrstück* rehearsals were often exercises in how to act, rather than how to act a particular script. Brecht was more interested in training young actors than in producing finished plays (which may account in part for the barrenness of the learning plays). From this context Brecht developed his concept of a pedagogic theater, which is a theoretical correlative to the gest and, some have argued, forms the conceptual basis of Brecht’s later work (see Steinweg).

The purpose of Brecht’s pedagogic theater was both to train its amateur players in the lexicon of social action and to expose this lexicon to their critical scrutiny. In the workshop rehearsals, the gestures of daily life could be identified, examined, and “decomposed” into distinct attitudes, which were then subject to the critical eye of the entire group. Rehearsing was a matter of reassembling these attitudes and behaviors into consciously and intentionally acted types of social action. It was an inventive form of ethical and political training: “At the root of the learning play lies the expectation that the player can be socially influenced by carrying out certain ways of behaving, by assuming certain attitudes, reciting certain speeches, and so forth. In this way the emulation of highly qualified exemplars plays an important role, as does the critique that is applied to such exemplars through intentionally playing them otherwise” (*Werke* 17: 1024). Brecht expected his actors, as a first step, merely to copy others’ actions, for only by copying a behavior could it be compared to other behaviors. The second step was to judge whether the behavior was effective, whether a different behavior might be substituted, or what other situation this behavior might be applied to.

Brecht’s attitude toward the “emulation” of exemplary actions and characters here qualifies his polemic against the “Aristotelian” theater, an issue too often clouded by Brecht’s and others’ modernist rhetoric. At its root, the gestic method was a *mimesis*, since a

theatrical gest was recognizable only through its imitation of real actions. Aristotle asserted, of course, that all the arts operated by such a mimetic principle. Brecht did not repudiate this mimetic function of the dramatic image. Indeed, as I have noted, the fictive, mimetic qualities of theatrical action justified its sovereignty toward the reality that it copied. And, Brecht shared with Aristotle an interest in affecting the actions and character of real people, that is, in making people better. But this effect was executed much differently in Brecht's theory. Because the fictional actions of theater had been criticized and judged to be true, those copies deserved to be copied in turn by actors in the real world. In effect, Brecht reversed the mimetic axis by calling for real conduct to imitate the hypothetical conduct of the theater.

This practical influence had, of course, a primary importance to Brecht. The practicality of the theater undergirded its political value. In the pedagogic theater, Brecht aimed to "influence" his young players socially and politically. Yet this aim was much more restricted than it might seem at first. Despite his Marxist aims, Brecht's gestic theater was not a form of agitprop or political propaganda per se. It was rather a kind of moral education with a political undertone (hence the moralism of learning plays like the *Jasager* and the *Neinsager*). Moreover, a play's pedagogic purpose might not be evident in the dramatic performance. In this case, the play was *not* the thing. Pedagogic success or failure was judged by the critical process which led up to a performance and which schooled the actors in critical action.

It is too often thought that Brecht tried to destroy the boundary between art and actuality, to remove the "illusion" from the *Illusionstheater*. In fact the gestic method merely made the boundary between art and reality more passable. The pedagogic theater schooled its players in the passage from the fictions of art to the real conduct of daily life. Hence the ambivalence of the gestic spectator before the dramatic image: it was an action to be emulated at the same time as it was criticized. But this ambivalence seems to enhance the fictive (or illusionary) qualities of the dramatic action; indeed, the critical judgment of actions in the real world depended upon seeing them as fictional or artful. Only as a fictionalized gest could such actions be subjected to the collective critical judgment of the pedagogic theater. Its players were constantly being asked to step across the threshold between fiction and actuality, and to evaluate the one in

terms of the other. They had, as Brecht said later of Helene Weigel, "to sacrifice neither realism to the ideal image, nor the ideal image to realism" (*Werke* 16: 609).

The restricted function of the pedagogic theater applied to its audience as well. Brecht noted that the "learning play teaches by being played, not by being seen. In principle there need be no spectator for a learning play, though one can of course be used" (*Werke* 17: 1024). By ostensibly doing away with the audience, Brecht in fact had merely displaced the audience's function onto the players themselves. The players were each other's audience, a circumstance that surely reinforced the kind of collective reciprocity at work between Brecht and Laughton in translating *Galileo*. When the learning plays were performed in schools, Brecht urged his young audiences to judge the accuracy of the players' depictions and to imagine themselves in situations similar to those portrayed on stage. Clearly, Brecht's pedagogic theater did not block identification with the play's characters altogether (this in spite of the author's often intemperate attacks upon "Aristotelianism"); nor did it encourage an immediate "participation" of the audience in the play's action. Rather, the pedagogic theater sought to induce in its audience the imaginary anticipation of the moment in which they would become actors in turn. The best audience looked forward to the opportunity to emulate the actions they saw depicted on stage and, wherever possible, to improve on those actions in their own conduct. The dramatic image posed by gestic acting was not merely the mediating point between actor and spectator; it became an ideal measure against which action in the real world could be gauged. The proof of the pedagogic pudding came when actors and audience both stepped back across the threshold from the theater into actuality. There the critical ambivalence of the gestic method was supposed to translate itself into a real conduct as malleable and intentionally chosen as the symbolic conduct on stage.

II. The Dialectic of Sovereignty

The purpose of the gest should now be clear. It was to foster in the participants of the theater a mastery over their own actions and hence a mastery over the world in which these actions occurred. Yet the pedagogic theater expected that everyone who entered it was in need

of education. And achieving mastery depended on the recognition that one's need for education never ceased. Even adults were treated as perpetual pupils. Brecht's pedagogy thus may be seen as a variation upon the familiar Enlightenment concept of immaturity, or nonage, a category that includes those not yet wise enough to act on their own account. The principle is preserved in today's legal distinction between minority and majority; that age at which young people can be trusted to vote for president and to drink hard liquor. Kant gave nonage its classical definition as "the lack of determination and courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another" (Kant 132). Specifically, Kant meant the point at which a person could decide questions without the guidance of authority and thereby achieve an intellectual autonomy to match the civil freedoms claimed by Enlightenment political thought.

The concept of gest differed from this classical principle on the question of the individual's autonomy from others' judgments. In Brecht's usage, maturity is demonstrated in the ability to follow others' judgments and to judge others in turn. This capacity might more properly be called sovereignty, since it summoned the recognition of others, and involved a collective effort (the mutual education of actors by spectators and vice versa).⁵ The accession to sovereignty in the gestic theater depended not merely upon educating individuals to take responsible action in the social world as it existed (and even less, to occupy the legal and social position defined by civil society). Rather, sovereignty was demonstrated most decisively in changing the social world according to those exemplars of good and bad action defined in the gestic exchange. Gaining sovereignty entailed the development of one's society as well as oneself.

It is on this count that Brecht's theory of gest can be appended to a dialectical tradition that began with Hegel and has been embellished by theorists of various disciplines in the last century and a half. But here the topic that I initially introduced as the modern problem of the subject can be called by its proper name: the problem of inter-subjectivity. The philosophical interest of Brecht's theory of gest lies in the intriguing context of its application; that is, at a juncture between experimental art and moral and political education. Stimulated by left-wing Weimar political culture, Brecht was trying to educate adults by treating them first as pupils, denying them recognition of maturity, then offering them the delight of a new mastery over their social world. The philosophical issue raised by this model may

be summarized in two closely related questions: Through what process of concrete interaction with others do individual subjects assume an identity? And, what practical limits does this collective process place upon the sovereignty of individuals in understanding and acting upon their world?

One may return to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to find a suitably dialectical analogy to Brecht's pedagogical scheme. Hegel believed that the autonomy of any individual in civil society rested upon a primeval event in the history of human consciousness.⁶ This event—the founding moment of all subsequent human societies—involved two consciousnesses, master and slave, in a struggle for recognition and dominance. In their struggle to the death, Hegel's master and slave achieve, paradoxically, the first human collaboration. Like Brecht's actor and spectator, the two consciousnesses of Hegel's primal drama depend upon each other to fulfill a function of which each is incapable alone. Both master and slave are hindered by a fundamental need that only the other can satisfy.

In Hegel's account, it is the subject's need for objects that turns it to other subjects. Again we see a mediating term provide the hinge upon which intersubjectivity turns. The Hegelian self-consciousness emerges into the world only to discover that its desires cannot be gratified by the objects that exist in the world. Or, to re-phrase an aphorism of Brecht's, the smallest social unit is a threesome, two subjects and an object, two subjects and an image. In the *Phenomenology* the "raw" object cannot be assimilated to the subject's pleasure, or *Genuss*. To resolve this stand-off between itself and the object, self-consciousness looks to a third term, another self-consciousness that can transform raw objects into the objects of desire. Hence, as Hegel put it, the original self-consciousness "achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness" (116). In the confrontation that follows, each self-consciousness gains a measure of sovereignty and recognition through the other. The slave's labor is given direction and purpose by the master's will, which it obeys. The master's need is filled by the slave, who prepares and offers the world's objects for the despot's pleasure. In both cases, the relation of subject to object is mediated through another subject. In contrast to Kant's version of enlightenment, consciousness matures by recognizing its dependence on another consciousness. Mastery is conditioned by the existence of another who cannot merely be the object of mastery, but must participate in it.

The same sort of dependence characterizes the actor and spectator in Brecht's gestic scheme: one watches and criticizes that which the other offers in performance. In this case, however, the mediating term is an image, not an object. And it should be remembered that Brecht superimposed the relation of teacher and student onto that of actor and audience. This installs in the dramatic relation the same asymmetry that Hegel posits between master and slave. The success of the pedagogical theater hinged upon the spectator's admission that he or she had something to learn from the action on the stage. And, not surprisingly, the gestic method enjoyed its most fruitful applications in a theater where the players and audience were predominantly students and hence more likely to profess their intellectual nonage. Brecht's adult audiences were generally not so cooperative.

The gestic method tried, however, to resolve the dependency and immaturity of the student-spectator. This distinguishes it from the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave. The gestic interaction resolved the asymmetric reciprocity of "master" and "slave" by offering the spectator the chance to assume the role of teacher-actor. With this came the opportunity to improve on the lesson that they had just been shown, to create a more accurate image of the real, and thus to demonstrate their mastery of the gest. In the pedagogic theater, learning involved the anticipation of mastery, but not—as with Hegel—a mastery over others. It is, rather, a mastery of the dramatic image. The dialectic of master and slave is the structural underpinning of the gestic relation. But since no subject ever occupies the master's position for long, mastery of one's actions is always provisional and must constantly be regained in the laboratory of the theater.

The same structural question appears in another Hegelian version of the dialectic of sovereignty, Jacques Lacan's account of the mirror phase.⁷ Lacan is primarily concerned with the effects of interhuman relations upon subjects in the earliest stages of development (from infancy to the years of the acquisition of language). In Lacan, then, we are dealing with yet another, more radical version of "nonage," the period of life prior to the moment when a young child can express itself and respond in speech to others. Yet, like Brecht, Lacan perceives a dialectic of sovereignty that is a process of self-recognition through others. And Lacan also is fascinated with the structural roles that underlie the formation of social bonds and individual identity. In Lacan's description, this process is mediated by the world of signs and language, and moreover,

the subject's identity itself is an effect of signs and images upon the subject. A discussion of Lacan at this point thus will redouble our theme of the mediating image and its anticipatory value for the actor-spectator.

Lacan's comments on the mirror phase are of special interest to our topic here because in the mirror phase, as with the gestic theater, the observer's visual attention takes precedence over the operations of speech. Lacan attributes this to the visual precocity of the infant, because of which the infant's sensitivity to shapes outstrips its power to speak the language in which it is spoken to. The infant's attitude is not unlike that of Brecht and Laughton in their *Galileo* collaboration, where the gest could in effect supersede the spoken code and communicate an attitude chiefly by bodily actions and vocal inflection. Likewise the infant's earliest interactions are dominated by its perception of human shapes (i.e., *Gestalten*, in particular the shape of the human face) and by its sensitivity to the rhythmic and tonal qualities of speech. Lacan argues that the infant's visual sensitivity is activated not only by others' shapes but also by the infant's own mirror image, which it comes to see as a distinct *imago*. The perception of a whole and integrated self in the mirror is at odds with the infant's experience of its own body, which is characterized by tension and conflict. This discrepancy between a perceived self-image and an experience of inner turmoil is the first instance of that ambivalence in the subject's development that we shall speak of again shortly.

Even in Lacan's version, this perception of self is realized in a theatrical interaction with others, specifically between the infant and its playmates. There, in the phenomena of transitivity, Lacan observes that the fascination with others' images contributes to a shifting and unstable sense of self. As Lacan says, "the child who strikes another says that he has been struck; the child who sees another fall, cries" (*Ecrits* [1977] 19). When children six to eighteen months old confront each other, they play games of tag and mimicry that allow them to practice mastery over their own bodies by imputing that mastery to others of the same age. In Lacan's words, they engage in "those gestures of fictitious actions by which a subject reconducts the imperfect effort of the other's gesture by confusing their distinct application . . ." (18). In the images of others, the child perceives and anticipates a command of its body that it does not yet possess; hence the "jubilation" that accompanies this perception. At the same time it attributes (mistakenly) a superior self-control to its nursery rivals.

The myriad identifications of the mirror phase—the child's playful attitude toward the mirror and the games of mimicry and aggression that it plays with its similars—give rise to an unbalanced reciprocity that Lacan calls an "alienating identity."

Lacan accounts for this alienation by referring to the radical dependency of the human infant upon those who care for it. This dependency installs into human experience a reliance upon others for the recognition of one's own selfhood. It is demonstrated both in the infant's games with its similars (its mirror-images) and in the influence of parents and other adults, who give the child its name. Indeed, the child's first encounters with its mirror image may well be accompanied by an adult's assertion, "That's you!" The child's initial experience of a self is bound up with the images and authority of others:

The first effect of the *imago* on the human being is an effect of the *alienation* of the subject. It is in the other that the subject identifies with himself and even first experiences himself. A phenomenon that will seem less surprising if one recalls the fundamental, social conditions of the human *Umwelt*—and if one invokes the intuition that dominates all of Hegel's speculation.

Human desire is constituted, he tells us, under the sign of mediation; it is a desire to have one's desire recognized. It has as its object a desire, that of others, in the sense that man has no object constituted for his desire without some mediation, as can be seen in his most primitive needs in the fact that even his feeding must be prepared and provided. (*Ecrits* [1966] 181)

In this characteristically playful and inventive revision of Hegel's terms, Lacan substitutes the helpless infant for Hegel's master, an equation justified by their absolute dependence upon the labor of others to satisfy their desires.⁸ Ironically, this utter helplessness gives the infant a control over the actions and desires of others—a control whose despotism can be appreciated only by the parents of a newborn infant. The infant's dependency is never entirely overcome in the subsequent phases of development, even through the acquisition of language. The ensuing "entry into the symbolic," as Lacan terms learning to speak, merely shifts the subject's dependency on and domination by others, since the poor child must then assume someone

else's name and learn someone else's language to express his or her own desires.

The alienating identity of the mirror phase is recapitulated in various dual relations in adult experience, among which Lacan names both the master-slave relation of Hegel and actor-spectator of the theater. What we have seen as the gestic exchange, then, is conditioned by an original interaction of subject and image in the playroom theatrics of young children. And what we have termed the *dramatic image* of Brecht's gestic theater is a specific form of that *imago* installed as the first instance of our identity. Yet all these dual relations are burdened with ambivalent identifications between inferior and superior terms. In his essay on aggression, for example, Lacan makes this comparison: "Similarly, it is by means of an identification with the other that [the child] sees the whole gamut of reactions of bearing and display, whose structural ambivalence is clearly revealed in his behaviour, the slave being identified with the despot, the actor with the spectator, the seduced with the seducer" (*Ecrits* [1977] 19). Not only does each of these relations recall the confusion of self and other in the mirror stage, but each recapitulates that "alienating identity" that Lacan holds to be the essence of human identity. By the same token, whether in the theater or in the sexual drama of seduction, we reenact the dualism of our antics before the mirror and of those mock battles in the nursery.

But there is no hint in Lacan's writings that these relations are reversible and hence anticipate an even-handed and egalitarian social relation. From the example of Brecht's gestic theater, we might well argue that the relations of sexual aggressiveness hold the promise of a playful exchange between seducer and seduced. And, in fact, Freud noted that certain perversions—in particular, sadism and voyeurism—allow partners to alternate between active and passive roles (Freud 14: 132). Brecht also believed the effectiveness of theater could be increased when the audience expected to assume the role of actor, and when actors were trained in watching themselves and others. If the relation of teacher and student is added to Lacan's catalogue of structural ambivalence, then the reversibility of these relations of dominance becomes something of a desirable norm rather than a pathological exception. The ambivalence of the mirror phase might also yield a concept of genuinely shared, but always provisional mastery that promises every subject the opportunity to assume

the structural positions of actor and spectator, teacher and student, seducer and seduced.

The sovereignty engendered by this dialectic need not reinstate the transcendental premises against which Lacan struggled so fiercely in his writings. It does depend, however, on a concept of collective or shared sovereignty of the sort that Lacan never asserted. In Lacan's view, the subject continues to be dominated by the "signifier" even after learning to speak and passing through the Oedipal trauma into later childhood. Thus, speech does not introduce the person into a condition of autonomy and free reciprocity, but continues to hold subjects in dependence upon the world of discourse which preexists any individual speaker. Lacan's commentators have sometimes questioned this persistent fascination with the structural integrity of culture and social relations, at the expense of the individual subject's participatory role in culture. John Brenkman has argued that, just as the mirror phase anticipates the bodily maturity of the young child, the acquisition of language "installs within experience a utopian expectation of self-developing interactions in which the individual's autonomy lies in participation not in an imaginary self-sufficiency. . . ." In other words, the speech situation contains a utopian promise: that subjects might participate freely and reciprocally in interactions with others, and that this participation be expanded to all domains of human life.

The (largely obstructed) utopian expectation of self-developing interactions does not eliminate the structural asymmetry of humans' relations to others. This asymmetry is the ineradicable result of our each having been a helpless infant, entirely dependent on others for our sustenance and education. Hence, the development of sovereignty will always be a dialectic, some version of the structural conflict between master and slave. Sovereignty will always struggle against the contradictory limits placed on it by our human experience: a continued dependence (even as adults) on others, coupled with the "imaginary" wish to be entirely whole and self-sufficient. Yet even Lacan's version of the dialectic of sovereignty may be directed, as Brenkman demonstrates, toward political questions. This does not mean that politics, or a political theater, may liberate humans from the trials of infancy and childhood. Politics may, however, promise emancipation from the particular, historical forms which constrain human interaction. Brecht's assault upon the traditional theater ought

to be understood in this context: as an attempt to challenge the particular constraints upon the interaction of actors and audience. In its place Brecht proposed, among other things, a dramatic version of what Brenkman calls “self-activity in language.” It is this self-activity that instates within our daily experience a lived alternative to the often autocratic, authoritarian, and paternalistic structure of existing institutions.

Brecht’s prescience lay in grasping the dialectic of sovereignty as a problem of political and aesthetic education. As we have seen, Hegel considered the role of this dialectic in establishing the social relations of civil society: behind every mature citizen lay the primeval struggle between master and slave. Lacan examines the dialectic as a process which transforms the inarticulate infant into a speaking participant in the community’s symbolic life. In his pedagogic theories, Brecht’s interest was how the gestic theater could foster the intellectual sovereignty of its members and so enhance their ability to act in history. Despite their differences, Fredric Jameson has suggested a fertile analogy between the Marxist terms of Brecht’s project and the Lacanian categories of imaginary and symbolic:

That it is not simply a question of method or theory but has implications for aesthetic production may be suggested by the example of Brecht, whose conception of an anti-Aristotelian theater, an aesthetic which refuses spectator empathy and “identification” has raised problems that are clarified by our present context: we would suggest, indeed, that the Brechtian attack on “culinary” theater—as well as the apparent paradoxes to which the ideal of “epic theater” gives rise—can best be understood as an attempt to block Imaginary investment and thereby to dramatize the problematical relationship between the observing subject and the Symbolic Order or history. (380-81)

Specifically, Brecht wanted to create a subject who could be at once a critical observer of history and a participant in that same historical process. The gestic theater addressed this problem by re-orchestrating the play of identifications between actor and spectator, although not by blocking identification altogether, as Jameson says. The spectator saw the gests of daily life translated on the stage into fictive images. At the same time, the spectator was expected to enact just these fictions (or similar ones) as soon as the audience was released

from the theater onto the stage of historical actions. By making gests, or actions, as "intentionalizable" as words, the gestic theater sought to make a language of action and to teach its basic alphabet.

The exit from the gestic theater marked the audience's "second entry into history," to paraphrase Lacan. Brecht wanted his audiences to emerge from the theater as subjects of historical action, not the objects of that action. If before they had seen history as an invisible drama directed by politicians and generals, Brecht hoped they would now understand that their lives were history as well.⁹ Having judged the fictive actions of the theater, the audience might enter the field of historical action with a different experience of their roles there. By successfully reversing the poles of actor and spectator, they could act the gest that made history, even if it were a gest so evidently trivial as learning one's alphabet (an example in the Brechtian play most obviously derived from the gestic theater, *The Mother*). The act itself might not have changed so much as the subject's experience of it: learning to read might now be felt as an action of the same historical magnitude as leading a military campaign. If it had succeeded, the gestic theater would have made of history a dramatic language that everyone could speak, a drama in which everyone had a role.

Brecht's intention required that a perpetual tension be maintained between acts of reflection and reflective action. His own comments show that he was attempting to erase that original sin of all class societies, the division between mental and manual labor, between thinking and doing:

There is no difference between the true philosophy and true politics. On the heels of this realization follows the thinker's suggestion to educate young people by acting in the theater; that is, by making them at once doers and observers, as it is prescribed in the pedagogies. The pleasure in observation alone is harmful to the state, as is the pleasure in deeds alone. In carrying out deeds that are exposed to their own observation, young people are educated for the state. (*Werke* 17: 1023)

The somewhat Leninist cast to this observation should not obscure its utopian statement. To engage fully in the collective life of the community—perhaps a more fortuitous term than "the state"—young people must engage in the collective enterprise of mutual observation

and shared action. The theater offered a site upon which their ability to act freely and think critically was developed and rehearsed. But the real test of the gestic theater was whether these gests could be emulated in history, whether this theater was a school for life. It was in this transfer from the imaginary to the historical that the pedagogic theater proved its usefulness—or its danger—to the state.

That Brecht did not succeed in abolishing the division between mental and manual labor need hardly be said. The notes on pedagogy outline a utopian design: it foresaw that the accession to sovereignty might coincide with the formation of political consciousness and a readiness to take political action. Yet the vehicle of this process was a dramatic practice that had to survive in existing cultural institutions. Consequently, the success of Brecht's political aims was contingent upon the readiness of great numbers of people—actors, directors, financial backers, set designers—to share in his aims. The theory of gest and the pedagogic theater flowered during that brief period in Brecht's career when he possessed the necessary raw materials for his project: a willing group of actors, access to theaters, a politically-minded audience, and (perhaps most important) a volatile historical moment in which radical change appeared imminent. The short life of this combination was to have subsequent and substantial effects on the nature of Brecht's theorizing and his theater. Even so, the theory of gest remains an intriguing fragment in Brecht's dramatic theory and, in the context provided here, a provocative formulation of the problem of human inter-subjectivity.

NOTES

1. For brief descriptions of this phase in Brecht's career, see Völker 144-51 and Willett 188-90, 206-08.
2. The formulation is borrowed from Jameson, who is concerned with the confrontation between a theory of society (Marxism) and a theory of the psyche (psychoanalysis). This produces "the difficulty of providing mediations between social phenomena and what must be called private, rather than merely individual, facts" (338). Psychoanalysis poses the question of the subject—those "private" facts of interiority—in such a way that Brecht and other Marxist thinkers may be reevaluated in

terms that are not always generic to the Marxist tradition. Such a reevaluation is undertaken in the analysis that follows.

3. Brecht may have adapted the term from his musical collaborator, Kurt Weill, who used the term to describe the gestic or demonstrative qualities of music (see Weill). Brecht usually applied "alienation" to professional acting, as a particular means of presenting or exposing a role to the audience, and to methods of staging the dramatic narrative. "Gest," on the other hand, described common, everyday actions, whether acted on the stage or outside the theater. Brecht's usage of "gest" dates from his work in the didactic theater at Baden-Baden and in Berlin, in the years 1929-33; his first systematic application of "alienation" came several years later, after his trip to Moscow in 1935.

4. For a strictly linguistic analysis of this reciprocity, see Benveniste's essay "Subjectivity in Language" (223-30).

5. The term is adapted from the context of political philosophy, which has traditionally attributed sovereignty to a monarch, a state, or the "body politic." In this tradition, sovereignty has usually required the recognition of others: the monarch must be recognized as monarch by his subjects, or the sovereign state must be recognized by other states (see Benn).

6. Hegel gives this construction to the master-slave struggle in his lecture notes to the *Philosophy of Mind*. There he argues that the struggle for recognition "can only occur in the natural state, where men exist only as single, separate individuals; but it is absent in civil society and the State because here the recognition for which the combatants fought already exists." Cited in Norman 51.

7. Lacan's most extended explication of the mirror phase is contained in the early essays "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I" and "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis" (*Ecrits* 1-29). Useful analyses include Laplanche and Pontalis 249-50, Wilden, Lemaire 79-81, and Jameson.

8. Freud links this to the prematurity of human birth, relative to other animals: the human infant's "intra-uterine existence seems to be short in comparison with that of most animals, and it is sent into the world in a less finished state. As a result, the influence of the real external world upon it is intensified. . . . Moreover, the dangers of the external world have a greater importance for it, so that the value of the object [i.e., the mother] which can alone protect it against them and take the place of its former intra-uterine life is enormously enhanced" (Freud 20: 154-55; cited Laplanche and Pontalis 190).

9. This is, I might add, the gest's contribution to Brecht's later "alienation effect." The gestic theater was supposed to deconstruct ordinary events into their gestic components and to present these components in the language of daily life: this way of buying an elephant, that way of washing one's face. The alienation effect performed a similar decomposition upon the events of history and the narrative plot of the play itself.

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