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# The Reality of Reflection

The rules of conventional filmmaking—from editing and shooting to writing and acting—are designed to create a convincing mirror of reality, an illusion that film can maintain more consistently than most artforms. As convincingly as film can mimic the real world, however, it can just as easily deconstruct reality in a way that reminds the audience of their positionality, both as spectators and as social beings. In his "Short Organum for the Theatre," Bertolt Brecht seems to have this deconstruction in mind when he states, "[I]f art reflects life, it does so with special mirrors" (16). A prolific playwright in Weimar Germany and later the United States, Brecht explored a reflexive form of storytelling in plays, films, and essays. His technique *Verfremdungseffekt,* translated as the "alienation effect" or "distancing effect," inspired generations of artists after him, including French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard and contemporary filmmaker Adam McKay, who wrote and directed *The Big Short* (2015), a fictionalized depiction of the 2008 housing market crash in the United States. McKay, like Brecht and Godard, deconstructs many conventions that uphold a suspension of disbelief to encourage his audience to question their passive acceptance of American capitalism; however, he also seems to depart from his Brechtian predecessors by creating characters designed to incite an emotional reaction in his audience. Nevertheless, closer analysis of both Brecht and McKay shows that despite this emotional appeal, McKay, like Brecht, does not position his audience to identify with the characters, making *The Big Short* a consistent example of Brecht's "epic" cinema.

Brecht's theories, which had an influence on filmmakers as different in style as Godard and McKay, stemmed from both his artistic and his political convictions. His plays, poetry, and music pushed a socialist message and caught the attention (both positive and negative) of left-wing theatre critics. It was not only the subject matter of his plays that garnered attention, however; Brecht's playwriting *techniques* were also revolutionary, a reaction against the Naturalism that dominated the theatre of the time and emphasized empathetic characters and the suspension of disbelief to fully engage the audience. Brecht lays out his alternative theories in "A Short Organum for the Theatre," published in 1949. The text describes his idea of *Verfremdungseffekt* and details how to achieve it in all aspects of theatre, from writing and acting to music and costumes. The goal of *Verfremdungseffekt* is to make the audience aware that they are watching a theatrical production, and in the process force them to consider the social message in the play that challenges their own role in the social order. According to Brecht, "a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (8), one where "the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed" (14). He called it "epic" theatre because it does not try to replicate real life but instead makes a spectacle out of it "forcefully and on the grand scale" (5).

Brecht's ideas on theatre were soon translated into film, by both Brecht and others. Brecht himself wrote that "since film can represent reality in such an abstract way, it lends itself to confrontations with reality" (Silberman 7). Angelos Koutsourakis writes of Brechtian cinema that its "role would be the exposition of 'social masks' firstly in the narrative world, secondly on the extra-diegetic one in the auditorium" (247). Cinema lends itself particularly well to Brecht's ideas of "self-reflexivity and anti-illusionism," which force spectators to "reflect on the

medium's social function and on their own function as social beings" (261). Before McKay and *The Big Short*, writer-director Godard incorporated Brecht's ideas in films such as *Tout va bien* (1972), a political critique of a strike at a French sausage factory. *Tout va bien* closely mirrors the techniques in Brecht's text; and because Godard's film is often used as a benchmark for Brechtian filmmaking, it is a useful tool for examining whether *The Big Short* confronts reality in the way Brecht intended.

From the beginning of his career, McKay has employed reflexivity in his dramatic work. He got his start as a comedian, working with the Second City improv troupe in Chicago before transitioning to head writer on *Saturday Night Live* (Weiner 34). He later went on to write and direct a number of comedies before releasing *The Big Short*. Comedy has a long history of self-reflexivity: the fourth wall is something to be tested and broken, or, as journalist Jonah Weiner says of McKay, "rammed into at full speed" (39). "Ideally," says McKay, "you want to be alienating four people, and you want six people to love it" (Weiner 39). Comic outrage alone, however, is not Brechtian. In *The Big Short,* McKay takes full advantage of Brechtian techniques—such as direct address, archival footage, superimposed text, and unconventional shooting and editing—to convey explicitly political messaging that challenges the audience's preconceived notions of American capitalism. McKay, like Godard, meets Brecht's challenge that "our representations must take second place to what is represented, men's life together in society" ("A Short Organum" 16). Leaving the theatre after watching *The Big Short*, the audience thinks not only of the story they watched, but also of the socio-economic context in which they live.

In published works and collected fragments of writing, Brecht lists specific techniques that produce *Verfremdungseffekt*, techniques used and adapted by Godard and McKay. In an

example of one such technique, Brecht insists that plays, and later films, should treat "our own time as though it were historical" so that the circumstances under which we act "will strike [us] as equally odd … this is where the critical attitude begins" (8). According to Brecht, this historicity distances the audience from their own time so that they can better see their place within it. His play *Mother Courage and Her Children,* for example, is set during the 17th-century Thirty Years War but is really about 20th-century nation-states profiting through war. Godard follows this model precisely in *Tout va bien* (1972)*,* which depicts a strike at a French sausage factory as a comment on the continuing class struggle in France at the time.

Similarly, *The Big Short* explores the 2008 market crash and the key players involved in it as a historical event, even though the effects of the crash likely still lingered for much of the film's audience. *The Big Short* was McKay's first foray into the world of highly political filmmaking; the film focuses on the events leading up to the crash and the small group of men who predicted (and profited from) it, "illuminating just such self-obscuring systems of power, the kind that depend on opacity to function" (Weiner 35). McKay grounds *The Big Short* in history by showing the events as taking place in the past, while consistently alluding to how the effects linger in the present. He also uses pieces of popular culture from 2008, such as viral YouTube videos and music, to further root the narrative in a historical time and place. Despite this historicity, however, the film's critique is aimed at audiences in 2015 and is still applicable to audiences in 2020. Employing a technique also found in Brecht's work, McKay treats these recent events as historical to instill in the audience a critical attitude.

Brecht's historicity attempts to encompass the full sweep of history, looking forward as well as backward, a scope adopted by Godard as well as McKay. Both *Tout va bien* and *The Big Short* end with a lack of resolution that suggests history flowing inexorably forward, an

opportunity for the audience to reflect on their own future. Godard, for example, concludes *Tout va bien* with a warning to learn from history: "[man's voice] Each his own historian. We'd be more careful about the way we live. [many voices] Me, you, him, her, us, all of you." The end of *The Big Short,* while more subtle, asks the audience to reflect on the future implications of the crash: "In 2015, several large banks began selling billions in something called a 'bespoke tranche opportunity.' Which, according to *Bloomberg News*, is just another name for a CDO [Collateralized Debt Obligation]." In other words, little has changed for the banks since the crash: the bundling of risky mortgage bonds that caused the crash is still in effect. This historical approach, like other features of Brecht's epic theatre, can play "a really revolutionary role" that "causes naked reality to appear" (Dayan 7), something McKay, like Godard before him, clearly emulates.

In another reflection of Brecht, McKay and Godard seek to achieve *Verfremdungseffekt* with their integration of extra-narrative images and text in *The Big Short* and *Tout va bien,* following Brecht's dictate that "the cinema's potential is to be found in its capacity to collect documents. To present some philosophy or another, or the images of life" (Silberman 6). One way Brecht achieved this on stage was to use written placards and signs. Between scenes, a sign might drop down with a narrative summary or interpretation of what was about to happen. In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, for example, the stage directions at the top of Scene 3 were probably meant to be shown to the audience in text: "Three years pass and Mother Courage, with parts of the Finnish regiment, is taken prisoner. Her daughter is saved, her wagon likewise, but her honest son dies."

In *Tout va bien* Godard integrates text with the use of posters and graffiti directed at the audience, with phrases such as "ON A RAISON DE SÉQUESTRER LES PATRONS. GREVE

ILLIMITÉE.” (WE ARE RIGHT TO SEQUESTER THE BOSSES. UNLIMITED STRIKE.). *The Big Short* is also broken up by text panels superimposed on archival stills or extra-narrative footage that provide “a dialectical counterpoint whose function is productive rather than descriptive” (Koutsourakis 260). For example, in the last third of *The Big Short,* as the protagonists anticipate the inevitable market crash, McKay superimposes a quotation over an image of a man and woman kissing passionately in a club. The figures and the kiss are not part of the main narrative; but the quotation, from Haruki Murakami’s *1Q84*, comments on the characters’ situation: “Everyone, deep in their hearts, is waiting for the end of the world to come.”

Other scenes in *The Big Short* present a collection of “documents” in the form of archival footage, encouraging the audience to reflect on the real world while still in the theater. Early in the film, for example, Burry meets with various bankers to place his bets against mortgage bonds. To illustrate the bankers’ reaction to this, McKay intercuts shots of their celebration with shots of widely circulated YouTube videos and music videos with the theme of “money.” The purpose is twofold: while McKay is illustrating these characters’ obsession with making money, he is also holding up a mirror to American culture and its attachment to wealth. The footage briefly takes the audience away from the narrative in order to impart this critique, a critique they could possibly apply to themselves. As Koutsourakis writes, Brecht’s brand of realism relies on “the coexistence of representation and its metacritique” (256), a coexistence McKay capitalizes on with this integration of commentary into the narrative.

Laying out another distancing technique, Brecht writes that film’s “effect must arise from the clear interruptions, which would otherwise just be common errors” (Silberman 6), and both McKay and Godard use “errors” in shooting and editing to expose their audience to the

mechanics of the filmmaking. In *Tout va bien* Godard uses long, unedited tracking shots of spaces with a long focal length that flattens the image to undermine the audience's suspension of disbelief. A shot at the end of the film, for example, shows a large supermarket and a student uprising that takes place inside. The shallow focus of the shot flattens the check stands and supermarket aisles into an abstract image, surveyed slowly by the tracking camera, a break with convention that "shows consumer space as a political space" (Pantenburg 16).

Similarly, McKay breaks with shooting and editing conventions in *The Big Short*, but he uses different techniques than Godard. At the beginning of the film, for example, McKay juxtaposes extreme close-up, handheld shots of Michael Burry's face with images of computer searches and whiteboard calculations. From a filmmaking perspective, the instability of these close, moving shots creates a feeling of mania; but beyond that, it pulls the viewer out of the narrative established in the previous scene, a conventional shot-reverse-shot conversation between Burry and a new hire.

Koutsourakis suggests that these effects are more powerful in film than on stage because "cinema's dependence on mechanical reproducibility could strengthen the audience's understanding of the visible—and here the term refers to the filmic visible and the social one—as something that can be constructed and not as unchangeable" (251). Conventions of Hollywood shooting and editing are meant to recreate reality so the audience will suspend their disbelief long enough to immerse themselves in the narrative, and most movie-going audiences (especially by 2015) have been conditioned to accept these techniques without question. Just as the symbolic, multi-tasking props in Brecht's plays—a suitcase that becomes a desk and then a door—would have been jarring to an audience that expected realism on stage, so McKay's

camerawork, like Godard's, challenges his audience to reconsider the historical and social narratives they have uncritically accepted.

Another of what Koutsourakis calls film's "medium specific elements" (256) that reflects Brecht's theories is direct address to the camera. Godard uses it throughout *Tout va bien*. The factory boss, played by Italian comedian Vittorio Caprioli, comically denounces the strikers, while the factory workers describe their subpar working conditions. McKay uses direct address even more extensively in *The Big Short.* Several characters, including narrator Jared Vennett, frequently address the camera directly, reminding (and in some cases explicitly telling) the audience that they are watching a film. Characters also point out the film's departures from the actual historical events portrayed. For example, when characters Charlie Geller and Jamie Shipley find the marketing presentation about the crash in an investment bank lobby, Shipley faces the camera and tells the audience that this is not how the real Geller and Shipley found the information, but that this fits the filmic narrative better.

In an extension of direct address, McKay takes advantage of his audience's awareness of celebrity to confront them with the artifice of the film. In one scene, actress Margot Robbie portrays herself sitting in a bubble bath while she explains subprime mortgages directly to the camera. This scene, its setting and actor unrelated to the central plot, brings the audience out of the film's narrative enough to grab their attention, the goal being twofold: first, they learn how a subprime mortgage works; and second, they are further removed from the narrative when a celebrity they recognize intrudes abruptly into the fictional world of the film. The sequence is made even more alienating by its lack of match-cut editing—Robbie picks up a champagne glass while speaking in the side-facing shot and picks it up again in the front-facing shot as she continues to speak, exposing that the two shots of Robbie were not simultaneous. In a later

sequence, celebrity chef Anthony Bordain explains Collateralized Debt Organization (CDOs) through the metaphor of a seafood stew, with similar editing. These techniques—direct address both within and from outside the main narrative—show the "knots," to use Brecht's words. According to Weiner, McKay believed "making a less confrontational movie, hewing to a measured realism would have felt not only boring but also incommensurate to the task" (34).

Although McKay uses many techniques in *The Big Short* similar to Godard's in *Tout va bien*, he appears to deviate from Brecht in his representation of character. According to Brecht, character action should not be driven by individual want and desire, the realist style, but should be determined by social class ("Short Organum" 12). In *Tout va bien* Godard blatantly organizes his characters into their respective social classes—cultural worker, bourgeoisie, and working class. These social categories drive the characters' decisions and, by extension, the plot. For example, in the inciting incident of the story, the factory workers lock their boss and the two protagonists in an office, an action motivated purely by their collective opinion of their working conditions, rather than by any individual desire for revenge. These workers in their white coats are a mass, rather than a collection of individuals. Even the protagonists, portrayed by stars Jane Fonda and Yves Montand, represent social categories more than characters with a full emotional backstory.

McKay, by contrast, makes a point of identifying three individuals and their motivations from the beginning: Michael Burry (Christian Bale), the acclaimed genius who first predicted the market crash; Jared Vennett (Ryan Gosling), a Deustche Bank investment banker (and narrator) determined to profit from the crash; and hedge fund manager Mark Baum (Steve Carrell). All three are motivated by their desire to expose the bank's corruption (and make a profit). In addition, Burry and Baum in particular are given tragic biographies: a flashback scene to Burry's

childhood shows him being bullied for having a glass eye, and Baum's brother's suicide plagues him throughout the film. These flashback scenes seem to frame Burry and Baum as tragic heroes, although, as events unfold, McKay dismantles this heroic framework.

For Brecht, *Verfremdungseffekt* should be visible not only in the way the writer constructs the characters, but also in the way the actors portray them. An actor's "feelings must not at bottom be those of the character, so that the audience's may not at bottom be those of the character either" (9). In *Tout va bien* Godard appears to take this directive literally. He decentralizes his stars (Fonda and Montand) and has the actors deliver their lines without much emotional vigor or passion. The characters became less emotionally compelling to the audience, allowing them to focus on the intellectual message of the film, rather than the story and characters. The Hollywood stars in *The Big Short,* conversely, act in the Method style, where actors use emotion to fully embody their character. Although much of the acting style in *The Big Short* is comedic and therefore slightly more self-aware than typical Hollywood dramatic acting, the actors provide emotionally realistic portrayals of the characters onto which McKay projects his critique.

Although it is tempting to dismiss the protagonists of *The Big Short* as un-Brechtian, part of the film's political efficacy comes from their vivid and passionate portrayal—which is also true of Brecht's own characters. In fact, "Brecht argued that emotions and feelings are fundamental in politicizing representation," for, as Koutsourakis asks, "how could one arouse the audience's political capacity without provoking emotional responses?" (264). In Brecht's anti-war play *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), for example, Courage's decisions are framed "at all times by the larger context of their devastating effects on the lives of her three children" (31), Courage herself representing both a selfish mother and the destruction of war

itself. She is still, however, a deeply complex and riveting character. In his book *The Death of Tragedy,* George Steiner describes Courage's reaction to her son's death in a 1949 production directed by Brecht himself and featuring Brecht's wife in the title role: "As the body was carried off, Weigel [Courage] looked the other way and tore her mouth wide open.…The sound that came out was raw and terrible beyond any description I could give of it. But, in fact, there was no sound. Nothing. The sound was total silence. It was silence which screamed and screamed through the whole theater so that the audience lowered its head as before a gust of wind" (qtd. in Vork 46). Clearly Courage (at least in Helene Weigel's interpretation) is a character that draws in the audience and demands their sympathy, even if the playwright insists that they should resist any temptation to empathize with her suffering.

In *The Big Short,* McKay constructs similar characters that position the audience to be both emotionally engaged but still critically distanced. Character Ben Rickert (Brad Pitt), for example, appeals to the audience's emotions when he says, in a heated exchange with Shipley and Geller after all three of them have made millions off the crash, "You know what I hate about fucking banking? It reduces people to numbers. Here's a number, every one percent unemployment goes up, forty thousand people die, did you know that?" Rickert's powerful lines, delivered with passion by Pitt, tempt the audience to share in his outrage; more than that, however, his words reframe himself and the other heroes of the film for what they are: millionaires who made millions more while most Americans suffered. McKay is not content to leave his audience with an emotional catharsis; he wants them to judge the actions that led to it. Rickert, like Mother Courage, creates his own tragedy.

Brecht did not intend for his plays to be disengaging; in fact, he insisted that "the 'story' is the theatre's great operation, the complete fitting together of all the gestic incidents, embracing

the communications and impulses that must now go to make up the audience's entertainment" ("A Short Organum" 14). There is clearly a balance to be struck between *Verfremdungseffekt* and entertainment; making the audience aware of their place in the auditorium and society at large, while being entertaining enough to keep their focus and inspire them to object to their unjust position in the social order. Even if the characters are not motivated by their emotions, the audience needs to be; Brecht, like McKay after him, needs his audience to be emotionally engaged enough to be outraged.

In his own unique interpretation of Brechtian principles, McKay's unconventional camera and editing techniques, archival footage, superimposed text, and even character portrayals in *The Big Short* meet the definition of *Verfremdungseffekt,* positioning the audience in a way that elicits both their critical and emotional engagement. In so doing, McKay takes his place among Brechtian filmmakers such as Godard, who says (in Pantenburg's paraphrase) "art doesn't have to do with the reflection of reality, but with the reality of reflection" (32). By using Brecht's engaging yet alienating form of storytelling, McKay is able to reflect the inner workings of American capitalism and its dangers for his audience, tricking them into "enjoying the taste of vegetables" (Weiner 40). Like Brecht's epic theatre, *The Big Short* holds up a new kind of mirror; rather than reflecting "reality," it exposes the flawed economic conditions in which the audience lives.

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