

*Brecht and Photography**Tom Kuhn*

In July 1924 Brecht noted “*fotografieren*” in a list of skills he wanted to learn (others include modern iambs . . . skiing . . . jiu-jitsu) and put a camera on his shopping list (BFA 26, 279). From that moment on, although he never became a very adept cameraman himself, photographs played an important part in his creative work and imagination. Early on, Brecht’s interest is in photographs of people, not least in portraits of himself. There are several wonderful photo-shoots, the most famous of which is probably the series from 1926 of him self-consciously posing in an absurdly baggy (borrowed) leather coat, taken by the Augsburg family photographer Konrad Reßler.¹ Here he styles himself as an anti-bourgeois provocation, a modern city bohemian, hard and unfeeling, indeed pretty precisely as the poet of the contemporary collection *From A Reader For City Dwellers*. The “props” of notebook, pen, and cigar are a nod toward those American detectives of whom Brecht was becoming fond: the poet as private dick, an ironically detached investigator uncovering the seedy underside of society. “Part of the ‘value’ of a poem is the ‘face’ of its author,” Brecht later remarked laconically, but that “face” remains, precisely, in inverted commas.²

Brecht’s fascination with modern media is well documented, so it is surprising that little has been said about his interest in photography. In the first place this is because of the fragmentary nature of his engagement, over several decades, during which his point of approach kept changing. He wrote no sustained reflections about this technology, means of reproduction, technique of record, medium of documentary, art-form – however, we choose to understand it – about which other

¹ Konrad Reßler and Hans-Michael Koetzle, *Bertolt Brecht beim Fotografieren: Photographien von Konrad Reßler* (Munich: Gina Keyahoff, 1998).

² *Journal*, August 5, 1945.

contemporary cultural commentators, notably Siegfried Kracauer, Franz Roh, and Walter Benjamin, were producing a substantial theoretical literature. In a broader context, it has to do with the fact that we have hardly begun to consider the importance of the visual and the visual arts for Brecht. Gradually, however, in the context of what is often called the “New Photography” of the 1920s in Germany it becomes possible to piece together, from photographs, occasional remarks and notes, quite distinctively Brechtian perspectives, especially in relation to notions of *Gestik* (or socially readable moments of behavior) and of “cognitive realism.” Both as an object of theoretical writings and as a creative practice, photography continued to fascinate him: from those early portraits to the use of projections in the theater, the mixed media work of the *Journal* (1938 to 1952) and the *War Primer* (1944), and the contentious records of theatrical practice, the *Modelbooks* (mostly compiled in the 1950s). One of his closest collaborators from the 1930s, Ruth Berlau, distinguished herself as a photographer and contributed to all these later projects.³ It is a broad field.⁴

The interest in portraiture and in the nature of what may be revealed or obscured in a photograph of a person – unsurprising given Brecht’s anthropological, behaviorist interests – is echoed in the contemporary work of August Sander, Erich Salomon, and other practitioners, as well as of other writers on photography. Siegfried Kracauer’s 1927 essay “Photography” sets out from a portrait-photograph of a film diva; and Walter Benjamin’s 1931 “Little History of Photography” discusses portraits above all other genres.⁵ Brecht, like Kracauer and Benjamin, is beginning to realize that the camera does not always “naturally” reveal something; on the contrary, the image can be manipulated to say what we want it to say. In the case of the Reßler portraits the confident, hard-boiled pose is an ironic mask. In another famous image, the collective portrait for a 1927 series on “the artist” in the magazine *Uhu*, the image is constructed as

³ A collection of her own photographs and writings has appeared as *Ruth Berlau. Fotografin an Brechts Seite*, ed. Grisca Meyer (Berlin: Propyläen, 2003).

⁴ I have written about these matters before, esp. “Was besagt eine Fotografie?: Early Brechtian Perspectives on Photography,” *The Brecht Yearbook* 31 (2006), 261–284; “Poetry and Photography: Mastering Reality in the *Kriegsfiabel*,” in *Bertolt Brecht: A Reassessment of his Work and Legacy*, ed. Robert Gillett and Godela Weiss-Sussex (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2008), 169–189; and in *BoP*.

⁵ “Die Photographie” in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, October 28, 1927, in Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), 21–39; “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” in *Die literarische Welt*, September/October, 1931, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989) II, 368–385.

a playful document of a collective process of artistic creation, that is, of an important principle for Brecht.⁶ The pose can conceal, the *Gestus* may reveal. Photography should be good for both.

Brecht's early writings also contain a small number of remarks about photographs of cities or buildings, which furnish us with more of a handle on the general problems of the contradictory (not simply revealing) representational function and analytical potential (or not) of photography. Above all, there is the famous remark from the writings of "The *Threepenny Lawsuit*" (where he is reflecting critically on the social functions of art): "A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions. Reality as such has slipped into the domain of the functional."⁷ This view of photography as little more than a model of impotent mimetic realism features in the writing of other contemporaries, too. Kracauer's essay argues that because photography fixes reality in a superficial way it impedes the viewer from understanding that reality historically or conceptually. And the remark about a photograph of a factory started off, it would seem, as a comment by the Marxist sociologist Fritz Sternberg (there it is a Ford factory) and subsequently migrated, now as an explicit quotation from Brecht (from the unpublished typescript of "The *Threepenny Lawsuit*"), to Benjamin's "Little History."⁸ Brecht goes on to conclude that representing reality is not enough, "there is in fact a need for art" if we are to intervene in social processes.

The debate about whether photography was just a technology of reproduction or a medium for artistic expression began in the mid-nineteenth century; but in the 1900s, and more especially after World War I, a number of photographers began to question photographic practice in the context of the development of a modernist aesthetics in other media. For them, the photograph was not to be concerned with mirroring the literal world and trotting after the mirage of verisimilitude. Instead, it was to be developed as the site of a new aesthetic, whether psychological or social, crucially beyond the reach of outmoded media like painting, and essentially critical of dominant ideologies and traditions. Much of this development took

⁶ *Uhu*, August 1927, issue II: pp. 38–39; also, for example, in Stephen Parker, *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), plate 10.

⁷ BFA 21, 468; BFR, 164.

⁸ Compare BFA 21, 443–444; and Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* II, 833–834. Also Steve Giles, *Bertolt Brecht and Critical Theory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), 133–136; and Erdmut Wizisla, *Benjamin und Brecht: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2004), esp. 168, 170, 173, and 252.

place in revolutionary Russia and in 1920s Germany, where the assumptions of representational art were aligned with a discredited bourgeois ideology. Photographers such as El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko, László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray drew on notions of “constructivism” and “estrangement” to disrupt received ideas about how we structure a supposedly “natural” world, and to exploit the camera as a radically new means of perception.

It is not clear how far Brecht was conscious of these new spirits at the time. One of his close associates, George Grosz, had also worked in photography, alongside John Heartfield, whose work Brecht certainly knew: from posters, book-jackets of the Malik publishing house, and the covers of the Communist Party newspaper. Besides, the print media were full of examples and discussions of the work of the new photographers. By the time the famous *Film und Foto* exhibition visited Berlin in autumn 1929 (with work by Moholy-Nagy, Helmar Lerski, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Andreas Feininger, Werner Gräff, Hannah Höch, Man Ray, and many others) feuilleton interest had reached a peak. Not all of these exponents were so radical in their visions for their art, and a softer version of the new visual style was everywhere: in advertisements, posters, and illustrated magazines, as well as in the widely promoted photographic art of popular publications such as Renger-Patzsch’s *The World is Beautiful* and Karl Blossfeldt’s *Artforms in Nature*, both published in 1928, the latter reviewed quite favorably in the same year by Benjamin, the former derided in both the “Little History” and “The Author as Producer.”⁹

However well he was getting to know these varied oeuvres, there is little to suggest that Brecht would have been all that impressed by the aesthetics of most of the representatives of the new photography. Just because he had a lifelong mistrust of the literal and simple documentary did not mean that he was about to embrace Dadaism or any playfully abstract avant-garde. Nor could it possibly imply that he was seeking the kinds of metaphysical moment of transcendence that Renger-Patzsch hoped to reveal in his transfigured “beautiful world.” In this sort of modishness, according to Benjamin, “is unmasked the posture of a photography that can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists.”¹⁰ In the same year that Benjamin

⁹ Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Die Welt ist schön. Einhundert photographische Aufnahmen* (Munich: Kurt Wolff, 1928); Karl Blossfeldt, *Urformen der Kunst: Photographische Pflanzenbilder* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1928). The latter was reviewed by Walter Benjamin in *Die literarische Welt*, November 1928.

¹⁰ “Kleine Geschichte,” *Ges. Schriften* II, 383.

wrote that, 1931, Brecht wrote a very short piece for the celebration of the ten-year anniversary of the *A-I-Z* (Workers' Illustrated Newspaper). As well as providing more evidence that Brecht had been watching the development of modern photography with alert and critical eyes, his piece gives us some sense of the resistance he felt in the face of the bourgeois fetishism of the "truths" that could supposedly be revealed by placing objects before a camera lens.

The immense development of photo-reportage has scarcely been of profit for the *truth* about the conditions that hold sway in the world: Photography has become, in the hands of the bourgeoisie, a terrible weapon for the *suppression* of the truth. The vast pictorial material that is spewed out every day by the printing presses, and which appears to have the character of truth, in fact serves only to obscure the facts of the case. The camera can lie, just like the typesetting machine.

Or, as Siegfried Kracauer had earlier put it, "In the illustrated magazines the public sees the world, the cognition of which is impeded by those same magazines."¹¹

Brecht's early remarks on photography could seem, out of context, just an expression of his repudiation of mimetic literalism, where the medium is made to stand in, almost lazily, for the "mirror" aesthetic. To a certain extent, photography does indeed have that function in Brecht's critique of realism in the later 1920s. Now, however, in close dialogue, not to say chorus, with Benjamin and Kracauer, his scattered comments begin to coalesce as a more sophisticated critique, not of the medium itself but of a particular aesthetic and a fashionable practice of photographic art. Given the enthusiasm for the new photography manifested at the time in countless illustrated publications and exhibitions, Brecht's skepticism seems healthy. The objects of all this "new" photographic practice appear, not as transfigured, nor yet even revealed as themselves, but rather under a spell that both freezes and withdraws them from our understanding. And the very tension between Brecht's fascination and his skepticism begins to suggest that the encounter with photography was providing a significant impulse for the development in the later 1920s of Brecht's characteristic, socially engaged aesthetic of analytic, cognitive realism, and of those key notions of *Gestus* and (ultimately) *Verfremdung*.

The fertile years of experimentation at the end of the Weimar Republic and the development of new theoretical and aesthetic

¹¹ *A-I-Z*, Berlin, No.41, October 1931 (BFA 21, 515); Kracauer, "Die Photographie," 34.

perspectives in theater were brutally interrupted by Nazism. After 1931 Brecht does not write about photography again, but he does *use* photography, and he most emphatically returns to the questions of *Verfremdung*, realism, and abstraction in which his thoughts on photography are entangled. There is, moreover, one other practice that continues uninterrupted: In the mid-1920s Brecht began collecting press photographs and clippings, and this activity continued and intensified in exile. He lived through the decades in which halftone printing of increasing sophistication was developed, and periodicals moved away from etchings, woodcuts, and line-drawings to become the richly photographically illustrated magazines we know, for example, from *Life*. At the beginning Brecht stuck the pictures, mostly without commentary, in his notebooks. Later, many of them migrated into the folders of materials for particular works. Brecht's collections of notes and sketches for literary projects very often contain photographs that seemed to him to capture a typical or illustrative "gestics" he might seek to investigate in a dramatic scene: for example, newspaper images of the "masses" in the *Saint Joan* file or pictures of Hitler among the materials for *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*. There is scarcely a folder that does not contain at least a couple of photographs. *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* is accompanied by an especially rich collection of press cuttings, and the play can even be read as the literary expression of insights gleaned from surveying the pictorial "evidence" in the news media. The first finished typescript is carefully and wonderfully illustrated.¹² In both text and picture collection, Brecht is trying to put his finger on the gestural theatricality of fascism.

It is worth noting the contrast between the picture collections from the late 1920s, predominantly of faces, where the face is taken to represent and express a social type, and the collections from the 1930s and 1940s where we see people, often full-length, in social situations and public encounters, and so readable for what Brecht would have called their *Haltung* (social bearing, attitude, stance). The point was to discover a gesture, not as the expression of the psychology of the individual, but as a symptom of social relations. In many instances it is hard to know which came first, the picture or the literary idea, but I suspect it was the picture rather more often than we have hitherto believed. Sometimes the images may have helped Brecht to envisage a future theatrical production, but in many cases they appear to have long preceded such thoughts, indeed to have been a part of the

¹² For example, BBA, 113 for *St Joan*, BBA, 266 and 267 for *Round Heads*, and BBA, 174 for *Arturo Ui*.

inspiration and capturing of gestures that are yet to be worked out in the literary text. We can discern images that may well have inspired poems of the Svendborg collection (“German Satires”) or scenes of the cycle *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (both mostly written in 1937–1938).

In due course the amassing of pictorial material began to take on a momentum and rationale of its own, more or less removed from the practice of writing – although of course with many of the same concerns. There are hundreds of photographs in Brecht’s archive that were never, and can never be, assigned to a particular project, but were left in folders of their own, or glued into albums. The activity of cutting and pasting is painstaking, and there is a growing emphasis on the pictorial, apparently even at the expense of the textual. Text and captions become more and more distantly separated from the pictures, or eventually even entirely redundant.

The famous *Journal*, begun in the summer of 1938, is one form of more “divorced” text-image combination, which deserves to be read more closely as the multimedia work it properly is. The overwhelming majority of pictures in the *Journal* are again from the contemporary news media. This can create the impression that they function above all to document the ongoing world war, as a backdrop to Brecht’s more personal concerns. This effect is exaggerated for modern viewers because of the inevitably historicizing feel of the black and white images, set against the subjective expression of Brecht’s text. But the selection of pictures is far odder than would serve simply that purpose. It may be possible, with varying degrees of success, to create some connections between the pictures and the accompanying texts, and indeed between one picture and the next, but the general purpose is far from documentary. Brecht’s interest is in the camera’s ability to capture and unmask assumptions about authority and the social order, and the disparate worlds and concerns of the *Journal* are not neatly joined. There is essential work that the reader/viewer has to perform to come to terms with this radically polyperspectival approach, which deliberately impedes any single approach to the material and demands a continual reorientation.

A similar pattern of broken sequences and striking juxtapositions is found in two independent albums that Brecht created in the 1940s, without the written word – or at least without any of his own words (there are some captions or adjacent texts from the original press source).¹³ Here Brecht apparently seeks to interrogate the images of “surface reality” to disclose

¹³ They are unpublished: BBA, 1198 and Peter-Voigt-Archiv, 237.

some of the underlying realities beneath – without the use of added text. The collage of news cuttings is disclosed as a heuristic method for the analysis of social behavior, political reality, and its representation. The approach makes one think back to the photomontages that John Heartfield created in the years before 1933 for the *A-I-Z*. Brecht seems, however, to be discovering that one could achieve similar effects with just arrangements of the original photos and without the bother, or indeed the confusion, of active montage. There is a case for considering these albums as, perhaps unfinished, perhaps first sketches, but readable and comprehensible works of political art in themselves, attempts at formulating a positive counter-agenda to both fascism and bourgeois capitalism. They constitute a remarkable (unpublished and undiscovered) part of Brecht's oeuvre and are the sole examples of a man whom we know as an eminently literary artist working in an almost exclusively visual medium.

Perhaps, one might argue, Brecht was on his way to developing an appropriate literary form to provide a textual commentary to the photographs – which he then consummately achieved with the elevated four-line poems of the wartime anthology *War Primer* (the first examples of what he called “photoepigrams” date from the summer of 1940). The final cycle of press cuttings and accompanying epigrams, which was not published until 1955 in the GDR,¹⁴ is strikingly innovative in its form, a veritable master class in a contemplative, cognitive realism, which eschews both passive naturalism and context-less abstraction, without missing out either on particular reality or on general reflection. Far from being a scrapbook of cuttings and captions, *War Primer* is a considered cycle of carefully chosen images and crafted poems, designed both to tell the story of the war and to disclose its larger context and purposes. The work is full of jerky, Brechtian discontinuities and cross-associations, which demand effort and imagination from his readers. Perspectivism and *Verfremdung* are the built-in consequences of the selection, framing, and flattening of press photography. The camera, far from being the dispassionate (and therefore useless) mirror of the surface of reality, has learned, with the help of these elaborate and elevated “captions,” to draw attention not only to its objects but also to the process of representation. “Look,” the camera is saying, “this is how we do things. Isn't it strange?” and, “Look, this is how we show and see things. That may be even stranger.”

Photography and photographs were important for Brecht, and he responded with characteristic skepticism and intelligence to the practices

¹⁴ Now at BFA 12, 127–283, and published in English, London: Libris, 1998.

that he encountered, both in the arts and in the print media. A work like *War Primer* is still an important inspiration today for contemporary artistic practice.¹⁵ Brecht's posthumous contribution to film theory is well attested (and discussed in the next chapter); perhaps if people had paid more attention earlier on, his contribution to the theory and practice of photography might have been as great.

¹⁵ It has spawned many imitations and independent works, amongst the more important Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *War Primer 2* (London: Mack Books, 2018).