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Montage Mahagonny: Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht's Theatre of Interruptions *

Introduction

Verkündet nicht mit der Meiner Unfehlbarkeit die alleinseligmachende Art, ein Zimmer zu beschreiben, exkommuniziert nicht die Montage, setzt nicht den *innern Monolog* auf den Index!¹

Methode dieser Arbeit: literarische Montage. Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen.²

Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin seem to have something quite different in mind in their use of the term montage in the above quotes. In the manifesto-like essay written in response to György Lukács as part of the 'Expressionism debate', carried out in the late thirties over the pages of *Das Wort*, Brecht lists montage alongside the inner monologue, as a narrative technique one should utilise in the composition of realistic works of art.³ Benjamin, in contrast, pronounces montage as *the* literary method used for composing the *Passagen-Werk*.⁴ He seems

* This essay was developed as part of *Material und Begriff. Arbeitsverfahren und theoretische Beziehungen Walter Benjamins*, hosted by the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung, Berlin. I would like to thank the organisers and participants for their illuminating comments and support.

¹ Brecht, Bertolt. 'Praktische zur Expressionismusedebatte', *Gesammelte Werke in acht Bänden*, Band 8, Schriften 2, Zur Literatur und Kunst. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967, p. 292.

² Benjamin, Walter. 'Passagen', *Gesammelte Schriften*. Unter Mitwirkung von Theodor W. Adorno und Gershom Scholem hrsg. von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Bd. 5 [N1a, 8], p. 574.

³ The key essay Lukács contributed to the debate was 'Es geht um des Realismus', published in *Das Wort*, Literarische Monatsschrift, Redaktion: Bertolt Brecht, Lion Feuchtwanger, Willi Bredel, Moskau: Jourgaz-Verlag, Heft 6, Juni 1938, pp. 112-138. For some general background on the debate see the introduction to 'Realism and Formalism' in Brecht, Bertolt, Tom Kuhn, Steve Giles, Laura J. R. Bradley. *Brecht on Art and Politics*. Brecht's Plays, Poetry, and Prose. London: Methuen, 2003, pp.205-212.

⁴ See *Das Passagen-Werk GS*. Bd. 5, pp.45-1060. The texts assembled in the *Gesammelte Werke* under the title *Das Passagen-Werk* were first published in 1982. They comprise of a study revolving around the Parisian 19th century shopping Arcades Benjamin had worked on intermittently between 1927 and his death in 1940. The main section of the text is divided into alphabetically ordered 'convolutes', each loosely centred around a theme. The material consist in large part of quotations, and much of the critical literature written since its publication has engaged with the question of the completeness of the work; some, like Tiedemann, suggested the assembled materials are fragments of an unfinished work. Others whose view I share, such as Eiland and McLaughlin, suggest 'the research project had become an end to itself', in which Benjamin further extended his abundant use of citation and experimentation with short form already present in *Ursprung des deutschen*

to be describing montage as a ‘transparent’ technique in which the author must merely display existing material, without its further transformation. This is the manner in which Adorno understood Benjamin’s montage, describing it as simply denoting ‘ohne Anführungszeichen zu zitieren’.⁵ Adorno further explains that ‘Benjamins Absicht war es, auf alle offenbare Auslegung zu verzichten und die Bedeutungen einzig durch schockhafte Montage des Materials hervortreten zu lassen’.⁶ Benjamin intended meaning to emerge out of the assembly of quotations without mediating commentary, Adorno argues. The possibility of constructing a philosophical argument by merely juxtaposing material, without its conceptualisation and interpretation, is questionable, he adds.⁷ Adorno critique of Benjamin’s concept of montage relates to what he viewed as Brecht’s influence on Benjamin’s writing. In the following, I will interrogate the extent and manners in which Brecht’s writing had in fact informed Benjamin’s concept of montage. It will be argued that, contrarily to what has been suggested in the past, Benjamin had not appropriated the concept of montage from Brecht.⁸ Furthermore, while in Brecht’s work the role of montage as a theoretical concept is limited, it is a key philosophical concept in Benjamin’s writing. Devoting attention to this seemingly marginal term in their writing, I will suggest, may shed new light on the intricate and widely studied intellectual relationship between Benjamin Brecht.

Benjamin’s describes montage, in his seminal essay ‘Der Autor als Produzent’, as a two-staged process.⁹ An interruption of an existing state of affairs, which enacts an arrest, is followed by an experimental reordering that transforms the function and value of the work as a whole. Teidemann and Buck-Morss both defended the function of montage in Benjamin’s writing from Adorno’s critique by arguing that Benjamin’s viewed montage as including not quotations alone but mediating commentary as well.¹⁰ I argue conversely that the two stages of

Trauerspiels and Einbahnstraße. See Teidemann, Rolf. *GS*. Bd. 5, pp. 9-41. ‘Einleitung des Herausgebers’, and ‘Translator’s Forward’ in Benjamin, Walter, Eiland, Howard, McLaughlin, Kevin and Rolf Tiedemann. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999, pp. ix-xiv, esp. xi.

⁵ *GS*, Bd. 5, [N1, 10], p. 572.

⁶ Adorno, Theodor. W., ‘Charakteristik Walter Benjamins’, *Prismen: Kulturkritik Und Gesellschaft*, Munich, Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1963, p. 244.

⁷ Adorno, Theodor. W., *Ibid*.

⁸ See for example Eiland and Jennings’ description of ‘Brecht’s theory of montage’ as ‘important to Benjamin’s practice as a writer’ in *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, Cambridge MA and London, UK, Belknap, Harvard, , 2014. p.323.

⁹ ‘Der Autor als Produzent: Ansprache im Institut zum Studium des Fascismus in Paris am 27 April 1934’, *GS* Bd. 2, pp. 683-701.

¹⁰ As Buck-Morss writes: ‘Benjamin’s commentary, in which those facts were embedded, provided the rivets that allowed the fragments to cohere’. Despite some differences of perspective, I am indebted to her illuminating work on Benjamin’s montage, and specifically her discerning both constructive and destructive dimensions in montage. See Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing*. 1st ed., London, MIT press, 1999, pp. 74-77, and Teidemann, Rolf. Ed. *Bericht GS*, Bd.5, p. 1073.

the procedure of montage combined bring about an interpretative process, and this procedure, as Benjamin envisioned it, itself adopts the structure of commentary.¹¹ No additional explanation is necessary since the juxtaposition and rearrangement of elements – quotations in *Passagen-Werk* – is constructive of new meaning, much like meaning created by the juxtaposition of adjacent shots in a film.¹² Sparked by Adorno, the debate over the interpretative potential of montage bears implications regarding the status of the *Passagen-Werk*, as a work composed largely of quotations, within Benjamin's writing. Can a mere assembly of quotations, or materials, function as a philosophical work? In other words, what sort of operation may transform materials into concepts? Montage is one of Benjamin's responses to this question.

The term appears repeatedly in the *Passagen-Werk* as well as in several other texts, at times, as above, used by Benjamin to describe the method of his own work. Although not named in these works, montage is present as both method and concept in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* and *Einbahnstraße*.¹³ Described as an artistic *procedure* [*Verfahren*] in 'Der Autor als Produzent', montage functions as a philosophical *principle* [*Prinzip*] in Konvolut N of the *Passagen-Werk* and 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte'.¹⁴ The term thus oscillates in Benjamin's different works, between two apparently oppositional meanings. On one hand, the *procedure* of montage [*das Verfahren der Montage*] in 'Der Autor als Produzent' focuses on montage as a theatrical method which interrupts action. On the other, the *principle*

¹¹ See *GS*, Bd. 5 p. 575 [N2, 6].

¹² The manner in which Adorno describes philosophy in 'Die Aktualität der Philosophie', which Benjamin (miss)quotes in a letter to Adorno from July 1931, is therefore applicable to Benjamin's concept of montage: 'Aufgabe der philosophie ist es nicht, verborgene und vorhandene Intentionen der Wirklichkeit zu erforschen, sondern die intentionlose Wirklichkeit zu deuten, indem sie kraft der konstruktion von Figuren, von Bildern aus den isolierten Elementen der Wirklichkeit die Fragen aufhebt, deren prägnante Fassung Aufgabe der Wissenschaft ist'. Adorno, Theodor W. *Gesammelte Schriften in 20 Bänden - Band 1: Philosophische Frühschriften*. Hrsg. von Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973 p. 335. For Benjamin's letter, in which he replaces 'Aufgabe der philosophie' with 'Aufgabe der Wissenschaft' see Adorno, Theodor W., Benjamin, Walter, Lonitz, H. *Briefe und Briefwechsel - Band 1, Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, Zweite Auflage, 1995, letter from 17.7.1931, p. 18.

¹³ In the 'Erkenntniskritische Vorrede' to *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* The philosophical idea is described by Benjamin as produced by a kind of montage of extreme elements. See *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Benjamin, Walter, Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gershom Scholem. *Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 1 Teil 3: Abhandlungen [...]*. 7. Auflage. Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 931. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2015, p. 227. In *Einbahnstraße* Benjamin writes, for example, about children's play as the production of objects through bringing together disparate materials into new relations, see 'Baustelle' in *Einbahnstraße*, Benjamin, Walter, Rolf Tiedemann, Tillman Rexroth, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gershom Scholem. *Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 4 Teil 1: Kleine Prosa, Baudelaire-Übertragungen [...]*. 4. Aufl. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006, p.93. In Both works Benjamin experiments with montage-form: in the *Trauerspiel* book the main text is interspersed by lengthy quotations, while *Einbahnstraße* is composed of short-form *Denkbilder* (thought or thinking images).

¹⁴ Benjamin, Walter. 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' *GS* Bd.1pp. 691-704.

of montage [*das Prinzip der Montage*] in *Das Passagen-Werk*, describes montage as a philosophical principle of construction [*Konstruktion*].¹⁵ Both as procedure and as principle, montage may be defined as a dual-staged process including either interruption then arrangement, or destruction and construction. And yet, there is a shift of focus in Benjamin's different texts; in his essays discussing Brecht's epic theatre interruption is more dominant, while in the *Passagen-Werk* montage is conceived of primarily as a principle of construction.

1. Montage as Procedure

In 'Der Autor als Produzent', Benjamin describes the procedure of montage as one which Brecht borrowed from other art forms and incorporated in his epic theatre:

Hier nimmt das epische Theater also – mit dem Prinzip der Unterbrechung nämlich – wie Sie wohl sehen, ein Verfahren auf, das Ihnen in den letzten Jahren aus Film und Rundfunk, Presse und Photographie geläufig ist. Ich spreche vom Verfahren der Montage: das Montierte unterbricht ja den Zusammenhang, in welchen es montiert ist. Daß aber dieses Verfahren hier sein besonderes, ja hier vielleicht sein vollendetes Recht hat.¹⁶

A foreign element is mounted, or installed, in the procedure of montage into an assembly or context that make up an artwork, thereby disrupting the interrelations of its elements. Montage consists, therefore, of an *interruption* of relations. The songs interjecting in mid-action in Brecht's plays, for example, function as such disruptive elements. Benjamin describes Brecht's use of the procedure of montage as interruptive, in its creation of breaks in action, yet claims at the same time that it has a complete, or perfect right [*vollendetes Recht*]. This 'right' relates

¹⁵ In 'Reduktion und Montage', Detlev Schöttker identifies montage in Benjamin's writing with construction, arguing for the link between Benjamin's interest in constructivist movements and his development of the concept of montage. This leads him to wonder why on one hand Benjamin positions 'construction' against 'epic theatre', while on the other using epic theatre as an example for the constructive procedure of montage. Schöttker explains this by suggesting that over the years Brecht appropriated the idea of historical construction from Benjamin, employing it in his own writing and, therefore, Benjamin later references to Brecht's work link epic theatre together with montage. While I agree there is a link between montage and constructivism in Benjamin's writing, and find Schöttker's observation of shifts over time in Brecht's approach to construction convincing, the apparent contradiction is avoided if one views montage as a complex, evolving concept in Benjamin's writing that includes moments of both construction and interruption. *Global Benjamin: Internationaler Walter-Benjamin-Kongress 1992*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München, 1999, bd.2, pp. 772-3.

¹⁶ 'Das Autor als Produzent'. *GS* vol. 2, p. 697-8.

to the political function of the play as a whole. Benjamin's central argument in 'Der Autor' pertains to the role of the artwork within communist politics. He suggests that in order for an individual work to contribute to the political class struggle, revolutionising society's relations of production, it must perform a refunctioning [*Umfunktionierung*] of its apparatus of production. Writing about so-called 'revolutionary' themes in a manner that is not transformative of the text's means of production does not make for political literature, argues Benjamin against the *New Objectivity* movement. In other words, in order for an individual work to play a role within the political class struggle, revolutionising society's relations of production, it must alter its own manner of production. One method for achieving such an *Umfunktionierung* of the apparatus is by using the procedure of montage. This transformation consists of a shift in the relations between the artwork and reality. Unlike dramatic theatre, which produces a mimetic illusion based upon reality, epic theatre organises elements of reality itself in experimental arrangements [*Versuchsanordnung*]. The procedure of montage therefore first *disrupts* then *arranges*: the interruption of the former order brings about a new one through its 'organising function' [*organisierende Funktion*]. The reconfiguration of relations between elements within the artwork transforms the *value* of the artwork as a whole. Thus while the action within an epic play is interrupted, the play gains higher merit, as an artwork, than plays in which the action on stage creates an illusion of continuity.

Benjamin describes two forms of relation-shifting. The first is between 'elements of reality' [*Elemente des Wirklichen*] within Brecht's plays, which are reordered in an experimental rearrangement. The second, between diverse artistic media used to compose an artwork, such as image and writing. He thus writes, for example, that photomontage refunctions the apparatus of photography through the use of captions: 'Was wir vom Photographen zu verlangen haben, das ist die Fähigkeit, seiner Aufnahme diejenige Beschriftung zu geben, die sie dem modischen Verschleiß entreißt und ihr den revolutionären Gebrauchswert verleiht'.¹⁷ Montage as an interruptive procedure therefore transcends the form-content distinction through its altering, at the same time, the artwork's means of production and its political value. Diverging from the prevalent meaning of the term montage – which denotes assembly or mechanical construction – Benjamin's description of montage in 'Der Autor' focuses on the interruptive moment which enacts a break, or arrest, followed by a shifting of the relations between both elements *within* the work of art and elements *composing* the work

¹⁷ 'Das Autor als Produzent', *GS* vol.2 p. 693.

of art. The reordering is an *Umfunktionierung* transformative of the function and value of the work as a whole.

Although Benjamin links the *Umfunktionierung* of the apparatus to technological innovation, this does not necessarily imply the use of new media in ‘Der Autor’. Benjamin is not suggesting revolutionary art as contingent upon the development of new technologies, although film will emerge as a privileged art-form in the Artwork essay. Rather, he suggests political art as one in which an interruption shifts and reconfigures the relations within the artwork. Technical progress as a foundation for political progress, as defined in this essay, must not, therefore, be confused with Benjamin’s critique of historical progress in texts such as ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’.

Benjamin directly discusses Brecht’s epic theatre in two versions of the essay ‘Was ist das epische Theater?’, the first written in 1931 and first published in 1966, and the second published anonymously in 1939 in *Maß und Wert*.¹⁸ Therein, Benjamin describes the interruptive procedure that is designated in ‘Der Autor’ as montage, although he does not name it as such. He uses the self-same example he gives in ‘Der Autor’ for the procedure of montage; which reads as following:

An einem Beispiel will ich Ihnen zeigen, wie Brechts Auffindung und Gestaltung des Gestischen nichts als eine Zurückverwandlung der in Funk und Film entscheidenden Methoden der Montage aus einem oft nur modischen Verfahren in ein menschliches Geschehen bedeutet. – Stellen Sie sich eine Familienszene vor: Die Frau ist gerade im Begriffe, ein Bronze zu ergreifen, um sie nach der Tochter zu schleudern; der Vater im Begriff, das Fenster zu öffnen, um Hilfe zu rufen. In diesem Augenblick tritt ein Fremder ein.¹⁹

A family row is interrupted mid-action by the entrance of a stranger; a ‘Tableau’, or moment of arrest of action, ensues. The former network of relations – both between the different characters on stage, and between the audience and characters – is disrupted, and the suspension

¹⁸ See *GS* Bd.2, p. 1380 and p. 1386, in which Tiedmann and Schweppenhäuser note the objections to the 1939 version of the essay expressed by members of Brecht’s circle, such as Margarete Steffin, if not directly by Brecht himself.

¹⁹ See *GS* Bd.2, p. 698. In ‘Was ist das epische Theater? (1) it reads as following: ‘Das primitivste Beispiel: eine Familienszene. Plötzlich tritt da ein Fremder ein. Die Frau war grade im Begriff, ein Kopfkissen zu ballen, um es nach der Tochter zu schleudern; der Vater im Begriff, das Fenster zu öffnen, um eine Schupo zu holen. In diesem Augenblick erscheint in der Tür der Fremde’; See *GS* Bd.2, p.522.

of action reveals a formerly hidden aspect of the state of affairs between the family members.²⁰ Furthermore, in both versions of ‘Was ist das epische Theater? Benjamin likens epic theatre to film; ‘Das epische Theater rückt, den Bildern des Filmstreifens vergleichbar, in Stößen vor’, he writes in the 1939 version. Since Benjamin describes Brecht’s plays as formally resembling film and enacting the procedure of montage, the question begs whether the procedure in itself, as described by Benjamin, may be found within Brecht’s theory and plays, and has merely been ‘remounted’ by Benjamin into his own work.

2. Ein Mensch wie ein Auto ummontiert

In the years preceding his writing ‘Der Autor’ in 1934, Benjamin read and responded enthusiastically to Brecht’s *Versuche 1-3* (1930), an edition containing plays and essays.²¹ The term montage appears only once in this volume, in Brecht’s ‘Anmerkungen zur Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*’.²² First published in 1930 in the journal *Musik und Gesellschaft*, under the title ‘Zur Sociologie der Oper – Anmerkungen zu Mahagonny’, it was republished the same year in *Versuche 2*, and repeatedly revised and republished in successive years.²³ ‘Montage’ is listed in one of the subsequently most quoted Brechtian texts: a table of two columns, the first entitled ‘Dramatische Form des Theaters’ and the second ‘Epische Form des Theaters’, opposite *Wachstum* (‘growth’, or ‘progression’) in the dramatic theatre column. It should not, however be taken as the negation of ‘*Wachstum*’; Brecht explains in a footnote that the terms in the table do not represent antitheses but rather ‘shifts of accent’ [*Akzentverschiebungen*].²⁴ Although Brecht does not comment on the table, the meaning of montage in this context may be deduced from the terms appearing above and below it in the table: ‘Jede Szene für sich’ opposite ‘Eine Szene für die andere’, ‘in Kurven’ opposite

²⁰ ‘Der Autor als Produzent’ *GS* Bd.2, p. 698.

²¹ See Benjamin’s letter to Scholem from the 20th July, 1931: ‘..these essays are the first – to be precise, of the poetic or literary essays – that I champion as a critic without (public) reservations. In another letter to Scholem from 17th April ’31 he writes specifically of the Mahagonny Anmerkungen, describing it as ‘a highly significant essay about opera’. *The Correspondences of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940* ed. G. Scholem and T. Adornon, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, Chicago IL, University of Chicago press, 1994 p. 380, 377.

²² ‘Anmerkungen zur Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*’ *Werke*, Große kommentierte, Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe. in 30 Bänden (33 Teilbänden). Band 24: Schriften 4. Texte zu Stücken. Aufbau-Verlag Berlin und Weimar, 1991, pp.78-9.

²³ For a documentation of the changes see *Werke*, Große kommentierte, Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe. in 30 Bänden (33 Teilbänden). Band 24: Schriften 4. Texte zu Stücken. Aufbau-Verlag Berlin und Weimar, 1991, pp. 476-78.

²⁴ Brecht, Bertolt. Anmerkungen zur Oper, p. 78.

‘Geschehen linear’ and ‘Sprünge’ opposite ‘evolutionäre Zwangsläufigkeit’.²⁵ Brecht utilises the term montage in this case, then, to denote a narrative form that is episodic, non-linear and in which the occurrence of events is non-causal.

A further hint of the meaning Brecht has in mind for the term montage in this instance may be gathered from *Mann ist Mann* (1926):

Herr Bertolt Brecht behauptet: Mann ist Mann.
 Und das ist etwas, was jeder behaupten kann.
 Aber Herr Bertolt Brecht beweist auch dann
 Daß man mit einem Menschen beliebig viel machen kann.
 Hier wird heute abend ein Mensch wie ein Auto ummontiert
 Ohne daß er irgend etwas dabei verliert.²⁶

Ummontieren, or remounting, denotes, in this case, the arbitrary reassembly of disparate parts, as in the construction of an automobile. The play describes the transformation of its protagonist Galy Gay from civilian into a soldier as the transforming of man into machine; dismantling and reassembly are a key image. Brecht notes ironically that Gay loses nothing in the process of remounting, yet while he loses none of his physical components, which are simply rearranged, in his farcical recruitment as a soldier Gay loses his identity, humanity and freedom. As Benjamin phrases it, ‘Mann ist Mann, das ist nicht Treue zum eigenen Wesen, sondern die Bereitschaft, ein neues in sich selbst zu empfangen’.²⁷

Montage, denotes then, in this case, mechanical assemblage. The use of the term ‘Montage’ in Brecht’s *Mahagonny Anmerkungen*, viewed in this light, would denote a narrative that includes jolts and breaks, rather than describing the continuous unfolding of events. The term is therefore one of several Brecht uses to define the discontinuous narrative of epic theatre. Moreover, both *Wachstum* and *Montage* are omitted from the later version of the table from 1938, and a version prepared for publication in 1935.²⁸ Benjamin takes up, then,

²⁵ Brecht, Bertolt. *Anmerkungen zur Oper*, p.79.

²⁶ Brecht, Bertolt. ‘Mann ist Mann. Die Verwandlung des Packers Galy Gay in den Militärbaracken von Kilkoa im Jahre neunzehnhundertfünfundzwanzig’. *Gesammelte Werke*, Stücke 1, Suhrkamp Verlag in Zusammenarbeit mit Elisabeth Hauptmann, Frankfurt am Main 1967, p. 336.

²⁷ ‘Was ist das episch Theater? (1)’ *GS* Bd. 2, p. 527.

²⁸ The 1938 version is reprinted in Brecht, Bertolt. ‘Anmerkungen zur Oper’, p.85. Morel, Jean-Pierre points out the significance of the omission of the term from later versions, see ‘Brecht et la question de montage dans les années trente’, *Études Germanique* 63, 2008, pp.229-245.

in ‘Der Autor’, a term that is marginal at this stage within Brecht’s theory, and defines it as epic theatre’s primary artistic method; the technique par excellence for producing political works of art.²⁹ Further, in the Mahagonny Anmerkungen Brecht calls, as does Benjamin in ‘Der Autor’, for the transformation of the apparatus of the work of art, claiming the social function of artistic institutions must be altered from that of entertainment to that of education.³⁰ Yet Brecht does not suggest, as does Benjamin, that a transformation of the means of production may lead to a transformation of the social function of the artwork, or transcend the form-content distinction. On the contrary, Brecht argues that merely ‘technologising’ the form of opera is not enough. He criticises ‘modish’ avant-garde attempts to update opera and suggests, rather, that ‘Wirkliche Neuerungen greifen die Basis an’ – truly innovative opera must attack the ‘base’, rather than enacting superficial formal alteration.³¹ The crux of Benjamin’s argument, which brings together the method of production of the work and its revolutionary value as exemplified in the procedure of montage, thus differs from Brecht’s position in the Mahagonny Anmerkungen. It is not until the late thirties, as part of the ‘Expressionism Debate’, that Brecht elaborates montage as a literary concept, utilising it to designate a disruptive technique that challenges the harmonious ‘Bourgeoisie’ structure of the text.³² Benjamin’s use of the term montage to denote an interruptive procedure in ‘Der Autor’ hence anticipates Brecht’s comparable use of the term.

3. Krise und Kritik

In Konvolut N of the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin describes montage as a constructive principle:

Ein zentrales Problem des historischen Materialismus, das endlich gesehen werden sollte: Ob das marxistische Verständnis der Geschichte unbedingt mit ihrer Anschaulichkeit erkaufte werden muß? Oder: auf welchem Wege

²⁹ ‘Montage’ remains undeveloped as a theoretical term by Brecht at this stage despite his engagement with film and cinematic montage, which begun when he created *Mysterien Eines Frisiersalons* (Kupro-Film, 1923), and continued in the 30’s with the production of *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?* (Prometheus Film, 1932).

³⁰ Brecht, Bertolt. ‘Anmerkungen zur Oper’ p.84.

³¹ Brecht, Ibid.

³² See for example, in ‘Aus: Der Geist der Versuche’: ‘In all dem, dieser *Montage*, diesem *inneren Monolog*, dieser kritischen Stellung der *nichtaristotelischen Dramatik* zur Einfühlung, löste sich die große harmonische bürgerliche Erzählung und das Drama auf, die Kunstformen mischten sich’. Brecht, Bertolt *Gesammelte Werke in acht Bänden*, Schriften 2, Zur Literature und Kunst. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967 p.320.

es möglich ist, gesteigerte Anschaulichkeit mit der Durchführung der marxistischen Methode zu verbinden. Die erste Etappe dieses Weges wird sein, das Prinzip der Montage in die Geschichte zu übernehmen. Also die großen Konstruktionen aus kleinsten, scharf und schneidend konfektionierten Baugliedern zu errichten.³³

Montage is defined quite differently here than in ‘Der Autor’, as a principle that can bring together ‘graphicability’ [*Anschaulichkeit*] on one hand, and the historical materialist approach to history on the other. Its method is described as that of *construction* using parts that are constructions, or assemblies, themselves [*Konfektionierten*]. That is, this construction of history is contingent upon a previous shattering of a whole (or a unified account of history) whose fragments are then reassembled. As demonstrated, montage as procedure includes a process of experimental arrangement [*Versuchanordnung*] following an interruption. The dialectic between the two apparently antithetic elements ‘interruption’ and ‘arrangement’, is comparable to that between ‘destruction’ [*Destruktion*] and construction in Benjamin’s writing.³⁴ Yet when Benjamin describes montage as *procedure*, the interruption preconditions the arrangement of the interrupted components. Conversely, when he describes it as a *principle*, like in the above quote, he focuses on the constructive process while interruption, or suspension lie both in the past and the future to come.³⁵ This dissimilarity attests to a distinction between the function of montage in Benjamin’s writing as procedure and as principle. The former interrupts, estranges, and rearranges; the latter constructs aggregates from disparate parts, that will one day be shattered once again into their bear elements. A further difference between the interruption-experimental arrangement binary on one hand, and destruction-construction on the other, is that the former implies, as demonstrated, the interruption of an existing state-of affairs, and the arrangement of its elements. In destruction, as described in the *Passagen-Werk*, the ancient state of affairs is entirely demolished. The arrest following destruction may be

³³ ‘Passagen’, *GS* Bd. 5 p.575.

³⁴ See for example ‘Für den materialistischen Historiker ist es wichtig, die Konstruktion eines historischen Sachverhalts aufs strengste von dem zu unterscheiden, was man gewöhnlich seine »Rekonstruktion« nennt. Die »Rekonstruktion« in der Einfühlung ist einschichtig. Die »Konstruktion« setzt die »Destruktion« voraus.’ *Das Passagen-Werk*, *GS* Bd.5, [N7,6], p. 587.

³⁵ See for example Benjamin’s discussions of Messianic interruption, described as a ‘weak Messianic force’: ‘...das vor uns war, eine schwache messianische Kraft mitgegeben, an welche die Vergangenheit Anspruch hat’ ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’ *GS* Bd. 1, p. 694.

described as a full stop rather than a pause, and therefore construction starts anew, from *tabula rasa*.³⁶

Crisis and Critique [*Krise und Kritik*], the name selected for the journal Brecht and Benjamin planned to bring out together, alongside Bernard von Brentano, Herbert Ihring and others, echoes a similar dialectic between interruptive and constructive elements.³⁷ Here too, significantly, the moment of crisis precedes the act of critique. It is not the work of art in itself, but the crisis of the work that precondition the possibility of its critique. The title of the journal which would have been, had it materialised, Benjamin and Brecht's sole joint project, makes manifest the link between the literary crisis and the social and political crisis Benjamin and Brecht were living through in the 30's, and their attempt to critically react to this crisis. Yet 'crisis' was also used by the journal's conceivers to designate a positive, productive shock or interruption. According to a transcription of one of the planning sessions for 'Krise und Kritik', Brecht described Joyce and Döblin's writing as representing 'Versuche, aus der Krise herauszukommen, sie sind aber, für sich betrachtet, auch noch selber Krise'.³⁸ This implies the extreme situation of crisis may only be addressed through crisis; social crisis demands a complementary productive crisis in works of art. In the blueprint of their joint work, the manner in which Brecht's conceiving of crisis as productive shaped Benjamin's thinking is most visible. Here I agree with Noys, who describes how for Benjamin, Brecht's 'destructive character 'makes room' for a new form of production'.³⁹

It is not my intention to suggest that montage as principle and as procedure are strictly separate within Benjamin's thought, or that he consistently outlines the differences between them. And yet, highlighting the distinctions between these two aspects or functions of montage allows us to discern that while Brecht's theory and plays were significant for Benjamin in shaping his interruptive procedure of montage, they were less so in shaping montage as a philosophical principle of construction in the *Passagen-Werk*.

³⁶ Benjamin describes, in 'Erfahrung und Armut', Einstein, Descartes, Klee and Brecht among others, as "constructors" – artists and thinkers who created from scratch, starting their work by wiping the traditional slate clean. See 'Erfahrung und Armut', *GS*, Bd. 2, pp. 215-216.

³⁷ For a detailed discussion of the *Crisis and Critique* project within the context of Benjamin and Brecht's friendship, and transcripts of the planning sessions of the journal, see Wizisla, Erdmut. 'Krise und Kritik', *Benjamin Und Brecht : Die Geschichte Einer Freundschaft ; mit Einer Chronik Und Den Gespraechsprotokollen des Zeitschriftenprojekts "Krise und Kritik"*. 1st ed., Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2004, pp. 115-163, 'Dokumente zum Zeitschriftenprojekt "Krise und Kritik"', pp. 291-327.

³⁸ From the session of 26 November 1930 on *Krise und Kritik*, quoted in Wizisla, Erdmut. *Benjamin Und Brecht: Die Geschichte Einer Freundschaft*, p. 315.

³⁹ Noys, Benjamin. 'The Organization of Destruction', *'Nihilism, Destruction, Negativity: Walter Benjamin and the 'Organization of Pessimism'*. Workshop, Jan Van Eyck Academie, 2 December 2012, p.7.

Conclusion

In ‘Krisis Des Romans: Zu Döblins “Berlin Alexanderplatz”’, published 1930, concomitantly with the planning of *Krise und Kritik*, Benjamin describes the governing stylistic principle [*Stilprinzip*] of Döblin’s novel as montage; ‘Die Montage sprengt den “Roman”, sprengt ihn im Aufbau wie auch stilistisch’.⁴⁰ Benjamin argues montage is the reaction, by means of an interruptive style-principle, to the crisis of the novel that was caused by its being superseded by the epic. The crisis instigated by montage interrupts the traditional boundaries of the novel, experimentally reordering material of daily life (‘Die Bibelverse, Statistiken, Schlagertexte’).⁴¹ The author’s interpretative voice is unnecessary in Döblin’s novel, writes Benjamin, since the montage of quotidian life material speaks for itself. As in ‘Der Autor’ and the essays on epic theatre, Döblin’s montage is associated with the epic form, which Benjamin interrogates closely in ‘Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows’.⁴² Therein, he designates chronicle and history as two types of epic form. While the historian explains the happenings with which he engages, the chronicler simply displays them, without interpretation, as does Döblin in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Montage, as a literary and theatrical procedure or style-principle that belongs to epic form, may therefore be understood as one that merely exhibits the material that is interrupted and arranged, without adding explanation, allowing the juxtaposition between elements to perform an interpretative act. Montage as a philosophic-historical *principle*, on the other hand, includes interpretation, ‘die es nicht mit einer genauen Verkettung von bestimmten Ereignissen, sondern mit der Art ihrer Einbettung in den großen unerforschlichen Weltlauf zu tun hat’.⁴³ In his critique of Benjamin’s montage, Adorno conflated procedure and principle, understanding montage as the mere assembly of elements lacking additional interpretation. Adorno’s critique of Benjamin’s concept of montage is part and parcel of his more general criticism of Brecht’s influence over the *Passagen-Werk*, from

⁴⁰ ‘Krisis Des Romans: Zu Döblins “Berlin Alexanderplatz”’ *GS* Bd.3, p. 232.

⁴¹ ‘Krisis Des Romans’, *GS* vol.3, p.233.

⁴² Benjamin, Walter, ‘Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows’, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, Bd. 2, pp. 438-465. I would like to thank Stephan Pabst for pointing out the relevance of this essay to the debate over the role of montage in Benjamin’s writing.

⁴³ ‘Der Erzähler’, *GS*, Bd. 2, p.452.

which he repeatedly warned Benjamin.⁴⁴ The case of montage serves as an example for Adorno's long-lasting impact on the reception of Benjamin and Brecht's intellectual exchange. Adorno's overestimation of Brecht's influence on some aspects of Benjamin's writing resulted in blind spots that have been consolidated and remained un-interrogated despite the vast amount of scholarly work written on the topic. Drawing attention to the complex range of meanings and functions of montage in Benjamin's writing allows us to better perceive the manners in which Brecht indeed had shaped Benjamin's thought, and to trace the limits of the former's so called 'negative influence'.

⁴⁴ See for example Adorno, Theodor W., Benjamin, Walter, Lonitz.H. *Briefe und Briefwechsel*, letter from 20.5.1935, p.112, and letter from 2-4, 5.8.1935, p.143.

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