

Seeing Better: Modernist Legacy and its Modifications

In Harun Farocki's film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989), spectators assume that archival aerial photographs taken by American pilots in 1944, document a factory complex in Poland. It was not until 1977 that two CIA officers recognized the rows of barracks, the crematoria and the long lines of blurry figures in the snow for what they really were—the images of Auschwitz. Through a simple shift in context or angle an image can reveal itself in a surprising, sometimes horrific, new light. What we see depends on how we see it. Even though artistic devices and theories of estrangement can be traced throughout the history of theatre, art and critical thought—from Aristotle and Horace to Hegel and Freud—artists of the historical avant-garde reveal this notion in its full aesthetic and political complexity turning it into a language of the Epoch. They viewed art as a reverse mimesis, and believed—as Oscar Wilde put it—that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life.” (789) As a result, estrangement became a way of thinking, a means of comprehending the world, and even a life style. The art of estrangement strove to change the aesthetic conventions to correspond to a reality marked by images of trenches on the one side, and dreams of a new society on the other.

Between the beginning of the 20th century and mid-1930s, two major estrangement theories emerged from avant-garde art and critical thought—that of Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht—and laid the foundations for further analysis of the defamiliarisation concept and its application to various forms of theatre and drama. In 1917, Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky focusing primarily on literary examples, coined the term *ostranenie* to describe the artistic technique of making the familiar strange. Estrangement (*ostranenie*) is a means of counteracting one of the

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most deadening forces in both art and life—habitualisation or automatisisation—that, as Shklovsky puts it, “devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (“Art as Device” 12). Bertolt Brecht’s estrangement theory is embodied in his well-known concept of *Verfremdung* – the main feature of his epic or non-Aristotelian theatre and drama. Brecht’s concept presupposes a certain ideological goal – it distances the audience from the stage work in order to enable seeing the well known in its ‘true’ state. Even though Brecht’s concept of *Verfremdung* was not fully formulated until 1935, hints of his future theory were evident in one of his earlier plays where he has suggested “even if it’s not very strange, find it estranging/ even if it’s usual, find it hard to explain” (*The Exception and the Rule* 109).

I argue that the concept of making the familiar strange was not only an integral part of the historical avant-garde, but also potentially one of the most important legacies of European modernism especially when the dialectics of aesthetics and politics is concerned. The notion of artistic thinking as thinking from the point of view of estrangement (Shklovsky) as both ideological position and as strategy with its paradigms in European modernism, becomes a palimpsest, creeping through many different contexts of multiple histories and fragmented narratives. The legacy of the defamiliarisation strategies has been sufficiently examined in regards to the Western avant-garde practices of the 1960s and also in relation to some postmodern practices, but I am interested here in the immediate impact of the estrangement concept in politicising contemporary performance and in its theatrical and performative modifications.

In his essay, emerging from the infamous Expressionist Debate, Brecht wrote: “Literary works cannot be taken over like factories; literary forms of expression cannot be taken over like patterns” (“Popularity and Realism” 81 in Taylor). This

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assertion suggests a certain relativism of aesthetic forms and devices, which is particularly true for the concepts of making the familiar strange. Although Brecht textualised his devices, and by doing so, somewhat canonised his methodology, he pointed out here the key aspect of estrangement aesthetics and politics—strategies of making the familiar strange wear out and in order to work, they always need to be re-invented. I will examine here the workings of *Verfremdung* looking at two contemporary performances that approach Brechtian legacy and/or echo his estrangement practices in very different ways: the 2009 staging of Brecht’s *Mother Courage* at the National Theatre in London and Christoph Schlingensief’s explosive *Auslenders Raus* performed in Vienna in 2001. Heiner Müller famously pointed out that the only way to remain true to Brecht is by betraying him. Working with the premise that Brechtian *Verfremdung* is an aesthetic strategy of making the familiar strange with a political aim, the examples that follow tap into this dialectics between faithfulness and betrayal, but with very different aesthetic and political results.

Analogy and Difference

The UK production of *Mother Courage* in the new translation by the famous American playwright Tony Kushner and directed by Deborah Warner, with the star actress Fiona Shaw in the leading role, employed all the well-known Brechtian epic devices. The stage machinery and the technicians were visible, stage-hands were helping the actors through costume changes in between scenes, video captions were used, and Gore Vidal’s voice was recorded reading scene descriptions. Moreover, the aim was to draw a clear political analogy between the play’s anti-war approach and the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan lead by Britain and the US. This link was further reinforced through instances of historicisation, again of a Brechtian kind. Tony Kushner’s translation occasionally uses the well-known rhetoric of “exporting peace

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and democracy” heard too often in the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and through lines such as “This is a war for God”. Deliberate anachronism also contribute to this kind of historicisation, including the sounds of modern warfare with which the performance opens and the satellite dish on Mother Courage’s cart at the peak of her trading success. Both the program notes and the Sky/ Arts documentary about the show stress the topicality of this staging of Brecht’s play. In the documentary, interviews with Deborah Warrner and Fiona Shaw, and excerpts from the rehearsals, are interspersed with news reports on British soldiers dying in Afghanistan.

The poster for the show further emphasized the intended contemporary resonances of the production: against the backdrop of explosions, stands the leading actress, Fiona Shaw, in modern clothes and with a cheeky smile holding a mobile phone camera in the direction of the onlooker. The contrast between the smiling actress and the iconography of war is ironic and *gestic* in nature. The actress’ smile, accompanied with her camera pointed towards the audience, is both inviting and somewhat challenging. This also suggest Brecht’s attempt to prompt a certain audience attitude, no longer passive and voyeuristic, but active and almost agitated. However, the star actress adorning the poster also promises a good entertainment value to the prospective Brechtian spectator. This is not untrue to Brecht either, as in his later theoretical writings, he stresses the need for theatre to be engaging and entertaining while at the same time being political and dialectical. Estrangement devices couple with spectacle and entertainment in the second key feature of this production through its rhythm, energy and music, which at times creates the atmosphere of a rock concert – a culture Brecht might have even embraced, as he did boxing and cabaret, had he lived long enough to witness it.

The reviews of the show were mixed ranging from overtly negative,

I have no doubt that some will claim to find all this compelling and describe the production as a telling commentary on Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, the show struck me as merely idiotic, full of sound and gimmickry, and signifying almost nothing. (Spencer, *The Telegraph*)

to very favourable ones such as Michael Billington's that concludes in the following way:

The good thing about Deborah Warner's revival is that it frees Brecht's play from pious reverences and releases its dynamic energy. Even if Warner's production occasionally throws the baby out with the bathwater, it presents the play as a piece of living theatre. (Billington, *The Guardian*)

Both reviews, however, seem to question the performance's political edge. How come that a production so conscious of its contemporary political relevance and so faithful to Brecht's strategies of estrangement—from epic devices to historicisation—fails to become politically thought-provoking?

Arguably, the pleasure of the spectator of this production of *Mother Courage* occurs on two main levels: the intellectual—which relates to the plays intertextual, or rather inter-theatrical links and to Brecht's *Verfremdung* strategies— and a more sensory pleasure that comes through the rock-en-roll energy of the production. The pleasure of inter-theatricality, however, comes to those equipped with knowledge of Brecht, his writing and performance methodology, and with the experience of previous stage incarnations of *Mother Courage*. It is the pleasure of watching how and when are the epic devices employed? What kind of acting choices have been made? When do these choices pay homage to past productions and how they depart from their predecessors? When confronted with the dead body of her son, Swiss Cheese, for instance, will Fiona Shaw's *Mother Courage* opt for the silent scream quoting the legendary performance of *Courage* by Helena Weigel or not? In a way, distancing here comes less from the relationship between a topical political subject

matter and epic devices and more from the aesthetic of theatrical estrangement against the backdrop of inter-theatrical links with past productions. With or without the ammunition of a theatre scholar, one is drawn, emotionally and sensually, into the stage world through music and spectacle. Although the songs deliberately disrupt the stage action and the lyrics provide a commentary, their *gestic* dimension gives way to the pleasure of rock-en-roll spectacle that emotionally envelops the audience. Nevertheless, amidst various intellectual and sensory pleasures this staging has to offer, the question of UK's involvement in the most recent "wars for God", for instance, remains on the level of vague allusion. The foregrounded topical aspects of the production never really become a provocation to the audience.

Why in this performance, of a very high quality, some of the most recognisable Brechtian strategies appear to have such "culinary" (to use Brecht's terminology) effects? Arguably, the problem concerns the methods of reinforcing contemporary political relevance of *Mother Courage*. Various instances of making the play topical, as well as various strategies of historicisation, gesture towards the contemporary contexts of war, but fail to engage with the relationship between text and context. The main method of asserting political relevance here is through analogy, inserting the contemporary context of war into an almost generic matrix. In the "Rehearsal Diary", the production director of National's *Mother Courage*, notes that the creative team's research process involved looking at images of war in the last 180 years.¹ By way of analogy, *Mother Courage* becomes an Every-war paradigm and the context-specific dimensions of both the war as subject matter and estrangement devices as a means of elucidating this subject matter become neutralised. In other words, the analogy between the text and Brechtian staging

¹ *Mother Courage Information Pack*, National Theatre, London: 2009 (n/pg)

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devices, on the one hand, and the contemporary context, on the other, has been taken for granted. Hence, *Verfremdung* devices come across as ornamental features rather than instrumental aspects of the content that would enable a new seeing of the familiar. This production has established the analogy between Brecht's *Mother Courage* and the contemporary world, but it hasn't contemplated the difference—which is the virtue of any artistically successful “betrayal”.

Brechtian Verfremdung Without Brecht

My second case study does not use Brecht's text (or any pre-existing script for that matter) as a point of departure and does not even claim any specific links to Brecht, but I would argue that it makes familiar strange with a very strong and wide-reaching political resonances. The case study in question is Christoph Schlingensief performance intervention *Foreigners Out!* (2000) staged in Vienna and commissioned by Wiener Festwochen. Although the issues explored by the project have wider significance, its impetuses related to a series of electoral successes of Austria's far-right Freedom Party and its leader, Joerg Haider, whose strong anti-immigration views defined his campaign for government (1999/2000). One of his electoral posters featured the overtly xenophobic term *überfremdung*, previously employed by the Nazis, to describe the country overrun with foreigners. This move towards the far right, prompted the European Union to put Austria under diplomatic sanctions as a way of voicing its outrage not only over Freedom Party's exclusionist approach, but also over what that party represents with its chequered history involving strong Nazi ties. Schlingensief set up his project with a sense of political urgency as a means of exploring the ambivalence of the Austrian populace who, on one hand, unmasked their xenophobic sentiments and cast their ballots overwhelmingly in

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favour of Haider while, on the other, staged a wave of political protests against the Freedom Party and its anti-immigration campaign.

For one week, Schlingensief kept his asylum seekers confined in a container that both resembled a detention centre, but also alluded to a concentration camp. Unlike the actual detention centre, located on the outskirts of Vienna, Schlingensief's container stood in the heart of the city in the Herbert-von-Karajan square in front of the *Staadsooper* making a stark contrast to the opera building's architectural grandeur. On the top of the container a huge banner proclaimed AUSLÄNDER RAUS! Cameras installed in the container enabled the public to constantly observe the asylum seekers and eventually to vote some of them out of the country in the style of *Big Brother*. The last one to remain was promised a monetary prize and marriage to an Austrian citizen to get immigration papers. Biographies of the protagonists, describing them in terms of exaggerated cultural and racial stereotypes, were posted on the director's web sites. Schlingensief acted as a kind of MC of the event, giving provocative, sometimes contradictory speeches and engaging in debates with the public that in the course of the event grew increasingly heated, even physical in some instances.

This performance works out its own devices of estrangement that are radically different from Brecht's methodology, but its political resonance and impact resembles some key aspect of Brecht estrangement epistemology. Although Brecht belonged to those avant-garde directors who removed the footlights to break the fourth-wall aesthetic in theatre, he deliberately kept the demarcation line between stage artifice and life. Theatrical stage still framed and preserved the distances between performers and audience, even when through epic devices the performance would reach across the proscenium arch. Physical demarcation between the performance and the

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audience, was necessary for Brecht's defamiliarisation devices to work—offering a scenic synecdoche, through which the individual and the society became objects of study—so that what had previously been taken for granted became revealed in its contradictions and ambiguities. Schlingensief's methods, however, also reveal contradictions and ambiguities destabilising previously held attitudes and convictions. Yet methodologically he works in the opposite direction from Brecht—Schlingensief deliberately obscures the relationship between performance and reality, pushing the limits of both. In the case of Brecht, even when the roles of subject and object were shifted, they were never blurred. Schlingensief's estrangement depends much more heavily on the process of turning the onlookers into active participants, in circumstances where the director has limited control over the unfolding of the performance, while Brecht strived to also control the reception process through estrangement devices.

In the light of all this methodological, aesthetic, even to some degree ethical difference, how can I claim that Schlingensief's performance is Brechtian in nature? And how can I possibly argue that this performance invokes estrangement as a means of politicising performance way more strongly than any theatre production adorned with exposed stage machinery, projections of titles and scene descriptions, and direct addresses to the audience?

Schlingensief's performance takes Brecht's notion of engaged and agitated spectator to the next level—it prompts a massive and controversial public debate. He stages a kind of political morality play for the Austrian public—a genre Brecht has explored too, albeit through very different means and never on Schlingensief's scale. Brecht envisioned theatre as a boxing arena with mass audiences, loud and argumentative, basking in a politically charged atmosphere, but he never fully

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achieved this vision, not even when performing his didactic operas in boxing rings. Arguably, Schlingensief's *Foreigners Out!* fully realises the notion of boxing-ring theatre reaching far beyond the theatre going public and provoking responses from different social and political strata of the society. Schlingensief's different estrangement methods work in a fashion similar to Brecht—they destabilise previously firmly held political positions. Schlingensief's performance not only brought the issue of asylum and xenophobia centre-stage, but also revealed activism, agency and finally ethics of representation in their contradictions and ambiguities. This is not only a matter of taking the performance outside theatre buildings, a strategy explored to great extent decades before Schlingensief, but of reinventing devices of estrangement that could fully politicise the public. Schlingensief defamiliarises and utilises the public space almost in a manner of Brecht's scenic synecdoche—using one significant detail as a macrocosm that has a semantic capacity to stand for ambiguities and contradictions of the wider environment. It is possible to think of Schlingensief's container semantically, much in the same way we contemplate the *gestic* significance of the cart in Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Schlingensief's political attitude and estrangement devices he uses to convey it are closer to Brecht than to the performance practices of neo-avant-garde and post-modernism. Likewise, the legacy of Brechtian estrangement emerges most strongly where it is perhaps least expected—in Schlingensief's new radical, political theatre. Unlike Warrner in her staging of *Mother Courage*, where ornamental epic devices become inter-theatrical references, rather than a politicised aesthetic, Schlingensief manages to prove the full vitality and urgency of estrangement strategies, not even through betrayal of Brecht, but through radical reinvention of *Vrefremdung* as a device of political performance—a kind of *Verfremdung* without Brecht. The value

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of this endeavour is neither aesthetic nor dialectical but political. And not only in its subject matter, but in pointing to both the possibility and the need to constantly extend and push the limits of political capacity of performance.

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