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Seeing Better: Modernist Estrangement and Its Transformations

Silvija Jestrovic

Seeing Better: Modernist Estrangement and Its Transformations

The concept of estrangement (*ostranenie*) that the Russian Formalists introduced is nothing but a need to see. *Ostranenie* is a peculiar ophthalmologic diagnosis—the majority of mankind has serious problems with its eyesight (and not only with its eyesight). The duty of an artist is to see better, which means to see differently than the rest of the mankind.

—Kis 1995

Quit writing about HOW, HOW, HOW much you love me, because at the third “how much,” I start thinking about something else.

—Shklovsky 1923

[comp: please set 1st line in small caps]

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: 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 theater, art, and critical thought—from Aristotle and Horace to Hegel, Freud, and Marx—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” (Wilde [1891] 1997, 789). As a result, estrangement became a way of thinking, a means of comprehending the world, and even a lifestyle. The art of estrangement strove to change the aesthetic conventions to correspond to a reality marked by images of trenches of WWI on the one side, and dreams of a new society on the other.

Between the beginning of the twentieth century and the mid-1930s, two major estrangement theories emerged from avant-garde art and critical thought—those of Viktor

Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht—and laid the foundations for further analysis of the defamiliarization concept and its application to various forms of theater and performance. 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 most deadening forces in both art and life—habitualization or automatization. Bertolt Brecht’s estrangement theory is embodied in his well-known concept of *Verfremdung*—the main feature of his epic, or non-Aristotelian, theater 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 though. In *The Exception and the Rule*, for instance, he suggests “even if it’s not very strange, find it estranging/ even if it’s usual, find it hard to explain” (Brecht [1930], 1965, 109).

However, in today’s world, flooded with information, images, and sounds, where the distinction between real and virtual becomes increasingly blurred, where the terms “fake news” and “post-truth” have not only entered our vocabularies but also been shaping our perception of reality, what are the strategies of “seeing better,” of subverting our stock response and making the well known fresh and meaningful again? And how can art—and theater in particular—use its capacities for making the familiar strange to facilitate this deautomatization of perception?

I am looking back at the concept of making the familiar strange as an integral part of the historical avant-garde, in order to understand its workings, its legacies, and its potential to play out the aesthetics and politics of seeing better for our time. The notion of artistic thinking as thinking from the point of view of estrangement, with its paradigms in European modernism, is a point of departure for reflecting on the relationship between aesthetics and politics—for foregrounding the concept of making the familiar strange both as formulated by Shklovsky and Brecht, respectively, and as it has been reemerging through its various transformations in contemporary artistic practices.

<A>MAKING THE STONE STONY: OSTRANENIE AND VERFREMDUNG

In his famous article “Art as Device” (*Isskustvo kak priëm*), Shklovsky defined his concept of estrangement:

Art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The aim of art is to offer the perceptibility of things, as they are perceived, not as they are known. The device of art is to make things strange [*ostranenie*], to make forms difficult [*zatrudnennaya forma*], increasing the complexity and the length of reception, for the process of reception in art is self-sufficient and needs to be prolonged; Art is the device of bringing an object to life, while the object itself is not important. (Shklovsky [1917] 1969, 14)

The term *ostranenie* is translated in English as “defamiliarization,” “distancing,” or “estrangement.” When Shklovsky coined the term, he was naming the concept of distancing the familiar already present in various forms throughout the history of art. Yet his work outlined the notion of defamiliarization not as a mere byproduct of aesthetic representation but as the core of art and its reception. *Ostranenie* is established through form-conscious devices and by taking the material out of its habitual context and organizing it into an aesthetic object. *Ostranenie* is a device for separating art and life that enables the perception of the well known as if seen for the first time.

The concept of making the familiar strange has never figured as a static principle, with an unchangeable set of rules. It evolved within the work of its theorists, showing its variety and multitude. Shklovsky’s own thinking on this concept oscillates between an *ostranenie* that brings about a new perception of reality, and *ostranenie* as an intertextual phenomenon. The notion of *ostranenie* developed from Shklovsky’s principle of device and effect to Jurij Tynjanov’s notion of artwork as a system—a complex whole characterized by interrelations and dynamic tensions among the components. Tynjanov’s studies in parody point to the intertextual dimension of *ostranenie*, seeing parody as a form that, by making fun of conventions turned into a degenerate cliché, enables a more perceptible set of conventions to emerge. In that light, the phenomenon of making the familiar strange becomes the *spiritus movens* of artistic changes.

Brecht elaborated the notion of defamiliarization as the concept of *Verfremdung*, which became one of the main trademarks of his epic, or non-Aristotelian, theater. Although *ostranenie* is translated in German as *Verfremdung*, Brecht’s concept embodies a different variant of making the familiar strange. *Verfremdung* is a calculated, Socratic device that by distance the spectator from the stage action, guides him/her towards a certain direction of comprehension. It is at the same time a construction of disbelief and belief. Through the devices of *Verfremdung*, Brecht breaks the illusion of reality on the stage, to establish the

illusion of breaking the illusion. *Verfremdung* was not present from the very beginning in Brecht's theory, but developed together with his theoretical and practical work. In the concept of *Verfremdung*, an amalgam of influences can be found, among which are Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, Russian avant-garde theater, political theater of the director Erwin Piscator, and Chinese theater, as well as some theoretical notions present in Aristotle, Friedrich Schiller, G. W. F. Hegel, and Karl Marx.

The word *Verfremdung* is most often translated into English as "alienation," which causes confusion in interpreting Brecht's ideological beliefs and his aesthetic of estrangement. The German word for alienation is *Entfremdung* or *Entäußerung* (in Russian *otchuzhdenie*). *Entfremdung* is one of the central notions of Hegel's theory, which was later revised by Marx. The term "alienation," however, bears different meanings in Hegel and Marx. In Marxism, *Entfremdung* has a negative connotation meaning the alienation of a person from his/her own self and from the products of her/his work. Marx's version of estrangement is rooted in Hegel's concept, but modified and taken out of the framework of Hegelian idealism into the philosophy of dialectical materialism. The term *Entfremdung* in Hegel's work embodies his theory of knowledge and is a positive epistemological device.

Brecht defines *Verfremdung* in Hegelian terms as the negation of negation in the 1938 note "*Dialectic and Verfremdung*" (Brecht [1938] 1992, 401–2). He also uses the term *Entfremdung*, which is often confused with his theatrical concept of making the familiar strange. Brecht employs *Verfremdung* devices to show the alienation (*Entfremdung*) that the social and political power structure creates. So Brecht's *Verfremdung*, as a Hegelian concept, has a positive connotation and is an epistemological device. The alienation (*Entfremdung*) in society is habitualized, no longer perceptible, taken for granted, understood as natural or as inevitable. *Verfremdung* in theater and other arts shows the alienation (*Entfremdung*) as a matter of causality, as a historical and alterable situation, not as a human condition. Therefore, alienation (*Entfremdung*) is the subject matter of Brecht's theater, while *Verfremdung* (estrangement or, in Russian, *ostranenie*) is the methodological procedure of representing and distancing that subject matter.

The two estrangement strategies involve the audience in different ways: Shklovsky's perceptibility allows for a freer interplay of sensual, intellectual, and even metaphysical experiences in the reception process, while Brecht tries to manipulate the reception—to various degrees of success—to trigger the audience's intellectual engagement and communicate a sociopolitically charged message. Nevertheless, both in German and Russian the prefixes added to the word "strange"—*Ver-fremdung* and *o-stranenie*—stress a

continuous process, a transition from one point to another—from the point of familiarity with the represented object to the point where this familiarity is challenged and renegotiated. Thus, “strangeness” is just one aspect of the *estrangement* phenomenon. In both Brecht’s and Shklovsky’s cases, the other aspect is familiarity—the recognition of the well known; yet, the well known is seen in a new light (Shklovsky) or in its true state (Brecht). In both versions, making the familiar strange is not so much about *what* we see, but *how* we see that which we already know. Or in the words of art theorist John Berger, “The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled” (Berger 1972, 7).

<A>COMING TO TERMS: AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

In his article entitled “Commitment,” Theodor Adorno challenges the relationship between aesthetics and politics and between form and content. He stresses that there is no art that comes *ex-nihilo*, entirely divorced from extra-artistic reality, yet he addresses the problem of committed art using examples of Jean Paul Sartre’s and Bertolt Brecht’s dramatic works. Adorno asserts that the problem with Sartre is his placement of new ideological and philosophical thought within the framework of a worn-out theatrical form—the bourgeois melodrama. The problem with Brecht is that while he finds a new aesthetic form, one would end up becoming a lousy Marxist if educated in the ideology of Brecht’s plays. Adorno finds the strongest relationship between ideology and form, one that challenges the distinction between autonomous and committed art, in the works of Samuel Beckett. Adorno regards Beckett’s radical aesthetic form as a political statement and provocation in its own right, even though Beckett’s plays do not make any overt allusions to politics or the social context. Adorno points out that autonomous art communicates an ethical perspective as well, and gives the example of Paul Klee’s painting:

During the First World War or shortly thereafter, Klee drew caricatures showing Kaiser Wilhem as an inhuman iron-eater. Out of these came in 1920 the *Angelus Novus*, the machine angel, which no longer carries any overt marks of caricature or commitment but far surpasses both. With enigmatic eyes, the machine angel forces the viewer to ask whether it proclaims complete disaster or the rescue hidden within it. It is, however, to use the words of Walter Benjamin, who owned the picture, an angel that does not give but takes instead. (Adorno 1976, 92)

The relationship between form and ideology in both *Verfremdung* and *ostranenie* has often been treated one-sidedly: *Verfremdung* has always been related to a critical and Marxist worldview, while *ostranenie* has often been criticized for promoting the philosophy of art for art's sake. Russian Formalism, especially when Shklovsky's work is in question, is reputed to be too rigid in isolating aesthetics from other cultural and social phenomena. This view is further reinforced through various interpretations of Formalism, both in the Soviet Union and in the West, as an essentialist and nonhistorical theory. The main points of criticism concern the Formalists' lack of historicity and their tendency to isolate art from extra-artistic reality. The problem with the critical reception of *Verfremdung* is in accessing Brecht's theatrical practice predominantly in ideological terms. Even though it is impossible to detach a work of art from its theoretical underpinnings, analyses of Brecht's *Verfremdung* suffer a range of presuppositions of ideology, from Marxist readings to the Poststructuralist interpretations of the concept. Brecht's theory and ideology are misunderstood as a standard for his practice rather than its dialectic accompaniment.

However, a closer reading of Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie* suggests that both the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of an artwork are inherent in the way in which it systematically works against one of the most powerful forces both in life and in art—automatization or habitualization of perception. Brecht also alludes to this habitualization of perception of his audience, commenting on the need for estrangement: “The representation sets the stage material and the course of events in the process of estrangement. This estrangement is needed to enable comprehension” (Brecht [1938] 1992, 264).

Both Brecht and the Russian Formalists emerged on the European cultural scene in a period within which a crisis of humanism became overt. To deautomatize the automatized by means of distancing the familiar is a way of humanizing both art and life. Theorist Ann Jefferson offers a new reading of Formalist aesthetics by linking its vocabulary to the violence associated with the lives and times of the Russian Formalist thinkers and their contemporaries. Jefferson points out that a notable degree of conflict and aggression emerges as an aspect of their thinking, even though it was not explicitly intended to theorize violence. Shklovsky's principle of defamiliarization is defined according to Jefferson through the metaphors of incipient aggression:

“Habitualisation”, says Shklovsky using another term for automatisisation, “devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war”. Literature counters this insidious and deadening process by creating difficulty, in a manner which often carries its own counter violence. This, to begin with, may be no more than a matter of

vocabulary, but its effects can also include reminders of the existence of the violence itself—the passion and the fear of war which Shklovsky alludes to. (Jefferson 1990, 129)

Seemingly, there is a discrepancy between the highly dramatic historical context within which Formalism came to prominence, including the First World War and the Soviet Revolution, and the Formalist tendency towards isolating artistic phenomena. Jefferson's article suggests that this discrepancy is not as big as it may seem. Shklovsky's premise is that when our perception becomes automatized, we recognize things around us, but we do not see them. The goal of *ostranenie* does not end in the artwork itself, but in the process of challenging the automatization of perception. This, however, reaches beyond the treatment of art as the sum total of artistic devices and even beyond literature and the modernist context.

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag turns to Wordsworth and Baudelaire to point out that the “argument that modern life consists of a diet of horrors by which we are corrupted and to which we gradually become habituated is a founding idea of the critique of modernity—the critique being almost as old as modernity itself” (Sontag 2003, 95). Yet the main pursuit of her book is the quest for “a more reflective engagement with content” (95), echoing Shklovsky's perceptibility, even if inadvertently. She writes about deadening of feeling, especially in the domain of news and television: “An image is drained of its force by the way it is used, where and how often it is seen. Images shown on television are by definition images of which, sooner or later, one tires” (94).

Film director Alejandro González Iñárritu's contribution to the *September 11* omnibus speaks to both Shklovsky's and Sontag's quest for perceptibility. Iñárritu chooses a simple concept: he takes the iconic and endlessly repeated documentary footage of the 9/11 attacks—people falling from the burning Twin Towers. He replays the footage yet again, but makes a seemingly small intervention. First, the footage is shown without sound—the audience watches the falling bodies in complete silence, then the images are removed and the audience listens to the sound footage in complete darkness of the cinema. This treatment of the frequently used, and thus familiar, footage has made a well-known event strange, astonishing, and horrific again. The notion of habitualization suggests that our perception becomes desensitized. Iñárritu's intervention exemplifies this point and, using a strategy of *ostranenie*, counteracts this dehumanizing indifference. Shklovsky, like Sontag and also Brecht, is aware of the erosion of perceptibility and of the dialectical nature of the estrangement procedure that needs to be always created anew.

Shklovsky's approach indirectly suggests that aesthetic choices are always in a way political, ideological, or ethical choices as well. In the article "Form as Social Commitment," Umberto Eco writes that the composer Schönberg refused to employ the tonal system because its structure embodied a view of the world as coherent and ordered, a view in which he no longer believed:

To speak of today's man, however, art has no choice but to break away from all the established formal systems, since its main way of speaking is as form. In other words—and this amounts to an aesthetic principle—the only way in which art can speak of man and his world is by organizing its forms in a particular way and not by making pronouncements with them. Form must not be a vehicle of thought; it must be a way of thinking. (Eco 1989, 142)

For Shklovsky too, form is content. Ideology is not an aspect outside the formal properties of a work; the choice to defamiliarize reality and art through aesthetic means is a political position in itself.

Theater and performance theorist Patrice Pavis describes the ideological level of an artistic work in the following way:

The ideological is not limited and locatable like a theme at the specific point in a literary text, but present at all levels, especially in a text's structure, form and materiality. The ideological is a mediating force between production and reception, between the text and the social context, as well as between literary form and social content. (Pavis 1987, 130–31)

Pavis stresses that there are several constraints governing the manner in which ideology is textualized and located by the reader/spectator in dramaturgical and stage forms. He finds that the two processes occur simultaneously—the textualization of the ideological when a given ideology culminates in a specific text, concretized in a signifying system, and the ideologization of the text when the text is linked to ideology. He also notes that ideology is more often subtly located on the level of formal, rather than thematic, properties:

Ideology thus encourages focus on the form of a work of art. This has an immediate effect of enabling the receiver to escape from the autonomous work and to link the

text to the discursive referent outside it. Ideology is not located on the “direct” level of content, nor on the level of pure forms, which are meaningless until linked to the Social Context. (Pavis 1987, 135)

The ideological level of an artwork is not a permanent stable category that is always, in all conditions and contexts, expressed overtly. However, there is an ideology of one kind or another inherent in the work of art, which springs from its authentic ideological context. When the context changes, the ideology of the work tends to shift as well. Neither the ideological nor the aesthetic features of the work can stop this process of transformation. The relationship between aesthetics and ideology within a work of art is reevaluated and renegotiated with each new generation or class of audience and takes place both synchronically and diachronically. Different receptions of Brecht’s work in his time prove this. The ideological repercussions of aesthetics are always reinstated in the act of reception as a process of concretizing (Ingarden, Vodička) the artwork.¹ The devices and strategies of *Verfremdung* and *ostranenie* do not necessarily work as universal patterns of making the familiar strange. *Ostranenie* is not bound to ideology in the same way as Brecht’s concept is. *Ostranenie* is epistemological, yet in a different way than Brecht’s *Verfremdung*, for through it one learns to see and sense things again. In the case of Brecht, however, the politics of seeing and sensing better needs to make an immediate political impact Brecht’s *Verfremdung* is used as an aesthetic tool that foregrounds the political and ideological, often asking for an art that is critical and corrective of both itself and society.

<A>EVERYTHING CHANGES

What has happened has happened. The water
You once poured into the wine cannot be
Drained off again, but
Everything changes. You can
A fresh start with your final breath.
(From “Everything Changes,” Brecht [1944])

[COMP: No indent]

German playwright Heiner Müller famously proclaimed that to perform Brecht today without betraying him is a betrayal of Brecht's theatrical principles. Theater director Robert Wilson, well known for his surreal theater of images, seemed like a strange bedfellow for Brecht when he staged the performance of *The Ocean Flight* (*Der Ozeanflug*) for the Berliner Ensemble in 1998—a triptych involving Brecht's radio play, Heiner Müller's play *Landscape with Argonauts*, and Wilson/Kuhn's adaptation of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Dead House*. Brecht wrote *The Ocean Flight* in 1929 for, at that time, the new medium of modern technology—radio—in his search for new possibilities of theatrical performance that the traditional theater was no longer able to offer. The play, performed in 1929 at the Baden-Baden Music Festival, is an almost biblical parable for the “scientific age” mounted around Charles Lindbergh's legendary first solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927.

In Wilson's staging, Brecht's play is treated as a transtheatrical link that ties different parts of the show together. Wilson's strategy of putting Brecht's text and staging devices in a postmodern framework alters both Brechtian dramaturgy and its ideological consequences. It becomes a reference and quotation within the production, but also material for an intertextual and ideological polemic. Wilson incorporates elements of epic theater such as the direct address to the audience, epic commentary, and Brecht's acting methodology of *Verfremdung*—which involves showing both the actor and the role he/she plays. These devices do not have the power of aesthetic innovation or relevant ideological meaning, since the play embodies the Marxist notion of progress through man conquering nature in a manner of naïve optimism. In Wilson's theater, Brechtian *Verfremdung* almost becomes an ornamental feature, not necessarily because the postmodern director neutralizes its aesthetic and ideological force, but because this concept taken as a staging formula is no longer able to carry out its ideological goal with conviction.

In Wilson's parodic interpretation, the character of Lindbergh looks like a movie star from the 1920s and 1930s. The powerful machine that took him across the ocean becomes a desk hanging from the ceiling, while the actor who plays Lindbergh sits on a bicycle and pedals the “mighty engine.” Lindbergh's plane, a wonder in the 1920s, at the end of the century looks like a poorly constructed toy. The figure of Lindbergh, as an icon of progress and of the belief in a better future that the advance of technology is to bring, becomes in Wilson's staging a naïve dream from the childhood of the twentieth century. The theater of Wilson and also of Heiner Müller survived the future that Lindbergh's flight announced.

In the context of Wilson's production, Müller's *Landscape with Argonauts* could be understood as an answer to Brecht. This answer comes after the experience of the Second World War, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and after the planes were used not only for exceptional acts of human endeavor but also as weapons for destruction of other human beings. Interweaving Müller's and Brecht's texts, Wilson confronts the pre-Holocaust theater of Brecht with the post-Holocaust one, showing that both the aesthetic of *Verfremdung* and Marxist ideology assume a different shape at the end of the twentieth century. In other words, through the aesthetics of both Brecht and Müller (who is considered to be Brecht's official successor), Wilson demonstrates that the paradigms of *Verfremdung* and epic theater are relevant today only through a renegotiation of the Brechtian canon, through its parody and betrayal. This production still establishes a *Verfremdungseffekt* of sorts by means of defamiliarizing Brecht's concept of defamiliarization.

Paradoxically, Wilson's theater treats Brecht's concept dialectically in the context of postmodern sensibility. His staging of Brecht implies that even though formal choices imply an ideological aspect by either subverting or conforming to the given canon, the ideological relevance and the aesthetic force of the artistic devices are relative in nature. Thus, Brecht's estrangement needs to be reestablished and renegotiated with every new interpretation and within every new context. Theater scholar Josette Féral points out the different sense of history and reality that distinguishes Brecht's *Verfremdung* from estrangement in postmodern theater and in the context of a media dominated reality:

Brecht believed that history had meaning, and that the stage was a starting point for discovery of truth through discourse. Performance art gave up the search for such a starting point, putting again in question both the status of reality and meaning of history. (Féral 1987, 471)

Brecht indeed understood very well the relationship between form, content, and context when he wrote: "Literary works cannot be taken over like factories; literary forms of expression cannot be taken over like patterns" (quoted in Taylor 1977, 81). He was aware of a certain relativism of aesthetic forms and devices, which have been particularly relevant for the concepts of making the familiar strange. Although Brecht textualized his devices and, by doing so, somewhat canonized his methodology, he pointed out that strategies of making the familiar strange wear out, and, in order to work again, they always need to be reinvented. Wilson's postmodern pastiche based on Brecht, *Der Ozeanflug*, is the case in point. Féral

rightly questions the status of reality and the meaning of history in postmodern performances of estrangement—a question that nowadays applies perhaps more than ever to the current state of politics and society on both global and local levels. Yet this makes a need to rescue the political dimension at the heart of Brecht’s *Verfremdung* more relevant than ever. Aesthetic devices of estrangement are renewable; their mutations, variations, and transformation apparently abundant; but what about the political dimensions of the concept? How can estrangement “make the stone stony” and counteract habitualization of perception if all its politico-ethical dimensions have been amalgamated into the postmodern simulacrum or sucked into the vortex of post-truth?

Two very different examples of contemporary performances that approach Brechtian legacy, echo his estrangement practices, and are deliberately political in their aims offer thought-provoking case studies to examine the workings of aesthetics and politics of *Verfremdung* for the twenty-first century. The performances in question are the 2009 staging of Brecht’s *Mother Courage* at the National Theatre in London and Christoph Schlingensiefel’s explosive *Auslanders Raus* performed in Vienna in 2001. 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 the dialectics of politics and aesthetics, and into the question of faithfulness and betrayal, with very different results.

<A>ANALOGY AND DIFFERENCE

The UK production of *Mother Courage* in the new translation by American playwright Tony Kushner and directed by Deborah Warner, with Fiona Shaw in the leading role, employed all the well-known Brechtian epic devices. The stage machinery and the technicians were visible, stagehands were helping the actors through costume changes between scenes, and video captions were used. Gore Vidal’s voice was recorded reading scene descriptions, and his outspoken anti-American-imperialism in the spirit of patriotic condemnation of his own nation foregrounded the link to contemporary politics. Moreover, the aim was to draw a clear political analogy between the play’s antiwar approach and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan led by the United States and Britain. This link was reinforced through instances of historicization,² again of a Brechtian kind. Kushner’s translation occasionally used the well-known rhetoric of “exporting peace and democracy,” which has been heard too often in the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and cited lines such as “This is a war for God,” echoing speeches of Tony Blair and George W. Bush. Placing this familiar war rhetoric out of its journalistic context and within the world of *Mother Courage* made the absurdity of

these phrases disturbing again, while establishing direct analogies between the war on the stage of the National Theatre and actual wars in other parts of the world.

Deliberate anachronisms also contributed to this kind of historicization, including the sounds of modern warfare with which the performance opened and the satellite dish on Mother Courage's cart at the peak of her trading success. Both the program notes and other publicity material, such as the Sky/Arts documentary about the making of the show, stressed the topicality of this staging of Brecht's play. In the documentary, interviews with Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw and excerpts from the rehearsals were interspersed with news reports on British soldiers dying in Afghanistan. Last but not least, its staging at the National Theatre placed this production within the context of politically engaged British theater that has been struggling in the last decade to renew its strategy and relevance, not only in relation to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also in facing the rise of the Right in the UK and globally.

The poster for the show further emphasized the intended contemporary resonances of the production: against an image of explosion in the background stands 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 actor and the iconography of war is ironic and "gestic" (from Brecht's concept of *gestus*, which means both gesture and gist).³ The actor's smile is both inviting and somewhat challenging. However, the starring actor adorning the poster also promises a good entertainment value to the prospective Brechtian spectator. This is not untrue to Brecht, as in his later theoretical writing he stresses the need for theater to be engaging and entertaining while at the same time being political and dialectical. Thus epic devices, most notably Brecht's songs that provide commentary to the stage action, coupled with spectacle and entertainment, were the second key feature of this production: its rhythm, energy, and music, which at times created 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.
(Charles Spencer 2009)

to very favorable, such as Michael Billington's, which concludes:

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 2009)

Although, according to Billington, this production showed that Brecht's play is by no means dated from a dramaturgical and theatrical point of view, both reviews seem to question the performance's political edge. How did a production so conscious of its contemporary political relevance and so faithful to Brecht's strategies of estrangement fail to become politically thought-provoking?

The enjoyment for the spectator of this production of *Mother Courage* occurs on two main levels: the intellectual, which relates to the play's intertheatrical links, and the sensory, which comes from its rock-and-roll energy. The pleasure of intertheatricality, however, only comes to those equipped with knowledge of Brecht, his writing and performance methodology, and with the experience of previous stage incarnations of *Mother Courage*. Is it the pleasure of watching how and when the epic devices are employed? Of what kind of acting choices have been made? Of when these choices pay homage to past productions and how they depart from them? When confronted with the dead body of her son, Swiss Cheese, for instance, will Fiona Shaw's *Mother Courage* opt for the silent scream emulating the legendary performance of *Courage* by Helena Weigel, or will she 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 intertheatrical links with past productions. With or without the ammunition of a theater scholar, however, one is drawn, emotionally and sensuously, into the stage world through music and spectacle. Nevertheless, amidst various intellectual and sensory pleasures, the question of the UK's involvement in the most recent "wars for God," for instance, remained on the level of vague allusion. The foregrounded topical aspects of the production never really became a provocation to the audience.

Why in this performance did some of the most recognizable Brechtian strategies fail to be politically provocative? The "Rehearsal Diary" notes that the creative team's research involved looking at images of war from the last 180 years (National Theatre 2009). By way of analogy, *Mother Courage* became 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 were neutralized. Hence, *Verfremdung* devices come across as

ornamental features rather than instrumental aspects of the content that would enable a new seeing of the familiar. In other words, this production of *Mother Courage* did not betray Brecht's strategies enough to foreground estrangement as a way of political thinking.

<A>**BRECHTIAN VERFREMDUNG WITHOUT BRECHT**

The second case study does not use Brecht's text (or any preexisting script) as a point of departure and does not even claim any specific links to Brecht, yet it makes the familiar strange with very strong and wide-reaching political resonances. The work in question is Christoph Schlingensiefel's performance intervention, *Auslander Raus! (Foreigners Out!)* (2000), staged in Vienna and commissioned by Wiener Festwochen. Schlingensiefel, who died in 2010 when he was almost 50, was a well-known agent-provocateur of European theater, from his staging of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2001) with repentant Nazis, to his death-defying performance in the face of terminal illness subsequently built into his show *The Church of Fear* (first staged in 2003). In another project, "Auslanders Raus!", Schlingensiefel placed a group of asylum seekers in a container in the city center. Although very little was revealed about the participants outside the context of Schlingensiefel's reality show, they were not actors and their immigration status was presumably real. This project was a reaction to a series of electoral successes of Austria's far-right Freedom Party and its leader, Joerg Haider, whose strong antiimmigration 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 as 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 the Freedom Party's exclusionist approach, but also over what that party represents with its checkered history, including strong Nazi ties. Schlingensiefel set up his project with a sense of political urgency to explore the ambivalence of the Austrian populace, who, on the one hand, unmasked xenophobic sentiments and cast ballots overwhelmingly in favor of Haider, and, on the other hand, staged a wave of political protests against the Freedom Party and its antiimmigration campaign.

However, the project, documented in Paul Poet's film *Foreigners Out!*, has never ceased to be eerily relevant in the years since, most recently in December 2017 when current Freedom Party leader Heinz-Christian Strache was made vice-chancellor, making Austria the only western European state with a far-right presence in government.⁴ The Freedom Party, notorious for its antiimmigration views, now controls the foreign, interior, and defence ministries. In addition, the scale of migration since Schlingensiefel's staging has grown

immensely in recent years, with images of capsized boats and washed-up bodies on the shores of Southern European beaches making front pages, only to subsequently fade out of sight again as the “deadening” habitualization of perception takes over.

For one week, Schlingensief kept his asylum seekers confined in a container that represented a detention center but also resembled a concentration camp. It stood in the heart of the city, in front of the *Staadsooper* in Herbert von Karajan square, making a stark contrast to the opera building’s architectural grandeur. On the top of the container, a huge banner proclaimed *AUSLÄNDER RAUS!* The public was invited to vote the participants out of the country via an online platform. The last one of the participants to remain was promised a monetary prize and marriage to an Austrian citizen to get immigration papers. Biographies of the participants describing them in terms of exaggerated cultural and racial stereotypes, were posted on the director’s website. Schlingensief acted as a kind of master of ceremonies for the week long 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 worked out its own devices of estrangement that are radically different from Brecht’s methodology, but its political resonance and impact resemble some key aspects of Brechtian estrangement epistemology. Although Brecht belonged to that group of avant-garde directors who removed the footlights to break the fourth-wall aesthetic, he deliberately kept the demarcation line between stage artifice and life. Physical demarcation between the performance and the audience was necessary for Brecht’s defamiliarization devices to work—offering a scenic synecdoche, a stage microcosm, 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 revealed contradictions and ambiguities destabilizing previously held attitudes and convictions, yet methodologically he worked in the opposite direction from Brecht: Schlingensief deliberately obscured 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 depended much more heavily on the process of turning the onlookers into active participants, in circumstances where the director had limited control over the unfolding of the performance.

In light of all these methodological, aesthetic, even to some degree ethical differences, how can we claim that Schlingensief’s performance was Brechtian in nature? And how could it be argued that this performance invoked estrangement as a means of politicizing

performance much more strongly than any theater production adorned with exposed stage machinery, projections of titles and scene descriptions, and direct addresses to the audience, such as Warner's staging of *Mother Courage*?

Schlingensief's performance took Brecht's notion of the engaged and the agitated spectator to the next level—it prompted a massive and controversial public debate. He staged a kind of political morality play for the Austrian public—a genre Brecht explored too, albeit through very different means and never on Schlingensief's scale. Brecht envisioned the theater as a boxing arena with mass audiences, loud and argumentative, in a politically charged atmosphere, but he never fully achieved this vision, not even when performing his didactic operas in boxing rings. Schlingensief's *Foreigners Out!* fully realized the notion of boxing-ring theater reaching far beyond the theater itself, going public and provoking responses from different social and political strata of the society. His different estrangement methods worked in a fashion similar to Brecht's—they destabilized previous firmly held political positions.

Schlingensief's performance not only brought the issues of asylum and xenophobia to center stage, but also revealed activism, agency, and finally ethics of representation in their contradictions and ambiguities. This was a matter not only of taking the performance outside theater buildings, a strategy explored to great extent decades before Schlingensief, but also of reinventing devices of estrangement that could fully politicize the public. Schlingensief defamiliarized and utilized the public space almost in a manner of Brecht's scenic synecdoche; in set designs Brecht often used one significant element, but most potent in meaning, as a microcosm that has a semantic capacity to stand for ambiguities and contradictions of the wider environment of his plays. One such element is the cart in *Mother Courage*: it is her business and her home, her means of survival and her burden, and it stands both for her tragedy and for her complicity in war profiting. At the very end of the play, after she has lost all her children, the only thing that remains is her cart. She pulls it with great effort and walks in circles—there is nowhere to go, but she cannot stop moving. 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*. Both the cart and the container go back to the politics and economies of war, as well as to its victims—ordinary people far removed from centers of power where decisions have been made in their names.

Schlingensief's political attitude and estrangement devices are closer to Brecht's than to the performance practices of neo-avant-garde and postmodernism. Likewise, the legacy of Brechtian estrangement emerged most strongly where it was perhaps least expected—in

Schlingensief's new, radical political theater, rather than in actual staging of Brecht. Unlike Warner in her version of *Mother Courage*, where ornamental epic devices become intertheatrical references, rather than a politicized aesthetic, Schlingensief managed to prove the full vitality and urgency of estrangement strategies, not through betrayal of Brecht but through radical reinvention of *Vrefremdung* as a device of political performance—a kind of *Verfremdung* without Brecht. The value of this endeavor is neither aesthetic nor dialectical but political, not only in its subject matter, but also in pointing to both the possibility and the need to constantly extend and push the limits of the political capacity of performance to enable us to see better.

<A>NOTES

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¹ Literary theorists Roman Ingarden and Felix Vodička both point out that texts (and we might also add performances, installations, paintings, and other works of art) are only completed in the reception process. Ingarden views text as having "points of indeterminacies" that get temporarily determined in the reading process. Vodička introduces the term *concretization*—the context of reception of the work determines its meaning. The notion of *concretization* maintains that text/performance is not a fixed entity that can be understood in a particular way once and for all; it exists only upon completion of a reading/reception process, which is always situated in history.

² Historicization is one of Brecht's strategies of contextualizing the text and/or performance. It is not about presenting historical material, but about showing the workings of history, its contradictions, paradoxes, and analogies.

³ *Gestus* shows the attitude in staging, music, and characterization. It situates the character as a socio-political being. (Brecht had no interest in individual psychology.)

⁴ When, in May 2017, the coalition between Chancellor Christian Kern's Social Democrats and the People's Party collapsed, snap elections were called. The People's Party won, but fell short of a majority and formed a coalition with the Freedom Party. The People's Party's 31-year-old Sebastian Kurz became the country's new chancellor; and Strache, of the Freedom Party, his deputy.