

Playing With Distances: a Probing into Brecht's (Re)Presentations

Per K. Brask
Helmut-Harry Loewen

I

Discussions of Brecht's work customarily point to the formidable influence exerted by his aesthetic theory and theatrical practice on modern cultural landscapes. One scholar notes that "even dramatists with totally different political standpoints are forced to define their aims in his terms. As an 'instant classic' he stands like a rock in the mainstream of German drama, forming stylistic eddies even in work that has no connection with his 'theatre of the scientific age'."¹

While it is clear that Brecht's vision of an epic theatre has inspired much work done in theatres on the Continent, in Britain, North America and elsewhere, it must be noted that the ensuing widespread attention to Brecht's theoretical and practical work seldom has been accompanied by any account of the principles and assumptions which form the complex theoretical apparatus of Brecht's aesthetic. Specifically, discussions of the conceptual armature of Brecht's aesthetic often fall into the trap of accepting and absorbing his own characterizations of the key terms in which he couches his discourse. For instance, writing of the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*, Eugene Lunn points out that "it is intellectually designed to reveal a knowable, but shifting, multifaceted and contradictory outer reality, estranging his audiences from habituated mental assumptions so that they may be able to truly master the social world."² What is left unexamined in such descriptions of the Brechtian project are Brecht's own key assumptions based on specific philosophical frames of reference. In short, discussions of Brecht's aesthetic usually accept, without further analysis, its implicit 'realist' epistemological framework based on two undeveloped assumptions: (i)

Per K. Brask is Associate Professor of Theatre and Drama at the University of Winnipeg. Helmut-Harry Loewen is Lecturer of Philosophy and Germanic Studies at the University of Winnipeg.

there is an objective world independent of the perceiver, and (ii) theatre, if properly grasped as a site in which *Verfremdung* is operative, can offer 'correct' (truthful) representations of that world.

In unpacking the fundamental philosophical assumptions which support Brecht's aesthetic, the present essay attempts to place the theory of *Verfremdung* in its proper textual site. While Brecht's theory of knowledge is developed in scattered texts such as the *Short Organum* and in brief, theory-laden fragments, such epistemological assumptions are basic to the whole edifice of his aesthetic theory. In questioning the inherent epistemological framework of Brecht's theory, we aim to show that it is problematic to claim that *Verfremdung* is a way of bridging the gap between an external world and the dramatic text. What is thereby eshewed is Brecht's adherence to the highly problematic principle that there can be correct representations of the world, representations whose truth is secured and legitimized by a metanarrative derived from Marxist philosophy.³ In suspending the principle of correctness what is gained is a better sense of the dynamics at work in the Brechtian texts. Indeed, what such reading enhances is the very *fictionality* of Brecht's dramatic texts which offer liberating *perspectives* on his (and our) epoch.

II

A reading of Brecht's philosophical writings, including the notes and fragments that comprise his "Marxistische Studien," reveals a thinker who is critical of various types of idealism. In a fragment critical of those who "hammer out (idealistic) world-views," Brecht writes: "Do not create a picture of the world for its own sake."⁴ Brecht's relationship to philosophical idealisms is worthy of further exploration, but it can be maintained that the Brechtian notion of *Verfremdung* is related to Hegel's notion of *Entfremdung*, as sketched in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in connection with the process of knowledge-formation. Although Brecht never directly acknowledged this relationship, the two notions stand in an inverse relation to one another, a relationship Brecht might have termed dialectical.

Hegel employed his concept of *Entfremdung* to describe the process whereby an observer derives knowledge about the world by perceiving it as if it were "strange." Brecht's concept, by contrast, is an aesthetic device whereby the world depicted or represented on stage is made to appear strange so that observers (the audience) may derive knowledge about it.

A sense of the highly problematic issues involved in the notion of *Verfremdung* can be gathered from paragraph 44 of *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, Brecht's most developed theoretical statement, in which there are hints that Brecht knew of the inversion mentioned

above. Addressing what is required of a perceiver to move beyond a merely passive acceptance of the world in which he or she lives, Brecht writes:

To make all the givens appear to him as doubtful he would first have to develop that estranged (*verfremdet*) way of looking with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier. He was astonished by the swinging motion, as if he had not expected it and could not understand why it occurred, and through this he arrived at its principles. This way of looking, as difficult as it is productive, the theatre must provoke through its depictions of human social existence. It must make its audience wonder and this happens through its depictions of human social existence. It must make its audience wonder and this happens through the technique of making the familiar strange.

(*GW*, Vol. 16, pp. 681-682)

Brecht argues that theatre is to be created in which the world observed on stage will be presented in such a way as to incite the audience into the way of seeing which Hegel termed *Entfremdung*. In other words, *Verfremdung* is a theatrical and textual device which aims to provoke *Entfremdung*. Taking this statement to the extreme one might say that the result Brecht wishes to effect in the relationship between the stage and the audience is similar to a situation in which Galileo's chandelier would not only swing, but also give him the clues as to why it did so. What Brecht has overlooked is that the process Galileo underwent was a mental process. It is not the case that Galileo observed a strange, abnormal or *verfremdet* event. Rather, it is the observation of a normal event which Galileo *entfremdet* by breaking it into its component parts in the act of scientific analysis. This is not to suggest that *Verfremdung* does not exist, merely that Brecht's presentation of it is flawed, such that it can function on his terms only if one accepts the untenable position that it is possible to force an audience to analyze what it is watching and to think in a manner of *Entfremdung*.

We do not claim that Brecht aimed at creating representational depictions of the world on stage. It is well known that Brecht conceived of a theatre which would inspire an audience to alter its perception of reality. Theatre would assist in dispelling the false consciousness of audience members, a task legitimized by Marxist theory and achieved through socialist practical action. It could be said that what Brecht aimed at was to force the audience into a

perceptual state of *Entfremdung*, that he was as much interested in changing how we see as in what is seen. Indeed, such an objection to what has been outlined thus far would have its merits only if Brecht's project were to be taken at face value. What is questioned here are the crucial philosophical contradictions which underlie his notion of *Verfremdung*. As Brecht noted: "Epistemology must first and foremost be critique of language." (*GW*, Vol. 20, p. 140)

The development of the theoretical foundation of *Verfremdung* became important to Brecht as part of his rejection of Gorki's definition of Socialist Realism and Georg Lukács' attacks on expressionist experimentation in defense of Realism based on the notion of "typicality." It was especially in the confrontation with Lukács, chronicled in the journal *Das Wort*, that Brecht defended formal experimentation against the aesthetic formalism which he observed among socialist theoreticians. *Verfremdung* was thus to be given a political dimension which could be justified within a Marxist discourse as well as an aesthetic dimension which would achieve this political purpose. In the *Short Organum* Brecht emphasized the changeability of the world and the particular enjoyment which the "children of the scientific age" derive in securing the possibilities for change depicted on stage. Brecht insists that *Verfremdung* will provoke critical assessments of reality on the part of the audience. His basic assumption is that the intent of the presentation will be effected in the minds of audience members. Of course, whether this is so or not cannot be tested in an actual setting, but, as we argue, these claims are founded on questionable premises. The objection that Brecht's theatre is a presentational theatre and not one that is representational is, from an aesthetic standpoint, true, but his theory is nonetheless based on a philosophical model of representation.

Verfremdung as a notion is tenable only if, in the first instance, a commitment has been made to the premise which assumes that it is possible to produce intellectually a correct description of the world. The premise holds if it is, in fact, possible to arrive at a translucent sign which truly represents the world. Once false consciousness has been dispelled, the audience will be able to view the world in its historicity and mutability. As attractive as such a notion is, it overlooks Brecht's own admonition concerning the critique of language. It is precisely Brecht's use of the vocabulary of dialectical materialism which forces him into a representationalist corner. With a conceptual apparatus that includes such highly contentious notions as "base and superstructure" and the claim that social being determines intellectual being, dialectical materialism betrays an acceptance of the notion that something exists separately from the human expression of it, i.e. that the human mind fundamentally reflects its environment rather than

participating actively in its creation. There is, to be sure, an appreciation of the dialectical interrelationship between mind and environment in the frame of reference in which the Brechtian discourse is located, but the vocabulary of dialectical materialism clearly privileges the material environment, specifically the economic and social nexus. The reflectionism inherent in this interpretative scheme has consequences for Brecht's theory, inasmuch as he privileges the world which, for him, lies before the sign. In this sense, then, it can be shown that underlying Brecht's presentationalist proposal for the theatre is a problematic representationalist view of the world. It is precisely due to this schism that Brecht engaged in fierce polemics with thinkers such as Lukács.

With dialectical materialism Brecht shares a faith in the transparent reciprocity between the world and the sign. A sense of the reflectionism inherent in Marxist epistemology can be gathered from Brecht's declarations on dialectical thinking:

The dialectic is . . . something which Nature possesses (and always has), a property which was first discovered by Hegel and Marx.

Only in the mind of the dialectician is this thing, the dialectic, which is a property of Nature, reflected.

(*GW*, Vol. 20, pp. 151-152)

On these terms, it is said to be possible that a sign is mentally produced which "mirrors" Nature. Such a separation between sign and what it is supposed to reflect or mirror betrays a traditional and highly suspect interpretation of sign, language, and aesthetics. An alternative (postmodern) expression, by contrast, asserts that the sign stands for itself, that it is not a reflection of something external. It is more appropriate to speak of a sign's participation in the making of a world than of its supposed reflection of an outer world. If the latter were the case, the sign would be a mere *tabula rasa*, passively registering what the exterior imprints upon some *interieur*. Worlds exist, then, because humans create them in various forms of sign-making activities, the making of theatre among them. On this count, therefore, the problem with dialectical materialism and with the representational assumptions which subtend Brecht's presentational aesthetic, is that they assume a number of problematic notions, namely that the world exists before interpretation; that a sign is separable from its context; that something lies before the making of meaning; that there are ultimate material truths which the mind can grasp.

This truth can be secured, following these claims, if we learn *Entfremdung*, that, if we learn to see with the clarity of materialist dialectics, freed from the cloudiness of false consciousness.

In light of the foregoing it should be noted that Galileo's *entfremdet* observation of the chandelier did not merely result in a better reflection of the world, in a more "accurate" picture of it. It resulted in a *different* world, one which was incompatible with the previous scientifically-understood world. The consequence of Galileo's way of seeing was a profoundly different world, though it was a world not necessarily better in accordance with the myth that human knowledge advances ever-closer to the ultimate truth. Although this clearly belongs to another discussion, suffice it to say here that the teleological, deterministic dream of humankind's progress towards truth and liberation through science is shared by the Marxist assumption that the progressive unveiling of ultimate material truth will both reflect and spur on the inevitable victory of a collective historical subject. Our argument, then, is that as signs create worlds, they are capable of making differences and changes in human thinking and action. This, however, is a different assertion than the claim that it is possible, through theatre or in other world-making acts, to unveil the "real forces" which govern history. Through *Verfremdung* Brecht attempted to unravel the real workings of the social world so as to produce a presentation which would hint at the contradictions constitutive of reality. Not truth, but political intent and philosophical contradiction were revealed. Brecht's intention to construct an aesthetic which would reveal truth, thus, cannot really be said to have failed, since, in the postmodern outlook it is impossible to do so to begin with. The erection of a presentational theatre on the shaky foundation of a representational epistemology vitiated such a task.

As noted earlier, this should not be taken as a rejection of the possible functioning of *Verfremdung* within an art work. The notions of aesthetic distancing, estrangement and *Verfremdung* had been put to use even before Brecht offered his own version.⁵ Such Russian thinkers as Osip Brik and Roman Jakobson had advanced their theories of art both before and after the 1917 Revolution. Central to Russian Formalist thought was the notion that literary art works differentially in relation to its environment in that literature estranges it. Similar understandings have been voiced by a host of other thinkers, from Edward Gullough's famous article on "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle"⁶ to Ortega y Gasset's *The Dehumanization of Art*, in which we find:

. . . . a work of art vanishes from sight for a beholder who seeks in it nothing but the moving fate of John and Mary

or Tristan and Isolde and adjusts his vision to this. Tristan's sorrows are sorrows and can evoke compassion only in so far as they are taken as real. But an object of art is artistic only in so far as it is not real. In order to enjoy Titian's portrait of Charles the Fifth on horseback, we must forget that this is Charles the Fifth in Person and see instead a portrait--that is, an image, a fiction. The portrayed person and his portrait are two entirely different things, we are interested in either the one or the other. In the first case we "live" with Charles the Fifth, in the second we look at an object of art.⁷

It is, in fact, this aspect of art which enables humans to exercise options and explore new possibilities within fictional settings. Brecht recognized this when he noted:

Based on the things with which he comes into contact and with which he must get along, the human makes pictures, little models which reveal to him how they function. He also makes depictions of humans. Based on their behaviour in certain situations, which he has observed, he draws conclusions about their behaviour in other, future situations.

(*GW*, Vol. 20, pp. 168-169)

With his theory of *Verfremdung*, Brecht put to use and emphasized an intrinsic property of art for the purpose of exercising artistic options within a worldview established by dialectical materialism. It must be reiterated, however, that this does not compel an audience to observe the world with *entfremdet* eyes.

Having thus examined certain inconsistencies in the logic of Brecht's aesthetic, we examine more closely the consequences of having suspended the problematic representationism of Brecht's notion of *Verfremdung*.

III

Brecht's theory of *Verfremdung* is indebted to the epistemological frames of references inherited from German Idealism and Marxism. As such, Brecht's own theory bristles with tensions and hesitations characteristic of dialectical materialism. A brief sketch of the *dialectic of subject and object*, central to paradigms of dialectical provenance, will set into focus its correlate in Brecht's view concerning the relationship between *text* and *world*.

Whereas the Hegelian dialectic is propelled towards the *telos* of

"absolute truth" by the ever-widening rationality of a mind that comes to know itself, the Marxist dialectic advances through the material praxis (the labour) of a collective human subject acting upon its world. One pole of the Marxist dialectic of subject and object claims that humans create their own history, a notion which reflects the activity-centered concerns of Hegelian anthropology. The objective pole of the Marxist dialectic, by contrast, claims that it is only under given conditions that humans create their history. Human activity is tempered or "determined" by the social context in which that activity arises. The objective pole of the Marxist dialectical frame of reference thus permits the articulation of a deterministic view, namely, that it is the social which determines human consciousness. The wavering of Marxist dialectics between (i) an activist and interventionist theory of an expressive human subject and (ii) a deterministic theory of consciousness poses serious problems for an aesthetic based on a subject-object dialectic and for a theory of *Verfremdung* which is placed in the context of epistemological problems dealing with perception and representations of the world. Debates within Marxist thought have reflected a hesitation as to which of the two poles is to be considered predominant. An accentuation of the subjective, activist pole results in a Marxism with Existentialist or voluntaristic hues, whereas theories claiming dominance of the objective pole include Leninist copy-theories of knowledge (*Widerspiegelungstheorien*).

Without engaging in the debate concerning predominance of terms within a dialectical framework, suffice it to say that the Marxist model admits of some kind of reciprocity between human subject and world. An interactionist subject-object epistemology is basic to Marxist philosophy and to its teleological view of history which understands "correct" or genuine knowledge as that which fosters human development towards a socialist *telos*. Implicit in Brecht's theory is the dialectical framework with its concept of knowledge as world-transformation.

A correlate of the subject-object dialectic is a view which may be termed the dialectic of text and world. On such a view, a text (and, by extension, a dramatic presentation of a theatre-text) offers correct *Abbildungen* (Brecht's term) or representations of the "laws" governing human social existence. According to the Brechtian theory, theatre, one moment within the first term of this dialectic, can give correct depictions of the hidden mechanisms and explicit contradictions of life in a social world scarred by exploitation and oppression. Yet, such a representation of the world is not for Brecht merely a copy of reality. The representation itself offers "correct" images (the correctness secured through the Marxist meta-narrative), though the images displace the customary views of social reality, turning them upside-

down, inverted and estranged.

The text-world dialectic subtending Brecht's aesthetic claims correctness as a hallmark of theatre's depictions of reality. Our contention is that such a claim is not needed, indeed, that such a claim to objectivity (i.e. descriptions of "objective" laws of social existence) detracts from the very *fictionality* which stirs humans into action in their world. Whereas Brecht argues that *Verfremdung* arouses the mind of the spectator at the theatre event to critical reflection and then intervention upon his or her world (a view which, in turn, is a correlate of the unity of theory and praxis propounded by Marxism), we note that *Verfremdung* is a textual device and not some bridge between an *exterior* (the "outer" world) and *interior* (text or enactment of text). Reflection on the notion that there is a text-world dialectic is inevitably drawn to the metaphorically charged images that must be employed in making sense of that dialectical relationship. Indeed, the spatial images inherent in the dialectic of text and world (a dialectic of *inner* and *outer*) points to the degree to which perceptions and representations are fictional and perspectival.

Brecht's claim that correctness is a criterion (secured by Marxist philosophy) by which theatre's images of the world are to be judged is thus held in abeyance. The claim to truth is tempered, but in its place the play of textuality comes to the fore. Brecht's greatness, to follow Roland Barthes' characterization, is that "he keeps inventing Marxism."⁸ Brecht reclaims from Marxism not only its problematic epistemology, but--perhaps more productively--a narrative framework within which the drama of human life in dark times can be told. Marxism, on the one hand, provides Brecht with a problem-laden theoretical underpinning for his aesthetic, but it also secures a fictional frame of reference within which artistic options can be exercised and new aesthetic horizons explored. Given the tensions within the Marxist paradigm, however, it is not the case that the real is directly or correctly known. Instead, the real is known--to follow Barthes' echoing of Nietzsche--only "in the form of effects (physical world), functions (social world), or fantasies (cultural world); in short; the *real* is never anything but an inference; when we declare that we are copying reality, this means that we choose a certain inference and not certain others."⁹

On these terms, then, the real becomes textualized. The world emerges as a text which is to be deciphered by the meta-language of Brechtian aesthetic theory and by the performance of theatre texts. It is quite possible that Brecht knew of this tendency, though he could not fully explicate its implications, given his commitment to Marxist dialectics. Yet, paragraph 27 of the *Short Organum* notes that theatre, "with such slight and pitiful things as a bit of cardboard, a

little miming, and pieces of text," can move its audience with "so feeble a reflection of the world." (*GW*, Vol 16, p. 674)

We may conclude with Barthes that Brechtian theatre posits a "Marxist meaning" even as it transcends such a frame of reference in Brecht's *suspension of meaning*", i.e. in the claim that it is the spectator or reader who is to participate in the act of making worlds out of theatre's fictional signs. The tension within politically engaged literature is such that the meaning of its significations is simultaneously frozen within the signifier even as it is set free, unleashed in the textual play of signification. Brecht's solicitation of a Marxist science of meaning with its criteria of truth and correctness is thus counterbalanced by Brecht's contributions to a utopian permanent revolution of signification in which meaning, now deferred, opens new horizons not only for aesthetic theory and political practice, but also for dramatic narration. Brecht is the Marxist fabulist whose texts, once deconstructed, reveal themselves to be the very thing they were all along, now shorn, however, of their problematic underpinnings. Brecht's texts emerge as powerful fictions which--as is the case with utopian perspectives that project new worlds--show the shimmering of a humane *not-yet* in the alienating and deadening realm of what has thus far been the slaughterhouse of history.

University of Winnipeg

Notes

1. Christopher D. Innes, *Modern German Drama; A Study in Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 133.

2. Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) 122. Cf. also the claim that for Brecht the task of epic theatre is to represent social conditions in Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: New Left Books, 1973) 18.

3. In *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978) 35, the philosopher argues that epic theatre is given a sense of direction from the hypotheses and criteria posited by Marxist social science. Paragraph 45 of the *Short Organum* likewise notes that the technique of *Verfremdung* permits theatre to avail itself of the dialectical method of Marxist social science. These texts point to Brecht's contention that Marxism is the theoretical underpinning of the presentational representations that are staged in the epic theatre. For a discussion of ways in which knowledge-claims find their justification or legitimation on the level of such meta-narratives as Marxism or positivism, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984).

4. Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 20 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag,

1975) 50. All references to Brecht's theoretical work are to this edition. Subsequent references are shown in the body of the essay as follows: *GW*, Vol., page reference. Translations from Brecht's work are our own. Readers are also referred to John Willett's translations of selected theoretical writings, including *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

5. For a survey of concepts related to *Verfremdung*, see R.H. Stacy, *Defamiliarization in Language and Literature* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse UP, 1977); see especially pp. 32-49 on Viktor Shklovsky and pp. 137-138 for a brief account of Brechtian *Verfremdung*.

6. *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. V (1912).

7. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956) 10.


8. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1972) 74.

9. 151-152.

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