

Illusion, Mediation, *Inter-struction* and Adherence: Brecht and Goncz

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In his quintessentially post-modern novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, Umberto Eco explores the interplay between truth and reality. In *Foucault's Pendulum* an untruth, an illusionary plan, finally becomes real enough to cause the death of two or three young people. One of Eco's themes is that truth ought not to be confused with reality which is, after all, capable of being spun out of illusion. This is what Alan Megill means by saying "discourse creates its own reality."¹ From this theme Eco develops yet another idea: that such truths as do exist are forever trapped between the various states of created reality; so much so that truth can only be grasped by examining the movements and interchanges between the fields of truth and reality. An instrument in this examination is illusion.

For the past decade, I have become more and more committed to this same idea and have explored the issue in several theatrical productions. I should like to present two such explorations in productions I have recently directed of modern European playwrights.

The method of employing theatre as a means of investigating the transactions and deflections between reality and truth, I have come to call *inter-struction*. While the problem of *inter-struction* is not especially post-modern, the devices I have used, when applied to modernist scripts, can and have been described as post-modern just as Eco's work might be called post-modern. Certainly the device of *inter-struction* is contemporaneous, but it is clearly related to the ancient problem of illusion.²

While all arts raise the question of illusion, it is the fundamental theme of theatre. The question is not should illusion be a theme of the theatre but how will a given theatre artist prove skill and originality in exploring the theme? Just as permanence is *the* unavoidable question in architecture, so illusion is *the* grand theme of theatre. Of the one we ask: how will it stand up; of the other we ask: how will it make-believe?

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But artists of every age must grapple with grand issues in the context of their own culture. Today we do not insist, as did the 18th century, that what seems like truth is truth. And most of us find insufficient the 19th century's conviction that an exact replica of the middle class world (or any world for that matter) has an exclusive privilege in relation to truth.

Yet our present concerns are obviously shaped by the preoccupations of our progenitors. Do we not today possess our understanding—and this is especially so in terms of illusion, because past generations had other understandings? As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, "understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which the past and present are constantly fused."³

In this mood I approached productions of work by Bertolt Brecht and Arpad Goncz. Both playwrights are very different. The one is known as a modern master; the other is only now emerging from relative obscurity. Both men wrote pointed political works in highly charged and, from their perspective, oppressive political situations. Interestingly, both political situations changed in each playwright's lifetime in the direction advocated by the writer. Consequently, both plays may be said to have lost part of their original intention.

But as the post-structuralists have taught us, it is foolish to assume that works of art have single, coherent sets of intentions. Today's audiences are committed to a world held together by strings of adherence rather than by clear coherence. We crave, as Betty Jean Craige observes, "a multitude of interpretations."⁴ To this multitude I added my own in terms of Brecht and Goncz.

Three years ago, I came to produce the *Threepenny Opera* both as a live theatrical event, as a slide show, and as a video performance. That is to say the illusionary techniques of the stage and of the camera were used synaesthetically, sometimes cooperatively, sometimes in conflict, more often they were *inter-structured*.

Brecht's play was produced in a proscenium theatre with fixed, frontal, continental style seating. An apron was built in front of the permanent stage and risers for audience seating were set up on the stage. Some of the scenery was placed on one side of the apron so that the on-stage audience could also view it. At the rear of the auditorium, high above the regular audience seating, was erected a second staging unit, used as the warehouse and occupied by several women making constant commentary. Flung out between the rear stage and the front stage were irregular runways floating just above the audiences' heads. Above the runways were projection screens of various sizes and shapes. The runways contained trap doors in several places for entrances from below.

Also on part of the original proscenium stage was a giant television screen; some 12x15 feet. Sometimes prerecorded tapes were shown on the video screen; sometimes a hidden camera showed the audience views of itself or views of the whorehouse, so that persons had the choice of turning to watch the prostitutes or simply watching the same events on video.

The overall quality of this presentation was classically Brechtian: rough hewn and unprettified. Even the huge video screen was presented unadorned; it simply hung there. But although Brecht had available crude film clips and projected photography, video with its inter-structural possibilities is completely contemporary.

What I had in mind was the exploitation of the ironies of the text, especially the comment on humanity's inhumanity, for Brecht in the mood of *Threepenny Opera* is unrelentingly, embarrassingly ironic about human frailty. After all, irony is at the root of the Alienation Effect, which seeks, by suddenly shattering an illusion, to startle the audience into seizing a truth. But to shatter an illusion, the audience must be made aware that an illusion is being created. The emphasis is on the illusion first, then on the resulting destruction. This is the difference that Brecht and his colleagues seemed to be drawing between the intentions of epic theatre and the purpose of late 19th century Realism, which proceeds from some preselected reality towards an illusion which reproduced that reality so exactly as to lull the audience into forgetting that it is dealing with an illusion. The audience in Epic Theatre must never lose sight of the illusion nor even search for a related reality, which is beside the point. This need for a splendid illusion to shatter may well be why Brecht is so often described as being a better playwright (read illusionist) than political polemicist, the normal assumption being that truth, including political truth, grows from reality not from illusion.

To exploit Brecht's special ironies in 1990 meant to bring to the 1928 text some performance illusions consistent with contemporary expectations. Hence the multiple performance planes, the flow available along the runways, and above all the movement among various mediation states. Of course there was the script itself, already emphasizing illusion by being based upon an older theatrical tradition, the ballad opera. And there was the mediation of Weill's music.

We added the mediation of television. The video screen was as large as a cinema one; so that the audience expectation was that they were to receive a standard film image. But the play's opening, the so very familiar "Mac the Knife" musical number, was picked up on video in a special way. The number was actually staged everywhere in the theatre: on front and rear stages, in constant flow over every part of the runways, in the theatre aisles, and—because of the continental seating—among the very audience itself. During the song there took place pimping and scuffling, stealing, looting, soliciting, and even rapine.

But these were the "living" activities. Above the audience and the actors, photographs of Victorian London slum scenes were flashed, and on the video screen were live images of the event as it was being performed. These, of course, were video images: isolated, specific, cool, slightly vague and detached, while the events present in the theatre were generalized, heated, precise and wholly engaged. Of all the theatrical illusions available at that moment this second generation video image, an immediate illusion of an illusion, was closest to most of our audience's concept of reality, for in the present world, television gives the surest sense of the real even as it removes the viewer by its very nature from the tangible. For our purposes, we had intersected the video structures with older structures of theatrical art so that the several mediations had *inter-structured*.

Here then was the approach throughout the production. Multiple states of illusion, forcefully presented to the audience as illusion, not in probable sequence but in quanta or batches of inter-penetrating or *inter-structuring* images. Hence the several playing areas and the use of these areas for simultaneous presentation; hence the actors floating above the audience on the runways and the constant disconcerting of the audience by forcing them to turn in their seats or crane their necks to see. Hence the constant distraction provided by hundreds of slide photographs being projected overhead. Hence the television.

For as soon as the audience was used to the live video images, we presented the "Pirate Jenny" song as an obviously prerecorded image with the same actors captured in a music video. With this last addition, we had created a sufficient number of mediated or illusionistic states to offer an alienation effect for the 1990's. It was now a case of allowing the several planes of structure to penetrate each other, creating aesthetic and intellectual adherences rather than a unified, coherent metaphor.

One instance should suffice. Macheath is in jail. His cell, a small cage suspended from the ceiling since the beginning of the performance, descends on him, trapping him on a runway in the middle of the house. The prostitutes on their platform moan and complain. On the video screen is an extreme close up of Macheath. On the stage platform facing the audience Lucy is entered. I say "is entered" because she is brought on by that time honored illusionistic device, the turntable. As she slowly rolls round, we see various views of her pregnancy. Macheath cries out "Lucy" from his cell, the prostitutes cackle from their field, Macheath's giant video head does facial reactions. The lights change. Lucy steps from the turntable into a new field. She sings directly to the audience: "Once I was pure, and I used to be pure, just like you used to be." There is a dance break in the song, a sort of jazz cake walk. Lucy lifts her skirt, adjusts her

pregnancy padding, and dances. A moment of *Verfremdung!* The illusion is shattered!

Now Polly appears. The two argue over Macheath, reaching for him through the prison bars. Macheath's huge televised head reacts with smirks and leers. The argument moves beyond spoken words. Lucy and Polly sing a duet, "Mackie and Me." A music video production of the same duet appears on the large screen. Standard camera techniques abound: close-ups, close-ups mixed with middle distance figures, cuts from one singer to the other, extreme close-ups of both singers nose to nose. At first the stage song and the video song collide, then a counterpoint develops between the two. Finally the song is completed with the four voices—two on stage, two on video—in four part harmony. Structures have juxtaposed, conflicted, interpenetrated and adhered. The song ends. Cut to live video of the audience applauding. Another *Verfremdung* moment! Another wrenching of ironies by the sudden shattering of illusion, now an extremely complicated illusion not coherent but containing adherences from the several illusionistic fields.

In this case the shattering is achieved not by breaking a single illusionistic device but by offering so many possible illusory choices that the audience must either give in to confusion or select out some resultant realities: the live voices, the music, the video, the staging device as a referent. In the end, of course, just about the time the audience might make a choice, they are left only with themselves—as applauders in a theatre or as applauders in a theatre watching themselves on video as applauders in a theatre. It is the vanity of vanities, an ultimate irony, a contemporary equivalent to Brechtian theatre.

But all plays are not by Brecht, who makes it easy by calling for epic theatre devices and paving the way for mediation and *inter-struction*. In January, 1991, I had the pleasure of producing the American premiere of a work by the Honorable Arpad Goncz, the President of Hungary, who had come to the United States for the production. Arpad Goncz like Brecht is a central European dramatist. He is of Brecht's generation. But he has outlived Brecht's communist Utopia. He spent years as a political prisoner. Most of his works, written while the communists were in power, use the relationship among illusion, reality and truth in a way very different from Brecht. Communism was one reality which had always to be acknowledged. Truth, when it ran counter to that reality, had carefully to be concealed. Thus, the function of illusion in a Goncz work is not to be shattered but to remain whole as a protective screen for whatever truth might be present.

Written in the late 70's and entitled *Hungarian Medea*, the Goncz script is in the European neo-romantic tradition of using ancient myth as a fable for our time. Medea Deak is from an aristocratic Austro-Hungarian family. She is a

chemical engineer married to Andrew Jason, son of Hungarian peasants whom Medea met while working on a collective farm and whom Medea put through school. After attaining his doctorate, Andrew Jason rose steadily in the technical elite of communist Hungary. Now middle aged, he leaves Medea for the young daughter of the chief engineer. The play opens as Medea returns from divorce proceedings.

The first lines are a choral ode taken directly from Euripides. There are other Euripidean odes sprinkled throughout the play. There is only one other voice in the full length play, that of Medea: suffering, complaining, spitting out bitter humor, wallowing drunkenly in self-pity or bravely and lucidly facing the loss of her past and the hopelessness of her future.

The achievement of the Goncz play is not in the prestidigitation of the alienation-effect, but in the creation of a powerful sense of Medea's personal isolation, past, present, and future. By the use of the telephone, the most ubiquitous of all modern media, Goncz's builds up Medea's loneliness. Our Hungarian Medea communicates with no one except through telephone calls, until a visit to her door at the end of the play from a policeman. Medea is literally *mediated* into loneliness.

Medea Deak's physical isolation is exacerbated by her spiritual and emotional desolation. Like her nation, she is stripped of the legacy of her cultural past. Though the play abounds in resonances of Euripides, the Hungarian woman never draws a parallel. Athens, Rome and Vienna are part of a life she rejected in choosing Andrew Jason, a bright, uncultured young communist peasant. And Medea Deak is stripped of the emotional support of her parents whom she rejected because they failed her by failing to create an alternative to communism. There is, of course, a pointed political allegory here. Goncz has said that when politics become merely a matter of administering decisions made by foreign masters, literature must become political, but when political action returns, literature is free to pursue itself alone.⁵

My task was to pursue Goncz's *Medea* for itself alone. Certainly the work, having never been seen in America before, could have been passed off as a curiosity, a polemic the current President of Hungary wrote before the Cold War ended. But the play has a value beyond 1975. We wished to provide a 1990's context. Our Medea would be that contemporary Western woman: middle aged, attractive, intelligent, well-educated, articulate, with a good professional position, one or two teenaged children, and a recent divorce. Politics aside, this also is Goncz's Medea Deak, for as the actress who played the role remarked: "this woman could have been any one of my friends."⁶

With such a freight of disappointment, is it any wonder that Medea Deak should complain and for hours, or she reads aloud, or she uses the telephone.

When she is not making or receiving telephone calls, Medea constructs an imaginary conversation with Andrew Jason, whom she excoriates viciously. Or she reads from her divorce papers. Or she screams out her thwarted love. Or she drinks and listens to the chorus in her head. Or she changes clothes. Or she reads aloud old love letters which conjure up other illusions, visions of happier times. Were they real? Is the present despair the only reality? Was her life an illusion like the old photographs of her parents? Where is the truth for Medea Deak? Is the truth her love for Jason? Is the truth the doctoral dissertation she virtually wrote for him? Is the truth her son's dirty shirts?

Such an interplay of realities, illusions and truth called out for theatrical *inter-struction*, for mediation devices. Of course there was the telephone and the photographs which play a crucial role in the drama's climax. Medea's clothing changes are a traditional medium of theatrical illusion, as is the reading aloud of letters and documents. And the chorus is the most ancient mediation device in the theatre. To this we added large screen television. The video image was disguised as an 8x10 painting which carried a permanent image of a modern rendition of archaic Greek motifs. Since Medea Deak's apartment was by Goncz's request a collection of furniture in a wall-less space the "video painting" formed the central scenic unit.

Goncz's play opens with a Euripidean choral ode. The audience had gathered with the minimalist set in full view. The lights dim; Medea enters through the audience; the images on the "video painting" are animated to reflect the recorded words of the chorus. Medea adds her voice to the chorus as she mounts the steps to the stage. Worlds have begun to be *inter-structured*.

From the opening of the play, whenever the recorded voices of the chorus were heard, the central painting became animated, as it did when Medea spoke of Jason. Yet the animation may have remained only a curiosity, a sort of epic theatre device playfully grafted on to a neo-romantic work, except that we were to move one final step into the surreal. Having established the metamorphic possibilities of the painting, we presented midway into the first act the ultimate contemporary image, the 20th century's most grotesque reality: the extreme camera close up, the disembodied, "talking head." Medea Deak's enormous head, or a large part of it, was seen reading Jason's love letters while below, on the stage platform in front of the moving video image, the tiny actress sobbed, paced, threw herself on the furniture, made wry comments about the letters and even spoke an occasional line in unison with the huge, impeturable head above her. Thus it is that we read to ourselves, in one field of activity, while eating, drinking, crying—drawing out other realities even as we read. Which is the illusion? Which was the illusion in our production: the giant head, or the actress roaming about the stage? Where was the reality? Where in the interplay

between illusions and mediations of more illusions, between the concreteness of the actress and the televised vision of a monstrous talking head was truth to be located?

I think the point is sufficiently taken, and I'll leave Goncz's text with the hearty urging that the work of this accomplished author, who is only now being circulated widely in the West, is well worth the production.

As Steven Soderberg in the film, *Sex, Lies and Videotape*,⁷ and the Canadian director, Atom Egoyan, in an even more potent cinema statement called *Family Viewing*,⁸ have reminded us, we are a culture committed to mediated experiences. Our neglect of an immediate action for its mediated version is eloquent in its implications. We delight in choosing from an assemblage of illusions and realities. The result, of course, is that we do not have one truth but several truths for our times. The task of today's theatrical director is to recognize, as Hans-Georg Gadamer observes, that in a contemporary audience, as in any audience, the "prejudices and fore meanings of the interpreter are not at his free disposal."⁹ At present our prejudices tend away from construction and coherence. We have lost our innocence about unity. We are more comfortable with adherence and *inter-structions*. The simultaneous applying of various traditional and contemporaneous instruments of mediations is an especially productive means of achieving that *inter-struction*.

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Notes

1. Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) 343.
2. August Staub, "Shakespeare and Contemporary Problems of Illusion," *On Stage Studies*, Number Thirteen, 1990.
3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: Continuum, 1975) 258.
4. Betty Jean Craige, *Re-Connection*, (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1988) 112.
5. Arpad Goncz, "Politics and Literature: Politics in Literature," Charter Lecture, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, January 22, 1991.
6. Jessica Phelps, Interview, January 20, 1991.
7. Steven Soderberg, *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, Outlaw Productions, 1986.
8. Atom Egoyan, *Family Viewing*, Ego Film Arts, 1987.
9. Gadamer 293.