

How to Write a Brechtian Article on Brecht (Part II)

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Abstract: *This is a two part article which strives to trace a cultural history and, as well, a practical framework of the „verfremdung” concept, following its emergence from the earlier theoretical work of Viktor Shklovsky and its ostranenie and Meyerhold’s later „odchudzny”, as he in turn chose to coin Shklovsky’s conceptual frame. This cultural paradigm is important because it renders a precise context and helps to further clarify the importance of „grotesque” in modernist drama and also the means to express it.*

It reads like a travel log, concentrating on how Brecht’s entourage, such as Asja Lācis, Walter Benjamin, Vasilij Lunacharsky, Eisenstein, Tretiakov, Bernard Reich familiarized him with the ideas of Meyerhold either directly or through their own work, which was stemmed as well from Meyerhold’s pre 1917 theatrical experiments. Finally, as secretary general of the Departament for Theater in the Illumination Minister (Education), Meyerhold encouraged the developement of labourers artistic brigades, or TRAM, blue-collar workers. The TRAM performances, akin to the cabaret performances of the early 1900’s had a profound influence on the left leaning theater practitioners in Western Europe.

Through this network of people that were influential to Brecht’s carreer I closely follow the developement of epic theater and the „verfremdungseffekt”, from his debut in directing, „The Life of Edward The Second, King of Scotland” up to Brecht’s work being formally introduced into the artistic life of Soviet Union, with the adaptation of his „Three Penny Opera” by Tairov in 1930 and also Brecht’s direct contact with Meyerhold’s theater, during the latter’s 1930’s tour in Germany and France.

Keywords: *verfremdung, verfremdungseffekt, ostranenie, odchudzny, formalism, grotesque, modernist drama, epic theatre, estrangement, Meyerhold, Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Eisenstein.*

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*"Footnotes and the habit of turning the page to check an argument
must be part of the theatrical practice."*

– Bertolt Brecht

The "Know-how" Paradigm

Meyerhold, the first actor to have ever played Treplev in Chekhov's *Seagull*, parted his way from Stanislavsky's Art Theatre, as a new form of performance was emerging. In the beginning of the XXth century, during a time when the decadent and the symbolist movement were generating the ferments of modernism, the cabaret was its peak of performance. In 1901, Ernst von Wolzogen alongside Frank Wedekind founded the "Buntes Theater" (Colorful Theatre) later known under the name of "Überbrettel". As a *fun fact*, Frank Wedekind made a reputation for himself in the cabaret not as a playwright but rather as a singer and composer¹. Both Meyerhold and Brecht keep Wedekind in high regard – Brecht praising his stage presence and energy², whilst Meyerhold appreciated his efforts to detach himself from the naturalist dramatic convention through the use of songs, which undermined the sequential unity of the scenes³.

Meyerhold, as a director employed in various Sankt Petersburg theatres led a double life by directing, playing in and writing plays in the vein of the *Commedia dell'arte* under the pen name of Doctor Dapertutto (Clayton, 1993, p. 85). During this time and being mainly influenced by the literary works of E.T.A. Hoffman, Jacques Callot's engravings as well as the Wolzogen manifesto, *Ernst von Wolzogen offizielles Repertoire. Erster band. Buntes Theater* (Berlin, 1902), Meyerhold (quoted in Meyerhold, 2016, p. 163) develops his own artistic manifesto around the concept of the grotesque, who's manifestation takes place by presenting a familiar subject from a strange perspective. The term used by Meyerhold to conceptualize the grotesque is *ostranenie*. This term is extremely useful to access the right understanding of the *Verfremdung* process, as it is used in the Brechtian system. For now,

¹ Another composer close to the founding nucleus of the Überbrettel cabaret was Arnold Schoenberg. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803110446105>

In fact, another important practitioner of modernist theatre, Max Reinhardt, as well as Karl Vallentin (the actor who would play the lead role in the first and only film directed by Brecht, *Mysterien eines Frisiersalon* - 1923) played, wrote, directed and performed songs in the Berlin cabaret band "Schall und Rauch" ("Noise and smoke") (Braulich, 1972, pp. 30-33).

²At Wedekind's death in 1918, Brecht wrote a eulogy in an Augsburg diary:

He filled every corner of the room with his huge personality. I still remember the first impression he left on me when I saw him on stage: provocative, threatening, brutal, with his hands in his pants pockets, as if the devil himself could not budge him (Eddershaw, 1996, p. 9).

³ "Unfortunately, Wedekind suffers mainly from a lack of taste and a tendency to introduce many literary elements into the stage," notes Meyerhold in a footnote in his article *Balagan*, translated by the English editors of his essays from the edition consulted for this article under the title *The fairground booth* (Meyerhold, 2016, p. 165).

it's important to note that in the system developed by Meyerhold *ostranenie*⁴ gives us the key to the understanding of the *Verfremdung* concept.

According to Meyerhold, the process of theatricality takes place during three stages. In the first stage, the actor stylizes. Stylization employs a certain degree of verosimilitude, and it also coerces the actor to analyze the process (Meyerhold, 2016, p. 164). During the second stage schematization ensues, which purports a certain degree of stripping reality to its bare essentials. In the third stage a synthesis of the two stages is involved, during which the grotesque is created, by means of estrangement, or *ostranenie*. According to Meyerhold, the grotesque is a union of opposites, which creates consciously brutal incongruences and fractures the internal logic of the character, the situation or the conditions to whom or which we are familiarized. Quoting a fragment from Hoffman where the latter describes Callot's engravings, Meyerhold underlines the fact that these precise events in which familiar events of people's life are depicted, such as funeral processions, military parades, crowds gathered at various public events – there is always a feature that makes them look both familiar and strange. Therefore, we can conclude that the grotesque is made up of elements that mutually contradict each other. For instance, the gothic church bells. The grotesque is composed of elements that contradict each other: "like Gothic architecture, for example, in which the soaring bell tower expresses the fervour of the worshipper whilst its projections decorated with distorted fearsome figures direct one's thoughts back towards hell" (Clayton, 1993, p. 57). The use of the grotesque in art, in the sense that Meyerhold appoints to the term, can express in a higher degree of likeness the contradictory complexity of reality.

In fact, according to the definition of the grotesque given by the German esthetician Wolfgang Kayser in *Das Groteske in Malerei und Dichtung* - "das Groteske ist die entfremdete Welt. Es ist unsere Welt die sich verwandelt hat" ("The grotesque is the estranged world. It is our familiar world that has taken on a different appearance"), we observe not just a similarity of conceptual approach concerning the role of defamiliarization, or estrangement, but also an etymological one, which is much more rigorously tied to the process called "Verfremdung"⁵ by Brecht.

⁴ The theoretical foundation of the Stanislavsky method is provided by Tolstoy, mainly in the series of essays grouped under the title *What is art?*, and especially in the essay *On Shakespearean drama*. The theoretical foundation of the method developed by Meyerhold lies in the writings of Appia, Fuchs, but also in the manifesto of Ernst von Wolzogen.

⁵ In the article *Archeology of an Acting Style*, published in 1998, in the 2nd no. of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, its author, Peter Buse, speculates the idea that "Ver-fremdung" must be dissociated from the usual meaning that Entfremdung has in Marxist critical theory and infer, but without providing any source, other than his own ability to untie crossword puzzles" the fact that Verfremdung is a word invented by Brecht rather after the structure of Freudian neologisms (the famous Freudian slips - *Versprache*, *Verhoren*, *Verloren*, etc.) and used to suggest a failed act. Furthermore, the author continues to slide on this dangerous slippery slope until, finally, he concludes that the Brechtian method is an "anti-humanist" one. The prefix "Ver-" in this case, Buse speculates, is an equivalent to the prefix "mis-" in English (with which the word "misinterpretation"

Read without considering the paradigm of theatricalization initiated by Meyerhold, Brecht can be extremely difficult to understand, especially since, as surprising as this statement may seem, it is extremely difficult to consider the influence of Meyerhold's ideas on the Brechtian method exaggerated. In fact, the method of reaching to the emotional level of a character (in Brechtian terms the appropriate concept would be "inner attitude") starting from bodily action, a method developed by Meyerhold following the physical training of bio-mechanics ("don't tell me, show me"), is stated by Brecht in an extremely clear way in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*: "What a funny thing smoking is: when a man smokes he seems calm, and if you imitate a man who calmly lights a cigarette you end up calming down too". As observed in studies based on somatic theory, by imitating external attributes, the actor can achieve the internal conditions associated with them. It was also from Meyerhold, especially from the performances at the height of his career, during the fruitful collaboration with Mayakovsky, that Brecht borrowed the use of banners in performances.

The *Verfremdungseffekt* is also found in Meyerhold's method focused on the estrangement phenomenon of the grotesque. At this point, it is important to note that there is a conceptual distinction in the Brechtian method between the *Verfremdung* ('estrangement') and the *Verfremdungseffekt* - 'the effect of estrangement'. Thus, the *Verfremdung* is the process by which the actor turns a familiar condition into an unusual, or strange one, and the *Verfremdungseffekt* implies that the estrangement process has taken place successfully and has been noticed by the audience.

Meyerhold defines this 'effect', without conceptualizing it, as decisive in determining the spectator to have an ambivalent perspective towards what is presented to him in terms of scenic depiction. Moreover, for Meyerhold, the *Verfremdung* represents a constant desire of the artist to shift the viewer's perspective from an obvious point that is being made to another one, completely and utterly unforeseen (Meyerhold, 2016, p. 165). Brecht, as the German philosopher Walter Benjamin observes, uses it as a scenic equivalent of the Socratic method, making the spectator question the "unity" of the stage action presented (Benjamin, 1998, p. 12) or, in other words, giving the viewer a chance to see the illusion as what it is.

is formed, for example). "Misinterpretation" is actually a very appropriate term for what Buse does, and his article is symptomatic of a type of so-called scientific writing in the performing arts academy area, based rather on personal bias, unverified intuitions and easy speculation, rather than on rigorously verified factual information. Buse's intuition is not implausible, but it remains easy because he does not take the next step, which is necessary if we take into account the fact that dialectics is at the very heart of Brecht's method of acting. In other words, the "Ver-" (which suggests exteriorization) of the *Verfremdung* necessarily presupposes the "Ent-" (which suggests the interiorization) of the *Entfremdung*. Of course, if we want to take his linguistic approach seriously. We cannot, however, because it assumes only the negative aspects of words formed with the prefix "Ver-", but it does not assume the positive aspects, such as *verstanden* or *versuchen* (pun intended). *En fin.*

In fact, in a letter to Strehler about his performance, *The Three-Penny Opera*, Brecht states that although the musical moments in the performance were inserted to break the illusion of the performance's "unity," that illusion had to be created before it was to be dissipated. An atmosphere simply cannot be destroyed before it has been anticipated and built. The transformation of the actor from the character into the actor-who-plays-a-character in the frame of the show can take place only after the viewer's condition of identification with the actor in question has been facilitated.

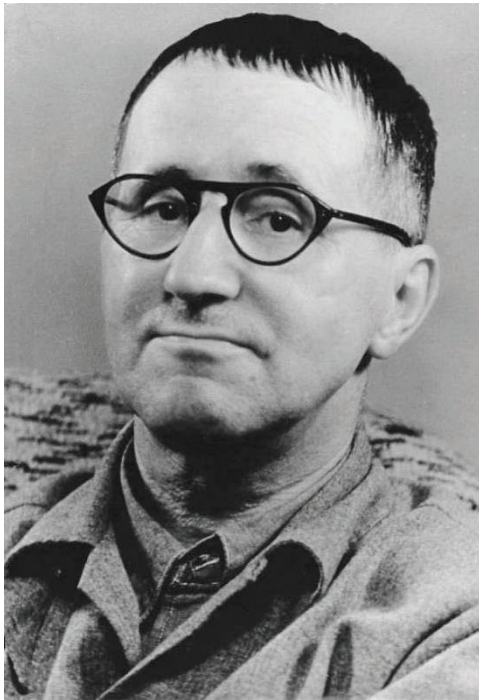
Estrangement cannot exist without emotion, and Stanislavski's study is indispensable for the Brechtian paradigm. As Brecht himself confesses in "Complements to the Little Organon", the novelty of his method and the apparent abandonment of Stanislavski's method come from his inability to take into account the fact that - here too he quotes Mao Tze Dun - "From the two sides of the contradiction, one is necessarily the main one" (Brecht, 1972). The need of the naturalistic method presence in the familiar-strange dialectic is only overshadowed by Brecht's almost exclusive preoccupation with drawing the coordinates of epic theatre. At a conference held in 1953, Brecht speculated that Stanislavski may have insisted on the actor's empathizing with the character in order to prevent any attempt at hamming. In fact, the concept of super-objective in Stanislavski's method is the closest equivalent to *Verfremdung* (Brecht and Mueller, 1964, pp. 155-166). In both methods, the actor is at the same time actor and character, and this contradiction overwrites any conscious feeling. Moreover, when the actor understands the over-objective, he represents society and is outside the character. As an author, according to Brecht, he firstly needs an actor that completely identifies with the character, which is also a major purpose of the Stanislavsky method. At the same time, he needs an actor who abandons his character and looks at him critically, from the perspective of a member of society, which any actor ultimately is. After all, as he states, the dialectical relationship between *Verfremdung* and identification can only be supported by an equal opposition between the two terms. In addition, Brecht notes that he allows actors to empathize with the character both in rehearsals and during performance, just as Stanislavski allowed his actors to play out of character. Obviously, each of the two allowed this to happen in various degrees. (Brecht and Mueller, 1964)

I think it is necessary to mention here an ideological motivation that determined Brecht's predilection for the dialectic of empathy - estrangement rather than for the simple process of naturalistic build-up. In 1909, the theatre critic Georg Fuchs formulated in the political theatre the idea of the social utility of empathy understood as abandonment of the self. Thus, by estrangement of the self following the empathic process, the author of a play in which ideals from the political spectrum of the extremist right were circulated could inoculate the public, imperceptibly, ideas of force (nationalist, militaristic, classist etc.).

Starting from the critique of this practice, Brecht finalizes his dialectical system of empathy and estrangement. Empathy shuts-down, so to speak, the processes of critical thinking and transports the viewer into a malleable state of receptivity during which he

becomes susceptible to being infested with a harmful ideology, even without his consent. Estrangement, on the other hand, stimulates the processes of critical thinking, putting the viewer in a position where he can consciously fight in this “invisible war” against the ideological contamination to which he is exposed. Therefore, Aristotelian drama is conservative, while dialectical (or epic) theatre is ultimately progressive (Robinson, 2008, p. 207). In Stanislavski's method, the super-objective also stems from the need to avoid the positioning of the actor as a “parasitic agent”, in order to prevent the contamination of the viewers with harmful ideological norms.

A variation of the method occurs when the actor has to identify and reproduce the meaning hidden behind the text or the sub-text, as it is called in the terminology developed by Stanislavski. Simplifying, we refer to the true positioning of the character in relation to the conditions in which it manifests, a positioning that is often not even openly expressed, or more so, denied. For Brecht, the meaning hidden behind the text has the dimension of a social attitude (*gestus*) rather than an emotional expression. Thus, in the case of Stanislavski, the truth of the actor who plays the role is based on the psychological understanding of the character. In Brecht, the truth is based on the sociological understanding of the character. To further conclude, in the Stanislavsky method, the truth, being based on psychological reasons is corrected from the inside, emphasizing references related to the observable reality of the psyche, while in the Brecht method, truth, being based on sociological reasons is corrected from the outside, emphasizing references related to the observable reality of society.



Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956),
German poet, playwright, director

As in Stanislavski's method, in Brecht's method the character had to have a satisfactory motivation, a drive that would push him to act. There are testimonies during the rehearsals, according to which Brecht showed great care for extremely fine details of psychological analysis. Angelika Hurwicz, the actress playing Katrin in *Mutter Courage*, recognized from reading *An Actor Prepares*, many of the exercises that Brecht did during rehearsals with the Berliner Ensemble (Mitter, 1992, p. 42).

The difference was that, at one point, the actors had to move to another level, where the estrangement was included. The estrangement process had to contain and simultaneously overcome the process of identification. Thus, the episodic montage appears. Within the Stanislavski system, the actors have to find a line of force for the whole role, possibly expressed in a simple sentence

and through which the atmosphere of the whole motivational force that leads the character from one end of the action to the other can be rendered. Thus, all his actions can be decoded as logical and coherent. Brecht, on the other hand, urged his actors to make a kind of "inventory" of all the behavioral attitudes and psychological traits that defined the character and to emphasize especially the lack of logic and/ or consistency in the character's behavior along with the paradoxical character traits. Of course, these different methods also reflected on the way the actor built his role. Brecht, unlike Stanislavski - who constructed each scene in light of what had been dramatically presented until then - insisted that each scene play for itself. As Benjamin suggests, there were no delayed viewers at Brecht's theatre. On the contrary, the scenes were so constructed that, for example, a member of the audience could drop in at a performance of the *Three-Parade Opera* just so that he can watch the scene in which Peachum chooses a wooden leg for a beggar (Benjamin, 1998, p. 6).

In fact, what Brecht set forth by using the *Verfremdung* in the actor's technique, – paradoxically, since his method was a progressive one, yet it stemmed from a very rich tradition of the grotesque in art - and through the perception of the process – *Verfremdungseffekt* – is based on a very rigorous research in the field of cognitive sciences. No form of artistic expression is capable of exposing total sum of all events that take place in real time. Art disassembles reality by presenting it either spatially or temporally. For this reason, as Meyerhold (2016, pp. 163-165) notes, art consists either of images (expressed in spatial forms) or in the alternation of images (expressed in temporal forms).

Image reading is classified psychologically in the category generically called "perception of symbolic material". In *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899), William James proposes a theory according to which

when we listen to someone speak or read a printed page, much of what we think we see or hear is provided by our own memory. [...] how little we hear we really realize if we go to theatre in a foreign country whose language we can't speak but we see a play to which we are familiar with, because what bothers us the most is not that we can't understand what the actors are saying, but that we can't hear their words (quoted in Gombrich, 1973, pp. 242-243).

The author of the book from which I truncated the above quote, the art historian Ernst Gombrich, recounts a personal experience during the Second World War, when he worked for the BBC, at the Transmission Monitoring Service. In this service, Gombrich came to realize "the importance of guided projection for the understanding of symbolic material". As a rule, the most interesting transmissions were also the most difficult to hear, in the sense that only a few articulated sounds could be discerned from the wax cylinders on which they had been recorded. To understand what was being said, the monitor had to first know what could be said. More precisely, he chose from the known possible combinations of words that seemed similar, which he then projected onto the heard noises. But the monitors were in a contradictory situation: on the one hand, they had to project possibilities, and on the other hand, they had to be critical of their own projections. Left to the imagination, perception

could have recorded absolutely any pre-designed combination of words. From the moment the monitor's expectations were fixed, his beliefs well established, the noises "seemed to fall into place and turn into the expected words" (Gombrich, 1973, pp. 244). Expectation breeds the illusion.

It is exactly on this principle (expectation breeds the illusion) that estrangement works. The refutation of what is to be expected laid forth from the build-up automatically leads to the disintegration of the illusion. The critical attitude of the actor towards the character, the sudden caricature commentary of the conditions that make the character act in a precise manner refutes the expectations of the viewers concerning the respective character and places them to a position from which they can perform a critical reasoning process over what they are being presented on stage with. Moreover, through the *Verfremdung* process a domino effect occurs from actor to viewer: when the actors put a hold to their inner projection with their characters, the viewers put on hold their inner projections towards the character as well. That is to say that the naturalistic, psychological method of acting is therefore crucial in order to produce the process following which the familiar becomes strange. As Meyerhold (2016, p. 385) puts it very plastically, "for the arrow to take flight, the bow must first be stretched", or, as Brecht (1980, p. 92) says in an entry in the journal of June 18, 1942, "[...] there remains the tradition, which seems to be necessary, with its artistic material, which must contain something that can be overturned."

The concept of empathy (*Einfühlung*) was first theorized by a German philosopher that remains quite unknown to this day, named Robert Vischer, in 1873, in order to explain the act of receiving works of art. Vischer formulates a proto-theory of cognition according to which works of art are received as an active psychological projection of feelings either in one object or in another person. The emerging academic tradition based on this idea has a consistent orientation with Hegel's dialectic, in the sense that it assumes that empathy involves not only a subjective construction of the object as a process of emotional internalization (or, in other words, the object - inner image), but also an objectification of the self as a result of the process of outsourcing the projection. Or, more clearly stated, "following the objectification of the self lies the alienation (estrangement) of the self" (Robinson, 2008, p. 207).

Epic theatre proposes a different way of perceiving rhythm and stage action. First, the introduction of a new type of conception on rhythm is necessary because "thought processes require a completely different rhythm than affective processes" (Brecht, 1972, p. 68), and this rhythm implies a deceleration of the stage action (*Haltung*). The actor's ability in the paradigm of realistic naturalism to "evolve unitary, internalized and uninterrupted" in character gets overloaded in the epic theatre, because here the actor must play after each ellipse of each episode multiple character traits of the character, while being perfectly incompatible between themselves, but at the same time, despite depicting conflicting facets of the character's personality, must retain at all costs the character's *geist* throughout the whole play.

The character is shaped in front of the audience depending on how he reacts in different situations, often paradoxical and contradictory. The episodic structure functions as an element that allows the actor to manifest the transformation, the pre-acting⁶, as Meyerhold calls it, and the spectator to register it. The change (both personally and universally) occurs as a result of the confrontation between perfectly incompatible elements.

In things, in people, in events, something is hidden that makes them the way they are and at the same time different. For they do not stagnate, but develop, until they become something unrecognizable. And [all] things, as they are at the moment, contain in them, even imperceptibly something else, something of long ago, contrary to the present (Brecht, 1972, p. 260).

As he later adds, the main prerogative of social realist artists is to emphasize the moment of becoming and obsolescence. This process takes place both by depicting the clashing of forces of opposite polarity (internal or external) and by presenting the transformation resulting from the opposition between things, people, events - both types of relationships can be continuous or episodic (Brecht, 1972, p. 268). And the actor that, strangely, both Meyerhold and Brecht give as an example to illustrate the concrete way of manifesting theories on the grotesque as a central element of social realism is Chaplin.

Chaplin, *Verfremdung* and *ostranenie*

Brecht first refers to Chaplin in an article about the German chamber film (*Kammerspiel*), especially considering Leopold Jessner's masterpiece, "Hintertreppe" (1921). In that essay, Brecht drafts a program of criteria that he believes German filmmakers should take into account when trying to surpass the success of the emerging commercial film industry in the United States. After a review of the qualities of German cinema of his times, he finds that Nordic cinema generally lacks actors capable of reproducing the grotesque dimension of reality, such as Chaplin was.

⁶ The term used in the English translation consulted for this essay of Meyerhold's texts on theatre is pre-acting. The example of pre-acting that Meyerhold gives is that of the actor Lensky playing the role of Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing*. He hides to catch a dialogue in which Beatrice is told that he loves her, and her reactions to this information are related to the fact that she knows he can hear her at that moment. Benedict/Lensky is left alone on stage and comes out of hiding, occupies the center stage and looks at the audience for a long time, with an expression of amazement frozen on his face. During this time, little by little, a smile emerges, first shy, then wider, which turns into a giggle and then an explosion of laughter that culminates in shouts of joy. Meyerhold adds, however, that this concept is not a technical means of embellishing the text with mimicry. The pre-acting prepares the viewer's perception, so that he understands in advance both the stage situation and its entire solution. From that moment, the actor can provide the viewer with information about what is hidden behind the stage situation (Meyerhold, 2016, pp. 257-258).

Meyerhold also refers to Chaplin, and also in connection with film. More precisely, he invokes Eisenstein's approach to try and introduce in montage theory principles acquired during the period in which they were both involved in the study of bio-mechanics. Thus, according to Meyerhold, in order to consolidate his theory of montage and arrive at a coherent system centered around bio-mechanics, Eisenstein spent years, studying an important number of scientific papers concerned with the movement and the changes that the human body moving in space elicit on human behavior. The objective of the experiments that took place at the Bio-Mechanics Studio was "the exploitation of the expressiveness of movement". To achieve this goal, Eisenstein analyzed for a long time the movements of gymnasts and workers from the steel industry. 10 years had passed since then when Meyerhold (2016, p. 398) concludes, jokingly, that this goal could have been achieved without this huge effort only by studying Chaplin alone, observing his freeze frames, the strangeness of the movements, the puzzled expression that dominates all his movements. In Chaplin, as in the case of a performance gymnast or a worker in the metalworking industry, everything is reduced, Meyerhold observes, to a "fortunate concentration of physical action".

A well-made comedy, according to Pushkin's definition, depends not only on the ability to provoke laughter, but also on the way the characters are developed. Moreover, states Pushkin *apud* Meyerhold, in a good comedy we will often see the characters being driven in the no man's land of tragedy. Which, in Meyerhold's view, is exactly the case with the film *The Gold Rush* (1925), a film to which, by chance, Brecht also refers. In *The Gold Rush*, the characters often go through very hard or very sad situations. Continuing to use Pushkin's dramatic theory (that drama must involve three elements - laughter, sympathy, and terror), Meyerhold states, without providing examples, that Chaplin's film uses all three of these elements. Of course, it might seem like a random projection, especially since we don't have any concrete examples to see to what extent Pushkin's grid can be applied to *The Gold Rush*. Therefore, I will try to apply Pushkin's grid quoted by Meyerhold (without examples) to exactly the three examples of *Verfremdungseffekt* that Brecht provides when referring to *The Gold Rush*, in a note in his journal entitled *Chaplin V-effekte*⁷, written a year before Meyerhold's essay on Chaplin

⁷ In the ensuing article, Brecht gives examples of the *Verfremdungseffekt* from other arts, as follows: "the integration of cinematographic documentary materials in theatre performances; the actions on the stage become strange by juxtaposing the objective images from the projection screen" (for clarification of this statement see the production of the experimental performance *Hamlet* - 2015, made by Wooster Group); "Cezanne uses estrangement when, for example, he exaggerates the width of a vase"; "Surrealism and Dadaism use radical forms of defamiliarization. Dada objects do not return to familiarity." The article also concludes with the observation that "the defamiliarization effect of classical art produces a high coefficient of understanding." (Silberman, 2000, p. 10)

Although Meyerhold's essay doesn't have a date, it refers to Kerjennév's article in *Pravda*, so I suspect that it was written after December 1937. Brecht's typed note is dated to approximately 1936.

Laughter: "Chaplin's starving companion sees him in the shape of a giant chicken"

Sympathy: "[at] the table, Chaplin eats his boot according to all the rules of good manners; takes out a nail as if it were a bone; eats with his little finger raised"

Terror: "Chaplin destroys his rival by simultaneously courting him" (Silberman, 2000, p. 10).

Of course, the classification I have just made is subjective and relative to certain personal affinities and judgments that led me to distribute Brecht's three examples on the grid that Pushkin made up and was quoted by Meyerhold. More than likely, another person, with different personal affinities and applying a different analysis of Pushkin's grid and Brecht's examples would group them all differently. However, what's striking is the fact that, without exception, all the examples of *Verfremdungseffekt* provided by Brecht contain elements of the grotesque. This might be a good place to remind the reader about Meyerhold's statement on the grotesque as the nature of theatre, ("not only in the joke, but also in the tragedy, and in the tragicomedy, and in the whole theatre in general") referred to in the first part of this article. I think we have by now enough evidence to conclude that the vague term "distancing", with which the *Verfremdung* process is (unfortunately) rather widely equated with, actually has a much more concrete meaning: that of materializing the grotesque.

As Benjamin (1998, p. 83) very well observes, "Brecht reveals the conditions in which we live under the drape of conventional concepts". And following this process of this, let's call it, even though it might seem a little weird, a denude (denoue)-ment, the human content springs from underneath it. Unfortunately, and this calls into question the very concept of the grotesque, ideologically tributary to the convention of naturalistic realism, this revealed human content is presented in a dehumanized form. But, in fact, the stage poet uses the most available conceptual matrix, especially since the process by which the revelation of the condition behind which the human content is hidden in its "unconventional" form is made through satirical intermediation. Satire is always concrete and material. Corporal. And with the legacy of Brecht and Meyerhold, it also becomes dialectical. Paradoxical.

The somatization of the theory

Before presenting the improvisational exercises used by Brecht to facilitate the appropriation of the *Verfremdung* process by the actors, it should be mentioned once again that estrangement is not a position, but the result of a transition. However, the Brechtian exercises do not only aim at simply facilitating the transition from empathy to estrangement but also to train the actors so that they can support these two states simultaneously. The actor that Brecht needs, as he himself states, is "the actor who can completely empathize with the character, and at the same time can completely detach himself from the character" (Brecht and Mueller, 1964, p. 166). These exercises are developed by Brecht to help the

actor understand the know-how of the empathy – estrangement dialectics. A practical answer to the matter-of-fact question “ok, but how does it work”.

In a letter addressed to Strehler just as the Italian director began rehearsing the *Three-Penny Opera* at the Piccolo Teatro and wanted to familiarize himself with the method of estrangement, Brecht recommended **parody** as his first exercise. Thus, progressively, a tragic scene will be played in a comic key, and the actors will have to intentionally look for in the text the accents with comic potential for that scene. The search is based on providing a contextual commentary that justifies the motivation for which the actors choose to present the tragic situation in a comic key. Trying to provide a meta-text, the actors suddenly become the object of their search.

Another exercise supposes that at any time during rehearsals the actors should suddenly and swiftly change roles between themselves. At first, they should undergo this change under the direction of the coordinator. Subsequently, as they become more and more familiar with the text, the stage routes and the psychological motivations, and the intentions of the characters are fixed, this exercise is proposed by the actors at their free discretion, either for short periods of time or by a longer stretch, or alternating return to the role they were originally cast and entering the role of stage partner. This exercise also has the gift of helping the actor to give up the early discoveries during the first rehearsals, which could be the basis of a linear development of character, correct, but also devoid of dialectic or paradox.

A variation of this exercise involves the actors being filmed while rehearsing the scene in the original cast, and then, after watching the video of them rehearsing, to change the roles between them while trying to recreate, with their inner resources of course, the same facial expressions, the same gestures and the same emotional impulses invested by their partners in the roles that were assigned to them. The exercise is useful because it allows each actor to observe (as much as possible) objectively both the dramatic substance of the stage situation and his way of characterizing that character in the situation in question. This type of training has the gift of revealing the relative nature of characterization (in a juxtaposition with the other characterizations from the performance) and explicit (in turn, the characterization is itself subjected to interpretation).

Another version of this exercise involves an actor playing alone both his role and that of the partners in a scene, trying to reproduce as accurately as possible the way in which his colleagues typify their characters and, at the same time, changing the tragic *geist* with a comic one or vice versa.

Another classic example of an exercise, used by Brecht himself in rehearsals for Jakob Lenz's *Der Hofmeister*, requires the actor to recite, in the rhythm in which he would recite a poem, the directions of the playwright, where they exist, before he starts uttering

the text assigned to the character he is playing⁸. The actor must dissociate the intonation and even the tone of the character's voice he's playing from the tone of the author's voice. Through this exercise the aim is to access the mechanism within the somatic theory according to which the internal conditions are determined by external factors. The exercise also clearly highlights the distinction between text and meta-text. Also, paraphrasing the authorial indications, the actor can, by calibrating the intensity of the delivery, generate the subversive energy of parody. Authorial indications are essentially interventions related to the functionality of the dramatic text. Their delivery in poetic form denounces their technical character and, through reterritorialization, gives them an aesthetic character which, paradoxically, blurs the authorial vanity.

This process, according to Shomit Mitter (1992, p. 47), is very similar to the functioning of the super-objective in the Stanislavsky method because it generates a social critique of "class privileges" (i.e. hierarchically, the playwright is above the actor). Another residual effect is that, by formulating the authorial indication, the actor confirms the temporal recurrence of the performance: this does not happen now for the first time, but takes place every night in the same space, but with another audience who is suggested to do so, every time. And a last residual effect is that the actor makes the character refer to him in the third person, effectively producing an act of estrangement. Officiating this act, the actor becomes the meta-text.

Another classic exercise envisages the character's temperament. Four actors take on the roles of two married couples. The wives are separated from their husbands by an imaginary wall and the action they partake in is that of folding the bed linen. During this time, the spouses in the front room have a generic discussion about a neutral topic. From the other room, the wives are heard praising each other's husband, but this dialogue is actually a game, meant to inflate the husband's ego, whilst their "real" intention is in fact to ridicule their husbands who pursue their "manly" affairs instead of helping the two to finish folding the linen at a faster pace. In other words, the wives create a subtle *quid pro quo*, meant to convince the two spouses in the other room that there is a heated debate between them about the moral superiority of one husband in the detriment of the other and vice versa. The two end up exchanging blows to simulate a heated degeneration of the debate, but, on another level, the simulated blows degenerate as well and the two end up fighting "for real".

This exercise is divided into three stages:

1. The two wives simulate a quarrel to fool their husbands.
2. They end up hitting each other while folding the linen.
3. The game takes a serious turn.

⁸ The exercise can also be performed by imprinting a purely technical aspect to the lyrical passages in the text, even going as far as the infusing the interpretation with vulgar and/or prosaic undertones.

In the first stage, the actors are asked to support two competing levels of scenic truth: the actual situation - the visit plus the action of folding - and the situation of simulating a heated argument. The simulacrum is obviously initially subsumed to the "realistic" stage truth. In the second stage, the gestural content of the actors (the fact that they fold the bed linen and hit each other) replaces the textual content (praises), which they express entirely as a stage action. And in the third stage, the two competing actions seem to merge in terms of the stage situation. But, dealing with a struggle whose purpose is not to be real, but to seem real, two plans still coexist. This time, neither one is subsuming the other. The action is and at the same time is not real - and both levels must be acted with the same conviction⁹. On one hand, the fiction becomes reality. On the other hand, the fiction continues to be nothing more than fiction.

As soon as this technique of simultaneously supporting two competing levels of scenic reality is mastered, the exercise is distilled into a more refined form and is based on an above-average mastery of corporal means. Thus, the actor assumes the role of a magician who performs a magic trick or a juggler who presents a juggling routine. The more elaborated, the better. At the same time, he must render through facial expressions the expressions of astonishment or amazement of members of the public at various stages of the magic trick or juggling routine. Either by imagining them, or by actually imitating his colleagues, whom he must first convince to look at and whose attention he must gain from the beginning.

Another exercise involves suggesting an option contrary to the one the character decides upon during the dramatic unfolding of the action. The exercise is called "Not ... but ..." and consists of introducing an estrangement in a sentence structure. For example, "he did not spare his life, but ended it" presents a commonsense expectation (to save someone's life) deceived by the revealed reality of the action that actually took place. During rehearsals, the actor must identify the opposite idea that is dialectically contained in each line of dialogue and in each action and express it explicitly (Brecht and Mueller, 1964). During the actual performance, this explanation of the opposite course of action that could take place at any moment is suppressed, but the actor's awareness that determination is an illusion can find its tacit expression in stage actions, as demonstrated by the practice of somatization. The objective of this exercise is first to highlight the fact that there are always two courses of action, and second to present the nature of reality as relative, not absolute.

⁹ This process is illustrated very clearly in the rehearsal scenes of John Cassavetes' *Opening Night* (1977).

Instead of "instead of conclusions"

I will give a personal account of how it was when I first attended a so to speak "Brechtian" performance in Berlin, in 2010, at the "Berliner Ensemble". I wrote above, quoting Gombrich, about the "importance of guided projection" and how "expectation breeds illusion." I remember that the "directed projection" from the teachers who mediated my (mis-)understanding of Brecht's system, especially done during informal discussions on the nature of foreign theatre, was that "Brecht's theatre is a theatre devoid of emotions", "thesist", "obsolete". This perception was generally accepted without any further questioning coming from the student's side, no attempt to test the "limits of the theory" was ever made. Probably out of a sense of fear of not having our expectations betrayed. So, my expectations were set somewhere in this area: I was expecting to see an awful, dated performance, a sort of museum theatre piece, and I was very eager to see this performance so that my bias could be confirmed. I can't think of any attitude screaming 'provincial' louder than the one I had when entering the Berliner Ensemble that evening.

The performance I was attending that evening was *The Broken Jug*, by Kleist, directed by Peters Stein, and starring Karl Maria Brandauer, a huge actor whom I had previously seen in Istvan Szabo's "German trilogy" (*Mephisto* - 1981, winner of the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, *Oberst Redl* - 1985 and *Hanussen* - 1988). The show started in a very naturalistic vein, with a flock of chickens walking about aimlessly on the stage, which had the gift of decelerating my directed projection. I was ready to give up the point, considering that the director probably had to make concessions to the naturalist system to attract the public (the hall was full) and that Brecht's system was *kaput*. I had given up on the thought that I was about to see a hardcore Brecht performance, believing that his method had somehow lost the battle against naturalistic realism, so, naturally, I put aside my prejudices about Brecht's theatre. Then, imperceptibly, I entered the atmosphere of the performance and as more and more confusion threatened the reputation of the judge, played by Brandauer, at one point, in what I would call the climax of the action, he, finding himself alone on the whole stage, comes to the proscenium, he pauses for a moment to catch the audience's attention and very simply shrugs. Of course, it is dire to write down the intensity of a moment of such effectiveness and simplicity - but, paradoxically, one so complex that it presented, simultaneously, the struggles of both The Judge and Brandauer, at the same time - like the one I witnessed, so I will limit myself to presenting the effect of this simple gesture: the whole audience burst into a heart-felt applause. One might sarcastically rebuke: and everyone clapped. Jokingly, I can also reply: Can confirm. I was the applause. Because that was the moment when all my prejudices about the Brecht method were shattered. It was just theatre very well done.

It was precisely this dialectic of estrangement that brought Brandauer back to me in an extremely familiar light. The fact that "the one which shows must also be seen showing" has the gift of bringing the audience closer to the actor, in complete accordance with Brecht's dialectic, which, indeed, must be made in order to be seen and must be seen in

order to be understood. And what I saw was a performance of the highest quality, not an "emotionless", "thesist" or "obsolete" performance. That is why I believe it is necessary to remove the prejudices around this method, especially since the problems posed by Brecht are still present in what we like to call the "total theatre" of our times.

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