

Removing the Footlights

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Epic devices—asides, prologues, epilogues, direct addresses to the audience, songs, the chorus—are traditional means of exposing the system of mediation, breaking the illusion, and of making the familiar strange in theatre. Even though epic devices are at the core of Brecht’s concept of theatrical estrangement, they are not the only ways of breaking the illusion and distancing the familiar. *Theatricality*, *metatheatre* and *stylisation* are also means of reinforcing the tension between the illusionist and anti-illusionist forces that disrupt the convention of make-believe.

Theatricality is analogous to the Russian Formalist notion of *literariness*—the distinct quality of the literary work that differentiates it from other arts. As Hansen Löve, who wrote one of the most comprehensive studies on Russian Formalist *ostranenie*, points out, literariness is a reduction principle. He traces this Russian Formalist notion to Edmund Husserl and his *Investigations in Logic (Logische Untersuchungen)*, where the phenomenological epoch is described as a reduction, a “bracketing” (*Einklammerung*), by taking from the object (phenomenon) its outside factors—historical, social, individual, and existential.¹ Yet, literariness does not presuppose that a work exists in a kind of self-serving vacuum, rather it

¹ Hansen Löve stresses that the Russian Formalists practiced a reduced form of phenomenological thinking described as “*positivistischer Phänomenologismus*.” See Hansen- Löve, *Der Russische Formalismus: Methodologische Rekonstruktion Seiner Entwicklung Aus dem Prinzip der Verfremdung*. 181-8.

defines, positions and differentiates a specific literary work in relation to both other literary works and to the extra artistic reality.

This notion is closely linked to the concept of “divergence quality” (*Differenzqualität*) that Russian Formalists borrowed from the German aesthetician Broder Christiansen. His premise is that the aesthetic object loses its effect and the process of perception is aborted when something is familiar. Deformation and distortion of the familiar establishes the divergence quality, which enables the sensation of difference (*Differenzempfindung*), detectable against the backdrop of given norms and conventions (*Differenzbasis*).² To describe the distinction between poetic and practical language, and between the aesthetic object and its analogous aesthetic or extra-artistic phenomena, Shklovsky takes from Christiansen’s theory two concepts: the emphasis on the receiver’s role in the reception process, and the notion of “difference quality” as a divergence from conventions. Literariness often involves an estrangement quality as a result of diverging from the norm, which evokes a special kind of perception as seeing (*videnie*) or sensing (*oščuščenie*). Christiansen’s aesthetic theory and Shklovsky’s application of it shift the focus from production to reception in the literary process, understanding the reception activity as a sensual rather than an intellectual phenomenon.

The divergence quality stresses the dynamic character of an aesthetic object that relates to other aesthetic objects.³ Analogous to the literariness of

² See Broder Christiansen, *Philosophie der Kunst*, 117.

³ For Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work also influenced the Russian Formalist School, elements of a system were defined by their divergence from other analogous elements as well. See Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. The Russian Formalists’ notion of divergence quality is echoed in Jacques Derrida’s famous concept of *différance*, even though he used it to push Saussure’s theory of language to its limits. The term *différance* is ambiguous, it is both *to differ from* and *to defer, postpone*. Writing does not copy spoken language, it *differs from* it; meaning is continuously *deferred* since each word leads us to another word in the system of signification. Thus, text can be viewed as an endless sequence of signifiers that lead to other texts. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*.

narrative works, theatricality—theatre’s eminence and the divergence quality—makes a theatrical event distinct from any other artistic or extra-artistic phenomena. When established as an estrangement concept, theatricality makes the theatre’s divergence quality perceptible to counteract the habitualisation of perception. The notion of the re-theatricalisation of theatre, advocated by Meyerhold and other avant-garde directors, is a way of performing theatre’s own divergence quality.

However, theatricality can be present in the context of illusion without a self-referential aspect, but whenever theatre’s conventions and processes become the subject of a performance, theatricality turns into a conceptual approach. Theatricality functions as a distancing device when it foregrounds that which is eminent to theatre, including the difference between the character and the actor, the exaggeration of body language and make-up, the display of theatre’s means of production and so on. Theatricality calls attention to the fictionality and incompleteness of the represented as if world. In an early note from 1914, Meyerhold describes theatricality in the manner of Russian Formalist scholars: “Theatricality presupposes an inevitability of form. [...] Theatre is art and the laws of art should determine everything in it. Art and life are governed by different laws” (*Meyerhold on Theatre* 147). Theatricality reinforces the notion of the theatrical stage as a place of play and artifice, which does not copy reality, but represents it through its eminent theatrical means.

It often makes use of romantic irony—a literary concept elaborated by Friedrich Schlegel—that enables the authorial discourse (or quasi authorial discourse) to enter the discourse of dramatic figures. Romantic irony is established when the author shows what she/he is doing while doing it—when

the narrative refers to the creative process itself and makes the artistic toying with the medium the subject of the work. In theatre, romantic irony usually takes the form of a play within a play, consciously revealing the fictionality of the dramatic/stage action. When romantic irony is used, a conflicting semiotic activity takes place contributing to the effect of theatricality—the signifier and the signified are simultaneously shown as identical (through the protagonist’s voice) and different (through the authorial voice).

Metatheatre shows reality as theatrical, often through the devices of theatre within theatre and play within play. As in *Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author*, metatheatricality emphasizes that the line between life and stage illusion is very thin. It tends to represent “life as a dream” (Calderon) and to show that “all the world’s a stage” (Shakespeare). Metatheatre is a device for establishing a dramatic and theatrical metaphor through which life is shown as an endless play, an ongoing theatre of sorts. The difference between theatricality and metatheatre is that the former emphasizes the divergence between theatre and life, stressing that theatre does not reflect reality, but corresponds to life through its eminent means and logic. The latter points to the affinity between theatre and life, not by trying to make stage events life-like, but by showing that the conventions of real life are in fact theatrical.

The notion of stylisation in its broadest sense is as an umbrella for all the forms and tendencies that challenge, subvert, or distort the concept of the mimetic representation of reality in theatre and drama. It is the artistic approach of foregrounding a certain style, calling attention to the author’s intervention and choices made in the treatment of the material. Stylisation and *conventionality* as estrangement devices are particularly prominent in

Meyerhold's theatre of *conscious stylisation*. The idea of conscious stylisation and conventionality (*uslovnost*) comes from the Russian Symbolist poet Valeri Brjusov and stresses the complex interplay between art and reality.

Meyerhold's theatre is conscious of the process of what we would call today semiotization, as each element of the performance turns into a "stylised" sign. A director of stylised theatre, as well as an author who relies on the techniques of *ostranenie*, uses various structural modifications of the material to partially orient the associative process, forcing the receiver to renegotiate his/her stock relationship to the well-known objects and notions. The spectator is made conscious of the artificiality of the stage figure, being constantly reminded that the actor is performing a role, rather than incarnating the totality of a character. Leonid Andreev's letter, quoted by Meyerhold, defines precisely the anti-illusionist character of conscious stylisation: "In stylised theatre the spectator should not forget for a moment that an actor is performing before an audience, with the stage beneath his feet and the set around him" (*Meyerhold on Theatre* 63). Both Meyerhold's practice and Symbolist ideas of conscious stylisation are rooted in Arthur Schopenhauer's notion of stylisation. According to Schopenhauer, it is an anti-illusionist strategy that stresses the divergence between art and life, and activates the recipient's imagination. It presupposes that art deliberately insists on the incompleteness of the representation, otherwise there would be very little left to the imagination of the beholder. Meyerhold's concept of stylisation in theatre is a means to activate the role of the spectator that echoes Schopenhauer's notion that the aesthetic object exists fully only through the understanding of the receiver.

As early as 1907, Meyerhold proposes *the theatre of the straight line* in opposition to the closed *triangle model* (writer-director-actor) that excludes the audience from the creative process. The *theatre of the straight line* adds to the roles of author, director, and actor the role of the spectator as the fourth creator. This approach stands in opposition to Konstantin Stanislavsky's school, which assumes the notion of the invisible fourth wall, where the audience is offered the sensation of peeking through a keyhole at the life on stage.⁴ In Meyerhold's performances, the relationship between the inner and outer circle of stage communication remains open and dynamic. His acting methodology is deliberately anti-psychological; the actor is not expected to internalise the character, as in Stanislavsky's method, but rather to treat the role as a mask. For Stanislavsky the proper stimulation of the actor's mind would lead to a more truthful stage expression. As Alma Law and Mel Gordon argue, Meyerhold and his most prodigious pupil Eisenstein believed quite the opposite:

[...] Expression in movement – the actor's motor functions – could lead automatically to feelings and inspired emotions. They (*Meyerhold and Eisenstein*) argue that the function of acting is not merely to fill the performer with hidden thoughts and feelings, but to communicate expressively with the audience. Whether an actor feels "correctly" or not becomes immaterial if the spectator cannot see and feel the result. Theatre is much more than an exercise in truthful emotion; it involves an entire spectrum of scenic elements, acting being one of them. (2)

⁴ In the article "Stanislavsky und Meyerhold", Herta Schmid offers a systematic comparative analysis of their acting and staging approaches.

Moreover, the spectator is made conscious of the artificiality of the stage figure, is constantly reminded that the actor is performing a role, rather than incarnating the totality of a character. *Theatre of the straight line* calls for staging and acting techniques that do not recreate an as-if world in minute realistic detail, but rather stylise it, so that the divergence quality between theatre and life is deliberately exposed. In this way the passivity of the audience is somewhat counteracted, since the spectators become compelled to use their imagination creatively in order to fill in the gaps of the stage world.

This approach shares a common ground with Shklovsky's notion of *perceptibility*, closely linked to his phenomenon of *ostranenie*. Perceptibility requires the author's and, consequently, the receiver's consciousness of the form. The strategy of creating the sense of seeing the well-known as if for the first time not only makes the artistic form palpable, but also triggers a certain way of aesthetic thinking—on the part of the author and on the part of the recipient—through which the divergence between the familiar and the defamiliarised is comprehended. In Shklovsky's theory and Meyerhold's practice, the phenomenon of perceptibility is based on the notion of apperception as introduced by G.W. Leibniz to describe a perception in the second degree, or the perception one is conscious of. Perceptibility, therefore, is a perception which one apperceives; in other words, it is a perception of a perception. The spectator in Meyerhold's theatre is made conscious of the stylisation and theatricality of the work, but also of his own role in the aesthetic process, as is the reader when encountering literature based on defamiliarisation and the form-conscious devices that Shklovsky and other Russian Formalists studied.

Echoing Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of Dionysian and Apollonian theatre, Russian Symbolist Viacheslav Ivanov asserts "there arose the magic barrier, which even today, in the form of footlights, divides the theatre into two opposite camps, the performers and the onlookers" (in *Meyerhold on Theatre* 63). Meyerhold puts Ivanov's thoughts into practice saying, "having removed the footlights, the stylised theatre aims to place the stage on a level with the auditorium" (*Meyerhold on Theatre* 62). In his book *Audience*, Herbert Blau also connects the removal of footlights with anti-illusionist theatre practice pointing out "since Brecht, and his assault on illusion, the lights are not always hidden now" (212). Removing the footlights becomes in a way a symbolic gesture that epitomizes various estrangement practices—from epic devices to conscious stylisation—in the anti-illusionist theatre of the avant-garde. The notion of "removing the footlights" also embodies the paradox of distancing in theatre. On the one hand, the spectator is distanced from the event as the "Apollonian illusion" is broken and the voyeuristic sense of peeking through the fourth wall into someone else's life is disrupted. On the other hand, the distinction between the stage and the audience is established as unstable. At times, distancing devices involve the audience in the stage event even more strongly by turning them into participants, providing either the possibility or the illusion of co-creation. Asides, removed footlights, and direct addresses to the audience are bonding strategies between the stage and the auditorium. In the illusionist theatre, the audience is "invisible"; it is a discreet intruder into the as-if world. The theatre of the avant-garde disrupts the spectator's pleasure of invisibility through distancing devices, while simultaneously inviting the audience to participate—intellectually, spiritually, emotionally or physically—in the theatrical event.

Theatricality, metatheatricality and stylisation emphasize indirectly the presence of the author and the artificiality of the stage world, impeding the spectator's suspension of disbelief and the safe voyeuristic approach to performance. Epic elements, theatricality and stylisation are, of course, not devices that exclude one another; very often they are used interchangeably. The notion of making strange can be achieved even in those works that rely entirely on introducing an as-if world when this world is presented as a distortion of either the prevailing artistic conventions or the logic of reality. Forms such as the grotesque, parody, and pastiche in theatre and drama often involve the phenomenon of making strange and breaking the illusion. Nevertheless, Brecht figures as the icon of theatrical distancing. Dramatic and theatrical practice challenge this understanding, showing that Brecht's notion embodies just one aspect of distancing the familiar in theatre and drama, while Shklovsky's concept could be used to encompass those aspects of the phenomenon that Brecht's *Verfremdung* only partially covers, or does not include at all.

One could argue that unlike practitioners of other periods of theatre history, Brecht used the concept of distancing consciously as a calculated and strategic device, but so did many other members of the 20th century avant-garde. Theoretical works and notes to the productions of, say, Piscator, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Evreinov and many others show that these artists were both aware of the concept and used it as one of their basic stylistic principles. Yet the mode of defamiliarisation in their works differed from Brecht's approach, since their works were more strongly based on theatricality, stylisation and conventionality than on traditional epic devices. Vakhtangov's famous 1922 production of Carlo Gozzi's *Turandot*, for

instance, combined epic devices and elements from the Asian theatre tradition with forms of theatricality and metatheatre. Vakhtangov's actors explored a concept of distancing which was similar to the one that made Brecht famous. The actors went in and out of their roles, showing both the dramatic figures and themselves representing those figures. Vakhtangov's production depicted the world as theatrical and fairytale like. Brecht's distancing is of a different kind; his estrangement technique is meant to communicate a socio-political critique of the world. Brecht's *Verfremdung* is not a broad enough concept to be the very embodiment of the overall defamiliarisation principle in modern theatre.

A brief comparative analysis of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters In Search For An Author* (1921), Bertolt Brecht's didactic play *The Measures Taken* (1930) and Eugene Ionesco's tragic farce *The Chairs* (1952) illustrates the difference between Brecht's dramaturgical strategies of *Verfremdung* and other defamiliarising possibilities in 20th century drama. All three plays make a conscious and strategic use of defamiliarisation through the devices of theatre within the theatre, but otherwise have very little in common. In this case only the dramatic text is considered, even though, of course, it is not only the textual but also the scenic component that partakes in the defamiliarisation process.

Pirandello presents theatre within theatre in the form of romantic irony, the dominant distancing device in his play, establishing three levels of fictionality: the actors and the director in the process of rehearsing the play titled "The Rules of the Game" by an author with the same name as the actual one; the six characters who interrupt the rehearsal to enact their dramatic destinies; and, the actors who imitate the representations of the mysterious

characters. The notion of distancing in this case enables Pirandello to establish theatrical process and theatrical reception as the central theme of the play. The playwright toys with making and unmaking the illusion, leaving the audience in a state of ambiguity between contemplating theatricality as a metaphor and indulging in the as-if worlds that the play has to offer. The process of distancing established in Pirandello's play serves to shift the line between theatre and life, illusion and reality.

In the play *Measures Taken*, Brecht uses devices of theatricality not to make theatre the theme of his work, but to represent and problematise reality. He employs the device of the play within the play in the form of a flashback and through songs and quotations—the well-known elements of Brecht's epic dramaturgy that often serve as *Verfremdung* strategies. The Control Chorus plays the role of the internal audience, while the four agitators enact the situations that lead towards the execution of one of them during their mission. The play within the play is used not to highlight theatricality, but to represent a body of evidence, while the songs and questions of the Control Chorus are meant to keep the spectator alert and to offer a guideline for assessing the presented evidence. Brecht uses *Verfremdung* not only to distance the familiar, but also to ensure the correct comprehension of the material and to influence the reception process.

In Ionesco's *The Chairs*, an old couple invites a non-existent crowd of people to hear a professional orator, hired specially for this occasion, deliver the old man's last message. The space begins to be filled with chairs instead of people, which divide the mimetic space into the podium for the orator's performance and the auditorium. The couple addresses empty chairs in a polite conversational mode as if they were real people. At last, one person

arrives—the king himself—and the orator turns out to be dumb and able to utter only a few nonsensical sounds. Ionesco labels the play a tragic farce mocking the traditional genre conventions. The conversations with the empty chairs, and the inability of any message to be delivered, distance both real-life and theatrical logic. Ionesco's distancing technique is the grotesque, where the author toys with distortions of reality, replacing and rearranging the material. While Brecht's *Verfremdung* is an epistemological device that has to bring meaning closer to our understanding through distancing the familiar, defamiliarisation in *The Chairs* is governed by principles much closer to Shklovsky's notion, which calls for an increased complexity of form. Ionesco establishes the illogical world of his play so that "the well-known is seen as if for the first time" (Shklovsky). Brecht's *Verfremdung* places the material in an artificial theatrical framework, and represents it from various angles, but keeps its undistorted, realistic image. Shklovsky's *ostranenie* provides a more suitable conceptual framework to describe the process of making the familiar strange in Pirandello's and Ionesco's plays, than does Brecht's *Verfremdung*.

The different versions of the defamiliarisation technique in dramatic and stage works depend on the hierarchy of the components and their relation to the dominant component within the structure. Roman Jakobson defines the notion of the dominant element "as a focusing component of a work of art: which rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. The dominant guarantees the integrity of the structure" ("The Dominant" 82). In Brecht's theatre, distancing the familiar and breaking the illusion function as subversions of the work's own dominant principle. Brechtian theatre has a realist framework, and the representation has a metonymic character. His dramaturgy relies on the notion of the subject—the dramatic figure who is the

carrier of the action. Although this figure is often shown as inconsistent or represented through fragments, it still preserves the resemblance of a traditional dramatic hero. The audience's identification with the protagonists in Brecht's theatre is never fully abolished. The defamiliarisation devices in this context function as disruptions of the stage illusion. Songs, asides, commentaries, and film projections in Brecht's theatre remind the audience to construct, every once in a while, their disbelief. The realist framework is often the dominant component in Brecht's work, while breaking the illusion is a strategic and calculated disruption that marks the dramaturgical character of *Verfremdung*.

In cases where a dramatic work or a performance relies not only on epic devices, but also on various kinds of stylisation, illusionist components are scarce since they can hardly come into being. Ionesco's play shows this very clearly. The traditional notion of the dramatic hero is abolished. So is the audience's identification with Ionesco's protagonists, since they are often reduced to linguistic units and shells or pieces of traditional dramatic heroes. Yet, the illusionist components do not function to disrupt the dominant principle of the work, but to reinforce the sense of something familiar that the dramatic or stage presentation makes strange.

Estrangement techniques in Brecht's, Pirandello's and Ionesco's plays establish different ideological connotations as well. A certain ideological kinship can be found between Brecht and Ionesco, although they use very different aesthetic devices and their plays were written in different historical contexts. Defamiliarisation devices in Brecht's plays are employed to achieve an ideological and political goal through drama and theatre. The Marxist, leftist orientation of the play is apparent as the relationship between the

individual and the collective is made strange and by the same token opened for re-examination. In Ionesco's play, where the logic of everyday reality is broken into pieces, distancing devices render common bourgeois social and communicational conventions nonsensical. Yet, the pro-leftist ideology of Ionesco's play is, by means of absurdist defamiliarisation, close to the Formalist *ostranenie*, elevated from a didactic to a metaphysical plane. Pirandello, who uses some devices of theatricality similar to those employed in Brecht's play, differs ideologically from both Brecht and Ionesco. Through defamiliarisation techniques, Pirandello creates an effect of ideological relativism by blurring the line between illusion and reality. Even though the famous *Six Characters in Search of an Author* shifts the boundaries of dramatic conventions, the absence of a material basis for the comprehensible in the play—since in the play political, private and artistic reality is but a game on the verge of being illusory—could be understood as an invitation to an imposition of form (reality) through power.⁵ These three examples point out that the relationship between the ideological level of a work and its aesthetic devices is a very complex one. Any clear-cut distinction between Brecht's *Verfremdung* as the set of aesthetic strategies that bring about politically committed and ideologically charged works, and Formalist *ostranenie* as the idea of art as self-indulgent and self-sufficient, does not hold true.

⁵ Brecht's leftist orientation and anti-Fascist views are well-known, Ionesco also made his anti-Fascist stance clear and approached political reality through critique of bourgeoisie hypocrisy and values, while Pirandello through his sympathy for the Fascist ideology inclined to the opposite side the political spectrum of the late 1920s and 30s.