

Brecht's *Lehrstücke*: Strategic Aporia and the Materiality of the Negative

For a playwright whose professed aims are pedagogical and material, what can be said about the *unsaid* in the work of Bertolt Brecht? His audience would seem to leave the theatre with something substantial. Unlike other playwrights of Brecht's lifetime who traffic in the inexpressibility and inadequacy of human language, this is not the theatre of myth, wonder, and saturated spiritual experience of an Antonin Artaud, or the theatre of nihilistic sarcasm of a Jean Paul Sartre. Although Brecht's atheism and his historicism might connect him to contemporaries in "the theatre of cruelty" and "the theatre of the absurd," his use of absence, silence, and the *unsaid* take a very different tack than the void of despair or unknowing so appropriate to Camus and Beckett, or the invisible yet vast, shared human underground implied by Artaud. Rather, Brecht's drama strives for the creation of conscientiousness and a critical audience—and assuredly this is something substantial.

However, it is a substantiality that depends upon a rhetorical structure that traffics with sophistication in the realm of aporia, ambiguity, and the creation of negative space, rather than pointed argument. Even in Brecht's most didactic of works, the *Lehrstücke*, a purposeful ambiguity slides easily beneath the surface of plays that would seem to have a moral at the end of the story. And of course they do, but this moral is more the work of the audience's own conclusions and decisions than a heavy-handed, teacherly attitude on Brecht's part. Brecht, in getting his audience to think, leads them to places where the realization is not that they now know what they previously did not, but more complicatedly that they still do not know what they perhaps once believed was knowable.

Brecht saw his *Lehrstücke* as raw material that participants in his *Grosse Pädagogik* would claim as their own, and so a play like *Die Massnahme* purposefully leaves itself open-ended. *Die Massnahme* challenges participants' own commitment to a socialist ideology. By modeling a process rather than preaching conclusive ideas, *Die Massnahme* shows how the Young Comrade, with his zeal that is both laudatory and dangerous, both furthers and hinders the work of the Party. His execution is at once practical, punishment, an honor killing, and assisted suicide. The way to value the Young Comrade's death as a learning moment is not to commit to any one of these readings, but to regard his death as basically inexplicable and irredeemable. The Control Chorus may approve of the actions of the Agitators, but this does not mean that execution is always an endorsed option, nor does it mean that sparing life at any cost is always the best endeavor. The death of the Young Comrade represents an "aporia," as understood in the most traditional sense of the rhetorical term: "Deliberating with oneself as though in doubt over some matter; asking oneself (or rhetorically asking one's hearers) what is the best or appropriate way to approach something."¹ The death of the Young Comrade is the point where *Die Massnahme* opens up to further argument and debate, while at the same time acknowledging that argument may not lead to conclusion, just as the Young Comrade's death is neither fully excusable and appropriate nor inexcusable and inappropriate. It is both, and neither.

¹ "Aporia." *Silva Rhetoricae*. 26 February 2007, 23 February 2009, <<http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/Silva.htm>>

On the surface, *aporia* as a rhetorical device may seem artificial and facile—too easily can one summarily contradict oneself. The “rhetorical question,” in popular use, is not really a question, but a play for time before the real argumentation begins. But for Brecht, aporetic deliberation does not speak “as though” in doubt over some manner; instead it exposes the generative role that doubt can play by taking a distanced and critical view of the ideas in his dramas. It is in the critical interplay between options that learning arises, not necessarily in the deciding of one over the other. In *Die Massnahme*, no option presents itself as desirable over all others. Instead, actions have practical consequences. The point of the play is not to deplore emotionality over rationality, but to ask how privileging one over the other may have dire effects. The zeal of the Young Comrade, his sense of moral indignation and outrage, demonstrates the kind of thinking that the Party draws upon to make their cause approachable and reasonable to their new Chinese recruits. By silencing the Young Comrade, the Party begins to transform itself into something new, into something that undermines its first causes. At the same time, the audience sees, and the Control Chorus is convinced by the Agitators, that the Young Comrade’s actions truly are a danger to the Party’s aims and to himself. But neither the Young Comrade nor the Party is “right” in contrast to the “wrong” of the other. They are both wrong and they are both right. The dilemma between the Young Comrade and the Party “has no good solution. If [the Young Comrade] remains morally pure, the world remains unchanged; if he changes the world, he violates himself.”² The Party, too, is in a similar situation. The *aporia* that opens up is in the desire to decide which is “best,” “right,” or “good.” These designations are too limited for Brecht, and so the reader/audience is led to a place where their first assumption that a “correct” answer is reachable is entirely upset. The moral at the end of the story, then, is more a realization of the ambiguity of morality and its context-dependency and constructedness, and that one may doubt the possibility of an “answer” or decision of any sort.

Aporia, in Brecht’s work, can most clearly be seen in the stance of wonder and amazement toward real conditions, and the understanding that other options always exist. While the Brechtian actor’s first priority is to “show things as they are,”³ he must also “feel astounded” and “act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants.”⁴ This “astounded” attitude depends upon a healthy dose of doubt, and willingness to come to a new place marked by unknowability and the unsaid, rather than neat correspondences between actions and ideas. Perhaps the most obvious “unsaid” in *Die Massnahme* is the lack of Marxist content. While the play doesn’t preach Marxist principles, it invokes the name, almost as if to invite contestation over what the “The teachings of the Classics / The ABCs of Communism” would entail.

² G.E. Nelson, “The Birth of Tragedy out of Pedagogy: Brecht’s ‘Learning Play’ *Die Massnahme*,” *The German Quarterly* 46.4 (November 1973): 566-580.

³ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) 15.

⁴ *Ibid*, 137.

Furthermore, by allowing the Young Comrade character to be played by each of the Agitators throughout the course of the play, each individual’s stance in regard “the ABCs of Communism” can be reimagined; each actor’s particular approach to the character (which will differ in minor and various ways even if the actors strive for consistency between their performances) will create a slight variation on the realm of the unsaid, and multiply again those “possible variants” to which the actor strives to allow the audience access through his or her performance. “Aporia” becomes here the place in the midst of the multiplication of possibility where the very existence of multiple possibilities implies the *impossibility* of choice.

However, choices must be made, according to a Brechtian outlook, which is why his *Lehrstücke* and especially *Die Massnahme* function more as useful forms on which to hang the specific interpretations of performers and participants, rather than as content-driven scripts. This play is a “performance draft with intentionally controversial governing principles that have the power to generate a performance (or acceptance or rebellion).”⁵ So the aporetic impossibility of choice that I speak of here is not the same kind understood, for example, in Derrida’s philosophy of the “possible-impossible”—that is, something that depends upon its impossibility for its possibility, such as hospitality, forgiveness, or the gift. The aporetic impossibility of Brecht’s non-conclusions (such as the acceptability/unacceptability of either the Young Comrade’s actions or his execution) means that choice is impossible outside of real-life context. Choices are always made/constructed out of the material at hand, and never predetermined, no matter where one’s ideological allegiances may lie. Every choice is impossible, but every choice must be made, and in its making on the Brechtian stage, each choice emphasizes the fruitful absence every other possible choice that blossoms around it. Brecht’s theatre forces the impossible choice (impossible because not universalizable, but dependent on context, environment, need, etc.), and in doing so, creates the possibility for change.

In multiplicity of possibility is ambiguity. Brecht’s *Verfremdungstheorie* itself is an example of the creation of ambiguity through multiplication of possibility. *Die Massnahme* creates distance between performers and characters, actors and audience, by employing tactics of the Epic Theatre: a series of short scenes strung together “episodically,” the use of discussion and correction, the “demonstrative” and self-reflexive nature of the play within the play; narration, and direct address. The actors create a critical distance between the performers and the characters they portray by playing multiple roles, and especially sharing the role of the Young Comrade. The *Verfremdungseffekt*, by making strange and exposing “the natural” or “the universal” as an assumption, also makes strange the possibility of assigned and static meanings. It can be read to go as far as to upset the assumed knowability of any kind of meaning—but especially cultural and social designations and identities.

⁵ Andrzej Wirth, “The Lehrstück as Performance” *The Drama Review* 43:4 (Winter 1999): 113-121.

It is for this reason that feminist philosophers and critics such as Elin Diamond and Judith Butler have found Brecht theoretically useful. On the socially constructed status of gender Butler writes, “Only from a self-consciously denaturalized position can we see how the appearance of naturalness is itself constituted.”⁶ It is by re-deploying, in a repetition of slight displacements, gender as a performance that queer folk may constantly upset “natural” and “essential” attitudes toward gender and identity. Diamond’s feminist deconstruction of theatre semiotics calls for a “gestic feminist criticism” which “would ‘alienate’ or foreground those moments in a playtext when social attitudes about gender and sexuality conceal or disrupt patriarchal ideology,”⁷ so that viewers may understand gender as an ideology itself:

Understanding gender as ideology—as a system of beliefs and behavior mapped across the bodies of women and men which reinforces a social status quo—is to appreciate the continued timeliness of *Verfremdungseffekt*, the purpose of which always is to denaturalize and defamiliarize what ideology—and performativity—makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable.⁸

The ambiguities inherent in queer identities are matters of straight perception, perceptions which, through a process of defamiliarization, reveal themselves as also ambiguous in their constructedness. Likewise, Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* reveals ambiguity as a consequence of assumed knowability.

Although Brecht’s work strives for substantial changes in attitude on his audience’s part, with the intention that this translates into social change on a larger scale, this does not mean we can always look to Brecht’s writings for definitive instructions by which to define his thinking. Rather, investigating the open spaces of ambiguity, unknowability, aporia, and the unsaid reveals an attitude that favors the productive role of doubt over sterile definition. However, this argument should not be taken as trying to prove that substance and the material have no actual place in Brecht’s thinking. Instead, we must think how a concern with materiality and substance lends itself to the creation of negative space within Brecht’s dialectical theatre.

The *Verfremdungseffekt* is often misunderstood in this light—or rather, its definition often stops short. The term is commonly interpreted to mean the creation of distance between the subjective experience of the audience member and the objects portrayed in performance, and the way in which this distance allows the spectator to question the naturalness of what is portrayed, dispelling illusion, and opening up conversation. But we must also remember that *Verfremdungseffekt* as “alienation” (and Willet’s translation has become ubiquitous in English scholarship on Brecht) is also a criticism of the act of alienation: “Familiar with both Hegel’s concept of the slave’s subjectivity reduced in alienation to an object controlled by the master and with Marx’s critique of workers’ dispossession of their labor power and agency under capitalism, Brecht explicitly defines *Verfremdung* as an estrangement from and thus critique of

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 149.

⁷ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: essays on feminism and theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 54.

⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

alienation.”⁹ As Loren Kruger demonstrates, translating “*verfremdung*” as an original term coined by Brecht must put it in relationship with not only Marx and Hegel, but also Max Weber’s *Entzauberung* (de-enchantment), and earlier translations of “*Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst*” as “Dis-illusion Effects in Chinese Acting.” “Dis-illusion” and “de-enchantment” imply not only a new approach to theatrical technique but also a broader picture that puts “alienation” in context.¹⁰ The worker is alienated from his real conditions of existence, his means of production, and his product because Capitalism turns the worker himself into a commodity. The audience is alienated from the events on stage through the techniques of epic theatre—why and how? They suddenly see the artificiality of theatricality, the constructedness and illusionism of an all-encompassing narrative. Alienation, then, is not the goal of Brecht’s theatre, but another layer of experience to be investigated and deconstructed. Alienation is the negative space that grounds the materiality of existence and allows Brecht’s viewers to question the justice and rightness of those material conditions.

The Exception and the Rule demonstrates this opening up of negative space in order to critique alienation itself. In the social and economic relationships between Karl Langman (The Merchant), the Guide, and the Coolie, Brecht (or “Brecht”) slyly writes in ironic gestures that deconstruct the notion that an economic form depends upon hierarchical social stratification. The players who introduce the show ask the audience to “discover / That what happens all the time is not natural. / For to say that something is natural... / is to regard it as unchangeable.”¹¹ Subsequently, the “natural” hierarchy positioned with the Merchant at the top, the Guide in the middle, and the Coolie at the bottom is undermined by the Coolie’s and the Guide’s acknowledgement that they are playing parts in an arbitrary social scheme. The action begins with the three trekking across a desert in order reach a recently discovered oil well before the Merchant’s competitors do. When the Merchant orders the Guide to make the Coolie go faster, the Guide does not order but suggests to the Coolie “*Try to go faster*” (emphasis mine). When the Merchant corrects the Guide, pointing out that he must use a harsher tone and beat the Coolie in order to gain results, the Coolie turns around and instructs the Guide, “Beat me, but not with all your strength, because I’ll never get to Han Station if I have to call on all my strength now.”¹² The Guide then complies. In this opening scene, the overt theatricality of the Guide’s and Coolie’s social performance functions to alienate the audience from assumed knowledge about the social status of each character.

But we must keep in mind that if we assume alienation at this point in the play ends with the feeling of estrangement from the theatrical conventions with which the scene is toying, which functions as an analog for social conventions, then this might prevent us from acknowledging and understanding the negative space into which it throws

⁹ Loren Kruger. “Keywords and Contexts: Translating Theatre Theory” *Theatre Journal* 59.3 (2007) 357.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 358.

¹¹ Bertolt Brecht. *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001) 37.

¹² *Ibid*, 38.

us. This kind of Heideggerian “thrownness” into the space of aporia and ambiguity is one that places us in a realm of instinct, reaction and experience. To be “thrown” is to find oneself in a space where only visceral reaction makes sense, and where a “higher” level of reflection and interpretation may not necessarily be possible. Heidegger’s “thrownness” is what explains human interaction with the world as immediate and instinctual within a steady “flow” of experience.¹³ Alienation, instead of inviting sound reflection and constructive criticism, can also be read as “thrownness” into a lived, embodied engagement with phenomenological existence. Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* does not transition viewers into a neutral space where they can reasonably reflect on the implications of self-reflexive drama. Instead, when the audience member laughs at the irony of the dialogue between the Coolie and the Guide, the *Verfremdungseffekt* jolts the viewer into a more immediate and visceral relationship with the here and now, a process by which we can understand *Verfremdung* as widening aporia and charting the space of negativity *through* the material.

Another example: The Merchant fires the Guide when the party reaches Han Station because the Merchant fears that an alliance between the Guide and the Coolie will be fateful for himself in the uninhabited and treacherous desert which they must next cross. So, the Merchant orders the Coolie to take on the role of guide. As might be expected, the Coolie has no clue how to navigate the desert, and the pair soon find themselves hopelessly lost with little water. As the trip wears on, the Merchant forces the Coolie into scenarios that endanger his life: fording a river that is too deep, in which he breaks his arm and nearly drowns, forcing him at gunpoint, and beating him despite his broken arm. And yet, when the Coolie thinks that the Merchant must be thirsty, he offers him his hidden stash of water—the Coolie is the compassionate exception to a rule that would mandate revenge. Thinking the Coolie must be attacking him with a stone in order to steal his water, the Merchant shoots the Coolie dead. The death of the Coolie, like the execution of the Young Comrade, is an instance of ambiguity in the *Lehrstück*. It would be easy to read the Merchant as a two-dimensional villain, but his suspicions are founded on experience, and he acts on instinct. The shooting is the product of a net of material relationships, but what it produces is an empty signifier in the dead and then absent body of the Coolie. The material conditions leading up to the Coolie’s death are what make the negative space in which the final courtroom scene occurs possible.

The bodies of the dead in *The Measures Taken* and *The Exception and the Rule* function as empty signifiers, but the status of their “emptiness” depends upon the net of material relations that determined their deaths. Postmodern semioticians acknowledge a break or disconnection between signifiers and signified. An “empty” signifier is a sign with a highly variable, vague, or non-existent signified. Empty signifiers can function like placeholders, like the non-number zero, and can be used as adaptable tools for meaning depending upon the needs or desires of its users and interpreters—they can mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean. Considering this radical split between

¹³ Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*.

signifier and signified, one must conclude, “a sign only means that it means.”¹⁴ In the final scenes of both *Lehrstücke*, the bodies of the victims are notably absent: the Young Comrade lies disintegrating somewhere in a lime pit, and the audience never knows where the Coolie finds his final resting place. Around these *bodily absences* the endings of the plays are *materially* constructed—the Merchant is found innocent and so the widow and son of the Coolie are not compensated for his death. Because of the delay with the trial, the Merchant loses the financial opportunity with the oil well. The Control Chorus approves the actions of the Four Agitators, who will continue their work for the Party. These material conclusions are what make the bodily absences of the Coolie and Young Comrade so palpable, and what open up the *Lehrstücke* as variables and placeholders for meanings needed or desired by its interpreters.

Part of the *Verfremdung* dealt with in *The Exception and the Rule* has to do with the frustration of signifieds that mean whatever “the master” says they mean.¹⁵ The courtroom scene is obviously weighted to benefit the elites, portrayed by the judges who cast knowing smiles upon one another, and who readily side with the Merchant’s version of the story of the Coolie’s killing, for which the Merchant is undeniably responsible. He is exonerated, however, because the judges decree that the Coolie’s compassion was an exception to the rule of animosity:

THE JUDGE: ...[Y]ou have killed a man who was conceivably innocent, but only because you had no way of knowing he was innocent. That happens to our police now and then. They fire into a crowd of perfectly peaceful demonstrators, simply because to them it’s inconceivable that those people aren’t going to pull them down off their horses and lynch them. Actually those policemen shoot because they’re afraid. And their being afraid is a proof of good sense. You mean you had no way of knowing that the coolie was an exception!¹⁶

In other words, any vengeful or violent act can be re-read as self-defense, just so long as one can make a case for one’s unwitting assumptions of the worst in the other person. This scene could be easily read to simply denounce the corruption of the court or powerful figures in any legal system. But the true work of the scene is its demonstration that the meaning of justice or a just sentence can be infinitely deferred by skillfully playing within the ambiguity and even unknowability of the relationship between signifiers and signified, between words and meanings, between the lawful and the just. The judges pretend to fix meaning while at the same time they dismantle meaning.

The Guide is the figure who laments this misuse of language in the scene:

THE GUIDE *sings*:
 In the system they’ve put together
 Humanity is the exception.
 Try to do a generous deed
 You’ll be the loser
 Fear for the man who shows a friendly nature!
 Hold that man in check

¹⁴ Robert Goldman and Stephen Papon, “Advertising in the Age of Hypersignification,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 11 (August 1994) 50.

¹⁵ I don’t remember where to find this, but Lacan invokes Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty, who says in response to Alice’s query whether you can make words mean different things: “The question is, which is to be master. That is all.”

¹⁶ Brecht 58.

Who has thoughts of giving help.

What should give the audience pause in this scene is the notion that the “freeplay” of signifiers—that they are not, as Derrida writes, fixed to their signifieds but point beyond themselves to other signifiers in an “indefinite referral of signifier to signified”¹⁷—can be just as easily used to pernicious as benevolent effect. The Guide is disturbed because the court twists meaning. Through this, being thrown into aporia through *Verfremdung*, the audience is disturbed because the scene shows meaning as never natural, never fixed. In this way, the final words of the Players who close the drama ring strange in the ears of an audience ready to commit to a cause. The Players abjure the audience, “What is not strange, find it disquieting! / What is usual, find it inexplicable! / What is customary, let it astound you. / What is the rule, recognize it to be an abuse / And where you have recognized abuse / Do something about it!

Consciousness knows and comprehends only what falls within its experience; for what is contained in this is nothing but spiritual substance, and this, too, as *object* of the self. But Spirit becomes object because it is just this movement of becoming an *other to itself*, i.e. becoming an object to itself, and of suspending this otherness. And experience is the name we give to just this movement, in which the immediate, the unexperienced, i.e. the abstract, whether it be of sensuous being, or only thought of as simple, becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation, and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth, just as it then has become a property of consciousness also.¹⁸

[E]xistence is really the perversion of every determinateness into its opposite, and it is only this alienation that is the essential nature and support of the whole. We have now to consider this process in which the moments are stirred into life and given an existence of their own; the alienation will alienate itself, and the whole will, through this alienation, return into its Notion.¹⁹

¹⁷ Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978) 25.

¹⁸ G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) § 36, pp. 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, § 491, pp. 299-300.