

# Alienation Theory in Multi-Media Performance

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Translated by Ron Bermingham

Although Brechtian alienation is usually presented as a theory of acting in most schools of theatre,<sup>1</sup> its operative domain encompasses not only the actor, but an entire theatrical system in which the interaction of numerous elements assures the effectiveness of the theory. My hypothesis here is that the theory of alienation effect in acting can only be properly understood within this larger context, a context in which links between actor, spectator, and social context are woven together by an omnipotent director or author. It is indeed the interaction of the four elements mentioned above that constitute the basis of the alienation effect. I shall define alienation effect as a process by which both theatrical and extra-theatrical phenomena are rendered strange, forcing the spectator to adopt a critical distance with regard to that which is given to see and hear. This definition has the advantage of enlarging the concept of alienation effect while keeping it in line with similar concepts, such as the notion of *ostranemie*, that have been defined by the Russian formalists.

In this article, my purpose is, first, to stress that the alienation effect for the actor cannot be considered as an acting theory *stricto sensu* and that it can only be understood if replaced in the whole structure of the Brechtian system; second, that the notion of alienation effect is not specific to Brecht, that it is a permanent characteristic of modern art today and more specifically of multi-media performance art.

As a starting point, it might be useful to recall the different ways in which Brecht defined alienation: "At each important moment, in addition to what the actor is doing,

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<sup>1</sup> Among the different acting theories, the influence of Stanislavski, Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski are the main figures. Although Stanislavski is without contest the main influence in the United States and, to a certain extent in Europe, Brecht is, or I should say was, a permanent reference in France, England, Germany, and Italy in the 1970s for his political, aesthetical as well as acting theories. Currently, even if the

he must give to understand something that he is not doing." Or, "The Chinese show not only the behavior of men, but also that of the actors." Or, "One can clearly distinguish two characters: one shows, the other is shown."<sup>2</sup> Confronted with these notions, Grotowski reminded us that Brechtian alienation is not a method of acting; at most it may be thought of as a principle of acting. Before Grotowski, and sometime after the Berliner Ensemble's visit to Paris in 1954, Barthes has remarked on the degree to which the principle of alienation surpassed a simple reflection upon the best way of portraying a character.<sup>3</sup> And in 1979, Benno Besson, who has worked with Brecht for a number of years, commented upon the principle of alienation, stating:

I have spent considerable time working with Brecht, specifically from 1949 until his death in 1956. During all of our practical work, not once did I hear him mention the word "alienation." This is a theoretical point of view which he (Brecht) had adopted during the 1930s, and which he had not used since that time. All the theories of Brecht can be very dangerous if isolated from practice, and can serve only to disguise and to obscure his actual practice. It is detestable to see persons intimidated and inhibited by abstract concepts. Instead of granting the importance of sensual, emotional, as well as of intellectual perceptions, one restrains perception by relying exclusively upon abstract concepts, thus blocking the very sensitivities by which concrete concepts are finally grasped.<sup>4</sup>

By not limiting the principle of alienation to theories of acting, I am asserting that it can indeed be an effect produced by the play itself, and/or by certain characteristics of the stage. As such, alienation effect could be felt independently of the actor's physical intervention. In addition, alienation effect cannot be dissociated from a larger project that aims at social reform, a project that requires the participation of an informed spectator interacting with new and imaginative textual material. If either the social project, the spectator, or the text is missing, the process of alienation is inoperative.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, in today's theatre numerous examples may be cited, all of which indicate that the phenomenon of alienation has become an implicit principle of contemporary theatre without any specific reference to Brechtian acting theory: the dehumanizing of Kantor's (*La Classe morte*) and Mnouchkine's (*Les Clowns*, *L'Age d'Or*, *Richard III*) characters; the removed and distant coldness of the characters in Lavaudant's *Les Céphéides*; the mechanization of Wilson's characters in *Einstein on the Beach*; the

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direct reference to Brecht has receded from a political as well as from an aesthetic point of view, his acting theory and mostly the alienation effect has remained a concept often used to indicate a non-Stanislawskian performance by an actor. For more specific information on the Brechtian acting theory see Timothy J. Wiles, *The Theatre Event, Modern Theories of Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "Sur le métier du comédien," in *Ecrits sur le théâtre* (Paris: L'Arche), 395, 411, and 412.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *France-Observateur*, 22 July 1954.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Lou Bruder in "La distanciation, découverte brechtienne du monde," *Obliques* 20-21 (1979): 23.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the episode that Brecht relates in his journal on the subject of a spectator reacting emotionally while watching the Chinese actor, Mei-Lan-Fang, play a death scene. This episode proves that alienation played upon the stage goes no farther than the proscenium in cases where the spectator does not possess a code to facilitate proper communication. It also proves that the spectator can identify with the character portrayed in spite of the fact that alienation effect is governing the portrayal. See Bertolt Brecht, "L'achat du cuivre," in *Ecrits sur le théâtre*, 596.

measured hysteria of the characters in Foreman's *Penguin Touquet*. All of these may be analyzed as examples of the alienation effect to which Brecht referred in his texts.

Inspired by parallel trends in the arts, in the new technologies, and in the multi-media performances, a different theatrical movement has come to life, a movement that has amplified and displaced the process of alienation, moving it away from the actor and from his relationship with the character portrayed, while reserving it for all that surrounds and absorbs him. This new trend is seen in the work of Trisha Brown, Andy de Groat, Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, Bob Ashley, Elizabeth Lecompte, Ping Chong, and the Impossible Theatre. In all these instances, Brecht is seldom quoted as a source, and his alienation theory is hardly ever a reference for the artists mentioned. Therefore the above cases cannot be considered to be pure examples of Brechtian, or even of neo-Brechtian alienation effect; and Brecht should *not* be construed to be the only reference here.

Such a statement raises certain questions. For instance, how are we to explain the preeminence of alienation effect in modern and postmodern theatre while foregoing all references to Brecht's theoretical preoccupations? And further, how are we to understand Brechtian alienation effect in light of a non-Brechtian theory? I shall attempt to answer these two questions while fixing my attention upon the theoretical and philosophical presuppositions that have given rise to both Brechtian and non-Brechtian manifestations of alienation effect. In order to do so, I will examine the following more precisely: the kinship existing between the Brechtian notion of alienation and the notion of "foregrounding" as defined by the Russian formalists, the fact that alienation effect is mainly a literary concept which is linked to a special vision of the relation between society and art, the multi-media performance art form which gives a new perspective to the alienation effect today.

The research of John Willett has demonstrated that the alienation effect is not strictly a Brechtian concept and that it offers a very strong relationship to the notion of "foregrounding" as defined by Russian formalists, notably by Chklovski.\* In his research, Willett relates Brecht's use of the term *Verfremdung* with his (Brecht's) visit to Moscow in 1935, thus identifying the origin of the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* with Chklovski and the Russian Formalists. Chklovski characterized

\*John Willett, *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht: a Study from Eight Aspects* (London: Methuen, 1959), 208. Willett's thesis has been developed by Marjorie Hoover in an excellent article that further clarifies the subject of alienation effect. Cf. Marjorie Hoover, "Brecht's Soviet Connection: Tretiakov," in *Brecht Heute-Brecht Today* 3 (1973-74): 39-56. V.V. Chklovski (1893) was a writer and a literary critic. He founded the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (*I'Opoiaz*) which was the germ of formalism. He wrote short polemic essays, among which are found: "The Movement of the Knight" (1923), "Literature and Cinema" (1923); books such as *The Theory of Prose* (1925), *Style and Substance in Tolstoi's "War and Peace"* (1928), *Notes on the Prose of the Russian Classicists* (1955), *Pros and Cons: Notes on Dostoievski* (1957), *Literary Prose* (1959), *Tolstoi* (1963); and also novels. Demonstrating the way in which the Chklovskian concepts of *ostranenie* and *otdalenie* constitute the very origin of the concept of alienation effect, Marjorie Hoover recalls Brecht's visits to Russia and his initial encounter with these concepts. According to Hoover, Brecht's friend, Tretiakov, was the first to speak to Brecht about these concepts. Tretiakov was very familiar with Chklovski's research on Tolstoi, research that has been published by Tretiakov in the journal *Novyi Lef* that he edited at that time.

the particular nature of the work of art as the process of "foregrounding" (ostranenie).  
 Writing in 1917, he stated:

The process of art is a process in which objects are foregrounded; it consists of an act in which the form of the object is *obscured*, of an act that increases the difficulty and the duration of perception.<sup>7</sup>

Here art is described as a process by which the world is rendered less familiar, a process used by the artist to construct the world as a "vision" rather than to paint it as an object "to be recognized."<sup>8</sup>

The goal of art is to render the object not as a fixed entity to be recognized, but as a vision. . . . Art must render its object as development in progress (*becoming*); an object that is, is of no interest to art. . . . If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that once actions become habitual, they also become automatic.<sup>9</sup>

In order to better clarify the precise meaning of the term "foregrounding," Chklovski referred to the novels of Tolstoi.

The process of foregrounding in the works of Tolstoi consists not in calling an object by its name, but in describing the object as if *seeing it for the first time*, and in treating each incident as if it were occurring for the first time. In addition, in describing the object, Tolstoi does not use the words habitually used to name its parts, but rather employs words that he has borrowed from descriptions of corresponding parts in different objects. . . . Tolstoi constantly uses foregrounding: for example, in *Kholstomer*, Tolstoi foregrounds objects not by allowing us to perceive them directly, but rather through the eyes of the horse that narrated the story.<sup>10</sup>

Foregrounding appears as "seeing objects out of their habitual context,"<sup>11</sup> as a series of displacements within the semantic network created by the text, as taking the object out of its "mundane surroundings," as "extracting the object from its envelope of habitual associations."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the poet operates by semantic displacement. He removes the notion from the semantic series in which he finds it, and, by associating it with other words (a trope), places it in a different semantic series. Such a displacement creates a new way of perceiving the object. . . . This is one of the ways in which the object becomes perceptible; it is the way in which the artist transforms the object, making it an element of a work of art. The creation of a *multi-levelled form* is another. Here we perceive the object in two or three different ways in a game of projections and oppositions. . . . In such a case, one often doubles the object, or simply divides it. . . . There is a variant of this process that consists in focusing on one detail of a painting, thereby accentuating it in such a way that its habitual proportions are deformed.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. V. V. Chklovski, "L'art comme procédé" in *Théorie de la littérature* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1965), 83. All words underlined in this quotation, as in following quotations, are used by Chklovski in the article mentioned above.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 83 and 81.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 84 and 85.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>12</sup> V. V. Chklovski, "La construction de la nouvelle et du roman," in *Théorie de la littérature*, 185.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 184 and 185.

Chklovski concludes that "where *image* is found, one is almost certain to find foregrounding."<sup>14</sup> Foregrounding as described above by Chklovski deals primarily with poetic texts, disclosing some of its processes: images and metaphors, semantic substitution, and displacement of meaning. In addition, Chklovski examines the process of narration, the arrangement of episodes, the nesting (*enchâssement*) of utterances, the embedding (*emboîtement*) of discourses,<sup>15</sup> of multi-level structures, the framing and succession, etc. Such a description highlights the very same poetic strategy that Irving Goffman has defined as the "foregrounding of meaning."<sup>16</sup>

In the "play" of the text<sup>17</sup> – in the displacement of signifiers and of signifieds within a novel or a play – the principle of foregrounding highlights the strangeness of the text, modifying the conditions of its emission in order to transform the perceptions of the reader. Chklovski gives words a depth of meaning that they lack in shallow everyday usage, thus continually renewing the reader's reception of the text. Chklovski's principal preoccupations correspond very closely to those outlined by the Linguistic Circle of Prague:<sup>18</sup> a renewed attention to the process of semiotization that characterizes the work of art, and the effort to understand the specificity of literature as an art form.

It can be seen from this brief analysis that a *rapprochement* between the principle of foregrounding and Brechtian alienation effect is justified on the basis of shared methods and objectives. One may assert that if the process of foregrounding as defined by Chklovski is above all a literary process, it is therefore reasonable to maintain that the theoretical foundations of Brechtian alienation effect are also processes of the text.<sup>19</sup> If such a *rapprochement* is not an unequivocal argument in favor of a direct

<sup>14</sup> V. V. Chklovski, "La construction de la nouvelle et roman," 90.

<sup>15</sup> "Nesting" and "embedding" are translations from the concepts of *enchâssement* and *emboîtement* of the signified used in narrative semiology to indicate the insertion of a narrative into a larger one, without altering the nature or function of the micronarrative. See A. J. Greimas and J. Courtès, *Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (Paris: Hachette, 1979), 123.

<sup>16</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> This notion of "play" applied to the text has been used commonly in literary analysis since the beginning of the 1970s in the work of thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, Tzvetan Todorov, and most of all Jacques Derrida. See Julia Kristeva, *Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), and Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971). The best definition given is by Jacques Derrida: "If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite. . . ." Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 289.

<sup>18</sup> Victor Erlich develops this point in *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine, Third Edition* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969). Cf. also Ladislav Matejka, *Semiotics of Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1976).

<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless the following remarks underline points of divergence between the two methods: 1.) Even though the notion of foregrounding might have inspired Brecht, one must not forget that he has also been influenced by his exposure to Chinese theatre. This form of theatre played a definite role in the development of the principle of alienation. Brecht's meeting with Mei-Lan-Fang was particularly important, for this Chinese actor seemed to incarnate the very principle of alienation. According to Reich Bernhard, Brecht had not only studied the literary application of Chklovski's theories, but had also become

lineage between Brechtian alienation and the principle of foregrounding, it is at least a demonstration of the very close relationship between the two concepts. Like the Russian Formalists, Brecht attempted to modify passive and involuntary perception by foregrounding various aspects of theatrical representation. In this effort to assign value to what might be called a particular aspect of theatrical representation, the text becomes the most important factor to be considered. It is not surprising that such an aspect precludes the traditional mimesis of reality. From its inception, it permitted the work of art to distance itself from reality.<sup>20</sup> This dual relation of the text with reality in Brechtian alienation theory is quite important to stress – the text being at the same time a representation of reality and pointing at it as a representation.

The fundamental complexity of Brecht's theory of theatre regarding its relation with reality resides in its circular process. Brecht begins with the political analysis of an actual situation which he then represents and develops in the play. The representation incites the spectator to transform reality. Alienation is the process or principle (not the method) that allows the author to pass from reality to the stage; it is also the process that permits the spectator to cast a critical eye upon the reality that is to be represented as well as a critical eye on the theatrical process underway.<sup>21</sup> Thus, reality and its representation on stage are the fundamental stakes in the work of both author and spectator, director and actor.

Brecht's theory does not question the mimetic role of theatre. On the contrary, the theory assumes as its fundamental a priori the existency of a reality outside the theatre, and further, that it is possible to represent this reality on the stage, to explain it and to modify it through the mediation of the spectator. Thus theatre finds its *raison d'être* and its justification outside itself.

As in Aristotle's *Poetics*, Brecht's theatre represents reality through the text and the words. The words define the fictional situation and establish a link between it and the reality to which it refers. The alienation effect is therefore assumed by the words used to represent it. The words infuse the text with the quality of strangeness.

familiar with the application of these theories to the theatre. 2.) It should be remembered also that Nicolai Okhlophov, director of the Realistic Theatre, had produced Pogodin's *Aristocrates* in 1935, and that Brecht attended the production. The theory of *Verfremdungseffekt* appeared shortly after 1935. 3.) Even though the theoretical notion of *Verfremdungseffekt* appeared very late in Brecht's works, the process of alienation was practiced much earlier by both Brecht and Piscator. 4.) In addition, this link shows also that the process of foregrounding is the very essence of every work of art. We might also add that the processes of alienation have also been frequently used by comedy, by forms of popular theatre, and by Asian theatre.

<sup>20</sup> Although the notion of reality is quite complex from a philosophical point of view, the notion of reality is referring here to the outside world, to the extra-theatrical phenomena that the stage represents.

<sup>21</sup> Thus, the importance of a precise definition of the notion of alienation as the "effect of strangeness" that makes objects and events stand out by placing them at a distance. In 1917, Chklovski noted that "The process of art is a process of highlighting objects by making their form more obscure, that is by increasing the difficulty and the duration of perception" (Chklovski, "L'art comme procédé," 83). Art appears as a process struggling against a passive type of perception, a process working to inscribe the world as a vision being imagined rather than as an object being recognized. "The goal of art is to give the sensation of imagining rather than recognizing." The theatre becomes "a means of feeling an object becoming; that which already is, is of no importance for art" (Ibid.).

There is no universal form that can consistently describe this specific process of alienation. This form is inscribed in the text by specific practices; it differs greatly from one play to the next. As a result, a uniform analysis of its norms is impossible. Although it is extremely difficult to give it an adequate description, I will attempt here to outline some principles by which it functions.

Alienation is an effect produced solely by the text; or rather it is the text that is responsible for setting the process of alienation in motion. As process, it is logically tied to the narrative. The appearance of the actor behind the character is first and foremost an effect of discourse. This appearance heralds the emergence of a new subject of enunciation who, taking charge of various speech acts, suddenly breaks out of the story in order to point it out to the audience. This is one of the roles traditionally assumed by the songs in Brecht's plays. Thus, there are two enunciations: the enunciation of the character that takes place within the story and the enunciation of the actor that takes place on the stage. The two enunciations alternate, sometimes overlapping, giving the narrative a polyphonic texture. The alienation effect alternately highlights the profile of these different enunciators, making each visible to the spectator. Alienation effect sets in motion a process of semiotization which selects, highlights, and obscures signs that are destined for the spectator. In this way alienation effect appears as a process contained in the story; its effect is realized in the alternation of affirmation and denial played by the actor who is both a fictional character and a real person dictated by the text and the stage.

With respect to the narrative, alienation occurs first in the story line. It stops the narration and fragments the story. By introducing holes in the narration, alienation blocks the progression of a fiction which otherwise would unfold according to its own interior dynamics. Alienation gives the narrative a dialectical organization in which external conditions interrupt, imposing seemingly contradictory forces upon linearly unfolding narrative processes. Suddenly the time of the performance is substituted for that of the play. In such an instance, the immediacy of the theatrical event appears precisely at the moment when a rupture in the order of representation has been registered on stage; it is by this rupture that the order of the narration is displaced by that of the theatrical event itself. Alienation effect constitutes this rupture, this process of foregrounding. Alienation is in fact the passage between real and fictional orders that takes place on stage, the passage that transforms fiction into a discursive object, thereby introducing a rupture, the pertinence and effectiveness of which are measured on a socio-analytical scale. Aesthetic forms are themselves caught up in this dialectic in which the stage oscillates between cabaret and narrative, between mirrored reflection and discursive exposition.<sup>22</sup>

Alienation can also be produced by the embedding of signifieds or the superimposition of discourses (parody), and by the mixing of various rhetorical forms of performance (cabaret, film, slides, pictures). These forms are nested one within the other; they

<sup>22</sup> It is with reference to the portrayed character's actual inscription in the narration and in society, that the discourse (gestures included) of the character is defined as a discourse revealing the mode of social integration and class appartenance, but it is with reference to a *future* society that the actor and the character become dissociated, and that a new subject of enunciation emerges.

appear; they vie for recognition; they make themselves known to the audience decentering its perception. The effect of alienation is the result of their juxtaposition. Altered forms appear within the performance itself, establishing a dialectical relationship between differing aesthetic forms. Each of them is unique and yet at the same time part of a larger ensemble, still maintaining a relative autonomy while producing its meaning and its justification with reference to the whole, and more than ever with reference to the text. "The part," said Lukács, "designates the whole, the essential being present in each segmented instant of the whole."<sup>23</sup>

Research meaning  
These considerations allow two assertions. First, that the alienation effect, in Brecht's works, is discursive in nature within the text. It is manifested by the displacement of the subject of enunciation, a displacement called for by an art newly oriented toward social reform. Second, that alienation effect for the spectator is also an effect of the actor's and of the public's increased sensitivity to the play's continual slippage between reality, the fictional situation, and the stage. In this sense, alienation is the result of an intertwining of discourse in which reality is scrutinized from the stage, and the stage reexamined with respect to the extra-theatrical finalities to which it is necessarily linked.

The fundamental complexity of alienation is that its processes function in an intermediary zone between reality and discourse. This zone is a zone of exchange in which the real is represented by language. However, such language must find its justification outside its own discourse, that is, in the reality that forms its substance. More precisely, alienation appears as the moment during which the function of discourse is transformed. At this moment, the audience passes from a discourse which aims at interpreting reality, to a discourse of purely aesthetic and theatrical intent.<sup>24</sup>

This relation that Brecht establishes between the text and reality has an implicit assertion or a theoretical a priori. In fact Brecht's alienation theory functions to promote mastery – mastery of the realities to which words refer, of sought-after truths,<sup>25</sup> of extra-theatrical truths to which words are linked, and of discourse.

That which we are hoping to obtain is not so much that one looks differently, but that one looks in a very definite way; in a different manner, not different from all others, but correct, that is, in a manner conforming to things in general. We do not want simply to attain mastery in art and politics, but to attain the mastery of things in general.<sup>26</sup>

According to Brecht, it is possible first of all to understand the world, secondly to represent it, and finally to explain it. It is through words that one grasps the world. Such a dogma implies the existence of extra-theatrical truth which polarizes and justifies not only the unfolding of theatrical fiction, but also the entire artistic enter-

<sup>23</sup> "The part," says Lukács, "designates the whole, the essential being present in each segmented instant of the whole" in *La théorie du roman* (Paris: Gonthier, 1963), 43.

<sup>24</sup> There is a third term in the operation of alienation effect that Brecht does not take into consideration: the subject. The subject, as a psychological and psychoanalytical entity, as both a semiotic and symbolic figure, is left outside the fictional situation and outside reality.

<sup>25</sup> The notion of "truth" is not referring here to an absolute truth that would exist outside a specific subject or an ideology, it refers specifically to the coherence of a representational system where the causality of social phenomena is shown.

<sup>26</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Considérations sur les arts plastiques* (Paris: L'Arche, 1970), 60.

prise. It calls for a strong historical point of view and accepts the possibility of mastery of reality through the mind.

In spite of certain similarities to Brechtian alienation, the processes used in multi-media performance art, as well as in certain contemporary theatre, are quite different. These processes rely upon various technologies (video, television, photography, synthesizers, etc.) that have restructured the manner in which the alienation effect is produced. These new technologies have given alienation effect a dialectical dimension that better corresponds to present day sensibilities, while still maintaining the principal terms of the larger process: i.e., reality, the actor (the performer), the new spectator, and a vision of society elucidated by history.

The processes of alienation at work in the theatre of Brecht described above have been: fragmentation of the narrative; rupture in the order or representation; displacement of the subject of enunciation; decentering of the spectator's point of view with respect to the event; passage from reality to fiction and from the fiction to reality; placement of the part within the context of the whole, and a mixture of other visual forms (film, slides, cabaret, etc). Contemporary theatre, and to a greater extent the multi-media arts, have transformed the bulk of these procedures into an aesthetic form which today signals the contemporaneity of the performance. In point of fact, the formula has become so common that such procedures no longer invite the spectator to adopt the traditional critical distance that might formerly have been evoked by such circumstances. The contemporary stage has abandoned narration; the text no longer rules supreme, nor does character, fictional or otherwise, occupy center stage. The actor has become yet another sign, directed and used with respect to reality, just as other signifiers.

More interesting yet is the specific recourse to the media. The multi-disciplinary performing arts use the media as the substance of daily life. Media reproduce our environment and shape our sensitivities as well as our imageries. As in the Brechtian enterprise, multi-media performing art takes reality as a starting point, turning back questioningly upon it in an effort to analyze its status. In this type of theatre, the essential work of alienation touches upon an analysis of reality and of the way in which both the performer and the spectator perceive it.

The concrete manifestations of alienation are many, and vary according to specific practices. I will examine only some of these practices that reproduce reality on the stage through the use of scenes of violence, news reports, everyday gestures, etc. Such a reproduction of reality sticks rigorously close to reality itself, relying not only upon the use of mimetic images of reality, but moreover upon the strategies of perception that such images bring into play. More than being a reference to actual reality, scenic images take on meaning as a result of context and of grouping with the other signifying systems with which they have established a dialectical relationship; they underline both divergence and rupture with respect to the deeply rooted logic in which the images are cast.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the film by Jim Jahrmush, member of the SQUAT Theatre. I am thinking here of the first part of *Dreamland Burns* by SQUAT Theatre in which the reality effect comes from the screen and not from the stage. Cf. also the description of the play performed for the *Festival des Amériques*, published in *The*

Imagery brought to the stage through the use of the various media creates the rupture that forces us to adopt a critical stance with respect to the stage. Such imagery displaces the subject of enunciation, bringing a different point of view to the stage, i.e. that of the camera with its corresponding relationship to reality. Media such as screen, video, television, and film introduce a non-polarized subject, a new subject of enunciation that disbands the process of representation in progress. In this case however, the reproduction of reality is not tied to a particular vision of society, as it is in the theatre of Brecht. That which is at stake in multi-media performing art is quite different. A society capable of being analyzed in Marxist or Brechtian terms has no place in the multi-media production. The reality of the multi-media performing art is more like that of the subject in his/her relationship to reality; it is a reality in which the social dimension is present, but only as one of the many constituent parts of reality. Nevertheless, such a procedure is not strictly formalist in nature. It is not directed uniquely against habitual modes of artistic representation. It goes far beyond an examination of the syntax of representation. It does not attempt to institute a purely aesthetic discourse without connection to reality. Rather, it seeks to uncover the automatisms that filter the spectator's relationship with reality, thus redefining the spectator as one who knows how to decode a critical discourse the purpose of which is to denounce.

More than any other visual form, the media authorize an almost absolute proximity between stage and reality. For this very reason, reality is practically abolished. Continually forced to reproduce reality with exactitude, the media substitute themselves for reality, by swallowing it up. Henceforth, a mediated reality is only appearance, illusion, viewpoint, and vanishing point. Walter Benjamin affirmed that *technic* permits overcoming the sterile opposition between form and content.<sup>28</sup> It would appear that if this opposition has indeed been overcome, both form and content have disappeared in the process, or better stated, have dissolved into each other. On the other hand, the performer's integration in the very process of dissolution skirts the menace of an enterprise in which media dominate, for the performer puts into play his/her unifying vision, his/her body, his/her perception of reality, his/her relationship to objects as well as his/her Sisyphusian effort to rejoin reality.

The circumrotation of reality and image ends in an impasse in which acts of mastery and knowledge of reality are excluded. In such theatre, each act of mastery is foiled as soon as it is realized. The social being is no longer at stake, at least not the one that is classified according to specific social categories. Here, society itself is only an effect of illusion, created by the displacement of viewpoints which ultimately dissolve. In this game of similitudes, only the individual counts; here the possibility of a universal history is precluded.

An enterprise that allows the media to proliferate unchecked upon the stage ends by swallowing its object, thereby substituting itself for that object. In such an event, similitude sucks the very blood of reality, henceforth remaining indistinguishable from it. Responding to the lure of reality, cybernetics substitutes its own reality,

*Drama Review* 108 (1986): 137-139; as well as the article "Il existe au moins trois Amériques," *New Theatre Quarterly* 3:9 (1987): 82-88.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Essais sur Bertolt Brecht* (Paris: Maspero, 1969), 110.

creating its own space and temporal structure, thus negating reality entirely. Here reality has been completely swallowed up by a microscopic perspective that finally implodes.<sup>29</sup>

Brechtian alienation is founded upon two a priori: first upon the possibility of representing reality; secondly upon the choice of language as a privileged instrument in a representation that seeks to transform society. Multi-media performance art is founded upon completely different a priori. In point of fact, the essential elements of the type of alienation effect operating in multi-media performance art do not touch so much upon representation itself, as they do upon the very status of reality. It may be that such performances do not aim at transforming reality. Nonetheless, while avoiding being ensnared by it, they put perceptive strategies into play that permit the deciphering of reality. In this sense, the multi-media enterprise is very much a political enterprise.

Without doubt, alienation effect in performance art aims at instituting a critical distance with respect to reality. Where Brechtian alienation institutes an act of mastery, performance art alienation institutes an act of dispossession, an act in which the individual is stripped of his/her grasp upon the world and the reality that surrounds him/her. This type of alienation represents the loss of one's hold upon reality. History has no role to play in such a process; the historical dimension loses its importance because it is no longer possible to envisage the all-commanding, unitary viewpoint that gives history its meaning. Here we are in the domain of what Vattimo, in *La fine della modernità*, defined as "weak thought" or "strong weakness."<sup>30</sup>

Brecht believed that history had meaning, and that the stage was a starting point for the discovery of truth through discourse.<sup>31</sup> Performance art gave up the search for such a starting point, putting again in question both the status of reality and the meaning of history. Performance art brought the perceptive strategies of the spectator to the stage. Performance art has become the art of unmaking reality,<sup>32</sup> of suppressing all hidden references, of substituting overcoding for the Brechtian decoding of reality, and, by using a surcharge of signs, of signifying in a manner which often ends in complete exasperation.<sup>33</sup> In so doing, the multi-media arts have imposed upon the stage, upon reality, and upon the subject in a very different way. They have again brought into question the relationship between society and art, thus manifesting one of the most current and interesting means of understanding alienation effect today.

Let us finish by recalling the essentials that Brecht outlined in "considerations of plastic arts":

The artists of different eras see things differently. Their vision does not only depend upon personality, but also upon the knowledge that they and their time possess about things. It is

<sup>29</sup> "Dramaturgy of self implosion" is a concept used by Sue-Ellen Case in an article on Heiner Müller, *Performing Arts Journal* 8:1 (1983): 93-102.

<sup>30</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *La fin de la modernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Guy Scarpetta, *Brecht ou le soldat mort* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1979).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Guy Scarpetta, *L'impureté* (Paris: Grasset, 1986), 186. "In the modern tradition, representation is checked by the irruption of reality; in the postmodern era, it is the actual status of reality that is suspect."

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. "La distanciation procède par surcodage et non par décodage. Elle n'est pas critique."

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a requirement of our time that we consider things in evolutionary perspective, that we consider them as forever changing, influenced by other things and by other processes.<sup>34</sup>

The reality about which Brecht was speaking demanded a certain faith in universal history, a history presiding over the destiny of humanity. This reality placed "universal man" upon the stage; above all, it was a social reality in which "man" appeared as a product of the greater collectivity. The reality of postmodern art is no longer that of society; it is its own reality and touches human beings in isolation, i.e. outside the collectivity. This new reality touches the very subject abandoned by the theatre of Bertolt Brecht.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Bertolt Brecht, *Ecrits sur la littérature et l'art* (Paris: l'Arche, 1970).

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